

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE HARMONY OF DIFFERENT VOICES WITHIN CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

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The question of relevance of constructive critical conversations to professional development emerged from a dual method autoethnographic and hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry into the essence of effective constructive critical conversations in the workplace from the perspective of tertiary education quality. For the purposes of the enquiry, constructive critical conversations (CCCs) were defined as those conversations which exist in a constructive environment which utilise criticality within an empathetic interaction to build upon existing knowledge or understanding. Discourse analysis through a transdisciplinary lens revealed CCCs play a crucial part in professional development in the workplace.

These findings fit within a concept of *He aha te kai o te rangatira? He Kōrero, he kōrero, he kōrero!* (What is the food of the leader? It is knowing, it is sharing, it is communicating!) Constructive critical conversations allow for individuals' voices to harmonise in a communal chorus toward a socially constructed overture. While every individual voice is different, it is the sum of the voices which gives depth to the chorus. Further, each individual will have their own unique internal connectedness regarding the experience and what they have gleaned from hearing others' vocal parts within the harmony. The overture result of the CCC is professional development of the engaged participants.

## ENVIRONMENT OF CHANGE

"And it's up to you to keep yourself engaged and productive during a work life that may span some 50 years" (Drucker, 1999, p. 1). Drucker's advice over two decades ago was part of an acknowledgement across academia and industries that careers no longer sustained employees in the sense of one expertise being sufficient for the duration of a person's career. His advice was to the individual who is self-motivated and self-aware enough to continue to grow and contribute in relevant ways.

Similarly, and more recently, Zao-Sanders (2021) points out the need for employers to recognise a different approach to learning in the workplace. Lifelong learning is appealing to new employers, yet it could be difficult to assess. Zao-Sanders writes in the Harvard Business Review that employers should ask how a new recruit learns. The need for continual learning is crucial to the workplace, to an organisation keeping pace with unknown future changes, and to the sustainability of the organisation through the changes.

## ECLECTIC LEARNING OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Facilitation of eclectic learning of the individual through engaging in CCCs points to an educative solution to professional development which is focused on an unknown future. Eclectic learning is not necessarily a new concept, yet no learning theory similarly encapsulates the entirety of internal connectedness that the individual

brings to the workplace. This learning is eclectic in that it draws from the individual's different interests and learning within different contexts to form a unique connectedness within the individual. It is eclectic in the sense of the unique combination of perceptions and conceptions that the individual has, thus drawing upon both subconscious and conscious connectivity within the individual. These connections are made possible because of the individual's choices to take advantage of opportunities to engage in new experiences. When the individual experiences something new, reflection enables the individual to consider from within their unique connectedness toward learning. This reflective learning defines professional development in the workplace.

An analogy can be drawn between the eclectic learning of the individual and a vocalist or musician who learns as opportunities come up. A broad exposure across many different styles of music enables the musician to join impromptu jam sessions. This is where each individual adds value from within the musician's own range of musical understanding, yet within a shared musical structure. It is a spontaneous harmonising of skills across the group confined within the temporality of the event. The shared experience may draw upon elements from jazz, pop, rock, country, or any other genre which the musicians incorporate to add value in the moment.

Likewise, eclectic learning is prompted by the individual's unique combination of interests across multiple discipline spaces without regard to, or recognition of, developed disciplinary boundaries. The eclectic-ness of the individual's learning has a theme which can only be truly known by the individual. The eclectic nature of the learning emerges from the connections of understanding which the individual makes across their unique combination of interests and experiences. Further, the breadth of connections of the eclectic-ness over time adds value to the individual's overall ability to connect new experiences within their existing knowledge. Notably, the uniqueness of these combinations of connections does not mean the broad eclectic-ness of the individual's learning cannot be appreciated by the organisation. Rather, this uniqueness adds to an ability to innovate in a transdisciplinary way because the learning process itself has been transdisciplinary, forming internal connectedness which is irrespective of disciplinary boundaries.

Similarly, the musician is able to join in and add value to the overall overture from within their ability. If the individual knows how to play multiple instruments or sing different vocal parts, the contribution comes from the connectedness of those abilities, not from employing more than one instrument or vocal part simultaneously. Thus, the contribution is from the entirety of the individual's internal understanding and connectedness yet within the need of the context.

## REFLECTION

The concept of reflection and the internal mechanisms and external impacts on internal processes are important in realising a notion of eclectic-ness. Moon (1999) offered a comprehensive review of theory and practice of reflection as a learning tool, asking questions of the repetition implied by the term. Namely, how is it possible to revisit something to learn through reflection, when the term itself infers that learning has occurred in the first instance. Whence cometh the initial learning upon which the reflection works? Moon has entirely answered the question within terms of reflection; however, there continues to be a gap regarding the accountability of the connectedness which informed the initial learning. This gap is the space which accounts for the individual's unique internal connectedness from the beginning of their existence.

