

Taking Restorative Practices Seriously

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Abstract

Reflecting on four years experience this paper explores some of the challenges and successes Re-Engage Youth Services encountered as they embarked on a journey to embed restorative practices throughout the organisation. This meant important changes to key aspects of service delivery, and just as importantly, it meant foundational changes to policy and procedures for managing staff and communication. This paper represents an honest attempt to share our reflections on what has been helpful and unhelpful for those interested in undertaking a similar journey.

Introduction

In 2011 key members of Re-Engage Youth Services' leadership team (the then "youth arm" of Community Partnerships at Work) met with Terry O'Connell (Director of Real Justice Australia) to discuss what was understood at the time to be a program called "The Challenge" (O'Connell, The Challenge, 2010). What was poorly understood at the time was that Terry wasn't interested in simply offering a program to add to the suite of other programs that Re-Engage Youth Services (Re-Engage) had already developed for young people. Instead he was looking for the right organisation to take on restorative practices (RP) (Wachtel, 2012) as a whole of organisation practice framework. That meant not only using it as a framework to guide our work with young people, but embedding it deeply into the organisation's DNA. This included: challenging organisational culture, rewriting policies and procedures, and developing consistency that would inspire new ways of working. In short, it was a challenge to take restorative practices seriously.

Since that time the organisation has been on a journey that has had many highlights and a few critical "learning opportunities" (what might commonly be known as mistakes). What follows below is a summary of some of these more interesting moments and an attempt to weave them into a logical progression of learning. The reality of course is something much more disjointed and arduous. Change happens slowly (though some of the Re-Engage staff might dispute this point) and often it is experienced by those on the ground as a process that feels more like "two steps forward, one step back". The journey described below will focus on the following elements and how they have developed over the course of the last four years:

- Our practice with young people
- Our practice with each other
- Sharing our practice with others

We want to present this reflection in the form of a story so as to make it broadly accessible, and to do justice to the developmental nature of change. However there are other equally appropriate ways to sequence the events that took place. That is, we could also use the event to emphasise the journey of being:

- Firstly being restorative with yourselves/ourselves (our personal insights)
- Secondly being restorative with each other (the changes we have made to organisation culture etc)
- Finally being restorative with everyone else (the way we work with young people and how we share the journey)

Whilst we are opting for the more chronological approach, the alternative approach would have highlighted the importance of the personal work of restorative practices and how our work with young people and others is built squarely on this foundation.

Re-Engage Youth Services works with young people suffering multiple and complex needs, issues and barriers, helping them to reengage in education and employment pathways. Through its mobile assertive outreach case management service, programs and individualized support, Re-Engage helps disadvantaged, vulnerable young people to become productive, healthy and participating members of our community. (Re-Engage Youth Services Inc, 2008)

In early 2011, Kerrie Sellen (Re-Engage Youth Services Manger) and Tara Lemmens (Team Leader) were introduced to Terry O'Connell through a mutual friend¹. Shortly after this initial meeting, Re-Engage applied for and won to offer "The Challenge" training to local case managers. Terry returned to meet again with the leadership team at Re-Engage and the newly appointed Senior Restorative Practitioner (Ben Lohmeyer). The team came to this meeting with many years of experience in the youth sector and some previous exposure to Restorative Justice². At the conclusion of the meeting a memorable moment occurred that has continued to shape the personal and organisational journey since: Ben put a question to Terry about the program's (The Challenge) capacity to engage young people who did not wish to voluntarily participate. Aside for the obvious inquiry about participation, the question had at its core a fundamental misunderstanding about the journey we were about to go on. Upon reflection the layers of significance in the question demonstrated the difference between a behavioural focus (that motivated the question) and the relational focus that restorative practices was going to bring. It was the difference between a program and a practice framework. Creating a now all too familiar experience of frustration, Terry responded to the question with a relatively dismissive: "Mate, once you get it you will be asking different questions." Frustratingly, he was right.

Our first Challenge

In our first meeting we encountered something completely unexpected: Terry didn't initially volunteer information. Instead he relentlessly asked questions:

- Tell me about your practice?
- You mentioned that you use a coaching model. What is this about?
- You have regular structured staff meeting. What form do these take?
- What do you talk about?

