Shifting the paradigm

reflective practice beyond journalling

Coach and coach supervisor **Michelle Lucas** unpacks and redefines the notion of reflective practice for practitioners and supervisors

As helping practitioners, making time for reflective practice can be challenging. While we might appreciate the value it brings to both ourselves and our clients, finding space for it is often a different matter. With the increase in digital and online working since COVID-19, schedules can become increasingly tight and boundaries are often approached with more flexibility. Alongside an ever-expanding 'to do' list, reflecting on our client work can often get pushed to the back of the queue.

Working with learning styles and preferences

Though busy schedules can be a deterrent to embedding a reflective habit, in my case there is another natural derailer – my learning style[1] is more 'activist' than 'reflector', meaning I am more likely to learn by doing than reflecting. As a trainee coach, and trainee coach supervisor, I was encouraged to engage in reflection through journalling. I was surprised at how difficult I found it to embed this as a professional habit. Despite my more introverted nature, when it came to reflecting on client work, my natural tendency was for more extroverted thinking; I valued an independent ear to 'play back' and/or extend my thinking. For many years I castigated myself for struggling with the routine of reflection, believing the answer lay in greater self-discipline. I tried ever harder and yet a sustainable approach continued to elude me.

A turning point in my reflective practice journey came when I began working with my colleague Charlotte Housden. Using Charlotte's abstract photography, together we created a series of cards, which we developed into what became known as the 'Liminal Muse Conversation Cards'. We ran a series of workshops guiding other practitioners to work with the cards, supporting and encouraging them to integrate imagery into their client sessions, and their feedback to us was that the cards helped to deepen their client conversations.[2]

Liminal Muse Conversation Cards
© Photography: Charlotte Housden

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The practitioner feedback from our workshops echoed my own experience when using the cards as an aid for reflection – the playfulness that they evoked almost always generated new insights. I found Charlotte's abstract imagery particularly useful – it piqued my curiosity and my reflections became deeper than I had previously experienced.

This discovery was pivotal in my own reflective practice journey. Once I challenged my assumptions about what might be considered 'reflection', I realised that the root cause of my struggles with journalling was that I was attempting to use an 'out-of-preference' approach. Why? Because I simply didn't know what alternatives were available to me. With a changed paradigm about what independent reflective practice might look like, I noticed that insights often occurred when I was engaging in movement. For example, I would use my morning dog walk to prepare for clients and then at the end of the day, I'd use the evening walk to process how the sessions had gone. I noticed that long train journeys also offered a protected space. When sitting in a rear facing seat and surveying the moving landscape, new thinking often arrived unannounced. This phenomenon has received attention in the literature with greater interest in the body's role in learning and developing. For example, as business psychologist and consultant Eunice Aquilina writes: 'When we learn through the body, we go beyond our intellectual understanding or cognitive awareness, to being able to take new action with ease.'[3]

Liminal Muse Conversation Cards
© Photography: Charlotte Housden

Box 1: Example reflective prompts according to processing styles

Cognitive (journalling)	Naikan questions – informed by the work of Krech, a leading authority on Japanese psychology practices.[5] Holding a particular client in mind, three reflective questions are contemplated: 1) What have I received from X? 2) What have I given to X? 3) What difficulties have I caused X?
Visual	Optical illusions – an invitation to notice how we explore this type of image prompting consideration of what parallels we might use to explore our work (link provided in Resources (p19) to my favourite surrealist artist).
Auditory	Forest soundscape – a carefully curated suite of sound tracks, supported by reflective questions inspired by the sounds of nature. Research by Mind documents the restorative impact of using blue and green spaces to help us process our thoughts, many of the auditory prompts leverage this perspective.[6]
Kinaesthetic	Emotions body maps, based on the research of Nummenmaaa et al[7] – an invitation to notice how our body responds and the information this may hold as we engage in reflection.
Metaphor (using poetry)	*Teach Your Children* by Ted Perry – the original screenplay script, cited in Gifford, 1951, a passage often attributed to Chief Seathl[8] – an invitation to reflect on the meaning of the poem. In the book, I share my research in locating it, a process which may also prompt further reflection.

