

Research Report
Self-Reflective Practice in the Helping Professions: Cultivating the Potential for
Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines the experience and potentially transformative learning of a group of mental health practitioners following engagement in an eight week educational program designed to help establish and enhance self-reflective practice. The study highlights a number of emerging themes related to the benefits of self-reflective practice in the helping professions. Further, the study focuses on facilitation strategies that have the potential to enhance establishment of self-reflective practice and contribute to both the academic preparation of those entering the field as well as the professional development/continuing education of established practitioners.

Introduction

Reflective practices, when understood from an academic or professional learning perspective, commonly focus on critical thinking activities and reflection upon problem solving within the context of the occupational role. "Critical reflective practices involve a) assessing our assumptions and b) analyzing power relations. It involves not only improving my practice but also changing the world." (Brookfield, 2000).

Schon describes reflective practice as "the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning; one of the defining characteristics of professional practice"(1983). I would concur with these above statements regarding reflection in professional practice; however, I would take this a step further when considering the role of self-reflection within the helping professions to include deeply personal elements of the practitioner's experience in all aspects of life.

This study was undertaken to identify best practices that might be applied to facilitate the development of self-reflective practice in the helping professions and potentially lead to transformative learning opportunities.

Purpose of Research

The goal of this research project was to identify the most important components of a self-reflective practice for those working in the helping professions and to further illuminate the most effective educational strategies for fostering self-reflective practice through transformative learning opportunities.

The focus of the research project was multiple and included a deeper understanding of the role of self-reflective practice with a group of community mental health professionals actively engaged in service provision with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) – Thunder Bay Branch. Further, the emphasis of the project was to establish the relevance of self-reflective practice, the most effective strategies to enhance practice, and the processes that best support the integration of self-reflection in professional practice.

Overview of Research Report

This research report focuses on the main themes that emerged through the facilitation of eight weekly educational sessions, the completion of feedback surveys, and interviews conducted with the participants involved in the research project. This is followed by a discussion of the relevance these findings might have in the field of adult education; specifically, how educational strategies might be structured to promote transformative learning through self-reflective practice in the helping professions, the importance of the coaching role in the process, how self-reflection might be enhanced when applied within real life practice, and the value of establishing self-reflective practice strategies over an extended period of time.

The results may have an impact on both formal academic programs designed to prepare future health care and human services professionals and is also relevant in the development and delivery of continuing education and professional development training within the helping professions. Feedback from participants was focused on both the process and content included in the educational sessions. Further, there are implications that might be helpful with regard to the ways in which organizations might best encourage and support the establishment and development of self-reflective practice within their agency policies and practices with a view to creating effective organizational culture. Finally, the conclusions will include recommendations with regards to both content and processes that could be helpful in the establishment and maintenance of self-reflective practice in the helping professions that might prove useful to individual practitioners, adult educators, and those in management and leadership positions within health care and human services organizations. These recommendations could be incorporated into the curriculum of academic programs, ongoing professional development activities, and organizational policies and procedures. I have incorporated the results of this research in a manuscript entitled *The Art of Conscious Service: Using Reflection and Reframing, to Rejuvenate Practice in the Helping Professions* and a training/coaching program entitled *Living the Art of Conscious Service*.

Background

It appears to be commonly understood that health care and human services professions have a high risk for burnout. While there is some emphasis on the importance of self care and self-reflection as a component of academic preparation in the helping professions, there is a tendency to focus more on technical and theoretical knowledge and skill development related to the specific occupation at the expense of developing capacity for self-reflective practice; that is

practice which involves developing an awareness and connection to the self and the inner processes of mind, heart, and spirit. Once in the profession, there is often little time available for fostering self-reflection, and at times, organizational policies and practices may act as a barrier. For example, many organizations continue to operate in a hierarchical structure or may be unionized environments; both of which have elements of power imbalances often impacting upon the interpretation and implementation of personal responsibility, which is a key element of self-reflective practice. Disciplinary policies may also run counter to this notion of personal responsibility and self-reflection.

Further, when reflection is encouraged in the classroom and the workplace, it is often in relation to reflective learning and the integration of theoretical information into professional practice. For example, practitioners may be encouraged to intellectually understand symptoms related to burnout along with specific strategies to prevent or respond to distress. However, understanding this information intellectually really has no impact unless the learner puts it into practice, which provides clear evidence of learning. Similarly, it is not enough to simply understand self-reflection on an intellectual level; it is a practice and a process that must be engaged in if the benefits are to be realized. Further, due to the emphasis on self-awareness, self-connection, and personal responsibility, there is a high potential that self-reflective practice might transform not only the experience of the practitioner, but also extend to the quality of service provision and to the enhancement of organizational culture.

One of the factors contributing to the risk of burnout is the element of emotional labour involved in the helping professions. To witness personal challenges, and often traumatic events in the lives of individuals accessing service can be emotionally exhausting; hence the reference

to emotional labour. It is common for those entering helping professions to express a desire to contribute to meaningful change in the lives of others, often with the expectation that there will be tangible evidence of this change. Quite often, that evidence is not readily apparent or may happen very slowly over a long period of time and may go unnoticed. Further, practitioners may expect a certain sense of personal fulfillment through service to others. To manage the emotional labour involved in helping professions, practitioners might vacillate between overextension and self-protection, which both potentially lead to a sense of alienation from their work and service to others. The hope in this research study was to gather information to support the idea that there is, in fact, another way.

The heart of any helping profession whether it be health care or human services exists within the relationship that is established between the person accessing the service and the person providing it. It is a deeply intimate and personal connection that occurs within the context of a professional relationship. It is crucial that practitioners develop deep levels of self-awareness and self-reflection in order to care for, cultivate, utilize, and replenish the resource that is the self.

Self-reflective practice is a holistic, personal, and active approach to self awareness and conscious living. This study promotes an expanded view of self-reflection to go beyond assumptions, biases, judgements, values, thoughts, and feelings, to include awareness and reflection upon personal history and experiences, culture, spiritual beliefs, and the ways in which all life experiences have been interpreted through the personal lens.

Statement of Research Problem

A review of relevant literature confirms the value that reflective practice can have within the helping professions (Schon, 1983; Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 2002). While some literature emphasizes the importance of reflection on values, beliefs, attitudes and personal interpretations, much of the literature has been more focused upon reflective learning that encourages the integration of theory into practice. In short, there appears to be agreement amongst health care and human services fields that solid professional practice involves the ability to be reflective. Further review of literature also highlighted the importance of the coaching role within the facilitation of reflective practice (Cohen, 1995; Herman & Mandell, 2004).

As mentioned previously, it is commonly accepted that health care and human services professionals often face the high risk of exhaustion and burn out as an inherent hazard of the profession. The nature of this work involves the ongoing exposure to and connection with individuals who may be facing very significant challenges either from a health or social perspective. Over time, without attention to personal self care, practitioners might find themselves disillusioned, disconnected, and depleted as a result of witnessing the struggles of another. Many practitioners vacillate between the extremes of over-identification and over-extension within the helping relationship leading to a loss of identity to the other end of the spectrum involving a shielding of self in an attempt to self-protect at the cost of disengagement and discouragement within the helping relationship. While wellness and personal care are acknowledged as integral elements of professional practice, there remain many gaps with regard to the best ways in which this might be encouraged and supported amongst practitioners.

Self-reflective practice is essential to self-care and has the potential to not only enhance practitioners' awareness of their personal self-care needs, but can also lead to increased feelings of fulfillment in work experiences, and ultimately lead to higher quality of service.

There is a tendency to assume widespread agreement on what it means to be self-reflective and how this practice might best be supported within the helping professions. It is common for human services textbooks to highlight the importance of awareness around personal values, biases, and belief systems in order to ensure that these are not imposed upon others in the delivery of services. However, there is very little offered in the way of strategies that assist practitioners to engage in self-reflective practice that encompasses a holistic perspective, delving deeply into personal elements of being as well as the examination of theory and best practices. Further, these activities, when encouraged and supported, often tend to incorporate the use of case studies and scenarios or simulations. While these activities can be useful for learning and integration of concepts, it is often very different from what a practitioner might experience when immersed in real life situations. The reflection that is supported in these processes often involves what Donald Schon referred to as "reflection-on-action" as opposed to "reflection-in-action," which ultimately creates greater opportunities for presence within helping relationships (1983). Practitioners are provided the opportunity for in-the-moment information to which they can readily respond and alter their choices accordingly. Where there is awareness of current thoughts, attitudes, emotional reactions, and interpretations, there is the opportunity to be more conscious of the choices made and resulting actions.

In the field of health care and human services, thinking about ideologies and best practices is not enough. It is important that foundational theories and values go beyond intellectual understanding and ultimately translate into action and behaviour. The literature focused on

transformative learning highlights this point; the goal being that of transformed perspectives, altered habits of mind, and the integration of new information (or the renewed understanding of previously held ideas) into our actions (Mezirow, 1997). Self-reflective practice can enhance our awareness of personal transformative experiences. Transformative learning can involve a degree of discomfort and disorientation as learners are asked to release attachment to previously conceived notions long enough to critically consider the introduction of new and potentially, alternative ways of understanding. This is also a common experience for those accessing health care and human services in order to manage a life challenge. Helping professionals are called to engage in potentially transformative learning opportunities with those to whom they are providing a service. It is important then that the practitioner is also prepared to engage in personally transformative learning experiences themselves.

Self-reflective practice is at once personal, subjective, and potentially intense in nature. Deeper levels of self-connection can greatly enhance the potential for transformative learning while assisting professionals to develop the courage required to honestly explore the inner workings of their minds and hearts and eventually allow these discoveries to become evident through their actions and behaviours. This is often translated into social action and social justice activities that often engage many health care and human services professionals.

The literature supports the value of self-reflective practice, the importance of coaching, and the immense impact that transformative learning opportunities can have on best practice in the helping professions. However, the question remains, “how do we best facilitate transformative learning opportunities to support learners in the development and maintenance of a personal self-reflective practice?”

Research Methodology and Approach

This was a qualitative research study using mixed methods to explore the stories of the participants and the meaning participants give to their experience. I chose a qualitative inquiry methodology as the framework within which to conduct this research project in order to gain a broad and expansive view of the perspectives related to self-reflective practice with a view towards garnering the most relevant and potentially useful information in relation to my quest to more deeply understand the most effective ways to facilitate and support this learning experience for others. Specifically, this research project could be defined as a qualitative case study. According to Merriam (2009) “the overall purpose (of qualitative research) is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences” (pg. 23). This is not the type of information that can be quantified due to the highly subjective nature of self-reflective practice.

My methodological choices reflect my desire to gather a rich resource of information with which to explore the questions I held regarding the best ways to facilitate transformative learning opportunities through the development of self-reflective practice in the helping professions. With an appreciation for unique learning styles, it was important to offer a number of learning strategies as well as relevant content in order to understand the personal responses to the material and processes as experienced by the project participants. It is interesting to note that this single case study conducted with individuals employed in the same agency, while eliciting many commonalities in the various responses, also showed diversity with regard to individual experience within the project.

This qualitative research study used mixed methods designed to understand the perspectives, learning journeys, and transformative learning experiences of community mental

health professionals as they engaged in an educational process to establish and maintain a holistic self-reflective practice intended for incorporation both personally and professionally.

The study involved two phases including a) a series of educational workshops, and b) follow-up individual semi-structured interviews.

Data collection occurred at four levels and involved mixed methods including a) an ongoing survey during the workshop phase, b) the use of a research journal by the researcher, and c) semi-structured interviews approximately two months following the completion of the educational sessions. Mid-point and final evaluations were also completed by each participant in relation to their experiences with both content and process of the educational sessions, as well as their ability to integrate knowledge and skills into their professional practice and personal lives.

