Reflective Hybrids in Management and Consulting

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Creating Learning and Change through Reflective Conversations

Abstract

In this paper we examine the importance of reflective conversations in creating learning and change and we propose an epistemology of practice that takes as its starting point the notion of Donald Schön's (1987) reflective practice and subsumes that into a larger model in which the site of reflection is a shared space occupied by two or more reflective colleagues. Our purpose is to explore how engaging in shared reflection creates additional opportunities for making meaning of experience. The authors share one particularly impactful conversation that helped challenge assumptions and create new understanding that led to teaching changes. We are using the same reflective approach in writing this article that we use in our conversations.

> *It is the last class before spring reading break and Tom is discussing a case from a previous midterm with his 3rd year business ethics class. Students are using their cell phones to text comments that appear on the computer screen at the front of the class. Tom pauses to acknowledge a student whose hand is not so much raised as it is pointed at the front of the room. Tom turns to see the writing on the screen and is stunned into silence.*

1 Introduction

In every classroom session there is potential for the agenda to be shifted off course by unexpected input from a student. A competent instructor knows the audience, teaches the lesson well, and responds

appropriately to keep the lesson on track. A masterful instructor, by contrast, sees the lesson as a means, not the end of the educational encounter; a shared voyage to a destination that may not be fully known in advance. Like a river rafter, a masterful instructor is immersed in the flow of the unfolding lesson; sensing *and making sense of* the complex interaction between ideas, learners, and each other; feeling the emotional currents beneath the surface; alert to the unexpected; receptive to surprising comments or results that differ from normal; knowing when to go with the flow and when to pull hard on the steering oar. In this analogy a competent instructor knows and follows a course charted in advance; unexpected deviations off this course represent danger and the unknown. A masterful instructor embraces the river as a contingent experience knowing that currents vary with water level, shoals may appear and disappear, and a snag can be hidden around every bend. The masterful instructor realizes that the unknown may harbour danger, but understands that is where new knowledge may be found. Because masterful instructors accept that there are many ways to "ride the river," they are receptive and prepared to turn the unexpected to advantage, to surface new knowledge and, with a bit of luck, to create deeper learning by students and instructor alike.

This article is written for managers, consultants, educators, scientists and others interested in developing their professional practice beyond the level of technical competence required for, say, skillful process management, reliable task execution or the timely completion of deliverables. Although a teaching example is used here, we might easily draw from other areas of professional practice examples that require real-time responses to unexpected input. Here we take technical competence as given. Our interest and the focus of this article is on cultivating the potential that resides in that amorphous space that separates professional practice we recognize as merely "competent" from such practice we recognize as "masterful", practice that epitomizes what Donald Schön (1987) calls *professional artistry* and what Hubert Dreyfus (2004) calls *expertise*. In his Five-stage Model of Adult Skill Acquisition, Dreyfus distinguishes between

"proficiency", the capacity to discover a solution through a deliberative analytical process, and "expertise" the capacity to generate a solution through an "immediate intuitive situational response". Schön's concept of professional artistry, relative to teaching, is not the knowledge of how to teach or the subject matter expertise, but rather the execution of high-performance teaching in conditions of uncertainty.

Schön (1987) distinguished between *technical rationality* and professional artistry. Technical rationality is a positivist approach where the competent practitioner is unreflective, separate from the problem, does not question how the problem is constructed, and uses expert knowledge applied in a scientific way to seek solutions. In contrast, professional artistry is a constructivist approach, wherein the *reflective practitioner* is inextricably linked with the framing and the solution of the problem in a cycle of experimentation and discovery. This is not to say that technical rationality is unimportant, since teaching, or any profession, demands competent expert knowledge of theories, concepts, and practice. However, the artistry of masterful teaching is in the capacity to make sense of unknown and uncertain situations by testing one's knowledge to generate new learning outcomes. In any field, professional artistry combines a high level of technical competency with a highly developed capacity to adjust in the moment to sudden uncertainty or rapidly changing situations (Schön, 1983, 1987).

