

Spheres of Influence on Culture Shift & Transformation in the Legal Profession

Reflective Practice as a Catalyst for Cultural Change

Reflective Practice and Transformative Learning: Promising Practices Panel

International Symposium Series: Reflective Practice for Legal Professionals · Queen's Law
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The Research Team

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Practicing lawyer and researcher. Recently completed a thesis: Trauma-Informed Lawyering: Practicing Emotional Acknowledgment (2023).

Together we bring: legal pedagogy · Indigenous legal education · access to justice · trauma-informed lawyering · wellbeing

Psychological Safety: The Prerequisite for Genuine Reflection

Psychological safety is the belief that one can speak, take risks, be uncertain, and make mistakes without fear— it is the precondition for every domain of reflective practice.

In Individual Reflection

Without safety, self-reflection can stay surface-level or performative. People may share what they think is acceptable, vs. what is true.

In Collective Settings

Collaborative autoethnography requires participants to be vulnerable with each other. This only happens if the relational space is genuinely safe (safety must be actively built; it takes time).

In Legal Culture

Law's emphasis on certainty, hierarchy, and invulnerability can systematically suppress the conditions for honest reflection. This is a structural problem we name. Can systems & safety co-exist?

"The legal profession is so guarded in a lot of ways, because there's so much to risk or lose in bringing your full self. - Where are we starting from if not whole?"

Before We Begin

*An opening **invitation** for reflection —*

Think about a moment in your professional life when you felt asked — explicitly or implicitly — to be something **less than fully yourself.**

What were the circumstances? How did that feel? What did it cost you?

Hold it quietly. No need to share. We'll return to this at the end.

Why This Work, Why Now

The Evidence Tells Us:

- The Sherbrooke Report (2022, 2024): pervasive mental health challenges across the legal profession in Canada
 - Emotional suppression is normalized as professional competence
 - Both lawyers and clients experience dehumanization as routine
 - Colonial structures and hierarchies continue largely unchallenged
 - Trauma-informed awareness exists — responsive, dignity-centred practices are needed

Knowing is no longer enough.

Our Wonders:

Trauma-responsive practice?

Moving beyond awareness to actively healing and preventing harm

Dignity-centred culture?

Centering human worth as the organizing principle of law schools and practice

Reflective practice as process?

Using collaborative autoethnography as a vehicle for collective, critical, and integrative reflection

Why “Spheres of Influence?”

Recognize Emotional Load

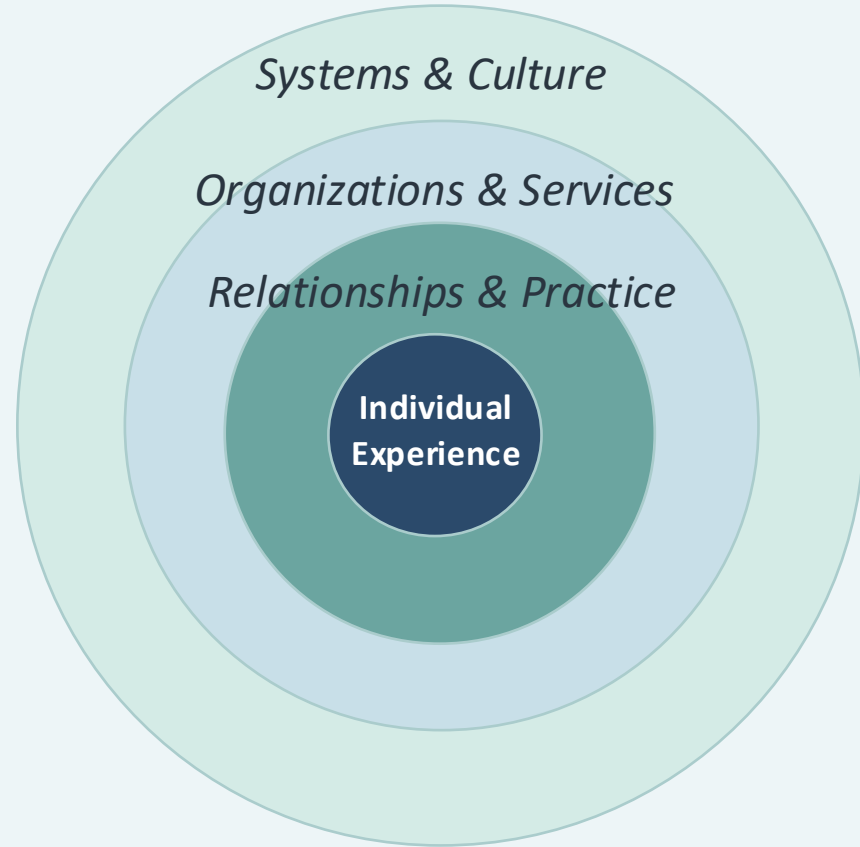


When do I notice stress in
my body, OR my body
asking for care?