Coming together to reflect alone

I then took what felt to me a courageous step as a coach supervisor. I started to voice my struggle with traditional journalling among my colleagues and clients. This became a watershed moment – I discovered I was not alone. Many others – indeed, many of my supervisees – were struggling with the same thing. All of us seemed stuck as to what alternatives might exist. The idea, often attributed to Einstein, that *problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them*, feels particularly pertinent to reflective practice. Much of the helping practitioner's work is carried out independently, so we will need to be creative and approach reflection differently if we are seeking to illuminate our blind spots. Noticing that it is often easier to meet a commitment to reflect with others, eg peer supervision, than it is to honour an appointment with ourself – I launched the Regular Reflective Practice Space. This was an invitation to practitioners to meet on a regular basis, creating a protected time and place where colleagues 'come together to reflect alone'. Initially, I offered my own prompts. However, having created a collaborative environment, participants generously began to share a variety of prompts that they enjoyed and found useful. As the library of resources grew, I noticed that these could be organised into different processing preferences. With more deliberate attention to building the resources comprehensively, my book *Creating the Reflective Habit*[4] was born. It offers a library of materials designed to appeal to each of the different processing styles – Box 1 shares an example of each.

In the book I offer 12 prompts for each of these five preferences – material for a year of experimentation. In writing the book, I realised that while 'reflection' is just one word, 'reflective practice' requires us to consider eight elements, which I identify as space, content, process, structure, purpose, reinforcement, review and meta-reflection. Each element will itself require us to experiment with different approaches – revisiting our current reflective practices so that we can unlearn what is less helpful and embed that which is helpful. Based on this part of the book, in Box 2 below I offer examples of eight questions to support you and your clients to experiment and to develop an approach for reflective practice that is authentic and sustainable.

> **As helping practitioners we have an opportunity to role model how to optimise the depth of our professional reflective discussions. What layer of the onion do you currently take to your supervisor? What layer of the onion do your clients bring to you?**

Reflective practice in supervision

I can be ambivalent about the benefit of reflecting prior to a supervision session. As a supervisor, I tend to encourage my supervisees to prepare for our sessions. In Box 3 below I offer four questions to stimulate thought on what to bring.

However, I also rather enjoy holding the space for a supervisee to engage in a stream of consciousness as they consider 'in the moment' what they would like to bring to supervision. Once we have created a partnership of trust and safety, there might be an argument for encouraging an emergent approach – for where there is preparation, there might also be (conscious or unconscious) selective presentation of information. As a supervisee myself, my reflective ritual used to be a mental 'stock take' of what is happening with my clients to create a short list of items for discussion. I wouldn't inspect these items further, rather turn up with curiosity and see what manifests as I shared what was emerging with my supervisor. I now complement this with the insights that emerge as a result of the additional independent reflection I conduct at my monthly Regular Reflective Practice sessions – typically, this will bring much more lateral content than my previous logical 'client list' approach.

Box 2: Eight elements of creating our reflective practice

1. How and where will you create a space and time for reflective practice that can be sustained within your working routines?
2. What will be the focus of reflection? While we may assume that reflection is about reviewing what has been done, reflective practice can have a future or planning focus – known as 'pre-flection'. Additionally, as well as reflecting on work that has been tricky, taking a positive psychology approach and reviewing how we came to be successful can be wonderfully generative. Increasingly I notice that reflecting on how we are managing our self-care is not selfish, it's an important element for any helping practitioner.
3. What processing preference will you use to aid reflection? While for many people journalling can be the mainstay of our reflective practice, if this feels onerous, remember to use approaches that match your preferred learning style.
4. How will you structure your protected time? In busy lives it can be helpful to put a little time aside for mindfulness practice before engaging in reflective practice, it will generate more holistic and broader reflection. When reflecting alone, what follow up activities might help you hold yourself to account for developmental change?
5. As professionals we understand that reflective practice is an expected part of our best practice and commitment to clients. However, what is your personal sense of the utility of your reflections? Unless you know this, you could find yourself in the territory of 'shoulds and oughts'.
6. You may find engaging in reflective practice generates novel insights that provide a natural reinforcement, creating a self-sustaining habit. However, where this is not the case what approaches do you offer to clients who are seeking to embed habits that you could use yourself?
7. What value does your reflective practice bring you? How do you assess whether insights gained through reflection make a difference to how you practise and the value that your clients experience? Our work can often be nebulous and difficult to measure, but nonetheless if we are not deliberately checking its quality rather than relying on regularity and quantity, how will we know if our reflection is time well spent?
8. Once you have a method for capturing the inputs and outputs of your reflective practice, you are in a position to engage in meta-reflection. Here you can look for themes and patterns emerging from single reflective moments. What underpinning development needs might a collective analysis uncover?

