Chapter 16

Enhancing Self–Reflective Practice and Conscious Service in the Helping Professions: The Value of Informal Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights the results and the implications of research that was conducted with a group of mental health practitioners involved in an eight-week educational program designed to help establish and enhance self-reflective practice. The study elicited a number of emerging themes related to the benefits of self-reflective practice in the helping professions. The research project took place within the context of a professional setting; however, emphasis and value was placed upon the informal learning experiences of the participants. While there were a number of findings and recommendations obtained through this research project, the main focus for this chapter centers on the role of informal learning as an element of the research project design and ultimately as an integral component of self-reflective practice. The highlighted results include two elements of the findings related to curriculum design and effective facilitative strategies that might be helpful to adult educators involved in post-secondary education as well as continuing education and professional development activities with an emphasis on maximizing the benefits of informal learning.

INTRODUCTION

Self-reflective practice is the thread that weaves through and connects the elements of conscious service, which is comprised of four distinct, yet interrelated components of self-connection, enlightened communication, transformative relationships, and creative communion. Conscious service is built upon the foundations of presence, engagement, connection, awareness, and curiosity which creates the space for practitioners to not only know themselves as people and professionals,
but to bring the essence of who they are to their helping relationships ultimately enhancing the quality of service to others. With this in mind, it is important to create opportunities for growth and awareness that emphasize not only formal learning experiences, but equally value the informal learning processes of practitioners and students.

In our fast-paced society, a multitude of social conditions have had an enormous impact upon the human experience. There is a growing number of health and social programs aimed at assisting people to navigate and manage daily struggles, significant life challenges, and traumatic experiences. Charged with the responsibility to provide these services, community support workers, social workers, nurses, therapists, physicians, counselors, and a range of health and human service professionals are trained in various theories encompassing several areas of study, as well as skills development with the aim of becoming effective helpers. While the areas of expertise may vary amongst these professionals, the theme of helping human beings is central to all.

So, what role does informal learning play in the training and ongoing development of practitioners who are engaged in helping professions? In fact, it is a very significant role; however, the insights that are gained through informal learning are often not recognized, valued or utilized to the greatest extent—both by practitioners themselves, and by those involved in the facilitation of academic preparation, continuing education programs and continuing professional development of practitioners.

In general, informal learning is considered to be learning that occurs outside of educational establishments, without professional organization and structured curriculum. It often occurs spontaneously and is a result of the natural functions of daily life. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) state that “studies of informal learning, especially those asking about adults’ self-directed learning projects reveal that upwards of 90% of adults are engaged in hundreds of hours of informal learning with a great majority of this learning occurring in the workplace” (p. 35).

There is no question that formal academic and professional development training opportunities are of great value to the overall development and preparation of the individual involved in the helping professions. However, it is equally important to consider the impact and contribution that informal learning processes have on this overall development, ultimately informing and guiding practice. Self-reflective practice provides a means to access and integrate all learning; both formal and informal, in order to gain deeper awareness of the personal meaning of professional and personal experiences. Self-reflective practice also provides an opportunity to become more aware of the personal philosophy that shapes our interpretations and guides our actions (Brookfield, 1995).

In human services, the professional is the resource. 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, 2006; Tisdell & Taylor, 2001). An ongoing exploration of these deeper realms is paramount to the realization of truly therapeutic relationships in which both parties are enhanced through the process.

Integral to helping professions is the desire to connect, to make a difference, to be helpful to others through service. As professionals embrace their own humanity and opportunities for growth, the quality of the service they provide is greatly enhanced; there is recognition of the interconnection between their own well-being and their ability to be of service to others. This leads to greater levels of authenticity, which is an important element in working with others.

In my experience, authenticity is fostered through a holistic approach to self-reflective practice, which has the potential to bring integrity to one’s life experience in that alignment can occur between values and beliefs, thoughts, and actions. From this perspective, practitioners learn