

Revealing what is ‘tacit/rationally-*invisible*/in the background’: an online coaching pedagogy for developing improved leadership practice through ‘presencing empathetic responsiveness’

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PROLOGUE

This is a story about my practice over the past eight years as an online coach on a Masters programme in leadership and change. While there may be several aspects of this situated practice in higher education that you might find interesting and/or useful, I realised during my viva that there was a danger that you might have some difficulties in identifying and appreciating some/all of these. During the three hour dialogue with my examiners I became increasingly aware that there were important features of my practice that were still tacit, ‘in the background’, and not all that obvious even after some exploration. And so with their active encouragement I’ve written this special prologue to the thesis to offer you some pointers and extra signposting to help you get the most out of your reading of this work. In doing this I am providing an example of the process I call ‘presencing empathetic responsiveness’, writing this prologue in response to ideas and questions that were revealed during the viva that the examiners and I agreed would benefit from further explanation.

Using a metaphor from the game of golf, what I’m going to do now is attempt to ‘mark your card’. What I mean by this, as the ‘designer’ of this [golf] ‘course’, is that I’m going to introduce you to the nature of the terrain you are about to traverse, point out ‘hazards/out of bounds’ areas, warn you about the most likely ‘bunkers/sand traps’ you might land in, generally keep you on the ‘fairways’ and out of the ‘rough’, and help you read some of the tricky ‘greens’. There are a number of ways in which you could ‘read’ this course [my thesis] and I’m keen that you get the most out of the time you spend with my story, using it to stimulate your own thinking about how you regard yourself as a person in relationship with others, particularly in a coaching role, and the other contexts in which you work and live. Though this story is situated very much in the world of online coaching in a higher education programme in leadership studies, I’m hoping you will be able to get ideas about how you might go about developing your own skills of relating and influencing what happens in the world around you, and so be more aware of ‘what what you do, does’, so you can better ‘know how to go on with others’. I put these two little phrases in quote marks because they are ideas borrowed from two philosophers, whose work I draw on in sharing with you this much more practical story. But given that this is a PhD thesis, I have needed to frame my ideas and findings using the resources and the language of the Academe to provide legitimating support for my more practical living story about my coaching practice. This integrating process – relating theory to practice and vice versa – is one I’ve very much enjoyed, but my intention here is to invite you to seek out what you find of personal and *practical use* in these pages.

So what I’m offering in this prologue is an *invitation* to approach your reading in a particular way. And, whatever else you may want to get out of this process, I invite you, as an important first ‘mark’ on your card, to use this reading to develop your own practice of *presencing*. What I mean by this term ‘presencing’ is the process of bringing into the present moment something – a feeling, an idea, an intention, a skill – that prior to you doing this, is tacit, invisible, or temporarily unavailable to you; and which when presenced, allows you to experience and see a situation, an event, or an issue in a changed light enabling you to ‘go on’ in a different way. There are of course other ways of thinking about ‘presencing’, but in this thesis I focus particularly on two forms of this ‘take’ on the process: ‘presencing development possibilities’ by which I mean bringing into the moment an opportunity to develop an idea, skill, or practice *while* you

are working/performing – a process I refer to as ‘close learning’; and ‘presencing empathetic responsiveness’ to what’s required or preferable in the situations around you, by which I mean intervening and offering appropriate leadership in a situation that you’re involved in and where the current practice leaves something to be desired.

Both of these ‘presencing’ practices are ones which I’ve created and exploited in my own development and online coaching work as I’ve looked for ways to help students improve their scholarship and develop their own practice as leaders. So as one thought, I invite you to use your reading, and your reflections during your reading, to ‘presence development possibilities’ for yourself i.e. to bring into the present moment ideas and thoughts that might address in new ways, issues that are concerning you about your own coaching practice and its effectiveness. And to see what new intentions and actions these thoughts energise and encourage you to experiment with in your practice...and what influence these might have on your ability to respond empathetically to the needs in the everyday situations you find yourself in, and so be able to offer/take part in appropriate leadership activity in such situations.

