Using a learning journal to improve professional practice: a journey of personal and professional self-discovery

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This paper provides an account of how I improved my professional practice by keeping a reflective learning journal. It begins with the recognition that to improve my practice I first needed to understand its nature. This resulted in an evolving journey of personal and professional self-discovery that led to a greater understanding of my role as a practitioner–researcher. I describe how engaging in double-loop reflection (as distinct from single-loop reflection) became my ‘real’ reflective learning, and how that process helped me analyse my theories-in-use, leading to an understanding of where and how my practice needed to improve. I acknowledge the importance of recording my practice honestly, and illustrate how writing openly and appreciatively led to a richer reflective and reflexive journal that helped me better understand and manage the change taking place in my organization.

Introduction

As a practitioner engaged in facilitating the development and learning of others I have long been concerned with ensuring I practice to the best of my abilities. In the context of my own work (helping to develop managers in developing countries) such a concern takes on a special impetus. This is because for cultural reasons I am rarely given feedback on how well, or how badly, I perform in my work. Without feedback there is little opportunity to understand from my client’s perspective what ‘works’ for them, and how we can improve what we do together. In these situations it is left to me to judge the standards of my own work and it is easy to feel I am performing to the best of my abilities, when in fact the opposite may be true. In the absence of feedback from my client I believe one way to help improve my practice is by generating my own feedback. By subjecting accounts of my practice to critical reflective inquiry I am able to recognize the dissonance between what I espouse to practice and what I actually do. In doing this I place myself in a better position to improve my work by...
taking action designed to correct the ‘mismatch’. I then continue my learning process by further reflecting on the effect those actions have on my client, the organization and myself.

Background

In the constructionist view, our perceptions, appreciations, and beliefs are rooted in worlds of our own making that we come to accept as reality. (Schön, 1987, p. 36)

The concept of reflective practice has long been associated with improving professional practice (see Brubacher et al., 1994; Cheetham & Chivers, 1996). In this context reflective practice may be thought of as ‘a professional development technique that enhances organizational, as well as individual, performance … [offering] an alternative approach to change, one which emphasizes people and ideas’ (Osterman, 1990, pp. 141–145). The process of engaging in reflective practice requires the practitioner to become a ‘researcher in the practice context’ (Schön, 1983, p. 68) and necessitates undertaking a sustained critical inquiry into thought and action as a means of responding to a problem, puzzle, surprise, confusion, or discrepancy usually associated with one’s professional practice (Peters, 1991). In the reflective process thought and action become integrated; and the reasons, assumptions and feelings that govern behaviour are carefully reflected on as a means of improving practice and increasing self-development (ibid., 1991). This issue is succinctly articulated by Osterman (1990, p. 134), who describes reflective practice as ‘the mindful consideration of one’s actions, specifically one’s professional actions … and critical assessment of one’s own behaviour as a means towards developing one’s own craftsmanship’: the aim being through this process to contribute to positive organizational change and effectiveness. In this act there is a requirement to consciously consider the consequences of those actions and how one’s behaviours impact on others (Zehm & Kottler, 1993; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998).

The process of paying attention to the impact of one’s behaviours is especially important for those engaged in facilitating the learning and development of others. In this context of helping others develop personal and professional skills the need for self-awareness takes on a special resonance. Megginson (2001, p. 6) is particularly forthright on the importance of self-understanding in these situations when he suggests, ‘if we can’t understand or make sense of ourselves then we can hardly hope to make sense of anyone else’. Where seeking to understand organizations is concerned, Kaplan (1999, p. 25) suggests this is achieved, inter alia, ‘through guided reflection on action, through facilitated self-critique [and] … through observing one’s own development’. The requirement to pay attention to one’s own personal and professional development when developing others is therefore writ large.

