Learning as a context for differences and differences as a context for learning

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In this paper we describe how we, as two trainers with multiple differences, engaged with a group of trainees in a process of deconstructing the differences between the participants in the training group, using the acronym Social GRRAACCEESS as a heuristic. We will explore how these differences reflexively influenced the process of learning, through teaching, training and supervision, within the group.

Introduction

The importance of being aware of, sensitive to and competent in working with issues of social difference has a rich history in the systemic and narrative approaches to therapy and training. In any situation these issues may vary between being: visible and voiced; visible and unvoiced; invisible and voiced; and invisible and unvoiced, and all movements in between. Yet all issues of social difference are continuously important and influential in the co-creation of contexts for therapy and learning. All practitioners, by dint of their own experience, skills and preferred ways of practising will have their ‘favourite’ issue/s to explore that are within their ‘comfort zone’ (e.g. Wilson, 2007), that they privilege, feel most passionately about, and feel more skilled in attending to in their practice. Each of us, for a variety or reasons, will also find certain issues outside our ‘comfort zone’ and which tend towards becoming subjugated in our practice, sometimes without even noticing this is happening. Using the acronym Social GRRAACCEESS can assist practitioners in being mindful

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about a range of differences, and generating a desire to extend their practice beyond their current abilities. This paper will explore how different aspects of experience can be brought forth through creating methods of supervisory practice that make differences explicit and open to development.

Social GRRAACCEESS: What does it ‘stand for’?

This acronym, and its variations, has been developed between Burnham (1992, 1993) and Roper-Hall (1998, 2008) since its origins in 1990. In Burnham’s version of the acronym the letters ‘stand for’:

- Gender
- Race
- Religion
- Age
- Ability
- Class
- Culture
- Ethnicity
- Education
- Sexuality
- Spirituality

This linear list offers clarity, but it fails to embrace the complexity involved, and besides people don’t ‘live’ in a list. So this acronym also ‘stands for’ a position that says these aspects of experience are important, interrelated and constitutive of a person’s experience in all aspects of their life, and therefore important for all participants in the endeavours of therapy, training and supervision. Social GRRAACCEESS may be usefully visualized as a tapestry or kaleidoscope in which the constituent parts will wax and wane in any person’s practice, over time and in relation to what is permitted to be discussed in any particular relationship.

Developing and extending GRRAACCEEFUL abilities in training and supervision

Adult education and theories of learning also provide a resource for thinking about social GRRAACCEESS, and in particular how to creatively manage the relationships of power inherent in training
relationships. Heaphy (2000) reviewed the literature up to 2000. Since then, Burnham and Harris (2002), Divac and Heaphy (2005), Mills-Powell and Worthington (2007), and Karamat (2007) have continued this potentially rich vein.

A process of learning is at the centre of systemic supervision, whether it is connected to formal training or not, and so using educational and learning theories alongside systemic and narrative theories is potentially enriching (e.g. Burnham, 1993; Burnham and Harris, 2002). hooks (1994) suggests that the structure of participation in classrooms is shaped by *racism, sexism and class elitism* before any class discussion begins. Distinctions between different kinds of learning are often made by *age* (Knowles, 1990); while Brookfield (1995) proposes that *culture* may be more influential than age. Early research into adult learning focused on men, but generalized the results to women also. Belenky *et al.* (1986) repeated this research with women from a variety of *cultures, social classes, sexualities, ages and educational levels*. Among other things, she proposes moving from a ‘banking model’ in which teachers deposit, and students withdraw true knowledge, to ‘connected teaching’ in which teachers are to be ‘midwives’ helping students to give birth to their own knowledge. Fenwick (1999) reviews a radical cultural perspective of education and learning, and cites Giroux and McLaren (1994), Freire (e.g. 1998) and hooks (1994) in support of the view that ‘relations and practices related to dimensions of race, class, gender, and other cultural/personal complexities, determine flows of power which in turn determine different individuals’ ability to participate meaningfully in particular practices of systems’ (Fenwick, 1999, p.4).

Our reading of these educators supports the view that the social *GRRAACCEESS* and relations of power are interwoven in the educational context. We (trainers and trainees) can use different reflexive abilities to make a difference that makes a difference. Each participant in the training can maintain their coherence (I-identity) while changing, through practices of self-reflexivity, while all participants can achieve coordination (We-identity) (Lang and McAdam, 2001) using relational reflexivity (Burnham, 2005; Neden and Burnham, 2007).

**From theory to practice: How did we do what we did?**

We, as trainers, propose that we can practise Social *GRRAACCEESS*, at all levels of approach, method and technique (Burnham, 1992,
1993), within the training context. It is important to create changes both within a broad philosophy and within the small and ordinary practices of training.

