

# Formation as Transformation: A Case Study Investigating the Theory, Application, and Result of Eight Years of Parker Palmer's Formation in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Formation retreats create a space for educators to consider the connection between soul and role. They are premised on the idea that good teaching comes not from technique but from the identity and integrity of the educator. This model and the result of one community college's experience with Formation is presented.

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant,  
Success in circuit lies,  
Too bright for our infirm delight  
The truth's superb surprise;  
As lightning to the children eased  
With explanation kind,  
The truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind.*

—Emily Dickinson

## Reflective Practice in Professional Practice

Reflective practice is premised on the foundation that our professional practice as educators is a manifestation of who we are; that knowing ourselves and the larger cultural context in which we work is important to improving our practice. For the institution, it suggests that organizational performance is connected to how well individuals know themselves and how well their gifts, behaviors, and passion align with the collective mission of the organization (Wheatley, 2005).

Reflection on self and practice seems logical. However, research suggests that without guidance, humans rarely engage in this type of introspection (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982). In addition, in those times when we do, we typically don't reveal the deeper thoughts, feelings, and motives that connect our current behaviors to our internal standards and values (Wilson, 2002). Given this disconnect, high performing organizations integrate reflective practice as a thread throughout their professional development endeavors (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993).

While reflective practice is founded on principles guided by knowledge of self in relationship to practice, the varied approaches to reflective practice are as diverse as the human population. At one end of the spectrum is a cognitive or analytical focus to self critique. This model suggests that our behaviors are a manifestation of our hidden assumptions. That self knowledge around our practice requires an "objectification" of self, in which we cognitively step outside of who we are and critically look at our practices as an outsider. With the sharing, assistance, and questioning of others, we consider why we do what we do, the effectiveness of what we do, the reasons why we do what we do, and how we might improve our practice through self awareness.

There is sufficient evidence that a direct, cognitive critique of one's beliefs and practices can be valuable in improving a professional's practice (Schon, 1991). However, given the diversity of humans who work in higher education, this singular approach is not sufficient nor appropriately engaging for everyone. In reality, the truth of who we are, of Self, is not always so easily discovered. As shared by

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Emily Dickinson in the opening poem, the deepest truth must be explored “on slant.” Parker Palmer (1998) describes this journey of self-knowing as exploring the soul.

### **The Art and Craft of Formation**

In 1994, Parker Palmer convened a group of educators in a retreat setting to explore what a more holistic approach to reflective practice might look like. The purpose of this original experiment was to provide a space for the re-integration of the professional’s soul and role. There was a recognition that the organizational and social environment of teachers was often toxic, over time eating away at the passion that called them to the profession. While this deforming environment was acknowledged in whispers, the primary response was a continued emphasis on technique, both in teacher preparation and in continuing professional development. Palmer labeled his new model of teacher development Formation as a response to this deforming experience. The intent was to create a place for educators to reconnect to their calling. Palmer’s model extended to higher education in 2001.

The work of Formation is offered in a retreat format rather than taking a "workshop" approach. Silence and solitude have an important place in the program. Time for reflection, journaling, and quiet meditation are also part of each retreat. The size of a retreat optimally ranges from 8 – 24. The settings are typically rooted in nature and last from three to four days. Retreats are often times offered in a series where the same group will meet 3 – 4 times a year. These groups may continue for more than one year. The sessions are facilitated. The role of the facilitator(s) is not to lead but to provide activities and an environment for participants to discover their own truths. Each retreat is guided by a set of constantly present and adhered to guidelines known as the Touchstones. These norms are as follows:

1. **Be 100% present.** While here, you are invited to set aside the usual distractions of things undone and the callings of the outside world. Allow yourself to "be, now."
2. **Suspend judgment.** Set aside your judgments of yourself and others to listen more fully.
3. **Identify assumptions.** Our assumptions are usually transparent to us, yet guide our being in the world. By identifying our assumptions we can set them aside to open ourselves to greater possibilities.
4. **Listen deeply.** Listen intently to what is said, listen to the feelings beneath the words. Listen to yourself as well as others. Seek to understand. Strive to achieve a balance between listening and reflecting, speaking and acting.
5. **Presume welcome and extend welcome.** We learn best in inviting spaces. We have a responsibility to welcome all who are here and presume that we are being welcomed as well.
6. **When things get difficult, turn to wonder.** When you disagree with another, turn to wonder: "I wonder what brought her to this place?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me?" "I wonder what he's feeling now?"
7. **No fixing.** We are here to discover our own truth, to listen to our inner teacher, to take one's own journey. We are *not* here to set another straight, to "fix" what we perceive as wrong or broken in another or our institution.
8. **It is never "share or die."** You will be invited to share with others in many ways. This is an invitation, you will determine the extent to which you want to participate in the discussions and activities.