The activity of reflecting on an experience can bring subconscious connectedness into the conscious realm for the individual to engage critically from within their unique connectedness. One simple example of this could be found in unconscious bias. An individual may have an experience which has influenced how they perceive, or think, about something or someone. Once the individual reflects on their inner feelings or ideas, they are able to consciously consider the matter with criticality. The original perception or conception does not necessarily change. This does not matter. It is the reflective outcome which matters. The individual's reflection allows the

individual to make sense of a new experience in light of the earlier experience, thus forming a new conscious connectedness.

In terms of voices within a chorus, the reflective, eclectic learner is similar to the individual voice which has been purposefully developed over time to be responsive within different singing environments. The communal effort may require a strong solo voice to contrast while building toward a chorus which overtakes the solo. In the end, it is the entire performance which is beneficial with no one part able to be left out in the appreciation of the music.

## **SOCIAL IMPACT**

Singing or playing an instrument in a group is a social event. Each individual not only contributes but listens for the impact of that contribution so as to be able to adjust. For example, volume may need to be adjusted, flat or sharp notes tempered.

Reflection, while seen as an individual method of learning, is enhanced through a socially collaborative process such as a community of practice where there is shared interest, knowledge and expertise, and members are active practitioners in the shared area of interest (Hatcher et al., 2016). In fact, Day (1993) contends that reflection requires a confrontation of some kind to mature to development. This could occur within a community of practice and impact as accelerated learning (LMhieu et al., 2017).

In the workplace, conversations provide social opportunities for transformation through 'dialogical sense-making' (Grzegorzcyk, 2018). Goodwin (2013) agrees that, in the workplace, conversations are the point at which sense is made and collaboration reinforces the results of reflection. This highlights the value of conversations as an opportunity for learning in the workplace. Conversations take place naturally, occur in any workplace setting, and allow individuals to contribute or engage at a level they are comfortable with.

In a musical setting, this is similar to newer musicians taking on a range of notes which are not difficult to hit. Likewise, more experienced musicians are expected to tackle a wider range of notes or the more difficult high or low notes. Together, their combined work makes sense within the collaborative effort.

Awareness to what is happening is an integral part of reflection. This is where experience of a deep level of expertise gives an understanding or feeling for what level of awareness is required within a new context. This awareness adds depth to the ability to reflect (Roth, 2015). Kahneman explains a deep concentration level achieved within a state of flow as "...maintaining focused attention on these absorbing activities requires no exertion of self-control, thereby freeing resources to be directed to the task at hand" (Kahneman, 2012, p. 41). In practical terms within the workplace, this means that the individual who is interested in learning will maintain focus throughout the experience which is informing the individual's learning.

Similar to a choral group, where many individual voices are contributing, the mindfulness of reflection within a CCC seeks to find that place of harmony. This is where everything comes together in one concerted effort. The individual's voice adds value to the movement and blend of what is occurring within the chorus. As the individual hears others' voices, they respond from within their own connectedness and understanding of what is required, or what will add value. In this way, the overall harmony becomes complete.

## **COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

Singing different vocal parts at different times, and thus increasing the individual's repertoire, is similar to purposefully engaging in new experiences toward learning eclectically. Intrinsic motivation through eclectic personal interests allows the individual to have experiences in the blurred edges of multiple disciplines' boundaries

through engagement in different communities of practice. Thus, the unique combination of experiences over time enables the individual's eclectic internal connectedness to impact the workplace context. A practised ability to adapt knowledge to new contexts is both anticipatory and evolving. Thus, as Heidegger (1953/2010) presented, there is a knowing before a matter is known.

In terms of voices within a shared chorus, the individual is sure of their own vocal part, yet able to adapt and contribute through harmonising and complementing others' vocal parts. Due to a deep understanding of how voices blend, the vocalist is able to anticipate within a musical work.

This is similar to understanding from different perspectives within the CCC. The individual's voice does not jar because there is purposeful harmonising within a shared chorus. There is a knowing of what is required before the moment comes when it is realised or known.

## CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Constructive critical conversations provide opportunities in the workplace for eclectic learners to reflect-in-action. Eraut (1995) argued that reflection-in-action events occur in real time without the opportunity to pause and consider what is happening. This is not a problem for the eclectic learner whose unique connectedness and reflective habit enables the individual to be in a state of flow, where a challenge is met by a level of expertise. Lave (2019) has built upon the concept of reflection-in-action and explains more readily the connection with a concept of flow as developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1997).

