Learning to Listen: developing a mindful and crafty facilitation practice

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Abstract

This thesis has as its form the learning journey of the PhD. I am inquiring into my own practice through action research.
Its theme is *the nature of facilitation practice*; 'noticing' and use of self, sense-making and reflection in real time. Key issues in my inquiry are power and powerlessness, recognising a diversity of ways of knowing, silencing and voice, inclusion and participation.
The purpose of developing this practice, and of this thesis, is to contribute to developing facilitation practice for positive social effect.

I argue that it is possible, through critical reflexivity, to develop *a mindful and crafty facilitation* practice in order to be able to create empowered and empowering space (Kemmis), to better work with power as it manifests in multiple dimensions in a group and situation.
By which I mean a practice that enables a facilitator to bring her biography and situatedness into her practice, without contributing to dominance through being blind to her own ideological assumptions and positioning, and their effect on her choices and sense making.
I challenge the assumption that facilitation should be (or could be) 'neutral' and identify the importance of the facilitator (researcher) to be fully present themselves in the facilitation interaction.

I describe the fine-grain detail of a mindful and aware facilitation practice; the development and application of micro-noticing practices. I explore the benefits and forms of reflective writing, and ways of using writing to sense-make and communicate, including the use of self study and autoethnographic texts to make political points and issues available to the reader.

The thesis, and my practice, is influenced by a feminist approach to research, by critical theory and specific schools of action research. All of which have been important for me at least in part because of my life journey, class, sex, race and disability.
I tell the story of my journey through the period of undertaking the PhD inquiry, also referring to my professional practice during the last four decades and the political context surrounding it.

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An accidental picture that feels so perfect

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Opening

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Opening

I am writing this by way of an introduction to this thesis. Consider it the writing equivalent of my taking your hand; not to shake your hand and then let go, but to take your hand in mine in order to lead you into this writing. And to invite you to respond to my hand on yours through your own hand; pressing back, embracing, flinching. I am the author of this piece and I am inviting you as reader to enter into a dialogue, not to be a passive consumer of the ideas within it. After all, participation lies at the core of this thesis and my practice.
At times I will write quite deliberately in emotive and very personal ways – partly because this *is* personal, its my practice in the world, and I have ideas about practice which I want you to hear; and partly to try to evoke reactions in you my reader which I hope will help you to have a better felt-connection to what I am writing which can then be placed in its theoretical context by me[1].

What you read here is an account of a learning journey taken by me from the time I started studying at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, University of Bath in 1996 until now in 2005. This journey has taken me from a starting point of believing I should somehow expunge my self from my facilitation practice and be neutral in order to serve my client, to my belief today that I need to use my whole self in service of my client and in order to do that appropriately I need to study, and practice noticing, myself. The learning journey has taken me from a defiant advocacy of my beliefs and political awarenesses, through a tempered and insecure period of knowing and not knowing, to a time now when I am trying to balance an acute sensitivity to issues with a solid and grounded knowing[2].

My professional practice is as a facilitator, and this thesis concerns itself with how we can choose to develop *a mindful and crafty practice* of facilitation through *learning how to listen*, first to ourselves and then to the people we are working with. For if I do not know who I am in the world how can I best use my skills? If I don't know where I begin and end how can I avoid getting in the way of my clients, their issues and the work we do together?
I need to be *mindful* of my self and others, and of issues such as inclusion, silencing and voice.
I need to be *crafty* as I use the best of myself in service of my clients; whether that is my outrage or my compassion, my lived experience of silencing or of exclusion.

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[1] For more detail about this way of writing in order to engage the heart as well as the intellect of the reader, see Appendix E. *Telling stories, telling lies.*
[2] For more detail about this learning journey and the three 'moments', see Chapter 1. *Introduction to my learning journey*.

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What has moved me to try to better understand the practice of facilitation, and particularly the use of self in facilitation, has been my dissatisfaction with aspects of my own facilitation practice and that of others. Over the last twenty years I have seen facilitation become less 'alternative' and more mainstream, recognised and respected; as 'participation' has been taken-up as a cause by governments and public services there has also been a gradual dawning that participation requires processes like facilitation to enable it. As participative research has become more accepted and respected many commissioners have come to understand that it requires its own type of facilitation. Good facilitation is key to ensuring that not just the usual voices get heard.

However there is still much simplistic and mechanistic practice out there! And without wanting to mystify facilitation unduly I do feel that some facilitation is too superficial, and that everyone concerned could be getting more out of the process if facilitators were supported through a 'practice' to utilise more of themselves in service of the task.