The group process relies heavily on the use of “third things.” Third things are objects or activities woven around questions of importance to the participant. Drawn from the wisdom traditions, expressive therapy, or literature, these poems, art activities, or stories allow participants to work at a deeper level via the gift of the third thing. It is not about exploring the artist or his/her historical moment, etc., but about exploring themselves, their own inner lives, at both a personal and archetypal level. These activities are performed in large groups, small groups, and individually.

## **Transformational Results**

This study investigated the experience at a single community college with approximately 15,000 students. During the time of this study a majority of academic leaders had participated in multiple retreats over the course of one or more years. Approximately one-fourth of the full-time faculty had a similar experience. The methodological approach to this research was an interpretive study over time. Data were collected beginning with the first retreat and continued over an eight-year period. The result of this research suggests transformational change at both the level of the individual and the institution. This qualitative change has been manifest in eight distinct, but often overlapping, themes: Vocation, Practice, Alignment, Personal Renewal, Community, Culture, Skill Enhancement, and Process Change.

Vocation can be described as the deepening of a personal sense of work or one's calling; the ways in which a person finds meaning and purpose. In the language of Formation, this is finding the intersection of soul and role. A typical response can be found in this quote by a participant: "I feel confirmed that my vocation is right for me." A more specific example is the following, "Formation came at a time I was questioning how well some newer parts of my job fit my skills and career goals. [The retreat] made it very clear to me that I was headed in the right direction despite any temporary misgivings. I left Formation with the confidence I needed to move ahead with commitment and energy." A confirmation of vocation was not the only result of Formation. Some participants came to understand their current position did not provide them with the meaning and purpose they desired. Knowing so caused them to seek out new positions, both within and outside the institution.

Practice speaks to being more emotionally and intuitively present in one's work. Simply described by one participant: "I trust myself." Others speak of having the courage to listen and act on their "inner voice," "intuition," or "gut response." As a body, they articulated as experienced faculty or administrators they can't always argue or even explain their response to an idea or decision. However what they've learned through Formation is the value in listening to the initial "feeling" they get when confronted with an idea or need for a decision. There is "wisdom that lies in the quiet, reflective voice within." Specific examples ranged from how to deal with a difficult classroom situation to the hiring of a new Associate Dean.

Alignment is an understanding of how a person's work connects to a larger system. As described by one participant, "[The college] is a big, bustling organization focused on decision, action, and outcomes. I think the whole process of Formation allowed me to find a place in the organization where my own deepest personal values were honored and engaged in a way that contributed to my work life." For another, Formation was described as feeling more connected to the formal planning of the college. Understanding how individual roles aligned within the mission, vision, and values of the college was described as being enhanced through Formation.

Personal Renewal was a dominant theme within the data. This can be described as the value of time to reflect and renew as a person and professional. One participant's quote summarizes the response of most: "I find it hard to find time for renewal in my work life which can be hectic and never has enough hours in the day. Formation forces the participant to step out of the pressure of the immediate and enter a different kind of time and space where focus on work is in one sense more intense but without the pressure and routine that dulls sensitivity. You come at your work through your senses, through art, through poetry—avenues I rarely use in my daily round of activities but which yield new understanding." Overall participants reported feeling a new sense of energy and commitment to their work because of the pace and process of Formation.

While not a form of community building, the creation of community was an important outcome. What participants reported is they came to understand themselves first, and through the sharing of this "authentic" self developed strong connections with others in the Formation experience. As described by one participant: "I got to know people I otherwise would never have known in ways that go far beyond the superficial. I could connect to the passion for students and for subject that other participants brought to the discussion, and I learned to appreciate the richness that difference of opinion brings. I also got a

sense of how much we really do have in common, despite our different disciplines.” Many reported that the value of this community is carried back to campus. They now had a deeper understanding of what their peers found important and could then make individual decisions that aligned with their shared values.

Beyond the individual or individuals in community, participants articulated a change in the college culture. As more people participated in Formation they became aware of the presence and honoring of the rituals and symbols of Formation. The most common example is the acceptance and use of quiet reflection. The use of the Touchstones, which also appear in the category of skill enhancement, was also apparent. In particular, “sitting in wonder” or “deep listening” emerged as the most common shifts in cultural norms. However, there was also a clear longing for the Formation to be much more present in the participants’ daily work life. This exemplified by the following participant responses. “I wish I could carry forward the experiences I have at Formation [into the culture back at work] because honestly my days spent in Formation have been the best I’ve experienced at the college.”

