

Chapter 1: Introduction

“The first duty of love is to listen”.

(Paul Tillich, quoted in Nepo, 2012, p.179)

“It took courage to allow myself to pursue something that I loved. I had to allow myself the luxury of learning”.

(Cameron, 2007, p.502)

The Beginning

In this Chapter, I will introduce you to who I am, what brought me to a place of doctoral level inquiry, what I set out to learn and what contributions I am making to the practice and theory of coaching supervision, particularly in virtual small groups.

I am a coaching supervisor, an executive coach, a member of the faculty for a coach supervisor training organization, and a member of the faculty for an executive coach training organization based in North America. My primary practice is supervising virtual small groups of executive coaches. I worked primarily in the virtual space before the global pandemic; now my work is exclusively virtually.

In all of my endeavors I have embraced life as a learner, engaging in a variety of personal and professional development opportunities fueled by my core belief that I am on a journey towards mastery in my profession, in my engagement in life, and in my humanity. I do not imagine I will arrive one day and say, “I know enough”. I am filled with gratitude for the opportunities to awake each morning and engage with others in learning, laughter and love.

I am passionate about my work. I find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in service to the learning and development of others (Whitehead, 2015). In my approach to supervision, I seek to create sacred space. Not sacred in the formal religious sense, but rather a space that holds the mind, heart, body, and spiritual dimensions of the group. O'Donohue's (2008) *Blessing for Work* starts with "May the light of your soul bless your work with love and warmth of heart" (p.146). At the heart of coaching and supervision is presence with the client, and a focus on the client's agenda. This is "love" as Brach defines it— "the offering of our attention is the deepest form of love" (Kornfield and Brach, 2004).

My interest in coaching supervision began at the completion of my coach certification training in 2009. I sought out the leader of the certification program for her advice about how I might continue to develop and learn in the community. She introduced me to a new concept, in the U.S., of coaching supervision, which was designed as reflective practice space. I began as a supervisee in a virtual small group. Reflective practice had been a personal practice since I was in my mid-20s, done alone on Friday afternoons, as I reviewed the week. Now a coaching supervisee in my mid-50s, as we shared our cases and issues, I experienced the different perspectives, approaches, and underlying assumptions of members in my group. As my colleagues inquired about their practice, I was able to notice and learn more about my own practice. I found the learning and comradery nourishing, stimulating, and challenging. I was intrigued. It was mysterious, and I was hooked.

I decided to become a supervisor, and I was certified as a supervisor through a diploma program based in the U.K. in 2014-2015. In the assigned reading there were many references to the lack of an evidence base for executive coaching, and even less for coaching supervision. I felt a tickle of curiosity and it would not go away. My coaching supervisor, Alison Hodge, inspired me as she had recently completed the fourth thesis on coaching supervision (Hodge, 2014). I wanted to learn and engage as a practitioner-researcher and focus on the potential of improving practice in virtual

small group supervision in my executive coaching community in North America. This brought me to Middlesex University in 2016 to the Doctor of Professional Studies programme.

My earlier years

I was born and raised in Portland, Oregon, one of five children. My father had a graduate degree in electrical engineering; and my mother, born in a one room house with a dirt floor, had an eighth-grade education. It was a tumultuous and challenging childhood. I emerged into adulthood with these core beliefs and values: education was my path to a professional career; I was motivated to be in service to others; and hard work and humility, hand in hand, were essential.

I added core values and beliefs in my 20s. I graduated with a degree in Economics just as I was turning 20 and was excited to be embarking on my career. I was deterred as institution after institution turned me away with the explicit statement that they would not hire me, and invest in me, as I would undoubtedly get married, have children and leave the workforce. These experiences inspired me to return to education for a law degree; I was following in my favorite Aunt's footsteps. She had been one of the first women to graduate from her law school; she established a successful practice that provided for her family. From these early adult years, I learned that it was going to be a fight to achieve in the world. The training and capabilities needed for the "fight" were more education, an incessant drive for results, and bold decision making—which meant taking risks, and resilience coupled with perseverance.