From this beginning you may gather that the process of ‘presencing’ has become an important part of my online coaching practice, informing many things I do. In fact it has become so central that it now *frames* my practice as a coach, as well as providing powerful coaching tools. So instead of seeing my role in perhaps the more usual terms applied to coaching like listening, questioning, making new connections, providing support, and so on, I now see it primarily in terms of ‘revealing what is rationally invisible’. What a strange phrase, you say – what can he mean? And yes, I too found it a little strange to begin with. But as I grew more and more interested in approaches/tools that allowed me to ‘peek behind’ appearances or ‘look beneath’ the surface of the taken-for-granted, I realised that *this* was what I was most interested in doing as a coach: helping people see other ways of understanding and dealing with what they were taking for granted, by seeing what was for them at the particular time and place, tacit, ‘rationally invisible’ or ‘in the background’. And it is this particular feature of the thesis, what might be hidden from view or rationally invisible in my students’ worlds, in my practice, and in my writing about my practice - that I became more strongly aware of in the viva, and realised I needed to respond to and bring out more clearly.

So to introduce the main ideas I want to tell you about in this prologue, let me comment on aspects of experience that often seem hidden from us i.e. ‘there’ but not noticed, and how I’ve made this a central focus of my coaching practice and the research you will read about in these pages. In what follows I deal with these often fleeting and evanescent phenomena – now you see them, now you don’t - in four sections which form the body of this prologue:

- what actions are taking place between the students and myself in our everyday interaction in the learning logs and essays, on the main educational ‘stage’ so to speak, which are associated with the developments and changes I make claims about in the thesis, and which are the most ‘visible’ aspects of our practice?;
- what aspects and features of these interactions between us, and the contexts in which we are operating on this main ‘stage’, might be tacit, hidden in the background, and/or rationally invisible to us, and which if revealed, might help students improve their scholarship and leadership practice?; and, to continue with the theatre metaphor

- what kinds of things am I the coach, thinking and doing ‘backstage’ (and how am I doing these) to make the varied contributions you can see ‘on stage’, where I explore, experiment, and enable the changes/developments you see taking place, through working with, presencing, and revealing what I’m noticing ‘in the background’?;
- and finally, what am I doing in parallel, but in different domains and to a different time scale, to further develop my own skills, everyday practices, and sense of role and identity, to be able to be aware and responsive enough to what is happening in front of me at any moment, and which enables me to deliver the type of coaching service that I describe here?

What’s happening on the main ‘stage’ – interactions in the learning logs/essays?

What’s happening on the main stage is what should be visible to you the reader, at least as far as the various materials and examples I’ve included in the body of the thesis and appendices. So here you see examples of the texts from learning logs and essays and my responses to them, my later reflections and commentaries on these interactions, as well as reflective writings and discussions captured in video clips with students and my supervisor. In a sense all of these are made ‘rationally visible’ to you because I frame them as evidence of what is going on between coach and students and within the coach himself, and they appear mostly in black and white textual form. What you will also notice, particularly in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, are examples of often verbatim interchanges in which I help initiate the following ‘events’ which I then use as indicators of development progress: firstly, what I’ve called ‘fleeting moments’ of educational influence which can initiate significant change; secondly, what I call ‘development episodes’ where students are able to take a momentary shift in perception/response and develop this over time into new ways of seeing and behaving, so developing an aspect of their leadership capabilities; and then in the longer term i.e. over the two year term of the programme, how these various incremental shifts/reframes and developments can come together to influence a student’s whole approach to leadership, and often their very sense of identity, and which can be recognised in what I’ve called their ‘reflexive biography’ – the story of their development history. Because I’ve framed this level of information in this way and so ‘made it visible’, most of this should be obvious to you as you read through the text – this is the front page story of how I’ve understood how my coaching has influenced the development of students, offering in the process a three stage framework for recognising and amplifying incidents of such influence.

So far, so good. But what might *not* be so easy to notice and understand in my experience, and writing up of this experience - and so need further signposting?

What might be taken-for-granted/‘invisible’ - to actors and/or audience?