The evaluative component following each weekly session was based on Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 2006) and was intended to encourage ongoing dialogue between and amongst the participants and myself, as the researcher. The Critical Incident Questionnaire "is a quick and revealing way to discover the effects your actions are having on students and to find out the emotional highs and lows of their learning" (Brookfield, 2006, p.41). I reviewed this information weekly to not only reflect upon emerging themes related to content and process, but also as a means of understanding areas that might require further clarification in upcoming sessions (See Appendix H). In the first two sessions, participants completed a personal questionnaire in writing. In subsequent sessions, participants requested that the process be completed as a group with me recording the responses.

Participants were also asked to engage in a more formal mid-point and final evaluation process in order to capture information related to their overall learning process to date with a

view to understanding the cumulative effects of the workshop sessions and the participants' ability to integrate concepts and strategies into practice. Further, participants were asked about my facilitative style in order to identify areas for growth or particular approaches that worked well. I felt it was important to open myself to ongoing exploration as a facilitator and coach in the same manner I was asking of the participants. My intent was to foster a spirit of partnership and to maximize my effectiveness in the facilitation of the learning process (See Appendix I, J).

The semi-structured individual interviews occurred approximately two months following the completion of the educational sessions. Since I had gathered information about participants' learning experiences in the final evaluation, as discussed above, I was curious to understand how the participants continued to engage in self-reflective practices, how the processes and information had been integrated, and any insights that might have evolved after a bit of time had passed.

Due to the personal and subjective nature of self-reflective practice, I endeavoured to focus on open-ended questions within the interview format in order to provide an opportunity for a variety of perspectives to be voiced and included (See Appendix K). It is important to note that there is not any singular way to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of self-reflective practice; however, there appear to be several themes emerging from the results of this research that point to the best practices that might be incorporated in the process.

I maintained a research journal throughout the duration of the project to capture my perspectives with regard to the dynamics in each session. With an emphasis on mentoring/coaching as a part of the facilitation process, the research journal became a tool for self-reflection on the part of the researcher. Self-reflection "is the most fundamental of all the

habits of mentoring.Every mentor must acquire a watchful “little spirit” (Herman & Mandell, 2004, p.142).

Research Methods

Through a series of eight three-hour workshop sessions, participants were actively involved in the development and application of a personal self-reflective practice. The educational workshops included presentations, learning processes that incorporated the sharing of information, the use of dialogue, participation in application exercises, and transfer to practice strategies. Participants were provided with information related to:

- Adult learning principles
- Strategies to enhance self-reflection
- Becoming an effective agent of change
- Coaching/Mentoring principles
- Philosophical foundations of human services and the interconnection with personal philosophy, and personal values and beliefs

A detailed outline of each session is included at the end of this report (See Appendix F).

Efforts were made to align the curriculum of the education sessions with the philosophies of the organization as well as the foundational ideologies of *The Recovery Model*, a research based approach currently adopted within the organization. This is an extremely relevant point as it establishes the connection between self-reflective practice and the incorporation of various forms of training that might be offered within organizations. Most health care and human services agencies are guided by best practices, research based approaches, and over arching, values-based missions and mandates. Ideally, these more abstract philosophies become

integrated into policies and procedures, and ultimately, into each practitioner's approach.

Training is often provided in order to encourage understanding and implementation on the part of agency employees. Self-reflective practice might enhance the practitioner's learning, and ultimate capacity to bring life to often very complex and abstract concepts.

Participants were asked to engage in "between session" activities in order to enhance the transfer of theory to practice. For a more detailed outline of the "transfer to practice" guidelines, please refer to Appendix G. This was an important component of the research process as it encouraged "reflection-in-action" (Schon, 1983), and maximized the opportunity for the integration of learning and enhanced personal awareness directly into the participant's professional practice and within their helping relationships. Further, there has been extensive research that emphasizes the importance of informal learning as a component of adult education. While the weekly education sessions, in fact, the overall research project was conducted within the professional environment with an emphasis on professional development, the establishment of self-reflective practice has both professional and personal benefits. The use of "transfer to practice" activities provided the opportunity for informal learning in that they were conducted within both the professional and personal realms of the participant's lives and were done so without direct facilitation or instruction. Participants were also free to decide how they might incorporate the strategies, when they would engage in the activities, or if they would engage at all.

"Transfer to practice" activities that occur within real life situations tend to be much more powerful than the application of theory in scenario or case study based exercises (Schon, 1983, 1987; Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999). This is especially true when it comes to self-reflective practice; a practice that can be continuous in nature, occurring in any given moment, and in any

environment. I hoped that these activities coupled with the opportunities to “reflect-on-action” in subsequent educational sessions would combine to enhance the potential for transformative learning.

The educational sessions were followed by individual interviews to gather information related to participants learning experiences both during and as a result of the educational workshops, and potentially, the changes that had resulted through participation in the workshops. These interviews were conducted approximately two months following the completion of the educational sessions in order to explore and understand the impact, if any, on participants’ practice, as well as to examine what participants saw as important components of maintaining a self-reflective practice in the workplace. I followed a semi-structured interview format consisting of 12 open-ended questions, which focused on overall learning experience, involvement in self-reflective practice prior to and following the educational sessions, beneficial self-reflective strategies, participation in “between session” activities, capacity to incorporate into work life following the project, and the role of mentoring/coaching (See Appendix K). The semi-structured interview format created opportunities for participants to expand upon their responses and allowed for further probing in order to clarify meaning and interpretation. Specifically, the individual semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant involved in the research project provided detailed insight into their personal learning experiences, their perceptions of the content and strategies incorporated in the workshop sessions, their ability to transfer learning to practice, the perceived benefits of developing and incorporating self-reflective practice, and also shed light on the type of supports that might enhance the learning process.

I generally engaged in the journal process directly following the completion of each session and included aspects of my experience from a holistic perspective – thoughts, feelings,

energy, and personal meaning – and I also documented any questions that arose for me during and following the session, as well as any ideas or recommendations that might be incorporated into the following session. This was an extremely helpful process providing me with the opportunity to engage in both reflective learning as well as self-reflective practice. At those times, when I was aware of personal challenges and opportunities for growth, this process provided me with the opportunity to reflect and engage in personal exploration that I often shared in following sessions. One of the most important elements of effective coaching is the ability to model behaviour and engage in the same practices that we are asking learners to explore and embrace (Malderez & Bodóczy, 1999).

Recruitment

The Canadian Mental Health Association is mandated to provide direct services to people living in the community who experience various forms of mental illness. The agency is guided by the *Recovery Model* philosophy which emphasizes a strengths-based, holistic approach to service provision. The Thunder Bay branch of CMHA is committed to quality improvement and the support of agency employees as they integrate philosophy, theory, and best practices into their professional role. Further, the organization is active in the provision of mental health education and awareness within the community.

In 2010, I approached the Canadian Mental Health Association (Thunder Bay Branch) (CMHA), to invite their participation in the research project. CMHA agreed to participate and created opportunities for the project to be introduced to their employees across two program teams. The agency further supported the project by allowing those interested to participate during work hours over a period of eight weeks. By 2011, we had six interested participants and the project was launched.

Specifically, the research study began with a phone call to the Program Director at Canadian Mental Health Association, (CMHA), Thunder Bay Branch to enquire as to potential interest to participate. This was followed up with an in-person meeting with the Program Director and three Managers involved in the day-to-day operations of several programs across the agency. Interest to participate was expressed and this was confirmed in a formal *Invitation to Participate* sent to the Program Director in order to document the project specifics and the agency commitment required (See Appendix B). Due to the significant time commitment requested for employees to take part in the education sessions during work hours, we required further approval from the remaining members of the leadership team. Once this was granted, I worked with the Program Director and Managers to arrange meetings with various program teams across the agency who indicated interest and willingness to commit the required time.

It should be noted that there are several programs operating within CMHA. Three of these programs indicated interest in hearing more about the project, while others did not have sufficient time to commit to the process. Meetings were held only with those programs whose team members could be supported to engage in the process if they so chose.

Two meetings were held to introduce the project, the research design, and what participants might expect through their involvement. Prospective project participants were left with a *Letter of Invitation* (See Appendix C), and an *Informed Consent Form* (See Appendix D) for their further reference and consideration following the introductory meeting. CMHA as an organization demonstrated their support for the project through their facilitation of these meetings as well as their commitment to the time and space requirements for engagement in the education sessions. Potential participants were provided with my contact information for any questions regarding the research and/or to indicate their willingness to participate in the project.

I began to receive emails from interested individuals and ultimately, six individuals agreed to participate and the project was launched in January, 2011. I consulted with the involved managers and potential participants to find the best times and days for the sessions with a view to ensuring the least disruption to services and team management. Due to the size of the organization and the nature of the work, it was imperative that the leadership team and managers of the programs approached for participation in the project be involved in the coordination of the overall process; from initial invitation to the scheduling of workshop sessions. To clarify, the leadership team and managers were not involved in the educational workshop sessions once the project began.

All participants involved in the research project had engaged in some form of post-secondary education (college/university) under the broad umbrella of the helping professions. This organization is also known for its ongoing commitment to professional development and training/education programs for employees. I had no reason to believe there would be any challenges with literacy; however, it was important to ensure plain, clear language because the nature of self-reflective practice can be fairly abstract. Further, individual interpretation of language, values, and theoretical underpinnings of practice can be extremely varied from one person to the next. In fact, this understanding fuelled many of the exploratory discussions, including the presentation of “alternative” definitions for familiar/common terms in order to stimulate critical thinking and potentially challenge existing frames of reference.

Of the six employees who volunteered to participate in the project, three identified as already engaging in some form of self-reflective practice and demonstrated an affinity to the exploration of personal awareness and development. The remaining three participants expressed an interest in learning more about self-reflection, but were less aware of what this might involve.

Participants also indicated that the direct provision of services for people who access the organizations' programs were less challenging for them than some of the interpersonal dynamics encountered amongst colleagues and coworkers. This seemed to be especially evident in the process of translating policy into practice and the many perspectives and interpretations that were present across the organization and within the community.

At the initial education session, participants signed *Confidentiality Agreements* (See Appendix E) to ensure agreement regarding their privacy and the sanctity of the group process so that a "safe space" could be encouraged where each participant could feel as comfortable as possible to share their personal insights and processes. Due to the highly personal nature of self-reflection, the potential existed that some participants may feel vulnerable or distressed. Every effort was made to promote a group environment within which participants felt comfortable to participate fully. It should be noted that those involved had pre-existing co-worker relationships and varying degrees of familiarity making the group cohesion process fairly quick and seamless.

Transformative learning has the potential to be disorienting and unsettling as it unfolds. Scott, (1997) explores the role of grief in the process of transformation and defines grief as an emotional journey in response to a variety of losses. Grief, itself, involves a process of transformation from an old way of being and doing to a new way of being and doing. This experience can be common for professionals as they develop a personal self-reflective practice or as they engage in any potentially transformative learning activity, for that matter. Participants were being asked to explore and potentially, challenge long standing ways of thinking and interpreting their world and this process could feel like a loss and trigger a grief reaction as the participant might become aware of being in a state of limbo. After all, if I am no longer sure about my beliefs and interpretations, how do I define myself as a practitioner?

Participants were encouraged to participate at levels that were conducive to their personal comfort and were reassured that there was no pressure to engage in activities that created personal distress. They were also advised that they could leave at any point without consequence. While the education sessions were not group therapy sessions, there was still the possibility that participants may become aware of highly sensitive insights or delve into areas of their experiences that could potentially lead to a sense of disorientation and vulnerability; an integral element of transformative learning. With this in mind, participants were also reminded of their ongoing access to the agency's Employee Assistance Program should they wish to pursue professional counseling services.