I am reminded that as a trainee social worker I described myself as a 'practical' or 'manual' social worker, rejecting the more therapeutic approaches of many of my fellow students. I later came to understand my practice and the way I could be of service very differently through using more of my *Self* in my work without trespassing on the autonomy of my clients.

I am also contributing practical approaches to facilitation practices; this is not just a thesis about self study. I write about developing pragmatic approaches to action research, and the use of tools to maximise participation and contribute to learning in communities and organisations. These are further illustrated by my practice accounts.

Giving an overarching sense of my whole thesis:

Over nine years of working on this inquiry I have become quite used to answering the sort of question you get at parties that goes something like 'so what's the topic of your thesis', and in response I try to sum up my thesis in a few words and normally end up feeling either that I've made it sound very dull and have not done it justice, or alternatively, that I have got overexcited and must stop before I drive my listener away! Here I will attempt to describe succinctly the key areas of my thesis without falling into either of these pitfalls.

In this thesis I suggest that it is enormously important that as facilitators we make best use of our selves in our facilitation practice, otherwise we deprive the people that we are working with of an essential part of us,

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and do not pay attention to how we might get in our own and other people's ways. And if we are to use our selves in our facilitation – by which I mean our biography, our psychology, our political and social positioning, our situatedness, our intuitive-symbolic and rational responses – then we need to do that awarely and mindfully.

Approaches to facilitation have been taught that seek to exclude the self. Yet how could *we* not be there in our interchange as facilitator, how could we not be present in some way? I propose that it is a huge asset if we can come to use our whole selves, *and* that there needs to be a clear *discipline* in the way that we manage ourselves if we are to take this approach. I have learnt that this discipline needs to include;

- a critical awareness of the political context we are working in and the situatedness of ourselves and others,
- a critical self-awareness,
- a 'nimble' questioning dynamic (for example tracking how meaning is being constructed) and
- a set of micro noticing practices that ensure that other aspects of disciplined practice are in-use (you can look ahead to chapter 6 for the figures which summarise my facilitation practice model).

The story in this thesis is about my learning journey to understanding and developing the disciplines for responsibly using my self in my practice, so that I respect and support the people I work with and expand the space in which new knowledge can form amongst those in the groups facilitated – we co-generate more.

I particularly work in contexts where the participant groups have very unequal levels of power. Although I also contend that this discipline can enhance the practice of facilitators in any situation.

As well as the micro noticing practices, a fundamental of my practice has been to respect my different ways of knowing in the same way that, working from my values, I respect the different ways of knowing of those I work with. For me this is about how I sense things, how I dream things, how things arise and connect for me and this is another aspect of using the whole of my self.

One of the things that I have become passionate about over the period of this learning journey, and in which I have surprised myself, is how I can integrate aspects of myself and my understanding that are more than simply the intellectual or the emotional. Therefore what you see here in my writing – the use of the imaginal, of metaphor, of the transpersonal has also been important to me. I have included some examples of this in the thesis, both in a 'digested' form in the main body of the text, and in their more raw form in some appendices in order that you can see me working in this way.

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How this differs from other styles of facilitation

The facilitation approach I'm offering differs from the dominant styles of facilitation in identifying self-knowledge as an important component of this way of practising. It's not simply a collection of tools and techniques, however important those are, it needs to be rooted in self-knowledge, and it needs to have an acute and nimble awareness of power assisted by a set of disciplines to support self-awareness in the moment.

This is a post-conventional facilitation; it is not facilitation for a simplistic consensus, or for advocacy or campaigning. It's a facilitation which engages with the system in order for me and others to be more aware of the whole system in the situations in which I work.

The thesis is laid out in the following way

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to my learning journey and its stages or moments.

Chapter 2 started off as a methodology section but grew to be something much richer. It describes and explores my approaches to inquiry and what has influenced my thinking and my practice, and gives some detail of my noticing practices.

It also takes a deeper look at the way I use writing to communicate and to sense-make.

Chapter 3 considers the social and political contexts in which I have worked, and identifies key ideas and issues relating to the exercise of power in those contexts. This chapter is divided into an introduction and working definitions; a description of the context in which I worked between 1970 and the 2000s, particularly focusing on the relationship between the state and communities; it then goes on to explore ideas about power including the politics of the research process, definitions and theories of power, the scope for empowerment.

Chapter 4 consists of a collection of practice accounts, and demonstrates me working with my clients over the period of the learning journey, focusing particularly on how I have been inquiring into my own practice, the issues raised through each account and why it's of interest here, how I have developed my capacities and presence as a facilitator and each account's relationship to my learning journey.

