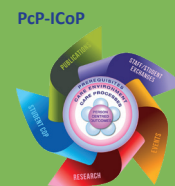


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ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

Navigating new waters together using critical creativity

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Abstract

Background: This article is about our experience of, and inquiry into, using critical creativity as we learned to live with the unknown and to fly the mandalas of critical-creative companionship and critical creativity. It is about letting go, flowing the other way and trusting our 'in-body knowing' as we navigated the uncharted waters in which we found ourselves. The inquiry was supported by the inaugural Angie Titchen Award (2019).

Aim: Our aims at the outset were: for Margaret, to embed and embody the mandalas in her facilitation of the everyday in practice and life; and for Angie, to deepen her understanding of her own tacit, professional artistry of critical-creative companionship as she helped Margaret use the mandalas in her everyday nursing leadership and facilitation. When unforeseen global, community and personal events struck, we flowed into working together virtually in ways that deepened our critical-creative companionship and enabled us to flourish.

Methods: Alone and together, we captured our experiences and understandings using body/cognitive senses, connecting with Nature, reflexive conversations, stories, poems, symbolism, metaphor, creative writing and artistic expressions. We used a layered, storybook approach to show:

- Our adventures of experiences, co-learning and discovery
- How critical-creative co-learning through inquiry is done
- The impact on us and our practices in various phases (chapters)
- Stepping stones to help readers into new ways of seeing, knowing, being and becoming through a practice-before-theory approach.

Conclusion: The purpose of this article is to help readers step into the complexity, mystery and magic of the mandalas, getting a feel for what they might mean and then be drawn into exploring them theoretically and experientially with a critical ally or companion.

Keywords: Critical-creative companionship, experiential learning, co-learning through inquiry, professional artistry, pandemic, whole-person-centred learning, critical creativity

Navigating new waters together using critical creativity



Navigating new waters,
Moving out from the edge, through portals of change to deep water
Awakening core, strength and treasures remembered
Gently cradling the yet to be revealed

Being supported,
and comfortable with, starting
an inquiry 'back to front' or 'flowing the other way',
i.e. with no firmly determined destination.
Other than open inquiry questions and a commitment
to use a critical-creative inquiry approach.

Also learning how to do it
through practice/experience first
and then theory,
at the right time.

The thrill of it all
gliding backwards, looping and turning
safe in the light of a companion's torch.
Sharpening focus for little things,
the doodle in the corner.
Curiosity and patience,
Power-tools of flight

The power of letting go,
then plunging into and embracing the unknown
Symbols, metaphors and artistic expression effectively
holding our co-learning and co-inquiry
together

Margaret's new term,
Deepening and expressing '*in-body knowing*'. I love it!
Co-learning and holding that space

Surrender to *Movement in Stillness*
Working in and with Nature, ancient wisdom
and creative expression leads to deep insights and development
of the more explicit dimensions of professional artistry.

As well as uncovering its hidden processes
that show up or backlight the dimensions.

This deepening and developing
may not occur so readily,
or at all, with purely
cognitive approaches.

How long it took
for Margaret to embed and embody the mandalas
in her learning and practice and how the critical-creative companion knows this has to be.
The slow start and commitment to pointing the mandalas out for a long time
requires patience. As learning builds momentum to a torrent.

This is truly exhilarating when it happens
for the critical-creative companion,
as well as the person learning!

Simplicity in complexity
comes through naming parts and whole
of theoretical, methodological and flourishing mandalas.
In the midst of action we analyse and evaluate what is happening.
Professional artistry reveals ourselves to ourselves, clarifies contexts and cultures.

We sense possibilities, create different patterns
of understanding and take informed action.
Margaret's symbolising mandalas as satnav is inspired.
A system powered by professional artistry

With the gift of the virus
boundaries cleared, within and between,
Bedrock transformed
Welcome new landscape
Becoming fluent in language of explorer, equipped to discover more
As we end, I start to truly know and
love the mandalas!

Insightful feedback
succinct, immediate, poetic helped
Angie better understand herself as co-learner
inquiring with another. Feeling truly held and valued
One Margaret, one Angie Flourishing.
Bringing our personhood, our whole selves
To our companionship.

Welcome and introduction

Our opening poem is a free-flow expression of the language and experiences we shared as critical-creative companions during an inquiry journey made possible by the Annual Angie Titchen Award (2019, see below). It summarises our story, charting our navigation through new waters as we learned to live with the unknown, doing critical creative co-inquiry in challenging times that led to our human flourishing. Our co-inquiry centres around using the mandalas of critical creativity to better understand ourselves as person-centred learners and facilitators (see below). Our storybook is written particularly with readers in mind who are new to critical creativity and would like to build their knowledge about how/where to start. It is also for facilitators who would like to develop their understanding of how they can use and bring to life the mandalas when acting as critical-creative companions for others.



Critical creativity

Critical creativity is a new paradigm or 'landscape' for person-centred learning and facilitation of learning, practice development, research and education that leads to human flourishing for all involved. In terms of its philosophical foundation or 'bedrock', it synthesises person-centredness (McCormack and McCance, 2017) and critical, aesthetic and metaphysical assumptions and principles (Titchen et al., 2017). It evolved through three decades of work of which Angie has been a part (for example, McCormack and Titchen, 2014; Titchen and McCormack, 2020).

Critical creativity is expressed through three mandalas- theoretical, methodological and human flourishing. A mandala is an ancient symbol that, in critical creativity, shows the parts and whole of theoretical, methodological and human flourishing principles and elements, and the relationships between them. Working in Nature, drawing on multiple knowledges and intelligences and using artistic, as well as, cognitive methods are key. Critical-creative companionship and its professional artistry are also expressed as mandalas and are used in this new landscape (Titchen, 2018).

Margaret: For me, our co-inquiry has been an exhilarating journey of self-discovery and transformation as my critical and creative practices evolved. Embodying these practices changed my way of being, seeing, knowing and doing in relation to all aspects of my life, not only my work. With Angie's help, I awakened to the wealth of resources available to me, particularly the hidden reserves and strengths stored deep within myself that I had forgotten about. Surfacing these strengths helped me navigate and swim through the uncharted waters of life into which I was suddenly plunged. Working with the mandalas helped me cope and flourish through very tough times.

Angie: It was a privilege to learn and inquire with Margaret. I intentionally role-modeled and shared my practical knowhow of embodying the mandalas and embedding them through my critical-creative companionship with her. Margaret gave me feedback that enabled me to become more effective as a co-learner/inquirer with her and helped me deepen my understanding of the hidden professional artistry of dancing with the mandalas.