While anonymity could not be maintained in the educational sessions, it has been assured in the transcription of the individual interviews. Further, participants' names will not be used in the report and instead individuals will be referred to as Participant A, for example.

Due to the personal and individualized nature of self-reflective practice, the individual interview allowed the researcher to gain deeper insight into the participants' perceptions, revelations, and experiences; some of which had the potential to be complex and highly emotional (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The learning experiences of each participant resulting from the educational workshops, and awareness of personal transformation was a subjective and individual matter. As such, the individual interview with a focus on thematic analysis provided the best method for capturing these experiences.

Individual interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. I also took notes during each of the interviews, which were then securely stored in a locked filing cabinet. The tapes were later listened to with a view to summarizing categories of information and capturing specific

participant responses to questions posed. This information was analyzed by me using literature in the areas of qualitative research, thematic analysis, critical reflection, transformative learning, spirituality, and mentoring relationships to determine emergent themes and differences in the responses, and to present a complete picture of the participant's perspectives of the overall learning process, their personal learning experiences, and their ability to apply self-reflective practice in their work lives.

“Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 3). For these reasons, the use of thematic analysis in my research project seemed the best fit. With an awareness of my deep interest in the use of self-reflection in the helping professions, I feel it necessary to acknowledge that I approach this research with already well-formed perceptions and established ideologies that play a role in the data analysis process. As Braun and Clarke note, it is imperative to recognize the “active role the researcher always plays identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers.” Further, we are reminded that themes “reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 5).

Following the interview process, the recordings were stored in a safe and secure cabinet. The summaries of the recordings were stored in my computer; password protected. The information shared in the recorded interviews was supplemented by my notes. The use of a number of data collection methods, namely, weekly Critical Incident Questionnaires, recorded interviews, mid-point and final evaluations, and the researchers journal provided the opportunity to compare responses and identify recurrent themes, which enhanced validity and reliability in the research outcomes. The use of both group and individual feedback amongst the participants

allowed for the collection of information from the perspective of each person's interpretation and created a rich resource of results.

As might be expected, managing several data sources can be quite challenging. To ensure a complete analysis of data, I engaged in review of data continuously throughout the research project. Weekly use of my researcher's journal provided the opportunity and space to record my observations during the educational session and to record and reflect upon the weekly feedback garnered from the participants. As themes emerged, I recorded the information and later incorporated it into the follow-up interview format. Similarly, as I obtained mid-point and final evaluation feedback, I reviewed the data and recorded the apparent themes. Through this process of weekly review, I was able to stay focused on the data relevant to my original study purpose.

I took extensive notes during the interview process in order to support the recordings. I later listened to the recorded interviews to document and summarize the content. I was able to compare these documents with my written notes and identify clear themes and sub-themes.

Delimitations and Limitations

In the best case scenario, I would have preferred to conduct the educational sessions with a mixed group including direct service providers as well as managers and members of the organization's leadership. I chose to limit the possible participants to those who were directly involved in the provision of service to individuals living with mental illness. Education sessions facilitated over an extended period of time in the context of professional development could have a significant beneficial impact upon any organizational culture. However, when viewed in the context of research, ethical concerns were raised as to whether all participants would feel comfortable being open when involved in a group of people with differing levels of perceived

power and authority within the agency. In other words, would people feel safe to speak freely if they were concerned about how their comments might affect a supervisory relationship? Because the scope of the research project would not allow for the time and intensity required to fully support this type of process, I elected to narrow the pool of potential participants to include only direct service providers. No managers or members of the leadership team were involved in the educational sessions or follow-up interview process.

Self-reflective practice is more than a skill or an activity. Over time, it becomes a way of being – a way of perceiving self and connection to others, including the world at large (Brookfield, 2006). It is not a place or destination at which one arrives, but rather a process; a constantly evolving journey. What one might learn about self and life at one point in time can look completely different at a later date. Therefore, while it is possible to have epiphanies and sudden flashes of insight as part of a personal self-reflective practice, it is something that naturally requires time for establishment and maintenance. The crux of this research project was the educational sessions from both a content and process perspective. While it may have been more time efficient to conduct one or two workshops as opposed to eight weekly sessions, it is my firm belief that this would have been much less effective. In fact, I believe that an extended period of time would have been beneficial to the process; however, within the context of a research project that required timelines and limits, not to mention the extensive commitment this required on the part of the organization and participants, I felt it to be an adequate compromise to settle on eight sessions.

Coaching is an essential component of this process. The educational sessions incorporated a group coaching process which appeared to be helpful; however, between-session individual

coaching would have been ideal to provide one on one support and encouragement for interested participants. Within the context of a research project, this can pose an ethical concern regarding the delineation of coaching vs. counselling so it was not included in the process.

There were few limitations to mention. One participant, for reasons beyond anyone's control and unrelated to the research process, was unable to engage in the follow up interview process. This participants' input as collected in weekly sessions as well as mid-point and final evaluations has been incorporated into the findings.

Another limitation of this research study is that it was focused on one select group of people; a single case study. The perspectives shared by these individuals are not representative of any other group, so would not necessarily be echoed within other groups engaging in the same or similar process.

Ethical Considerations

I am an independent researcher without any previous affiliation with CMHA or the participants involved in the program, other than through virtue of working in the same community as professionals involved in similar fields. Participants were involved in group educational sessions, so anonymity was not possible. Others would know that they participated in the project; however, to protect the identity and input of the participants the following steps were taken to assure confidentiality of their contribution to the study.

Participants signed confidentiality agreements to protect the privacy of all group members and promote a "safe space" within the context of the group process. Further, as mentioned previously, there is no identifying information contained in the transcripts or this report.

Participants will be referred to as Participant A, B, etc. Recordings, transcripts, and all other data were stored in a locked filing cabinet both during and following the research project.

As mentioned previously, self-reflective practice and transformative learning processes have the potential to evoke intense emotional responses within people as they challenge existing frames of reference and consider alternative perspectives. Further, the educational process itself included activities and exercises that could potentially trigger emotional experiences and reactions on the part of the participants. For the purpose of developing self-reflective practice in the helping professions, it is not effective to attempt to compartmentalize experience into personal and professional domains. Rather, it is much more beneficial to consider the professional as a human resource that brings a variety of perspectives, skills, and gifts to their work, while also allowing their chosen vocation to be an expression of their being – their spirit. With this in mind, the educational process had the potential to conjure up feelings and thoughts in relation to the personal aspects of the participants' lives that may not so readily seem connected to their professional role. It was important to encourage the creation of a "safe space" within the group setting and to assure participants that they were in no way forced to engage in any activities that made them uncomfortable. There was no requirement to share beyond personal comfort levels and participants could withdraw at any time if need be. Participants gave consent to participate as part of the Invitation to Participate. Discussion occurred in the first session to describe the elements of self-reflective practice and transformative learning opportunities to prepare participants for potential reactions. Coaching support was provided within the group context and participants were reminded of their access to the Employee Assistance Program through CMHA. Further, participants were assured that their involvement or non-involvement in the project had no impact upon their employment with CMHA. As a researcher, it was important

that I be aware of emotional management within the group process and facilitate, to the best of my ability, the dynamics of the group and support those individuals involved.

I have had a long standing interest in the development of self-reflective practice both personally and as it relates to the helping professions. It was extremely important that I remained aware of my personal perceptions and interpretations as it related to self-reflection, spirituality in the workplace, and the role of the human services practitioner. The use of a researcher's journal and my own personal self-reflective practice was integral to my ability to continually challenge the limits of my own mind, manage my personal emotional responses following sessions, and retain my objectivity to the best of my ability within the context of a highly subjective research project. Journalling was an extremely helpful tool to assist me in the reflection of my personal learning throughout the process and ultimately, helped me to capture those moments of illumination and insight within my own process. This solidified for me the importance of "walking the walk" as a coach.

Definitions of Terms and Acronyms

CMHA: Canadian Mental Health Association

Self-reflective practice: a holistic, personal, and active approach to self awareness and conscious living.

Transformative Learning: Transformative learning experiences have the potential to lead to responsible and autonomous thinking, which in turn develops greater capacity for personal self-reflection, effective collaboration with others, and ultimately, the opportunity to become true agents of change (Mezirow, 1997, 2002; Freire, 2000).

Participants: refers to employees of the Canadian Mental Health Association involved in the research project over a period of eight weeks followed by individual interviews.

Holistic: refers to the integrative approach that emphasizes the connection between all aspects of the human experience to include physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. One might also consider the inclusion of social, sexual, and financial elements to provide a full perspective of the human experience.

Health Care and Human Services: includes a variety of professional occupations that involve the provision of services to individuals, families, and communities. For example, this might include nursing, social work, mental health, rehabilitation services, community support services, and teaching, to name just a few.

Transfer to Practice Activities: includes a number of exercises designed to capitalize on the learning experiences and material discussed within each educational session providing the opportunity to practically apply the concepts and practices into the real daily lived experiences of the participants in their natural settings.

Presentation of Data and Findings

In this section, I discuss the compiled data and findings related to the feedback received from participants throughout the project along with the rich insights gleaned through the interview process, and personal reflections documented in my researcher's journal.

Participants were asked to engage in weekly sessions which involved experiential activities, group dialogue, and group coaching. Further, participants were encouraged to engage in transfer to practice exercises within their real life experiences. Feedback was sought from participants following each session and more formally in mid-point and final evaluation processes. Preliminary analysis of emerging themes indicated an overall consensus with regard to the benefits of self-reflective practice, the integration of relevant content related to the nature and philosophical constructs associated with health care and human services, the value of coaching, the importance of dialogue, the significance of real experience application, the worth of facilitating the process over an extended period of time to allow for development and integration, and the potential merits of self-reflective practice when integrated across the organization as a whole.

I have began the discussion with a brief look at participant experience with self-reflective practice to create the context around prior learning experiences and how this may shape the way in which participants approached their involvement in this research project. I continue the discussion with a review of participant perspectives related to the content of educational sessions, the educational session process, the incorporation of coaching, and the integration of self-reflective practice at both the personal/professional and organizational levels.

Participant Experience with Self-Reflective Practice

All participants were experienced professionals in community based mental health services with varying degrees of experience with self-reflective practice. Each individual had some post-secondary education at either the college or university level. In this particular instance, these individuals having worked for a period of time with CMHA had also been exposed to extensive

training and professional development opportunities as a part of their employment with the agency. This may have included various workshops facilitated outside of the agency and many in-service training opportunities. This indicates that the project participants were accustomed to both traditional learning that might be considered academic in nature, as well as continuing education opportunities within the context of their specific vocation in the field. Further, a number of participants were also engaged in other informal or non-formal learning activities that were directly related to the material and processes involved in the research project which may have acted as further incentive and encouragement on a personal level for these individuals as they participated in the educational sessions and transfer to practice exercises.

It was interesting to note that four of the individuals commented on the fact that as a result of their participation in the research project, they became able to name their practice stating that they realized they had already been engaging in various self-reflective practices, but didn't necessarily refer to it with that terminology. Further, three of these participants stated that they had enhanced awareness of their practice following the educational sessions.

Content of Educational Sessions

The content of the workshop sessions was an important element of the overall research project. Not only did it provide context for the group discussions, it was an impetus to stimulate consideration of alternative perspectives and further elicited the sharing of ideas and insights from participants that contributed to further refinement of the curriculum and content.

Specifically, the material discussed throughout the course of eight weeks included adult learning principles with an emphasis on transformative learning opportunities; defining self-reflective practices and exploring various strategies for engagement; what it means to become an

effective “agent of change” and contribute to building community within an organization; the elements of coaching and mentoring and the reciprocal nature of this role; and the examination of the philosophical foundations of human services and how this intersects with personal philosophy, values, and belief systems. As mentioned previously, efforts were made to align the curriculum of the education sessions with the philosophies of the organization to enhance learner relevance.

