

Prologue to Chapters 5 and 6

“Practice is a laboratory”.

(emphasis in original) (Jarvis, 1999, p.92)

*“I suppose a room is the summation of all that has happened inside it.”
“Yes, I think it is,” agreed the Count. “And though I’m not exactly sure
what has come of all the intermingling in this particular room, I am
fairly certain that the world has been a better place because of it”.*

(Towles, 2016, p.331)

Turn to narrative inquiry

As described in Chapter 3, I planned to use an interpretive approach to analyze the data collected. In supervision, the coaches primarily shared cases and issues through storytelling. To understand the following chapters, it is necessary for me to make explicit that I ultimately embraced narrative inquiry rather than phenomenological case study methodology. My journey to embracing narrative inquiry happened throughout the research process; for clarity, I explain it in this prologue to the Chapters in which I share the narratives of the Daring Group and the Creating Community Group.

Data Analysis

I began the data analysis with two steps. First, by steeping myself in the data: I read all of the transcripts, journal entries, various emails, and my own regular reflections, as well as re-watched the 47 hours of recorded sessions. I was observing myself as supervisor, the group interactions and what I noticed from process and content perspectives. I contrasted the early sessions with the later sessions; I contrasted each group with the others. Then, second, I stepped back from the practice perspective and considered what the literature offered me as different lenses of what was going on. At that time, I was immersed in 4 books that explored dialogue in groups—Isaacs (1999) on dialogue, Coyle (2018) on creating effective work teams, Block (2009) on building community and Scharmer (2009) on reflective practice. These books captured my interest as they

explored small group interactions. I had not yet decided the focus of my research would be on the container and its ebb and flow in reflective practice. I was still holding the mistaken belief I could write about more than this single topic; I had a robust list of possibilities.

Thematic Coding

I began coding the transcripts. I used the thematic coding approach (Saldaña, 2015) of identifying themes, grouping them into larger themes by pulling meaning from sentences or sentence fragments. In coding the 14 hours of the first group's sessions, and their action learning meetings, I assigned 59 concepts that incorporated ideas from the literature and my knowledge of the intent, goals and process of supervision. It was a process that took me deeper into the transcripts. It also caused me to notice that by coding fragments, the relational elements among the participants were lost. In my late August 2018 meditations, I wrote:

I noticed I could not pick phrases or sentences from the transcript and code them – ala assigning words or phrases and categorizing these. (Saldaña, 2015) The “pulling apart” of the words, phrases and sentences, did not help add meaning. Rather, it took away meaning. The transcripts are of interactions. People in relationship, in dialogue, in discovery, in exploration. The relationships and their facets, the dynamics within and among the group, levels of connection, deference, challenge – the dance within the group – is what provides the context. The context is what gives meaning to the data – it cannot stand alone.

My focus in the coding was on the process—e.g., facilitation of a recording review, exploration of the reflection question, inquiry by colleague, inquiry by supervisor—and on outcomes—e.g., increase in self-awareness, learning-in-the-moment, shame, vulnerability, etc.

I was beginning to identify my preferences to considering the data and analyzing it. I was drawn more to the story—the narrative of what was happening in the experience. I found myself focusing on the nuanced, complex, layered elements of the interactions: what was

between the lines of observable data, the relationship elements among the participants and the participants' evolving relationship with themselves. How the groups, and individuals, and our working relationships changed over the year; I paused the coding.

Focus on the inquiries within the container

I was feeling pulled in a number of directions: the supervision process itself was structured around storytelling (Clandinin, 2007); the coach's presentation of the case was narrative; and I was wondering how to capture what the coach was noticing, feeling, sensing, judging, or wishing. The complexities of what transpired in the sessions were rich with learning for many of the participants, and for me, as a supervisor and a researcher. I saw the potential of contributing to the academic knowledge through sharing meaningful narratives. Marshall's (2016) elegant prose had painted images for me at every turn and created a deep longing to engage with my research in a way that future readers might experience the power of the narratives.

I considered the data from different perspectives, exploring not the process but the content of the sessions. I began to consider that the "data" were the "field texts" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), within which there was the content that came into the room—the cases, issues, themes, inquiries, reflections and learning—as well as the processes by which the content were structured—pre-session emails, the format of the session including check-in and reflections on reflection questions, the type of facilitation used by the supervisor, e.g., hierarchical, autonomous (Heron, 1999), the use of observational methods, etc.