Each chapter in our storybook shows different phases and incremental levels of learning over time. Using extracts of our meeting records, reflective and reflexive accounts of action, critical-creative dialogue, creative imagination, stories, poems, symbolism, metaphor and artistic expressions, we show how we worked together, cognitively and creatively, melding and blending inquiry methods as we went. There aren't rigid boundaries as in data gathering, analysis, interpretation, evaluation and so on. Rather, what we have created is a holistic storybook where the traditional research format of literature review, description, analysis, evaluation and critique are melded and blended into a whole – a story of words, poetry, colour and imagery. The experiences we recount provide real-time examples of how, with Angie's help, Margaret's practice evolved and transformed as she embraced letting go of traditional ways of thinking and being, and instead learned to trust her 'in-body' knowing and embody new ways of being and doing. Hence the writing focuses on Margaret's narrative, with Angie's professional artistry and practice wisdom shining through and showing up what is usually hidden.

Stepping into critical creativity often means doing things differently! Within critical-creative co-inquiry, methods such as those shown here are used to capture, make sense of, analyse, critique, evaluate and share new understandings and meanings that are critical/aesthetic/metaphysical in nature. They include the whole of ourselves using different knowledges and intelligences.

We know from experience that it is challenging to understand and learn to use the critical creativity mandalas in practice. So we show others how to role-model and live the mandalas in action and, importantly, how to talk about the 'mechanics' or 'steps and music' during actual experience or in critical-creative dialogue afterwards. We have found that a companion who helps us to move beyond theoretical understanding to embody and embed the mandalas in our practice is a must, and that it is best

to start with practice first and not theory. This is why in writing this article we have intentionally embedded and embodied some of the principles and elements of the mandalas without explaining or telling you theoretically what the parts and whole of the mandalas mean. Rather, in the story we point out, using italics, the principles and elements, and indicate which mandala we are talking about. So you first encounter them experientially and begin to make the meaning for yourself. We have also inserted green reflective boxes throughout to help you.

Should you choose to 'follow the breadcrumbs' to look at the theory and explanations of the mandalas as you go, then follow the links under Figures 1-4 and they will take you to an ebook in which the original papers are published. However, we do encourage you to try a less traditional way – namely, 'Practice first, then Theory' by just looking at the mandalas with soft eyes and letting the words, imagery, colour, movement and energy wash over you. Notice what you notice, what you see, feel and imagine. If you find you enjoy our story and want more, click on the links then.

So, the purpose of this article is to help readers step into the complexity, mystery and magic of the mandalas, getting a feel for what they might mean, and then be drawn into exploring them theoretically and experientially with a critical ally or friend (Hardiman and Dewing, 2014) or critical companion (Titchen and Hammond, 2020).

Figure 1: Critical creativity mandalas

Theoretical principles, bottom left; methodological principles, middle right; and elements of human flourishing, top left (McCormack and Titchen, 2006, 2014; Titchen and McCormack, 2010). All three publications can be downloaded for free in Titchen and McCormack, 2020 (chapters 5, 6 and 7). Chapter 2 in that publication shows how the mandalas work together in ‘dynamic dance’.

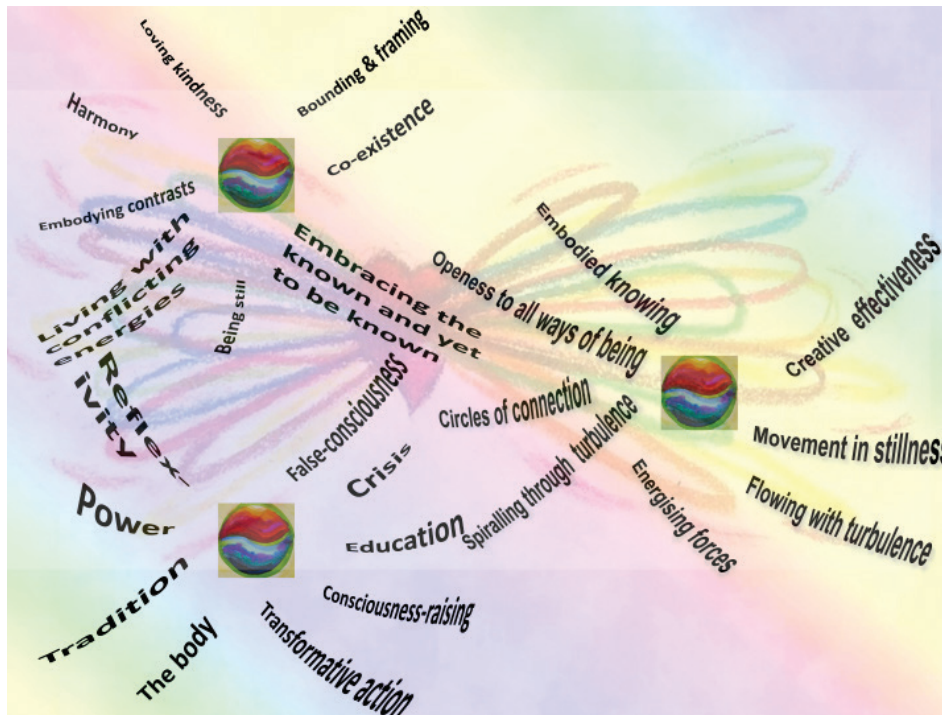


Figure 2: Critical-creative companionship (CC-C) (Titchen, 2001; Titchen and Hammond, 2017; Titchen and McCormack, 2020, chapters 8 and 17)

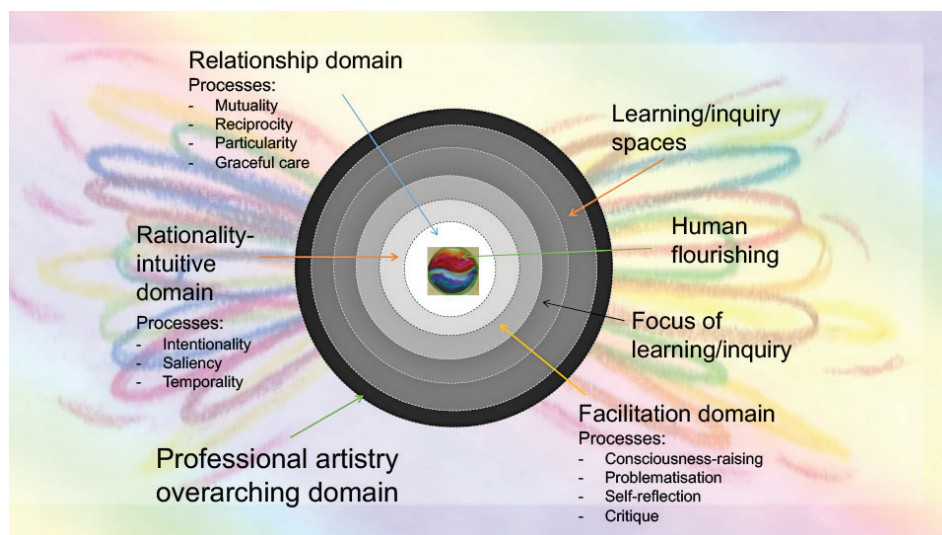


Figure 3: The explicit dimensions of professional artistry in critical-creative companionship