A key element of curriculum content included the investigation of philosophical foundations of human services and how this connects to personal philosophy. This included the examination of qualities such as respect, empathy, compassion, and empowerment, to name just a few. There was a high level of agreement amongst participants that the creation of a personal philosophy as one of the experiential exercises provided the opportunity to really think about their approach to work and how this may have changed over years of practice and further, how this philosophy is actually lived in their practice. This exercise began with an activity designed to identify those values integral to each individual and the ways in which these values are demonstrated in behaviour and the ways in which they might not be demonstrated. Participant F shared in the Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 2006) a sense of being surprised and puzzled by,

The discussion of values...came to the realization that I have never examined my values. It was hard to think of them, and then I censored myself at first, not wanting to identify a value that I don't regularly demonstrate but expect to find in others. This will be on my mind for awhile!

Participant B offered this feedback with regard to the exploration of personal values and the development of a personal philosophy,

Discussing personal biases and philosophies was interesting. I explored those ideas in my 20's and established a personal philosophy at that time. I'm at peace with those things.

There was general agreement that it was important to explore these foundational values as related to the profession as well as those guiding values specific to the agency to determine impact upon actual practice; the point being to assist practitioners to identify guiding philosophies and values that might serve as an individual blueprint for practice.

There was support for the value inherent in having a continual process of self-reflection as we evolve and grow over time both personally and professionally. It was also recognized that one might become "comfortable" with habits and potentially rigid in practice eventually challenging the practitioner to unlearn old ways of doing things (Schon, 1983). Ultimately, I would describe this as a deeply spiritual process. The role of spirituality in adult learning is related to the ways in which interpretation and meaning are attached to experience which is integral to the practice of self-reflection (English, 2000). Participant E offered the following thoughts in regards to the importance of continual reflection and personal challenge,

The practice of looking at ourselves takes practice....we have to do it regularly until we integrate it.....some people won't sit down and look at what they did wrong...and take responsibility....you have to stand up and take responsibility for it. Even that takes practice.....the more you do it the more it becomes part of your personality...it becomes who you are....second nature. Yes it is a conscious choice....commitment.....our brains

become efficient.....our brains tend to take the easiest course. We have this series of behaviour that allow us to function in society....they allow us to work at that time. We are often faced with situations where following that rigid pattern won't allow us to function in that situation and it leads to conflict....we're on automatic. Yes, you would need to be more mindful to see if those set of behaviours apply. That's why we need to go back and evaluate what is the impact of what we're doing and where we need to fine-tune it. Life is not static.....it is dynamic...the environment is changing...our roles are changing. We have to go back and reflect.

In contrast, Participant B did not experience as profound an impact as a result of exploring foundational values in the helping professions within the context of the workshop sessions from a personal perspective, but appears to recognize the value of reflection as a means to incorporate values in an active way and had this to offer,

Some of the curriculum...reflective listening skills...was not necessarily new information. I've done the PSR (Psychosocial Rehabilitation) training and this material wasn't new. What does it look like in practice? We all have a good understanding. This material is not new for this audience....a group of clinicians.

Participant B further elaborated on thoughts expressed above in relation to the importance of continual reflection on guiding principles,

It's a challenge....applying those principles and reviewing them. We used to have a set of principles that guide the program...we would have some discussion...sit and discuss the principles and practice. Having these discussions regularly to bring the principles and practices closer together was a good thing, but the principles are no longer there on the

wall. So if you don't revisit them it is really easy to get lazy....for staff to get selfish and care more about themselves than those being helped becoming focused on being overworked and what I want more than what they need..... It's really easy to slip away from reviewing the principles and what we believe. It's a challenging thing....we can agree in practice....but as individuals how do we interpret it and how do we practice it with other people?

I expected to see this type of contrast in perspectives within the group as these principles and values are extremely abstract in nature and are very much open to personal interpretation. Again, the intention was to foster critical thinking and deep reflection about the ways in which these values were apparent in action for individual practitioners. The transfer to practice exercises suggested for application between sessions were designed to support this process. For some practitioners, these exercises were easily incorporated into their practice, while others experienced challenges and barriers in follow through.

Another key element of curriculum content included the introduction and practice of various self-reflective strategies. Participants engaged in meditation, journaling exercises, group dialogue, creative visualization, brainstorming sessions, "clearness committee" process (Palmer, 1998), and the use of music and quotes. These experiential activities provided the opportunity to practice various strategies with a view to developing a personalized practice. Participants were encouraged to integrate these strategies and others, such as exercise and yoga between sessions as a part of transfer to practice activities.

Participant D offered these thoughts in relation to how previous personal practice had been enhanced since the project by some of these experiential activities,

Yoga, meditation, working out, listening to music....but I found when you talked about the music that kind of helped to inspire me to keep that going. Now I've been downloading and making cds.... really enjoying it....having dance parties at my house and incorporating into my body work.

Educational Session Processes

Group Dialogue/Peer Learning

All participants expressed appreciation for the group dialogue that occurred each session with some noting the depth of personal sharing as particularly significant. The sharing of stories and experiences amongst colleagues was seen as a valuable part of the process and naturally stimulated critical thinking within the group exposing participants to alternative points of view. While the group dialogue process was seen to be of value, participants had different reasons for this and experienced satisfaction with the peer learning process at different levels. One participant shares

I really liked the group work....learning from others and bouncing ideas off others. I felt safe in the group...it was safe to be vulnerable. I had a role in the group...sharing different experiences....getting feedback and processing past experiences. The Clearness Committee was a powerful process and I think everyone benefitted. I was surprised at how open people were...sometimes I didn't feel I had something to say..... I was surprised at my ability to share an issue that I've known I've had, but thought, why not? With the Clearness Committee, I was not sure I would feel comfortable with the team because I didn't know the whole group either, but since we shared so much and learned so much about each other it became easier (Participant A).

And further...

I felt I played an active role in group activities and liked listening and sharing within the group. I liked playing the role of devil's advocate and often see four sides of any situation...not sure of the right side...often comfortable voicing different perspectives as a way of inquiring...asking questions. I had increased discomfort when ideas were very different from my own. Disagreement felt uncomfortable (Participant B).

Creating a support network is an invaluable part of the establishment and maintenance of a personal self-reflective practice. This best occurs with a variety of options including group processes as well as one-on-one interactions. Ideally a blend of choices would be most beneficial, but ultimately, this is a personally developed plan with the most important element being that it meets the needs of the individual practitioner. These research results have implications for organizations which will be briefly reviewed later in this report.

Real life application

The purpose of incorporating transfer to practice exercises was to provide opportunities for application of strategies between sessions within the context of real life in-the-moment experiences. Self-reflective practice is holistic and involves the more complex nature of emotions and spiritual elements, such as values, and beliefs. While simulated activities might trigger emotional responses or intense personal reactions, this is commonly heightened in the actual experience. The ability to apply self-reflective strategies within the context of real interactions and in the moments that might be personally challenging increases the likelihood of potentially transformative experiences. The opportunity to consider personal interpretations of events and align this with personal philosophy is most meaningful in real experience. Coaching

can assist this meaning making process. The following insights shared by Participant E really capture the importance of real life application,

It's not false experiences in my life that influence my ability to work with other people. Without self-reflective practice, the whole process of helping – engagement, assessment, intervention, evaluation, termination....now if I'm not doing the reflection then first of all I'm only going to engage with certain people because I'm going to shy away from other people...the assessment skills will all be through that lens...my perception. It will influence my assessment and how I view that problem. If I'm an abused woman and I go to school and I think the only way to do it is to leave that's what I'll encourage the person to do but that's not the only answer. I have not only an obligation to this individual I have an obligation to the society at large....want to solve the problem not the symptom.

Learning over an extended period of time

Historically, training related to self-reflection or self-care has been considered a “softer” skill as opposed to the technical skills of the profession and is commonly afforded less time and importance. Ideally, self-reflective practice is something that is encouraged, established, developed and maintained over the course of the lifetime; a weekend workshop is not sufficient. It is important to provide the time required for transfer to practice and the integration of knowledge, strategies and personal insights into practice. Further, this process is most effective when supported in a variety of ways beginning with strong personal commitment and responsibility on the part of the practitioner, the support of likeminded people in a group situation, and access to the ongoing support and encouragement of a coach. The following comments from two participants highlight this,

Engaging in self-reflective practice heightens awareness of your own capacity and your own limits....being involved in that practice allowed me to do that. That's not to say that everyone who gets involved in self-reflective practice is going to experience that....the difference between sitting in a course and taking that information and applying it to your life. It's not like school where you take the test at the end....it's a practice....you actually have to do it. It's very evident if you're using it or not....you get this clarity. There's less pressure....you aren't worrying about what the boss thinks...there is evidence (Participant E).

And further,

It would be good to extend the process even further....maybe, shorter sessions over a longer period of time.....with the whole agency.....maybe, even partner with other community agencies for different perspectives (Participant C).

Participant E also touches upon the importance of personal responsibility in the comment above which is further echoed in the following comments,

Well, if anything, if I go back to my core teachings....as within, so without...all change starts with me...anything I want to see change...I have to look within. So starting with myself...where I need to shift and start....my external environment will automatically shift...law of the universe (Participant C).

Ideally, the goal is to encourage practitioners to progress from reflection-on-action to reflection-in-action, (Schon, 1983) implying the ability to be present, to be aware of triggers, insights, and challenges as they arise, which provides the opportunity to respond immediately, or

perhaps, transcend the thoughts that are better left until later to ponder. Over time, the practitioner becomes more able to stay connected to the experience and the interaction which is extremely powerful as part of the therapeutic relationship and as a basic element of effective communication.

Coaching

Part of my role as a facilitator involved coaching within the group process which included asking questions, providing alternative perspectives, and encouraging discussion. Further, and perhaps, most importantly, I was challenged as a researcher to ‘walk the walk’ in my own practice. I was certainly provided with opportunities to do so within the dynamics of the workshop setting and while, at times, uncomfortable, these occasions were integral to the learning process, not only for the group, but also for me. I maintained a research journal throughout the process and used it diligently not only to capture the details of each weekly experience, but also to reflect upon my own process and learning.

I believe that individual coaching between sessions would have been extremely helpful with respect to encouraging follow through on the transfer to practice exercises and to provide depth to each participant’s personal experience. This is echoed in the following participants’ comments,

Coaching is an integral component....very valuable. In between coaching would have helped....follow up and transition planning....(coaching) would be helpful to continue to incorporate in my practice. Having guidance helped. I liked the meditations that were guided. I’m a person who needs the guidance. I learned that about myself (Participant A).

Self-reflective practice enhances the potential for transformative learning experiences....yes....could I have done it alone? I needed structure to keep things safe and secure. Sub alliances with my co-worker helped. A coach doesn't tell what to do, but offers choices, asks questions, redirects and offers support (Participant E).

When asked about the role of a coach and the importance of this role to the development and maintenance of self-reflective practice, Participant C had this to offer,

A good coach is someone who can help you identify what your own needs are by asking the right things and getting you to identify them and being the person who supports you in achieving them....keep you on track I guess but isn't doing it for you and isn't making you feel bad if you don't.....helping you achieve what you've decided is important....a way of being...a quality. The coach has to be good at it. They should have some kind of experience with that already....or at least a good understanding. Yes, it's important for the coach to have their own self-reflective practice....practice what you preach...walking the talk. I don't see someone could adequately coach someone in self-reflective practice if they weren't practicing themselves...