Then I came face to face with the issue of working with others. I had completed law school, discovered it was not a career I wanted, and joined a professional publishing firm serving lawyers. After succeeding in a field office, I had been promoted to headquarters to lead a small team in new product development. I then attended a leadership development course at the Center for Creative Leadership. The feedback from my team, and colleagues was difficult—I was an excellent individual contributor; I had not yet

learned how to manage, influence, or lead. My advisor in the program suggested I had three choices: 1. to return, ignore the feedback, and continue just as I was, which would likely lead to termination; 2. to return temporarily, while seeking a position at a different company that would value my current capabilities; or 3. to return, acknowledge and welcome the feedback, and enlist others to help me grow, develop, and learn. I swallowed hard and chose the third option, leaning into humility.

Commitment to learning and development

That experience led me to a new value—the value of candid, rigorous feedback, coupled with developmental and learning opportunities. Within four years I was hired to lead the startup of a new publishing endeavor; and having achieved remarkable success within three years, the startup was merged with the largest legal publisher within the parent corporation and I was appointed as Chief Executive Officer. During those seven years I returned to Center for Creative Leadership four additional times, continuing to work on my developmental edges. I also implemented rigorous feedback and leadership development programs within my organizations for all mid-level and above managers and executives. I continued the focus on professional growth and development as I moved into other Chief Executive Officer roles, and ultimately to the Los Angeles Times as Publisher, Chief Executive Officer, and President. I lived this commitment further by teaching and facilitating programs at the corporate umbrella Leadership Training Institutes in each of my roles.

Becoming a coach and focus on self

I left Corporate America in 2000 and engaged in a variety of opportunities. In 2008 I was hiking in the woods of North Carolina with a friend who had been head of Human Resources for me at the Los Angeles Times. She was reminiscing about our leadership development endeavors and wondered out loud why I had not become an executive coach. Her question flooded me with resonance and ignited my journey to learn and become a certified coach. The biggest surprise to me in the coaching training program was the focus on one's "self as coach" (McLean, 2009). Throughout the eight-month

training program, there was a focus on us as the instrument of our work as well as the theoretical underpinnings and practice requirements. We were offered many opportunities to develop reflective practice capabilities.

I began the exploration of who I was and how it impacted my coaching. I was cracked open by the multitude of possibilities from learning about my habits, beliefs, and actions. I was the consummate problem solver, advice giver, expert with the answer. Those were strengths in my corporate roles; they were not useful in my development as a coach. I had to unlearn them, after decades of acknowledgement and reward for deploying them. I had to learn to be present with the client, in relationship and exploration, in curiosity, to believe that the client was fully resourceful, to begin to learn that my answers were not in service to their development.

The most impactful experiences in the training were the recording reviews, conducted by external mentor coaches who would review a coaching session and provide rich and candid feedback. I relished those reviews—here was the opportunity to live into my value of receiving real feedback—and amazingly it was right there on the recording. I began to record my sessions frequently and review them on my own. It was a mining expedition to see more of myself, to begin to learn how to observe myself in the sessions, not only afterwards. I made a personal commitment to continue recording and reviewing my work going forward.

The three required reviews, in the certification training program, tapped into my prior corporate experience of training and facilitating; I wanted to do recording reviews for other coaches in training. About two years later, as my development as a coach had progressed, the certification program invited me to become an external mentor coach and conduct reviews. In working with coaches in training, I experienced the differences in their responses to the feedback based on a number of variables. Namely, their relationship with feedback, their inner critics, their ability to observe themselves, their defensiveness, the language I used, the stance I came to the session with, the tone and tenor of my observations, and the strength with which I made or reiterated a point.

These observations cultivated a curiosity about becoming a supervisor—how much more effective could I be with these coaches in training if I was trained as a supervisor?