Perception is very much a relational phenomenon and so is strongly affected by one’s location in space and time. What you notice and hence know from any single position can only ever be partial, and so it makes sense to seek out multiple ways of seeing and knowing in order to appreciate situations and possibilities in more rounded and creative ways. On page 78 of the thesis I introduce one such framework which I refer to as a ‘systemic spiral’ of different perspectives (see also Appendix 13 to chapter 1). This has

helped me appreciate ‘many ways of knowing’ and has given me the potential to think ‘systemically’ and so be better able to see how context and feedback processes can become associated to create subtle and complex but often unexpected inter-relations and effects.

Because of the constraints and affordances offered by one’s location, and the fact that the written texts can only show the tip of this complex communication ‘iceberg’, a lot of what is happening or supporting what is happening, is inevitably located at a tacit level or in the background. Much of this may not be obvious to the eye, not only of readers like you but more importantly to the actors on the stage – the students and I. And it is here that my version of ‘presencing’ becomes the key move in my practice, where I use this process to reveal important aspects of what can be regarded at one level, as a continuous and indeterminate flow of experience that is in the background and often ‘rationally-invisible’. What might be some of the potentially important features of this ongoing ‘hustle and bustle’ of everyday living and conversation, and relations with the environment, that I seek to reveal and make rationally visible to students to enable them to better influence their own practice and those of others around them? There seem to be at least five aspects which I regularly pay attention to:

- ***tacit knowing***: a lot of our knowing is tacit in nature and so we can have difficulty understanding how we and other people arrive at our/their conclusions: what information do they notice, what assumptions do they make, how do they reach decisions, and what inner explanations do they offer for these? What we miss are all these tacit operations which happen in milliseconds, and just see the outward behaviour and outcomes. Such apparent outcomes and behaviours will in any case be surrounded by more or less uncertainty and ambiguity so requiring further detailed questioning and dialogue.
- ***complexity***: the new science of complexity shows us that in any situation there are usually countless possible variations that might occur, and that what happens/emerges (or is assumed/agreed to have happened) is merely one outcome amongst many. We generally don’t see/appreciate that the singular is but one possibility amongst the many. And in a similar vein, our culture encourages us to look for ‘attributional’ explanations i.e. those that explain things by referring to the characteristics of individuals, rather than the more complex but probably more accurate analyses that look for more dynamic and ‘contextual’ explanations.
- ***social accounting practices***: similarly, our ‘accounting practices’ – how we account for how we create meaning - encourage us to see only what is ‘rationally visible’; that is what social norms and local practices tell us *should* be seen or done in that situation. In this way such accounting practices work to instruct us in how to ‘see’ an otherwise indeterminate flow of activity – the hustle and bustle of everyday living and conversation - as having ‘this’ rather than ‘that’ form to it. These accounting practices also in this way, work to render certain things ‘rationally invisible’ to us. However, these shaping and moving influences spontaneously exerted on us by the use of language and the dominant discourse of the day, remain in the background and are a largely invisible presence, out of our direct control.
- ***power relations***: these social accounting practices are not just to do with the grammar of our local language. Again in a less than conscious way, all of these

language practices are suffused by what the French philosopher Foucault called ‘disciplinary power’ which is a distributed and usually hidden feature influencing relationships within a practice/situation. While in this view, power is not seen as being possessed by particular individuals, asymmetries in the power relations that exist often suppress certain voices and delete and distort meanings.

- **meaning-making:** finally, we easily fall into the trap of not seeing that we are *participants* in ongoing practical action, concerned to engage with and make ourselves understood in this action, to others around us. We consequently imagine that what we are constructing together in conversation is an arms length and strictly rational process. In reality it’s a much more relational, improvisatory, and embodied process where we and others continually respond to each other – and to the contexts in which we are interacting - in a never ending search for/negotiation of meaning. The intimate nature of our involvement and responsibilities for outcomes in these engagements, therefore often escapes us, and so we end up blaming others or the situation for what happens.

So in addition to what’s ‘on stage’ and more easily recognised, there are also these less visible/legitimate aspects which I’ve labelled as being ‘in the background’, taken-for-granted, or tacit, which together contribute towards the multi-layered context and flow of experience in which we live. These have a critical role to play in how matters turn out, and how students make sense of their studies and work practices. As a coach, I’ve found it very helpful to be able to notice and reveal some of this ‘background’ as an integral part of the development process, so that students, through raising their awareness of these factors, can take greater responsibility for their contribution to certain interactions and situations, and hence have options for behaving more creatively.