I revisited the transcripts and journal entries to track how a case or situation was first presented, how the issue shifted through the inquiry in the group, what the coaches took away with them in the session, and how their reflections shifted in the journaling following the session. I put these on flipcharts. I categorized the themes that arose in the consideration of the cases, identifying 30 in total, and connected the themes through the sessions using the low-tech approach of yarn. See Figure 9, a photo.

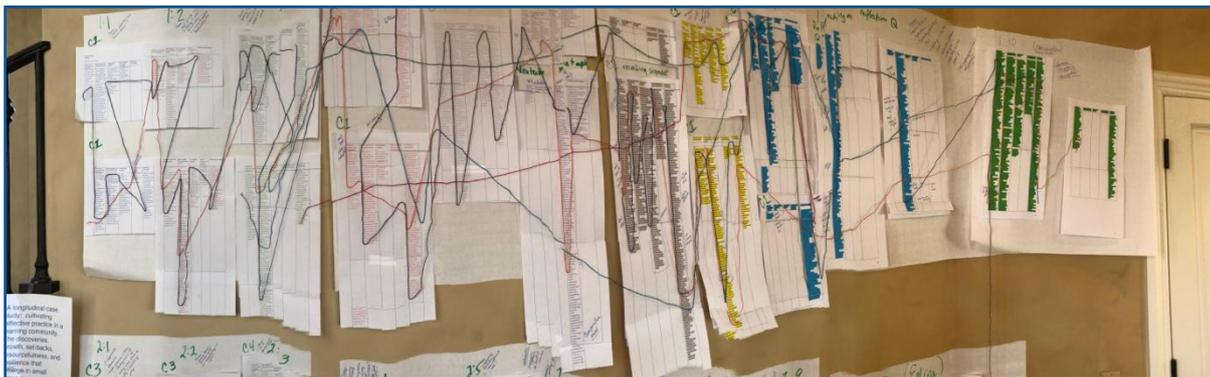


Figure 9: Flipcharts

I continued to consider the scope and fragmentation of the field texts. At the recommendation of my academic supervisor, I took a deeper dive into narrative inquiry, reading Polkinghorne (1988), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), some of the chapters within the Handbook of Narrative Inquiry edited by Clandinin (2007), and returned to two favorites – Bateson’s *Peripheral Visions* (1994) and Karr’s *Art of the Memoir* (2015). I also noticed that what pulled me into Block (2009) and Coyle (2018) were the stories—I could “see” the adults trying to build a structure with spaghetti strands, string, tape and a marshmallow (Coyle, 2018, pp.xv-xviii), and the bringing together of community members to create “restorative community” (Block, 2009, pp.47-54).

Primary focus on my two groups

I decided to focus on the two groups I had supervised and use the experiences of the three other groups to help me see more of myself as supervisor, and to further illuminate the experiences within my groups. Jarvis (1999) notes that “certain aspects of their practice, such as those that are tacit or habituated” are difficult to identify by their very nature (p.103). Our experiences inform what we notice; it is difficult to describe the water one swims in when one is a goldfish (Wallace, 2005). I have wondered about this throughout the research process—what was it that I was doing as a supervisor, or as a researcher, that was part of who and how I am, but was either unconscious competence or unconscious incompetence? What were the ways of excavating this knowledge, these skills or capabilities? The three groups supervised by others provided bright illumination.

As I learned about their experiences, I learned more about supervision in virtual small groups, and what was out of sight to me (Burch cited in Bryson, 2016).

