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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

## Working with relationships and boundaries: Part 1 – Developing relationships

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**ABSTRACT**
*Background*: While I was acting as a critical companion to a practitioner, he disclosed a very personal past history to me. I discussed this with my own supervisor who advised me that I needed to set clear boundaries around my facilitation work. This two part reflection, using both creative work and theoretical literature, is a direct response to that advice.
*Aim:* Part 1 - To explore how setting boundaries could impact on the development of an effective critical companionship relationship.
*Conclusions*: To enable a safe and supportive learning environment, the relationship between a critical companion and practitioner needs to be mutually negotiated, open, honest, non-hierarchical and person-centred.
*Implications for practice*:

- Facilitators need specific guidance on both developing relationships and setting appropriate boundaries within their work
- All those working in any facilitative capacity should ensure that they have their own support mechanisms in place

**Keywords:** Critical companionship, facilitation, facilitation relationships, facilitation boundaries, critical reflection

**Background**
As part of my current role, I work as a facilitator supporting individual practitioners with their professional development through work-based learning. To underpin this way of working I use '*critical companionship*' as my guiding framework (Titchen, 2000, 2003). Critical companionship is a conceptual framework for an holistic, person-centred, helping relationship between an experienced facilitator and a co-learner who embark together on an experiential learning journey (Titchen, 2000, 2003)

After working with a practitioner for about a month, I received an email from him that gave me a brief rundown of his personal past history, and the current situation he found himself in. At the end of the email he asked whether I still wanted to continue working with him, in view of what I now knew about him. The issue he raised was a personal one and not directly related to our work together, so the email that I sent in response said that I was more than happy to continue, but I gave

him the option of ending the critical companionship relationship if he wanted. I also said in the email, that I did not want this to become the 'elephant in the room' (i.e. a topic which everyone is aware of, but which nobody mentions because it is uncomfortable) in our 1:1 facilitation meetings, so as a friend I could listen if he ever needed to talk, but that I was not able to offer him any counselling. I did say however, that when we next met we would discuss alternative sources of support that were available to him.

After sending the email, I discussed the issue with my own supervisor who told me that I must set up boundaries in my facilitation relationships, and that this would fall outside that boundary so I must not become involved, not even as a 'friend'. Following this discussion I thought that initially I had clarity, but on further contemplation I was confused. I knew that what my supervisor said was right, and I needed to differentiate between this issue and the support offered by facilitation, but surely this issue is a part of the practitioner, and in working with the whole person I could not just shut it out and pretend it was not there? I felt that to set a rigid boundary at this point would impinge on the supportive relationship required for the practitioner to feel safe enough to take the essential risks required for his own flourishing. I therefore decided to explore this whole issue, with reference to the relationship domain within critical companionship.

**Creative work**
As an integral part of my reflective work I often use creativity. Undertaking creative work helps me to articulate different things e.g. what the artwork makes me feel, what I see in it and, how I make sense of it (Titchen and Higgs, 2001 ). It not only enables me to make meaning from my experiences, but also helps me to express this to others. It has been suggested that using the creative arts involves right-brain activity which is holistic and non-verbal, as opposed to left-brain activity where thinking is sequential, logical and language based (Petty, 2003). Using both sides of the brain like this, involving feelings as well as intellect, is believed to lead to lasting and pervasive learning (Rogers, 1983 ).

My creative work started with painting three images, to try to capture how I see the possible alternatives. In two of the images I perceive myself as a facilitator working with a boundary, and in the other working without a boundary.
Image 1 has me within a boundary and all the practitioners outside.
Image 2 has me and the practitioners without 'issues' within the boundary, but the practitioner with the 'issue' outside the boundary.
Image 3 has no boundary at all.
My initial thoughts are that Images 1 and 2 are neater and appear more 'controlled' than image 3.

**Image 1.** Working with a boundary

In Image 1 I am clearly visible and unchanged, whereas in images 2 and 3 parts of me 'blend' with the practitioners and become hidden.

If comparing Image 1 and Image 3 directly, Image 1 feels very cold, with no connection between me and the practitioners, while Image 3 feels warmer.

**Image 2**. Working with a boundary for some but not all

In Image 2 there is a degree of overlap and blending with the two practitioners within the boundary, which I perceive as the development of a supportive relationship and the sharing of learning. This does not happen at all for the practitioner outside the boundary who is significantly isolated.

