

## International Practice Development Journal

Online journal of FoNS in association with the IPDC (ISSN 2046-9292)



### Through the looking glass: provoking progression in practice development?

**Debbie Horsfall**

School of Social Sciences and Psychology, University of Western Sydney. Email: [d.horsfall@uws.edu.au](mailto:d.horsfall@uws.edu.au)

Submitted for publication: 16th January 2013

Accepted for publication: 22nd February 2013

#### **Abstract**

*Aims and objectives:* My aim in this paper is both to show and tell about the *Enhancing Practice Conference* in Sydney, and its relevance to practice development, as it unfolded over the three-day duration. It is not a review of the conference; rather it reflects what stood out and was important to me, guided by a conscious process of critical questioning. I have sought to show how core concepts of practice development were embodied in the conference and how this shaped individual behaviour (mine). I also aim to uncover what might be hidden, or inhabiting the margins, of what I have termed the 'practice development movement', as showcased at the conference.

*Concluding questions and implications for practice:*

- How can indigenous and culturally diverse knowledges, voices and practices be included in their own right?
- How would a greater emphasis on the larger sociopolitical context of practice development contribute to the movement?
- How can the theory-practice dualism be kept in balance?

**Keywords:** Practice development movement, critical questioning, critical companionship

#### **Introduction, or 'Here is the glass I am looking through'**

I like going to practice based conferences. People are there in pursuit of sharing really useful knowledge; knowledge that intervenes in the blood and spirit of people's lives, not the usual consumerism of ideas (Lather, 1991) that can go unchecked at the more traditional academic conferences where the 'argument' is what counts, abstraction rules, questions are longer than the presentation and can be an exercise in showing off, and there are usually lots of big words that leave me feeling inadequate. I like going to practice based conferences because people take seriously the notion that our goal as academics, researchers and practitioners is to make both the production of knowledge and the communication of knowledge as democratic and accessible as possible, and there is a desire to make it fun so that producing and talking about new ideas is contagious (Horsfall and Titchen, 2009). I like going to practice based conferences and the 2012 *Enhancing Practice Conference* in Sydney was no exception. It embodied a community of practice. You could almost smell the generosity and excitement in the air. The pursuit of really useful knowledge was palpable. I like going to practice based conferences even though I am not a health practitioner, or a health academic. My practice context is as a researcher and educator in sociology at the University of Western Sydney. It's important to mention this here. Although I have been a social care practitioner I am not an expert in practice development. I have had a long relationship with some of its leaders and advocates, Angie Titchen in particular, who is a friend, colleague and co-writer.

My research is in the field of caring, especially at end of life (Horsfall et al., 2012a). I am interested in how caring can contribute to developing compassionate communities (Horsfall et al., 2012b) and I take a strengths based approach. I am interested in people's stories, especially the stories of people from whom we don't often hear and who are at the margins of decision making about the things that matter. And I am particularly interested in how we can enable people to talk about really difficult things. As such, I use a variety of creative methods to conduct research and to present research findings. I tell you this not to do the above mentioned 'showing off' but so that you can start to paint a picture of me. So that you can know why I might write the things that follow and what I might be attempting to provoke in you as I write them. On the whole though, I attended the 2012 conference and write this as someone looking at practice development from the outside-in, or through the looking glass.

*“Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through –”. She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.’ (Carroll, 1871, p 3)*

This metaphor works in terms of my positioning and status at the conference. I am a sociologist academic, not a practice development academic. It also works for me in terms of my theoretical position – sociologists look from the outside-in. This means I ask how structures, systems, practices of power, discourses and knowledges operate on, and shape, individuals, groups and societies, as well as asking how people resist this, or take agency. Ideas and practices of practice development have appealed to me over the years precisely because I think it looks from the inside-out: the focus is on person-centred practices, on compassion and knowing of self, on exploring micropractices and changing workplace cultures from the inside-out. It seems to be mostly about agency and behaviour and there is the contagious optimism that people and practices should and can change for the better. This is the politics of hope in action. Theoretically, both practice development and my own work are informed – in different ways – by critical social theory and critical social sciences. However, like the looking glass in Alice's hand, I think the differences and boundaries between outside-in and inside-out are misty and are probably most useful when they drift away.