Skill enhancement - individuals using the tools and practices of Formation in their work – is evidenced in the data. As stated above, the Touchstones have been identified as a prominent new set of skills learned by the participants. As described by one participant: “Formation allows for difference by requiring wonder when you disagree or don’t understand someone. Instead of focusing on a rebuttal, I could try to step into the mind of the other and wonder what made him or her come to the conclusion that seemed wrong to me. In the process I came to a better understanding of the issue at hand.” The process and value of reflection was also identified as a new skill that enhanced the participant’s professional practice.

The final theme of process changes came from how the experience and philosophy of Formation informed or changed institutional decision-making activities. The clearest example of intuitional change in the data was a complete revamping of the hiring process for academic leaders based on the work and experience of Formation. This historically had been a problem for the college. A new system was developed that asked more personal questions around meaning and purpose and less around technique and knowledge. The result was the hiring of new administrators who had clearly reflected on their chosen vocation and increased the probability of hiring new staff with a complementary philosophy to the college and current administrators. Another example includes the use of open-honest questions, another Formation tradition of asking none-leading questions, as part of faculty evaluations.

### **Transformational Learning Theory and Sustainability**

The data does suggest that the participants in these series of retreats changed their understanding and practice within their profession, often extending to their personal lives. Given this, it is important to evaluate how this change occurred. Using the critically reflected framework of Jack Mezirow (2000) the outcomes would suggest a change in their meaning perspectives, schemes, habits of mind, and other epistemological foundations of meaning making. This appears to be true. However, when applying the steps of transformation to the process of Formation, there are some significant conflicts. The most important is Mezirow’s concept of rational discourse and its central role in transformative learning. This type of dialogue and debate, where participants rationally present arguments with supporting evidence, runs counter to the Touchstones of Formation. A basic fundamental of Formation is “the answer lies within” and thus any type of critical argument between participants is forbidden in the experience.

The mytho-poetic, or depth psychology perspective (Dirkx, 2003), provides a better explanation for this change. Most of the activities of the participants were metaphorical based poetry, art, working with ancient texts, etc. The intent of the retreats is to create a space where participants can engage with images that allow them to connect with their soul – for Palmer (2003) this is that inner self that is present in many traditions, exemplified as “spark of the spirit,” the “Divine,” “inner spirit,” “true self,” etc. Palmer goes so far as referencing the soul as the “outcome of individuation” in the tradition of depth psychology (p. 377.) Thus what happens in Formation is “transformative learning [that] leads not back to

the life of the mind, as we might find with reflection and analysis, but to soul.” (Dirkx, 2000)

There is a sociocultural transformational learning perspective (Conner, 2005) to Formation as well. Participants are introduced to new norms while forming a new community of practice. The new norms are suggested in the outcomes. The use of deep listening, open-honest questions, or sitting in wonder conveys a different set of “rules” by which the person might do his or her job. Finding meaning through metaphor or quiet reflection was also communicated as a new way of being by the participants. In addition, these norms and cultural values were shared and supported by the community formed through the retreat. While the individuals did change, this change came in part through the acquisition of a new set of norms, tools, and community.

If we consider the three legs of sustainability as environment, economy, and social wellbeing, Formation clearly connects to the latter two. The root of Formation is to provide a space for individuals to connect who they are, with what they do. The results of Formation suggest that participants feel better about themselves; more confident, refreshed, and whole. Richland College, the 2005 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winner and first college to practice Formation, makes this very clear when their model for building sustainable local and world communities connects whole people, whole organizations, and whole communities with Mind-Body-Spirit Renewal and Wholeness at the center of their model of sustainability. The experience of Formation appears to nurture the well-being of the participants.

High performing, and thus sustainable, organizations also need people whose gifts and passion align the mission vision and values of the organization. People perform better when their workday experiences include more positive emotions, stronger intrinsic motivation (*Amabile & Kramer, 2007*). The outcomes of this research suggest that Formation allowed the participants to make these connections. To sustain an organization in the future, whole organizations need to allow whole people to come to work bringing forward and connecting the best of both. Formation appears to allow this to happen.

### Conclusion

The results of this research suggest a counter-cultural approach to faculty and organizational development. These offerings do not replace skill building at the college but presuppose individual competence within many areas of the participants’ practice and is designed to go beyond technique. As a result of this professional development, participants report being left with a deeper and more integrated sense of self while understanding their own place and connection within the larger context of their lives and their institution. This new sense of self is manifest in positive and long-lasting changes in their practice at the college.

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