**Image 3.** Working without a boundary

In Image 3 with no boundary at all, there is a much greater degree of blending, which I feel implies a more supportive relationship with much greater shared learning between all. However, large parts of me seem to be obscured. Is this significant? Does it actually make me less available to work with the practitioners?

**The relationship domain**
The relationship domain within the critical companionship conceptual framework has four processes that together provide a structure for developing the relationship between the practitioner and critical companion (Titchen, 2003). These four processes are:

- Mutuality – working in a carefully negotiated partnership
- Reciprocity – a two way exchange of giving and receiving
- Particularity – getting to know and understand the practitioner
- Graceful care – providing support through being present, and using appropriate touch and non-verbal communication

One of the influencing philosophies in the development of critical companionship is that of humanism, and in particular how a humanistic approach can be applied to learning (Rogers, 1983). In my exploration of this issue, I am therefore going to draw on the essential requirements in a facilitator that enable a humanistic approach to learning (Rogers, 1983), the key features of a relationship that is set up specifically to facilitate the personal development of another (Heron, 2001), all linked with the four processes that make up the relationship domain within critical companionship (Titchen, 2003).

**Negotiated relationship**
It has been suggested that one of the most important conditions that facilitates learning is the attitudinal quality of the interpersonal relationship between a facilitator and a learner (Rogers, 1983). Rogers suggests that the facilitator and learner should openly discuss these issues, and work out together how to enable both of them to be 'whole human beings' in the learning encounter. In a similar vein, Heron (2001) believes that a mutually agreed voluntary contract should be implicit in a helping relationship. This contract should ensure that there is a clear understanding as to the facilitator's remit (Heron, 2001). Within critical companionship 'mutuality' is the most dependent process, and again involves the critical companion and practitioner working together in a partnership that is carefully negotiated. This is particularly important when the relationship involves work-related hierarchical structures. Amongst the strategies that enable mutuality is creating equality in the relationship and sharing responsibility with the practitioner for the outcomes of the relationship (Titchen, 2003).

Careful negotiation of the relationship between the facilitator and the learner should lead to a situation where each receives 'gifts of care, concern, satisfaction and wisdom from each other' (Titchen, 2003, p36). The relationship thus becomes 'mutual, collaborative, educational and empowering' (Titchen, 2003, p 36). Within critical companionship this is termed 'reciprocity' and is the second process within the relationship domain.

This would suggest to me that whatever I decide about setting a boundary, it must be done in conjunction with the practitioner and after an open and honest discussion.

**Getting to know each other**
Once the facilitator and learner have negotiated a mutual, reciprocal relationship, it is important that they get to know and value each other. Rogers (1983) believes that a facilitator is much more likely to be effective when they enter into the relationship with the learner as themselves rather than either party trying to hide behind a façade. The key features that Rogers sees as essential for both learning and personal growth are genuineness in the facilitator, a deep empathic understanding of the learner, and a warm, loving acceptance of them (Rogers, 1983). This ensures that the relationship starts on an equal footing as a person-to-person relationship, and should be most effective in breaking down any barriers or power inequalities. It also means that the facilitator can share the whole range of their real emotions.

Valuing the learner for who they are is the second key feature of a relationship that Rogers believes enables learning and personal growth (Rogers, 1983). It involves caring for the learner in a non-possessive way, prizing his feelings and recognising his potential. Part of this may involve supporting the learner when he engages with something that hinders rather than helps his learning, and accepting both the fear and satisfaction of the learner as he travels along his learning journey.

The third aspect identified by Rogers is the ability of the facilitator to understand the learner and the way they view and interpret the learning processes they are engaged with (Rogers, 1983). 'Students deeply appreciate when they are simply understood – not evaluated, not judged - simply understood from their own point of view' (Rogers, 1983, p 125). Using these key skills enables the facilitator to develop a safe environment and a supportive relationship with the learner, thus enabling them to flourish.

Heron identifies similar attributes which he believes are the main source of any 'helping behaviour'. He calls this 'internal grace', and believes that it has five key attributes: concern, empathy, insight into the others needs, effective facilitation and genuineness or authenticity (Heron, 2001).