So, what was I doing there and what am I writing *about*? Well, I was there to give a keynote presentation on my work with aged carers and I was to share this presentation time and space with Nikolas Yu, a Clinical Nurse Consultant in Leadership and Facilitation. I was also facilitating and co-facilitating a number of workshops. I am writing this as I have been invited by the *IDPJ* editors to write about 'my thoughts on the *Enhancing Practice Conference* as a whole' (pers. comm. Kate Sanders, 2012). Rather a loose – and trusting – brief and one I was delighted to accept. This long preamble is to set the context for these thoughts. In writing this paper I used the following critical questions to guide me:

- What were the vibe, the themes, the key ideas?
- What were people talking about in the breaks and to me as we sat in sessions?
- How did it capture what is best about practice development?

I then analysed my experience of the conference from up on the mantelpiece, from the other side of the looking glass, and asked: what were the issues/concerns/the barely spoken (or misted over) that inhabited the margins of this conference and perhaps the practice development movement overall?

### **Jumping through to the other side**

Human flourishing occurs when we move from a point of inner knowledge to taking right action effortlessly, swiftly and with a natural flow (Titchen and McCormack 2010, p 538).

*Day 1: am*

*Arriving at the conference*

*Hotel of my wedding night*

*Thirty years ago.*

*From bride to 'proper' academic*

*Clutching my stand-and-deliver keynote.*

*Ten carefully constructed PowerPoint slides.*

*Day 2: am*

*Bumping into Angie*

*At the top of the stairs*

*Flash of insight illuminates my heart*

*Precisely packaged in snappy PowerPoint text.*

*One carefully constructed talking head.*

*Day 2: pm*

*Sitting with Nikolas*

*At the back of the lunch room*

*Scripted presentation*

*Shredded*

*As we co-create our keynote.*

*Scared, vulnerable, disassembled*

*Time running out.*

*Coherent keynote in constructive turmoil.*

*Day 3: am*

*Performing stage-walkers*

*Heartfelt flow*

*Expanding, contracting*

*To me, to him, to audience*

*Same same different different*

*Doing, offering, experiencing*

*Flourishing on the go.*

Here I was with a person I did not know creating a one-hour, co-facilitated keynote session for 200 participants. I had thrown out my presentation and I was stepping into the unknown. During the process of rescripting I did experience the odd moment of terror; on the day I was less nervous than I have ever been in such a situation. We stuck to time; we spoke when we needed to and said what we wanted to. It felt like 'right-work'. Looking from the inside-out I am not going to be humble. Clearly both of us were experienced facilitators and adult educators – albeit with very different styles. We worked hard in a short space of time to establish a respectful and trusting relationship and get to the heart of the matter. We also knew our stuff inside and we both had the inner resources to step into the unknown. On reflection I can see that we were informed by core principles of practice development: practice wisdom; craft knowledge; inclusiveness; imagination; and respect. This was unspoken but I believe enabled what we created to unfold swiftly, seamlessly and naturally. It appeared effortless but in fact emerged from years of complex, challenging work and a deep knowledge of self, arrived at through critical reflection. We had been placed in the conference theme 'human flourishing'. I felt as if I embodied human flourishing as conceptualised in the quote above (Titchen and McCormack, 2010, p 538). So our keynote had integrity. And while talking of flourishing, flourishing was happening.

Angie here is the looking glass as she stood at the top of the stairs: in a few short moments she did critical companionship (Titchen, 2004) in action and managed to get me to throw away what I had in

mind and agree to do something completely different with a complete stranger. All without asking me. Certainly 'high challenge'! Our relationship over the years embodies high support and we didn't need to do that work in that moment.

Nikolas is also clearly a skilled critical companion.

