

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5

### Inquiring about my practice

In this chapter I describe how I have sought feedback on my practice from colleagues, and reflect on the experience of doing it.

For this thesis I am presenting a short description of the process, and some key areas that arose as a result.

Because I only engaged in the process of seeking this more formal feedback recently it confirmed *what I was doing*, rather than contributed directly to changes in my practice. It attempts to answer the questions *what does my facilitation practice look like, and how is it experienced by others*<sup>283</sup>.

I start by describing my response to less formal feedback; how I have listened to the voices of those I've facilitated and their evaluative response to my work, and give some examples of how this has informed my practice in a less formal, implicit way.

#### ***The apparent absence of the voices of those I've facilitated***

I know from my own experience and from talking with other facilitators<sup>284</sup> that getting feedback on one's practice can be problematic for several reasons:

- o Participants can be all blissed-out with an event, or grateful, which does not enable them to be critical
- o They are often more interested in content, and seldom notice design or facilitation
- o I am cautious about the position does asking a question which is not shared puts me in? – If it's only my question how do I engage participants/ clients? Do I have the right to ask a question which could seem so self-referring?
- o I want fine grained detail to help me to reflect on my micro noticing practices. I question whether this is possible unless participants are forewarned of my question - and if they are won't that get in the way?

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<sup>283</sup> I do regularly ask for feedback from co-facilitators, clients and participants. Evidence of this can be found in *Appendix H*, where Sally notes this happening as we work together, and in the *CPC Practice Account*, where Martin notices the imperfections in our feedback/reflection processes at that time (1995 - 1997).

<sup>284</sup> In my inquiring conversations I specifically asked others how they sought feedback and how successful it was. "How do you gain impressions of what you are like in practice?" This provided the opportunity for sharing both our anxieties, and strategies and methods for obtaining feedback. Without exception people have described this as something difficult to do.

- As facilitators we are perceived as powerful, therefore for some there is anxiety about criticising us
- As facilitators we may have our own (personal, historical) issues around asking for and getting feedback – I have mine and explore these below
- There are issues about whose voice gets heard – I noticed that in the exploratory writing I did on feedback from colleagues there was a lot of my voice in the text, and not enough of theirs.

The usual practice to gather feedback is the use of feedback sheets (at their worst known as ‘happy sheets’) and reflection sessions with groups. My approach nowadays is to keep the written feedback sheets for getting opinions on the logistical arrangements (venue, access, lunch, number of sessions) and to seek other information directly from the group in a reflective session, normally close to the end of the day/session.

The information gained from sessions like these ranges from the useful but clunky:

e.g. ‘I would have liked more time for lunch’ – which may simply be the response of a slow eater or a plea for a buffet rather than a sit-down lunch, to the possible hidden messages:

‘I would have liked more time to *network* over lunch’ – which may be signalling that the group wanted to do more forming, or that they felt their priorities were more important than those on the formal agenda. A face to face session enables me to gently test what lies behind the plea for a longer lunch break, and draw out any more messages. However I suspect much still goes unsaid for the reasons given above.

There is however a steady stream of often subtle data which we can pick up from participants, which we take-in and interpret. This is most often informal, implicit feedback, and sometimes requires some reflection on my part for me to ‘get it’, but it adds up to a shared exploration with the people I have facilitated of what is most effective and beneficial. This is not ‘do this’ type feedback so much as more subtle confirmations and expressions of preferences.

Examples of the types of learning I have gained from this feedback, which has informed my practice are:

- To stop worrying about the clock and the tasks
- To create the conditions for ‘communicative space’ to arise
- To get out of the way and let a group work
- To be more humble, to have faith that the answer is in the room
- That I can keep an eye on the big picture and care-take the interconnections
- That interpersonal, interconnectedness is key
- To hold the space and the group – *holding them in mind* and letting them experience this holding

- o To work from love *and* outrage
- o That everyone involved deserves my compassion
- o That I could go for a walk and everything would be ok, if I have framed things right
- o That personally *I can't* go for a walk – and that's my stuff
- o That my practice is nothing special, and very special
- o It's not for me to develop solutions for a project, but to support participants to develop them
- o It's not for me to develop a vision for a project, but to support participants to develop it
- o It *is* for me to do the connecting, relating, interpreting, work – if needed
- o That understanding others' motivations can expose aspects of power at work
- o It helps for me to hold a scanning alertness that enables me to draw together, hold and interpret a big picture with the group
- o The voices of the powerless must be present, even if they are there in recorded words and not body
- o That social learning happens – trust it. And anyway I can't *make* it happen
- o That work based on consensus-making is often superficial
- o That even powerholders need support
- o That powerholders particularly need support
- o That the powerless have huge resources to offer
- o That the powerless have a series of needs that must be met before they can fully engage e.g. confidence building, space to grieve
- o I was right about the value of lived experience, which I have always felt was as valuable as 'expert' knowledge
- o Facilitation is not campaigning or advocacy, but it can be conscientisation
- o Being a leader and being a learner are not conflicting roles.

I believe that you can see this learning dawning on me as I grow through the progression of the practice accounts in the thesis.

For example:

I learnt the *theory* of 'get out of the way and let the group get on with it' from Marv Weisbord, but I learnt the *practice* from groups I have worked with since and their feedback to me.