My experiences with the recording reviews as a student, and subsequently as a mentor coach, bring to the foreground how I learn. Until I put a theory, practice, or idea into action, experimenting with it (often awkwardly at first), testing how I bring it into my sessions, exploring it with clients or colleagues, reflecting, and experimenting again, I do not get it. I can say the words, but I do not embody what it means, I cannot dance with it. This is consistent with my activist/pragmatist learning styles (Honey and Mumford, n.d.). I need the experience, the application in practice, to know that I have acquired the knowledge. Reading about theory, models, and how to practice is insufficient.

Cultural Context – North America is at the Beginning of Embracing Supervision

When I enrolled at Middlesex, the U.S. was about 10 years behind the UK and Europe in the adoption of coaching supervision (Turner and Hawkins, 2015, p.4). This survey confirmed my personal experience that many coaches in the US do not see the value of coaching supervision, view it suspiciously and debate it (Mallett, 2015, p.1; Passmore, 2011, pp.3-9; Turner & Hawkins 2015, p.4; Watts and Morgan, 2015, p.1). This lag continues. In the most recent global research (McAnally et al., 2019), coaches based in the US are “still in the early adoption phase of coaching supervision with only 19% working with a Coach Supervisor” (p.11).

This is important context. This is research about North American coaches and supervisors who are early adopters of coaching supervision. It is situated in our phase of early adoption of coaching supervision. It provides part of my motivation for embarking on this journey in order to be able to share the results of the research towards influencing the adoption of supervision within North America.

The utilization of the supervision remains very low, and when this research was undertaken in 2017, it was barely on the horizon (Turner and Hawkins, 2015). The relationship with the organization that sponsored my work ensured I had access to coaches who were engaging in supervision. If I had gone to an organization such as the ICF (International Coaching Federation), it would have been a much more difficult recruitment process to find the proverbial needle in the haystack. Up until 2020, the ICF's position was not to embrace supervision, and in fact it continues to limit to 10 hours over three years the amount of supervision that can be counted as continuing education for recertification of individual coaches (International Coaching Federation, 2021; International Coach Federation, 2014). The first North American coach certified as a supervisor was in 2009 (Marum, 2016). Contrast this with the EMCC (European Mentoring and Coaching Council which required supervision as early as 2004 (EMCC, 2004). This research is about the emergence of supervision practice in North America; it is capturing the innovative work within the Sponsoring Organization's supervision center, the first, and still only, Institute training and certifying coaches that provides supervision for alumni. It is important to read this thesis in this context. One cannot read it from the perspective of the European and U.K. experiences of long-term recognition and utilization of coaching supervision.

[Full circle to beginning this research](#)

This brings us back to where I started this Chapter, with my engaging in supervision following my training, the emerging desire to become a supervisor, and my experiences in the supervisor certification program which led me to Middlesex and this project. My own experiences with recordings initially fueled the project design. An express assumption I had was that this way of learning worked for me; it could work for others.

My need to articulate what I know and continue my learning journey toward mastery by looking at my practice is what brought me to conduct qualitative research within the context of a professional doctorate. Through living and exploring what was happening in the groups I would learn about my own practice, and the practice of small group

supervision. Meeting the requirements of the program to shape the field texts into research texts that share both the practice implications and the desires to contribute to the theoretical knowledge of coaching supervision in small groups, conducted virtually, would provide a context for my development as researcher. It would unlock the ability to live an inquiring life in a radically different way (Marshall, 2016).

My Theory of Supervision

My philosophy and fundamental principles about supervision framed how I approached this research and continued to influence my stance as researcher-supervisor at key points. It started with my love of learning which is at the core of who I am. My key beliefs within that context were embodied in this philosophy:

1. The approach is holistic as a coach and as a supervisor we are the instruments of our work.
2. The journey to coaching mastery requires rigorous and courageous reflection, experimentation, and practice. There is a reason it is called a coaching practice.
3. Supervision is reflective space about one's body of work.
4. There is magic in emergence!!
5. Unconditional positive regard is a foundational principle in coaching and coaching supervision.
6. Coaches initiate supervision and determine the content they bring.
7. Adult learning principles (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2015) must be honored.
8. The creation and co-creation of the container for reflective practice is a joint endeavor, led by the supervisor.
9. There are energetic connections between and among us that exist in the virtual space as well as the in-person space.