From the outside-in there was a culture and ambience to the conference that engendered a sense of permission and openness to difference, which enabled me to throw out what I had come with. This didn't happen by accident. There was a number of concrete, enabling and generous, structures:

- Home groups
- Shared tickets
- Co-keynotes
- Three days rather than two
- Offers by the organisers to pay for accommodation and registration for speakers (unusual these days)
- Other presenters beginning to mess around with what was expected
- Sitting in circles
- No questions from the floor, or questions from the floor as people took control
- Music

And of course, there is the history of this conference. It has always reflected creativity, adult learning principles that invite people in rather than assume the expert voice (constantly at least), a dominant discourse of improving people's lives through improving practices, a politics of hope and a 'holding' of an international community of practice. This culture leads to people being curious and open, rather than being there to advocate a position, or themselves. And this is the fertile ground from which emancipatory and transformational actions can flourish. I use the example of what Nikolas and I did to show how the conference shaped my behaviours in the moment, and to try and capture some of the feelings of it through creative and critical reflection on a concrete example. This example demonstrates some core principles of practice development in action in the moment.

Another reason why I like practice development conferences: doing, informed by being, happens.

### **Possibilities from the margins**

It was interesting to see the groundswell that has taken place in the practice development movement. It does seem to have the hallmarks of a 'movement' now. It is moving, or has moved, out of the margins and appears to be becoming accepted and desirable. So my question is: what now is on the margins; what is being hidden and is not seen? This is an important question as it can provoke people in the movement to ensure it remains dynamic and responsive and does not become part of the status quo or orthodoxy. So this is the paradox – practice development has become accepted, with recognisable leaders, a body of literature, a group of highly skilled professionals and regimes of practice. And people have worked hard for this. However, movements need to keep flowing and being refreshed to resist becoming orthodoxies themselves. They need to cultivate and embrace mavericks, people and ideas on the margins, to challenge what is now becoming taken for granted.

Having been immersed in this particular conference and having engaged in a process of critical reflection, I am left with three, possibly prickly and provoking, 'margins' that I would like explore here.

#### **1. A white person's practice?**

Uncle Max came and welcomed us to Country. He talked about the traditional owners of the land where we sat, the Cadigal clan of the Dharug language group, and their highways and byways and trading routes, many of which remain as Sydney's major traffic routes. And he told us some stories. Then he left. And there was no blackfella voice or presence after that. And that disturbed me.

What will it take to be inclusive of difference? How can we be welcoming? How have other conferences included an indigenous voice – not only as welcomers and not only as being spoken about by whitefellas but as experts in their own right, with their own knowledge, epistemologies, wisdom and practices to share? How do we avoid tokenism? Appropriation? Colonising?

There was little reference to indigenous epistemology and postcolonial theory and this matters, especially when talking about health. The relationship between poor health and early deaths and the systematic dispossession and oppression of Australia's indigenous population is well established. How can these practices be changed? How can we work against ongoing oppressions? Does being silent about this through unconscious acts of omission reproduce already existing relations of power? And I wonder about people from other countries. If you come from parts of the world other than Australia, are these questions relevant in terms of dispossessed and oppressed peoples in your society?

What about culturally and linguistically diverse health practitioners and academics? In a multicultural society such as Australia it was surprising to see so few people talking from different ethnic positions. What is it about practice development that seems to say 'white Eurocentric'? Is it time for affirmative action?

### **2. Redressing imbalance 1: changing behaviours and challenging the system**

The following two imbalances are interconnected but I will try to explore them separately. Again, prickly questions with no answers. But perhaps the asking of the questions can open spaces for possibility.

How are people working to understand how systems, structures, discourses and relations of power shape us? How are our practices, wherever we are, constructed by bigger social relations? This is about consciousness-raising, social justice, the moral dimension of human flourishing and reflexivity; key concerns of critical social theory and critical social sciences, particularly in this postmodern age. While practice development is concerned with changing workplace culture, what about the larger sociopolitical context of these workplaces. How do these contexts shape the workplace? Perhaps it is time to include more outside-in thinking.

Can we flourish while others suffer? What if it is consumerism, oppression, discrimination, poverty, our gender, our exploitation of the natural world, whether we live in the first world or the majority world that makes us sick and in need of care? What if the development of medical technology and pharmaceuticals is done at the expense of others? Which persons are we centre-ing in our person-centred care? And if these questions don't matter, why don't they?