Pivot #3 Arriving at narrative Inquiry

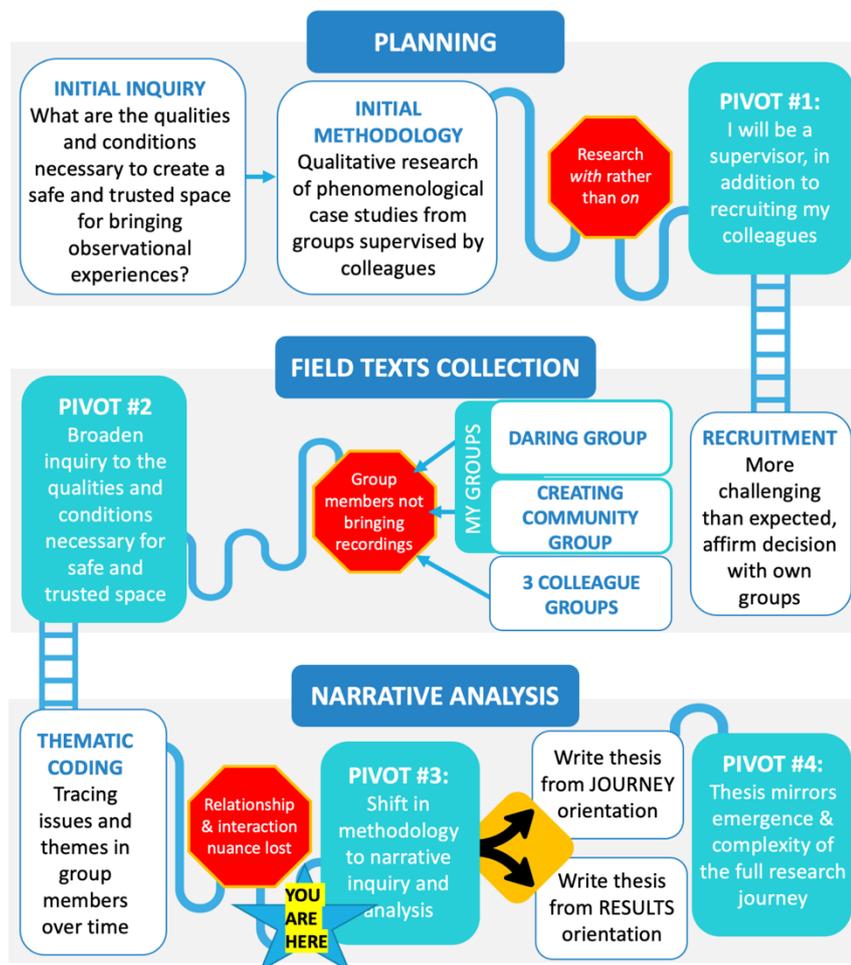


Figure 10: Pivot #3

Narrative inquiry—excavating what we know, how we reflect, our own stories, and what leads to learning (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000)—is the process of the supervision experience. I decided to demonstrate this, embody this, and create a lived experience for the reader. To place the reader in the wonder of “Who we are is how we coach” (Murdoch and Arnold, 2013), supervise (ibid.), research (Xu and Storr, 2012), and write (Marshall, 2016).

My stance as I undertook the narrative analysis incorporated and integrated what I had learned, and then was shaped and re-shaped over time as I continued to act, reflect, evaluate and consider (Kolb, 2015), moving deeper into self-reflection and critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1990) with the benefit of the full arc of the year of supervision sessions.

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) described the “four turns” to narrative inquiry:

We become narrative inquirers only when we recognize and embrace the interactive quality of the researcher-researched relationship, primarily use stories as data and analysis, and understand the way in which what we know is embedded in a particular context, and finally that narrative knowing is essential to our inquiry (p.7).

I made these four turns over a long period of time, and not in sequential order.

Turn One happened in the first 18 months of the research through the development of my proposal, receiving approval, and navigating major revisions during recruitment. I moved from a theoretical commitment to working with the participants (Pedler and Burgoyne, 2015) to having been challenged with putting it into practice.

I was primed to make the second turn, the appreciation of words, language and story, early in my corporate career as I sought approval for development of new products as what mattered most were the stories, not the numbers. I made the second turn when, as described above, I was coding and found the loss of context and relationship to be a huge problem. In reading Marshall (2016) she further illuminated for me that narrative inquiry wasn't just about what happened but was about providing context through narrative detail to illuminate what happens beneath the surface and to allow for interpretation. I had read and savored the experiences of the stories.

