21. CRITICAL COMPANIONSHP

Nurturing Mindful Dialogues in the Midst of Practice

OPENING SPACE

Meet Katherine, an experienced physiotherapist working in a community service in Australia. This chapter is her story. Increasing complexity of healthcare and consumer knowledge, combined with overwhelming accountability measures for healthcare administrators and practitioners, inequitable access and cracks in and fragmentation of healthcare services, produces a very mixed picture for healthcare consumers. Katherine knows that, within this complexity, it is always relationships that make the difference for vulnerable, unwell people.

In creating such relationships with clients, she has been influenced primarily by the frameworks of skilled companionship (Titchen, 2001a) and person-centred practice (McCormack & McCance, 2010). Moreover, when helping less experienced colleagues to become skilled companions, she has found that many of them find it difficult to talk about, and thus critique and improve, the relational aspects of their care. Like many skilled practices, these aspects are often deeply embodied and embedded in practice and are thus inaccessible to mindful dialogue. Critical companionship, a learning relationship with colleagues, has, however, a proven track record of helping people to access and articulate embodied, embedded know-how (Titchen 2004; Titchen & McGinley, 2003; Hardy, Titchen, Manley, & McCormack, 2009).

In this chapter, we are using a “faction” genre which is fiction based on “fact”, derived from empirical research and experience. We can imaginatively show you Katherine’s inner thoughts and feelings, as she goes about her work, seeing what she notices and how she responds as she creates spaces for mindful dialogues with a client and an inexperienced colleague. The chapter is written as a mandala (see left) which shows the parts (i.e., domains which hold the processes and strategies of critical companionship) and the connected whole (i.e., unique blending and melding of the domains by professional artistry according to the particular person, needs, situation and context). The connected whole is linked with helping people to flourish.

PREPARING THE GROUND

Critical companionship is a person-centred helping relationship between a practitioner with highly developed facilitation skills, who develops trusting
relationships with and accompanies, colleagues on experiential learning journeys. Through using the whole of her/his self, the companion helps people to experience practice-based learning as inquiry in and on practice, either in the midst of everyday work or through learning supervision/partnerships, active learning groups, work-based learning, workshops or collaborative inquiries. The companion enables people to develop new knowledge and ways of knowing, blend these new insights through professional artistry into practical know-how and then using this know-how to transform themselves (if they so wish) and their practice.

Through her reading, Katherine discovered that critical companionship was developed by Angie in her PhD research and throughout her career as a practice developer, facilitator and action-oriented researcher (Titchen, 2000; 2004; Hardy et al., 2009; Titchen & Peelo-Kilroe, 2014). As she read of people’s experiences of using the critical companionship framework (e.g. Gribben & Cochrane, 2006; Titchen & McGinley, 2003; Greggans & Conlon, 2009; Brown & Scott, 2010; Eldridge, 2011), she began to appreciate the complexity of enabling person-centred helping relationships and creative spaces. She learned that practitioners could find their own personal meaning by relating the framework to their own practice, as they are reading it. Then, they could try out bits of it (one chunk of the elephant at a time), notice and evaluate what happened before going back to read it again.

There are four domains in the critical companionship framework with one overarching domain (Figure 21.1), each with a number of specific processes and strategies. All of the domains except the facilitation domain are also found in the skilled companionship framework, although they are likely to be delivered differently in the context of the practitioner/client relationship. In the following faction, the domains, processes and strategies used by Katherine are shown in italics. The spiralling river in the figure symbolises the energy of the relational space created by the companion’s professional artistry in the turbulence of practice.

The relationship domain has four processes: mutuality (working with, in partnership); reciprocity (reciprocal giving and receiving of wisdom, care, concern); particularity (getting to know the particulars of the other as a whole person in his/her situation and contexts) and; graceful care (authentically engaging the other as a whole person with the whole of oneself and being kind/present/emotionally engaged but balanced).

The blended rationality-intuitive domain has three processes: intentionality (being deliberate, purposeful cognitively and intuitively); saliency (knowing what matters/what is significant/what needs to be paid attention to); temporality (past, present future time, timing, timeliness, pacing and anticipating).

The facilitation domain has four processes: consciousness-raising (enabling conscious awareness of taken-for-granted assumptions, embodied wisdom and the carrying of culture in the body, discourse and language); problematisation (helping others to see problems that they are not aware of, or, re-framing problems to help others see things from different perspectives); self-reflection (helping people to reflect on themselves and their practices to develop self-knowledge and to be able to evaluate their impact with others); critique (engaging in critical-creative