Encountering Nature:

Exploring a [collective] practice that resists manic machine culture

Rachael Donovan and Peter Westoby

Introduction

This article outlines a practice of reflection based on observation of natural and living processes. It draws on the wisdom of the book *Three Rivers Flowing* (Westoby, 2022), which centres on a phenomenological reflective practice, with a focus on social and ecological processes. The article offers a way of reflecting on our work in community development and our own inner state of being within the work. In participatory community development, this inner exploration is known as the implicate level of practice; an ever-evolving understanding of self in relationship to our work (Kelly & Westoby, 2018). Kaplan and Davidoff (2014:8) frame an aspect of *implicate* method in relation to our role as change agents or activists - focusing on '*awakeness*':

As activists, the starting point for all our endeavours lies in our understanding of the intersection and relationship between who and how we are in the world and what it is that we do… therefore our own awakeness is both the quest for and key to any truly activist endeavour.

Note, we have purposefully put the term '*collective*' in brackets in the title, acknowledging the both/and nature of this practice; on the one hand, it is a profoundly individual practice – as wakefulness and implicate method require work and consciousness from individual practitioners; but, on the other hand, reflective practice can be most effective and potent when activated as a collective endeavour.

This article centres on an exercise in phenomenological reflective practice offered at the Queensland Community Development conference in October 2023 as a grounded example in building observational capacity and reflective skills. An extended version of this process has also been offered as one-day workshops for community practitioners on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, and is based on the work of German poet-naturalist Goethe and Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff from *The Proteus Initiative*, South Africa (Kaplan & Davidoff, 2014; Kaplan, 2002). The practice aims to disrupt the neoliberal and technological drivers that contribute to increasingly manic and machine-like processes that govern our bodies, work and workplaces in the contemporary world. We argue that without careful and disciplined reflection and observation, our lives and work can begin to mimic these forces that we are trying to change, thus strengthening rather than shifting them (Kaplan & Davidoff, 2014).

Hence, the emphasis of this article is on an alternative type of practice for community development workers that helps them become more attuned to the communities with which they work. We have showcased this practice through a method of *encountering nature* as an alternative way of both *being* (implicate and ontological), *thinking* (epistemological) and *doing* (methodological) which helps build both individual and collective observational capacity. By *encountering* nature, we posit that through conscious practices of observing nature and natural processes, we can begin to shift and develop new ways of seeing that are more aligned with living processes, complexity and change, which can be applied to our social change work. Through these nature observation practices, we begin to see *what* we are seeing with more clarity, but also *how we are seeing*. For example, even though humans are implicitly part of nature, we are often challenged by a perception of separation that can then impact our community-based work. To counter this, we argue that some form of disruption to the taken-for-granted separate way of being-in-the-world is needed. The practices discussed below invite a way of shifting from perceptions of separation to an awareness or even awakeness of *being in relationship with nature that is connected and intimate, that can be applied in our inner lives/implicate level reflection and social change work*.

We also signal that while we write of nature as a *noun* we prefer to think about nature as *naturing*, that is, as a *verb*. To observe nature *naturing* clarifies that an ecological sensibility to understanding the world is to see *living process* at play; observing nature (and communities) as a process: emergent, unfolding, disruptive, complex, creative and alive. By observing these in action we can deepen our observational and reflective capabilities and bring more presence and attunement within ourselves and in our work.

The context: The challenge in current workspaces

It is 2024 and we hear in many community practitioners' stories of the challenges they face both within their organisational contexts and in the larger social and ecological realities that impact their work. From managerialism, audit culture and funding requirements, to increased demands on our social service system, practitioners are arguably under more pressure than ever before. Organisations are becoming increasingly dysfunctional due to these inner and outer pressures and staff are becoming more frantic, manic and burned-out, trying desperately to keep up with the demands. Some philosophers now even call this a 'burn-out' society (Han, 2015). Others have analysed the impact of COVID, with the turn to online worlds and 24/7 workplaces, increasing people's already over-extended individual and collective sympathetic nervous system/s responses (Jarczok, Jarczok & Thayer, 2020). This creates an alarming cesspool for both worker wellbeing and the overall effectiveness of social change work.