Integration within personal/professional and organizational practices

It was generally acknowledged that participants experienced a heightened level of awareness with regard to their personal engagement with self-reflective practice following the educational sessions. Having a name for their practice appeared to be an element in this increased awareness, with all participants stating that they either began incorporating new strategies, enhanced existing strategies, or simply had the realization that what they were doing was part of their self-reflective practice. For example, prior to the research project, going for a

walk might have been just that; following the research project, going for a walk became an opportunity for deeper self-reflection.

For some of the participants, they had been provided with opportunities in their day to take time away from tasks in order to engage in self-reflective activities of their choice. For example, Participant C offered the following comments,

As a team we have talked to our manager about how to incorporate that.....given explicit permission to take time in our day for that – whatever that looks like for us – maybe it’s the gym.....or grab a latte and sit and chill or read a book...just gather myself.....take 30 minutes in our day however we see fit to engage in whatever that looks like to us.... creation of time and space without feeling like you’re being watched over.

This same participant elaborated on the above comments when asked about the ways in which self-reflection could simply be incorporated into personal practice on an individual basis, which demonstrates the importance of personal responsibility for reflection regardless of external supports,

..... a way that I engage in self-reflective practice.....I ask a lot of what if’s....that’s a big one...a lot of why. Why do I feel like this...why is this important...why am I focusing on that....not to be judgemental because why can be....how? I think I ask myself a lot of questions.

With respect to incorporating self-reflection into supervisory and team meetings, it appeared that a few participants saw this as an important contribution that could be made from an

organizational perspective. The following perspectives and suggestions supported the incorporation of a self-reflective approach within these one-on-one and peer related activities,

I still have monthly supervision because that's what I need...it's time for me to sit down and reflect on this is what I'm doing. I need that coaching kind of a relationship. That's exactly what we have....I talk about my experiences and (supervisor) sits back and doesn't judge....all it is is a coach thing. (Supervisor) pulls out of it....generally you come in...you have problems....I know you have the solutions to it....someone who knows the rules...how to make things happen on a higher level...generally (supervisor) is a coach....doesn't tell me you're bad...you do this etc.....affirms situation (Participant E).

And further, this participant elaborated on the quality of the supervisory relationship as a factor in feeling encouraged in self-reflective processes,

Feeling supported in the process even if it doesn't look as it should...a person can feel if someone is extending authentic support...not just bullshit. I get irritated if I feel like I'm being spoon fed just to shut me up (Participant C).

This comment also supports the importance of authenticity, genuineness, and the foundation of relationship within the supervisory dynamic.

Participant D had the following suggestions to offer with regard to incorporating self-reflection into team meetings,

Maybe even like weekly team meetings almost....an hour a week to get everyone together and talk about the topics...just to keep it ongoing...because a lot of people forget. Could incorporate into the existing structure...team meeting...tossing around ideas...bringing in

something that represented how your month was and what was going on with you...thought that was pretty good....haven't done it yet...something to show your personal growth and share that might inspire others to do it.

Along the lines of integration into team meeting activities, Participant A also mentioned,

.....had a discussion about it....management for it....talked about various forms of expression. Not the whole team was for it....not everyone understood what it was about..

This comment implies that training and coaching across the agency may be beneficial as a means of incorporating self-reflection as an organizational activity. Further, this comment appears to support the notion that we cannot simply make the assumption that everyone understands what self-reflection is and why it might be a helpful tool in the helping professions.

From a broader perspective, there was support for the idea that self-reflective practices could be valuable to the organization as a whole. Various perspectives and suggestions were provided by participants in this regard,

But then....as a whole agency.....so it would be part of your weekly routine...as far as....this is something managers and everyone would participate in..... It's important....if we are going to encourage self-reflective practice as an organizational way it has to be holistic... everyone is involved....it's demonstrated....everyone's engaged. It could be incorporated not only as ongoing development but also in 1-1.....more functional....not just philosophical change but a functional change...informs the process of supervision.... informs feedback.... informs evaluating your professional practice....front

line....management style....policies and procedures.... but it depends on how flexible and open the people are (Participant E).

Participant C had the following thoughts with regard to organizational integration of self-reflective practices,

I think sometimes it takes a person and I guess anyone could be that person...but on some level it has to be someone who has decision making ability to say this is important....this is what we are going to focus on....internally....this is what we're going to do. There has been lots of focus on what we do externally and lots has been positive but haven't seen the same things happen internally and with each other.

In summary, there were consistent responses that supported the idea that full involvement of the whole organization would likely enhance the integration of self-reflective practices as an agency-wide approach to delivering high quality services and creating effective and harmonious culture in the workplace.

Discussion of Findings

As indicated through the data analysis process, it became apparent that this material could be presented in the context of two major thematic areas; curriculum design and facilitative processes developed to enhance the establishment and ongoing development of self-reflective practice in the helping professions. In the next section I will incorporate the exploration of these themes as they interconnect to the literature related to reflective practice, transformative learning, the function of coaching in facilitation, and the role of spirituality in the process.

Relevance of Self-Reflection in the Helping Professions

All participants involved in the research project agreed that the practice of self-reflection had inherent value to the helping professions. In consideration of the nature of helping relationships, it appears obvious that the depth to which the practitioner is self-aware and self-responsible impacts upon the overall quality of the helping relationship. It is important to consider the intimate nature of these relationships and to remember that the practitioner brings not only a skill set and philosophical approach, but also brings the essence of who they are as human beings with experiences, values and belief systems, and personal assumptions to the work they engage in with others. If helping professionals are an instrument in the process of transformative learning and development within those who access services, then it stands to reason that a personal awareness of one's own transformative learning process is an integral component of providing connected, present and effective services. Not only does this benefit those who receive services; it is also a reward for the practitioner who has the enhanced opportunity to learn about themselves as professionals and people.

Participant D shared the following insights in support of self-reflective practice in the helping professions and the personal impact of the project,

I realized how much it affects my work performance. If I'm not doing my practice then I'm not as effective....you're not doing what you're meant to do to the best of your ability...you are not giving all your gifts to someone if you are not giving them to yourself. It boosted my confidence in work as well...my performance...wow, I am doing a good job. I do live that philosophy. I do incorporate that because you don't take the time to really think about that....you just do it...so that was good.

The recognition of the importance of self-reflective practice in the helping professions amongst the project participants emphasized an awareness of the role of interconnectedness as a central element in the helping relationship. Al Condelucci (2008) has long advocated interconnectedness within human services extending to all relationships to include the helping relationship as well as co-worker and organizational relationships. Further, this holistic perspective can also be applied at the individual level to incorporate all aspects of what it means to be human; the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual realms.

A key component of self-reflective practice is the ability to develop awareness in relation to individual beliefs, values, and the personal meaning attached to experiences, both internal and external. The exploration of these personal elements is crucial to the development and implementation of a personal philosophy to guide practice, which was a central feature in this research project. Awareness of a personal philosophy and its impact upon practice provides the opportunity for deconstruction and reconstruction of guiding principles, values, attitudes, and belief systems (Brookfield, 1987, 1988, 2006; Tisdell & Taylor, 2001). Ongoing exploration of these deeper realms is paramount to the realization of truly therapeutic relationships in which both parties are enhanced through the process.

The desire to connect, to make a difference, to be effective, to help is common to those entering and remaining in any type of human service. In order to do so, the professional must embrace their own humanity. To assist in the process of change and transformation is a core purpose within therapeutic relationships. Awareness of personal opportunities for transformation and growth within the professionals' life experience is crucial to the development of effective helping relationships and speaks to the interconnected nature of this type of work.

Personal and Subjective Nature

Throughout the duration of the project, it became clear that there is not one “right” or “wrong” way in which to engage in and encourage self-reflective practice. This practice is highly personal and subjective both as it relates to the nature of an individual’s practice, as well as the process an individual might experience as they establish and maintain a personal practice as part of their professional life.

A number of strategies were introduced into the process and time was provided weekly for participants to engage in various approaches. Some of the participants had familiarity with various strategies and had already incorporated these into their personal practice, while others were new to the experiences. All participants were encouraged to try different approaches on for size, even when it might have created some discomfort; however, each participant was supported to engage as they felt personally comfortable to do so. The idea was to explore strategies that might be used in solitude as well as those that might be practiced in connection to other people or material, such as reading or music. Through this process, it became evident that some participants felt very comfortable and attuned with certain approaches, such as meditation, for example, while others found the meditation practice somewhat long and challenging. This was also true with journalling activities where some individuals found this to be a natural process and others found it tedious, to some extent. This was interesting and validated my suspicions that it is important for adult educators to consider a number of approaches that might encourage self-reflection amongst learners.

Journalling is often used as a standard approach, especially in the academic realm, but in being single-focused, it is easy to short change those individuals who do not find the practice

enlightening or fulfilling and who might benefit from a number of other approaches. At the end of the day, a well-rounded practice that includes both solitary and connected practices and allows an individual to experience self-reflection in a holistic way appears to be the most effective and provides the greatest possibility that a personal practice can be maintained. As human beings, we continue to evolve and a self-reflective practice that evolves along with us will ultimately, be most effective.

The notion of authenticity in helping professions has long been considered an essential quality with regard to the development of helping relationships. To express oneself authentically in life, including the vocational realm is enhanced through self-reflection and awareness of interconnectedness (Palmer, 1998, 2000). To develop an authentic approach, the individual practitioner must have the capacity to explore the very personal and subjective way in which life events are interpreted. We all have a personal lens through which we view the world; something that can be examined and adjusted on a continual basis allowing for the expansion of perspective and understanding. Anais Nin said “we do not see things as they are we see them as we are” (1903-1977). This quote summarizes beautifully the power of the personal lens and speaks to the importance of accepting full personal responsibility for the ways in which we interpret all life experiences, including how we see ourselves and others. This approach holds great potential for transformative learning with regard to challenging personal assumptions, judgements, and biases; a process facing all helping practitioners as they strive to create truly helpful relationships and approaches.

Relevant Material

Notwithstanding the importance of process and various learning approaches, the relevance of the content presented cannot be underestimated. This was true for both the material related specifically to the development of a self-reflective practice including relevant strategies, but was also an important factor when considering the type of material that the participants were asked to reflect upon as part of the application process. In this regard, it was important that the focus remained on theoretical and philosophical approaches central to health care and human service professions. The values inherent in the profession were emphasized as a point of reflection throughout the research project.

Brookfield states that we must “put ourselves into practice rather than theory into practice.” So, while theory and field related philosophy is part of shaping a personal philosophy and ultimately, a personal practice, it is also important to consider other contributing factors.

Reflection on the connections between field related literature and our personal interpretation of these theories and philosophies is an important component of critical thinking. One has the ability to consider the relationship between the information and personal values, attitudes, and belief systems. Self-reflective practice incorporates both critical thinking with respect to literature, theory, and field related philosophy, but extends beyond the professional context and incorporates personally held belief systems and values, which are often stored deeply in the subconscious or even, unconscious realms, yet impact upon practice in a profound manner.

In addition to the inclusion of field-related philosophical ideas on a broader level, the specific philosophical approaches promoted within CMHA were also incorporated as points of discussion and reflection within the group. Participants were encouraged to consider the ways in which all of these ideals, theories, perspectives, and philosophies actually fit into their personal

approach and the ways in which they felt they actually lived various values in their lives. At the time of the research project, *The Recovery Model* was one of the most relevant models incorporated into CMHA's approach to service delivery. Attempts were made to draw connections between this approach and the broader and more abstract philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of helping professions in general.

Ultimately, relevance might also be considered from a very personal and subjective perspective. What is relevant to one might be completely irrelevant to another. It was important that participants were provided with the opportunity to find personal relevance in all that was discussed and presented throughout the project. The "transfer to practice" exercises were designed to provide this opportunity between formal sessions. In this way, participants were asked to focus on even one piece of information having particular significance to them that had been included in the weekly formal session and consider it from the very real life experiences and interactions they had throughout the week. Participants were also encouraged to consider a wide variety of perspectives both formally presented, but also those that arose within the group, with an open mind and curiosity so that they might determine the personal significance and relevance that any of the information might have in their own lives.