Marshall's (2016) book was, at the most elemental level, a manifestation of being on the journey as a lifelong learner. She shared with the reader sweeping global perspectives and the smallest of details, she interwove first-person inquiry with the academic

literature, with being in relationship with others, her own journaling and collective writing. As she writes of “the southern group,” she shares the landscape, the seasonal colors, the carpark, the drive with another group member (ibid., pp.125-128). I was caught off guard. Even as I write this paragraph in this moment, I marvel at the box I had created for what was “appropriate” to share within the stories. I had visualized including the personal and professional challenges of the participants when “relevant” (in my assessment) to the stories. I hadn’t imagined including the change of seasons, the weather, the physical locations of the participants. The world that is alive around us was not part of my concept of what should or could be written; yet as I reread the transcripts there it was in its fullness: one coach “wishing you could see what I see out my window, distracted by the birds singing”; another noticing that her presence was different that day as she was driving, on the phone, and found that “[she was] more present in different way than on the video”; the supervisor who shared she was relocating countries and how much that meant in logistics, in loss, in possibilities.

I was struck by the parallels in the use of stories: coaches work with the stories their clients share (Drake, 2015; McLean, 2012); coaches bring the stories of their work with their clients, and the clients’ stories to supervision (Clutterbuck, Whitaker and Lucas, 2016; Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Bachkirova, Jackson and Clutterbuck, 2011). Narrative inquiry looks at the stories of the researcher and the researched (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000); as a coach and supervisor I was familiar with working with stories; as a supervisee and coaching client, I was familiar with my own stories. The challenging task to engage in narrative inquiry proved to be the move from the field texts to the research texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Turn three toward narrative inquiry involved moving from generalization to the particular— “narrative inquirers embrace the power of the particular for understanding experience and using findings from research to inform themselves in specific places at specific times” (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, p.24). This brought me back to the beginning of the research design as a practitioner-researcher. In writing about narrative studies Gergen (2015) states “narrative research features the first-hand accounts of people

themselves...their voices are treated with respect..." (p.73) and it gathers "the narratives by which we construct our lives" (p.72).

I saw that the markers for the possibilities of narrative inquiry were with me from the beginning; I did not yet know enough to recognize the signposts. These concepts are also found in action learning (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014, p.16) and insider-researcher endeavors (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010).

There was one more turn to consider as I made this declaration—the turn to acknowledging "multiple ways of knowing and understanding human experience" (Pinnegar and Daynes, p.25). Narrative inquirers "accept and value the way in which narrative inquiry allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist as part of the research account" (ibid.). "Part of the narrative inquirer's doubts come from understanding that they need to write about people, places and things, as *becoming* rather than *being*...that they have a narrative history and are moving forward" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.145).

As I was writing and revising a book chapter (Downing, 2019), I saw that the disparity of experiences with bringing or not bringing recordings and/or transcripts were individual to each coach. Each one could describe why he or she brought it, why they didn't, why they intended to but didn't, why they were not going to do so but did, and so on. How to recognize all of this, without the need to find a generalizing principle, emerged in the Chapter entitled "A new dimension? Using Observational Data in Supervision" (Downing, 2019). I had arrived at the signpost for turn four.

"Engaging in narrative inquiry entails thinking within the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry—temporality, sociality, and place" (Clandinin, 2016, p.38). The temporality was the 18-24 months of the project, and the views of each of our lives before I moved "into living alongside" the participants (ibid., p. 43), as well as our prior relationships and our future relationships. The sociality was the group as we came together, our individual and shared experiences, the certification and training experiences including the methodology, language, format and process of the learning

experiences, the culture of the Sponsor’s programs, our knowledge of the faculty personalities and foibles, and the lives of each of us outside of the sessions—our practice, our clients and their organizations, our families and friends. Sociality was about our internal landscapes as well as existential questions. Finally, the places were our Zoom windows during the sessions and all of the places we were in, whether office, home, automobile or other settings. It is also where we lived, traveled, referenced and planned for, e.g., training for a marathon, planning a wedding, raising a teenage daughter, or staying in a hotel room (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.50).

The stories of what happened in these two groups in Chapters 5 and 6, and the three colleague groups in Chapter 7, are told as institutional narratives “expressions of who ‘we’ are, what we’re doing, where we have been, where we’re going, and why” (Chase, 2018, p.550). The institution is the practice of supervision within the supervision center.