Westoby, in *Three River's Flowing* (2022: 26), characterises these challenges in numerous ways:

Foremost is the colonisation of mechanical thinking and practice which sees the world in ways informed by linear, reductionist, engineering ways of thinking. Think of logical frameworks, models of input-output-impact, management for results. This colonisation is accompanied by instrumental thinking in which practitioners 'intervene' into social phenomena and social organisms, imposing their 'will' on them. There is a manic addiction to solutions with an unconscious unwillingness to first learn what is causing the problems from a deeper accurate perspective. Inevitably, most solutions are then tainted by the causal factors, creating yet more problems. Furthermore, the worldview behind mechanical and instrumental work is underpinned by a paradigm of control – 'if we do x then y will occur'; 'these inputs will lead to those outputs'; 'if we transfer these resources or this knowledge, that capacity will be built'. The colonisation leads to diminishing freedoms in social and ecological fields as mechanical thinking and control – manifest in compliance and audit worlds, 'evidence-based practice' (sometimes a euphemism for hiding the politics of evidence) – lead to a lack of engagement with the world in ways that acknowledge the 'truth' of living process, including a humility of not-knowing. All in all, these mechanical and routinised ways of doing work lead to ways of being and doing that fail to do justice to the complexity, emergent nature of living systems.

Breaking this down, the argument is that many of the problems practitioners face – while felt as manic, urgent, pressured – is a result of much larger forces. As the quote suggests, these can be characterised as a machine-culture, mechanistic in thought and practice, instrumental in the kind of intervention; uneasy with uncertainty and obsessed with control despite the complexity. These forces and structures are certainly not aligned with natural living processes that our lives and work are ultimately governed by. When out of alignment with life processes, both our wellbeing and work suffers.

The big question then relates to how, on the one hand, practitioners, individually and collectively, 'see' and 'make sense' of these forces - for as Paulo Freire's work of understanding the world would suggest - if we do not understand the larger social-economic-cultural forces that shape our life, then we have little chance of exercising collective agency and freedom within them (Freire, 1970). And, on the other hand, there are questions about how to find a way of resisting these forces through a different or more conscious type of practice that help us move into different ways of both being and doing.

We suggest that one way forward is to build a stronger reflective and observational set of practices (phenomenological) and to particularly learn through the observation of nature – as nature is a living process and therefore offers the alternative to machine-mechanistic-instrumental-control-manic oriented systems.

What do we mean by phenomenological reflective practice?

Phenomenology, or the recognition that the *way we see and perceive changes what is seen*, was understood and explored by German poet-naturalist Goethe (even though the term phenomenology came after Goethe's time), i.e. the understanding that inner and outer worlds are intrinsically connected. Yet, it is difficult to notice *how we see*, as mostly we see and perceive our own meanings, perceptions and labels but mistake these inner definitions as *the thing itself* (Kaplan & Davidoff, 2014). We have probably all experienced this on some level. The *way we see* our partner, or our children, can directly and sometimes immediately effect or change *what we see*. If we see our child as obnoxious or argumentative, then of course we will respond to them from this perception and in turn they will live more into the identification that we have (often unconsciously) projected. It creates a self-perpetuating loop, which from a sociological perspective is known as labelling theory and can limit how others see themselves by how we perceive or label them (Bernburg, 2019). How do we then interrupt this automatic seeing-meaning-making loop, so that people, communities or other beings can be *seen more clearly*, in all their change and complexity?

The practice of phenomenology invites us to change our perception, to see afresh, or to *see as if for the very first time*; to see beyond the initial impetus towards labels, judgements, or categories. To be fully alive to any phenomenon – for example, to see a tree as for the very first time, to let go of categories of 'tree' so the tree can be perceived in its own singular beautiful wondrous way, as both a '*thing*' (a bounded being) and a '*process*' (in movement and connected to everything around it, almost unbounded). But not only a tree; how about a community – imagine, seeing a place *as if for the very first time*, letting go of pre-judgements, or stuck 'stories' of what that community is in our imagination?