There is an interconnection between philosophy and practice, which becomes entrenched in our beliefs and actions, and ultimately impacts upon our interactions with others, both professionally and personally (Tisdell & Taylor, 2001). According to Tisdell and Taylor (2001), and echoed by Brookfield (1995), we all operate from a personal philosophy whether we are aware of it or not. Most participants agreed that reflection on this type of material was important saying that while they had all been exposed to these ideas and philosophies as part of their

formal education, they felt it valuable to be in a process of continual reflection and review. This reinforces the idea that our values, philosophies, and approaches are all designed to serve as a guide for our actions, but they do not provide concrete, step-by-step instructions for us to follow in the application. There is no specific formula. But, if we consider that the helping professions are grounded in these abstract concepts and qualities, it becomes obvious that the highly effective helping professional is one who continually explores these foundational qualities just as rigorously as they might engage in professional development related to a more concrete aspect of their work.

Experiential learning

Freire promotes “education as the practice of freedom.” Freedom is an outgrowth of the development of high levels of personal responsibility. This is a central theme in the establishment and maintenance of a personal self-reflective practice. As we develop a sense of personal responsibility for ourselves, including our most deeply held beliefs and values and the ways in which our choices and actions are influenced by such, we become able to fully respond to the events of our lives, which often appear to be beyond our control. In this capacity to respond, we are liberated; we are free. Education, however, is not just academic in nature. Education can occur in all realms of our life experience.

It was with this spirit that the “transfer to practice” exercises were promoted as an element of the research project. The “transfer to practice” exercises were an important part of experiential learning activities providing participants with some direction as to how they might apply the intellectual learning to real life experiences. Participants were encouraged to share, within their personal comfort levels, any insights or challenges they may have encountered as a result of the

transfer to practice exercises. Most participants experienced challenges in the completion of the transfer to practice exercises, which will be discussed below.

Further, participants were provided with opportunities to experience various self-reflective strategies within the context of the formal educational session. Most sessions began with a meditation practice and most sessions included some time for journaling followed by group sharing. Participants also engaged in strategies related to music, reading, and also experienced a modified version of Parker Palmer's Clearness Committee exercise. Again, everyone was encouraged to engage even if they might have previously discarded the strategy from their personal practice. It is possible that one strategy that works for an individual for a long period of time might lose relevance and those strategies not valued might suddenly become invaluable.

Learning through Dialogue

Related to experiential learning is the importance of group dialogue and the opportunities this provided for participants to more deeply consider their thoughts in relation to those of others. Freire and Kolb acknowledge the importance of interaction between the person and the environment as central to learning and development. Kolb makes reference to Freire's term, "praxis" – using dialogue to stimulate reflection and action in the world in order to transform it" (pg. 134). Freire also writes, "to engage in dialogue is to be genuine" (pg. 104), and sees this as the path of humanism. All participants expressed appreciation for this component of the research project and found listening to the ideas of other group members to be enlightening, interesting, inspiring, and at times, even challenging, but nonetheless relevant to the group process and to individual learning. The following comments reflect participant perspectives in relation to the group process,

I enjoyed it...I found it interesting. I think what I enjoyed the most was the people....great group...and the diversity of the group made it particularly interesting....a good mix of personalities and people and perspectives.....spending time and getting to know people more and the dialogue (Participant B.)

As a novice, it was good to learn and bounce ideas off of others...learn from others and their experiences (Participant A).

Candy makes reference to a learning society, which is necessary for lifelong learning and recognizes the social nature of learning. It is acknowledged that self-directed learners access support from a vast number of people and know how to access their resources. The responses of the project participants in relation to the role of group dialogue as a component of their personal learning process certainly supports the idea of a learning society and reinforces the importance of the social nature of learning.

As expected, several participants had more intense emotional experiences as a result of the group dialogue in which they may have shared more vulnerable parts of themselves with others; especially if this related to any personal challenges they might have been encountering at the time or if it related to a new insight. The group managed these experiences with compassion, support and openness. The potential for this to occur is very high when bringing people together to engage in deep personal exploration, so I felt that these were valuable and positive parts of the process. I believe that while all participants were reminded of their ability to access their EAP services to engage in brief counselling should any concerns arise as a result of the process, individual coaching between sessions would have been an added benefit for those interested participants. This will be discussed further below.

Transferability of practice to real life experience

There was agreement amongst participants that the development of a personal self-reflective practice occurs best when in the context of real life experience. Many of the participants had attended workshops that were geared towards the principles associated with self-reflection and all participants were familiar with related concepts as they had been exposed during their academic preparation. However, it was agreed that the intellectual consideration of these ideas in the context of a brief workshop didn't necessarily translate directly into action.

The use of case studies and scenarios, as mentioned previously, can be helpful when embarking on the establishment of a self-reflective practice and as a teaching tool to introduce the concepts and application. However, nothing compares to the application of the principles in real lived experience when a practitioner's emotions and perceptions are genuinely involved and the aim is to stay present to the helping relationship in the midst of challenges.

The combination of artistry and science is a strong theme in Schon's work (1983, 1987). The importance of providing learners with the opportunity to connect theory in the classroom with their professional practice, which is referred to as "living the experience" is encouraged. It would be in this process that one would discover the artistry involved in reflective practice; however, one might expand on this notion. While the process itself is an element of the artistry involved, one might consider the incorporation of alternative, holistic, and spiritual "knowledge" as an enhancement to the practice.

Spirituality is central to practicing the artistry of reflection. This does not necessarily imply a link to religious beliefs and practices; however, it is important to note that the two may be interrelated for some practitioners, while not so for others.

Ensuring opportunities for application during field work experiences within an academic program followed by the discussion of the professional's experience with self-reflection and presence is imperative to the establishment and maintenance of a self-reflective approach. This also emphasizes the important role that coaching has in this process which can be provided from an academic perspective, by both the faculty member and the professional responsible for guidance of the learner within the organization. It should be mentioned that some organizational professionals may require support with regards to how they might best provide this kind of coaching for learners on field placement.

When incorporating the practice of self-reflection as a component of continuing professional development as well as an overall approach to service, it is recommended that opportunities be provided to practitioners to reflect in both one-on-one interactions with leadership and management and also within the context of team meetings and peer learning opportunities.

Role of the Coach

The role of coaching was an important element in this research project; however, it was integrated in a subtle way throughout the process of the weekly educational sessions. As mentioned previously, it had originally been my intention to include one-on-one coaching sessions between the educational workshops. However, due to potential ethical conflicts this element was excluded as an explicit approach within the project. When asked the majority of the participants agreed that coaching was an integral element in the process of establishing and maintaining a self-reflective practice. In fact, this is a practice that could potentially be integrated

within academic programs and organizational approaches as a way of encouraging and supporting others in the development and implementation of self-reflective practices.

Heron's perspective of becoming "researchers of our own practice," is grounded in a holistic approach in which we see ourselves as integrated beings, ultimately developing our "universal witness" as the highest form of consciousness (pg. 44). To elaborate, we are encouraged to enter into communion with all that occurs external to ourselves through the practice of attunement, resonance, presence, and empathy; all of which are integral to the work of the helping professional. As a facilitator, Heron suggests that personal style will develop as we become increasingly authentic. The effectiveness of the helping professional within a therapeutic relationship is similarly enhanced as the theories, knowledge, and skills obtained through academic preparation are more fully integrated into a holistic, personalized, and human approach. It is the genuineness, or authenticity, of the helping professional that goes the furthest with regard to developing rapport and beginning to mold that relationship; that container, within which transformation might occur. It stands to reason that the demonstration of these same qualities within the coaching relationship would only act as reinforcement for the cultivation of a similar approach within practitioners.

It is important to note that the qualities associated with being an effective coach would be valuable to the process of promoting inclusion of self-reflective practice across the organization, which is discussed in the next section.

Inclusion across the Organization

There was general agreement that it was important that a self-reflective approach be established across the entire organization as a whole in order to enhance organizational culture.

Many participants asked if the management and leadership teams would be involved in a similar process to promote self-reflection within their own practice and approach. While the element of personal responsibility was acknowledged; meaning that it is a personal choice to engage in self-reflection regardless of what others are doing or not doing, it was also recognized that embracing self-reflection as an organizational approach could have a greater impact upon organizational culture.

Taylor (2007) discusses the role of relationship as integral to the transformative learning experience, with an increased focus on the nature of these relationships, to include love, memory, and imaginative dimensions. A peer-learning model is suggested as an approach that can potentially assist in the process of perspective transformation. Critical elements of a peer-learning model include trust, non-evaluative feedback, non-hierarchical status, voluntary participation, partner selection, shared goals, and authenticity, which are imperative to creating a space in which highly personal self disclosure might occur. One might consider the impact that this approach to all relationships within an organization could have on the overall culture regardless of role and level of authority. Is it possible to encompass these same qualities present in a peer-learning situation within the traditional supervisory relationship? I believe it is.

Taylor also highlights the importance of instrumental learning, guidance, supportive climate, and trust to the process of transformational learning. This supports the argument for mentoring and coaching within the development and maintenance of a personal self-reflective practice.

Both Senge (2008) and Hughes (2004) promote similar ideas in their separate works related to learning organizations and creating gracious space. Both authors support the idea of

organizational structures that would be considered less hierarchical in nature with an emphasis on personal responsibility for how individuals contribute to the overall functioning of the agency.

The following comments were offered in support of a holistic, all encompassing approach,

It's important – if we are going to encourage self-reflective practice as an organizational way....has to be holistic...everyone is involved...it's demonstrated...everyone's engaged. It could be incorporated not only as ongoing development, but also in 1-1...more functional...not just philosophical change but a functional change...informs the process of supervision....informs feedback.... informs evaluation of your professional practice...front line...management style (Participant E).

An interesting point of discussion arose in one interview that I feel important to include as it related to overall organizational functioning and professional ethics. Social work, like many other helping professions is governed by a code of ethics. Quite often, practitioners can become focused on the ethical conduct of their colleagues as opposed to reflecting more deeply upon their personal practice and ethical management. Self-reflective practice can enhance ethical conduct within helping professions as it is a means to measure this from a personal perspective providing opportunities for behavioural change as required. Participant E had the following thoughts in this regard,

There would be little need for policing through the code of ethics if self-reflective practice was promoted and practiced.....we wouldn't have to worry about professional ethics.

Recommendations

Implications for adult education

The implications for adult education occur at two levels – academic preparation and continuing education/professional development.

Academic Preparation

Adult educators involved in the academic preparation of the next wave of health care and human services professionals can integrate the results of this research into their programs and teaching practices. The results of this research suggest that the following approaches may be helpful.

Create the foundation for self-reflective practice early in the learning process. Incorporate learning exercises that encourage self-reflection on the part of learners. Explain the importance of self-reflective practice within the helping professions and encourage learners to consider how this might benefit their practice and enhance the quality of the services they provide. An introductory learning opportunity might include an exercise that encourages learners to examine their personal motivations for entering the field and how they hope to contribute through their chosen vocation.

Provide support and coaching immediately to establish a trusting relationship with learners. Be transparent with your own practice as an adult educator. Show learners how you have established your own self-reflective practice and the types of strategies you use. Become skilled at asking questions that assist learners to dig deeply into their belief systems in a supportive manner. Get to know who the learners are as individuals and assist them in the process of discovering their unique areas of interest. Be curious.