This level of experiencing is less obvious both in my practice and in my writing about it. However, you will see some evidence of it in the reflections I’ve added (in blue text) as I lead you through sequences of learning log interactions in Chapters 4 and 5. For instance on p 113 and p 118, I offer examples of tackling the issue of power relations and how this – in the form of ‘dominant stories’ - might be holding students back. It’s easier to see that in these reflections I am bringing forward thoughts that probably were largely tacit and not obvious to me and others in the original entries.

So given that these ‘invisible’ phenomena (as well as the visible) form an important dimension of what is happening ‘on stage’, what and how do I attempt to understand and influence these dynamic interactions?

What’s going on ‘backstage’ to support these educational interactions?

Because a lot of this enabling work happens in the background, most of us don’t notice or take account of these important influences in what happens and how this happens. So while the focus of the story will usually be on the higher profile signs of change/development, other things will be happening mainly in the background to facilitate and support such shifts in appreciation and framing. This opens another potential space for knowing, a space where one can notice and take account of the usually not seen or valued, adding this ‘messier’ data to what’s already visible and agreed to exist. This space exists ‘backstage’ (behind the higher profile reported actions you read about in the learning logs) where the coach works, again largely in the background, to achieve useful outcomes for the students, by revealing and making

visible potentially useful aspects of the situations they are working in. Many of these activities form what I might call the ‘choreography’ of my practice, where I seek to improvise and experiment within the dialogues with students, to stimulate, provoke, and ‘presence’ development possibilities. And by ‘presence’ here I also mean the bringing forward into the moment, the intention and readiness to *act into* the present situation. By doing this, students immediately alter the relations of self to self, self to other(s), and self to context, increasing the likelihood of what I’ve referred to as a ‘fleeting moment’ of influence, the very first indicator of change. This can then lead to them enhancing their empathetic responsiveness to what might be needed in the situations they are working in, and so taking timely action to ‘go on’ effectively with others.

Because I see these moves as exploratory steps in a ‘dialogic dance’, I deliberately use the term ‘choreography’ to presence the ‘dance’ metaphor, and so to convey the image of a creative form of conversation where the outcome remains open as colleagues and interlocutors feel their way forward together towards mutual orientation and meaningful interaction. Much of this kind of positioning and preparatory work associated with e.g. rapport building, developing empathy, and creating and maintaining dialogue, is not normally that obvious in face to face coaching activity, as it’s mostly in the background as a natural part of human communication. But in the asynchronous and largely written interactions that take place online, these need much more attention. So it is here that my portfolio of ‘moves’ associated with the general process of ‘presencing’ comes to the fore in my practice, where I use these to reveal something of what is often tacit and/or ‘rationally-invisible’, to enable students to better influence their own practice and those of others around them. Very much as in the theatre, much of this work is done ‘backstage’ or in the background to the action on the stage, and so might not be visible to the casual observer. So what might be some of the more important of these ‘backstage’ activities? Here in addition to talking more about the meaning of my ‘presencing’ practice, I touch on four of the more important ‘moves’ I use i.e. ‘fishing’, experimenting, contextualising learning, and fostering dialogue.

Presencing – transferring resources into the present

I’ve already indicated that for me ‘presencing’ is the process of bringing into the present moment something – a feeling, an idea, an intention, a skill – that prior to this is absent, invisible, or temporarily unavailable to you; and which, when presenced, allows you to experience and see a situation, an event, or an issue in a changed light, enabling you to go on in a different way. But this process can take many different forms. For example Scharmer who first popularised this concept sees it very much as a group phenomenon where people sense and embody emergent futures, ‘letting go’ present ideas and ‘letting come’ something new and preferable. Against this rather mystical view, Shaw with her complexity theory approach, sees it more pragmatically as people choosing particular courses of action in ‘a living present’, that are likely to make sense in moving forward together with others. From a learning point of view, Polanyi’s ‘from-to’ notion of tacit knowing that comes from ‘dwelling in the subsidiaries’ clearly also depends on a tacit process which presences and embodies new experiential information to inform decision-making and outcomes. Similarly the ideas of someone like Bahktin on the improvisational nature of dialogue, point to a presencing process at the very heart of these interchanges between people, where new information is introduced at each conversational ‘turn’ which can alter the meaning and direction of travel.