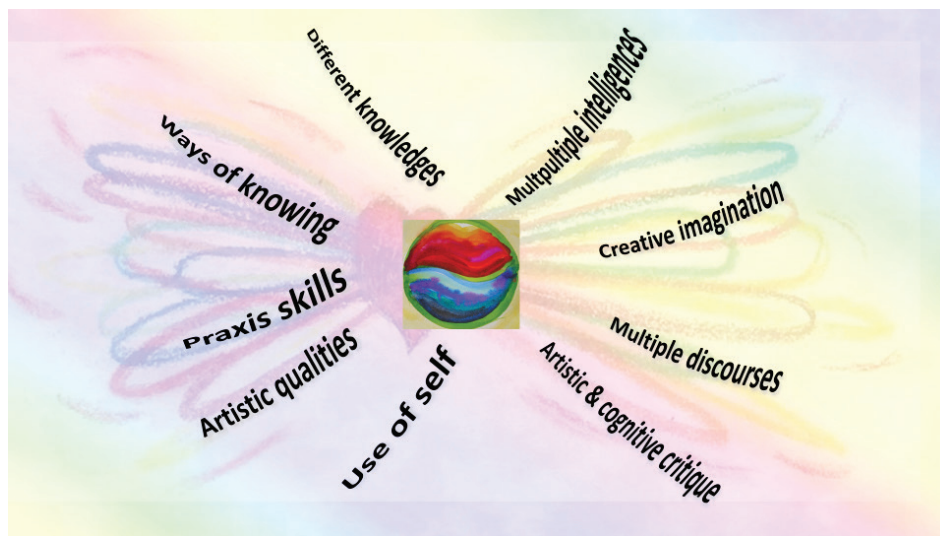
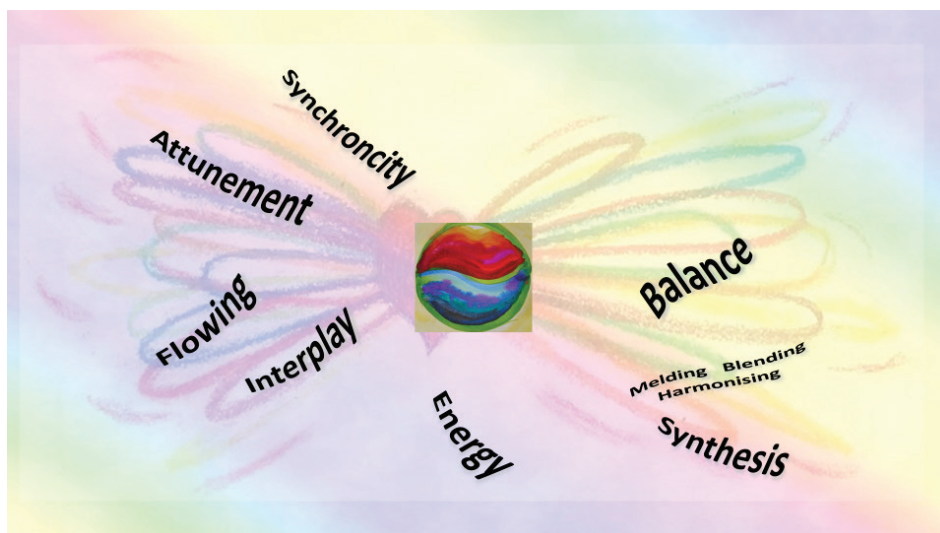


Figure 4: The more hidden professional artistry processes in critical creative-companionship that backlight the explicit dimensions



(Figures 3 and 4: Titchen, 2009; Titchen and McCormack, 2020, chapter 2)

To avoid possible confusion, you might like to print out the four mandalas above so you can look at them easily as you go, rather than endlessly scrolling! That is the way we do it ourselves!

Prelude to our journeys alone and together

Margaret: I was thrilled to have been selected for the inaugural Angie Titchen Award because every time I had worked with critical and creative processes in my professional practice, I had found them energising, refreshing and highly effective in getting to the heart of an issue or exploring new thinking. I flourished there.

At this time I was working in the National Quality Improvement Team in Ireland. We were halfway through an ambitious three-year project to introduce a National Programme to Enable Cultures of Person-centredness across the entire health service. It was a really generative time, when evidence about what was working and what needed to be changed was emerging and we were asking ourselves tough questions about the effectiveness of what we were doing. So to have the opportunity to work with Angie and hone my knowledge and skills in relation to critical creativity and person-centred facilitation was exciting and perfectly timed! I would say, though, that coming into this work the mandalas (critical creativity and professional artistry) were not to the fore in my mind. While I would refer to them at work, I hadn't yet taken them to heart in a meaningful way.

Angie: I was thrilled too when Margaret won the Angie Titchen Award. The prize was for the winner to be supported by me for one year, as critical-creative companions (C-CC), in undertaking a person-centred inquiry into some aspect of their practice. (Note, the abbreviation CC-C is used in this article to refer to both the Critical-creative companionship mandala and the critical-creative companion.) This is exactly what I love doing most in all my years of working in practice development and action-oriented research. I knew that Margaret already had some experience of working in this way, so I was very excited. The prize included a three-day critical-creative retreat with me and a visit from me to Ireland to work with her and her colleagues. We agreed that we would also meet virtually each month. Due to the pandemic, however, we were only able to meet once in person, but it always felt as though we were physically and soulfully together when on Skype or Zoom, because our three-day retreat experiences together in Nature had been so intense!

I explained to Margaret that C-CC involves a co-learner and inquirer with the person, group or organisation they are working with. So, while I would be helping her to find her own learning through inquiry question and ways of working, I too would be inquiring into how I helped her to go where she wanted to go. I wanted to deepen my understanding of the professional artistry of helping someone learn how to inquire into their own practice by using a critical creativity approach. I have been researching professional artistry through uncovering the hidden, tacit, embedded and embodied aspects of professional practice over 30 years, but there is always more to reveal and deepen!