This is similar to the harmonic flow of an overture. It is powerful because of the reflection-in-action which is occurring simultaneously by all participants. The minute adjustments made by each individual as they respond at precise moments within a piece is similar to when individuals within a CCC recognise and respond from their eclectic connectedness in the moment.

Within the data from this enquiry were strong indicators for a need to engage in CCCs for professional development within the workplace. Education quality specialists noted CCCs "encourage reflection in the learner." This was in the context of teaching team members who were expert in non-education disciplines becoming more knowledgeable and effective in the context of tertiary education. One participant stated that, as an opportunity for learning, a CCC is "not something we just attend. The purpose for that attendance is what's important." This comment is in line with a need for mindfulness with intent to learn through the CCC experience. In other words, it is the individual's choice to engage in the event with purpose. This is also aligned to Roth's (2015) concept of becoming aware and that of reflection-in-action. However, eclectic learning as a concept goes beyond reflection-in-action. It is the connectedness of all prior experiences and learnings toward future anticipatory learning. It cannot be defined by the individual in words for others to understand. Yet the connectedness held uniquely within the individual's entirety is available for collaboration within a constructive critical conversation.

Collaboration is where dissonance can be addressed. Dissonance is when something jars against what is believed to be known. This must be resolved, and in the process learning occurs. The theory of dissonance has evolved (Bhat, 2014; Chew, 2015), and is where eclectic learning and, later, tacit knowledge is able to contribute to CCCs. Reflecting-in-action requires not only resolving dissonance in the individual's own mind, but within the context of CCCs the individual is also attempting to understand and assist resolving dissonance in others' minds. It affords considering a matter from different perspectives, and from that ability predicting what may be useful within the context of the current conversation. This is entirely separate from what an ideal may be. It is a recognition that, in this moment, at this point in time, this CCC requires contribution in this way because it will benefit the CCC. This temporal urgency is important because it creates the focus for contextual reflection-in-action (Buonomano, 2017; Eraut, 1995; Heidegger, 1953/2010).

If considered within Foucault's (2011) ideas of parrhesia and care of the self, the CCC could be seen as the catalyst for creating the emancipatory space within which the individual can be free to innovate on behalf of the organisation.

Within a musical context, this concept could be seen from the perspective of the ability of musicians to understand possibilities within the musical style and how their own abilities can contribute to the overall sound. It is also an empowering accountability of each musician to address dissonance within the combined work.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Relationships are an important part of the complex human social interactions and therefore impact any professional development achieved through CCCs in the workplace. Ramachandrin and Blakeslee (2005) relate how patients who have suffered strokes may employ self-deception in their interactions with others. They begin with a quote from Thomas regarding social sciences: "Our behaviour toward each other is the strangest, most unpredictable, and almost entirely unaccountable of the phenomena with which we are obliged to live" (Lewis Thomas as cited in Ramachandrin & Blakeslee (2005, p. 127). Ramachandrin is an example of an eclectic learner himself when he draws from biology and philosophy to discover answers to psychology questions. His work is an example for others to learn broadly as opportunities are presented because whatever it is could mean something substantial to the individual in future. His comments also allude to the significance of time and how the subconscious is aware of more than can be articulated until coming to an awareness within an event, similar to what Roth describes in his own narrative (Roth, 2015). The perceptions which are captured lend themselves to the conceptions of the conscious mind through reflection.

It is not unusual for individuals to know more than they can articulate until some point in the future. Connectedness is happening at both subconscious and conscious levels, and is not bound by disciplinary boundaries within the function of the brain. Lyotard (2004) recognised this in acknowledging that events cannot be fully represented. The relatability of what has occurred is only able to be represented by established language or symbols, whereas, the event encapsulates elements which are not able to be represented until there is a shared symbolism, language or agreed construct of some kind. The CCC environment allows a shared experience such that representation can be socially constructed with purpose.

Within the data collected for this project, participants strongly believed that CCCs are vital to individual professional development. That this impacts also on the organisation is reinforced by a statement that, without candid feedback and a flow of contribution back and forth within a professional setting, an organisation 'becomes stagnant.'

Similarly, singing or playing an instrument in a group provides opportunities to learn socially. Musicians experience others' interpretations of the music and subconsciously experience the event in a way which influences conscious reflections. Hearing others' musical interpretations broadens the individual's understanding of potentialities within a piece of music. In this way, the individual's learning of styles is impacted over time and the overall connectedness evolves to grow into a unique style for that individual. It is from this connectedness the individual is able to contribute to group efforts in performing. Further, an event which is shared is able to be represented with symbolism, in this case through the median of music.