To become masterful practitioners is our shared, explicit, elusive goal. What this goal entails surely varies by profession: a good scientist does not automatically make a good manager, as witnessed, for example, by the checkered results of university technology spin-off companies. And although we might have a healthy self-regard for our own work ethic and experience, whether we are truly masterful practitioners is a judgement more reliably made by other masters in the field. Accordingly our focus here is on the iterative process of becoming better, rather than on some necessarily arbitrary final destination, which for the conscientious practitioner remains always out of reach. Nevertheless we can say that our goal represents some kind

of fusion of theoretical knowledge with concrete understanding, and is a move in the direction of practical wisdom. A masterful [reflective] practitioner is able to reflect-in-action (Schön, 1987) or on-the-spot by recognizing surprises that "are not in the book."

What we are proposing here is an epistemology of practice that takes as its starting point and subsumes the notion of Schön's (1987) reflective practice into a larger model in which the site of reflection is a shared space occupied by the reflective practitioner and a *reflective colleague*[1]. Here we follow Russell and Cohen (1997) in adopting the term *reflective colleague* as useful shorthand to capture the role each of us plays in turn for the other as we reflect together on a common problem. In our model, reflection is an iterative process conducted as a lawyer might say "jointly and severally" by reflective practitioners who are each intellectually curious, are willing and able to share their insights, and understand the co-creation of a learning experience as a deliberate and mutually beneficial activity. The participants have a vested interest in learning with and from each other; dialogue, whether in person or mediated by technology, is the medium for exploration.

2 Reflective Conversations

Reflection is a constructionist view of reality in which individuals consciously reflect upon, reconsider, construct, or make sense of their experience to understand its meaning (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987; Weick, 1995). Reflection on experience, where reflection facilitates challenging assumptions, values, and behaviors in one's practice, leads to personal and professional growth (Oermann, 1999; Platzer & Snelling, 1997).

Christopher Johns (1994) developed a model of structured reflection for use by nursing education supervisors to guide dialogue with students. Johns' structured model of reflection is a set of questions that stimulates practitioners to uncover and challenge assumptions about professional practice and to interpret experiences to

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1 A reflective conversation may include multiple reflective colleagues.

determine the effects of actions and to formulate alternatives for future action. The sequence of questions in Johns' model covers four main areas: 1. description of the experience including reflection on the goals of the experience, actions taken, consequences of actions, and feelings in the moment; 2. influencing factors in the decision-making process; 3. evaluation of managing the experience; and, 4. learning from the experience, including affective factors, sense-making, and changes to ways of knowing.

We might think of a reflection as an internal dialogue, a conversation within oneself that gives voice to potential inputs, outcomes, or positions and systematically critiques the possible future scenarios that may result from different assumptions about reality. We often think of conversations as only a means for sharing information or building relationships, but in sharing knowledge and feelings with others we create the conditions for understanding and new meaning to emerge. Even what we think of as casual conversation helps us construct meaning from our experiences and build our reality; more deliberate conversation can be a powerful tool facilitating the deep reflection that leads to change and growth. Conversations when properly framed as reflective conversations have the power not only to generate understanding and deepen relationships but to create change.

Essentially, reflective conversations enable learning and change through systematically questioning assumptions to generate new knowledge and alternative actions (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Oermann, 1999; Schön, 1987). Thus reflective conversations differ from other conversations because the focus is less on exchanging information and building relationships and more on discovering, illuminating, and challenging, even changing, assumptions. Reflective conversation is different from personal reflection because it is in reflective conversation that we offer each other the gift of sight into blind spots, and reveal the secrets of our own hidden spots. This level of sharing, openness, and honesty takes, and creates, trust. This type of conversation is based on the assumption that people have the capacity for change, the willingness to share, learn, and grow, and

the courage to confront even the most difficult challenges. While these reflective conversations often take the form of impromptu café-like talk, there is a purposefulness that involves probing open-ended questions, careful listening on multiple levels, openness, sharing, honesty, and a willingness to give and receive feedback.