¹ Kudos to Cherly Bevan and Leslie Oliver

² Kerrie had undertaken The Challenge training 10 years prior. Whilst it had influenced her thinking and practice since that time, the program form of "The Challenge" had largely sat on the shelf with other "good ideas". Ben was undertaking a Master of Peace and Conflict studies at the time and was currently exploring a subject titled Community and Restorative Justice.

- What do you hope to achieve from these meetings?
- What are some of your practice challenges?
- What does success look like when working with young people and their families?

We were surprised by how impressed Terry was with what we were already doing. He said it was refreshing to hear practitioners explain their practice rationale. Particularly impressive was the deliberate structure and purpose. However, most importantly there were clear expectations around how all staff should engage young people and their families. When Terry finally shared some information, he began by suggesting that restorative practices as a framework had the potential to make our existing practice more explicit. It could offer a common language and practice that could be easily understood and shared by all stakeholders. The idea of being more explicit made sense in theory (O'Connell, *The Origins of Restorative Conferencing*, 2009, p. 2). However, how to go about sharing our practice rationale with young people and their families in practice wasn't immediately clear. We understood the value of what Terry was offering, but we didn't have a frame of reference then to make sense of what this looked like in practice. Developing this frame of reference is at the core of our journey.

Our starting point

Our journey to robust and deliberate practice didn't start with restorative practices. Even before we met with Terry we already had in place sound practice. Terry's questions helped us to clarify what we were already doing, whilst at the same time, highlighting the need to be more explicit in everything we did. Understanding where we were starting from and how our existing knowledge was a good fit with restorative practices, explains why within a couple of years Re-Engage had fully embraced the framework as our organisational philosophy³.

In 2008 Kerrie and Tara established the youth arm of Community Partnerships at Work: Re-Engage. This opportunity provided them with a chance to start fresh and build an organisation from the ground up. It was a chance to do things differently. There was a desire to build into the structure of Re-Engage some of the values that they believed were essential for good practice. These included:

- Ongoing critical reflection on practice
- Creating greater consistency for young people around practice and staffing
- Genuinely valuing staff for their contribution and commitment

In order to achieve these goals they set up regular practices in staff meetings that promoted critical reflection and affirmed good practice. They also attempted to manage staff in a way that offered flexibility, and designed incentives that would retain staff long term: for example staff rewards, greater access to leave and ongoing professional development. A "coaching approach" (Life Buisness, 2013) was adopted as the central practice framework. This approach

³ Our practice remains a work in progress but we feel we are well on the journey.

emphasised working alongside young people. It describes the case manager's role as a support and motivator to help them design and create the life that they wanted to live⁴. This foundation was built on the years of experience working in the sector and striving for best practice. The synergies between what was already established and the core values of restorative practices were clear. It was these synergies that set the stage for the next level of development in our practice.

The power of questions

A broad theme which encapsulates the learning that happened in 2011 could simply be: Questions. We had to discipline ourselves as we realised that focussing on asking questions was not as straightforward as it sounded. It was often with some trepidation and uncertainty that we engaged with each new restorative encounter. The most challenging aspect of this questioning (Socratic) (O'Connell, *The Challenge*, 2010, p. 22) approach was that up until this point, our confidence in our practice was based in our knowledge and skills which enabled us to offer opinions and advice. We prided ourselves on being problem solvers. Suddenly we were being asked to abandon this in favour of questions. As we built our skills we began to appreciate that using questions are the very heart of framing the 'right conversations'⁵.

The organisation, that is the all staff members, participated in follow-up training on two further occasions that year. On each of these occasions we were challenged to integrate restorative processes into our day-to-day practice. For some, this came naturally. For others, it was a struggle. We experimented with the various elements of the framework. We consistently used these restorative questions (*What happened? What were you thinking at the time? What have you thought about since? What has been affected and in what way? What do you need to do to make things right?*) (Watchel, *Dreaming of a New Reality*, 2013, p. 16). We handed parents the business sized question cards (O'Connell, *The Challenge*, 2010) and encouraged them to use these with their children. These questions also became part of how we challenged one another and in our personal reflection.

Some of us began to integrate these skills with other resources that were regularly part of our practice. One innovative staff member would deliberately leave a Hoberman Sphere⁶ on the front seat of her car. She did this so that when she picked up a young person to transport them to a program or appointment they would have to pick it up before taking a seat. Starting the conversation with "What is this?" the young person would initiate a conversation that led inevitably to talking about relationships and shame. Other staff began incorporating other

⁴ This model is called "Coaching Young People for Success" and is designed by Life Business.