In this self-reflective process it is important to recognize that in coming to understand ‘self’, and in making sense of one’s situation we are constructing our own experiences of self. This social constructivist perspective is articulated by Bleakly, who reminds us:

... the very procedure of self-assessment within reflective practice comes to construct the object of its inquiry. In other words, ‘self’ and ‘self-reflection’ are not discovered and
mapped through self-assessment within reflective practice, but self-assessment and reflection become technologies through which the reflective self is produced, maintained and disciplined. (Bleakley, 2000, p. 407)

One technique used for generating a better awareness of self and helping come to understand the nature of professional practice is journal writing (Brubacher et al., 1994; Boud, 2001). Zehm and Kottler (1993, p. 101) articulate the usefulness of journaling for generating better self-understanding and helping identify the issues that concern us:

Most of all, a journal is a place you can talk to yourself. It helps you develop self-discipline, greater precision and sensitivity in your communication. In this process of systematic self-reflection, you become more insightful about your own inner world and thus better attuned to your desires and needs. You are able to work through internal conflicts, solve personal problems, remember significant events that take place, and be more like the person you want to be.

From a professional practice perspective Holly (1989) reminds us that journaling not only provides a database from which examples of practice can be explored for analysis and decision-making, but also enables the writer to capture reflection-in-action, and through this process, provides a means to consciously reflect on tacit practice. In working toward self-improvement it is also important to remember that good practice is about being accountable, responsible and authentic in work (CDRA, 2003). Revans’ (1998, p. 85) principle of insufficient mandate also seems particularly pertinent—‘Those unable to change themselves cannot change what goes on around them’—as a reminder that committing to positive personal action from reflective learning is imperative to bringing about positive organizational change.

In work where practitioners aim to bring about change in the functioning of individuals (and thus organizations), holding and practicing values, particularly those of openness and honesty is crucial to effective working (CDRA, 1999). In addition to holding these values it is essential that practitioners pay explicit attention to them, rather than just allowing them to have an implicit effect on their practice (Bourner et al., 2000). In paying attention to values in this way practitioners will inevitably find ‘contradiction’ between what they say they will do (their espoused theories) and their actual practice (their theories-in-use), but as Johns (2000) reminds us, finding contradictions of this type is the essential nature of reflective practice. This search for contradiction in the reflective process has often caused practitioners to focus on a problem, puzzle, surprise, confusion or discrepancy, principally due to the belief that problematizing practice allows practitioners to continue to learn from the situation (Jarvis, 1999). For Dewey (1933) this was because true reflective practice only takes place when individuals are confronted with material that is problematic, and when the attempt to resolve the problem is undertaken in a rational manner. There have, however, been attempts at challenging this traditional approach to problem-solving (in an action research sense) through more affirmative methods of inquiry. The most notable of these methods is perhaps Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) theory of appreciative inquiry, which involves seeking what is ‘right’ in work, searching for successes, life-giving forces, and the incidences of joy in the organization, rather than the problems (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000).
My approach to reflecting on practice

My own approach to reflective practice substantively involved journal writing as a means of helping me better understand my work and how I might go about improving it. (For helpful guides on using journaling as a means for reflection see: Holly, 1989; Posner, 1989, pp. 21–35; Kottkamp, 1990; Brubacher et al., 1994; Boud, 2001). My approach was to record an incident that interested or puzzled me as descriptively and objectively as possible (which I entitled ‘What happened?’). I then asked myself four reflective questions related to that incident. These questions were:

- How do I feel about this?
- What do I think about this?
- What have I learned from this?
- What action will I take as a result of my lessons learned?

Separating my thoughts and feelings from what happened was my attempt to introduce some structure to my journal keeping (previously my journal entries were more streams of consciousness than any ordered account of events, meaning it was difficult to use my writing as an aid for reflection: for a fuller account of this issue, see Shepherd, 2004). Introducing a reflective ‘framework’ to my journaling by using the questions above helped facilitate my reflective thinking and afforded me a better opportunity to make sense of the complexity that surrounded me. By using my journal as a method of generating, interpreting and presenting data I was able to create a ‘text’ to interrogate (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998). Through interrogating this text I came to learn how I practiced, the approaches and techniques I used in my work, what worked well and what did not (for both my client and I), and how my client responded to my interventions. Once I became confident in using this framework I expanded my set of reflective questions to include:

- What have I learned from what I’ve done?
- What have I done with what I’ve learned?