Box 3: Four questions for consideration in preparation for supervision

1. What's going well in your client work that you'd like to savour?
2. What's been tricky that you'd like to unpick?
3. What's coming up that you'd like to prepare for?
4. How are you managing your self-care?

Liminal Muse Conversation Cards

> **I have noticed that now I am encouraging supervisees to engage in a broader range of reflective activities, they are bringing a different level of enquiry for discussion**

New territory: co-creative exploration

From a commercial perspective, it is legitimate to wonder whether as supervisors, if we help our supervisees deepen their independent reflective practice, will they still need us? My experience, in the coaching community where supervision is not yet mandated, is that they do. Additionally, I have noticed that now I am encouraging supervisees to engage in a broader range of reflective activities, they are bringing a different level of enquiry for discussion. No longer do they bring the 'low hanging fruit' that takes us down recognised paths; no longer do I see a familiar script appearing. Now, they have peeled the first, and sometimes the second, layer of the proverbial 'onion' themselves. And so, we enter the territory of co-creative exploration – original discussions that neither of us have contemplated before. This is unfamiliar territory: we trip up over false hypotheses, we find ourselves in dead-ends, we excitedly dip down into rabbit holes to see what's there. The result? Often what manifests is more questions, and greater uncertainty rather than clarity. However, I do know that wherever they arrive, they could not have travelled there alone. For me this is truly working at our combined learning edge – it's fabulous and it's tough. This is *my* stretch too.

With the longevity of supervision relationships, we are in a unique position to be a positive developmental influence for our supervisees. Everyone's preparation preferences will be different. Yet as helping practitioners we have an opportunity to role model how to optimise the depth of our professional reflective discussions. What layer of the onion do you currently take to your supervisor? What layer of the onion do your clients bring to you? When we can encourage supervisees to deepen their independent reflective practice, my experience is that it will change what is brought to the supervision discussion. Undoubtedly, this is more complex work for the supervisor and yet in so doing, we have the potential for supervision to accelerate not just the supervisees' development, but our own too.

While my thinking is largely influenced by my work as a coach supervisor – my sense is that the learning has much wider application. So here I offer an invitation to helping practitioners to consider what it is that your clients bring to you. What do you know about their independent reflective practice? Could the eight experiments outlined here extend the work you currently do with them? If your clients reflected differently, how might that change what they brought for discussion? How might that change the practitioner that you are becoming? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Lucas is the owner of Greenfields Consulting Limited, specialising in executive coaching, coaching supervision, and the training of internal coaches, mentors and supervisors. Her early career in clinical psychology was followed by a 20-year career in commercial organisations leading human resources functions. Michelle is an accredited executive master coach and master coaching supervisor with the Association for Coaching (AC) and an associate lecturer and coach supervisor for the MA programme at Oxford Brookes University, interested in exploring atypical applications of coaching supervision. She has written 15 peer-reviewed professional articles, is a keen blogger, and she lives in Weymouth, Dorset, with her husband and an elderly Chocolate Labrador, Tia.

RESOURCES

The work of Octavio Ocampo can be viewed on: Visions Fine Art's website: **www.visionsfineart.com/ocampo/index.html** Visions Fine Art is the Agent, Representative, Publisher for Octavio Ocampo, all rights reserved.

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