Grief: preparing to let go of the technical me

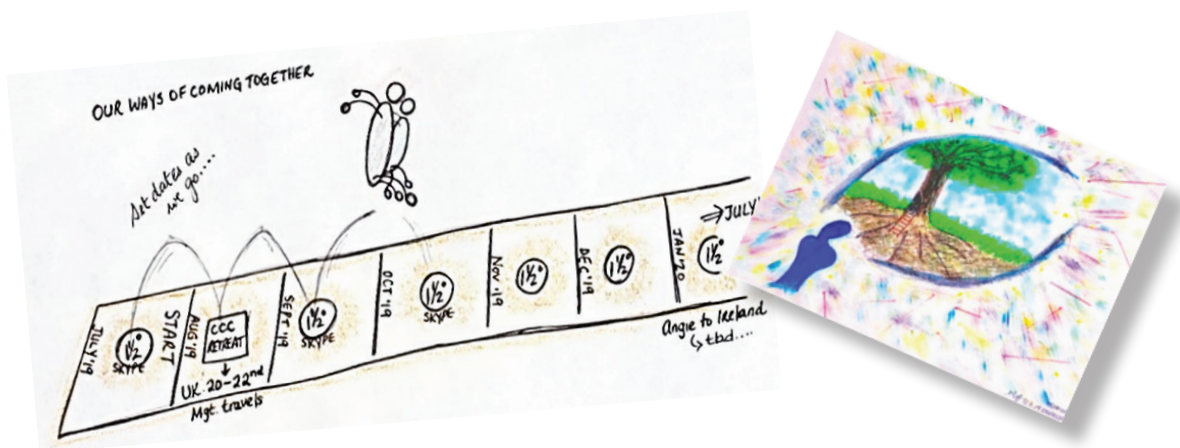
Margaret: The day before our first Skype call in July 2019, I felt the need to paint what was in my head as it would help get me into the zone for our meeting. The resulting image was light and airy, with gentle yet strong colours and lots of space and looseness. Yet the thought that kept coming to mind at the time was of **grief** at what I reckoned would be the last of the **old technical me** – the me I've known all my working life! That's **scary**, I wrote, will I miss it? **Why mourn it? Am I about to enter a place that'll change me – that is exciting, nerve-wracking, interesting, stimulating, fun all together?** And what of Angie? I wasn't sure what she expected or wished for herself from our collaboration? **I needed to ask** – otherwise how could I participate and enable her dream for this? **Wow! I want the year to go well, want Angie to enjoy working with me, want the best for both of us in this venture.** Later, when I shared the reflection with Angie, she responded:



Angie: *I have bolded the words that jump out at me – it seems that this actual reflective writing brought you to the ‘wow’ sentence at the end!? Is that the case?*

Margaret: *Yes, it was the act of writing and giving words to how I was feeling as I did the painting that brought me to the insight I describe.*

‘I love adventures,’ Angie said as we began that first call and I thought what lovely language to open our experience with! Using both cognitive and creative processes, we set the tone for how we wanted to work together and Angie led a visualisation exercise (Titchen, 2021) that enabled me to tap into my inner self and uncover what I wanted from our companionship. Gliding through a living light was a feature that came to the fore for me and Angie used this metaphor, of moving seamlessly between one task or topic and another, to begin a conversation about professional artistry.



‘Our ways of coming together’, as documented in our first meeting note, captured the carefree, playful yet systematic approach we adopted from the outset.

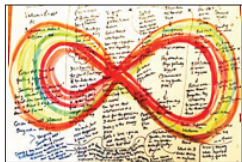
For both of us this was always as much about the journey as the destination. I could feel the collaborative spirit that came from Angie from the outset, an openness to let things happen and unfold. For me that was exciting. I was more than happy to take the plunge into the unknown and discover our path and destination together. It epitomised the true spirit of collaboration, unlike those times where an invitation to collaborate is really about joining a project to deliver predetermined outcomes in a predetermined way.

We left that first session with a plan to meet in a few weeks for our critical-creative retreat. To get me thinking, Angie left me with some enabling and challenging questions about my personal beliefs and values, the elements of professional artistry I exhibit in my work, my personal worldview and how it guides my practice.

Do you intentionally create a feeling of a collaborative spirit coming from you or do you rely only on talking about being collaborative?

Chapter 1: Learning to navigate

In this chapter we focus on experiences from our critical-creative retreat that demonstrate the importance of this time for getting to know each other and shaping the voyage we would take together. Our retreat took place in Angie's home in the Cotswolds, England in July 2019. In that sheltered haven (retreat) away from the hassles of everyday thinking and practice, we were able to immerse ourselves in the beautiful English countryside and focus on using critical and creative theories, methodologies and principles as critical-creative companions (CC-Cs). The stories we share in this chapter show how we used critical creativity to identify the issues/topics we wanted to explore together and how we would do it; how we identified the resources we had available to us and the ideas, 'hooks' and language that would help us navigate this journey together. It describes too the figure-of-eight symbol that became meaningful for us and provided the shape that would hold our learning together for our entire journey.



help us navigate this journey together. It describes too the figure-of-eight symbol that became meaningful for us and provided the shape that would hold our learning together for our entire journey.

Have you noticed how 'turning things around' can change our understanding? For example:
Treat: gift, indulgence, delight. To make better or salve.
Re-treat: to treat again, a haven, sanctuary, to withdraw.

Margaret: Coming into the retreat I was conscious of stepping, physically and metaphorically, into Angie's world. Angie knew this world so well and knew just how to create the conditions that would maximise the experience for us both. Every day she checked in to see, 'What do you need today – do you have an inquiry question today?' That 'starting where the other person is at' (*Particularity* or Getting to know the person – C-CC) was to become a key learning that had an immediate and significant impact on my work when I got home (*Saliency*, i.e. knowing what matters – C-CC).

Finding hidden treasure

From the outset Angie helped me to become aware of and recognise the multitude of resources that were available to help me maximise this journey of discovery. Going down the lane on our first walk together, Angie stopped to study the wall, the stones and the vegetation. She told me later she was *Role-modeling* (C-CC) a key lesson about slowing down, taking the time to appreciate things and making space for things to happen. The power of this really came to the fore a little while later when we stopped to pick blackberries:

'...they tasted so "real"...they reminded me of my youth. Angie squashed one of them in her notebook "to bring me back to this time, place and space" (Temporality – C-CC) during our year-long inquiry together.'

As I ate the blackberries, stories and memories about growing up in rural Ireland poured out. That simple act unlocked a treasure trove of wealth that I had stored deep within myself and forgotten about – stories of 'Mag's notions' and the 'radical deviant acts' of my past to name a few. By creating a space and listening, Angie had helped me to open into it and to shine a light on this wealth of past learning and knowing, 'enlightening' me about resources that I had available and could draw on at any time – *Consciousness-raising* – C-CC, *Ways of knowing*, *Creative imagination* and *Different knowledges* – professional artistry. Angie's challenge for me was brilliant – to breathe new life into them, reshape and reframe them (Bounding and framing – Human flourishing) so they became part of my valued competence that I could use as practice wisdom with others.