The role of reflective colleague has elements of both mentor and coach: like the mentor, the reflective colleague also benefits from the relationship; as with the coach, the goal of the reflective colleague is to help the practitioner reach his or her potential. However, both coaching and mentoring imply a hierarchical relationship that is either absent or deliberately set aside in the interaction between reflective practitioner and colleague. There is no giver or receiver in the co-creation of knowledge; whatever background or positional authority an individual brings to the dialogue, each individual acknowledges an incomplete understanding of reality, and accepts that progress or insight arises from the reflective process of which each is an equal party.

As in the example provided later in this article, the reflective conversations may take place as a form of post-action sense making. While they share many qualities of Johns' reflective protocol, reflective conversations are more open and flexible: additional elements and questions are introduced as they occur to participants; questioning tends to be recursive or iterative rather than linear; and importantly there is a free-flowing give and take that creates simultaneous foci on both participants in the dialogue. It is similar to the conversation between a coach and client where rapport is developed in support of the goal to challenge and replace established actions that are producing poor results by finding superior alternative actions, yet different in that both participants are playing both roles. In a sense, it is a mutual coaching conversation.

3 The Process

Russell and Cohen (1997) describe the use of email to support an extended, asynchronous shared reflection in a situation where face-to-face meetings were not possible. As later indicated, our process

relies primarily on face-to-face conversations that create a useful momentum and emotional intensity that are difficult to achieve with email. At the same time, email provides the opportunity for extended reflection and the chance to revisit and clarify our statements and our thinking.

The process we describe is deceptively simple in concept and surprisingly difficult to do well. Practitioners embarking on this path will require more than curiosity, more than an academic interest in the subject. Curiosity is at the root of any structured learning process, but real progress is unlikely if curiosity is not tempered with humility and empathy and fortified by Aristotle's master virtue, courage. The work of professionals is to intervene, control or manage in a complex world populated by complex individuals. It takes a certain humility to accept that no matter how well prepared, knowledgeable and experienced we may be, the cognitive limitations of the human mind constrain our ability to perceive and interpret a situation as it unfolds; as Daniel Kahneman (2011) notes we are often blind to our biases, blind to the obvious, and blind to our own blindness. We are, however, much better at noticing other people's blunders and biases than we are at recognizing our own (Kahneman 2011). It takes empathy to see the world through the eyes of someone else, to try to understand how their perspective makes what seems so obviously wrong to us seem so obviously right to them. It takes courage for an expert to submit to that kind of scrutiny by another expert, just as it takes courage to honestly confront the mistakes, miscues and misunderstandings that bedevil our best-intended interventions, in order to learn from experience the limits of the theories and assumptions that informed our prior action.

A reflective conversation is most effective when there is an atmosphere of trust and an absence of the defensiveness that sabotages learning. There is an expectation that the conversation will be honest, deep, emotional, intellectual, and at the same time caring, supportive, and unique and both parties know and work toward those expectations. There is a genuine search for learning by establishing the current reality of what happened, giving and receiving feedback

especially around blind spots, revealing assumptions for inspection, and a willingness to learn and change. These conversations by their very nature are difficult and emotional; and, no matter how well intentioned we are, we may inadvertently hurt each other's feelings in the pursuit of personal and professional development. A post-action review may be required to clear the air about any misunderstanding. We have each learned, too many times, how to apologize. Yet because we have come to appreciate the value of reflective conversations we eagerly re-engage time and time again.

To engage in reflective conversation one must change the framing of the conversation from just talking about the facts to deep sharing of assumptions, values and actions while concurrently listening attentively for understanding the other. Reframing conversation to reflective conversation means changing from a series of statements to a series of questions, answers, and more questions in a generative way that creates new meaning in between the participants rather than within each participant. For us the conversation usually happens around a specific task—writing a conference proposal, creating a client change intervention, designing or teaching a class, managing a particularly difficult departmental issue, or editing each other's contribution to a journal article.