We have chosen to deconstruct this episode of practice because of the effects on each person in the group, the rituals through which training is performed and the power relationships between the participants involved in training. The example occurred spontaneously, seemed useful and triggered us to reflect on what had happened. We reflected on it in preparation for the AFT/EFTA conference and then again writing this paper. Thus this is, probably, the third or fourth round of reflection. The ‘neatness’ with which we present this example was not present in the example itself.

The exercise took place at the beginning of the second term in the third year of a four-year training. The training team comprised: three white British female therapists in training on the Parkview qualifying course as systemic psychotherapists (Lisa W, Jan S and Clare W); a white British, male supervisor (John B); and a female, mixed-race, Latin American supervisor in training, with KCC Foundation (Diana AP). Even though the group members were predominantly white, there were significant differences in relation to the social GRRAAC-CEESS. Some were visible and voiced: age, ability, ethnicity, gender; others were invisible and voiced: religion; education and experience, sexuality, and class. (There may be others that are invisible, and are, as yet, unvoiced.) The extent and ways that these aspects were explicitly and implicitly influential in the life of the group waxed and waned over time. Many, though not all, differences had been enacted, discussed, debated and experienced as prejudice, preference and areas of learning in contexts of seriousness, intoxication and humour. On the occasion about which we write, the group were engaged in a videotape review, using, as was usual for us, a reflecting team ritual Andersen (1987). Rituals guide who speaks, to whom, when and with what authority. John B was reviewing a tape with Lisa W. Diana AP was with the other two trainees acting as a reflecting team (RT).

In opening the conversation, Lisa said that she ‘hated video reviews’ as she always felt she was being assessed (in contrast to John B, who ‘loved’ video reviews as a context for supervision). John B noted that he was holding the remote control and asked Lisa W if she would like to hold and use the remote control, so that she could decide when and for how long to pause and discuss her work. Lisa W
accepted the invitation. John B then invited Diana AP to reposition intellectually and physically, from being a member of the RT, to a position where she was able to supervise him. From this position she would be able to ‘pause’ him during the video review and to ask him to ‘reflect in action’ (Schön, 1987) through questions about his practice/intentions during the video review.

After this multi-layered supervisory conversation ended, there was an invitation to participate in different conversations that generated multiple levels of feedback. Lisa chose to comment on her experience first. Next, other trainees reflected together; then supervisor and supervisor-in-training reflected; and finally, as a whole group, we discussed outcomes of the episode and learning for the future.

Reflection on practice: What do we think and feel about what we did?

The reflections from the participants in the exercise unfolded the differences that influenced/were influenced by the process of learning. This episode reflexively influences our training relationship, identities and group culture. It creates a ‘revelatory experience’ for all three authors.

Trainee (Lisa W) Reflections

In my portfolio I wrote:

The effect of these conversations was for me to notice and discuss for the first time my repositioning of John from being my assessor to being my supervisor (a preferred story about the definition of our relationship).

The relationship with Diana also strengthened/different – seen her thoughtfulness, competence and ways of asking questions connected with how perhaps I’d like to ask them (as a woman).

More curious about her [Diana’s] position as trainee supervisor and also perceived her ‘strength of character’ – so that I was able to bring things up with her more easily.

During the session I was aware that the process between Diana and John was the ‘same’ as between John and myself [White and Russell (1997)] – asking questions
about self-reflexivity and intentionality. This somehow helped to shift preconceived ideas about the ‘experts/educators’ knowing best and having the right answers.

Personally, I think it was important for me as a woman to see another woman asking John these questions – related to ideas of power and male authority.

It created a context for talking about relationships as a team in a different way. I can’t remember a time on the course or in agency consultations with John where I had seen these kinds of questions asked of him.

Lots of transparency and relational risk-taking [Mason, 2005] – for me and John (?) to do it this way [public reflexivity, Hawes, 1993].

I definitely developed a new relationship with the remote control – I decided to have the remote during viva!’

The interchanges surrounding the writing of this paper triggered further conversations around those aspects of social GRRAACCEESS that had been visible and unvoiced and thus became available for deconstruction. Lisa wrote to John in an e-mail:

In understanding the supervisory relationships, I think that education in terms of experience, both clinical and academic was at the forefront. This also speaks to age (ideas of being older and wiser!) and time in the job. Until recently, I have viewed myself as inexperienced and placed both you and Diana in the ‘experienced’ group.

As a new ‘grace’ maybe, I think physical presence or size was important. This may seem a little daft, but Diana as a small, petite lady (especially as I consider you (John) as quite tall, with quite a presence) with so much knowledge and experience (which I kind of experienced for the first time in this exercise – or at least in a different, more confident way) was also significant and I think has some personal connections for me about also being very short and having had quite a hard time in the past for being so short and at times, people still comment on how short I am.

And about the exercise in particular:

It has definitely helped with watching videotapes of practice and helped me to realize that I could be self-reflexive as well as self-critical.