I have learnt that 'the answer is in the room'. This started off as a *theory*, moved to an *act of faith*, but now I *know* it to be true because groups have taught me, have shaped my expectations, have demonstrated to me what the conditions are that they need me to construct with them for them to have their best chance of finding 'the answers'.

The learning I have gained from working with clients has convinced me that, if sought and valued, this type of feedback can inform a reflective,

responsive practitioner. In this way my facilitation is co-created with the group because of working in a 'field' relationship with them. In this way I am constantly getting feedback from my clients, and it is constantly guiding me.

### ***The process of getting feedback from colleagues***

Because it has seldom been possible to obtain 'formal' feedback from the clients in my practice situations, this feedback from colleagues via *inquiring conversations* is a vital contribution to understanding what my facilitation informed by my reflective practices looks like.

In particular one group (Alison, Diana, Richard – referred to as ADR) can give me feedback that covers the entire period of my PhD learning journey and is therefore particularly valuable. Others can give much more up to date feedback on recent projects (Tim, Sally, Chris). In this way I hope to illustrate how my practice has changed across time and the, not always strictly chronological, 'moments'.

Another qualification for the people I chose to hold 'inquiring conversations' with is that I have facilitated each of them in a variety of groups of which they have been members. In this way they are a well informed and critical group from which to gain this more formal feedback.

### ***What I did***

In seeking feedback I sought three different kinds of assistance to look at myself:

1. Inquiring conversations with colleagues, which have enabled me to look at myself through their eyes and in the light of their observations. This has been particularly effective when our conversations have evoked deeper memories for both of us and we have been able to reflect and sense-make together<sup>285</sup> (see Appendix H)
2. Pre-arranged occasions of co-facilitation with another colleague who agreed to observe my practice and give feedback<sup>286</sup>. This produced contemporary feedback which I then used to tailor my facilitation. It enabled me to track specific aspects of my practice e.g. use of hands, moving in and out of the group as evidenced by posture and engagement etc.
3. Photographic and video evidence. This offered a chance to see myself working, and also to see what the group looks like when I am working with them (CPC and Governance Projects).

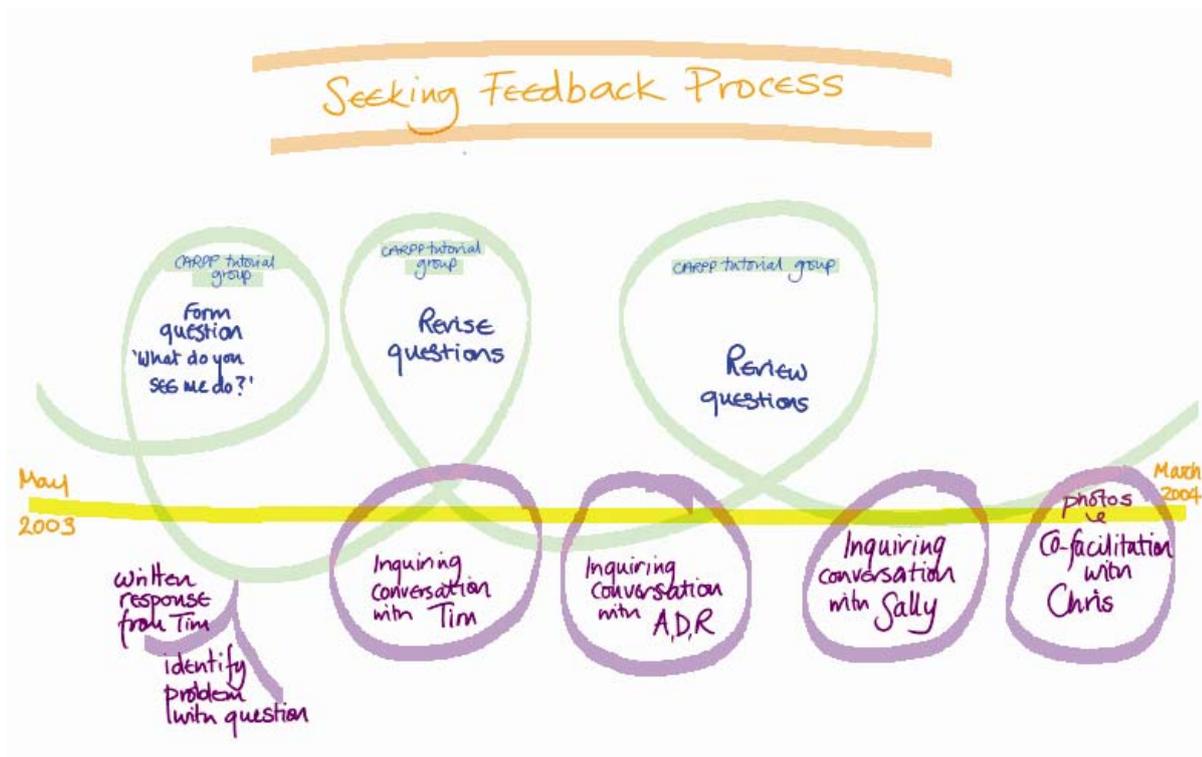
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<sup>285</sup> This informed the LGA practice account.