Later, when we sat in silence painting, some cows came over to see what we were doing. They came close and were so curious, they just stood staring. We were doing nothing and they found that fascinating! 'It reminded me of how a critical creative companion sometimes holds the space for the unknown to unfold', Angie said later (*Embracing the known and yet to be known* – Human flourishing).



Encircled by bullocks,
I was struck by their
focus. Just looking and
waiting

Imagery from Retreat Day 1: (L to R) Margaret's painting, cows, Angie's painting, poem and squashed blackberry

Angie: On that first day I was intentionally role-modeling for Margaret (*Intentionality – C-CC*) and trusting that using my body senses and creative expression, in connection with Nature, would enable something new and perhaps bizarre to emerge! During our walk and painting I held the space for Margaret, and gradually deep and difficult insights emerged for her. Later, I helped her to work with those insights using the question, 'How can I help Margaret to transform old thinking to new thinking?' (*Tradition – Theoretical mandala*), with a sub-question of, 'How can I help Margaret to use story to transform culture?'

I used this space to share something too of the nature of practice wisdom and its role in the professional artistry of a transformational facilitator/critical-creative companion. Practice wisdom is widely held to be a meld of three dimensions within professional artistry: multiple knowledges, intelligences and ways of knowing (Figure 3). My work suggests that this is achieved through the other dimensions, also in Figure 3, and supported by the professional artistry processes in Figure 4. I have been trying to bring these dimensions and processes to Margaret's attention throughout our C-CC, as shown in 'Turning things around'.

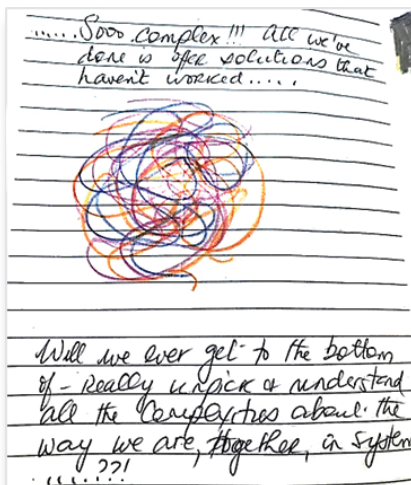
Turning things around



Another key learning that reverberated throughout our experiences together was the idea of turning things around, flowing the other way. It had surfaced on day 1 when Angie turned her 'sky-dome' painting around and it became something completely different for us.

Angie: My painting is the blue dome of the sky when my eyes were open and then closed. It is the same light, but the dome of my eyelids created different worlds – cradling other directions, nurturing. Cradling something new - like a hen cradles an egg. I had gone almost completely into my body on the first part of our walk, opening up my senses and noticing what I noticed. I then turned the painting around and told you what I saw then – it was completely different (*Role-modeling and Articulating practice wisdom* (Titchen, 2019) – particularly the embodied and aesthetic knowing and intelligence of the professional artistry mandala released through *Creative imagination* and expression).

The next day when we stopped for lunch near the river, Margaret was drawn to a craggy outcrop overhanging the water. She said: 'As I approached I noticed that things were very different than they had first appeared. I had assumed the river was flowing in one direction, but now I realised that it was in fact flowing in the other, and with a sucking force, a noise and an energy that hadn't registered before.' Things are not always as they seem and quietly the horses grazing next door knew that!



Margaret: This idea of turning things around and flowing the other way became quickly relatable to my work on the programme in Ireland. My journal entry captures the *Crisis* – theoretical mandala, I felt as I arrived for our retreat. I was questioning the effectiveness of the approach we were using for the Irish context and wondering if perhaps it was really only effective in the specific, highly supported and reflective worlds of education, research and practice development. To help me unpick my thinking, Angie drew on the metaphors and language that had come up during our retreat and suggested that perhaps if I embodied what I believed, we would do it differently ('it' being the upcoming national programme day). This led to a discussion about how we might facilitate it differently, starting from where the participants are at and, just as Angie had done with me, when the time is right, weaving in the right amounts of theory,

change, evaluation and process, being explicit and drawing on past experiences as examples for others. Within minutes, I had changed my focus about the upcoming national programme day. Later, (Chapter 3) I discover that this way of working goes way beyond formal education, research and practice development, into deep learning about oneself.

Our rainbow infinity loop

To close our re-treat, Angie suggested we move with eyes open and closed, in silence in the garden, opening our senses to what emerged and recording it on flipchart paper. She offered to be timekeeper, but I was conscious that this might distract her from being able to participate fully and so offered to use the timer on my phone. Angie's response, 'I can inhabit both spaces at the same time', was so immediate and natural that it stayed with us, became a hook, an articulated touchpoint that brought everything together and become another expression of constantly 'flowing the other way'. It culminated in the spontaneous co-creation of the rainbow infinity loop on top of, and bringing together, our notes – an authentic artistic expression of the key insights that had emerged for us.



Encircled, entwined
Flow - no beginning, no end
Safe conversation

Angie: I immediately felt that our co-creation, and the way we did it, was a symbol that held together our whole retreat. I came rapidly to this view, not as a result of cognitive thinking about what would work as a closure, but through listening to what my body was telling me (*Role-modeling and articulating Embodied wisdom* – C-CC). My body felt good and genuinely satisfied in that space and told me that anything more would feel unnecessary and perhaps detract from our wonderful experience. I was using *Embodied wisdom* – Professional artistry to *Bound and frame* – Human flourishing, the retreat ending so that we would go away with a bounded/grounded sense of where we had arrived, in terms of our understanding and relationship and our departure for further work.

Margaret: I loved our retreat! It was magical and inspirational at so many levels. I will carry the feelings, memories and learnings within me for a very long time and I know I will tap into them and use them in whatever I am doing from here on.

Angie: As it turned out, that was the only time we were able to meet in person but magically, on different levels, our symbolic rainbow infinity loop held us together as we navigated and wove our insights together. As we parted, I offered to reveal how I danced the mandalas using my professional artistry as Margaret's critical-creative companion. We agreed that I would study myself and Margaret would tell me what she saw, heard, felt, imagined as we 'critical-creative companioned' each other.

Chapter 2: Bringing it home

In this chapter Margaret describes some of the ways in which she incorporated and continued to grow her learning when she returned to work in Ireland. How, from July to December 2019, she continued to navigate away from traditional thinking and practice as she embraced, at least cognitively, more person-centred and creative ways of being. At this early stage, Margaret was still reliant on Angie as 'knowledgeable companion' to point out the elements of the mandalas as they arose in her practice.