What do I do, if
anything?

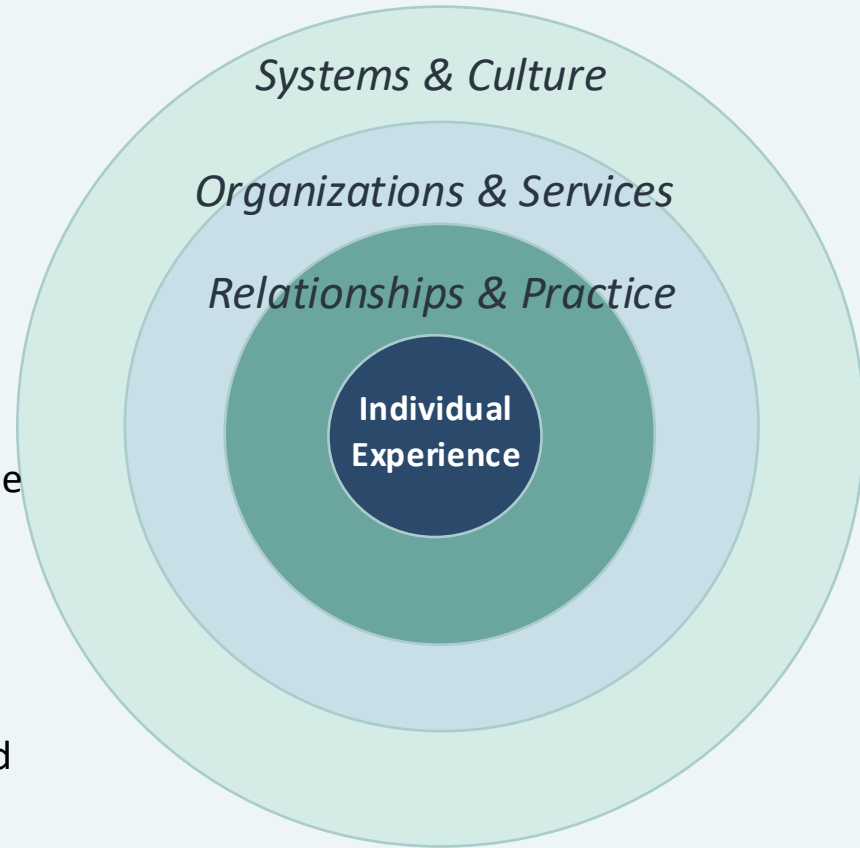


Understand Spheres
of Self-Care



Why “Spheres of Influence?”

- Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory suggests that individuals are embedded within interacting systems of influence (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems).
- Leering (2023) argues that legal educators and stakeholders share responsibility for identifying challenges, engaging in dialogue, and supporting change within their spheres of influence.
 - Building on these accounts of the role and capacity of ‘spheres’, reflective capacity can be understood as operating across multiple spheres of influence: self, relationships, organizations, and broader systems.



Why “Spheres of Influence?”

- *Systems are changed by people. People work from within their spheres. Acknowledging ‘where is my power’ and being accountable there is key*
- *This study asked: what becomes visible when legal professionals turn reflective attention on themselves — on their part in these systems?*
 - *Where is my sphere of influence (what’s immediately within my reach) vs. ‘How do I fix the system?’*



Collaborative Autoethnography

What is Collaborative Autoethnography?

A qualitative research method in which researcher-participants:

- Reflect on their own lived experiences as data
- Place self within social context
- Critically analyze those experiences together
- In a shared, structured, iterative process
- Across multiple sessions over time

The process itself is an intervention.

Research question:

What role do dignity-centred approaches play in thinking about healing, hope, and transformation within legal education and the legal profession?

The experience...