<sup>286</sup> This informed the Governance project practice account.

For the inquiring conversations I developed questions to guide discussion. The process was:

- o Formed questions (see Appendix I), it was an iterative process (for process see 'Seeking Feedback process diagram')
- o Discussed process and questions with CARPP group and supervisor
- o Sent questions to participants in advance of our meeting
- o Had inquiring conversations with colleagues from three periods of learning journey, these were taped and transcribed
- o Discussed with supervisor
- o Shared transcripts with all participants and their feedback incorporated. (The transcriptions included footnotes with my reflections on the content and process, this formed another cycle of inquiry and served to deepen the exchange when participants responded)
- o Mind mapped from transcript and comments
- o Wrote-up feedback, including noticings about my own process during the sessions. Later I 'wrote-into' these with reflections as I edited them (see example Appendix H)
- o Wrote-up process and content (reducing the original 140+ pages to three documents totalling 48 pages)
- o Shared with supervisor and tutorial group.



## Who I approached

I chose people who I knew would be 'friends prepared to act as enemies' (Torbert 1976:169), I wanted honest feedback; this is not just the equivalent of asking '*does my bum look big in this?*' I'm not gathering data to enable me to say '*well they say I look pretty good, so it's ok*'. They are listed here in the order in which I got feedback from them.

**Tim** – we met two years previously when we both worked as part of a CARPP consulting peer supervision group. We co-facilitated WMSEP action learning group.

**Alison, Diana, and Richard (ADR)** – we met in 1993 through Vision 21 and co-facilitated together in that and other projects. Alison and Richard worked with me on Children's Commission project. Richard and Diana were facilitated by me in the CPC project.

I wrote:

These people know me: we've been through a lot together; they've seen me when I've not been on my best behaviour, we've had our times of great elation but also of despair, disagreement and disappointment; we have had to say hard things to each other at times in the past because of the closeness of working together. I also know them to be scrupulous, honest, and interested in learning<sup>287</sup>.

**Sally** – we met in December 2000 when worked together on phase 1 of the LGA project.

**Chris** – we are part of the same CARPP tutorial group. We co-facilitated Governance project. Chris also took photos of me working.

A great deal of the feedback from Chris and Sally fed directly into the practice accounts and so is not duplicated here<sup>288</sup>.

## What I asked

The interview schedule changed from a simple (simplistic?) 'What do you see me do?' to the schedule attached as Appendix I. I took my questions to my CARPP tutorial group and the questions evolved as a result of our discussions.

Questions covered:

1. Changes in my practice over time
2. Impressions of specific occasions
3. How my presence was experienced
4. What it is I do, that is noticed
5. How others gain feedback.

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<sup>287</sup> Report on Inquiring conversations Feb. 2004.

<sup>288</sup> See also *CPC Practice account* for feedback from my colleague Martin Large.

## ***What I heard***

My analysis of the feedback produced three documents totalling 48 pages, in which I wrote about the process of engaging with the feedback, my internal concerns, what did and did not surprise me, and the debates I had with colleagues. I attach one of these as Appendix H as it shows the care and detail of the way I have worked with the material.

Much that came out felt very confirming of the effects of my internal practice, and somewhat familiar, even if viewed from a different perspective. However the conversations also produced some dissonance between my sense of self and the views of me discussed by the participants in these inquiries.

For this thesis I have been selective; here I include six more detailed examples of points raised, chosen because they either notice me at a *specific point or transition* in my learning journey, or because they are about the *essence* of the way I work. I include Richard's comments on what I was doing in the conversation, also things that arose about my condition. I then summarise other key points.

## **Presence**

When I started asking the questions I wanted to understand my presence, by which I mean my enabling and charismatic presence (Heron, 1989)<sup>289</sup>. I chose not to define presence for others but was curious as to what would emerge.

Asking about my presence opened up conversations about my attitude to my own power and authority – which I was perceived as uncomfortable with

Tim: I think you easily feel uneasy about things that might be considered pompous, or about authority in a certain way, or being in a position of expertise.

Changes over time:

Alison: I think it's softened...that's my personal experience; it's become a lot softer because I would pick up on Richard's use of the word challenging. You scared the life out of me often, but you don't scare me as much these days ... the presence is every bit as strong but it's much softer; I just equate it immediately with the way that your colouring has softened

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<sup>289</sup> Heron describes presence as *active charisma* 'a way of being, as and when appropriate, in and through hierarchical interventions. This is the outward spiritual power of the human person ... distress-free authority'. He also writes of *enabling presence*, giving free attention to the group, encompassing and enhancing the autonomy of group members (Heron 1989:132-134).

Richard: I have this picture of a much more flexible, softer, more centred you facilitating actually. Less reliant on bringing your design and everything in with you, it's great isn't it? ... it must have been good to have reflected and seen that change<sup>290</sup>

### And being calm

Sally:-my experience of your presence in the team was often of a calm centre. There were lots of occasions where people wanted to go, wanted to leave...so there was this sense of spinning and I think you had a capacity to demonstrate a sort of calm... equilibrium in the midst of all of that... that's not just a sort of Buddhist type presence, I think the way you do that is with a capacity to make sense of, to articulate some sense in a place, in an articulate and vocal way.