My aim in adding these questions was to create a dynamic means of analysing and implementing change through reflecting on what my intervention had achieved, and then committing myself to taking further action. In addition to recording learning incidents through the use of written narrative I also used mind-maps, photographs and drawings to help capture events. These techniques were particularly useful in helping me reclaim a sense of ‘indwelling’ when I came to reflect on my reflections, and a powerful means to reconnect myself to those issues that had once puzzled me. My approach to reflective practice also involved engaging in reflective conversations and dialogue with others doing similar to work to me (see Brockbank & McGill, 1998). I also experimented with more appreciative and affirmative forms of inquiry (see Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Jackson & McKergow, 2002) in an attempt to overcome concerns that my journaling was too negative in content (an issue I return to later in this paper).

In my learning journal I also recorded much of my routine work. My reason for doing this was grounded in the belief that to understand and improve practice it requires
‘laying it out’ for what it is. For me, this involved not only recounting my practice honestly, but also acknowledging the feelings and thoughts that underpinned my reasons for practising in the way I did. This allowed me to articulate my personal beliefs and values, a process that enabled me to identify the dissonance between my espoused theories and my theories in use. By doing this I was able to capture the real essence and nature of my practice beyond just naming my approaches as (say) ‘modeling’, ‘training’ or ‘coaching’.

**Coming to understand the nature of my practice**

The following excerpt from my learning journal illustrates both my approach to journaling, and how recording incidents like this helped me come to understand the nature of my practice:

**What happened?**

I finally get to talk with V about the financial regulations. I ask him to explain how I, as a new team leader for example, would go about making a purchase of new furniture. He describes the process to me and I make notes. … During this exploratory phase I reflect on some of the answers I am getting from V and wonder if these are influenced by the questions I ask him, e.g., ‘where is the purchase order for this transaction?’ I find my question quite accusatory and V gives me a problem-centred answer by focusing on what went wrong. If I rephrase the question using a ‘why’ approach the result is entirely different. I get a process-centred answer—why something isn’t done. For example, V would say to me, ‘do you know why T didn’t attach the purchase order to this transaction?’ [And then he would proceed to tell me.] I find this [my questioning] less accusatory …

**What do I think?**

I think I know him now and the reason for doing things the way he does. … I have the freedom to act, he does not. I think how important the right questions are—I am intrigued by the why/where questions and what they produce. I think about how I ‘work’ with V, the style I adopt and my general approach. It is very different to the way I work with other people. Do I have a ‘contingency’ approach as an adviser?

**What have I learned?**

Importantly how journal keeping leads to insights such as these and revelations that would otherwise never make themselves known. The act of documenting and reflecting on what I have done does this. The importance is not in the action itself, for this often reveals only the first layer behind an incident, e.g., V says, ‘x’, and therefore I have learned ‘y’. This is the first layer of meaning in journal interrogation. The key is to get to the second layer of meaning about myself as the writer. For example, this is how I behaved in this situation, does this mean I act differently with other people? Does this mean I adopt a contingency approach in my work? It is exploring this second layer of meaning that is key to a better understanding of self. (Journal, pp. 797–799)
By recording incidents of this type in my journal and the kind of questions I used (as I asked a question I would write it down) I am able to ‘reflect-on-action’ (Schön, 1983, 1987). In this respect my approach to journaling casts a spotlight on my practice, and when I see my practice for what it is I am in a better position to improve it. Through capturing the essence of my ‘reflection-in-action’ as the incident unfolds (i.e., my thinking-in-action related to the change in my questioning approach) I have captured my tacit behaviour. Analysing this tacit behaviour further helps me to determine the nature of my practice. This approach enabled me to differentiate the key learnings that my journaling exposed, those relating to the behavioural and tacit aspects of my practice.

