

Two Days in Carberry: A Step Towards a Community of Practice

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Abstract

How does one build community? How can a community of practitioners come together in a way that builds on the strength of commonality? These were the types of questions which led us all to an old estate: one hundred of us, from diverse locations and services coming together, searching to find a connecting link which would help us in our quest to become a 'community of practice'.

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Introduction

Meaning-making goes to the very heart of good residential practice; (workshop participant).

How does one build community? How can a community of practitioners come together in a way that builds on the strength of commonality? These were the types of questions which led us all to an old estate: one hundred of us, from diverse locations and services coming together, searching to find a connecting link which would help us in our quest to become a 'community of practice'.

Such a gathering needs a focus and the organisers (Max Smart and Linda Cullen) decided that one way to help us all come together was to focus on some aspect of our helping philosophy that we might share across areas of practice. It was hoped that, by coming together around some common values and beliefs, this divergent group of professionals might find a common link which would move us a step forward in becoming a community of practice. So, for two days in September 2004, residential care workers, managers, Who Cares? Scotland workers and academics gathered at Carberry Towers to participate in a workshop facilitated by Thom Garfat. This was the first time in recent memory, and perhaps the first time ever in Scotland, that a workshop of this size was conceived and delivered at a grass roots level.

The two days centred on the concept of ‘meaning-making’, or more specifically, how young people and staff make sense or meaning of their experiences. As Garfat (2004) has argued, perhaps ‘there is nothing more important than this process of meaning making,’ for ‘it is only when the worker attends to how meaning is construed... that she can begin to understand the young person and his or her behaviour’ (Garfat, 2004, pp.9-10).

The process of meaning-making is central to the process of intervention in Child and Youth Care practice. Attending to and understanding our own process as well as that of the people with whom we work helps us to understand our responses to one another. In understanding the process, we create the opportunity for different interpretations and, therefore, different responses to one another; (Garfat, 2004, p. 15).

In addition to exploring the concept of meaning-making and its relevance to practice, we discussed how we could carry forward the learning and momentum generated by these two days. One of the ways we chose to carry the momentum forward was to invite participants to write a short narrative of their experience of the workshop, and the meaning it held for them. For, as Krueger has said:

The way we make meaning of our developmental interactions is often best understood and portrayed in a short story, essay, film, portraiture, painting or other forms of expression that contextualize the experiences, and gives voice to those who might otherwise have been excluded; (Krueger, 2005).

What follows is a re-telling of the workshop drawn from these narratives. Our intent is to give voice to the experiences of those who were present in order to build on the sense of community emerging from those two days. We hope it will serve as a reminder to those who were there, and an invitation to those who were not, to join in creating a community of practice.

The impact of previous experience

People entering into a new experience bring with them their previous experiences of similar events (Bruner, 1990). Based on these similar experiences, their values, beliefs and general life position, they come prepared to make meaning of the new event through a developed framework of interpretation (Garfat, 2004). They come to a new experience prepared for it to ‘be’ a certain way. For some participants, their expectations were framed negatively.

When the invitation to attend the workshop was extended I was rather dubious. My initial impression was one of scepticism.

I had already had it in my mind how it was going to be, having been to many a training sessions in my day (i.e. boring, heard it all before, tell me something I don’t know).

I guess you can say I was not expecting a great deal from this experience.

Others were more open or hopeful.

I did not know exactly what to expect.

I hope I can learn something that will complement and augment my knowledge-base thus improving my practice.

Some even came with positive expectations based on previous experiences.

I had read an article by [the facilitator] and was very impressed by his pragmatic and common sense views. I was therefore looking forward to hearing his views on the meaning-making process and how it could assist and improve our practice in residential child care.

Despite such varying preconceptions, consistent themes about the experiences of, and meanings attached to, the workshop emerged from the narratives.

Engagement and connection

The experiences seemed to strike a chord with all of us.

A striking feature of participants' narratives was a common theme about their experiences of engagement with the stories told throughout the two days. Despite their initial negative preconceptions, some wrote of being immediately engaged.

After hearing [the] first opening story it quickly sank in. [His] stories and the way he articulated events and situations captivated my audience.

Within minutes of [the] opening gambit I knew I was in for an interesting two days.

Others described being able to identify with the stories told and the impact this had on them:

There can be few more powerful inspiring feelings than having your beliefs and values reflected and mirrored back to you...

In order to 'make meaning' of an experience, a person must first connect to their own experiencing of the event, for all meaning is filtered through the experience of self (Garfat, 2002). Without connection, there can be no interpretation.

I found I could identify with all the stories. I recognised my own attempts at meaning-making within our unit, but also my inability to use these as a tool to promote a better understanding of situations other than from my own rather limited perspective.

This excerpt also highlights how the stories made the theme of the workshop real and accessible. Whether we are aware of it or not, we all attach meaning to people's behaviour and other events that make up our daily lives (Bruner, 1990). While this may seem obvious and mundane, attending to the process of meaning-making, both within

ourselves and the young people with whom we work, makes possible a deeper and more powerful process of working.

