

An Essay in Six Voices: Part 2

Knowledge Generated in Collaborative-Dialogue On-line Supervision: Technical and Logistical Challenges¹

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Abstract

In this article we explore the particulars of clinical supervision online via Skype. To the technological and logistic challenges, we added geographic and linguistic contexts. The consultants as well as the consulters found themselves in opposite sides of the Atlantic: the city of Merida, Yucatan, Mexico and the city of Brno in Czech Republic. The sessions were facilitated with translators from Spanish to English to Czech and vice versa. This is the second part of an essay written in six voices. The relational work of the Kanankil Institute and the Narativ Group, described in the first part, made possible this adventure.

Key words: online supervision, technology, collaborative practices, Kanankil, Narativ

Introduction

This is a second part of an article about an on-going collaboration between two institutes, *Kanankil* in Merida (Mexico) and *Narativ* in Brno (Czech Republic). While the first part explored the relational context of this collaboration and reflections on the process, this second part focuses on the form and content. The article is written as dialogues and reflections. In some places, you will find a person's name reflecting over what happened. However, the narration was generated through never ending conversations and manuscript exchanges, among the six of us, during four years.

During this time, several on-line sessions were held which involved supervision of a therapeutic consultation at one site, and the reflections from the reflecting teams at both locations. We invite you, the reader, to look at how we organized these sessions and explore the reflections on the benefits and challenges that this experience brought us.

The idea to have the Skype sessions was generated in a conversation after Rocio's workshop in Prague in 2009. Even if some people were skeptical, thanks to the already established relations (Balášová et al., 2013) this idea survived. After Rocio's return to Mexico, we started to explore the possibility to organize a meeting between Kanankil students and the group from Brno via Skype. Rocio proposed to the students, on the Master program in Psychotherapy at Kanankil, the possibility of supervision sessions with clients and reflecting teams in both cities; they received the ideas with enthusiasm and the adventure began.

The first time we met via Skype we realized we would have to overcome several challenges:

1) Schedule: Czech Republic is seven hours ahead of Mexico and Kanankil classes are held on Fridays from 4 to 9 pm and Saturday from 9 am to 9 pm, so the best possibility was to

connect on Saturday morning Mexico's time, because for the *Narativ* group it would be Saturday afternoon.

2) Language: Brno's group spoke Czech as first language and *the Merida group*, Spanish. English became a possibility though the time doubled or tripled due to translation. In some cases *Narativ* would invite someone who spoke Spanish and Czech; however, fluidity remained a dilemma. At *Kanankil* the only opportunity we had was to translate from English into Spanish and back, since we couldn't find anybody who spoke Czech and some of our students do not speak English. So the languages through which the exchange took place were Czech, Spanish and English. The first session took almost four hours. Later on, we learned how to coordinate the translation process and now, it takes two hours per session. We emphasize that this does not mean it's easier now. The process is transforming and shaping so that all can participate; and we are finding ways to communicate as comfortable as possible for all the people involved, especially invited clients and guests (members of the learning team).

3) Technology: perhaps one of the biggest challenges to address. None of us have the professional infrastructure to facilitate online sessions or any other cyber platform for this kind of internet meetings. Some of the questions emerging during the first sessions were:

- What to do if the system crashes when the client is in session?
- How to incorporate all of these infrastructure challenges during the meeting?
- How to agree on the use of time among participants?
- What to do when we are off the air only for a short time?
- What if we do not have the ability to connect again?
- How to explore with the clients these situations so that sessions can be useful for them?
- How many times should we try to reset the call, when the client is present?
- How could we simultaneously address the students' needs?

The Format of Online Meetings

We thought it could be useful to describe our first sessions as a way to share with you, how we did it. So we have re-constructed these experiences using memories, internal dialogues, with each other conversations, and blog entries made by students on both sides of the Atlantic.

Papusa: *By the time of the first Skype session, I remember Rocio inviting me to take care of logistics – computers, microphones, projector, speakers, and internet connection-- because she was going to do supervision via Skype with the Czech Republic. I thought, are you crazy? How are we going to deal with taking care of the client, having to translate back and forth, and without all the proper technology? I accepted the challenge and began the odyssey of preparing for the session.*

We had decided, before the full session, that *Kanankil* would invite the first client. A student volunteered enrolled in the Master of Addictions Treatment, volunteered to bring a client, she wanted to have a consultation about a situation in her practice. She also knew Pavel from his two previous visits to *Kanankil* Institute; so she sensed a relational conversation.

Katka: *We were not in Brno at the time Rocio said she could be prepared with her students – every member of *Narativ* was in different parts of Czech Republic. Nevertheless we were so willing to Skype anyhow, that we decided to connect to Merida with my systemic psychotherapeutic training group in Prague; we were fifteen participants and our lecturer.*

Five minutes before the meeting started, the connection between Merida and Prague was established and after greetings and the excitement of starting this virtual adventure, we introduced members of

both groups by name and talked for a few moments about the ideas we had for the day. The first idea was to create a space to talk about the translation, rhythm, time, form and language that we would use, and then the way in which we would physically arrange ourselves so we could be in front of the computer camera and be heard.