4 The Experience

Two of the authors, Gary and Tom, are meeting at a local restaurant, one of a long series of informal meetings that stretch back more than a decade. The meetings have no set schedule because they must accommodate unpredictable travel and teaching commitments; they are infrequent enough to feel 'special', but frequent enough to permit a sort of conversational momentum. There is no agenda, just a preliminary phone call or email in which one or the other expresses an interest in sharing a situation, seeking advice, or finding out how a previously discussed work or life issue has unfolded. The venue is casual, quiet and away from the university so the discussion is unlikely to be interrupted. The meeting takes place over lunch with the expectation that lunch might stretch well into

the afternoon. Mid-day has been chosen because it is hard work to engage in deep reflection; for the same reason, the beverage of choice is water or coffee, not beer. They meet, in other words, when they have something significant to talk about, in circumstances that are conducive to deep conversation. After years of practice the authors know their roles. They expect a supportive, yet no-holds-barred conversation. They practice empathy and maintain a caring social relationship but dig below the surface to uncover tacit assumptions that frame the situation. It is the end of February and they have gotten together to reflect on an incident that transpired three weeks earlier in Tom's undergraduate business ethics class, an incident that has been much on his mind since.

In an effort to make his large classes more interactive, Tom has been experimenting with a web-hosted cell phone voting system designed to allow students to respond in real time to simple Yes/No questions or to enter longer text messages that appear on the screen at the front of the room. It is nearing the end of the last class before reading break and students are discussing the ethics case from the previous semester's mid-term exam: Who are the stakeholders? What do they have at stake? In this case, Tom tells them, the local First Nation[2] is an important stakeholder. Why is that? Where do their rights come from? Tom pauses to acknowledge a student whose hand is not so much raised as pointed at the front of the room. Tom turns and sees on the screen the following comment:

Natives are always fucking drinking. Drunk idiots.
Almost as bad as the blacks.

Tom is stunned into silence, strides to the podium and kills the projector. In almost 30 years of teaching, such a comment is unprecedented. Of course Tom has heard this kind of talk before, in pubs or industrial settings, but this is different; this is an ethics class for third-year business students in a top-ranked Canadian university.

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2 "First Nation" is a Canadian term for a tribal group of indigenous or aboriginal people.

Gary: That's incredible! And, this just happened out of the blue?

Tom: I certainly wasn't expecting it. Should I have? I'm not sure. In the previous class while we were discussing Kohlberg's classic case, one student had texted that the husband should "steal the drug because his wife is good in bed". That was immature, but not mean-spirited. I was surprised, but not very, because they are undergraduates and let's face it, some of them do find ethics irrelevant and boring.

Gary: Do they actually tell you that?

Tom: Sometimes. It comes with the territory. Then they realize what they've said and try to reassure me they don't think I'm boring, personally. I suppose they are afraid it will affect their grade, but who would even keep track of stuff like that?

Gary: OK. So someone posts this inappropriate comment about the wife and what do you do?

Tom: I remember scanning the room to see if any of the students seemed offended, but everyone seemed OK. In fact, just that process of silent scanning kind of settled the class, so I really didn't dwell on it. I mean, it's true that under other circumstances I might have laughed too.

Gary: Yeah sometimes you have to just let things go and pick your spots for interventions. In hindsight, would you have done something differently?

Tom: I could have revisited classroom norms, but just reminding them there is a time and a place for joking seemed like enough. They're smart kids, coming down hard on them seemed counter productive.

Gary: But this second comment about First Nations is in a different category altogether. It's horrible!

Tom: I was appalled, for sure. I told them I couldn't believe what I'd just read on the screen. I told them I couldn't imagine a student that would think such a comment, let alone post it to a class discussion.

Gary: "Couldn't imagine" or "didn't imagine?"

Tom: "Couldn't imagine" is what I said, but "didn't imagine" would have been more accurate. If I had imagined the possibility, I might have been better prepared. Anyway, the room went totally silent. I said I couldn't understand how such a comment, based on such profound ignorance, could surface in our ethics classroom. Then I just stood there trying to

get some objective distance from the situation. I really had no idea where to go next.

Gary: Sorry to interrupt, but I'm really curious. What exactly were you feeling in that moment?

Tom: I was upset, angry, pretty emotional … I think I felt betrayed, somehow. I just couldn't believe what I'd read! And at the same time, I felt exposed and ill-prepared. We'd spent the previous three classes discussing Mary Gentile's work on the importance of imagining future ethical scenarios and how we need to develop personal scripts to provide guidance in difficult situations[3]. Now I'm standing there, I'm the instructor and I don't have a script ready.

