

Editorial

Ritual, dialectic, and learning *in, from, about, for* and *to* practice

I have thoroughly enjoyed putting together this edition of the journal for many reasons. The submissions I receive are always interesting and important, even if they do not end up being published, as they provide insights into the quotidian experiences, views and professional performances of the writers. I wish, at times, that there was more space in the journal to include a greater range of papers and thoughts and am glad to keep expanding the practice reflections section we have introduced over the last few years.

The key reason, however, for my enjoyment over this issue is – and please forgive me for my indulgence here - a fundamentally personal one. I am currently fortunate to be on extended study leave from my university working with three universities in Malaysia – Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak – where I am a visiting professor. ‘*Why is this important?*’ you may ask. Firstly, I have been lucky enough to have undertaken an ethnography with one of the indigeneous tribes in Malaysia, the Jakun of Tasik Chini in the State of Pahang. These people are at a crossroads between preserving traditions and being dragged into a modern life that is often at odds with their traditions and beliefs. Secondly, I have been working with the universities to debate and discuss critical approaches to human practice and to inculcate new ways of learning and doing in such situations. This is now extending into Myanmar where we hope to add to the knowledge and skills of social workers and human service personnel as they build a new future in welfare services. These experiences connect my academic work and my concern for learning in practice, about practice, for and to practice across all the human helping professions.

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This little conceit of mine in expressing my joy in putting together this issue is not completely removed from the present issue. There is an interesting mix of papers in this edition of the journal that captures the zeitgeist of care that focuses on relational skills see Meier et al., so important to working with people whose communication and understanding may have been impaired perhaps by dementia as discussed by Ward and Dobson or, as Simpson and Murr consider, when working with those students who are ‘not yet competent’ in optimistic terms or ‘failing’ in pessimistic and judgemental, although it may be argued realistic terms. At the same time Higgins brings us back to the important, and on-going debates surrounding the ways in which the academy and practice are articulated, or could be through those ‘bridging’ individuals the ‘practice educators’. Couchman et al. illustrate some of the outcomes of the turn towards learning in and through practice in their analysis of practice education within arts-based professions. O’Sullivan brings the practice focus to the fore in his evaluation of groupwork programmes for young offenders.

Perhaps through these debates we are seeing the kind of dialectic envisaged by the late religious anthropologist and ritual theorist, Catherine Bell, who suggested that the daily performances we engage in and the theories we use to explain our cultures and associated cultural practices meet and synthesise through ritual to produce something new, transcendent and important. If we apply this to practice learning we see the convergence, a confluence of rivers of striving to enhance our collective knowledge and practices. What shape this dialectic will take is, as yet, unclear, but what we do know is that each part – practice or abstract theory – on its own remains lacking but comes to life when brought together. This is certainly part of the work that I have been involved in here in Malaysia over the last few months.

Alongside the continuing debate concerning practice and academic learning, this issue sports different methodological approaches that adds to our understanding and to the positions that we may all take in addressing this rather dualistic and tribal approach. Dualistic in terms of the false separation and tribal in that misplaced loyalties often conflict on the grounds that one approach to learning is better than another. The papers in the current issue show that many paths to knowledge acquisition are possible from Meier et al.’s realist evaluation, through Higgins’ thematic analysis, Ward and Dobson’s addition of descriptive

statistics to thematic analysis, Simpson and Murr's narrative analysis, and the discursive approaches of Couchman et al. and O'Sullivan.

My thanks extend to all this issue's contributors and I would encourage more readers of the journal to submit reflections and think pieces for the *practice reflections* section, as well as submitting research-base articles. If you have any ideas for possible papers for publication, whether these are thoughts and ideas about practice learning and education or if you have a topic for a possible guest-edited issue please contact myself or any member of the editorial board and we would be pleased to discuss this with you.

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