But phenomenology implies not only seeing, but *particular ways* of seeing. It invites a type of active receptivity that Richard Palmer explains, quoting Phenomenology and Goethe scholar Henri Bortoft,

… phenomenology means letting things become manifest as what they are, without forcing our own categories on them. It means a reversal of the direction from that one is accustomed to; it is not we who point to things, rather, things show themselves to us. This is not to suggest some primitive animism but the recognition that the very essence of true understanding is that of being led by the power of the thing to manifest itself…' (Bortoft, 2012:105)

This '*reversal*' is crucial: to be receptive to what is disclosed through a humble, open willingness to 'let go' of quick categorisations, interpretations and judgements. This phenomenological way of seeing is somewhere between the polarity of movements that can be understood as active versus passive - and becoming more receptively open to what is being made present. It is through this receptive-open seeing that *we* may begin to change (rather than imposing wilful change on the 'other').

In the context of community, Tagore takes this further and argues that to understand people or communities,

we need to not only see them, but *see what they see* (Nussbaum, 2010). Easy to say perhaps, but not always easy to do when we have a group to form or project to implement or a task to do, as the pressure to be efficient, productive and outcomes-focused are the norm; and of course, deep seeing takes time and trust-building, practice and presence. This is not a way of being that we are accustomed to and therefore requires profound reflective capabilities - hence *reflective practice* is central in this process. To reflect is to stop, pause, consider not only *what* we are seeing, but *how* we are seeing – the lens from which we are seeing; to pause before entering the fray to ask ourselves about our quality of presence, attention, noticing, listening. To withhold from a reflexive impulse to share, speak, categorise, interpret or react, instead becoming more open and curious or to ask further questions to get deeply inside the experience of another. So much is asked of us to be in a reflective practice; it is a life journey in and of itself.

Thus, this *practice* component requires regularity, intentionality and a clear idea of what's being done. It should not be a one-off, occasional, random thing. A reflective *practice* implies stretching and building our observation muscles, our phenomenological seeing and sensing, our awareness-in-the-moment *regularly*. From the trace of this phenomenological practice, it also insists on working reflectively with others, recognising that we each see in very limited ways and need others to see with us. As such, it's a collective practice.

Thus, to change our way of seeing, is to change our way of being, which in turn changes our way of doing, both in life and in work. This living practice of observing a situation as it is (rather than through our own interpretation) creates a type of *delicate activism* (Kaplan & Davidoff, 2014) - a different way of creating change in the world that is less forceful or instrumental, but more receptive and responsive to people, communities and situations *as living, ever-changing, interconnected processes*. It recognises that our own way of *being* has a significant impact on the work we are part of, thus, observing oneself is of utmost importance (yet often most challenging).

It is with these intentions in mind that we have been hosting observational reflective practice processes as a way of transforming inner and outer worlds for social change, such as the one outlined below which was held at the Community Development Queensland conference.

The workshop

The workshop invited practitioners to develop and enhance their observational capabilities through the direct experience of observing nature. Thus, it was an embodied, experiential exercise as opposed to an intellectual/conceptual one. This was intentional, as wisdom that is learnt, held and experienced in the body can be retained for longer periods and offers transformational potential over time (Chettaoui, Atia, & Bouhlel, 2022; Macrine & Fugate, 2021).

We centred the workshop and observational process around the following broad themes:

- 1. In the social field, we live within the polarities of action and reflection, intervention and observation. However, we often prioritise action and intervention at the expense of reflection and observation, which can have a detrimental effect on our own state of being and the social change work that we are part of.
- 2. It is difficult to see things as they are. We often observe then quickly jump to interpretation, meaning making and judgment (and often get it wrong). Our actions and interventions are often based on these (mis)interpretations.
- 3. Reflective observation takes time and enables deep intimate encounters with the other (both human and more than human).