Margaret: We used our regular virtual meetings to re-create that sheltered space where we could share, listen, point things out and ask questions, letting the story unfold. By now my inquiry question about the programme in Ireland had evolved and I was asking myself, 'How am I using my *Embodied knowing* – Professional artistry to help me engage more authentically with participants on the national programme?' When I shared this with my co-facilitator and we talked about approaching the facilitation segment differently, she agreed without hesitation to go with a workshop approach. In fact, she pointed out, the lead for that segment hadn't been allocated yet because, as we then acknowledged, it just didn't feel right! The new approach felt much better and more authentic. It led to a really useful chat about using/not using our *Embodied knowing*. As Angie pointed out later, our redesign was based on our new insights into helping participants to learn by enabling them to:

- a) Surface their own practice and body wisdom of facilitating person-centred practice
- b) Access ours by *Observing, listening and questioning* (C-CC)
- c) *Role-model and articulate* (C-CC) what we were trying to do with them (in terms of facilitation) as soon as possible after we did it– as Angie had done with me throughout our retreat.

I realise now this was a turning point towards me using embodied practice wisdom alongside my cognitive knowing.

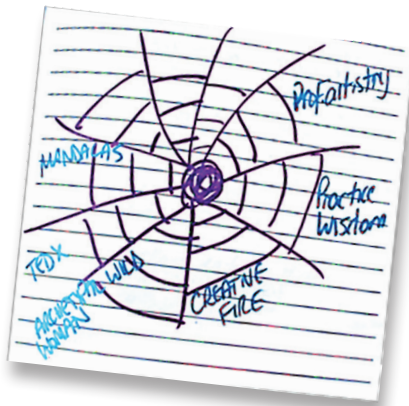
Weaving my own web

At times, I was bothered by my lack of theoretical knowledge in this field, which made me question my ability to be a leader in it! So I decided that what I needed to do was create my own web of learning – let go of my preconceived ideas about what I ought to know and pay attention instead to what I wanted to know and how I'd like to learn it. It was brilliant – liberating – and followed by a flourish of activity!

'Is this the beginning of *Bounding and framing* (Human flourishing mandala)?' Angie asked me.

I had to resist the urge to construct my web in the usual, technical way, and instead take out my paints and let my creative inner self take over. The result is the painting shown here which, for me, represents our initial meetings leading to what might be the beginning/readiness to jump into the fertile void. Angie pointed out that it was great to see principles from the theoretical critical creativity mandala beginning to emerge in my writing. My *False consciousness* overcome by recognising *Tradition* at play, along with *Crisis*. I was beginning to embody this mandala now and see its relevance to me personally as well as to my context.





Around this time too I felt the need to create a mandala of my learning, but I had to admit that I really didn't know what a mandala was! So following the breadcrumbs of my personal learning trail, I came to Mary Mulcahy's article (2013), and from there to [the blog](#), Angie's TED talk on flourishing (Titchen, 2015) and her recommendation of *Women Who Run With Wolves* (Pinkola Estes, 2008) which I loved! And so it continues, my trail has caught my attention and lured me in! I had no idea what my web/mandala would look like eventually, but it felt good, I was enjoying it.

The amount of 'extra' reading I managed to do between sessions was significant - way more than usual! In my notes I wrote that it felt like *'a soft and gentle trail that's meaningful to me... delicate, silky, flowy, a veil, not structured or sculptured. The pace and pressure feels right (very different than would normally be the case when there's "extra" to do')*. I wrote of being actively committed to this way of learning and how it is not a passive process. Reflecting on it all – the conditions and processes (creative, cognitive and active learning) that we were working with gave me a new level of appreciation about how I created and used them too in my work facilitating others.

Angie: Are you beginning to see something of *Synchronicity* and *Interplay* – professional artistry here?

Angie: 'It is so wonderful to work with someone prepared to embrace the unknown and work with it, who gets it on an experiential, embodied level first, then goes to the reading! I love your fertile void painting too – it seems very important to me in your journey of letting go to let come. I wonder if this is the beginning of your own professional artistry web – the dance behind the music/the light behind the leaves (professional artistry processes) revealing their true beauty!' What I was trying to do here within the C-CC mandala is raise Margaret's awareness of the need to be reflexive about what emerges through creative imagination and expression, in this case, her fertile void. So I was *Consciousness-raising, Problematising*, through a critical-creative critique.

It is likely that the steady evolution in practice described in this chapter would have continued as was, had it not been for the simultaneous arrival of the Covid 19 pandemic and Margaret being diagnosed with cancer. The disruptive jolt that resulted from these events propelled us into the next phase of our journey and though we didn't know it yet, provided the opportunity for even more powerful, transformational and experiential learning. The next chapter shows how Margaret's learning deepened as she learned to let go even more, embrace her in-body knowing, pay attention to and trust her whole self, as she navigated her way through these portals of *Crisis* to safety beyond.

Chapter 3: Navigating portals of *Crisis* from open seas to safety

Learning to navigate the uncharted waters of a diagnosis and treatment during a global pandemic was like being catapulted into open waves, churned and tossed in a sea of turbulence with nothing but uncertainty all around (*Crisis* – Theoretical creativity mandala). I could either swim or drown. I found myself leaning into person-centredness and critical creativity to help me swim, using it as a way of engaging with, capturing and 'being' in the midst of what I was going through. Angie pointed out that perhaps this '*Crisis* is an opportunity to learn more about yourself and about *Flowing with turbulence* – Methodological critical creativity mandala'. Practice first and now some theory!



Angie: Portals of *Crisis* as opportunity?

At this point we took a three-month break from our formal meetings but we stayed in touch, and soon our relationship became a person-centred friendship, supporting Margaret in learning to live with her diagnosis, rather than a C-CC role. Angie pointed out that this was *Graceful Care* – C-CC and *Loving Kindness* – Human flourishing in action and it felt absolutely appropriate to the context and the relationship we had developed.

Margaret: Between the swells and dips of rolling energy levels we used WhatsApp and email to reach out and maintain those important, gentle and supportive touchpoints. We shared experiences about what was happening, passing information back and forth, noticing what we noticed, sometimes laughing, having fun, being quiet, feeling the energy and harnessing it. Co-learning and holding that space.

Without doubt the things I'd been learning and practising over the previous three years were the things that sustained me and helped me through those times. I came to see the mandalas together as a kind of satnav system that provided information about where I was at and helped me interpret and describe what was going on around me. It took time to be able to read this new 'map', but the more familiar I became, the more I was able to use it to map my position and navigate where I needed to go – to safe harbour within and around me.