### Purposeful

Sally : Purposeful would be another word I'd use. Acting with purpose and intent... explicitly thinking about your intentions and then acting with that intention. Reasonably transparent

Me: Yes, because when you were saying that I was thinking 'how does that feel on the other side?' Because there's a potential for that to feel manipulative or controlling

Sally: Yes, I hadn't thought of that. I was thinking of a line where you start off saying fairly explicitly 'this is my intention, do I act with that intention, do I get that effect?' and for that to be open and transparent. So in a way it feels the opposite of manipulative really, thinking of manipulative as being when your intentions are hidden from everyone but you

### Having my back against the wall

Both my vulnerability and confidence were noted

Richard: I was thinking of ... the balance between your vulnerability and your competence, that's interesting. I think with different facilitators that balance is very different and I've been facilitated by some who are incredibly competent but they have no kind of, you can't see them there's no kind of sense of vulnerability and therefore for me anyway, it doesn't quite work

Diana: that's the authenticity thing: because you're being very much you, you are also very vulnerable in a way

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<sup>290</sup> I do have a felt sense of the shape of a process which I am holding as facilitator. My fear was that this did not show! It's as if one core part of me is refusing to play the game of being prepared on the level of designs on paper, this part of me wants to run on a felt sense of what's going on, what's right in the moment.

The last seven years have been about learning to listen to that part of me, and providing *just enough* of the structure which others need in order to let themselves take risks. When I first started on this learning journey I was very torn between me needing my careful plans to calm myself and to feel in control, and the me that wanted to reduce structure and experiment with a sort of open chaos (CPC). Now I can better appreciate the design principles behind Future Search and Open Space: a strong holding framework allows a secure space for exploration and creativity.

Alison: yes, you own up to your mistakes as you make them

Richard: I think it's energising ... and maybe those who are generally voiceless that's exactly what they need to see. They don't need someone who's ... very slick...

What I notice is thinking on the spot -- and almost loving that, as if that's why you're really doing it because you just enjoy 'here I am back against the wall' and just working your way through the situation whatever might arise. I remember seeing you in some place ... and I forget exactly who it was who raised some quite difficult political problems and there were lots of members<sup>291</sup> there, and I could see you thinking 'great! This is what I need 'and you just dealt with it.

Having my back against the wall is exciting, but I am aware of my fearful self. And I notice I want this fearful me recognised too, not so as to unsettle or make others feel insecure but so as to have an honest meeting point. In much the same way as I now want to be more open about my vulnerabilities around my condition<sup>292</sup>. I needed to hold these feelings close while they felt unbearable, but now I want them out and seen as an integral part of me.

And it's also true I do like to rise to danger in the moment, to feel challenged and stretched and on the edge, to step into my leadership power as facilitator.

## Deep thinking

Diana: and very deep thinking of ideas – like recently when I asked if you could think of good references you came up with a wonderful rich provision of things, which was fantastic... it led me off into all sorts of things. Like a resource person, a library, ideas.

As for deep thinking, I'm not sure... I still feel disadvantaged by an indifferent education, lacking a grounding somehow, a familiarity with a language or common currency of ideas and symbols. So my thinking feels locked away, I'm cautious often about sharing it, particularly in a group. I remember it feels like it took years for me to feel cool about speaking out in the CARPP open workshops, as if my questions or points would expose my not-knowing in a way that felt shameful. So this insecurity obscured a sense of my own thoughtfulness.

**Inspiring (and giving) respect** was another observation that was made. I feel unfamiliar with it internally, but I do recognise it, as when I assert something strongly expecting to be challenged and find others will believe me. It's always felt a dangerous ability to me, I think I'm afraid of what I can do with it, suspicious of myself using it to bully and browbeat. Not that I can remember ever having done so directly, but I do remember the *desire* to do so in order to protect myself from authority.

Tim: people give you respect quite naturally... I see nothing in your way of working that is about *trying* to get that respect.

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<sup>291</sup> Elected members of the district and county councils.

<sup>292</sup> Having MS, which is progressing.

I'm very interested in that because clearly to some extent with the agenda you've got, the *things you're passionate about*, it's about equality, it's about participation it's about working with people, and so how you relate to them when you are practising. You've been doing stuff a long time you've got a lot of skills.

People pay attention to you when you speak. You don't speak loudly, I would actually say you speak fairly softly ... there's some thing about what you did ... I think which is really good. It seemed to me *you've been doing it more this year than last year* in two totally different situations, I haven't got a clue what that is, does that make any sense to you?

People listen because a) you have stories they want to hear, but also b) because you demonstrate an understanding of their situation. I think you show people real respect. I seem to remember you many times in our workshops trying to make learning points on AR by adding to what someone was saying, building on it ... 'yes, and that makes me think of ...' and 'yes, that reminds me of'. My experience of this was that it wasn't just a trainer's trick to gain goodwill – that you actually did make these connections between your own practice and that of others.