I’ve already referred to two main uses in my own practice concerned with ‘presencing development possibilities’ and ‘presencing empathetic responsiveness’, and there are

many examples of both of these uses in the pages you are about to read. For an example of the former see ‘read some feminist literature’ on p 145, and for one of the latter, see ‘ask for more and better’ on p 112. In these applications, ‘presencing’ in our languaging and gesturing is about *grounding* our working in what’s before us in the moment and *moving towards a resolution* of some shared nature; rather than moving us ‘up into the air’, into theorising and planning type activities, which distract and can move us away from what we want. These uses in the area of one-to-one coaching are clearly more influenced by the ideas put forward by e.g. Shaw, Polanyi, and Bahktin than those of Scharmer, and find purchase in supporting students in ‘knowing how to go on’ in their leadership and their leadership development work.

‘Fishing’ - looking for important development ideas and opportunities

Many of my coaching responses are offered in what I call a ‘fishing’ mode. In this I cast out ideas based on my intuition, empathy, and sense of what might resonate. All the time I keep looking for glimmers of interest in their feedback and writing: is anything I’m offering ringing any bells? What’s important about this process is that it’s not a wholly rational and explicit intellectual process where I work through my ‘responsive repertoire’ or some framework in a mechanical manner. Instead I liken it to a tacit activity where through an embodied ‘intuitive inferencing’ process, I spontaneously cast out a range of ‘baited hooks’...and then scan the logs/essays for signs of interest which I can start ‘playing’ with. This is not like seeding ‘ground bait’ in a general way to attract interest, but a more precise process where each baited hook is tailored for the intended recipient and to the situation itself. There are of course some common ingredients in this bait which over time I’ve found to be useful across a range of students. To change the metaphor, these ‘development seeds’ often include ideas such as the role of the tacit dimension in the learning process, the contribution of contextual as against attributional explanations to meaning making, how personal and social narratives both restrict and enable perception and action, and the open-ended and improvisational nature of dialogical communication, which I use to encourage and anticipate certain shifts in how students might frame their own experiences.

This process shares similarities with actual fishing where there is both a need for diffuse, unhurried, attention while you wait for the fish to bite; which then needs to be supported by a more precise and dynamic awareness to bring the fish in. In my work the ‘fish’ is the unexpected, spontaneous hint/shadow that suddenly reveals itself in the text to the meditative ‘blank’ mind, the first glimpse that something important may be about to emerge. And the precise awareness is what is required to respond acutely to this first showing and through ‘playing’ with this new line of thinking, to gradually reel in/develop this into a useful piece of learning that can unfold further. If I suspect that something is beginning to emerge, I attempt to amplify this by offering praise, further relevant materials, and encouragement to experiment with the idea and begin what Polanyi has called the ‘indwelling’ process which tacitly ‘translates/transforms’ ideas into embodied practice. This fishing/seeding activity is supported by the portfolio of responses that I’ve partially identified in what I call a ‘responsive repertoire’ (see p 79 and Appendix 6 to Chapter 3) where I range across a number of standard activities to do with e.g. influencing expectations about the learning process, challenging initial perceptions, extending personal knowing, and presencing knowing-in-action. You can see illustrations of these multiple interventions in the many examples I offer in the excerpts from student learning logs in Chapters 4 and 5.