⁵ "Right conversations" deserve much greater definition than what we can offer here other than to say they are those in which the young person and their family are actively engaged in a collaborative process, which lays out clear expectations, and promotes the sharing of positive and negative affects (Nathanson, 1992).

⁶ The Hoberman Sphere is a tool that can be used as metaphor for how we react to feeling embarrassed or ashamed. It is brightly coloured and when it is closed it is spiky and small. When it is opened up its much larger, it has open spaces for conversation and people can metaphorically "get in".

visual resources such as picture cards or story books that taught emotional literacy and facilitated self awareness. Largely this was a year of experimentation. We also wanted to begin to challenge ourselves to articulate our practice. We became our own test subjects. Our team meetings format already included a chance for “critical reflection” (sharing failures) and “high fives” (sharing successes). In order to be more explicit, we started including in the reflection what it was about our practice that had or hadn’t worked. We also facilitated a few internal staff trainings where Kerrie and Ben would remind staff of the key elements of the framework and provide opportunities for staff to share what they had tried. We even sat staff in front of a video camera and asked them to reflect on what they had learnt or what bits of the framework they had experimented with.⁷ The energy and experimentation of 2011 set the groundwork for 2012. Of particular importance was the end of year staff day at which we created a mantra to encapsulate and articulate what restorative practices meant in our context.

Explicit practice 2012

The creation of a mantra at the end of 2011 was emblematic of the theme of 2012: Being Explicit (Ritchie & O’Connell, 2001, p. 156). In early 2012 we won a second round of funding with the purpose of sharing the learning we had gained from 2011. This began the challenge of shaping the way we communicated what we were doing and why. Expecting this to largely be about sharing and training other organisations, we were challenged yet again by the real value of being explicit. Communicating with our peers about the “what” and “why” of our practice has its challenges. However, with our peers we found we had a shared vocabulary and worldview that came from similar training and experiences. Communicating with people without this similar starting point, for example parents, professionals from a different sector (even one as closely related as teaching) and ultimately young people, was another challenge all together. Yet here is where we found the greatest reward. Taking the time to talk about what we do and why, with a parent and a young person transforms the conversation. It shifts from being one in which you are delivering a service “to” them or “for” them, to one in which we are partners working toward a shared goal (McCould & Wachtel, 2001). Articulating your practice clearly to other professionals opens doors to genuine collaboration, and has the added bonus of building greater respect and value for what you do.

An important test for our new explicit practice came when we chose to enter the “Great Places to Work” study. This independent study conducted annually measures an organisation’s culture in the following ways:

- Employee Trust Index
- Cultural Audit: Values - Programs - Practices (Great Place to Work Institute, 2014)

⁷ The intention of the filming was to develop a resource that staff could look back on and witness their progress. Our enthusiasm at the time quickly developed it into a sizeable and largely unmanageable resource. Something to maybe return to in the future.

It was to be a genuine test for us in terms of the work we had put into our staff culture. It also challenged us to put down on paper, in great detail, what we do and why we have chosen to operate this way. This study is dominated, as you might imagine, by big technology companies, sports brands and hotel chains. So when Re-engage featured in the top 50 in Australia (the only NGO to claim that a place that year) we knew that it wasn't as a result of the massive "ball-pit" and "hammock room" that we don't have. Rather it was as a result of the time and energy we had put into valuing people and relationships. At this point we made a commitment to re-enter the study over the next few years to continue to measure our progress.

Making it work in the real world

This achievement brought renewed enthusiasm and pride in our organisation and the RP framework. We began carefully examining some of the key parts of our everyday practice and decided it was time for new branding for the organisation. Two of the other most important and influential focal points for this year were around our intake and assessment processes, and the rules or expectations we had of young people in our services.

As a result of critical reflection we realised that the initial conversation with young people and their families that was happening during our intake and assessment process was foundational for the whole case management relationship. What we were using at the time was a series of questions on a clipboard that covered all the main risk factors in a young person's life. The case manager would sit with a new young person and work through the questions one by one. We found that often a young person would resist answering the questions, refuse or simply lie. The information gathered was often of questionable value; especially to the young person. That which was worth recording was later input in a database and rarely mentioned again. On reflection this interaction looked largely like an interrogation and this was evidenced in the outcomes it achieved. We decided to redesign the intake and assessment process to better reflect the values we wanted to emphasise and the foundation we wanted to establish in each new interaction. This new process became more about an opportunity for the young person to tell their story. It created an environment where power was shared and focused more on their strengths and relationships. Most importantly it set the tone for future conversations. In short it became less of an interrogation and more of a conversation. We developed a visual diagram which the case manager would lay out on the table and then both them and the young person would write or draw all over it. This became our tool for a conversation that had a clear purpose and meaning, but also valued the people and their relationships.