The fundamental principles that flow from the philosophy were:

1. Considering one's whole self is essential in considering one's professional self.

2. I will invite the group to join me in collaboratively designing a process that allows for emergence, stillness, silence and wondering. I will encourage those I work with to join me in tuning the process as we work together.
3. While a basic structure for process and for the container is essential; most useful is moving into the unknown, using stillness and silence, using affirmation and challenge, and trusting that whatever emerges is what is needed in that moment.
4. The processes and container are fluid.
5. I will invite the group to join me in wondering about the energetic connections between coach and client, within the client's system and among us as a group.
6. I will invite the group to join me in holding curious and inquiring minds, sharing intuition, compassion, stirrings, feelings and knowledge.
7. One must learn to observe one's self, in order to notice who and how one is and build self-awareness.
8. Feedback is essential to personal and professional growth.
9. For coaches who work independently in one-on-one relationships with their clients, the opportunities for candid and open feedback are limited, and perhaps rare. Supervision, in a small group setting, can provide opportunities for learning about one's self that would more typically come from feedback.
10. One must be bold and rigorous in challenging one's assumptions and beliefs and consistently seek to identify blind and unknown spots.
11. I will strive for holding unconditional positive regard at all times and invite the coaches to practice the same way of being.
12. Coaches lead the content; they establish their learning objectives, what cases/issues/themes/other items they bring for reflection and learning.
13. I encourage the coaches to experiment to learn about how they learn with preparation, participation and follow through.
14. My intention is for experiences that are joyful, fun, contemplative, challenging, nurturing, stimulating, awakening, explorative, reflective and sometimes without immediate answers.
15. My work will be consistent with and reference the appropriate ethical codes.

Purpose: My Motivations

My personal motivations were to engage in a high level of challenge in my personal and professional development; and to articulate my theory of practice through intentional exploration, in a formal research setting, of who I was, how I was and what I did as a supervisor.

My overall purpose was to favorably influence the adoption of coaching supervision within North America by sharing the opportunities and possibilities for growth and development through small group reflective practice with a certified supervisor. I wanted to make contributions to the practice of virtual small group coaching supervision by elucidating what actually happened in the groups; and to contribute to addressing the gap in research-based literature.

Aims

My aims were:

- enhance my capacities as a supervisor
- to become an inquiring practitioner, to embody the interplay of academia and knowledge areas with my practice experiences
- to influence how supervision is conducted in my community
- to share with the global supervisor communities what was learned
- as a platform to invite North American coaches to consider supervision as part of their development

Over the year of research with the supervision groups, the aims of this project were addressed in the evolution to these two inquiries: What are the qualities and conditions that create enough safety in the supervision relationships within a group to enable self-disclosure, reflection and learning? How are these qualities and conditions designed and brought forth?

My initial aims were expressed, more narrowly, as an inquiry about experimenting with using observational experiences in the small group supervision experience: what were the qualities and conditions that allowed the coaches to self-disclose by bringing their actual work into the session?

I set out to explore this question by asking coaches to experiment by bringing their actual coaching to the supervision sessions through recordings, transcripts, or coaching in the session itself. My particular focus was on reflective practice as the primary function of supervision with a provocative ask of self-disclosure—to have a coach share with the group their actual work, rather than share through storytelling.

As I will share later in this thesis, the initial inquiry broadened over the first several months of the groups engaging in supervision to the two questions set forth above.

[Emergent and Iterative Approach](#)

“Qualitative Research design, then, should be seen less as a linear, sequential pathway, but rather as a series of iterations involving design, data collection, preliminary analysis and re-design” (Gray, 2018, p.169).