Some of the participants used stories, either from the workshop or from their own practice, as a vehicle for explaining how they were connecting to the experience and making their own meaning of it, or how they might tap into this concept in their own practice. Others recounted how the stories prompted introspection and had a motivating effect on them.

The stories had a message. They were food for thought. They helped me to reflect on my own working practice.

It did drive me to some critical self-examination.

Individualising the experience

Many examples of meaning-making experiences [were] flowing through my thought processes spanning my eleven years in residential...; some I feel I got right and others making me feel I wish I had known about meaning making at the start of my care career.

Participants had their 'own experiences' as they made meaning of this meaning making experience. For as with all experiences, while the objective experience may look the same, the individual experience varies (Garfat, 2004).

Simplicity and accessibility

Many found the notion of meaning-making accessible, resonating with their own experience.

I felt that [the] meaning-making message reflected so much of what I know to be true.

I find a large part of my advocacy role is trying to help make meaning of young people's perceptions and interpretations for adults surrounding them.

Considering the different meanings each person might attach to a situation can, initially, seem simple and obvious. Yet like many powerful concepts, there is a complexity that lies beneath the surface simplicity and other participants seemed to pick up on this.

Whilst I found the concept of meaning-making easy to grasp, to remain focussed on it was not so easy and its application proved more elusive. I felt that to put it into practice will not be so easy.

I feel that this task may be one which will need a lot of skill and understanding from the worker's perspective.

Perception and interpretation

Themes of perception and interpretation ran through most participants' narratives, as they made meaning in their individual way of this common experience.

We do make meaning of behaviour without even thinking about it and this is to our detriment. The importance of meaning-making is to closely consider the needs of the individual child and what meaning he or she may derive from certain events, requests, actions.

The meaning-making process highlighted to me that by adopting its ideas of interpretation of the young person's belief systems, the worker would be better able to offer a more holistic approach to care and understanding of these vulnerable young people.

An appreciation of the differing interpretations each person brings to a situation, and their potential impact on communication and understanding, appeared to be a commonly shared meaning of the workshop content. A theme about the importance of *self* also arose, taking us further into the complexity of the construction of meaning.

Self

Just as participants came to the experience of this workshop prepared for it to 'be' a certain way, they approach the young people with whom they work in a similar manner. Our values, beliefs, experiences of childhood, and previous encounters with young people all influence our expectations of what should and will happen when we engage with a young person (Garfat, 2004). These expectations, in turn, shape the interaction and its outcome. In each moment of our work, we co-create the reality of what is happening based on the meaning we and the young person bring to that moment. The process of meaning-making is thus centred in self.

The meaning-making workshop to me was a very personal exploration of self-meaning, self-discovery, self-insight, of self. In my experiences, I don't believe I have been asked to look inside of self about what meaning I give to things and why, and subsequently how, that affects me as a worker of young people.

I have long believed that this is one of the greatest gifts that we can bring to our work with young people. The use of self as a tool, in order to gain greater understanding and empathy with others is very powerful.

From interpretation to action

I often find myself using meaning-making in my daily practice, even at home.

As with the process of meaning-making, action follows interpretation. The following comments indicate how some of the participants are making this transition.

Communication and honesty

I will now spend time searching for the meaning behind the behaviour in order that I can best deal with the needs of the [young people] I work with.

I now want to stop and talk to people and gain insight into the meaning behind behaviour. I want to capture this insight and use it in my practice.

The determination of those present to carry this concept forward in their workplace was evident and it was clearly recognised that without commitment, the impetus could be lost.

These excerpts clearly voice a resolve to apply the learning from the two days in a more effective way of relating to young people and others. Many of the participants shared practical ideas or plans as to how they might do this. A majority focused on the processes of staff communication with one another as an important starting point; for within our communications, our own processes of meaning-making are evident.

Meaning-making is about recognising the different ways we all might interpret actions and to do this requires communication between staff. If two staff members believe they are acting from the same understanding, when in fact they have 'seen' something completely different, then there can be no consistency.

It emerged, through discussion, that our communication with each other, at this point in time, was not up to scratch. We recognised that we need to get this area in order.

This participant went on to outline the current and proposed systems of formal communication that might aid them in reducing mixed messages and misconceptions. Another participant also highlighted lines of communication and honesty:

To bring about change in order to improve current structures, a degree of honesty needs to be achieved, possibly through informal supervision and questioning of practice.

Others focussed on more informal types of communication, but carried out in a systematic way:

Communicate with each other via email any instances of behaviour that may be particularly confusing, irrational or predicted and ask for comments. However, do not always focus on the apparently obvious, for fear of missing, or neglecting what we may consider as insignificant, or at least less significant; there's 'meaning' here too.