The second major redevelopment emerged out of a conversation between a few senior staff. One staff member had just finished facilitating a group session which had presented them with some "learning opportunities" (i.e. there were some issues). They reflected that we needed some standard expectations about what behaviour was appropriate, and what behaviour wasn't appropriate in our programs. The suggestion was to create some "non negotiables". A fruitful debate ensued during which it was discussed what might be included in such a list, and how it

might best be communicated to our young people. It became clear quite quickly that what was acceptable in one setting (e.g. listening to music in a literacy and numeracy program) might not be appropriate in another (e.g. in a carpentry workshop). In the end, we created “foundations for success” which instead of focussing on behaviours focussed on some of the important features of a healthy relationship. They are: safety, respect & legal⁸. We believed these needed to be discussed with young people before they entered a program. Having this conversation early establishes clear and understandable boundaries but also allows for flexibility around the different needs and boundaries that are required for different contexts and people.

Other important innovations that happened that year included:

- We integrated talking circles (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010, p. 5) into team meetings
- We implemented a morning briefing that included a “check in” for how staff were progressing.
- Leadership attended a second round of Restorative Practice training that provided even more ideas for change.

Q: What has been the hardest thing for you?

A: 2013

The year 2013 stands out clearly as the hardest year for our organisation to date. For the most part due to circumstances beyond our control. The year started with a criminal investigation of one of our staff members. This kind of incident is unfortunately not without precedent in community services. Regardless this kind of event is typically very unsettling and upsetting to an organisation and in particular to the colleagues and friends of the accused worker. As a result of the ongoing legal process, and in order to show respect to the people involved, we will focus here on the impact it had on our organisation (which is where the good learning is anyway). The way in which the investigation began, and the experience of the legal process took a huge emotional toll on both our youth work staff and management team. We learnt many important lessons. One of the standout lessons was about communicating as openly as possible with those affected.

Surprisingly, this kind of communication didn’t involve telling everyone everything we knew. Rather it was about having real conversations about what impact it was having on us, and giving people a chance to talk about what impact it was having on them. The RP framework, as well as the assistance from external figures⁹, helped us initiate these difficult conversations between ourselves, and shape the conversation we would have with others. It turned out to be

⁸ Whilst obviously these aren’t the only features of a health relationship, they were the features which we deemed were the most important in the context of group work and the programs which we were running.

⁹ These were people in our community of care. It is also important to note the value at times like these of access external mentors and professional support. For us they were Terry and Psychologist Vanessa Launer.

as simple and as powerful as providing people with the opportunity to talk about their experiences and taking the time to listen to each other. People shared their shock, their concern for themselves and others, their loss of confidence, and their anger. This was enough for people to spontaneously start looking for ways to support, to share and to find inspiration for the continued work with young people. After this conversation it was relatively easy to point to a way forward by respecting some important values including: respecting the privacy of those involved and being careful about the different ways people process their grief. Once these conversations opened up, the fractured and stressed cloud that had quickly descended on our workplace culture began to clear (slowly but surely).

Just as this process of healing was getting started we were hit by an altogether predictable, however no less damaging, response from our funding body. The quintessential punitive bureaucratic response: we were audited. Every policy and procedure, process and structure was scanned top to bottom. People with no training or appreciation for the work we do, or how we do it, were given access to some of the most sensitive parts of our organisation (including in some instances case files). This was a time of testing and stretching of our explicit practice and professional relationships. We came through the audit with no recommended changes, and a renewed sense of confidence in our practice framework. We had weathered, or arguable excelled, through two serious tests of our ability to take restorative practices seriously. There was one more to come.

Six months of high emotional stress had begun to take its toll both personally and professionally. Cracks and gaps began to emerge in a senior leadership team that had always worked closely and collaboratively. It appeared that some people were growing apart. Whilst fortunately¹⁰ the personal details of this divide did not become public knowledge at the time, there was still a noticeable effect on the staff culture. Members of the broader leadership team noticed tensions and avoidance behaviours. When a member of the senior leadership team decided to leave the organisation, questions and concerns were raised by the broader staff team. The only logical helpful response seemed to be to open up a chance for these questions and conversations to take place in the public forum where fair process (Chan Kim & Mauborgen, 2003) could be observed, rather than occurring anyway in quiet and hidden corners. It was a difficult time, and difficult decisions were made, but importantly it was framed as another learning opportunity.