Satellite navigation or satnav
An autonomous geo-spacing
positioning system that tells
you where you are, what's
going on around you and/or
how to get to a place.

Awakening to the park

By now I knew the power of Nature and the value of tapping into that as I learned to live with the uncertainty of my current situation. One of the ways I did this is shown in the account of a walk I did in my favourite park in March 2020. Because I'd taken a new path, I was noticing things I hadn't seen before when all of a sudden I was distracted with a fierce, freezing wind that was so stunning I had to stop for a second to catch my breath. It was as if my old friend (the park) grabbed me and spoke to me directly. I became acutely aware of the noise the park was making – the grass, withered leaves, the trees, birds, water flowing, the voices of people carried on the wind and the city far away – it was so loud, almost deafening. I was hearing the park in a way I never had before. It brought home to me again that idea of 'going/flowing the other way' and the things that can happen.



Something changed for me in a very tangible way after that experience. In my current situation there had been times when darkness and anxiety became irrational and all-consuming, and when that happened I'd been using mindfulness and meditation to help calm my mind. On this day, for the first time, I was able consciously and successfully to interrupt and stop that reel from looping! It felt different, as if tapping into something at a different level. Thereafter it was even more of a joy to go the park, to see what it would say and what I would soak up next.

Angie: 'Oh, Margaret, this is so incredibly wonder-ful. It seems to me that you empowered yourself to step into your fertile void! And there you experienced at least two principles from the Methodological mandala, *Movement in stillness*, and through that movement you began *Flowing with turbulence*. Also, I can see elements of the Human flourishing mandala, your *Being still and Co-existence* with the park and with NATURE. This is a moment I have been patiently waiting for *Temporality* – C-CC mandala. By remembering how I helped you on our retreat, you were able to create conditions that enabled you to experience the mandalas in action in your life. A-MAZ-ING!

Patients – perspective transformed!

In a surreal kind of way Margaret felt that she had been looking at the things she was going through, as a person with cancer, and her engagements with different individuals through a person-centred lens. 'I could see practice wisdom and professional artistry just shine from my consultant, clinical nurse specialist and secretary. It was amazing to see it so clearly. It was intriguing to see these people dance and weave their layers of expertise and to feel included and part of it with them. The nurse in particular I described as being a *duvet of comfort* over those couple of weeks!



'Patient-centred care' reconsidered



The idea of movement, spiralling and dancing is now very strong for Margaret. 'I could see how the care team expertly and artistically danced with each other and then gently brought me into their troupe when I needed it. They taught me the steps I needed to know, listened and gave me support in a way that made me feel like the centre of it all. But I wasn't the centre of it all! This experience made me reconsider the concept of "patient-centred care" as it is still called in Ireland, and challenged the remnants within me about it as the only acceptable way of delivering healthcare. I really get now that it has to be equally about the team. They would continue their dance together long after I'd moved on and continue to build more skills and scientific intricacies as they go. And they have to be given the space and support to do that. The secret is that they welcome/embrace the likes of me and dance with me in ways that keeps the thing evolving and helps me to feel better as I leave them. This

realisation brought new insight that I have embodied and am using now in the way I approach and lead specific projects at work.'

What are your thoughts about the frequently assumed perspective of the 'patient' at the centre of the healthcare activity?

Movement in the stillness

As 'social isolation' and 'cocooning' became my norm, life slowed down and in the stillness (Human flourishing mandala) I began to appreciate things I hadn't had time to notice before! I was amazed at how much my body was telling me: exactly what to eat, how much, when to rest, move. And slowly, like the river on our retreat, I became aware of the energy around me starting to flow the other way! My confinement had given me a stability (rock-like) that I could use to help others, and that felt good. I could see it when:

- My friends who were redeployed to acute services rang and were comforted by reminders to listen to their gut, trust their valued competencies, be kind to those who expect too much of them, be strong in their own voice
- My sister, who was thrust into a position of responsibility in her hospital, asked me to send her a question every day about the high-level skills she was using as it helped her reflect, stay positive and keep her confidence in herself up
- When I told others about my meditation, some of them joined in too. I facilitated it initially, but as my energy levels changed my friend's daughter took over (December 2021). We became a diligent little group and still have our nightly meditation calls

Re-membering, becoming whole

I could see too, the impact that the learning from our inquiry was having on all aspects of my life and how the boundaries that remained between the different components were disappearing, as seen when Oliver offered to shave my hair. Neither Oliver nor I had done anything like this before, so we started by figuring out what he'd do and how he'd do it. Then Oliver stopped, took my hands and asked me a question I'll never forget: 'Before we start, what do you see as the end result of this?' I remember looking at him and thinking, he really wants to know what I want. I paused and thought about it for a second, beyond the act itself. That gentle, sincere question was the most empowering, brilliant and trust-generating question he could have asked. As a facilitator, it's embedded in my heart and brain forever the importance of understanding what the other person wants, whatever the collaborative endeavour may be. At a very deep level I knew there was no longer a work me, personal me, patient me, etc. There is just one me, one Margaret, re-membering and whole.



Angie: It is wonderful to see your courage and authenticity, Margaret, in your sharing of this story. This act is so personal, beautiful and a wonderful exemplar of *Particularity and Graceful care* – C-CC and *Loving kindness* – Human flourishing. You are truly mastering the art of storytelling to reveal hidden aspects of person-centred learning and facilitation.

Mandalas take flight

When I shared these reflections with Angie she responded with a poem (*Giving and Receiving Portals*) that she suggested I read aloud to myself and 'If you do, notice what, if anything, happens!' And that's when I got it! A magical moment when the mandalas took flight and I'd learned to fly, when the autonomic nervous system took over and it became effortless – like learning to drive a car, when mind and body become fluid. The following image was my way of holding the feeling I experienced as I read Angie's poem aloud, the back and forth, back and forth figure of eight, centred by love. The buzzing 'aliveness' I hadn't noticed until it was finished.



Sensing, re-turning,
Hearing movement in colour
Mandalas take flight

On reading Angie's poem I'd been amazed at the way she had taken the words from my reflection and, by changing the order of them and adding punctuation, was able sensitively and expertly to reshape my story to give it a new perspective, without losing the essence of what I was trying to say. For me, it encapsulated so many of the elements of critical-creative companionship (C-CC); deliberately using critical creativity (*Intentionality*) to make me more aware of my tacit and taken-for-granted knowledge about critical creativity and Professional artistry (*Consciousness-raising*), at the right time (*Temporality*), with mutual collaborative exchange of feelings and thoughts (*Reciprocity*) and knowing

Angie: Margaret is fluent now in recognising the parts of the C-CC mandala in her own experience. She is now pointing out the parts of herself without my prompting.

what is meaningful (*Particularity*) and important to me right now (*Saliency*) and all in a way that makes me feel personally valued and promotes emotional, psychological and intellectual growth (*Graceful care*). I distinctly remember thinking that Angie had taken no liberties with my words. Even though they were laid out and punctuated differently in her poem, I could feel the love and faithful care with which they had been handled.