In this way, this ‘fishing’ process acts very much as an heuristic helping me find ways through the complex meaning –making ‘jungles’ that my students are creating, living and working in. If you look at my response to one of John’s logs on pp 111-113 you’ll note that I make at least 8 deliberate ‘interventions’ (and possibly more if we take account of the fact that many useful interventions are non-deliberate). Across 50 weeks of programmed study with two learning logs per week, this can amount to as many as 800 such interventions, with many covering the one or more key issues which the student is struggling with. I realize that this is something I created specially to deal with the particular difficulties of working online in an asynchronous and written environment. I learned to work at this intensity because I couldn’t get/wasn’t getting immediate feedback to my ideas, and wasn’t able to take advantage of the usual ‘background’ conversational practices, as I would in face to face work (see ‘fostering dialogue’ below for more on this). I needed to find a new way of stimulating feedback in the distance learning context that was less sensitive to time and the timing of my remarks. Here the idea of ‘radar’ provides a useful metaphor for thinking about the nature of this process. Imagine that my written ‘interventions’ in the learning logs are like bursts of electromagnetic energy in radar and go beaming out across the student’s domain of practice. When these strike something interesting – a hint/shadow of a ‘fish’ - they come back to me with added information, which I can then build on in future interventions. Because I’m sending out so many and there is so much redundancy across a series of logs, the timing of my remarks is less critical: if I persist in responding to hints in their writing, the important issues and ideas will get a response at some stage. You can see an example of this in my series of responses to Colleen on pp 117-120 where over a period of weeks I gradually home in on to the issue of ‘stark choices’ as something important to work on.

The other very important feature of this ‘fishing’ process is that to be most effective, it needs to be offered from an embodied state of being. I use the term ‘intuitive inferencing’ above to emphasise that although I’m sitting in front of my computer reading what a student has written in a log days before, I need to be imagining we are together engaged in dialogue, to generate the spontaneous flow of insights and interventions that populate the learning logs and essays. The clearest signal of this not being the case, with me just ‘being in the head’ is when I find myself feeling alienated from the student’s experience and struggling to think of useful and ‘clever’ comments to make. That’s why the metaphor of ‘dance’ and the relational energy that goes with it, makes such an important contribution to my practice.

Experimenting – stimulating tacit knowing

Students typically expect to absorb explicit knowledge from the university to add to their own again largely explicit knowing. Though this might be sufficient for the academic requirements of the degree, I don’t believe this is sufficient to support the kind of critical engagement and embodied development they need to improve their practice and performance. I want instead to provoke them into developing a more personal and embodied kind of knowing, and I do this through encouraging them to critically engage with their own and others ideas. I push them to try out and experiment with ideas in different contexts, and through reflective and reflexive work on their experiences, to refine their knowing, skills, and confidence for delivery in context. So as a continuation of the ‘fishing’ activity, I encourage them to try things out for themselves, create their own practical ‘fishing’ experiments, and learn from the feedback: what influences are they having on themselves and others in their context, and in the social formation of the organization in which they work? If any of the ideas are to

lead to anything practical, they need to be tried out and experienced in real everyday situations – ‘jumping into the water’ - so that embodied knowing about the dynamic fit between tool and context can be presented.

In this way, the open and extending ‘fishing’ activity gradually gives way to a more focused inquiry into what’s being done to use the knowledge, exploring the boundaries of application, and making adjustments to capability and identity. There is a good example of this ‘developing through acting into situations’ in the cascading process commented on by John in video clip 19 on pp 139-40.

Contextualising learning - generating uncertainty

To help them gain the authority and confidence they need to be effective in their working worlds, students need to have the opportunity to *make* their own reflexive or development biographies, as distinct from having them decided by other forces in the situation. This need is well served if they can do their learning and their performing in similar conditions, where the need to *act into uncertainty* - where they are subject to similar levels of both epistemological and ontological doubt - apply. In the online programme, the coaching required to support this kind of more open ended, contested, uncertain, and dynamic intertwined ‘learning while practising’ and ‘practising while learning’ - both at the same, and for yet another *first* time - needs to be thought of as taking place within a pedagogy which for example:

- consistently provokes alternative perceptions and feelings to develop a capacity for multi-perspectival framings;
- helps ‘presence’ or make visible and present the many developmental possibilities latent in their everyday lives for inquiring into these; and
- encourages experimentation and reflection on feedback in practical situations.