### **Projection and reception**

There seems to be a rhythm in my facilitation and the way I attend to the group I'm working with: projecting into the group to focus it on the task, galvanise it into action, enthuse it, but then drawing back to enable the group to take up the space themselves. My colleague from the Governance project observed:

Chris: so what I've noticed is a movement and a rhythm between projection and reception, a very necessary thing is to have the projection and if we weren't doing that job they'd probably be floundering<sup>293</sup>. And when we projected the hardest it galvanised some action, so there's something about a dynamic in between, its almost as if you are taking the earliest opportunity to step back and become less visible, and at some points you are in the limelight and at other points you become less visible and the conversation almost closes around you, not to exclude you but the conversation then moves between the participants and not referring to you. And then there are points when you come in.

### **What Richard observed me doing**

As one might expect from this group of reflective fellow facilitators others too were keeping an observing eye:

Richard: could I go back to what you said quite quietly, you said 'I don't mind any more' when Alison said whether they like you or not isn't the point. Which suggests that you used to want them to like you. And I actually feel that that's a good question because I think one of your talents, if you like, has been to be very caring about people: I've noticed you doing it quite a lot in conversation this afternoon, you say things

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<sup>293</sup> I think they'd be reverting to more central control for security.

which make people feel comfortable, and I think that's quite an important part of facilitation, not ignoring what you were [also] saying about going beyond the comfort zone<sup>294</sup>. (Transcript ADR session).

It's interesting to hear Richard's comments on me facilitating the inquiring conversation. At that moment you see me through his eyes, very rare, and one of the things this process gave me.

I wanted to believe this would be visible – the caring-terribly part of me, which nowadays settles into caring-solidly. But I can't say I was confident it would be perceptible, and I'd not expected it to be so very trackable!

### **Stuff re my condition coming up and coming out**

I was not sure that this section was relevant here. But maybe including it here is yet another cycle of me coming out about how I feel, and exploring how it feels to be heard or not heard (and in this way mirroring my clients' journeys). This has been a pattern in my PhD journey: I have held onto my feelings, refusing to share them; I've felt that this feeling part of me was excluded; and then have found ways to share it, often ways which feel almost explosive – the suppressed feelings splurging out untidily. Initially this messiness made me feel ashamed and more determined to hide the vulnerable bits (Tigers moment). More recently I have tried to firstly negotiate a place for this aspect of me (Unicorn), and later just to let it be here (Pig and Deer).

The image of being tired of coping finally crystallised into words spoken aloud through one of my regular therapy sessions (Feb.'03). An impatience with and exhaustion from physically coping and the related sense of frustration with myself and the position I find myself in due to my condition had been around for some time. I took the question 'how can I work-less, cope-less and do-less?' to my CARPP tutorial group in early July 2003, although I notice that I did not elaborate on what I meant by cope-less. In the context of discussing my schedule of questions for these Inquiring Conversations we were more interested in do-less and possibly work-less.

I can't claim that it was a deliberate strategy but I noticed immediately that when I listened to the tapes and read through the transcripts of the inquiring conversations (Aug. '03) further thoughts about 'cope-less' occurred to me and I recorded them as footnotes in the transcripts, which I then circulated to participants, leaving no doubt as to the charged nature of 'cope-less' for me and opening up the possibility of dialogue.

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<sup>294</sup> Taken in-context, the point about going beyond the comfort zone relates to taking groups into sticky areas by giving a safe holding framework within which they can take risks. Richard is not intending to suggest I *only* make people feel comfortable, but that I express my caring and so they can feel more comfortable than they would otherwise.

Sometimes they took the form of noticing myself in the session, and in the second of these inquiring conversations I was more direct about what I meant:

What have become questions for me, and the process of writing up has brought this up: is wanting to ... do less coping<sup>295</sup> -- because I don't see coping as a terribly positive thing, it would be nice to do something other than just cope.

A participant responded on reading the transcript.

Sue, on reading this, I feel very guilty at not asking how you are physically in terms of doing your work-- in all our conversation about you and changes, I didn't ask.

This was helpful as I was able to experience clearly in myself that I did not want him to feel guilty, or even sympathetic. *I wanted to speak about it and be heard.*

### **Summary - other things I learnt:**

I am also seen as (session with Tim)

- o Experienced
- o My discomfort with traditional forms of leadership
- o Wordy
- o Timekeeping with sensitivity
- o Different ways of using power in groups

And in session with ADR

- o Generosity with my time
- o Confident holding
- o Passionate
- o Use of pictures and metaphors
- o Challenging
- o Genuinely fascinated by the work
- o Adapting my style.

### ***My 'stuff' about asking for feedback***

I have said that I had 'stuff' about asking for feedback, here I look at how my psychology affects my willingness to listen for feedback.

I have a memory; I must have been about seven years old, of coming home from primary school to my mother with a question.

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<sup>295</sup> Admitting I don't see coping as a very positive thing, I'd like to do more than just cope. Starting to talk about the connection with the fatigue

We had been reading fairy stories in class, and I was full of thoughts of the archetypal characters.

Would I, I asked my mother, be beautiful when I grew up?

No, she said, but you might be attractive.

It seems to me, looking back on it now, such a sad failure to connect.

My seven year old head was still full of a fairy story world where all the successful women that I could identify with were beautiful, and all the others were not only ugly but doomed to come to a nasty end.

