



Northeastern Family Institute

Bringing Vermont Children, Families, and Communities Together

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Nurturing Reflective Practice

Blog #1: “Building a Culture of Curiosity”: *From Lenses to Mirrors*”

We are born curious; it is a birthright, and our very existence depends on acquiring knowledge about ourselves, others, our environment, and the interpersonal world in which we live. This curiosity helps us know our place in the world, it promotes our survival, it offers a foundation for lifelong learning, and it impacts our well-being and mental health. As we age and develop, our capacity and interest in the outside world remains steadfast yet shifting. This outward interest begins to give way, ever so slightly at first, to an interest and curiosity *about ourselves*. Spend time with three- and four-year-olds and it becomes abundantly clear how curiosity begins to reflect inwardly (witness the “why” questions). As this inner capacity develops, so does a child’s ability to self-regulate, attune to others and to reveal more of themselves through emotion-based language. Most of those “why” questions that toddlers ask are in the interest of knowing oneself and others better.

Caregivers and professionals increasingly expect that young children reflect on their own body sensations, emotions, thoughts, and actions. Where curiosity is a human instinct and impulse, the capacity to reflect more deeply is a developmental and biopsychosocial process; it exists within our connections and relationships with others. This reflective capacity is unique to humans as we can feel, think, consider, notice patterns, and wonder about our experiences, and those of other peoples. Reflection is our hunger to understand our world and its impacts on us. We learn, relate, change, mature, love and understand motivations, based on this capacity to reflect.

Reflective Practice is a professionalized form of self-discovery and self-awareness necessary in all human services fields (e.g., education, mental health, health, social services, law enforcement etc.). It is most simply defined as *curiosity, directed inwardly*. When applied in professional settings, reflective practice is *curiosity*

directed inwardly through a process of self-inquiry and self-interrogation designed to improve our skills, reveal blind spots, and help build more equitable systems. Often reduced to simple activities and questions we ask ourselves and others, its essence lies in it being situated in the culture of organizations, agencies, and individuals. Being reflective is being honest and having integrity; it is the willingness to consistently examine the impact our work has on us, and the impact that we have on our work. Reflecting is a primary way that we deal with the inevitable (even inescapable) emotional, relational, social, and existential pain that accompanies human services work. We must often choose between making meaning of and processing our pain, or blindly and recklessly perpetuating that pain onto the people we serve.

Too often the everyday reactivity of organizational, agency and educational life limits the capacity to be curious and to reflect. When we are not being reflective (as our true nature suggests we should be) then something individually, organizationally, or programmatically has prevented this organic process. When our innate capacity to be reflective is thwarted, it is often the result of organizational practices that continually value product over process, evidence over experience, and excessive busyness over time to think and innovate. Keeping our workforce too busy all but guarantees the status quo, which immediately raises the question, “Who benefits when our workforce is not provided the time to reflect?” Surely not our students, clients, patients, or citizenry, and clearly not our workforce (including leaders).

In many public schools, educators are conditioned to excessively surveil, deconstruct, and analyze the academic, behavioral, and now “*social-emotional*” capacities of its students. Like all professionals, educators acquire multiple “lenses” (a primary tool to see the landscapes of our professions) in which to see, categorize, frame, label and understand students. Lenses are precision and clarity tools designed to see things outside of ourselves, and are always vulnerable to bias, distortion, personal ideologies and identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, faith/religion). Likewise, the language of schools has, in places, become indistinguishable from the language historically reserved for laboratories (e.g., data driven, cause-effect, reinforcers, evidence-based) or businesses (e.g., contracts, incentives, accountability, performance standards). With this excessive focus on the landscapes of practice—students, clients, patients, citizens—is it any wonder that we still presume that the best way, as professionals, to improve our craft is optimize our gaze outward?

From the perspective of Reflective Practices, gazing outward is understandably necessary. We want our professionals to be interested in and *curious about* those

they serve. We want our professionals to read books and articles, attend professional development workshops, go to conferences, and acquire knowledge about others. Yet, looking outward will always be limited if not accompanied by an equally strong *alternate* set of tools. Where lenses help us see the outside world more clearly, “mirrors” enable us to see ourselves better. They promote gazing inwardly and internally. “Mirrors” bring greater authenticity, accuracy, and integrity to our practice, and are necessary as part of any pro-equity work.