**Behavioural learnings**

Analysing the journal excerpt above enables me to expose some of my behavioural learnings, for example how my initial approach to questioning is orientated toward surfacing shallow learning. By asking questions such as, ‘where is the purchase order for this transaction?’ my client proceeds to give me an answer solely concerned with the location of a particular piece of paper and I am surfacing information that tells me little about the way the process works. I also found that questioning of this type often elicited a defensive response from my client, as he sought to place responsibility for the missing paper on someone else; or, provided other excuses for its absence. The journal entry also illustrates my reflection-in-action concerning the appropriateness of my questioning technique, and how—in the midst of practice—I come to realize through the dialogue taking place that my approach is yielding information of minimal use. This dialogue surfaces an understanding of how well my approach is working, along with a growing consciousness on my part of the need to alter my questioning approach. The excerpt additionally illustrates how I reframe the situation based on the reflective dialogue taking place. This new understanding causes me to change my questioning technique to search for the reasons why the process isn’t working. The result is a deeper learning that contributes to helping both my client and I more fully understand the process we are jointly interrogating. The journal excerpt also indicates another behavioural concern for me, that of ‘how’ I engage with my client and the contingent approach I adopt in my work. Although there were multiple learnings from reflecting on this incident, a key one related to my use of ‘why’ questions (i.e., those orientated toward eliciting diagnostic thinking from clients) and how they were essential to helping my client and I more fully articulate the situation we faced together. By reflecting on learning incidents such as these I came to appreciate the value and benefit of careful questioning, as well as developing an understanding of the approaches and techniques I used in my work.

**Tacit learnings**

By reflecting on my practice in the structured way I describe I also came to highlight my tacit learnings. This came about through a process of double-loop reflection in
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Moving toward double-loop reflection

Analysing my journal entries helped me identify barriers to effective working, not only in terms of how my client and I engaged in learning together, but also the political, cultural and social constraints individuals faced in their work. In my earlier journal entry I stated, ‘I know him now and the reason for doing things the way he does … I have the freedom to act, he does not’. This statement refers to an earlier incident (not documented here) in which I learned of the constraints individuals faced in their work, such as the way managers delegated to their staff. I had noted that staff seemed rarely to take initiative in their work, which I attributed to a lack of delegation by managers (a single-loop reflection). My response was to advocate for managers to increase delegation, but despite their agreement to do so I was puzzled that they did not in practice. My real insight into this puzzlement came through a process of double-loop reflection in which I overtly articulated the managers’ espoused theories and then their theories-in-use. As I came to recognize
the reasons for the ‘mismatch’—as Marshall (1999) would call it—I learned it was constraints of a political, cultural and social nature that prevented people from taking initiative and from delegating. This understanding was realized through paying attention to the espoused values of staff, observing their theories-in-use, and then questioning the framing and learning systems which appeared to underpin their strategies. Coming to recognize the culturally bounded nature of the situation caused me to change my approach from advocating for increased delegation, toward one of working with the client and within the values of his system to bring about the desired change. By adopting this new ‘tack’ I moved from being in an adversarial role (previously lobbying senior management to increase delegation), to one in which I helped my client create solutions which he was prepared to implement. Through this approach I also came to learn that incremental change was likely to be more acceptable and effective than the ‘step’ change I had formerly sought to introduce. My previous focus on resolving the ‘technical’ problem (i.e., encouraging managers to delegate) had caught me in a single-loop learning mode and it was only by becoming reflexive that I provided opportunities for my real learning to emerge.

Reflecting in this way also helped challenge some of my own culturally bound assumptions about the learning and helping process in which I was engaged. I learned, for example, that the values and behaviours I felt important in helping clients learn how to learn were not what my clients valued or expected from me in my role as an adviser. Despite seeing myself in a ‘process consultation’ type role, which requires the practitioner to create a situation where clients continue to own their problems (Schein, 1969, 1990, 1995), my client saw me as an expert and had very clear expectations of how I should act. My pointing out how my approach was designed to help his learning did nothing to alter his view. This placed me directly in what Schön (1987, p. 6) termed the ‘indeterminate zones of practice—uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict’. Additionally, the process type questions I used (e.g., ‘what would you do in this situation?’) would often be viewed by my client as weakness on my part, indicating that I did not ‘have the answers’ to the problem. They saw me as an adviser, and here my responsibility was to provide expert advice, not to engage them in a learning experience. In these situations my client saw it as my ‘obligation’ to take the problem from him and deal with it myself. I do not believe that there was any reluctance on the part of my client to engage in the learning process per se, but it became clear that my assumptions about how learning should take place, and my role within that process were not necessarily shared by the people I worked with. It was during these complex situations that my reflective learning journal was especially useful for sense-making.

