

Reflecting Processes and Shifting Positions in Dance Movement Therapy

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‘Reflectiveness is about changing paradigms as was outlined in the film *Dead Poets Society* in which Robin Williams gives his pupils a symbol for seeing differently; he asks them to stand up on their desks to get a new view of old things.’

Michael Carroll (2001) ‘The spirituality of supervision’, p 81¹

The teacher in the film above energised his pupils through shifting their position, relocating their viewpoints and thus, their lived experience, quite literally and physically. Within the field of Dance Movement Therapy, we can do the same thing with trainees, supervisees, clients and within wider systems. In all of the above contexts, this shifting of position, in relation to space, time (and artistic materials), aims to generate different points of view. These may be affirmed as new embodied choices, when participants have the opportunity to reflect on

the different perspectives and resources afforded by moving to new positions. Providing space, time and artistic materials for positional shifts offers rich possibilities for reflecting on current choices and on new opportunities for growth and change.

This approach to Dance Movement Therapy invites a particular ethical stance. It encourages an attitude of wonder and respectful curiosity about difference, in relation to different people, concepts, worldviews, cultures, beliefs, values and preferred identities. This promotes attentiveness to the local ecology of human interactions. Such an attitude invites trainees, and others to reflect on the effects of their own movement preferences and their personal prejudices² or pre-understandings³ in specific contexts. It goes beyond self-awareness to an awareness of the interactional consequences of any position adopted. This shift leads to a specific kind of accountability for the therapist in the co-creation of meanings and interactional outcomes. Within the context of this brief positioning paper the authors are defining self-reflexivity as attention to moment to moment feedback as one basis for the next action or intervention.

This paper reflects an evolving model of training and practice, the Parker-Best Co-Creative Approach. This has emerged out of the authors’ desire to appreciate, wonder about and work with, the richness of

¹ Carroll, Michael (2001)

² Cecchin, Gianfranco et al (1994)

³ Andersen, Tom (1995)

difference during the evolution of their collaborative training relationship, over more than a decade. This may be applied in many other contexts of therapy, training and life in general. Together, they have developed a model of relationship which honoured an active appreciation of their very different worldviews, and movement preferences, at specific points in time and context.

For example, twelve years ago, one of the authors brought to their emerging reflecting conversations, a belief in the dynamic power of the unconscious and ways in which personal history may mould present actions. The other author brought to their interactive 'dance' a belief in the power of language (conversation in its widest sense) in the co-construction of meanings and its power to shape experience between people in the present moment. From a position of respectful curiosity and mutual interest, not always easy or comfortable, they gradually began to be able to change positions – to move into the other's point of view, prejudices, even experimenting with different movement 'preferences' and new choices in different contexts of training and supervision. And back again! Moving from self-awareness to the 'Reflecting Processes' model created by Andersen⁴ facilitated the self-reflexive positioning documented in the Social Constructionist literature⁵. This enabled each of the authors to shift their positions and reflect on the difference, jump on tables when necessary – to keep on walking their talk and talking their walk –and to find a way to reflect on these experiences together.⁶

This interactive dance has been echoed in the many different collaborative relationships and conversations created within the DMT staff team as a whole (at Roehampton University, London, UK). From these conversations and other conversations with DMT trainees over time, a model of training, therapy and supervision has developed, based on reflections on feedback at all levels of system. The development of this model has, over time, been informed by Bateson's seminal ideas of the "difference that makes a difference"⁷; Barnett W. Pearce's ideas about moral orders and the co-creation of meanings in context⁸; Tom Andersen's model of 'reflecting team processes'; Murray Louis' sense of playful improvisation and containing choreography⁹; Guy Claxton's ideas about creativity, intuition and learning¹⁰; Rachel Melville Thomas' ideas about the centrality of the body action

in learning and play¹¹; Joseph Campbell's ideas of the creative power of shared stories¹².

One further important influence in more recent years has been the notion of shifting 'perceptual position' drawn from NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming)¹³. This assists beginning level students to experience one very simple way of shifting positions; for example, 1st position – 'looking out of your own eyes'; 2nd position – 'walking in the other person's shoes'; 3rd person position – 'looking back at both 1st and 2nd positions from a distance'; 4th position – taking a 'helicopter view of all positions'; and, finally, moving back to 1st position with all the experiential 'information' afforded by moving between all these positions.