There are at least four mirrors that constitute good reflective practices.

- The first mirror, *self-reflection*, is the mirror used to think, consider, replay, and analyze our own physiology, emotions, thoughts, actions, motives, identities, and biases. Ideally, we do this regularly and with some capacity to ask ourselves difficult questions. As necessary as self-reflection is, it is also highly vulnerable to bias and blind spots. If you operate in a vacuum, you have extremely limited information about yourself. Absent any other information about ourselves, we simply cannot be self-aware in any meaningful way. Consider this: we all work with people who know things about us that we do not know about ourselves (blind spots), and vice versa. There is a potential wealth of information about *me* in the hands of other people. Yet, to optimize self-awareness and self-discovery, we need other mirrors in which to see ourselves. Remember, with only one actual mirror, you cannot see the back of your own head. With only one mirror, you lack a 3D and 360-degree view of yourself.
- The second mirror, *collegial reflection* (or your inner circle at work), is the mirror used to gain information about ourselves from those we interact with the most at work. These are the people that often see our trends, habits, propensities, biases, struggles and strengths from a different perspective. They often hold enormous potential for improving our practice. Of course, with possibilities for growth comes increasing vulnerability and risk. Feeling safe with one another is a critical pre-condition for reflective practice. When we formalize this process, it fosters lateral/horizontal learning and cross-pollination of ideas.
- The third mirror involves receiving feedback, support and encouragement from your formal supervisor, or *supervisory reflection*. In many professional settings, our supervisor provides much needed reflections about our work. They help us track both the technique and process of doing good work with those we serve.

- The fourth mirror involves *client/student/patient/ citizenry reflection*. Here, we elicit information from those we serve. While surveys and other anonymous tools can be essential to gauging our efficacy, more personalized methods via listening circles, conversations, storytelling, focus groups, and personalized interviews will breed incredible depth to our capacity to reflect.

For Reflective Practice to thrive and sustain, they need to be formally incorporated in the entire organizational structure and routinized. Since we are promoting a practice that in many settings is new, even disquieting, sensitivity to the process of enculturation and acclimating is necessary. Discomfort, as part of the process of many learning experiences, is a given, at times, during Reflective Practice. As the process moves from technique to culture, it becomes internalized and then simply “the way we do business around here”.

There are at least five benefits (or rationales) for Reflective Practice.

1. First, it helps improve skills and abilities; we get better at our work when we have more information. The practice is designed around the notion that there is so much wisdom within human services agencies that never gets “excavated.” When we are granted time to think and reflect, we inevitably innovate, change, and grow.
2. Reflective Practice is designed to decrease stress, burnout and other negative effects of isolation, tension, suppression of emotion and other pressures intrinsic to our work.
3. It promotes community and belonging amongst us. This does not mean we always agree, it means that reflective time can at least help us understand ourselves and others better.
4. It embodies a pro-equity stance. It requires that we make ourselves the object of curiosity, inquiry, and awareness, for the purpose of improving outcomes with those we serve. If we are to justify asking difficult, rigorous, intense, and even intrusive questions of our students, clients, patients, and citizens, we ought to be asking similar questions of ourselves, especially when it comes to issues like our physiology, emotions, cognitions, actions, motives, beliefs, and biases (especially as they relate to race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class and faith/religious beliefs). Without this

reciprocal responsibility, we too easily fall prey to simply scapegoating or blaming those we serve.

5. It is an efficient and effective use of our time. Where professional development relies on outside experts, reflective practice leans into collaboration, internal wisdom, lived experience, storytelling, and conversation. Dedicated time for Reflective Practice is not a luxury and the notion that “we have no time to reflect” is simply wrong and dangerous. To avoid this work is to support the status quo, and in the process, render positive change even more difficult. Reflective Practice does not require more time, it requires *better use of existing time* (which we often squander by “admiring the problem,” venting, ruminating etc.). It requires a willingness to try different ways of being with one another as professionals. In doing so, our reflective time fosters lateral/horizontal learning and a culture of connection.

While there are many ways to accomplish the goals of trauma transformation, there is no way to accomplish them without being reflective. We are not only wired to be curious and reflective, we are also a species that is constantly making meaning of noteworthy events in our lives. In fact, we cannot “not” make meaning, and when we try to, we inevitably make mistakes.

Next Blog Post: “Common Detours and Deterrents to Reflective Practice”