Groups of three were invited to observe a being in nature (tree, leaf, etc.) using the following 20-minute process:

- 1. Five minutes of solo observation, writing notes about what is seen/sensed. Participants were invited to observe, touch and use all senses, but to stay with the actual phenomena as it is, not using interpretation or labels.
- 2. Five minutes collective conversation about what each person wrote/saw.
- 3. Five minutes more solo observation. This time, noticing polarities i.e. growth/decay; levity/gravity, etc.
- 4. Five minutes collective sharing focused on the process the activity and what was noticed

We then hosted a plenary discussion with the following questions and provocations:

- 1. What do we notice about our noticing?
- 2. How does seeing ecological process help us see social process?
- 3. What did you see? What was it like to see with others?
- 4. What is it to see nature as a process, in movement? The formative/generative life force
- 5. What does it mean in our social and community practice?

Many things emerge from the **discussion**, but we foreground **four key issues** for now:

First, people enjoyed the careful spacious opportunity to see. Many soaked it up - enjoying the space and permission to do it. It was for many people, as phenomenological practice invites - *to see for the very first*

time. They loved it. Yet it can also be very hard. People get bored, they feel resistance, there is a sense of '*I've seen it, now I can switch off*'. The latter reveals how difficult it is now for people to hold attention.

Second, people struggled to stay with what we call '*seeing the facts*'. They quickly leap to interpretation, that is, giving names and categories, rather than sensing – through observation, smell, touch what is actually there. Rather than something like, '*a brown surface, roughly textured, with speckles*', it becomes '*a branch*'. The category trumps the phenomenon and in this way, senses are not stretched. Observational muscles are not strengthened. We reflected on how this also applies in the social field, when we might arrive in a community with a preconceived 'label' or 'category' which doesn't reflect the unique particularity of those people and that place.

Third, people, in the second and fourth step, realised how little they see alone. People hear what others see and there's often a profound realisation that what we see alone is very limited, and conversely, how powerful collective seeing is; and how important this collective seeing is in our teams and workplaces in order to see with more breadth and depth into our work.

Finally, there is awareness that intimacy grows in relation to the phenomenon through observation and reflection. What was just a 'tree' 20 minutes ago is now a living breathing unique tree living its own particularity. As such, through observation and growing intimacy, the relationship with the object is transformed and profoundly, observational practice as an intervention for change unfolds. To transform a relationship is to transform the world, which of course, is also true in the social field, where change becomes more possible through this deep, intimate seeing and encounter with the *other*.

As we considered what these reflections might mean for social and community practice, we discussed the following kinds of questions:

- How can we see our organisations, ourselves (as practitioners) and our work in new (living) ways?
- What can the natural world, which is inherently characterised by living processes teach us about how we can observe differently within ourselves and our social world?
- How can we see social processes as alive and in movement, beyond our projections and linear assumptions or mandates?
- Can a new way of seeing also bring more ease, gentleness and presence within us, increasing our own wellbeing as practitioners?
- And ultimately, can a different, more attentive, attuned and alive way of seeing enable us to collectively resist this manic machine-like culture?

Since that workshop, both of us, as authors, continue to experiment with this phenomenological reflective practice, both in terms of '*encountering nature*' and in our social fields. For ultimately, the two are intertwined as we are also part of *nature naturing* in life and work. Below are two stories from the first author of how this applies in practice.

Story #1. How pausing creates more space to see

I'm sure we've all been there; running from meeting to online meeting, with barely a break to look up from the computer, tension building in the body. It happens to me regularly. And if the body holds the ultimate intelligence (van der Kolk, 2014), then what wisdom is it telling me about my type of practice in that moment? How can I expect to bring a quality of presence, awareness, understanding or consciousness to the people I meet with and the ideas that are generated, if I am not present inside my own body? If, for example, I am stuck in a sympathetic nervous system response, if my breathing is fast and shallow, or I'm in some sort of survival flight/fight state, jumping quickly to interpretations or solutions in order to '*get the work done*'? It doesn't take much to recognise that deeper insight and wisdom or sensitivity to patterns or what is alive may not be as available to me if I'm only stuck on one side of the nervous system response.