Through collective reflection, we temporarily enacted a culture of vulnerability, dialogue, curiosity, and relational accountability, not merely a reflection on legal culture.

Moving Through Reflective Inquiry ... Reflective Practice

1. Naming Experiences

We reflected on lived experiences of dehumanization, hierarchy, meritocracy, colonial structures, harm, and emotional suppression in legal education and practice.

"I don't think I would have been as depressed about that aspect of my life, the work life, if I hadn't expected it to be different... going in and thinking that this was going to be a less racist type of environment..."

2. Reframing/Reclaiming

Through reflection, dignity emerged as a language that could hold complexity, acknowledge harm, and reconnect legal work with human experience.

*"Dignity centers the human and the goal. Trauma centers the trauma."
"Colonial systems do not inherently value worth they value productivity."*

3. Recognizing Agency, Hope, and Possibility

Reflection prompted discussion about how relationships, educational approaches, leadership practices, and professional cultures are experienced differently across identities, roles, and lived experiences.

"Change starts from within. Because each one of us has influence on the people around us."

In Our Voices: A) The Hidden Costs

Movement 1 — Reflection Revealed Hidden Costs (Deep Mental Impact)

“One of the most dehumanizing moments was witnessing docket court for the first time. People were treated as mere case numbers... reduced to terrible actions, and there was no space allowed for that person to be heard, seen, or considered at all.”

“There is a lot of suffering in legal work, both for practitioners and clients. The process is slow and painful. It can feel very defeating.”

Movement 2 — Reflection Was Not Comfortable (Resistance Work is Unevenly Distributed)

“Some of our meetings have been hard, sitting with tensions — which is a key part of this process and likely why many avoid this work. Reflective work really forces us to get real with ourselves if we’re willing to do that.” – face grief, pain, anguish...

“It’s go, go, go. There’s not a lot of time for grounding in organizations. And it’s easier to just sweep things under a rug.”

In Our Voices: B) From Knowing to *Responding*?

Movement 3 — Reflection Shifted the Conversation (Dignity & Dehumanization)

“Trauma-informed... all that really does is inform me about trauma. I’ve been thinking more about trauma-responsive being the baseline — the bare minimum. How do we move from there to more healing-centred or dignity-focused?”

“There’s now more trauma-informed lawyers. Cool, cool, cool... and what? Knowing is no longer enough. Our systems are perpetuating significant harm.”

Movement 4 — Reflection Made Hope Possible (Vulnerability & Accountability)

“Our gatherings... they’ve been raw, but I’ve also always left hopeful. I hope we can be raw and real in the presentation of this work and push hard conversations further.”

“How do you hold someone accountable without taking away their dignity? To me, that was a beautiful example of being held accountable and it reminded me of your humanity at the same time.”

Hard Truths in CAE — and the Collective Impact We're Building

Hard Truths

Collaborative autoethnography (AKA Reflection in Practice) is not comfortable.

"I agree with you all, and I also disagree... I'm just tired of having to feel like it rests on an individual. Why do I always have to keep being an example? I'm just... tired."

"My thinking has shifted to feeling overwhelmed... I don't know if the needle will move quickly enough so that I can see a measurable improvement."

"If I dig into my feelings, this is actually more work than I can handle right now... so I'm gonna step them down."

Collective Impact

And yet — the work created something. Something that may have momentum.

"We have, the four of us, a small army. Each one of us has influence on the people around us."

"There's so much untapped potential for bettering selves, organizations, and systems... If it was easy, it'd be done."

"I hope we can be raw and real in the presentation of this work and push hard conversations further into different venues."

Mapping our Processes: Finding An Evaluative Lens Through Reflective Practice Literature

ANTICIPATORY	PRESENT	RETROSPECTIVE	PROSPECTIVE	IMAGINED FUTURE
Reflection- before-Action Moon (1999), and Others Anticipatory reflection: preparing, planning, what may occur. In our CAE: To frame why our various perspectives/ theme areas are important in creating a 'well' justice community." Strong	Reflection- in-Action Schön (1983) Reflection during practice: evolving in real time, thinking on one's feet while acting. In our CAE: Live meetings: "My thinking has shifted..." Moderate-Strong	Reflection- on-Action Schön (1983) Retrospective analysis: examining past experiences. In our CAE: "Should I be doing that, or should I blame the system? But then it's like, I signed up to work here, and I'm still working here, so obviously now I am... part of the problem?" Very Strong	Reflection- for-Action Killion & Todnem (1991), and Others Reflecting to produce new knowledge for future action: deliberate forward orientation. In our CAE: "How do we move to healing-centred practice?" "Change starts from within." Very Strong	Future-Forming Reflection Scharmer (2007) "Presencing" Reflection in the realm of imagination: learning from the future as it emerges. In our CAE: "What if dignity became the organizing principle?" "I've always left hopeful." Emerging-Strong