My approved project proposal was for qualitative research using phenomenological case studies of supervision groups within my community. Originally, I conceived of this project with two research groups each supervised by one of my colleagues. Very quickly, I revised my approach and decided to also be a supervisor. I would be one of the participants; not solely an observer researching about them. I received approval to amend the project proposal. This was the beginning of an emergent and iterative approach.

In a more typical doctoral journey, the researcher identifies their inquiry, engages in a rigorous literature search to inform themselves of the opportunities for making a contribution to knowledge in their field, refines their inquiry, selects an appropriate methodology and methods, collects data, analyzes the data, and articulates outcomes and conclusions (Gray, 2018). The typical flow of the resulting thesis is a linear description

of the process, with identification of bumps and obstacles along the way. Nonetheless the road was followed.

This thesis is not that.

My journey to a Doctor of Professional Studies was influenced by three factors. First, I approached it as a research-practitioner with an inquiry that shifted and changed through the interactions with the research-participants. As a practitioner, I welcomed the immersive and emergent qualities of supervision. I listened, engaged in dialogue, questioned my assumptions and narratives, listened more, and shaped and reshaped the inquiry. Second, I was juggling three roles: researcher (embarking on my degree), insider (as staff of the Sponsor organization as faculty and supervisor within the supervision center), and practitioner (supervising two of the groups engaged in the research). This influence meant taking care to ensure ethical research in the context of participants who were participating in the research while they were paying for the supervision experience (the coaches) and were paid for the supervision experience (supervisors), which took intentional awareness and attention to elevating their concerns ahead of the research concerns. There were two benefits to this approach – the first is researching *with* (as opposed to *on*) the participants (Bradbury, 2015). Second, the field texts represent what really happened in the commercial real-life context, rather than in a purely observational research context.

The voice through the thesis is primarily that of me as the researcher-practitioner. It is consistently intertwined with an awareness of my responsibilities in all of my roles. The researcher voice emerges louder in considering inquiry, process, literature, and other similar elements. My practitioner voice comes to the forefront in Chapters 5 and 6 and in the final two chapters as I share what happened in each of the groups and describe the learnings that occurred.

If that isn't challenging enough to navigate, the richness of narrative inquiry includes even more voices: the voices of the participants, the voices of the supervisors, the voice

of the sponsoring organization, and the collective-group voices within the multiple experiences, perspectives, and interactions (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000). It requires both relationships between the supervisor and the participants with the researcher, and for my two groups, the researcher as supervisor. The participants' views and perspectives are in the foreground in chapters 5, 6, and 7. It is essential and respectful.

This is not intended as a rule book for group supervision; nor is it intended to provide findings or conclusions that are generalizable (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Rather it's a multi-voiced account of what happened in five groups and what was learned from these experiences.

I have made a deliberate decision to share with the reader the emergence of this process for two reasons. One, it's true to what happened and provides context for the evolution of this work. Two, while it complicates the readers' task, it provides insights for future researchers on the myriad, nuanced elements of being an insider-researcher-practitioner; and it is intended to capture the joyful process of engaging in the world as it is and working with what arises. This decision is expressed as Pivot #4 in Figure 1 below.

In-service to you, the reader, there are several signposts throughout this writing to help you understand where I started, the key pivots and how they came to be, and which voice is most prevalent in the various chapters. The pivots are summarized in Figure 1 below. Still, it is quite likely this remains a challenging read as it is conveying the messiness of small group coaching supervision. It is not a conventional thesis, yet I am certain that for the readers who engage with the text wholly, as one might engage with supervision itself, they will find themselves leaving with a deep appreciation for the complexity of the supervision experience, and a burning curiosity to experiment, reflect, and learn through that complexity.