Within critical companionship this process within the relationship domain is termed 'particularity' (Titchen, 2003) and requires the companion to know and understand the learner, both from a learning perspective and from a personal perspective. This will however depend on how much of their personal life the learner wishes to share with the companion. The better the companion knows the learner, the better they can support them to learn.

It could be suggested that when the practitioner shared his personal history with me, he was participating in the 'getting to know each other' phase, and this was simply an attempt on his part to be open and honest with someone who had taken an interest in him as a person. My response to the practitioner after his disclosure was therefore important, as I needed to demonstrate by my words and actions that I was still accepting of him. One of the first things that I did therefore was to reassure him that I still wanted to work with him. Before doing this I had to give it considerable thought however, so that I knew I was being genuine in my assertions.

**Key relationship features**
Support is seen as being the key feature of any helping relationship. According to Heron (2001), being supportive should be a way of being in the facilitator, as it underpins and gives validity to his six category intervention model (Heron, 2001). The six categories in the model are the basic intentions that the facilitator uses when working with a practitioner. These vary from prescriptive, informative or confronting interventions; to cathartic interventions, enabling the practitioner to express emotion; catalytic interventions which aim to support the practitioner to learn and problem-solve; and supportive interventions. Heron believes that being supportive is a form of unspoken professional loving, which he defines as providing 'the conditions in which that person can, in liberty, identify and realise her own true needs and interests', as well as personal love which is 'to delight in, and take pleasure in enhancing that person's uniqueness' (Heron, 2001, p 154). Heron goes on to state that both definitions cover loving oneself, as well as other people.

Being supportive as a way of being is believed to be different from supportive interventions (Heron, 2001), where being supportive is seen as 'loving', and supportive interventions are seen as 'caring'. Supportive interventions are an unqualified authentic affirmation of the learner. They include celebrating and affirming the worth and value of learners; making physical contact - which can vary from a light touch with the fingers, to a full embrace; expressing care and concern; and encouraging them to celebrate themselves (Heron, 2001).

Within critical companionship the process that best captures this is 'graceful care', which is the final one of the four processes within the relationship domain (Titchen, 2003). In this process, support is given to the practitioner by the critical companion through his or her presence, touch and use of body language. This makes the practitioner feel personally valued, and promotes his or her emotional, psychological and intellectual growth (Titchen, 2003).

Being supportive of the practitioner both before and after his disclosure has been, and will continue to be essential if he is to effectively participate in his work-based learning. I believe I demonstrated my support by embracing him when we next met, celebrating his achievements so far, but also by providing telephone numbers where he could access more appropriate and specific support for the issues he had raised. If by providing a safe environment I can support the practitioner to flourish, then I believe that should be my aim.

**Conclusions**

In considering the need to set a boundary for the work that I do with the practitioner, I have reflected on my creative work; the evidence above and also, as a professional, *The Code* (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2008) and the potential implications from that.

Key to my decision is the need to do the same for all the practitioners I am working with, taking into consideration any adaptation required to meet their individual learning needs. This was made obvious to me through Image 2 in my creative work. So I believe that I either need to set the boundary around myself and not let anyone through it, or I do not set a boundary.

Analysing the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of critical companionship would suggest that my intention to work with the practitioner in an open, trusting, valuing relationship, is the correct one. As a professional however, I am also bound by the NMC Code (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2008), which requires me to always to work within the limits of my competence, which in this instance excludes counselling. Counsellors are trained to guide their clients in exploring deep-seated personal issues (Wisker et al., 2008) which I am not trained to do, so although I may use some of the skills of counselling in my facilitation work, part of being open and honest includes identifying the limits of those skills.

The practitioner has elected to share with me a very personal life story, and knowing this should enable me to meet his learning needs, because potentially I will be better at picking up on cues and clues, and therefore able to structure learning experiences that will challenge him but not overwhelm him. Also, by being accepting and open, sharing some of myself and at the same time making clear through my words and actions that I value him as a whole person (despite his personal history), I would hope to create a safe environment. This should ensure that he does not have to continually worry about how he is perceived, which frees him to 'be himself' and therefore channel his energies into his own professional growth and flourishing.

However, I am still mindful of Image 3 that I painted, and how in that picture I am partially obscured by the practitioners I am working with. I am not sure if this is relevant and if so, how to address it.

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