### **3. Redressing imbalance 2: theory and practice**

I also noticed (some at times stated) resistance to theorising. Theorising, or generating explanations that help us understand the world and how it acts on us, enables us to move away from being enslaved to 'this is the way it is' or 'there is no alternative' thinking, where we work to make the system better even if the system is unnecessary or flawed. Theorising can also help us escape the pain of believing that we are the cause: if only we worked harder, better, longer then all would be different. Sometimes there are things that are bigger than us. I can't single-handedly get rid of capitalism, much as I might have serious worries about the system at this stage, where it has become hyper-capitalism and where consuming has become the new opiate of the masses and shopping malls the new places of worship. I can resist it though through, for example, buying what I need – not what I want, through shopping at co-ops or buying local when I can. So theorising about and understanding a system helps me to see where I can resist it, as well as understanding my own and others' behaviour within the system.

*I came to theory because I was hurting... I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me (hooks, 1994, p 59).*

Here bell hooks shows that outside-in and inside-out looking are both important, that both what was around her and what was within her needed to be understood. Theorising and combining inside-out and outside-in thinking enables us to challenge dominant, taken-for-granted assumptions. One of these assumptions, relevant in this context, is that hospitals, health professionals and social care providers are necessary; that the system should remain but just be made better, or more person-centred in this case. In my second job in the disability services sector, my boss told me it was my job to do myself out of a job – that as long as there remained a need for my job then as a society we had failed! Utopian of course, but it certainly opened up spaces and possibilities of doing the job differently and with a different sense of purpose.

The optimism of believing, or hoping, that you can change practices and cultures is important and contagious. This conference showcased examples of how this optimism has, and can be, operationalised. However, sustained transformation is only possible if the wider context of workplace cultures, team and individual practices are understood. Critically analysing relations of power, asking whose knowledge counts and what is being silenced are important questions for the practice development movement. Embracing both the psychology of why we do what we do and the sociology of why we do what we do will enable this movement to remain progressive.

### References

- Carroll, L. (1871) *Through the Looking Glass (And What Alice Found There)*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Project Gutenberg OnLine Books. Retrieved from: [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12) (Last accessed 15th February 2013).
- hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Horsfall, D., Noonan, K. and Leonard, R. (2012a) Bringing our dying home: how caring for someone at end of life builds social capital and develops compassionate communities. *Health Sociology Review*. Vol. 21. No. 4. pp 373-382.
- Horsfall, D., Noonan, K. and Leonard, R. (2012b) *Bringing our Dying Home: Creating Community at End of Life*. Research Report, Second Edition. Penrith, New South Wales: University of Western Sydney. Retrieved from: <http://caringatendoflife.wordpress.com/> (Last accessed 16th January 2013).
- Horsfall, D. and Titchen, A. (2009) Disrupting edges – opening spaces: pursuing democracy and human flourishing through creative methodologies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. Vol. 12. No. 2. pp 147-160.
- Lather, P. (1991) *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Titchen, A. and McCormack, B. (2010) Dancing with stones: critical creativity as methodology for human flourishing. *Educational Action Research: An International Journal*. Vol. 18. No. 4. pp 531-554.
- Titchen, A. (2004) Helping relationships for practice development: critical companionship. In McCormack, B., Manley, K. and Garbett, R. (Eds.) *Practice Development in Nursing*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp 148–174.

**Acknowledgements and funding:** To Nikolas Yu, a warm and generous person and a highly skilled facilitator. ‘Jumping through to the other side’ would not have happened without him; it was a co-creation although I take full responsibility for the way I have written about it here. The line in the poem ‘same same different different’ is taken directly from his performance schema for our keynote presentation.

The University of Western Sydney co-funded my attendance at this conference. *The Caring at End of Life* project referred to herein is an Australian Research Council funded project.

**Debbie Horsfall** (PhD), Associate Professor, School of Social Sciences and Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Penrith, New South Wales, Australia.