Once the technical aspects seemed set, we initiated a second conversation, among us and with the client, to discuss : how the interview would take place in Kanankil, the first reflecting team composed of Kanankil students (Andersen, 1994) (Anderson, 1999), then the Czech Republic group would reflect on what they heard on the previous dialogue; then we would ask the client for her thoughts on the reflections (what she might want to say after listening the voices of the two teams, and how was the experience of having been a client and listened to both teams in this manner). Finally, we wanted to have time to talk about the overall experience, because we wanted to collect what we had learned and the things we could change or use for the following sessions.

After this first experience we felt encouraged to do it all again; we were hungry for other consultations! In the period of four years there have been several of these meetings.

Katka: *The second session took place in Brno; me, Pavel and Jakub were there at that time, and a few of my colleagues from the Prague psychotherapeutic training group joined us. We didn't have a physical space to accommodate everyone who wanted to attend so we found ourselves Skyping from a bedroom belonging to a dear friend and colleague who owns a good computer and internet connection. I can't forget our "background" feelings after that, as it reminded us of those years during communism in Czech Republic, when many cultural, scientific, and artistic events took place in people homes, behind thick curtains.*

At this second meeting we have agreed to do the consultation – the supervisee was my colleague from the training group, Zolo from Slovakia. He had a challenging case at work and Pavel talked with him as a supervisor. After their dialogue, two reflecting teams' conversations took place – one in Czech Republic and one in Mexico.

Zolo: *As many of you, I probably experienced a collaborative dialogue, without feeling the geographical, social and cultural distance. I liked the idea of the silence in our dialogues as the translation took place; it gave us time to think about our inner ideas and the meaning of what we have heard.*

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I think we cannot underestimate the differences between us, because they can be a source of possibilities to inspire our thinking and feelings. Even if at the time I was thinking about Mexico and Czech Republic, the same is valid for our differences between me and my Czech colleagues.

The third session took part in Katka's office, with a client in Mexico. In that meeting we experienced many problems with the internet connection and it led us to create guidelines for the different situations which may happen unpredictably.

Pavel: *We also made an online connection while starting the International Certificate in Collaborative Practices program² in Czech Republic. We were appreciating so much to be part of an international connection that we offered that possibility to our participants. So we met on skype with Kanankil students the very first day of our program and it became an important part of it.*

Many consultations followed with all kind of situations: disconnections, loosing images but not sound, loosing sound but having images, etc. After some experiences we agreed on the following structure:

- a) an introduction of people in both sides,
- b) an agreement on what kind of reflecting teams we do and in what order --Tom Andersen's (Andersen, 1994), Harlene Anderson's "as if" team (Anderson, 1999), Michael White's external witness (White, 1999),
- c) a consultation followed with reflecting teams from each country, and
- d) a space for reflecting together upon the process and meeting.

Alfonso: *I found it very uplifting to verbalize what I am learning in Kanankil; I was also moved to be in a conversation with a group of students in Brno. I find it amazing that we can be associated with people who are thousands of miles from our door. In order to converse with people from other cultures, we have to expand our perspectives. It connects us to a global community, seeking to create a rhizome of conversations useful in therapeutic and educational contexts. Through collaborative strategies and dialogue we are invited to share experiences useful in our context and expanding our possibilities.*

Bára: *In Brno, we had been talking about what collaborative practices means and how we can employ postmodern ideas; but it was after this skype meeting with the Kanankil students and their stories with collaborative practices, that I really felt it is possible, that it is alive. It was only after that experience that I began to apply the collaborative practice in my job.*

Benefits and Challenges of Online Dialogues

Katka: *I still wonder why did it happen that we continued our dialogues? What was different from many other encounters, strong when they happen on one hand, but tending to lose its aliveness afterwards? For me the answer lies in the value of the relationships, lived in Kanankil. It is not only "a value" among others: it is our lives. Our lives don't exist anywhere else than in relationships. Our joy, our dreams, our inspirations, everything happens through relationships (Gergen, 2009). When I visited Mexico for the first time, I spent days submerged in wonderful colors, as it was the color of our first meeting. There I could understand why we continued with Rocio after her visit here. Kanankil is for me a place, where we find answers for what it is important in relationships, how are they made and how do we do them in practice. This is for me the answer to why we continue with the skype sessions despite all the technical challenges... I am learning now how much we can give each other in relationships and I feel enthusiastic about continuing our conversations, no matter how.*

I have also developed many interesting understandings of the process of translation. I am so sorry that we come from different parts of the world, but it gives us the opportunity to understand the language better and to not take things for granted. I learned this when I translated the reflections of the Kanankil students to Czech after one of the skype consultations. It made me think about what they wanted to say. I had to try hard to understand what they meant by their words – I wouldn't do that so properly if it was in Czech. Also Dora's article (Ayora, June 2012) about the experience of translating with her client helped me to see our process as enriched by all these languages.