[Tom goes silent, re-living the scene and Gary gives him some time to collect his thoughts.]

Gary: I can understand your emotional reaction, I would have been angry too. But you kept your cool, and under pressure that's difficult. It's ironic that we spend the majority of our time honing our subject matter expertise, yet so little time on our teaching practice, but in these critical moments experience, wisdom and genuineness trump content. So you're just standing there …

Tom: Yeah. And it feels like the whole course is hanging in the balance somehow, that if I say the wrong thing, I'll make things worse and lose the class for the rest of the semester. But at the same time it seems like there should be something that I can say that would provide the right message, the right perspective, the right lesson to make something valuable out of this mess. And I'm remembering now, as we talk about it together, that while this turmoil was going on, a story from my own past kept surfacing from my unconscious and I kept pushing it back down, because it happened so long ago and I couldn't remember it that well. I'd push it out of my mind and try to focus my thoughts on next steps, but the story kept surfacing and finally I realized my intuition was telling me this was the story I needed to share.

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3 Mary Gentile, *Giving Voice to Values.*

Tom: (*Speaking to his class*): *In 1973 I was an engineering student and the university's president was also my mathematics instructor. Teaching wasn't something that he had to do; teaching was a labour of love. The class began at 1:30 and many of us used to come early to chat or eat our lunch. One day someone dropped off flyers for a university event and some students started folding these into paper airplanes. Before long a battle had broken out across the aisle, and the room was littered with sheets of cleverly folded paper. We were just having fun. The president entered the room when the mayhem was at its peak. He looked around, and said nothing. He made his way down the stairs to the front of the class, stooping to retrieve each folded paper in his path. The room had fallen silent. A few students started to get up, with the intention of helping to clean up the mess we'd made. The president didn't speak, he gestured with his arm, commanding those students back into their seats. He was an old man and he moved slowly around the room stooping to pick up each scrap of folded paper. He deposited them in a wastepaper bin and returned to the centre of the room. We were seated in tiers, theatre style. He looked up at us and with great deliberation said: "You do not deserve the sacrifices that people have made to provide you with your opportunities."*

It is the final line that Tom wants to leave his students with. His class is silent, attentive. Tom allows the silence to stretch out, knowing that the silence is more important than anything he might say. Finally, and without further comment, he dismisses the students. They will meet again in two weeks, after the winter reading break.

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Gary: *I applaud your courage and ability to stay in that painful moment rather than 'running away,' which would have been easier but inappropriate. I like the story, especially the moral of the story. Now I'm wondering: what were you trying to achieve at that time? What were the consequences of the silence? For them, and for you?*

Tom: *Well, I didn't want to lecture them. What would I say that they didn't already know? Everyone in the room knew that the comment was totally out of line. Even the perpetrator knew they'd crossed a line; maybe*

otherwise they might have had the courage to take ownership of the comment. It seemed like a lecture would be a waste of time, but telling a story was another way of getting at the issues. You know sometimes it's less threatening if we use an example from our own lives rather than pointing out someone else's failings directly. So I told that story from my student days and let them draw their own parallels. The silence was to give them some time for the story to sink in. I didn't need the silence for myself; I had become quite calm in the retelling of the story.

Gary: I like the choice of a story over a lecture. You're probably right it's less threatening to use your own example, but in no way is it less impactful. Were there any other factors influencing you?

Tom: I started telling the story very slowly, a line at a time. Forcing myself to stop between lines to breathe. I was finding my way, knowing where the story was going, but not really sure how it would get there and worried that it would fall flat. But the retelling triggered the memories, which became increasingly vivid, increasingly concrete. My friend, a psychologist, calls this "state specific memory" – we have the memories but we can't recall them without a trigger event. Most of us have experienced this; for example, when returning to an elementary school or hospital and being flooded with childhood memories triggered by the familiar but long forgotten smells associated with the institution. At first I had only this vague recollection of the incident, but within a few sentences I could see the president's face, his glasses, the suit he was wearing. And by the time I got to the end of the story, I could hear his voice again, word for word. It didn't feel like I was remembering him or quoting him; it felt like I was channelling him. So I was very calm by the end.