Chapter 5 describes the ways in which I gained feedback on my practice for this thesis, and what that process evoked in me.

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Chapter 6 is a brief concluding chapter, written from the standpoint of completing this writing.

There is so much more I'd like to be able to tell and show here, but I have had to boil it down. For example one of the challenges of the nature of this work is to *show you* me in my practice, me learning. I can't write a PhD within length and do this for everything, so I have chosen to selectively *show you* sometimes and not others.

Other things you should know

There are a few things you should be aware of in order for this to be a smooth read.

Background information

I am undertaking action research; and this is a thesis about action research. As a student of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) I have undertaken study in three phases; a diploma programme introducing key ideas and frameworks, an MPhil stage and finally a PhD phase. I draw on the three phases in describing my learning journey. I started off as part of the CARPP3 cohort, but after I took an eighteen month break I returned to be part of a new CARPP6 cohort. Throughout this time I have been part of tutorial groups consisting of my CARPP peers and my tutor, who have contributed to my development through challenging and supporting me in discussions and feedback based on my writing and presentations. These sessions have been taped and I draw on them in this thesis.

My style is that I work allegorically. You will see this in my writing, particularly my use of dreams and images to make sense of my conscious and unconscious thoughts, and to communicate to the reader.

What I draw upon

I draw upon and quote from the following sources in documenting my learning journey. They have themselves been part of the inquiry process, which I explain in detail in chapter 2:

- My journal
- Notes from my therapy sessions
- Records of my dreams
- Taped supervision sessions with my supervisor
- Taped sessions with my tutorial group
- Taped sessions with colleagues.

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Formatting devices

Boxes – I use boxes in the text in two ways

- to contain detail which might otherwise be distracting were it placed in the body of the text
- to contain asides and extracts from my writing illustrating my learning journey (in Arial font 11 point), and my comments on these; integrating writing from different periods or moments through a process of overwriting .

Appendices – I use appendices to contain pieces of writing which you *may* wish to refer to for more detail or a longer illustration of my writing.

Footnotes – in this thesis footnotes are not incidental or optional reading. For me they are core and contain an important reflective trail running alongside the text, they are often where I appear at my most unguarded and authentic.

The importance of place

You will find references in the text to Laugharne. In 2002 I bought a small single story house on the top of the cliff in Laugharne, south west Wales. Over the last three years I have gone there to write, finding that the peacefulness and the rhythm of the tidal estuary has helped me to reflect, and that being so close to natural beauty has helped to give form to my thoughts. My work is about and amongst people; the contrast of the comparative isolation of Laugharne has been a quiet, personal space.

Significant people

Throughout the thesis there are references to significant individuals

Peter Reason – my supervisor from 1998 -1999
Judi Marshall – my supervisor 2000 to date
Stephen Morris (SM) – my therapist
Glenn Hall – my partner
Members of my CARPP tutorial groups, who I will mention by name where appropriate.

Criteria by which you can judge this thesis

I say more about criteria later[3] but feel I should introduce you to one of my original criteria for judging my writing; the 'Bill Booth test', and my current thinking.
Bill Booth was a radical socialist colleague who was impatient with and dismissive of 'bloody tree huggers' and similar others because he was

[3] I write of the qualities you can expect to find in my work, and so my writing, in my methodology section Chapter 2 *My Approaches to Inquiry.*

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unconvinced they would make any difference to the lives of working class people.
I set myself a challenge at one time to try to make this thesis acceptable and useful in Bill's terms – a test of myself that I now acknowledge to be an impossible feat if it is to be acceptable in the academy. More recently I just try to keep it as *simple, useful* and *accessible* as possible.

Key themes/issues – what this thesis studies

There are some issues which are key to my practice:

- my noticing and use of self as facilitator
- sense making in real time and reflection

(evidenced in *My approaches to inquiry)*

- power and powerlessness
- recognising a diversity of ways of knowing
- silencing and voice
- inclusion
- participation

(evidenced in *Power* section and *Practice accounts*)

- the creation of empowered space
- what are the qualities of a good meeting or partnership
- facilitating openness to happen e.g. supporting participants to be able to choose not get pushed into defensiveness or old behaviours

(evidenced in *Practice accounts).*

Key texts

I mention two texts here, which it will help for you to be familiar with as I refer to them throughout the thesis; *Women's Ways of Knowing* and *Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change*.

Women's Ways of Knowing, published in 1986, has been significant for me in conceptualising and reflecting on my PhD learning journey[4].