Incorporate real life application of self-reflection as early as possible. Field placement and group work in class are ideal opportunities. Depending on when field placement activities are

introduced in the academic program, prepare learners for self-reflection through the use of learning activities in the classroom. Provide opportunities for learners to consider the opportunities for their personal learning and growth. Actively engage learners in the development of personal learning outcomes that can be used in their field placement evaluations to encourage higher levels of personal responsibility for their learning experiences. Be a coach to learners to enhance self-reflection as they begin to apply their learning to practice. Group work dynamics are often rife with learning opportunities that have little to do with the actual topic of focus. For example, learners can be encouraged to identify and consider the ways in which they personally contribute to the group dynamic and working process; contributions that are both constructive and those that may act as inhibitors. In my experience, group work can lead to conflict situations with respect to shared workloads or personal styles. These are perfect opportunities to practice the very qualities often asked of learners to develop as a helping professional. For example, learners can be encouraged to explore how they might bring the element of respect into a group work situation where conflict has arisen.

It is important that reflection go beyond theory and concept, and learners are encouraged to really explore who they are as people as related to personal interpretations, biases, values, judgements, gifts, and learning opportunities. It is important to be attentive to the development of trusting relationships and the creation of safe space as an adult educator who hopes to encourage learners to really explore these deeply personal elements. Use any naturally arising classroom discussions to encourage the examination of what it means to live the values and ideals that are promoted as a component of the helping profession. When using case studies, scenarios, and films to stimulate critical thinking and application of theory, be sure to include the exploration of personal interpretation, values, beliefs, etc. that inform understanding and approach as an equally

important element. Don't shy away from using material that might evoke strong reactions and emotional responses. It is our job as adult educators to provide opportunities that best prepare learners for what they might experience in actual practice. However, be sure to prepare learners for these activities and be available both personally and with resources to support those learners who might be challenged by the learning activity. It is integral to the process that philosophical values and foundational ideologies are not left lingering as intellectual constructs, but rather are integrated into personal practice in ways that individual practitioners can benchmark their actions against their personal roadmap for practice.

Eliminate "busy work" and ensure that all activities lead to meaningful and practical learning opportunities. Use discussion activities and in-class exercises that not only inspire learning in the moment, but can also be integrated into larger assignment activities. Explain the relevance of various learning activities that might not be readily apparent so that learners are aware of how they might benefit from engagement. Encourage focus on learning as opposed to grades. I have often worked with learners who become so overwhelmed with assignments and grade achievement that they lose sight of the learning process. I would much rather receive a late assignment that has been well thought out and has an obvious impact upon the learner's experience than receive a poorly executed assignment on time. Use every experience as an opportunity to learn. This requires presence on the part of the adult educator so that learning moments might be captured. If something occurs that was not an intended outcome of the learning activity, find ways to use the incident as a learning opportunity within which to integrate particular philosophical approaches or techniques. Use it as an opportunity to demonstrate whatever you might be trying to promote in the learners.

Faculty members are most effective in facilitating self-reflective practices when they openly engage in a personal practice themselves. Share insights with learners – be authentic – learn in front of them – model the ability to engage in the process of self-discovery even when it might be less than graceful. Be as transparent as possible and as it is helpful to the process to demonstrate your own practice. Again, this requires high levels of personal responsibility, self-awareness, and commitment to self-reflective practice on the part of the adult educator.

Continuing Education/Professional Development

Practitioners who are already engaged in professional practice may be prime examples of those who have to unlearn many things before the way becomes clear. On the other hand, I believe that there are many professionals in health care and human services who have a strong desire for deeper levels of self-fulfillment and meaningful contribution within their work and are ripe for engagement in these strategies. The following suggestions may be helpful when establishing a culture of self-reflection in the workplace:

When leadership embraces the principles and actively demonstrates a commitment to personal self-reflective practice there is a higher likelihood that the organization as a whole will follow suit. This is especially true for those who serve in a coaching capacity. As those in a position of decision making authority set the tone for organizational culture, growth is likely to occur more quickly.

Introduce new employees to the organizations' commitment to self-reflection right from the start. Incorporate learning exercises that focus on the development of self-reflective practice within orientation sessions. Actively seek feedback from new employees with regard to their perceptions of how the agency demonstrates and promotes self-reflective practices. These

individuals bring a fresh perspective that might provide opportunities for reflection on the part of longer term employees as to how services and agency processes are perceived. This information can be very useful as a tool for evaluating whether the organization is actually doing what is intended.

Incorporate self-reflective activities into team meetings and welcome opportunities for spontaneous reflection. Use learning exercises that encourage deeper level discussions regarding the provision of services. Actively engage in a process of exploring the ways in which the more abstract philosophies are actually lived within the organization. Encourage employees to present concrete examples that they have either engaged in or witnessed in each other. Managers and leaders can also openly acknowledge what they see demonstrated in others to set the example. Maintain an open door policy to engage in self-reflective dialogue as the need arises in the moment whenever possible.

As a coach, adopt an open mind and challenge personal assumptions. Be as transparent with this personal process as feels comfortable. Be open to seeing those employees you coach as capable and promote opportunities for growth and celebration of accomplishments. Be supportive and patient and encourage the identification of personal aspirations.

Create learning and training opportunities centered on self-reflection. Place as much value on opportunities for training related to self-reflection as is placed on the more theory related training required. Encourage employees to identify those training opportunities they are most interested in as a component of their ongoing professional development plan. A highly self-reflective practitioner will likely be more engaged in other training opportunities and will probably have higher rates of actual integration into practice over the long term.

Incorporate processes into performance reviews and encourage practitioners to identify those areas in which they are most inspired to contribute and those areas in which they would most like to grow. Follow that up with a sincere desire to create opportunities for the fulfillment of these aspirations. This type of reward is often more powerful for many people than recognition dinners and little perks. Integrate other forms of recognition throughout the year rather than waiting to do this at an Employee Recognition Dinner.

Invite feedback about performance from those you might provide supervision/coaching to; make the relationship reciprocal. This indicates a belief that you are partners in learning and the delivery of services and acknowledges the skill and resources that employees bring to their work.

Introduce practices into leadership processes and communication that demonstrate commitment to self-reflection and personal responsibility. Make these processes transparent. This would include not only the ways in which organizational meetings are conducted, but would also include regular reviews of policies and procedures to ensure that the language used is consistent with the overall philosophy and values base of the organization. Beyond that, regular reviews provide an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which the organization actually practices philosophical values and approaches. Demonstrate a willingness to adapt policies and procedures when it becomes apparent that they are not aligned with the overall organizational vision. Invite input from all employees in real and meaningful ways when the opportunity is present. If a decision must be made quickly without consultation, do so rather than paying lip service to keep up appearances.

Conclusions

This research supports the integral role of self-reflective practice in the helping professions and illuminates the highly subjective nature of this practice, both in how it is experienced and with regard to facilitative approaches designed to foster learning. These findings provide a potential framework to guide the development of self-reflective practice in both formal and informal learning settings for practitioners in the health care and human service fields. The research will be of interest to health care and human service practitioners and organizations, as well as faculty members in related academic programs across post-secondary institutions. Further, the results of this research are currently being incorporated into a larger body of work *The Art of Conscious Service: Using reflection and reframing to rejuvenate practice in the helping professions* which will act as the foundation for future training, development and coaching programs in the helping professions.

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Appendix A



St. Francis Xavier University Research Ethics Board
29 October 2010
Ethics Approval for Research with Human Subjects

21186

Ms. Elizabeth Bishop

"Self-Reflective Practice in the Helping Professions: Cultivating the Potential for Transformative Learning."

Supervisor: Dr. Maureen Coady

The Research Ethics Board (REB) has cleared the above cited proposed research project for ethics compliance with the TriCouncil Guidelines (TCPS) and St. Francis Xavier University's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines, your project has been given ethics approval.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the REB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this research. An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s).

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the REB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects in the study procedures. These changes must be sent to the undersigned prior to implementation. A certificate that can be included with your completed thesis will be sent once we have the signed copy of the final version of your application. The Committee on Graduate Studies cannot accept a thesis without this certificate of approval.

On behalf of the Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Daniel W. MacInnes, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

May 27, 2010

Sharon Pitawanakwat
Director of Community Development and Services
Canadian Mental Health Association (Thunder Bay Branch)
200 Van Norman Street
Thunder Bay, ON P7A 4B8

Dear Sharon:

I am writing to request your permission to conduct a research project with the Thunder Bay Branch of Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).

I am a student in the Master of Adult Education program at St. Francis Xavier University. One of the requirements of the program is to undertake a research project. I am requesting permission to engage in a research project that I believe will not only meet my program requirements, but will also benefit CMHA.

My intention is to explore the potential for transformative learning through the use of self-reflective practice amongst professionals in therapeutic relationships. My goal is to create a process through which those interested in “helping” professions and those already engaged in practice are supported to develop a personalized and meaningful self-reflective practice with a view to enhancing their personal experience and that of those with whom they are in a therapeutic relationship. Grounded in adult learning theories and best practices associated with the field, participants in this project would be involved in a series of workshops which would include the sharing of information, experiential activity, dialogue, coaching/mentoring, and opportunities for the transfer of learning to practice. In addition to documenting the learning experiences of the participants, this research has the potential to contribute to existing knowledge related to the benefits of self-reflective practice in the “helping” professions, and deepen our understanding in relation to the ways in which this personal practice might be supported within organizations and systems in our society.

With an extensive background in both human services and adult education, I believe that I am uniquely positioned to undertake this research with CMHA. I have a deep commitment to the principles and practice of self-reflection and have explored the benefits of a personal practice for a number of years. At this time, I would like to use my role as an Adult Education student to look at the questions that are of interest to me and that have the potential to benefit members of your organization, CMHA as a whole, and contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation for self-reflective practice in human services on a broad level. I will not be paid for doing this research.

During the period of undertaking the proposed research, procedures will be put in place to make sure that I am doing the research in an ethical way, and that people who choose to participate are protected. I will garner informed consent from all participants by clearly explaining: (a) the reasons for doing the research; (b) the expectations of each participant; and (c) the potential risks associated with participation. Each participant will formally agree to be part of the research. I will ensure that people who participate in my research understand that their participation is voluntary, that they have the right to refuse to participate, or withdraw from the project at any time without negative consequences.

I hope that you will agree to the research I am proposing to undertake at Canadian Mental Health Association. It would be helpful to have a decision from you in the next four weeks so that I can proceed with gaining approval from St. Francis Xavier University and begin the process of planning, in partnership with you, the detailed logistics of the project, with a view to conducting the research in January/February 2011. Your agreement to participate would be conditional on my successful application to the Research Ethics Board and documentation would be provided for your records. My proposed delivery of a written report would be July 2011. I thank you in advance for your consideration and look forward to hearing from you about your decision.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Bishop
M.Ad.Ed Student, St. Francis Xavier University
(807)623-7308 or (807)476-5085
ebishop@confederationc.on.ca

Appendix C

Research Project Information

Title: “Self-Reflective Practice in the Helping Professions: A Journey in Transformational Learning”

Name of Researcher: Elizabeth Bishop, Master of Adult Education Student, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia

What is this research project about?

As a student in the Master of Adult Education Program at St. Francis Xavier University, I am working on a research project related to the development of self-reflective practice amongst professionals in human services. Specifically, I am curious about the potential for transformational learning through the use of self-reflective practice. The main benefits of self-reflection in the helping professions include the potential to assist practitioners to improve their ability to engage in self-care, to create opportunities for self discovery in relation to both personal and professional growth, and ultimately, to enhance the quality of service delivered. Mental health is a vital component of one’s wellness and I believe that Canadian Mental Health Association is a fascinating example of an array of strategies and services that can be offered in our society to address the needs of our community members. As you are a staff member with Canadian Mental Health Association, I would like to invite you to participate in a series of workshops (8 weekly, 3 hour sessions) and a follow up interview approximately three months after the completion of these sessions. These sessions will incorporate the presentation of material for consideration and discussion, quiet reflective exercises, group dialogue, experiential learning and activities designed to assist with the transfer of learning to practice. The interview process will focus on your personal learning experience including your perceptions regarding the benefits of self-reflection and the strategies and supports that you found helpful in the development and use of an individualized and meaningful self-reflective practice. The findings of this research have the potential to assist other human service professionals in the development of a personal practice, as well as to help our community organizations understand how best to support this within service delivery models.