But what if instead I could pause between meetings, or even start the meeting with a pause? To really come into the space and into my body and with others that I work with? To *observe* where I am at within the current situation? What quality of practice would that enable?

Recently I was part of a writers' group where we did exactly this to start our time together. Even though we were rushed and felt the pressure of the 'deliverable'. Even though someone had to leave early adding to that pressure. We still took time to stop, centre, observe our bodies and the space and connect with each other beyond the 'task' that needed to be done. Ideas and energy flowed out of that presence. They emerged naturally, of their own accord out of the space that was created (rather than being manically driven out of our own frenetic wilful energy). Like the tree that is, on the one hand, a physical thing, but also an emergent living phenomenon, the writing, ideas and clarity that followed came from a generative living energy.

This experience of pausing, observing and connecting allowed me to be more present to what was alive and real in that moment, with the people and in the work. Ironically, the act of slowing down allowed for more flow and enabled us to see the patterns and themes in our writing more clearly. While we can't know for sure, the quality of what emerged certainly felt more potent. And rather than leaving feeling depleted or drained (as is often the case in rushed meetings!), we all left feeling cantered, nourished and fulfilled.

Story #2. Sit spot - nature as teacher

In November 2023, I committed to a daily sit spot practice, where I spent 30 minutes each day sitting in the rainforest grove in my backyard with the sole purpose of *observing*. Observing myself and observing the world

around me. This practice is linked to the famous tracker, *Stalking Wolf*, through the Apache lineage in North America (Brown Jr, 2001). Sit spots have been used in many First Nations and naturalist traditions around the world as a way of understanding and building a relationship with an ecological space. Over those 30 days, this practice offered a way of attuning to my inner and outer world and deepening of my observational capacity.

Yet, 30 minutes a day for 30 days of sitting and observing wasn't always easy. Just like the reflections from the workshop, at times it brought up all sorts of resistance, agitation and boredom. But the commitment to the practice became an art of noticing and observing this within myself (thus observing both the inner and the outer worlds), without judgment; the good, the bad and sometimes the ugly. But there were also times of profound joy that came from the space and time to just be, to notice the small things, to see things afresh, to allow things to emerge. To watch the intricate behaviour as a bee traversed my foot, clumsily stumbling to find nectar from the flowers on the ground (why doesn't it just fly, I wondered); to notice things that I would never normally see. The space often allowed for moments of awe, curiosity and delight; to see beauty anew. To watch as the birds became more used to my company (and notice how their behaviour changed based on my internal state). To feel a profound sense of connection and belonging.

It was through observing, quietly and openly, that I slowly tuned into the intelligence and wisdom of the natural world. To see the polarities of life at play - growth *and* decay, giving *and* receiving, cooperation *and* competition, movement *and* stillness, and to reflect on these aspects in my own life and work and contemplate where they may be out of balance. Through the practice, I felt the embodied experience of being deeply part of the web of life; I became part of the landscape just as much as the trees, birds and insects. I felt myself interwoven into this beautiful rich life tapestry. I reflected that when I feel out of balance in my life (i.e. manic, stressed or addicted to machines), it's probably because I am out of alignment with natural cycles and systems of which I am part.

This is a simple practice, but such deep embodied wisdom emerged that is relevant to my own inner world and how I show up and be more present *within the world*, changing my state of being and doing.

Conclusion

In this article we have offered an observational practice that encompasses the ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) aspects of phenomenological reflective practice, through encountering nature.