After three years, we have identified several issues we regard as beneficial and challenging throughout the process:

- ✓ *Polyphonic event:* In each session, there were many voices present – the participants had diverse backgrounds such as psychology, social work, community work, psychotherapy, business and others. Some were experienced professionals, some students with just the practical experience. All enriched each other, given that collaborative practice invites us to listen to all the voices that are engaged in a conversation.

- ✓ *Cross-cultural exchange*: Bringing voices from two very different parts of the world enables to reflect more on each other's cultural background and bias. Listening to stories and views originated in other culture was fascinating and inspiration. Especially when no culture is "at home" in the process, and no one is "the stranger. We were at home and abroad simultaneously thanks to technology.

Zolo: *I noticed how many different local languages we have, how different it is even in emotions. I guess we are far more cold people here in Europe, not showing many emotions and maybe less spontaneous too. These are things which are very inspirational for me. I could not have the opportunity to see my own land without seeing something very different from so far away – this is one of the reasons why I value, very highly, this overseas connection.*

- ✓ *Mutual learning*: Everyone was a teacher and a learner in this kind of environment; even if we had different roles, we all learned from each other and, at the same time, were teaching the other about our views and insights.

Kanankil student: *We loved the Czech people ideas; the thought, that different cultures bring different discourses, is valuable if we start from the idea of collaboration, not competition. Co-constructing the session, Rocío's words accompanied me days later: "Invite people to construct with you."*

- ✓ *Time*: It is always difficult to schedule events to include all participants. The dates need to be set several months ahead so that everyone can put it in their calendars. Also, the meeting itself is time consuming because we need at least two and a half hours. This process also invites us to slow down and reflect on thoughts and feelings to be able to create utterances and affections.

- ✓ *The creation of local language*: Even if the "official language" was English, there were at least two other languages present: Czech and Spanish. Sometimes there could have been misunderstandings due to this multiple translations; it is necessary to speak slowly and to make pauses, so that people at the other site could have the possibility to stop the dialogue and ask about unclear words and sentences. Also the construction of meaning becomes a very deliberate action.

Translator: *The conversation was very slow and I had to translate from Spanish to English and then someone else translated from English into Czech. This meant that I lost my own internal dialogue, and could not fully understand the sequence of what was spoken. In fact, some things I didn't quite understand. Our thoughts, in Merida, felt a little repetitive; however, after thinking it over, perhaps what really happened is that one idea led to another similar idea, but with a slight change. Now I wonder if our thoughts were appropriately unusual as Tom Andersen said (Andersen, 1994), or maybe they were not unusual enough.*

- ✓ *Technology*: Unlike a face to face meeting, the Skype consultation must rely on technology and it is not always perfect. However, it places emphasis on the relationships and the possibility to erase geographic distances. For the Skype consultations, we have found that the following equipment should be considered on each side:
 - 1 computer (preferably two – the other can be used for searching information or for troubleshooting),
 - 1 camera (it can be done with the in-built camera of a laptop but a movable camera is much better),
 - 1 microphone (again, two microphones would be better and more comfortable – one for the translator and one for the therapist and client),
 - a strong internet connection, and

- a quiet room – without interruptions and noise so we can hear each other.

We have also developed a scenario for what to do when we lose the connection:

1. We try twice and if this doesn't work we just continue the work with the client and do not interrupt the process.
2. We re-connect at the end of the process after the client leaves.
3. The conversation among us depends of how much information we got before we lost the connection. Some of the issues revolve around the meaning of losing communication and what it does to the process, how we could improve it and what other possibilities we have.
4. At the end, we prepare a written reflection and send it through e-mail commenting in all of these issues.

Another challenge we found is connected with logistics. The meetings are limited by the connection and facility conditions. The sessions differ depending on the number of participants, their roles and the contextual settings and the agendas teaching, supervision, therapy or general conversation about our relationships across cultures. The larger the group on each side, the more preparation and logistics are demanded. A very important issue is to involve all the participants in the communication process.

According to our experience, it is important to facilitate the process so that all participants have the opportunity to engage in the construction of a “local language” beyond the linguistic, technological and cultural borders. For this to happen, the facilitator at each site is responsible to “orchestrate” who is speaking. In our experience, the facilitator should not be the therapist because he or she should focus on the client.

Final Thoughts...

The described experience with online dialogues is not at all finished, we see it as a process of becoming. We have recently started to explore even more possibilities of this format. When *Narativ* was organizing a Brno symposium on collaborative and dialogical practices in November 2013, we presented workshop out of the online supervision facilitated by Rocio. We believe that not only us but other people throughout the world, probably have had the opportunity to explore other possibilities of using new technologies for enriching transformative dialogues and mutual learning.

This second part of our article can be regarded as both: a summary of what we did and also as tips and recommendations for those who would like to take on this exciting journey. However we have to emphasize that this journey could not be so exciting and may even not happen if we would hadn't paid enough attention to our relations as we described in the first part (Balášová, 2013). We invite you, the reader, to explore, to walk with the certainty that can be found in the uncertain roads of cyberspace. We invite you to share with us, if you choose to do so, your experiences with encountering the “others”.

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Endnotes

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² For more information about the International Certificate in Collaborative Practices (ICCP) please go to www.collaborativecertificate.org

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