Gary: Yes, memory is amazing! Sometimes when it's really vivid, it's as if it's happening to us in the here and now, not being recalled in the there and then. Suddenly you are managing the situation by reframing the incident through a story, a story you could only vaguely recall at first but one that gains clarity in the telling. Tom, we usually only get to do one intervention in a crisis and maybe what you did was the best possible intervention under the circumstances. But I'm curious: is there

anything else you could have done? What is your best guess of how that would have turned out?

Tom: *I considered dismissing the students, but that would have seemed like admitting defeat: to have nothing to say in response to such appalling ignorance and prejudice in the classroom … And I shouldn't say: "considered dismissing them;" actually, it's more like the possibility flashed to mind and I rejected it just as fast. I did begin to feel that I might be telling the wrong story. There was another story drifting at the edge of my consciousness that seemed like it might have been a better fit for the situation, but by then I was committed and I put the second story out of my mind.*

Gary: *Do you wish you had gone with the second story?*

Tom: *A few days later, while the incident was still raw, I wrote up both stories and tested them against the situation. It was clear that the one I told them was a far better choice, although before I started speaking both stories felt so nebulous that I wasn't sure at the time. Anyway, I was right to follow my intuition.*

Gary: *I think a less experienced teacher might have been paralyzed and re-acted in an automatic unreflective way that could have inadvertently made things worse, whereas you understood the gravity of the situa-tion, steadied yourself, listened to yourself, and went with a plausible alternative you thought might work. That took awareness and cour-age. I am wondering what assumptions you were making at the time.*

Tom: *I suppose I assumed that the perpetrator was probably Canadian, white and male. I have more women than men students and quite a few in-ternational students so the list of suspects was relatively small. If I were honest, I would say that my suspicions fell on a small group of young men at the back of the room, even though I realize they could be com-pletely innocent. I also assumed in the moment that the perpetrator was in the classroom, but on reflection I have to admit the possibility that the conversation was hijacked by someone not in the class, that it was a prank played from outside the room—I discovered later that was a possibility because of the way the software was configured. And of course some more basic assumptions: the students should know better; they need to understand this is an institute of higher learning and we*

have a protocol and norms for discourse that are built on mutual re-
spect; they need to grow up.

Gary: *Interesting … And what if it wasn't that group of young males? What
if it was a less likely candidate? I'd be interested in knowing how we
could validate or invalidate all those assumptions you are making, but
it isn't possible this time. Anyway, your next class was two weeks later.
What did you do to move forward?*

Tom: *It felt like the first class after reading break would be just as fragile and
difficult as the previous class. We had to get started back up again as a
group, accept what we had learned individually and collectively from
the experience, and not forget about it, but at the same time put it behind
us. I thought of lots of things: abandoning the technology, hosting a
conversation around the situation; doing nothing and moving on; re-
visiting classroom norms; bringing in a guest speaker from First Nations
and so on. But I didn't want to put a First Nations person into that
kind of situation, and a number of students emailed me during reading
break to disassociate themselves from the comments and pleading with
me not to abandon the voting technology. In the end I threw away most
of my lesson and spent the first half of the class covering some of the
contributions of First Nations to the evolution of Canada as a nation. I
didn't discuss the incident directly—that would have felt like rubbing
their noses in it, and I knew that for almost everyone in the room I would
be preaching to the converted: there was no question about why we were
discussing First Nations history and their contributions to society.*

Gary: *Given our discussion and your distance from the situation, how do you
feel about things now?*

Tom: *The situation happened. Lots of things go sideways with teaching, so
I'm prepared for that; really it's the magnitude and the emotional in-
tensity of this situation that was unprecedented. I'm sure there are ways
I could have made the situation worse. I'm not sure if I found the per-
fect story, but the punch line was effective. Of course I owe that line
entirely to my former university president, a much wiser man and an
extraordinary teacher in his day.*

Gary: *Tom you're a pretty good teacher yourself. Give yourself credit for man-
aging a deeply disturbing situation. You displayed professional artist-*

ry; the ability to be reflective-in-action when faced with surprises. I wish I could ask the students how they thought you managed the process. My guess is they would praise your classroom management. So, how do you now make sense of this, especially in light of your past teaching experiences?