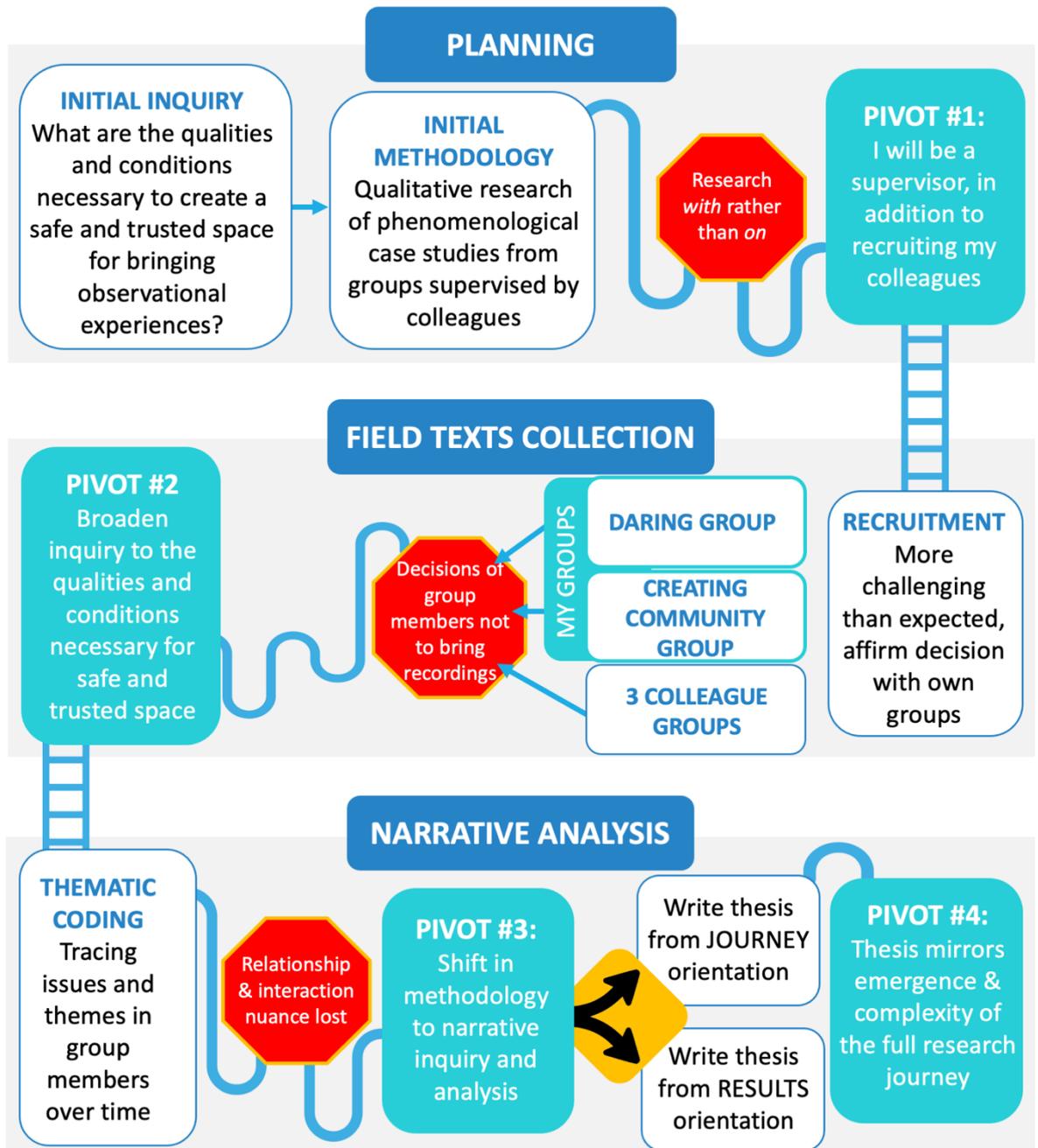


Figure 1: Key Pivots and Pivot #4

Contribution to practice and to theory

Two significant contributions are made to the knowledge of practice in the North American context. The first affirms the effectiveness of virtual small group supervision and the second reveals the multiplicity of practitioner accounts through the explicit revelation of our processes, approaches and interactions. These vignettes are the invitation to North American coaches to consider supervision by illuminating what was possible and how supervision could be experienced. The contributions to theory are to the understanding of the dimensions of the supervisory relationships in group supervision and the qualities and conditions that contribute to safe and trusted space.