Mapping our Processes: Finding An Evaluative Lens Through Reflective Practice Literature



Invitation 2: A Moment of Self-Reflection

Think about a moment in your professional life when you felt **deeply valued** — not merely useful or evaluated.

What conditions made that possible?

When have you felt most **devalued**?

Individual reflection · Pair share · Bringing it forward ...

Pair Share

Turn to someone near you.

1

Share as much or as little as feels right.

There is no correct answer. There is no performance required.

2

Listen without fixing, advising, or evaluating.

Just receive what is offered. Notice the quality of the listening.

3

Notice what this conversation itself feels like.

The quality of the space is data. Does it feel safe? Does it feel like legal culture — or different?

You are welcome to hold the question silently if you prefer.

Table Discussion

An Invitation to Discuss: What arose for you — and what can be built together?

What systemic shifts or transformations have you witnessed, or believe are urgently needed, to make legal culture — in education or practice — more humanizing, trauma-responsive, or dignity-centred? How can being a reflective practitioner help?

Consider:

- Curriculum & pedagogy
- Professional identity formation
- Mentorship & supervision
- Wellbeing structures
- Indigenous & relational approaches
- Leadership & institutional culture
- Access to justice & the public
- What you have personally tried or witnessed

Discuss

A question

Something the reflection raised that you are still sitting with. A question you don't yet have an answer to, knowing there may not yet be answers.

An idea

A connection, a spark, or a possibility. Something that lit up for you!

A realization

Something that shifted — even subtly — in how you see your role, your students, your institution, or the system.

Collecting Ideas: Impact

**Curriculum &
Pedagogy**

**Leadership &
Institutional Culture**

**Wellbeing &
Professional Identity**

**Relational &
Indigenous Approaches**

**Access to Justice
& Policy**

**Other Shifts
& Ideas**

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Invitation 4: Closing Reflection

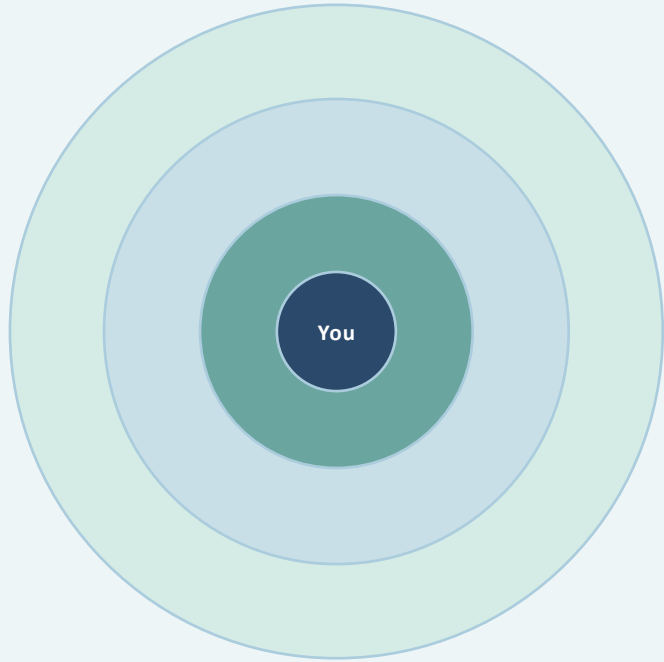
We started by centring on cost: moments of being less than fully ourselves.

What becomes possible — for you, in your sphere — if that cost were reduced by even a little?

"I'm tired of being a snowflake, trying to build up into an avalanche."

If trauma-informed asks 'What happened to you?' — does dignity-informed ask: 'What is your inherent worth, and how should that change how we treat one another?'

Your Sphere of Influence



Student

Teacher

Lawyer

Supervisor

Leader

Researcher

What is one small action within your sphere that could make legal culture more humanizing (within the context of reflective practice or otherwise)?

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