This kind of coaching relationship provides students with the kind of side-by-side support they need to feel their way forward in the face of ontological challenges such as ‘how can I become and practice what is being called forth in this situation?’, as well as dealing more sensitively and responsively with the demands of more routine forms of problem solving. I believe they best learn how to develop their practices of re-orienting and ‘going on’...*by doing just that!* And so I work to create a supportive culture of inquiry in which they feel confident to do just that.

Fostering dialogue - stimulating creative conversations

Over and above these everyday human difficulties which we all face in whatever situation we are in, there are also important differences between coaching in a conventional ‘face-to-face’ manner and in the ‘online’ environment. Because so much of what we do ‘face to face’ is of a taken-for-granted nature, these differences may not be obvious to those unfamiliar with the characteristics of the online virtual learning environment, and so it’s worth offering a few words about this. In face-to-face communication there are a number of things which are critical to understanding but which are in the background and which we take for granted. Amongst these are what we might call the ‘occasionality’ of expressions where the meaning is closely associated with the place and time of occurrence, the ‘specific vagueness’ of references where people offer something that seems to generally fit the situation, but not in a black and white manner so the specific meaning remains open and yet to be determined, and the associated ‘retrospective-prospective’ sense of a present occurrence in which we wait for something later in order to see what was meant before. All of these are sanctioned

properties of common discourse and furnish a background of seen but unnoticed features where people won't take predetermined meanings imposed on them in a conversation, and where their actual utterances are recognised as events of common, reasonable, understandable, plain talk.

These everyday taken-for-granted characteristics of face to face communication cannot be presumed to happen naturally in the online environment where all the non-verbal and contextual features of conversation are absent. Therefore, in order to foster the natural improvisatory process of dialogical meaning making, special effort has to be devoted to creating these necessary enabling features in this asynchronous and written medium. In my practice I realised over time that much of the 'fishing' work I was doing was not as redundant as I thought, because it served to create and support what in the text I call a 'development container'. This learning relationship located in virtual space, in which students could feel trusting, and able to inquire openly and creatively into the challenges and dilemmas facing them, created the feeling and many of the missing features of face to face conversation, where the students and I could engage in truly creative dialogues. I offer a range of examples of how this process 'in the development container' has worked, on pp 196-200.

So can anybody just turn up and do this kind of thing 'naturally' without any special development work or preparation? Or might this too involve work in the background that then enables this kind of intuitive and spontaneous support to be offered?

What background development work is needed to support this way of working?

Something that again will not be that obvious if not 'invisible' in the thesis, is the personal development work that I've engaged in over many decades that has helped me develop and provide the kind of coaching service that I explore in this research. As I mentioned earlier, this aspect of my practice is something that I've engaged in very much in parallel, in different domains and to different time scales, to the development and coaching roles I play. But my ability to work in an open-ended and creatively responsive way has been enabled, and continues to be sustained, by my own ongoing attempts to improve my own practice and the capabilities that help me do this. As you will note in various chapters in the thesis, this has formed an important thread in my life over many decades and continues to this day. You will also note that in many ways it has mostly been of an indirect nature following many different and personal paths which might seem to bear little relation to the coaching practice I describe here. For example I've spent much time exploring the ideas and practices of embodiment and in many different ways e.g. playing tennis/golf, doing shiatsu, practising chi gung, and learning to sing. Similarly I've also spent much time over many years exploring communication practices in a range of different group and individual therapies. So what might be important features of this work?

Empathetic responsiveness as fluency in pattern seeking and making

None of these development experiences have an obvious and direct relationship with my online coaching practice. But they have clearly served to help me learn to deal with the uncertainties and ambiguities that my preferred open-ended and improvisatory working stance poses, and have also provided a wide range of resources and tools to enrich my responsiveness. I talk about these improvisatory activities very much in terms of natural spontaneous responses, as though this is something that anyone without any real effort

could, perhaps lazily by just ‘doing what comes naturally’, achieve in the same situation. But I doubt whether this is likely to be so, and here use the metaphor of improvisation to illustrate the point.