The experiences of coaching supervision within two virtual small groups are elucidated; this is the first study, that I know of, on virtual small groups; the first study on small groups including external coaches; and just the third qualitative study on supervised small groups overall (Armstrong and Geddes, 2009; Butwell, 2006). Supervisor and coaches came together virtually, in small groups, and learned and developed, in their own unique ways, personally and professionally through integration of inquiry, reflection, and action. The findings and conclusions contribute to the understanding of coaching supervision and reflective practice.

The contributions to theory are the understanding of the dimensions of the supervisory relationship in the virtual small group context and the qualities required for the creation and stewardship of a safe and trusted container. I propose a process for the supervision engagement, a model for the elements the supervisor is holding, a model for reflective practice and learning opportunities and a model of the overall movements and views of the supervisor within the session. These demonstrate processes and methods to respond to the challenge to supervisors by Michael Carroll (2009, p.50) to work with their supervisees to learn how to be reflective practitioners.

I am writing this primarily for supervisors who are curious about their own work, who want to consider additional perspectives, open possibilities, identify more of their own habitual actions, and inquire about their journey on the road toward mastery. Supervisors who are awake to, and in wonder about their practices. I share the experiences of myself as supervisor, my two groups, and how we developed the sacred space for rigorous inquiry into our work so that others may contrast, compare, and reflect on how they supervise and work with their groups. Additionally, I offer the experiences as shared by the three additional groups supervised by colleagues to further explore through comparison of different approaches to supervision. I believe there is fertile ground for new discoveries. My ultimate goal, which encompasses my original reasons for coming to Middlesex, is to provoke multi-dimensional conversations that inspire supervisors and coaches to explore and enrich the practice of small group supervision.

Three additional sets of readers may benefit from this illumination of practice. Supervisees, and coaches considering supervision for the first time, could learn from how we worked together, reflecting on how they engage in reflective practice, and how they prepare and participate in supervision. Certification programs for supervisors may find useful information and ideas to inform and enrich their curriculum. This will be useful to anyone who gathers virtually, in small groups, and wants to learn more about how to facilitate or participate. In this time of COVID-19, the utilization of virtual small groups has expanded dramatically. The benefit of this research is greater than I could have imagined before the global pandemic changed everything in our world.

[Organization of the chapters](#)

I have just introduced you to my journey to Middlesex, my purposes to contribute to the coaching supervision practice and theory, and the primary reader that I have had in mind as I wrote. The Chapters are arranged in the following manner

Chapter 2—I set forth the literature that I drew on during this project. I engaged in the literature as the research progressed, seeking out theories and perspectives to inform how I considered what I was learning through practice.

Chapter 3—I discuss the project plan, including sponsorship, methodologies and methods.

Chapter 4—I describe the recruitment process which had the unusual component of having participants pay commercial rates for the supervision they undertook while participants in this project.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6—In the prologue to these chapters I share the move to narrative inquiry. In the Chapters I share vignettes from each of my own supervision groups as supervisor and capture the voices and experiences of the group members with quotes from the recordings, journal entries and other communications. I share the richness and complexity of the stories of the experiences of two groups.

Chapter 7— I write primarily as researcher about the experiences of the three groups supervised by colleagues based on the major themes that emerged in the prior two chapters.

Chapter 8—The findings on the co-creation and stewardship of the container that enabled self-disclosure, reflection and learning.

Chapter 9—The findings on the reflection and learning that was experienced, as well as consideration of ethical issues.

Chapter 10—The conclusions that contribute to the theory and practice of coaching supervision in virtual small groups and the evolution in my theory of practice.

Chapter 11—I share my reflections and learning as I look back on this journey.