Angie: I wrote the poem to awaken and deepen Margaret's awareness of her perspective transformation and emergence into embedded and embodied knowing of the mandalas. I used the Haiku form of a short verse of three lines with 5-7-5 words respectively (as shown above in Margaret's haiku and below in mine). This form helps us to get to the essence of what we want to say and I have found that most people can do this with ease often the first time they try.

Carpeted portal
Evening safety, freedom
Trees not scary now

Drawn in by green shoots
That's me, I say, tall, strong, gnarled
New wisdom budding

By reflecting Margaret's words back to her in a different form and inviting her to read the poem aloud, I knew from experience of working with Margaret and many others that she would sense, feel, hear and understand them with new, heightened awareness and sensitivity. I used the metaphor of 'portals' that I had introduced Margaret to on the first day of our retreat, as the place of transition from one physical, metaphysical, symbolic space to another. I knew that she understood this with the **whole of herself** (mind, heart, body and soul), so I was building on that to help her better understand her current challenging and scary situation and move through a portal from *Crisis* to *Transformation* – CC Theoretical.

Have you noticed that the centre of our rainbow figure of eight is a portal? A portal of 'back and forth'. We only realised that when we were writing this article!

Margaret: Angie's poetic and subsequent responses to my reflexive account brought the Professional artistry mandalas together for me too in a way I hadn't experienced before. I could feel the *Energy*, *Flow* and *Interplay* of hidden processes that were palpable in the back and forth of our communication. The fun and *Creative imagination* of responding to each other in different ways. It was a flourishing time. I could see Angie's insight and wisdom in relation to what would be helpful for me and how she responded to me at that time. It spoke to her use of *Multiple intelligences*, *Ways of knowing*, *Attunement and Synchronicity* and *Praxis skills* in the artful way she guided me through this series of events.

The more fluent I became in using the mandalas, the easier it became to see and use them in everything I was doing. When the counsellor asked how my diagnosis had impacted me, it felt right to use a critical-creative approach to help me to answer the question. That question was too big for me though, so I decided to break it down and go with the critical question '*What does it feel like right now to have been diagnosed with cancer*' instead. The following is taken from the account of the critical creative walk that resulted – unedited.

Chapter 4: Coming ashore in a new land



For me this is probably the most significant painting in our story. It is actually the ‘data’ relating to my clinical symptoms that I meticulously recorded during my first eight weeks of treatment. Reading from left to right, each ‘row’ is a different symptom that rises and falls depending on the score I gave it each day. Vertically, there are four ‘columns’, each of which corresponds to a two-week treatment cycle.

The painting happened one morning as I was sitting at the kitchen table perusing the data I had gathered in a ‘whole-some’ way; that is, without being drawn to any part of it in particular. As I looked, I could see the patterns emerging from it, so I reached for the paintbrushes and began to paint.

What I love about it is that it is so completely different to the narrative I was using at the time when speaking about my experience. The colours, tone, landscape, everything about it is different. For me it builds on the learning I spoke of earlier in *Flight of the mandalas* when Angie had shown me the radical perspective transformation (reframing) that can happen as a result of seeing things differently. Not just presenting it in a different way, but feeling it, experiencing it in a deeply embodied way that changes the way it is held forever. In this case, to be softer, gentler, more muted, earthed.

Through our critical dialogue my thinking evolved further, and in October 2021 I wrote to Angie. ‘Today when I was looking at my painting I was drawn to your *Flowing River* article (Titchen, 2018) and in particular your description of the four worldviews for person-centred learning and facilitation: technical, practical, emancipatory and transformational. How, just like in nature, their different bedrocks give rise to different landscapes, soil, vegetation and gardens. And again it clicked! What I had captured in this painting was actually a representation of how the bedrock of my personal landscape has been transformed forever!’

Angie: Oh, Margaret, this is so amazingly gobsmacking! It so shows that using creative language and images of Nature speaks to, and reveals, at a deeper, embodied level than rational, critical language and images speak to our cognition, as well as, how they dance with each other!! I am over the moon that you have arrived in this place. This is a BIG BREAKTHROUGH.

Have a great weekend, YOU DESERVE IT!!!

A xxx

Landing for now

Margaret: As I welcome this new landscape I appreciate the transformation our C-CC has had on my growth and development as a whole-person-centred practitioner, facilitator and leader. Also, how learning to use the mandalas has equipped me with a system for incorporating life learning into my practice and vice versa. We have shown again the power of learning with a companion using C-CC, and certainly the breadth and depth of growth and flourishing I experienced could not have been achieved alone. I don't know where my next adventure will lead but I am confident in my ability to navigate it using my newfound resources.

Angie: I have landed for now with a deepened understanding of how a whole-person-centred, transformational facilitator or critical-creative companion uses professional artistry to help others to recognise the parts and the wholes of the critical creativity, C-CC and professional artistry mandalas, as well as appreciate and grasp how the wholes work together in practice. In particular, while the more explicit dimensions of professional artistry are easier to show to people, Margaret's readiness to learn at an embodied, existential level enabled her to begin to develop the more hidden processes of professional artistry. I am more convinced than ever that a companionship is essential for the deep embodiment of critical creativity.

The journey continues

We hope that our article helps you to learn, and to help others to learn, about the complexity, mystery and magic of the mandalas and perhaps, over time, with a face-to-face or virtual companion, you too will 'glide through the light' as you embed and embody the mandalas in your own practices. In a future article we hope to write more deeply about the professional artistry findings from our C-CC journey. We believe that now more than ever, as we rebuild and heal our health services after Covid-19, that developing expertise in helping others in ways underpinned by *Loving kindness* and connection with Nature is more crucial than ever. The results are not only rapid, they lead to human flourishing.

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Resources



Titchen, A. and McCormack, B. (2020) *Dancing the Mandalas of Critical Creativity in Nursing and Healthcare: A Collection of New Work, Published Papers, Book Chapters, Creative Media and Blog Entries with Weaving Commentary*. Edinburgh: Queen Margaret University, Centre for Person-centred Practice Research.

This is a resource offering core articles for critical creativity. They are free to download. The final section, 'Widening', offers stories of learning and working with critical creativity. Available at: cpcpr.org/critical-creativity.

The Critical creativity Blog offers further resources. Available at: criticalcreativity.org/.

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