Tom: *It's very hard to anticipate everything that might happen in class, but trying to imagine the worst and then taking that to the extreme is a good way to prepare. I understand that racial tensions exist in Canada as they do everywhere to greater or lesser degree. However, we have the sense that this kind of prejudice is less of an issue among educated people, and that educated people have better self-monitoring skills, so that even if they are prejudiced they likely keep that to themselves. Also, students, no matter how old they are, have diverse backgrounds and complex lives, and clearly there can be powerful issues simmering below the surface. Students who come to class may have grown up in families or areas where intolerance is condoned.*

Gary: *I agree. We often see our students for only a few hours a week and we never know the baggage they bring into the classroom. It's why our assumptions are often wrong. Okay, I have to play my professor role, so now on to our learning. How has this experience confirmed, challenged or changed your ways of knowing about teaching or teaching ethics?*

Tom: *It's another reminder that abstract ideas have to be backed up by concrete experience. Mary Gentile makes a good suggestion that we need to have scripts prepared in advance for possible future ethical scenarios. I have taught that approach, but not practiced it systematically. Of course I have imagined different situations, surely everyone has, but I haven't sat down systematically to try to imagine all the ways that a class can go sideways. That would be a good way to train instructors: to get them together to imagine the worst, like preparing for a mission to Mars. I have a lot of experience in the classroom and I'm able to draw on that when the unexpected happens; after this many years, most situations are similar to ones I've encountered in the past. In this case I was at a loss for words initially; the solution came to me when I let my intuition take over. My rational brain kept rejecting the story, but my intuition persisted and the outcome was, I think, satisfactory.*

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Gary: Good stuff that intuition, and we need to access it more often. Maybe after talking about this situation we could turn our attention to that subject; how do we stay in the moment trusting our technique, and allowing our intuition to take over. I believe it's an essential part of reflective practice, especially the elusive on-the-spot variety you just demonstrated. Maybe we need to order dessert, or better yet book another lunch date. Hey, one more thing, any other takeaways?

Tom: I had been feeling very ambivalent about whether I did the right thing in telling my story in class. It just felt like I had fallen short in some way as an instructor. In fact, I feel pretty good about it now. I'm still upset about the incident, but not the way I handled it.

Gary: You know the First Nations say, "There are many ways to a good place." [Grinning] My gut says you took your students to a good place.

5 Discussion

The value of a reflective conversation is in helping us to distinguish the relevant from the merely coincidental. In the extended passage above we have recreated in very condensed form a reflective conversation that unfolded over nearly four hours. It is a re-construction not a transcript. It has been remembered, dismembered and rendered down until a certain essence remains that is true to the facts of the situation. This is consistent with how we construct meaning in general: retaining what is important for sense-making and discarding details that only serve to obscure understanding.

The conversation was already a post-reflection for Tom who had, over the reading break, reflected deeply on the incident, come to a conclusion about how to proceed, and gone back into the classroom with his solution—in this case, a remedial lesson on First Nations. Nevertheless, the reflective conversation with Gary, conducted in the spirit if not the letter of Johns' (1994) four-stage protocol, revealed a number of issues that had not occurred to Tom in his own reflections and allowed him to *test his response* to the situation against the judgement of another experienced, reflective practitioner; to *modify his perception* of the appropriateness of his actual intervention; to remind him of the *importance of intuition* in responding to the un-

foreseen; and finally to *question a number of assumptions* that had seemed obvious in the moment, but did not stand up to careful scrutiny.

Applying Dreyfus' model to the reflective conversation, we note in Tom's dialogue the tension between the analytic response of the proficient performer and the intuitive response characteristic of expertise. Between proficiency and expertise, between technical rationality and professional artistry, is a boundary we straddle, working intuitively when we can, and more deliberatively when our intuition is confounded by radical circumstance. To attain professional mastery is always a contingent and temporary achievement.