Late in 2013, we dedicated four days to focus on key areas of our practice that needed some attention. Demonstrating again the value of external supports, Terry came in to help facilitate the process. The Senior Practitioners spent a day being prompted and challenged to re-design the staff supervision process¹¹. This was then taken to all staff for comment and feedback. What emerged at the end was not simply a tick box checklist that ensures staff are doing what they were supposed to. Instead it is something closer to an explicit statement about the values and principles that guide the way in which a supervision conversation can take place. This approach

¹⁰ For the people involved and the broader organisation.

¹¹ We now have “template for supervision” which might also be described as “a framework for engagement”.

challenges people to raise their expectation of themselves and others, and opens doors to have those challenging conversations that sometimes need to happen in a workplace. This new way of relating to each other also had implications for the way we treat ourselves, and the way we engage young people.

During those four days we also spent time as a whole of staff team. Some of it spent in training, some in reflection and in talking circles. At the end of the day a surprising theme had clearly emerged: vulnerability. Vulnerability was identified as a key ingredient in strong and meaningful relationships. In a year of turmoil, the question of vulnerability came as both a challenge and a relief. Some staff felt they had been very vulnerable this year and weren't sure how much more they could take. For other staff, it was welcome permission to be open and honest. Ultimately the challenge lay in how we might build this new found vulnerability into our organisational culture and professional practice¹².

This year included many other important highlights. The assessment tool continued to be revised and improved. A whole section was scrapped and reworded based on feedback we received from trusted colleagues. We had multiple requests from external agencies to come and share our practice and our framework. These included: local case management providers, Primary Schools (including teachers, administration and - the most intimidating group - parents), and government agencies with responsibility for indigenous affairs and child protection. We re-entered the Great Places to Work study and came 64th. Whilst we dropped out of the top 50 we felt this reflected some of the challenges we had faced. We reminded ourselves that the purpose was not to be perfect but to continue look for ways to improve.

This was also the year that we changed the types of conversations we were having with the parents of the young people we work with. Expanding the insights of the social discipline window (practice domains) (Watchel, Real Justice, 1997, p. 209) we turned our attention of working "with" parents. We asked ourselves: how can we make sure parents are part of the process and feel like we were all on the same team? One important step was as simple as making sure we kept up positive communication with them. Typically these parents only hear from schools and services like us when something goes wrong. We now make a deliberate effort to contact parents regularly with positive messages about how their child is progressing.

2014 ... where to next...

The momentum kept building in 2014 as we were invited to firstly host the 4 day Basic Restorative practices training run by IIRP and visit Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to present at the IIRP world conference. Just as we thought we were getting a handle on articulating our practice. This challenge would take us to the next level in explicit practice. Once again we reviewed and refined our processes. We put time aside to reflect on our journey and what we

¹² This is particularly difficult. We will let you know if we ever find the answer.

have achieved and learnt. It has become clear that recording the journey, the learning and the successes, is just another important and difficult step. Themes began to emerge around organisational and personal strengths and weaknesses, which have provided direction for the future.

There have been many other exciting implementations and innovations that have occurred within Re-Engage which we have been unable to cover here. With much further to go in our journey and much to be thankful for we want to end this article with a few brief thank yous. Thank you first to Terry: for starting us on this journey, for your frustrating and insightful questions, and for your commitment to seeing this framework change the world. To the staff team at Re-Engage: you have been the willing test subjects that have braved the awkward stumbling first steps, tested and innovated the framework, and you continue to inspire us with the excellence of your practice. Finally, thank you to the young people who are a privilege to work with. You are the inspiration for this work and your resilience and energy for life continue to inspire and surprise us.

If you wish to hear more about Re-Engage's journey visit the International Institute of Restorative Practices 17th World Conference website to download the resources from the workshops Re-Engage presented and to view the recording of Re-Engage's key note presentation. Alternatively, you can contact Re-Engage Youth Services on the contact details below.

For more information about restorative practices training and resources you can contact Re-Engage directly or the International Institute of Restorative Practices.

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