My mother was unable or unwilling to enter my world however young I was, and always demanded that I relate to her practical, (and I now know personally disappointing) adult world.

As you read notice also the implied threat in that '*might* be attractive', it held the hint of something to be earned, conditional, a set of tasks to be completed to her satisfaction before even this could be achieved. Security had to be earned in this relationship

Who's surprised that I later indulged in a fantasy about being adopted? It felt that as I had got (what felt like) the wicked stepmother now, I must once have had a *real* mother. It was easier for my younger self to believe my mother had somehow been spirited away than it was to believe that this failure to connect was the way things were. Where was my *real* mother? This failure to accept 'the way things are' when the status quo offends my expectations of justice and connection, was to be an enduring trait and a driving force for my work.

It feels to me that all of this has contributed to me not wanting to ask others how they experience me. I needed to have a real sense of my grounded Pig-self in order to ask the question again.

It also contributed to the reluctance to share my inner worlds, and the subsequent suppression of working with image and metaphor, which had a late blooming, slowly within areas in which I felt more confident (certain relationships, certain tasks), and more fully via my writing and speaking as part of this learning journey. One could see it as me reclaiming the right to describe (in both senses of the word) my own world(s).

If I think about when this confidence appeared then it is in response to relationships in which another has been prepared to enter into my world, to connect without preconditions: a friend's parents, a close friendship, a therapist who provides the experience of being listened to and accompanied, a supervisor open to me, a supportive tutorial group.

The creation of spaces in which participants can enter into, or at least gain a view into, each other's worlds and can connect without preconditions is an important aspect of my facilitation practice.

The process of holding inquiring conversations with people who knew my facilitation practice has led to my being reminded of a Unicorn moment anxiety ('what if they can't see what I do?') and a discomfort with some terms and descriptions relating to my practice ('presence sounds so

pompous'), which also involves an anxiety that my thesis might not be useful or accessible to others<sup>296</sup>.

I remember that there was a time when I was imprisoned inside the belief that if someone didn't see what I was doing from the outside then I wasn't somehow authentic; if you can't see me doing it then it must mean I'm just lying about it, or I'm pretending or I'm fooling myself or attempting to fool you. Rather than the inquiry this feedback leads me to: *this is what's going on inside, this is what it looks like from the outside, and what does that mean?* In learning journey terms, moving from Unicorn moment thinking to a more grounded and open Pig and Deer approach.

It feels like (re)learning what I look like from the outside<sup>297</sup> in lots of ways:-

It uncovered the sort of thing that you hold in your heart; which is about what you *want to be* perhaps, how you *would like* to be experienced, what your *intent* is (the bit that pushes out into the world).

And then there's that internal barrier you've erected, which is pessimistic and cynical and worn down by the world and which expects to be judged.

And then there's the realisation '*oh my god, some of that stuff from the heart does get through!*'

So that it feels quite challenging to me to be going through understanding my own process and understanding more and more why I held-off having these conversations for years, then getting back stuff I hadn't necessarily anticipated. Positive, confirming stuff most of it. Disconcerting.

As I wrote in a footnote to the transcript of my conversation with Tim:

I am struck when typing up this tape with the feeling of fear always associated with asking for feedback. (Is it particularly re my work, where I claim a particular expertise?) So afraid of being told hard things, 'not good enough' messages, revealed as the inadequate creature I can feel like in the middle of the night, on a bad day, anytime I really stop to ask the question and listen to the answer.

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<sup>296</sup> It must pass the 'Bill Booth test'. See *Opening* section for explanation.

<sup>297</sup> I've always been aware of a slowness to recognise myself for example in shop windows or unexpected mirrors – a 'who's that? Oh it must be me'. And a way of looking at myself in photographs which is a sort of sideways glance, an almost not looking (I suspect not an uncommon experience).

There is an aspect of this behaviour which allows me to retain my own, selective image of myself, unaffected by the 'reality', hence having photographs taken for my Indian visa recently was a bit of a shock as I confronted my double chins and looked in vain for my cheekbones!

This (re)learning to see myself has something of the same feel about it: only in this case I have an image of myself as facilitator and activist which I carry very close to my heart, and which I don't expect to match up with the 'me' perceived by others. It's my expectation that some other, shadow aspect of me will have insinuated itself in-between me and my observer. That the heart-felt aspects won't be perceived.

A tutorial group colleague commented about my well developed dark side; he suggests I may be

on a quest to discover the most damning (sic) piece of feedback possible that would finally destroy you for ever! Of course you didn't discover it. On the contrary your colleagues were respectfully and carefully affirmative of you. Still I worry that you might get what you look for on another occasion – What we fear might be what we seek? (Rob, Tutorial group 11.03).

It feels to me to be important to understand at least a little about where these feelings about asking for feedback come from. I need to be able to recognise them and where they belong, and I need to be awake for any resonances there might be with the situations of those I'm working with who have been made to feel ignored, impotent and insecure by family or by the society in which they live (see Appendix J. on the quality of parenting and adult adjustment). The process I used gave me insights.

### ***My reflections on the nature of the sessions***

Here I look at the inquiring conversation sessions themselves; forming the questions, facilitating the feedback, my recording of sessions, and other things that arose.