The workshop at the Queensland Community Development conference and the two stories narrated by the first author demonstrate how this applies in practice; embodied practice and collective practice. They explore new ideas and ways of seeing and being and then *put them into action* - with the hands, with the body, with the eyes and with others. This is because the individual mind is rarely capable of seeing afresh or offering real resistance to manic-machine culture. The mind as intellect is good at doing narrow analysis and sense-making, but it is when the mind-body duality is overcome, through embodied practice, that real intelligence and wisdom unfolds. And when done collectively, there is greater ability to see more deeply and widely, as our individual ways of seeing are always limited.

As such, this article has offered ideas and narrated stories of *embodied doing* which eventually lead to new ways of *being*. Practice made through practicing many times to build this muscle. Sit spots over many days in a month. Pausing regularly to see clearly and pivot into a fresh awareness and new pathways. An observational practice that can be repeated endlessly as we stop and look at a tree - and re-encounter nature - and usually be awed through observing it revealing itself anew. These are the signals of inner and outer change unfolding, not through imposing change but simply through new ways of observing and seeing, phenomenologically.

Finally, while the article has offered, through story, some applications for people's lives and workplaces, we give three more invitations for the reader to practice in their own life and work.

Imagine beginning your staff or planning meetings with some time for reflective practice. To come into your body, the space and each other with a quality of presence. To identify the deeper questions currently flowing through your team or the work. To give space to live into those questions and allow yourself to be receptive to the ideas that emerge.

Or, why not as a team, practice the plant observation that was offered in the workshop (see earlier in this article). Use the questions within the activity to guide your discussion and notice the different ways of seeing within your team. Reflect on what this means for your work.

Or, by yourself, spend time each day sitting in a natural space, without distraction and without your phone. Spend 5-10 minutes observing the environment, using all your senses. What can you notice within yourself (i.e. are you restless, bored, relaxed)? What do you notice about your way of seeing? Practice noticing without any judgement. Take note of what you learn about yourself and the world around you. How aligned is your life with these living processes you are part of? Come back to the same spot every day and see how the environment changes. Notice how you feel as your relationship to this natural place begins to deepen.

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Jam Circles:

a recipe for developing and preserving communities one jar at a time

Kelli Dendle and Mira Chorik

This paper is written from the perspective of the first author, Kelli. I asked Mira, a friend and regular collaborator, if she would be interested in helping with the practical logistics of this workshop on the day. She was available as she'd presented on another of our projects earlier in the conference. As a never-ending source of inspiration and perspiration, her ability and willingness to support me is greatly appreciated. We achieve more together than we could alone.

I've been volunteering in community for many decades, in playgroups, schools, community groups, neighbourhood centres, libraries, sports teams, as host-parent to exchange students and other invisible roles. Cooking and feeding people have always been important, though following a recipe is usually a one-time event and after that it's all innovation and experimentation. As a grower I am always grateful for an edible harvest and don't like to think of anything being discarded. Making preserves is a satisfying and creative way to bring those facets together. The *implicate* level of Kelly and Westoby's (2018) participatory community development method calls on practitioners to explore ourselves and our world view. This deep reflection on where we come from and who we are is not well recognised in my other professional roles, but I think it is a valuable way to place myself within the context of what I do. In my professional life, I trained as an occupational therapist, I'm a qualitative researcher and I work in the Wellbeing space. While I don't work in community development, my way of being in the world is congruent with Kretzmann and McKnight's vision of *Asset-Based Community Development* (ABCD, 1993). I never stop seeking ways to help people create, use their hands and come together, but most importantly, ensuring that people are able to identify their own resources and assets to continue when I am no longer there. Given that the focus of this conference was to *Regenerate Community* by '*Getting Our Hands Dirty*,' I thought we could start with that most fundamental of human endeavours, *preserving food*.

I have long thought that there was no better way to build community and bring disparate people together than by coming together around food. It is easy to think of this in the context of eating, but historically, people came together at harvest time, taking local and excess produce and working together to turn it into more than the sum of the parts. Having a group of people working together towards a shared goal is one of the most fundamental of human activities and preparing food together is as old as time. By making preserves, we turn produce into something to nourish the body, develop grassroots skills, extend the shelf life and culinary possibilities for edibles and build