[My theory of supervision: how I practiced](#)

In 2015 I drafted my philosophy of group supervision—my approach as a supervisor. It is summarized at pages 9-10 in Chapter 1. The full statement is in Appendix 6. I share this because in my research it was clear that supervisors took different approaches in supervision, based on who they were, as well as the group dynamics. The reader will have a better sense of the vignettes in Chapters 5 and 6 by having the descriptions of my philosophy.

[An alert to readers—a challenging read ahead](#)

When I reached this point in the thesis I considered how to proceed. The shape of the next several chapters was not my initial starting point. With each draft, I went back to Clandinin’s and Connelly’s (2000, p.155-156) soup metaphor for research texts that leaves broad latitude to the author. As I introduced in Chapter 1, this was an emergent and iterative process, just as coaching supervision is an emergent and iterative process. In the cultural context of North America’s very early and hesitant embrace of supervision, and within the context of 5 groups of coaches and supervisors with differing levels of experience as coaches and in supervision, on the leading edge of utilizing small groups for

reflective practice, I found the complexity and messiness of change, experimentation and learning. These five groups were not the norm; they were courageous enough to undertake supervision under commercial terms, and to participate as research participants. Five groups willing to be seen, to share their inquiries about themselves and their professional practices through their learning journeys.

As I take you through what we did together, I was present throughout as myself, with experiences including as a coach, as a supervisor, as a researcher, and in my many other roles as a human. While I cannot separate these role-specific parts of myself to the exclusion of the other parts, I did often bring one of the roles to the foreground in observing, interacting and writing. For example, I focused more on my three responsibilities as supervisor when I interacted with my two groups, although my researcher role was there as well. In interacting with the three colleague groups, I focused more on my responsibilities as researcher, although I was also observing and interacting with an awareness of my supervisor self. The coaches participated in dual roles, as coaches, and as supervisees. The voices of these roles are present in the following three chapters. This is why this section is titled “An alert to readers—a challenging read ahead”.

I write in Chapter 5 about The Daring Group, in Chapter 6 about the Creating Community Group and in Chapter 7 about the Colleague Groups. I share narrative accounts of moments or segments of our work together that highlight what this research is about—the co-creation and stewardship of a safe container that creates the environment for self-disclosure and reflective practice. I do not necessarily share these accounts sequentially, nor are they told in ways that make the linear totality of the sessions coherent. In the supervision sessions and through journal entries, the supervisees and I lived and told our stories; in the action learning meetings and in later supervision sessions, we retold our stories, reliving some of them through how we had changed (Clandinin, 2016, p.34). The vignettes included in the following chapters are fragments in a mosaic of moments, each contributing to the bigger picture. “We must, in the composing, co-composing, and negotiation of interim and final research texts, make visible the multiplicity, as well as the

narrative coherence and lack of narrative coherence, of our lives, the lives of participants, and the lives we co-compose in the midst of our narrative inquiries” (ibid., p.49).

I write the vignettes in Chapters 5 and 6 primarily as supervisor and capture the voices and experiences of the group members with quotes from the recordings, journal entries and other communications. As I referenced in Chapter 2, the literature on the roles of the small group supervisor was primarily in the clinical supervision context and emphasized three roles of the supervisor as being in relationship with the individuals and the group, manager of the group dynamics and reflective practice guardian (Bernard and Goodyear, 2019; Ögren, Boethius and Sundin, 2014; Proctor, 2008). These roles emerged as important in this study. Each role required cultivation and ongoing stewardship. As I share the vignettes, I identify the primary role from which I am writing, whether ***supervisory relationships, facilitating within the dynamics of the group setting, or guardian of reflective practice***. In several vignettes the interconnectedness of the roles is noted. In a few, I write from my role ***as researcher*** and make that explicit. At the beginning of each vignette, the role is identified in *italics* for ease of the reader.

I write the vignettes in Chapter 7 as researcher, rather than supervisor, and capture the voices and experiences of the group members through their journal entries and focus groups. By sharing the richness and complexity of the details of my experiences, and the participants, that in itself is partially “the answer” (Flyvberg, 2006, p.240) to what reflective practice is, and how it can be embraced in virtual small group settings.

Following the vignettes, in Chapters 8 and 9, I share my findings and continuing inquiries; in Chapter 10, I state my conclusions. In the final Chapter, I share my reflections and learning.