What will I be expected to do?

I will be asking you to participate in each of the eight weekly sessions in a manner that is comfortable for you. Further, I will ask you to apply your learning between sessions through simple exercises that you can incorporate into your practice. I will ask you to share your learning within a group setting, again, in ways with which you are at ease. I will also ask you to meet with me in a one-on-one interview, approximately three months after the workshop

sessions, to answer a series of questions. With your permission, I will be recording the individual interviews using a voice recorder so that I may transcribe them later from the audio tapes. I may also take notes on paper during these interviews.

Specifically, in the interviews, I will be exploring your perspectives in relation to:

- What you learned as a participant in the workshop sessions
- Personal benefits you experienced through the use of self-reflection
- Particular exercises/activities that were helpful
- How you were impacted by coaching and mentoring in the process
- Whether or not you would describe your learning as transformational

How much time will it take?

The project will run over the course of eight weeks with one session, approximately three hours in length, per week. The strategies you will be asked to practice between sessions and tracking your insights will not take more than a few minutes each day, unless you choose to spend greater lengths of time. The one-on-one interview will take up to 1.5 hours and will take place at an agreed upon location and time that works for everyone involved.

What if I don't want to participate or if I change my mind in the middle of the research?

The choice to participate is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate without any negative consequences or repercussions. It will not have any impact upon your employment with CMHA. If you choose to participate, you have the right to leave the study at any time. Again, there will be no negative consequences or repercussions. It will not have any impact upon your employment with CMHA.

If you choose to participate and you are asked a question that you do not want to answer, you do not have to provide an answer. If you are asked to engage in an exercise or dialogue and you do not want to engage in, you do not have to participate. You can still participate in all other workshop discussions and exercises. You can choose to end your participation in the workshop sessions at any time during the eight weeks. You can still participate in the interview and answer only the questions you wish to answer. If you choose to participate and have agreed to have the interview recorded, you can ask me to turn off the recorder at any time during the interview. You can tell me if you want to stop participating in the interview at any time up to the time when I write the report. If you choose to cease your participation, you can ask me to erase the voice recording or your interview.

Is there any harm to participating?

There is no known harm related to participating in this research. You do not need to inform anyone of your participation if you wish. If you become uncomfortable with anything that occurs within the workshop sessions or interview process, you are encouraged to speak to me directly and we will investigate ways to support you. It is recognized that self-reflection is a highly personal and individualized practice and that sharing your insights, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs has the potential to lead to discomfort or a sense of vulnerability. For this reason, all participants are encouraged to participate within their comfort zones. All participants will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement form to ensure that confidentiality and privacy are maintained within the group and the sense of security and safety are optimized.

Are there any benefits to participating?

The benefits of developing and using a personal and meaningful self-reflective practice can be great for the individual practitioner both personally and professionally. Benefits may also translate directly to the service provided to the community and may also impact in positive ways upon collegial relationships. Personal experiences can vary greatly. This research has the potential to assist in the deeper understanding of methods that assist in the development of a self-reflective practice and strategies that support this process for people in the helping professions.

Will anyone know what I have said?

Anything you share within the group discussions during the workshop sessions will be heard by the other members of the group. As mentioned previously, confidentiality agreement forms will be signed by all participants to ensure each member's privacy. Your participation in the workshop sessions will be kept confidential. Your answers to the interview questions will be kept confidential. The voice recordings of the interview will be kept in a locked place until the project is complete. Your name and identity will not be used in the report. Instead, you will be referred to by a number or a letter such as Participant #1 or Participant A. As the researcher, I will be the only person who collects and uses the data and I am bound by confidentiality. The transcripts from the interviews will be kept confidential.

Who will get the report?

The report will go to my professor at the university. A report of the research outlining the findings and any recommendations you may have will be presented to CMHA. I will also provide a copy of the report to you as an individual participant in the research if you ask for it.

Storage of the data

I will keep all the transcripts and voice recordings in a locked place until July 2014. At that time I will destroy them.

Where do I go if I have any questions?

If you have any questions about the research or about anything I have said in this letter, you can contact me by telephone or email. My contact information is:

Elizabeth Bishop
537 S. Marks Street
Thunder Bay, ON P7E 1M6

Email: ebishop@confederationc.on.ca

Phone: (807)623-7308

You can also contact my professor. Her contact information is:

Dr. Maureen Coady
Department of Adult Education
St. Francis Xavier University
PO Box 5000
Anitgonish, NS B2G 1A9

Email: mjcoady@stfx.ca

Phone: (902)867-3244

Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D

Consent Form

I _____ agree to take part in a research project.

I understand that I will be involved in a series of workshops related to the development of a personal self-reflective practice.

I understand that Elizabeth Bishop will ask me questions in a one-to-one interview.

I understand that the interview will be recorded.

I understand that my ideas or words may be used in a report.

I understand that Elizabeth Bishop may take notes during the interview.

I understand that I will be able to read and comment on the summary report of the research.

I understand that my name will not be used in any reports and that the report will identify me with a letter (Participant A).

I understand that I do not have to participate in the interview. Nothing bad will result if I refuse to participate.

If I choose to participate in the interview, I can refuse to answer any question. I can leave the interview at any time. Nothing bad will result from this decision. I can ask Elizabeth to turn off the voice recorder at any time. I can ask Elizabeth not to use any of my answers or to erase any of the voice recordings.

I understand that my participation is voluntary.

I understand what this research is about and agree to participate. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E

CONFIDENTIALITY FORM

I understand that I will be involved in a research project in which I will be part of group discussions with fellow research project participants. During these discussions, I may share information related to content, session exercises, and practical application experiences. This information may include my thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values, beliefs, intuitions, and insights in relation to the learning experience, and those of others. I understand that all information shared within and between group sessions in relation to the research project is confidential and private. I understand that no information may be shared outside of the study either during the research project or following its completion.

I have read, understand, and agree to above confidentiality statement.

Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix F

SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR WEEKLY SESSIONS**SESSION #1**

- Introduction
- Background – researcher and project
- Format for program
- Adult Learning Principles
- “Pre-test”
- Self-reflective practice
- Concept Map exercise
- Group Discussion
- Presentation of Material
- Personal Lens
- Picture exercise
- Q & A
- Transfer to Practice exercise (TTP)
- Check-in

SESSION #2

- Dialogue/Discussion based on TTP exercise
- Foundations of Self-reflective practice
- The Responsibility/Freedom Equation
- The Pillars of Personal Responsibility
- Reflective Exercise
- Values and Beliefs
- Reflective Exercise
- Group discussion
- Personal Philosophy Statement
- Q & A
- Transfer to Practice exercise
- Check-in

SESSION #3

- Dialogue/Discussion based on TTP exercise
- Self-reflective practice strategies
- Practice session

- Circle discussion to share experiences/thoughts
- Q & A
- Transfer to Practice exercise
- Check-in

SESSION #4

- Dialogue/Discussion based on TTP exercise
- Strategies
- Practice session
- Circle discussion to share experiences/thoughts
- Q & A
- Transfer to Practice exercise
- Check-in
- Formal mid-project evaluation

SESSION #5

- Dialogue/Discussion based on TTP exercise
- Philosophical/Spiritual Principles related to Human Services
- Reflective Exercise
- Dialogue/Discussion
- Q & A
- Transfer to Practice exercise
- Check-in

SESSION #6

- Dialogue/Discussion based on TTP exercise
- Agent of Change
- Building Community
- Principles of Coaching/Mentorship
- Reflective Exercise
- Practice sessions
- Q & A
- Transfer to Practice exercise
- Check-in

SESSION #7

- Dialogue/Discussion based on TTP exercise (Clearness Committee model)

- The Mirror
- Reflective Exercise
- Q & A
- Transfer to Practice exercise
- Check-in

SESSION #8

- Dialogue/Discussion based on TTP exercise
- Lessons Learned
- Revisit Personal Philosophy Statement
- Group Discussion
- Post-test
- Program Evaluation

Participants will be provided with exercises to incorporate between sessions related to session content in order to begin the transfer to practice process. Completion of these exercises will form the basis of group dialogue sessions.

Appendix G

TRANSFER TO PRACTICE EXERCISE – SESSION #2

For the next week, read your personal philosophy statement frequently throughout the day and use your journal to jot down your thoughts and feelings in relation to your experiences

- how am I living my personal philosophy?
- Would I make any changes to my statement?
- Make any revisions you feel necessary
- Have I missed any values that might be important for me to incorporate?
- Begin to explore belief systems
 - ask yourself, what must I believe in order to see this experience in my life
 - in order to interpret it the way that I do?

Appendix H

CRITICAL INCIDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

With consideration to materials presented, exercises, group discussions, and personal insights, please respond to the following questions:

In today's session, when did you feel.....

Most engaged

Most distanced

Most affirmed

Most puzzled

Most surprised

Appendix I

MID-POINT EVALUTION

Describe your experience in this process so far.

With consideration to the content discussed in our sessions to date, what concepts or ideas stand out the most for you? Why?

Regarding the process of our sessions, what activities have you found most helpful or thought provoking? Explain

Describe your involvement in the “transfer to practice” exercises. Have you found this useful? If it has been difficult to engage in these activities, what do you imagine are the barriers for you?

If you could change anything about the project (content, process, format) what would it be?

With regard to facilitation of the sessions, what you like the facilitator to:

Stop

Start

Continue

Appendix J

SELF-REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR THE HELPING PROFESSIONS: CULTIVATING THE POTENTIAL FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

FINAL EVALUTION

Now that our formal sessions together are complete, I wanted to ask you to reconsider the questions I posed to you a few short weeks ago:

Describe your overall experience in this process.

With consideration to the content discussed in our sessions, what concepts or ideas stand out the most for you? Explain your answer.

Regarding the process of our sessions, what activities have you found most helpful or thought provoking? Explain your answer.

Describe your involvement in the “transfer to practice” exercises. Have you found this useful? If it has been difficult to engage in these activities, what do you imagine are the barriers for you? What do you think would be helpful as far as making this component more meaningful or accessible?

If you could change anything about the project (content, process, format) what would it be?

With regard to facilitation of the sessions, what would you like the facilitator to:

Stop

Start

Continue

Appendix K

Sample Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions:

The following questions will be used as prompts to guide the semi-structured individual interviews. The focus will be on exploring each individual's story with regard to their experiences as a participant in this research project.

1. How would you describe your involvement in self-reflective activities prior to the learning experience?
2. How would you describe your involvement in self-reflective activities following the learning experience?
3. Which self-reflective activities did you find most interesting and stimulating?
4. Which self-reflective exercises were least interesting and stimulating?
5. How would you describe your learning experience in the workshop sessions?
6. How helpful were the between session activities in your development of a personal self-reflective practice?
7. To what degree have you been able to incorporate self-reflective practice into your daily work life?
8. What supports have assisted you to incorporate the learning into your practice?
9. What supports were missing that you believe would have been helpful?
10. Describe the effectiveness of the mentoring/coaching provided through the learning experience.
11. Describe your role in the group activities. Were the group discussions and exercises helpful to you in creating a transformative learning experience? Please describe.
12. Is there anything else you would like to say about your involvement in the research project?