6 Conclusion

Now standing on the banks of the river feeling exhilarated and satisfied after a successful navigation of a tricky section of white water, we recount the ways we handled the dangers. In this article we have explored a reflective conversation process, highlighting a particularly impactful teaching incident, for guiding reflection to promote learning and change. Reflective conversations between practitioners are an important collaborative learning process that enables inspection of the often subtle difference between competent and masterful practice. Use of Johns' protocol, while not strictly adhered to in Tom and Gary's conversation, provides a framework for focusing the reflection on a myriad of areas one might not typically consider with respect to what can be learned through reflection on experience. Our conversation provides ample evidence that Tom's reflection allowed him to surface and challenge assumptions, analyze his actions and alternative actions, learn from the experience, and move forward with new knowledge.

Heinrich von Kleist describes how engaging in conversation with *anyone* is helpful for sense-making:

"If I mention [a problem] to my sister … I discover facts which whole hours of brooding, perhaps, would not reveal. Not that she literally *tells* them to me; for neither does she know the book of

rules […] Nor is it that her skilful questioning leads me on to the point which matters, though this may frequently be the case. But since I always have some obscure preconception, distantly connected in some way with whatever I am looking for, I have only to begin boldly and the mind, obliged to find an end for this beginning, transforms my confused concept as I speak into thoughts that are perfectly clear, so that, to my surprise, the end of the sentence coincides with the desired knowledge."[4]

But reflective colleagues in the same profession have the unique advantage of knowing the subject matter, as well as the difference between actual and desired practice, and can expose assumptions and challenge actions in ways that others cannot. In this way, reflective conversations among colleagues may serve as scaffolding for practitioners seeking to develop their professional practices beyond technical skills toward professional artistry. In writing this article we (Tom, Gary, and Al) have been continuously reflecting and learning through emails and phone conversations. We tried to make shared sense of the reflective conversation process and craft it into an informative article, and in so doing it caused us to revisit our own teaching. This collaborative reflecting and writing project has served to strengthen our friendships, question aspects of our practice, generate new knowledge, deepen our commitment and passion for teaching, and reaffirm that we are indeed making at least incremental progress toward our shared goal of professional mastery.

There are no short cuts on the path to professional mastery. Personal reflection is a necessary first step, but it is only the first step down a long path. To make progress we need the experience and the objectivity of reflective colleagues to help reveal our shortcomings and our misconceptions along the way. Shared reflection on experience through reflective conversations—however time-consuming, intellectually challenging and emotionally difficult they

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4 Heinrich von Kleist, Translated by Michael Hamburger. *On the gradual construction of thoughts during speech.* First broadcast in the third programme of the B.B.C. on January 12, 1951.

may often be—is a good way forward for individuals, organizations and societies. We teach this technique to students and clients because we believe in its value in promoting personal, organizational, and societal change.

Postscript: Tom learned in September that his teaching and course evaluations for the section in which the incident occurred were the highest he has received in two years of teaching the course. In discussion with Gary one plausible explanation for this high rating was that students might have responded to the emotional intensity and authenticity of Tom's response to this critical incident. Perhaps that is going too far. However, it is clear that injecting more emotional intensity and authenticity into the classroom is not automatically a fatal teaching error.

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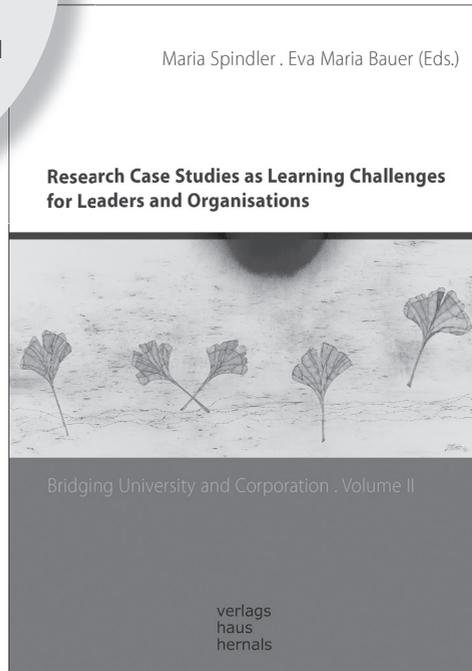
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