#### **Forming questions**

From feedback from Sally I identified that *changing my question* from simply asking 'what do you see me do' led to having much more of a sense of what it is I'm 'doing'.

I discovered a new aspect of what I was doing in that LGA consultant team, particularly around peacemaking and being facilitative around the issues of leadership. If I go back and look at the writing that I was doing 18 months ago, there was an absence of talking about me acting. Now it feels like it's added-in that additional dimension because I've got a view of what I was doing in the group' (tutorial group transcript, January 2004).

It has helped me to see that although my feelings in a facilitation situation are giving me valuable feedback, they are not necessarily a match to the role I am taking or the image others have of me: e.g. I have felt gauche, without language and unskilled, but what was visible to the observer was a quiet determination on my part to stay focused and get things done in accordance with my values.

And using the questions to revisit specific occasions of which we have worked together (question 2) enables people to think themselves back into it, and thickens the descriptions of the event, so producing better recall of detail.

## **What I did to facilitate the feedback discussions**

I took notes during and immediately after the session about my own facilitative behaviours –

Summarised these were:

- Framing – setting the scene for the session, building on my emails and conversations with the participants. Ensuring that the questions are known to all present. Including advocacy and illustration (Torbert)
- Giving permission – encouraging honesty and frankness, and opening up the conversation to meet our mutual interests, not just to serve my purpose
- Trying to manage my fear while admitting how hard it was – it felt important to both admit to myself and the others present how difficult and how scary the process was for me, whilst ensuring that my fear doesn't cramp my style or theirs. Ensuring the scary is also 'safe' and 'warm'. The transcript shows us moving from 'safe and warm' into more risky territory as the sessions progress i.e. one participant having found me scary
- Keeping track of the conversation, gently guiding it through the question areas
- Ensuring that we can all dance together – building on others' points, connecting their points into the flow of conversation, stretching the envelope to ensure others' interests are included, reaching out if someone sounds excluded.

So in fact facilitating this conversation was very similar to my usual working situations, facilitating conversations with clients or small group work.

## **The points I recorded from our conversations, differences from the transcript**

I made notes during our conversations, and later compared these with the transcripts to see what I had highlighted or missed. There was not a lot of difference here. Most of the main areas raised about my practice in the conversation found their way into my notes, with the exception of the comments about my providing 'a bedrock', being well prepared and being credible<sup>298</sup>.

I see this omission as a manifestation of my lack of confidence about my practice (not hearing some good things), and am concerned that this product of my personal past (insecurity) could obscure my in-the-moment actions. This is the type of thing I am cultivating noticing-for. I am left asking, can I find a way to give myself a less hard time and still practice well.

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<sup>298</sup> This also went missing from the transcript: It should have appeared twice but its first mention was left out when I wrote up the session, this was picked up by Richard when I circulated the transcript.

## Seeing my moving-around self in-action

Reflecting on the conversations with my supervisor identified a pattern typical of my practice; me 'moving around', this time in dialogue with others and their noticing of me. I'm persistently seeing 'the other side' – whatever those giving feedback say I see the other side too.

Examples: See my comments above regarding being **purposeful** – I question whether I'm being manipulative. **Inspiring respect** leads me to ask do I brow-beat? Being **confident** is balanced with wanting to be openly vulnerable.

This is my moving-around self in-action, never happy with just one perspective but wanting to see it from other angles. My concern is about fairness, and about the outcome. I'm double-checking, working in my 'noticing pocket', I have to ask those questions about my actions/motives, otherwise I feel I am asleep.

## Other questions that now arise

*Do I want information from others in order to prove I exist, and is that a generative or degenerative need? (And the answers are yes sometimes, and not always).*

*How do I/ you know if what I was doing was effective? What signals would I/you look for from the group to indicate something was not- on for example?*

*What about the facilitator as political not personal – when standing up for what I perceive to be in service of the greater good leads me to be abhorred by my group and possibly by my colleagues, how do I know I'm right? How do I keep myself going?*

These are continuing questions that 'line' my noticing pocket.

## An unexpected bonus

As we discussed these issues about which we all feel so passionately, I loved the sense of being held within a like-minded group again, as if I could surrender the championing of some aspects of the discussion to trusted others who would be able to speak them for the whole group, and for me as part of the group (ADR). I had not expected to feel this while engaged in this particular conversation. It feels as if we had built trust together, and this had rebuilt my trust about asking the questions and allowed me to take support and feel a member.

## Looking at ourselves – and the use of photography

The act of looking at ourselves is potentially estranging as to do so one has to take oneself out of the experience of the moment, so that the act of looking potentially creates a sense of detachment. I think it's a risk worth guarding against, this potential estrangement, or at least being

vigilant and ensuring that one notices if self examination starts to lead to an unhealthy or dysfunctional level of estrangement.

In accumulating photographic evidence I have had to face my own discomforts about my own image, including the lack of familiarity with my image. I am also rather vainly self-critical and additionally aware of being judged as a woman by my physical appearance: size, disability, age etc. There are definitely gendered aspects in this. One could consider these discomforts as purely the product of a personal anxiety or even neurosis, however I think these are existential discomforts and that they have relevance for my work:

If I feel lacking in a place or in legitimacy how can that inform my work with others who themselves have their right to place or legitimacy questioned?