[4] **From 'giving an account of myself' written for my tutorial group (May 1996).**
Reflecting now, at 41, the journey has been a long one, through many of the stages of knowing described in "Women's ways of knowing"
I lionized some - then had to challenge and reject them - but I still remember fondly the security of my early years in the Communist Party, safe in received knowledge and values.
I spent a considerable time - catalysed in a very literal way by the experience of cancer and the need to listen to my body - and valuing my inner self, my own felt experience. I grew to feel safe in the culture of public service, knowing the system and how to work it for myself and others - and I gloried in being able to analyse ideas, methods and tools for my work.
Sometimes I believe I can hear a wider range of voices, that do not require me to be dispassionate - a life without passion would feel like purgatory - but balances what I know in my gut with what I hear from others , enables them to coexist and me to be part of the knowing / known , think carefully / care thoughtfully.
I also know how often I revert, recycle:

Blythe Clinchy delivered a seminar on the research[5] which I attended shortly before I started at CARPP – these ideas were my introduction to a new way to develop my mind and my voice.

The research sought to understand why so many women, regardless of age, race or class, expressed doubts about their intellectual competence and felt alienated in academic settings. The authors were familiar with Perry's work on developmental epistemology undertaken with young men, and set out to understand better how women think and experience themselves as knowers.

They identified 5 major epistemological positions:

1. Silence – in which the knower is dwarfed by authority
2. Received knowledge – looking to others as authorities
3. Subjective knowledge – authority comes from within the self
4. Procedural knowledge – trust in authority, which sets standards for knower to attain. Some come to question this authority
5. Constructed knowledge – reclaims self by integrating knowledge which is intuitively important with formal knowing methods.

The last three of these relate to moments in my learning journey[6]: subjective knowing in my Tigers moment; subjective and (questioning) procedural knowing in my Unicorn moment; and constructed knowing in my Pig and Deer moment.

> We observed a passion for knowing the self in the subjectivists and an excitement over the power of reason among procedural knowers, but we found that the opening of the mind *and* the heart to embrace the *world* was characteristic only of the women at the position of constructed knowledge (Belenky et al, 1986).

Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change, written by Meyerson and Scully and published in 1995, gave a name to the concept of the *tempered radical* (TR); individuals who both identify with and are committed to an organisation, and also to a cause that fundamentally differs from the dominant culture of their organisation. They are *radicals* in that they challenge the status quo, they are *tempered* in both meanings of the word; by the heat of anger and frustration at injustice or ineffectiveness, and in the moderate behaviours they are obliged to adopt to influence organisational behaviour or values. They act as a cautious and committed catalyst.

Like other marginal people TRs experience ambivalence. They have

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— the stress of inclusion on the course or in my employing Authority sparks-off unrealistic views of tutors and mentors,
— anger can find me striking my chest asserting that 'I know' ,
— and at the moment I am charting the waters around my silenced self ' reactivated by a sense of powerlessness.

[5] CARPP seminar, Bath. 1996.

[6] See *Introduction to my learning journey* for details.

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> the knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of the outsider (Stonequist1937:155).

They can be critics of the status quo and critics of radical change, and advocates for both. They suffer from perceptions of hypocrisy, feelings of isolation and the pressures of co-option.

In her later book Meyerson identifies role options for TRs as:

- Conforming
- Flaming-out – stridently challenging the status quo, confirms belief one does not belong
- Leaving.

For my PhD learning journey the TR idea relates to role in GHA (Tigers moment), where I survived by building supportive affiliations with those outside the organisation who could affirm my identity and nurture me (Mark Gale, Martin Simon). I tried conforming, flamed-out and eventually left, having met four of Marshall's characteristics[7] and exhausted my options.

I was better suited 'to the role of pure radical, advocating from outside the organisation, from a position closer to their ideals' (Meyerson 2001:16). Many of my clients are themselves tempered radicals (see *Practice Accounts*: Jack, LGA; Julia, Tewkesbury). Part of my learning has been to learn how to recognise them, and support them in that role.

In the next section I unpack the stages of my learning journey, mapping the phases or 'moments' of transformation that punctuate this thesis.

[7] Marshall (1999) identifies 5 characteristics in the stories of managers who stayed over-long in environments unhealthy for them;
'the managers and their change initiative had initially been successful, but then other powerful people mobilised against them and attacked the women managers as figureheads of change
Senior figures who were advocating change in private did not support the managers in public.
The women became isolated.
They became over-committed to work, losing other sources of perspective in their lives.
They carried on, not willing to be deterred and disregarded their own safety'.

Chapter 1.

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