Coming to understand the nature of my practice

Reflecting on my work approaches through journaling also helped me to realize that I performed multiple roles in single incidents (in the way Schein suggests that consultants continually move between roles—providing expert information, ‘playing
Through this learning I came to understand how I really practiced, which led to a better understanding of the nature of my practice. The following journal excerpt illustrates how my work comprised of both directive and process type approaches in a single incident:

G has a problem. S goes part time next week and he hasn’t sorted out how her duties will be undertaken. Many tasks require a daily input and her attendance will be intermittent (and missed). ... He asks me for advice. ... I ask him to make a list of tasks that she does now, and the ones that she doesn’t that he’d like done. I then ask him the question after each task ‘who can undertake this task instead?’ by drawing on the remaining staff in the organisation and S’s part time attendance. He comes up with a name against each task, including the new ones. I suggest he then talk to S about the proposal and then to each staff member. (Journal, pp. 318–319)

Recording incidents in this way also alerted me to the way I responded to my client’s changing abilities, for example by moving from providing directional support (i.e., giving expert orientated advice), to one of simply observing and providing feedback as he became more confident and adept in his work. From this learning I was able to relate aspects of my own practice to theoretical models contained in the literature. Drawing on the above journal excerpt as an example, I found Hersey and Blanchard’s (1988) ‘situational leadership’ model useful for framing my work, particularly the amount of guidance and direction (task behaviour) I would give and how this related to my clients’ willingness to engage with the presenting issue. Analysing my journal entries also helped me determine other ‘helping’ or consultation theories and models useful for framing my practice; especially those orientated to helping clients solve their own problems and helping them learn how to learn. These included the models and theories of Blake and Mouton (1976), Brammer (1993), Cockman et al. (1992), Dougherty (1995), Heron (1990), Kubr (2002) and Lippitt and Lippitt (1986). Locating my practice in the literature in this way was only achieved by identifying the common themes and characteristics that defined my practice through journal interrogation. For example, by understanding the way in which I used ‘questioning’ as a technique, and then sourcing the relevant literature to help illuminate and develop that aspect of my practice. I found this approach a particularly useable means of helping me relate the theory (as defined in the literature) to my own practice.

Creating means for improving practice

Analysing my journal and subjecting the outcomes of an incident to further reflective inquiry and critical evaluation also helped me learn what worked and what did not for my client—including, importantly, the reasons why. I found that by subjecting learning incidents to continued reflective inquiry in this way I was able to create more ‘strategies for intervention’ (a phrase I borrow from Argyris and Schön; see Argyris & Schön, 1974), which in turn contributed toward an improvement in my practice as a whole. Figure 1 below illustrates this more clearly.
Figure 1. How reflective inquiry creates more strategies for intervention, which contributes toward improving practice.

At the outset of practice my work effectiveness is determined and constrained by my current understanding of the situation and the limited range of strategies I have to use. This is depicted by the small loop at the bottom of the spiral. Through reflective

Figure 1 above illustrates that structured, analytical reflection (that commits to action) creates more strategies for intervention, which results in improved practice.
inquiry my understanding of the effect my strategies have on the practice setting becomes clearer (depicted by the spirals building on one another). As I come to learn what works and what does not in practice (from every new unfolding situation by continuing to reflect-on-practice) I select and practice those interventions I find useful for achieving my work objectives. As I apply these new strategies I continue to improve practice (depicted by the upward and outward movement of the spiral column).

In my own work this reflective process has had significant implications for how I help the organization I am working with move toward becoming one that is resilient and sustainable. I have come to learn that achieving organizational resilience (i.e., an ability to bounce back from an adverse situation, such as a funding crisis) is enhanced through creating more options in problematic situations. In terms of transferring my learning to organization members this has meant increasing the capacity of my client to generate options through their own structured reflective processes.

The importance of self-understanding

Having illustrated how understanding the nature of my practice helped improve my work with my client, I now consider the importance of self-understanding to how I work. Through my journaling I started to develop a greater sense of self-awareness and began to think seriously for the first time about what I believed in and what I valued. Having made my values explicit (a more challenging process than I originally anticipated) my next step was to determine if I was implementing them in practice. This required me to record incidents in my journal in an open and honest way, a process that helped me see my practice for what it really was.