Most so-called ‘free’ improvisation that takes place in jazz groups is anything but ‘free’: it is most often the result of many, many hours of devotion to exploring and making familiar in mind and body, the typical patterns that characterise the harmonies and melodic lines of well known jazz ‘standards’. What then seems to happen ‘spontaneously’ during jazz sessions is more of a conversation between players, exchanging these well practised ‘riffs’ and also, if things are going well, some more in-the-moment and original expressions of this basic material. Without this preparation such improvising patterns would tend to be inchoate, banal, and stumbling and quite possibly not resonant with the playing of others in the band. Jazz is essentially a form of conversation and requires a special form of deep listening – and then responding – that is only possible when the preparation has been done, and tacit knowing takes over. In a similar way, the online coaching ‘choreography’ that I engage in depends on the same kind of discipline where I have many partial patterns to call upon and synthesise in the moment, as stimulated by my empathetic responsiveness to the other and their practice in their context, as we engage in our dialogic dance.

Theory building as constructing temporary ‘handholds’ along a learning journey

Despite the considerable amount of intellectual argument and theorising that you will find throughout the thesis, the focus is principally on my coaching *practice*. For this reason you will notice that a fair proportion of the theorising and argument building is not to do with the final ‘model’ of coaching pedagogy that I arrive at and present at the end in meeting the formal requirements of the PhD itself. Many ideas make a fleeting appearance and then go. These arguments are developed primarily as a means of helping me craft ‘handholds’ for helping me take the next step forward, in getting to know ‘how to go on’.

So for example when I introduce the idea of ‘improvisation’ e.g. on page 38 in Chapter 2 to illustrate a point I needed to make at that juncture, I do not really develop the idea further as I might have, given the eventual Bahktinian-influenced approach I do adopt. And this is not because it wouldn’t be a good metaphor for what I’m seeking to do - as you will have already noticed in the previous point immediately above when I do just this to illustrate something I want you to bear in mind. No in the example in Chapter 1, I use it instead to help me over a practical hurdle and then move on. Other such ideas like ‘language-game’ and ‘indwelling’ also pop up in the course of my developing story but they continue to inform my journey and so end up in Chapter 7 where I pull these key ideas together.

The paradox of ‘modelling’...but not ‘modelling’

Something I’m sure you will notice, as I point out on p. 20 in the Introduction, is that ‘in contrast to a conventional form of thesis which would have a chapter devoted to “methodology”, this whole thesis is concerned with my methodology as it develops and emerges over the period under review.’ And so in addition to an extensive review of methodology in Chapter 3, I continue the process at the start of each of Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and then review and put it all together again in the final chapter. So there can be no doubt that despite my protestations to the contrary – ‘this thesis is about my *practice!*’ – I am nevertheless fiercely interested in theories and models and perhaps

more importantly in theorising and modelling, as these inform my practice and my attempts to improve it. This much is something that probably becomes more obvious as you progress in your reading.

But perhaps what will not be so obvious is my equally fierce resolve not to become tied to any particular approach, model, or tool/technique. Yes, I'm happy to enjoy whatever benefits they might offer me and my students at a particular time but...! More important to me is that I am able to present a relatively open and responsive 'face' to whatever is being offered to me in the logs, essays, e mails, and Skype conversations, and *not* to be seeing these at the outset through 'this' framework or 'that' technique. This idea of having a 'blank mind' before the information is presented is of course idealistic – we cannot *not* bring prior frames/experience to what we see/read – but this is a very important matter for me: to try to be neutral before, so that I reduce the possibility of unknowingly being led down various predetermined sense-making pathways...by *my own* assumptions/prejudices/favoured models etc. So again you might notice as you read through that I seem to be using some approach, model, or tool with great enthusiasm, only to find a few pages later that I've dropped it cold and am pursuing another line of attack. This is the paradox I have to work with every day – so be warned!

* * *

So in these preliminary remarks I hope that I've 'marked your card' sufficiently to help you have some idea beforehand as to what might not be so obvious and straightforward about the story I'm telling you - what might be slipping under the radar - and to have you well and truly alerted to the often tacit nature of my knowing, the important clues that are hidden in the background, and the unwritten social 'rules' that so often like a magician, transform what is before our very eyes, into something that is 'rationally invisible'. Good luck with your reading of my text - I hope you find it stimulating and developmental.