If I feel lacking in voice can this inform my work with the silenced voiceless?

My sense of being judged as a woman in a negatively gendered way can be fuel for my awareness of gender and other power issues in and for the groups I work with.

Yet again there is an internal resonance between the personal and the political, the internal and the existential.

So my photographs produce two types of data: one is the feeling experience of using the medium and what I can learn through that if I can come to understand it; and the other is the data which I started-out seeking, the feedback about how I am in action and what can be learnt from that, which includes what I am doing with my body (leaning forward, gesture, expression), how I am attending, how 'present' I am seen to be etc.



I was interested in the experience of having the still photographs taken. My colleague handled asking the group for permission very elegantly and took the shots discretely, but there was another more valuable aspect to gaining their permission to take pictures, that of equalising our relationship in at least one way. I shared with the group that I was looking at my own practice as part of my research and in an attempt to improve

it. This seemed to change an aspect of the dynamic between us a little from 'us helping them as experts' (a designation we had never sought) to all of us learning together<sup>299</sup> (see Governance project) – them learning about how to sustain their organisation and me about improving my facilitation practice<sup>300</sup>.

If you look at the photos, somehow you can see in my animation that there is something fluid going on (meaning it's working well, not gritty).

## Coming to terms with myself

Just as I struggle with the process of gaining feedback through visual images I once struggled with listening to my recorded self. I had an ambivalence about hearing myself that was not present when I spoke out into the groups I was working with.

For a while (my Tigers moment) I did not want to hear my own strength in action, it was like a denial of my own expertise, which almost seemed to dismiss my 'success' as fluke, chance, and very little to do with me. My reluctance to hear myself was like taking flight, not resting long enough in my own power to get a secure sense of ownership of it. Later (my Unicorn moment) I could begin to listen and to hear a competence and even to start to own it. However it really has taken a long time (well into this Pig and Deer moment) for me to feel secure in both my *knowing* (expertise, power) and my *not knowing* (my openness to inquiring in-company)<sup>301</sup>.

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<sup>299</sup> There is an interesting paradox illustrated here about our culture's relationship to learning: we may profess to be learning communities, engage in lifelong learning etc but when it comes down to it people are reluctant to be seen to 'not know' and want to bestow expert roles on themselves and/or others. My humility in sharing my need to continue to learn gave them the space to somehow claim their own knowing about their organisation and its issues. From this starting point we could contract with them on the explicit basis of 'not knowing' together but engaging in inquiring together in order to better *know*. In this way their lived experience was better recognised and acknowledged and less power was given away to us as 'those clever people from the university'.

This also gave us a platform from which to draw attention to the processes we were using together (action research) and to emphasise their ability to continue it with and for themselves.

<sup>300</sup> In this way we were able to work positively with the otherwise sometimes problematic relationship between a community organisation and an academic institution, where we are often perceived as knowing a great deal and coming to tell them how to do things. We consistently challenged this perception but this instance of me learning while with them made our protestations of 'we are all learning together here' far more credible.

<sup>301</sup> I see this so clearly mirrored in the self effacing groups which I sometimes work with. The residents giving away their power (of lived experience) to technical experts who know little or nothing about their lives: their resources and needs; the patients who defer to medical experts who lack their (lived) experience of ability, disability, disease and ease. Even in the process of demanding to be heard these traditionally voiceless groups tend to give away their power and knowledge, deferring to the very expert others who are seeking information from them. The habits of voicelessness are hard to

## ***How seeking feedback has added to this journey***

### **Feedback confirming my thesis**

I identified that a 'whole' picture of what's happening when I facilitate is constructed of multiple perspectives:

I think maybe there's a chunk between the question I want to ask from where I am and what people want to tell me on hearing that question, maybe I just need to understand the link between the two... (conversation with Judi Marshall, 11.8.03).

I'm interested to hear myself making this connection. It reinforces the matrix idea of what I think of as *constructed reality*: it's not just what I say but what you hear, and expect, and the context we are both in etc. It seems that the world gets created from some matrix of:

- o What I think I'm doing inside
- o Other things that I don't know I'm doing but I am doing
- o What people see
- o Interpretations people have
- o What people want from me
- o And what emerges in the situation from the combination of all of these things.

It feels like just another dimension of the interconnection which I have been stressing throughout this thesis: that of the personal, the interpersonal, the political and the transpersonal.

But of course it's not as simple as a matrix, with its nice straight lines and clear correspondences: it's more like a series of overlapping circles which continue to shift according to the pressures put on them. This is what I mean by a '*constructed reality*'.

Asking others *what they see Sue do* can only give me the view from one perspective, which I can combine with my own and relate to the context we all are situated in (political, social), the outcomes I was working for at the time, choices I was making and so on. The feedback can't be a one-to-one correspondence notion of the truth, but it can give me other perspectives. So it's a valuable set of data but only when seen along with my own internal workings.

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break, the expectations often heartbreakingly low, the anger and frustration sometimes near impossible to channel into a felt sense of empowerment. In terms of development work it requires a longer, sustained engagement in which trust can be built, which then enables the knowing to emerge often through learning to inquire together.