If one links NLP positioning with DMT practice perhaps 1st position may be aligned with moving more in the Vertical plane and a privileging of one's own identity, and 2nd position may be seen as moving more in the Horizontal plane¹⁴, privileging communication¹⁵. Within the frame of the Arts Therapies as a whole, 3rd position seems to have more echoes with the notion of aesthetic distance rather than the objective observer of traditional research. Finally, 4th person position links back to one argument of this paper, that particular positions, in life and in therapy, each have their own opportunities and constraints. Different approaches to therapy and to DMT may be identified with the primary perceptual position they espouse – the Psychodynamic 'blank screen', the Humanistic 'I-Thou', the Cognitive (and others) more directive position¹⁶. Of course this is an over-simplification in order to create some useful distinctions. For the purposes of this paper, it is simply proposed that positions in themselves are never absolute, but that the ability to move between positions, take an overview informed by these shifts in positioning, is a key skill in the training of dance movement therapists, applicable to many other contexts of working and living.

This DMT model proposes that it is useful and ethical to act on the basis that meanings are socially constructed or co-created between people. In the context of appreciation of difference, it also proposes that reflecting processes are central to promoting learning and change, in the context of playing with different modalities and moving to different positions. It is interesting to note that there are some echoes with the recent account by Daria Halprin¹⁷ of her approach to DMT that also supports our confidence in the power of experiential learning.

⁴ Andersen, Tom. (1995)

⁵ Gergen, Ken (1989)

⁶ Parker, Gabrielle & Best, Penelope (2001)

⁷ Bateson, Gregory (1972)

⁸ Pearce, Barnett, W. (1994)

⁹ Louis, Murray (1980)

¹⁰ Claxton, Guy (2000)

¹¹ Melville- Thomas, Rachel (1993)

¹² Campbell, James (1988)

¹³ O'Connor, Joseph & McDermott, Ian (1996)

¹⁴ Lynn-Moore, Carol (1982)

¹⁵ Lynn-Moore, Carol & Yamamoto, Kauru (1988)

¹⁶ Spinelli, Ernesto (1996)

¹⁷ Halprin, Daria & Waller (2003)

The very necessity to shift between world views in order to develop their own professional relationship, led the authors, as tutors and supervisors, to embed a respect for difference and the ability to shift positions, as pedagogical methods within the DMT training programme. Differences between people, experiences, ideas, positions, values, abilities were highlighted through active reflective processes. The authors were able to situate themselves, the training praxis and a supervisory model within a wider context of ideas about communication from systemic/social constructionist viewpoints. These viewpoints share an assumption, inherent in the philosophy and techniques of reflecting processes, that there are multiple descriptions and explanations for observed behaviour and a variety of ways of creating and understanding meanings.

The authors offer this brief paper as an invitation for further discussion upon contemporary developments within the field of Dance Movement Therapy. Such a discussion seems timely as the profession is on the edge of a shift of positioning, situating itself within a larger and even more diverse group of professionals and worldviews. Perhaps this is time to remind ourselves that increased self awareness, on its own, may not produce the creative conversations needed to move forward well enough together¹⁸. The authors have put forward the concepts of reflecting processes and positional shifting as if these are separate components. Within the scope of this paper, it has not been possible to elaborate on the importance of shifts which might occur not only within person or perceptual positioning but also within the contexts of different time, space and multiple systemic relationships or 'conversations'. Nevertheless, it is suggested that our access to the different media which may inform 'artistic enquiry'¹⁹ (as dance movement therapists, and arts therapists) may allow us a very rich vocabulary for researching and playfully experimenting with shifting positions using artistic materials and different modalities to clarify and inform our mutual understanding and interactional shaping²⁰ on many different levels, including the co-creation of personal and professional identities in context.²¹

To conclude: in their training, supervisory and therapeutic practices, the authors have found, as Robin Williams suggests above, that literally shifting your position, assists reflection upon how you have been shaped by different contexts and environments. They propose that this may promote an invitation to new perspectives and understandings, leading to new

ways of acting in the world – for the benefit of ourselves and our clients, trainees and supervisees.

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¹⁸ Pearce, Barnett, W. (1992)

¹⁹ Hervey, L.W. (2000).

²⁰ Best, Penelope (2003)

²¹ Parker, Gabrielle & Best, Penelope (2001)