Recording incidents honestly enabled me to determine if my espoused theories were congruent with my theories-in-use, and whether or not I was living my values fully in my practice. To illustrate how I did this I recount below an event that was spurred by one of my biggest frustrations at work—the way senior managers controlled and withheld information. The following journal excerpt illustrates my reflection on recognizing the mismatch in my own behaviour and how I was equally culpable when it came to controlling information:

I reflected on yesterday’s conversation with D [an external consultant] and thought why was I being so exclusive? Why not involve V and S as well? And then I thought why not involve all the management team. Surely this would be a great opportunity for the organization to learn. And then I realized why I’d first suggested that just the three of us meet with D, it was about power and the control of information and wasn’t it a good thing that I’d managed to get D to share his ‘valuable’ information with seemingly (to me) the most important people in the organization. It was about having control and I feel ashamed about this. (Journal, p. 36)

Being ‘surprised’ at the mismatch between my espoused values and how I actually practiced was often a precursor to change in my behaviour. For me, a key condition for enabling this change to take place was preparedness on my part to record what happened (along with my feelings and thoughts) in an open and honest way. In my
journal I had found a safe place to do this—a place in which I could put my professional ‘armour’ to one side and reflect on my practice for what it really was, without fear of appearing vulnerable, or feeling a need to be defensive about my actions. By recording my feelings and thoughts in my journal I was presented with evidence of how I was performing (both good and bad), and in this sense I become a ‘witness’ to my own effectiveness. Being ‘true’ to myself in this way and acknowledging the incongruence of my behaviour enabled me to identify what I needed to do to improve it. Below is a short journal extract that illustrates how being honest and open was important in helping identify how my practice could be improved.

What happened?

I delivered a report writing workshop to the new staff. I hadn’t done much preparation. … P was translating for me and I hadn’t engaged him at an earlier stage to rehearse what we should do. Consequently P struggled with the translation and some of the concepts came across in a very complicated way, with him having to explain in the best way he could. I realized that my preparation hadn’t been that good … and the translation didn’t help matters. I had anticipated the workshop would be part theory and part practice, however, it all ended up theory. I tried to salvage the situation towards the end by setting them some ‘homework’.

How do I feel?

Ashamed and embarrassed really, I’m not really doing a good job like this. Why should I feel that doing things with little preparation and planning is good enough for my organization? I also feel for advisers who have to do things through ‘imperfect’ translation, it must be a nightmare.

What do I think?

I think I’ve become far too complacent. I think I need to get my self into gear … I do neither the organization nor myself any justice—it’s just not good enough. (Journal, pp. 717–718)

Being a witness to my practice (by presenting myself with illustrations of poor practice) became a powerful incentive to do something to improve it. By reflecting on the above incident I was able to inquire into the reasons for my complacency and take action designed to prevent such a situation happening again. Without this level of inquiry I may have just passed the incident off as ‘having a bad day’; or worse, blaming the translation. And despite my intention to be honest and open I find it difficult to imagine that this openness would extend to being quite this candid with a client when reviewing a workshop session. This realization in itself has presented me with an additional concern regarding my own professional effectiveness, as without sharing my felt shortcomings with my client I am simply compounding the problem of not receiving feedback. Failing to make myself open to how others view my practice simply means my potential for improvement becomes further diminished. This is something I still have to fully resolve, but I feel that articulating my concerns (and being open with you as the reader) has given me the confidence to take that next step.
As I have already stated, good practice is about being accountable, responsible and authentic, and by reflecting on my practice in an open and honest way I have moved toward holding myself more accountable for my actions. This has helped strengthen my strategies of intervention as I start to take full ownership and responsibility for what I do in my work.