Reflection is acknowledged within the data as a crucial part of the development of individuals. Further, to be effective in CCCs, the participants need to be experienced, habitual reflective thinkers such that reflection-in-action can occur. Participants within the enquiry felt this included an ability to see issues through different lenses and engage critically from different perspectives.

These skills do not appear overnight. Repeatedly, respondents referred to the time and purposeful effort required to achieve skills in reflection and criticality. Phrases were used to indicate the degrees to which the skills were achieved which related to identity of a developed self: “modus operandi”, “a way of being”, “a mode you get into.” This developed reflective self provides confidence as to what is known and what needs to be known to make sense of an experience.

This kind of experiential learning cannot be experienced in other ways. Within a CCC, the learning is immediately socially constructed, immediately socially supported, and immediately socially put to the test through challenge or feedback. The trust and reciprocity which exists within a CCC holds individuals accountable through criticality within the moment. This accountability extends to the self-development or ‘stretch’ as one participant described her learning through CCCs. Reflection could be described as the activity which occurs because of accountability to oneself within the learning opportunity which has been presented.

Likewise, the musician is accountable within the moment. Experience of performing in front of audiences allows the individual musician the opportunity to practise focus and reflection-in-action toward fulfilling expectations of the performance.

Just as musical styles have evolved over time, the nature of CCCs and the requirements for individual development will change over time. Increasingly, this is being identified in the domain of that unique package of connectedness, or entirety, which the individual embodies. Bell, a De Paul University psychology professor was recently quoted by Winsborough regarding the types of people who are sought at NASA for long-term missions:

What really matters over time is that you can do that give-and-take, do that self-monitoring. So, if the situation demands you be extroverted, that you can become extroverted and take charge. Or if the situation demands that you sit back, you can do that too. (Winsborough, 2020)

Professional development cannot occur without some level of engagement with criticality in CCCs. This is demonstrated within the data where one participant stated, “There’s no doubts in my mind at all that if you’re not in that critical mode then you’re going to end up (a) making bad decisions, but (b) there’s a whole lot of things that you could have been learning that you’re not going to learn.”

Personal development of the musician cannot occur without some level of performance. This performance necessitates an audience, feedback, reflection-in-action, and accountability within the context. For example, a concert pianist will be listening and responding differently if performing alongside a jazz group on a Friday evening in New Orleans.

And what of the conductor of the music? Leading the tempo, cueing changes with a nod, smiling encouragement and trusting the skills of the musicians to give a performance worthy of the occasion. In the same way, facilitators are the conductors of CCCs in that they point out opportunities, cue specific moments, and encourage performance of others.

The following is an example of how CCCs are effective and efficient within the workplace, providing sustainability for organisations which are prepared to support CCCs in daily practice.

## **A LIVED EXAMPLE**

The Kathryn Ryan “Nine to Noon” segment on Radio New Zealand provided a prime example of how the impact of COVID-19 contributed to learning in the workplace in new ways through CCCs. Young engineers were, for the first time, privy to the thinking processes of the more experienced engineers. The senior engineers were in lockdown in New Zealand. The junior engineers lived on islands where the large infrastructure projects were being built. Real-time experience was made possible by directing the physical actions of the younger engineers

on the structures via audio-visual technology and having a conversation with the younger engineers while they focused on specific aspects of the build (Ryan, 2020). Real-time feedback to both engineers allowed experienced ones to direct actions such as, "Wait, go back over that section again. Something doesn't look right to me." The real-time conversations provided junior engineers chances to understand what they were experiencing through the eyes and reasoning of the experienced engineers. They were in effect being given privy to reflection-in-action by the senior engineers for the first time. The model was so effective, the organisation realised that it could access the knowledge of the experienced older engineers beyond usual retirement timelines through continued constructive critical conversations via technology.

## IN SUMMARY

The ability of organisations to prepare for an unknown future can and must begin in the present through professional development of the individuals within the organisation. The concept of eclectic learning broadens the potential supports toward individuals' self-sufficiency and self-determination in pursuit of lifelong learning practices. Organisations which facilitate eclectic learning opportunities through constructive critical conversations will be better prepared to be flexible and resilient in the face of inevitable future changes because individuals have continued to develop professionally.

The harmony of achieving both individual and organisational goals which is brought about by purposeful engagement in constructive critical conversations will enhance the sustainability of the organisation toward an unknown future.

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