When on the floor and we see 'a certain behaviour', say to any staff member present 'meaning-making', out of earshot of residents. Use it as a prompt to promote discussion later on, when time and privacy allows.

These suggestions seem to be getting at the heart of the message of meaning-making, which is to begin to step back and challenge the formerly taken-for-granted meaning we ascribe to people's conduct.

Involving young people

One participant reflected on how we might encourage young people to begin to consider and relate to others from a meaning-making framework.

During this day I also began to question how we were going to include the young people in the meaning-making concept. In my experience many of the young people that I have worked with find it very hard to see things from another person's perspective or for them to be treated individually, with their own set of needs and experiences.

Already in action

It was heartening to read that one participant is already seeing and actively engaging in the application of a framework of meaning-making to the way he and his team think about the words and deeds of others.

It's now becoming quite common for those staff who attended Carberry, on noting an action/comment or both from a client (and sometimes a staff member), to look at each other and say 'meaning-making'. Discussion will then follow as to the purpose of the action/comment; what it might have meant to the person doing it and what it meant to those watching. Did their interpretations agree or disagree, or were there other possibilities?

Further implications for practice

Attending to the process

An environment where a paramount focus is on endeavouring to understand each young person's world from his or her point of view can in itself have a profound healing effect. It can also promote growth in the adults that work within it. Even those young people who do not have the ego strength to consider a situation from another's point of view might still be 'included in the meaning-making process.'

In keeping this focus paramount, it may be helpful to identify common areas in which meaning tends to be constructed, and begin to attend to the processes by which this happens. The following is simply one possibility of how this might be organised:

- *attend to the processes of meaning-making by the worker*: reflect on and invite discussion about the meaning you attach to different behaviours or decisions;
- *attend to the process of meaning-making by the young people, individually and collectively*: integrate this attention into handovers and discussions at the end of the shift;

- *attend to the process of meaning-making as a staff team*: create protected space in team meetings and away days;
- *attend to the process of meaning-making in supervision*: develop the habit of exploring together the meaning attached to behaviours or events, both in formal supervision, and impromptu, ‘on the floor’ supervision;
- *Identify any other areas where it might be important deliberately and explicitly to attend to the process of meaning-making*: depending on what other areas are considered important.

Communities of practice

Links are being made as I write and the connections we all felt constitutes the start, I hope, of a movement towards a more caring future in the child care field in Scotland.

So how does one build a community, and how can this community of practitioners come together in a way that builds on the strength of commonality? The concept of communities of practice has been developing and gaining prominence in recent years. A community of practice can be described as a group of people with shared values, language and perspectives, all centring around their practice. Knowledge is shared and collaboratively constructed, and meanings are negotiated (Roth, 1999). The building of such a community and its potential to effect positive change in our sector were essential parts of the initial vision for the two days at Carberry.

The agenda was what set the idea of this workshop in motion—to utilise the voice of young people and practitioners in the child and youth care field and to use it as a force for change inside residential child care. [Also] to promote the sense of positive collectiveness in the child and youth care field and to create a community of practice in regards to meaning-making that could be developed along with practice.

Some of the participants wrote about beginning to feel a sense of inclusion, connection or even empowerment resulting from the shared values, experience and perspectives related to their work in residential child care.

One of the experiences that I gained from this workshop was one of inclusion. I do not know if it is due to our geographical location or if it is the nature of residential child care but at times I feel that we seem to work in isolation.

For the first time in a long time we were not waiting on others to give us something, we would seek to develop the idea, we would be accountable, we would be responsible for our own learning, we could bring self-respect back to a profession often beleaguered by past scandal.

One participant wrote of a transformative aspect of her experience of the two days, possibly the result of a sense of membership in this fledgling community.

My thinking has changed and I hope to become more in tune with others around me. I signed up to write this piece on meaning-making which is unusual for me, as I had normally hoped that someone else would do it.

So it seems significant connections were made through the sharing of beliefs, values, ideas and stories all centring around a focal point of practice. And, as some have indicated, the impact of the workshop is still reverberating in and through them, shaping their work and workplaces.

Just like any other type of community, communities of practice require ongoing connecting, sharing, and building in order to survive and thrive. The Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care, with its journal, short courses, workshops, seminars, conferences, qualifying and post qualifying courses, is making strides towards a thriving community here in Scotland (see <http://www.sircc.strath.ac.uk>). Concerted efforts are taking place through other organisations as well, both locally and internationally -- for example, the International Child and Youth Care Network (see <http://www.cyc-net.org>).

The power of individuals, however, should not be underestimated in reclaiming and asserting the positive healing potential that good residential child care can offer. The two days in Carberry are a testament to this, and it is hoped that, given the powerful impact it had on the participants and their places of work, further collective events around this theme of meaning making are on the horizon.

This two day meaning-making workshop was for me an uplifting, invigorating experience, which left me feeling excited, empowered and on occasions deeply moved.

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