**Focusing on problems—a problem in itself?**

Earlier in this paper I noted how the traditional approach to reflective inquiry centred on identifying ‘problems’ for interrogation. In my own experience of reflecting on practice I had come to notice that my journal writing was not only problem-centred, but also ‘negative’ in representation (I had fallen into a habit of negatively framing the issues I faced in my work). In an attempt to address this concern I adopted principles of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000), searching out what was ‘right’ and positive in work rather than focusing on the negative aspects. However, when reflecting on this as an approach to keeping a reflective learning journal I found mixed outcomes. Whilst it was useful in terms of enhancing my own and others’ motivation and enthusiasm, I found it less fulfilling in helping me develop an understanding of my practice. My appreciative approach to journaling became a type of self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the positiveness of my attitudes and behaviours became amplified as the actions I committed to often involved doing more of the same ‘positive’ thing. I found this approach had some natural limitations, for example coming to learn that even providing reinforcing feedback to a client has a limit of effectiveness. I also found writing appreciatively led to journal entries that tended to lean toward a narrative devoid of problems, and because I did not problematize, it was difficult to ‘hold’ anything for interrogation. This approach to journaling led to a loss of my problem focus through appreciation, and I found myself confronted with Dewey’s (1933) assertion that true reflective practice only takes place when we are confronted with material that is problematic. For me, this was a somewhat uncomfortable realization given my desire to move away from problem-centred thinking, but through this process I learned that to understand my work more fully I did need to identify a difficulty and problematize it—but not necessarily to represent it negatively. Although appreciative approaches to journaling did not work for me, I do believe in the importance of creative experimentation in reflective practice methodologies. Here I hold with Marshall’s (2001, p. 437) view that we often ‘have to take the radical path in content and method, to make a double leap. Otherwise the limitations in orthodox methods stifle the radical potential of inquiry’ [emphasis in original]. Using elements of appreciative inquiry in journaling may be one way to do this, however, I believe the approach needs to be different to my own journaling method.

There were, nevertheless, some positive outcomes to having experimented with this more appreciative approach to journal keeping. As I focused less on problems I found that my writing became more fluid and descriptive in style. I felt this to be a natural evolution for my journaling and one that I believe (on reflection) enhanced my ability to be reflexive. The change enabled me to more fully understand the relationship
between my research and practice, how I came to produce knowledge, and how I tentatively started to develop a better sense of self. I believe the richness of the narrative form helped me articulate my own reality in a deeper and more meaningful way than my previous structured approach to journaling allowed, and most importantly for me, the problems where still there to be interrogated. Here, adopting a reflective stance, I hold with Bleakley’s (2000, p. 12) view that ‘the kinds of writing employed will constitute the kinds of reflection enacted. Flat, literal, instrumental and technical-rational will produce similar styles of reflection and reflective subjectivities’.

Adopting a writer’s stance, I follow Smith (1994), who suggests that the stories and ideas we create through our writing become useful in helping us solve problems in our professional lives.

**Lessons and final reflections**

When I first started to keep a learning journal as a means of reflecting on my practice, I had little realization that I would also be embarking on a long journey of self-understanding. Nor did I realize that the process of reflection was something I would have to work hard at, and engage with in a structured way if I was to make sense of the complexity that surrounded me. Along my journey I came to learn that reflecting on my practice in a meaningful way was key to improving it. This involved articulating and reflecting on my values (espoused and practised) in ways that I had not done before. This process has led to many discoveries, most notably a richer understanding about who ‘I’ am, and how the values I bring to work affect my role as a practitioner. A necessary part of this process has been to explicitly surface my values as a way of ensuring I practice honestly and congruently. The result has been to create more appropriate strategies of intervention that are acceptable and workable to my clients, which has in turn—by means of their own reflective processes—helped them create a more resilient organization. I have also learned that the best way for me to understand my practice is to simply start by articulating what I do. This enabled me to better understand both the nature of my practice and my learning, as well as the nature of my reflection. In this respect, my reflective approach contributed toward my own evolving personal theory of practice.

As Schein (2002, p. 2) said, ‘The choice for us as consultants or just plain human beings is whether or not to become more aware of processes at all levels and begin to own the consequences of our own processes’. This points toward the need to understand not only the nature of our practice, but also to understand more about ourselves so we can understand why it is we practice in a particular way, how we use our values to underpin and shape our practice, and how this contributes to a better understanding and sense of self. For me, this process has involved keeping a reflective learning journal, and through this journey coming to appreciate that:

… how we diagnose and construct our experience, take action, and monitor our behaviour while simultaneously achieving our goals is crucial to understanding and enhancing effectiveness. If we learn to behave differently and to make these new behaviors stick, we will begin to create a new world. (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. xi)
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References