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IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

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The work of John Heron

I chose to focus on the work of John Heron as a key influence on my practice development work. Whilst there are numerous people who have influenced my work ranging from philosophers like Jürgen Habermas, to theorists like Peter Jarvis, to nurse leaders like Dr Sue Pembrey and inspirational clinical nurses like Di Disley, I have decided to focus on the work of John Heron.

I first became interested in Heron's work when I was a student at Surrey University doing a Postgraduate Certificate in the Education of Adults (PGCEA) and had the opportunity to undertake facilitator development in the 'Human Potential Resource Centre' at Surrey University – a centre established by John Heron and which operationalised his philosophy of learning and development. It had a significant impact on me and resulted in a whole-scale shift in my thinking from that of 'teaching' to 'facilitation'. Despite various wanderings into a variety of literature and informative sources, I continually return to his work as a source for enabling effective facilitation of practice development, and it rarely fails me!

John Heron was concerned with how people were helped to learn. Influenced by the work of Carl Rogers (1983) on 'helping relationships' in the context of counselling, Heron challenged dominant pedagogical thinking that essentially was predicated on power relationships, where the educator was powerful and the student/learner powerless. This relationship is best illustrated through didactic models of teaching and most often referred to nowadays as 'death by PowerPoint'!! Heron argued for student self-directed learning, derived from an autonomous exercise of intelligence, choice and interest (Heron, 2002). He put forward a holistic approach to learning which he termed 'Whole Person Learning' in which he argued for connections to be made between all aspects of the person in order for meaningful learning to take place – connecting cognitive, emotional, intuitive, imaginative, embodied, psychic and spiritual dimensions of the person. He suggested that for this to happen five constructs needed to be operationalised – 1) facilitation of learning; 2) manifold learning (practical, conceptual, imaginal and experiential learning); 3) holism in course design; 4) participation with staff, and 5) co-operation with peers. These five constructs provide options for a facilitator of learning who is committed to enabling the emergence of self-directed and peer, holistic learning.

In the context of practice development where facilitation is central (Shaw et al., 2008) then Heron's work makes an important and significant contribution. We have adopted a philosophical stance in practice development that is primarily derived from a critical perspective. Whilst this perspective raises complex challenges about the relationship between the individual and their social world, fundamental to the perspective is that of being able to ask questions – self-reflective questions that might help me to view a situation differently or critical questions of others that may contribute to a perspective transformation. It is now widely accepted that there is a need for the development of facilitators who can help to create the conditions for people to empower themselves to take action and change their social context. The facilitator 'helps' through focusing on 6 dimensions:

1. Planning (the work programme for example)
2. Meaning (creating understanding)
3. Confronting (challenging rigid behaviours)
4. Feeling (working with emotional processes)
5. Structuring (how learning happens)
6. Valuing (how group members are helped to feel valued)

However, whilst facilitators can start with the best of intentions, the complexity of individuals, groups, teams and organisations, means that facilitators need to be equipped with a diverse range of knowledge and skills to be effective. Heron's work has helped with enabling facilitators to be reflexive about their role as a facilitator with the ultimate purpose being that of a group of learners becoming self-directed. Thus a facilitator tries to help a group move from a position of 'hierarchy' (where they are dependent on the facilitator to lead decisions) to one of cooperation (where group members make decisions with the facilitator) and finally to a position of autonomy (where a group make decisions for themselves and the facilitator is a guide).

In operationalising one's role as a facilitator (be it hierarchical, cooperative or autonomous) or working with one or more of the dimensions of practice (planning, meaning etc.), Heron argues that there are always six interventions that are most effective. Heron calls these 'Six Category Interventions' and although originating from a counselling perspective, they transcend any particular approach to facilitation and can be applied and utilised in a variety of ways by both facilitator and participant (Heron, 2002). They are humanistic in nature and can be seen to synthesise the work of Rogers and his focus on the nature of helping relationships (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). In addition the interventions help to make sense of the stages of development in reflection as articulated by Mezirow (1981) as it provides a framework for reflective questioning. The six categories of intervention are:

- Prescriptive interventions: the intention is to suggest or recommend a particular line of action or approach to a practice situation. It may include particular recommended behaviours; particular focus of reflection and literature to read, reflect on and relate to practice
- Informative interventions: the facilitator informs or instructs the practitioner in some way. These interventions should be limited to concrete situations and generalisations should be avoided. Over use of informative interventions can lead to the practitioner becoming dependent on the facilitator
- Confronting interventions: interventions that challenge the client in some way or draw their attention to a particular behaviour. A balance between confrontative and supportive interventions needs to be maintained
- Cathartic interventions: interventions that enable the practitioner to release tension through the expression of their emotional feelings about a situation or event. The facilitator needs to be able to facilitate the expression of such emotion and its translation into positive action

- Catalytic interventions: interventions that draw the practitioner out, expand and develop their understanding and encouragement to discuss issues further. Catalytic interventions are of greatest use to the practitioner and should be the dominant one used in a supervision relationship
- Supportive interventions: interventions that support, validate or encourage the practitioner in some way. These interventions need to be balanced with confrontative interventions

The 'look and feel' of these interventions changes according to the role a facilitator is operationalising and the dimension of practice. As a facilitator, knowing when is the most appropriate time to use each of these interventions is essential to effective helping. This can be best achieved by being sensitive to one's Internal Facilitator (Casement, 1991). The idea of the internal facilitator is that of being sensitive to one's intuitions, hunches and feelings about the practitioner's presentation, descriptions and reflections on action and to turn these into appropriate 'helpful' responses. A facilitator needs to learn to 'finely tune' their internal facilitator, by reflecting on the appropriateness of their interventions and responses from others.

The joy of discovering Heron's work at an early stage in my career has been the endless opportunities to continuously develop and refine my skills and expertise in working as a facilitator. Whilst I have developed a range of approaches to facilitation that I use in my work, I try to always draw upon these three core aspects of being a facilitator – clarity of role, identifying the dimension being worked on and being deliberate and intentional about the most appropriate intervention to use. Whilst these have been critical to my professional life, they have also become life-skills and have rescued me in many aspects of my life! The interconnected beings of the professional and the personal, the helper and the helped, the role and skills of the facilitator are all reflected in the image of the sculpture in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Interconnections beings

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