Because the processes of supervision were so public, I think it has helped me to think and develop my own ideas and skills about being a supervisor.
I wondered . . . was this spontaneous decision to actively experiment [Kolb (1984)], experienced as a confirmation of traditional power relations, or a genuine attempt to extend the available repertoire of potential ways of relating between the training group?

I was pleased that I had offered Lisa the option of taking the remote control, rather than saying 'Here you take the remote', and delighted when Lisa decided to take and actively used the remote control. She seemed to be pleased with taking this action.

I wondered what would happen when Diana accepted the invitation to prompt and guide the process of ‘reflection-in-action’ [Schön, 1987] between Lisa and myself. I had faith in Diana’s abilities, and wondered if Lisa would experience it as an enhancement of her video review or a distraction. This was a regular dilemma when training therapists and supervisors simultaneously [Breunlin et al., 1988]. This process also seemed to be a kind of ‘public reflexivity’ [Hawes, 1993].

As the process unfolded I experienced Diana’s competence at different levels in the difference in when and how she interrupted to ask questions, compared to when I would have done so. This enabled my learning too.

I was excited at finding another exercise that potentially integrates the training needs of both therapists and supervisors in training without feeling that to do one neglects the other.

In the process of reflecting on this experience in the writing of this paper, I ‘googled’ ‘remote control and gender’ and was interested to find a range of papers which could serve as contexts as to what had happened. Holding and using a remote control device has been explored in many ways including in relation to gender, age, close relationships, sexuality and employment status.

David Morley interprets the remote control as a ‘highly visible symbol of condensed power relations’. As one girl put it, ‘Dad keeps both of the automatic controls – one on each side of his chair.’ Morley continues: ‘domestic power is ultimately a fragile and somewhat insecure thing’ (Morley, 1986, p. 150).

David Gauntlett and Annette Hill (1999) develop Morley’s research further: ‘Hogging the remote may not represent a “real” articulation
of power, despite the effort to reassert his supremacy in the household, especially not for unemployed men.’

Alexis Walker (1996) considered that her research confirmed that partners in close relationships ‘do gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and exercise power even in their ordinary everyday behaviour, and specifically in their selection of television programming via a remote control device (RCD).

It could be that we can apply the same kind of thinking to training processes, not only in relation to the remote control, but in relation to how we ‘do’ other aspects of the training relationship.

Supervisor in training (Diana’s) reflections

As ‘learning always relates, in one way or another, to what has gone before’ (Boud and Walker, 1993, p. 8), I will contextualize my reflections by describing my relationship with the group of trainees and the supervisor prior to this exercise. Although, I was in the second year of my training as a supervisor, I had not supervised an ‘all-white’ group before. In one of the conversations we had about learning, the trainees mentioned how useful it had been to have two supervisors with different teaching styles, and they defined mine as reflexive and emotional which I connect to my gender, and my Latin American background. At that stage, I had noticed that the context and style of communication that we privileged for our conversation (the trainees and I) were different when the supervisor (John B) was or was not in the room. I have also noticed how stories of age and expertise (older and more experienced people know better) were informing my ability (disability) to position as supervisor in the room when the supervisor was also present.

The invitation to interview the supervisor fitted well with my learning process at the time. The feedback that the students gave me about my teaching style led me to appreciate what I had and, at the same time, encouraged me to try new ways to expand my repertoire; this invitation seemed the perfect occasion to do so.

The questions I asked to the supervisor were driven by a genuine curiosity for the supervisor’s choices and the process of supervision. I will describe my position for asking questions as a position of respectful curiosity. My curiosity was responding to the supervision process, the supervisors’ questions, the trainee’s answer and my/our own learning and dilemmas.

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For the purpose of this paper, I will organize a sample of the questions to the supervisor in:

- Question addressed to understand how the supervisor makes reflexive choices between alternatives (‘I notice at this point you decided to follow that idea . . . how come?’).
- Questions addressed to make the supervisor’s intentions transparent (‘What was your intentionality in asking that question?’).
- Questions addressed to see how the supervisor noticed the effect of his questioning (‘What did you make of Lisa’s response?’).

Before the exercise I was more aware of the similarities between myself and the trainees and the differences with the supervisor; after the exercise, through the repositioning (physical and relational), I became more aware of differences from the trainees and similarities with the trainer.

As a trainee supervisor I was pleased to:

- Witness the effect of my questions on John’s supervision of Lisa and it greatly contributed to my story of competence as supervisor.
- Learn from seeing the supervisor being reflexive and accountable for his choices. It appeared to me as an innovative way to encourage reflexivity and reversing the ‘traditional’ complementary relationship between trainers and trainees.

We have not included the voices of the other two trainees as, when we asked them to contribute their reflections for the presentation (several months later), they could not, despite considerable prompting, remember it happening! This, for us, was surprising, but is helpful in reminding us that the significance and effects of any training episode within a team will nevertheless be particular to each participant.

From practice back to theory: how does what we did extend our understanding of theories which contextualized what we did?

In a postmodernist view, learning is a process of continuously questioning prevailing representations of teacher/learners and learning. It challenges the assumption of what is to be included or excluded as normal, right or good; a continuous process of reflecting and challenging what we know and how we know it. This exercise made visible the tension in the relationship between trainees and trainers,
and rendered it available for deconstruction. As is often the case, Bateson’s concept of ‘both-and’ (Bateson, 1973) is relevant here. In systemic training, the supervisory relationship is shaped both by contexts of assessment – coherent with a modernist story of education, and stories of collaboration – coherent with a postmodernist story of education. Trainers/trainees have to coordinate their relationships in both of these contexts, sometimes sequentially, often simultaneously.

In a formal training context we cannot remove traditional hierarchical relationships, but we can find ways of achieving collaboration within hierarchies. As a supervisor in training (Diana) I will argue that more attention needs to be given to the struggle in achieving collaboration in training and working contexts in which hierarchy, assessment and power differences shape relationships and participants’ rights, duties and responsibilities. Brookfield (1995) points out the importance of educators’ reflections on their own struggles as critical learners and how they are valuable in helping educators to work with others in critical processes. It is particularly relevant for supervisors in training (in contexts of live supervision of supervision, for example) who have to achieve voice and professional competence in a flow of complex power dynamics between supervisor and supervisor in training and trainees where their position may be a disadvantaged one.

Thus collaboration to be effective must avoid obscuring the relations of power within supervision. As Hawes (1993) puts it so eloquently: ‘the supervisory relationship and the persons within it must become objects of supervision discourse in order to avoid the potential pitfalls of collaborative supervision.’ Reflexive collaboration is necessary to make explicit the hierarchical relationship within which collaboration becomes possible. The episode of supervision described in this paper invites the participants to reverse the traditional complementary relationship between supervisor and supervisor in training, generating a conversation which influences (in action) the process of supervision. It brought forth the supervisor’s process through questions which require him to be explicit/disciplined about his practices of reflection-in-action. Most important, it attended to how the participants’ position in relation to the Social GRRAACCESS greatly influenced and was influenced by the process of learning.

Differences (Social GRRAACCEES) are always present, and so there are important questions to ask when we participate in creating supervisory relationships in episodes of supervision:
• What similarities/differences are visible/voiced?
• What similarities/differences are visible/unvoiced?
• What similarities/differences am I aware of in this moment/relationship?
• What differences do we want to name and what differences do we want to silence?
• What differences do we want to preserve and what differences do we want to integrate?
• What is the need in the moment, and does this require emphasizing difference or integration?

We would propose that differentiation, from one another, is achieved through awareness and exploration of a person’s coherence in relation to each of the Social GRRAACCEESS, which requires self-reflexivity. Integration with one another we see as being achieved through collaboration between differences and requires ‘relational reflexivity’ (Burnham, 1993, 2005). This is defined as:

the intention, desire, processes and practices through which therapists and clients, (or trainers and trainees) explicitly engage one another in coordinating their resources so as to create a relationship with therapeutic potential. This would involve initiating . . . responding to . . . and developing opportunities to consider, explore, experiment with and elaborate the ways in which they relate.

(Burnham, 2005)

Thus we are constantly moving in between cultural differentiation (developing our emerging coherence through practices of self-reflexivity) and cultural integration (creating patterns of coordination through relational reflexivity).

Conclusions

Learning is a context in which social differences emerge, and social differences shape the process of learning.

If we look at the list of Social GRRAACCEESS,

Gender,
Race
Religion
Age
which ones were explicitly privileged in the ‘doing’ of this example? Which ones have been developed in preparation for presentation to an audience at a conference and then developed further in writing for publication? Which ones have not been explicitly discussed? If you were to ask questions of the participants in the training exercise to ‘bring forth’ and make explicit those aspects that are, at this stage, only implicit by their presence on a list, what might these questions be or what would the comments sound like?

In learning about difference, and considering differences in learning, we may become overly influenced by an idea that if only we can understand our own coherence through a process of self-reflexivity, and coordinate with others through relational reflexivity, then we have more control or influence over how to go on in the practices of difference. However, we are reminded by Barnett Pearce about mystery and its merits:

Mystery is the recognition that the human condition is more than any of the particular stories that make it coherent or any of the particular patterns of coordination that construct the events and objects of the social order. Mystery is a reminder of the fallibility of the process of social construction of reality, and of our emancipation from any particular set of stories and practices. It stands in opposition to those who would attempt to impose an over restrictive ‘rationality’ on the stories and coordinated patterns of action in which we live.

(Pearce, 1989, p. 23)

References


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