

21 February 2006

John O'Brien

## Moving Past the Limits in Person-Centred Planning

Disseminated as an element of government policy, person-centred planning has become widespread in some jurisdictions. When the results have been assessed, large scale system investments in person-centred planning have demonstrated positive but limited outcomes. In England, for example, developing a capacity for person-centred planning is a required part of local implementation of *Valuing People*, a national strategy to transform the delivery of services to people with intellectual disabilities (Routledge, Sanderson, & Greig, 2002). Evaluation of person-centred planning efforts in four English localities (Robertson, et al., 2005) shows that person-centered plans are strongly associated with positive changes in people's experience of choice, their contact with family and friends, and their participation in community activities (among other results) but not significantly associated with their getting a job or increasing the inclusiveness of their personal social networks (among other results). Like progressive policies in other countries, *Valuing People* promotes social inclusion and access to work as key outcomes, so these are significant limitations in the contribution that person-centered planning has made so far to the desired quality of people's lives.

These limits share two common features. One, each calls on people with disabilities to cross the social boundaries that separate people with disabilities from typical settings and ordinary relationships and take up the socially valued roles of worker, member, and friend. Two, each calls on those responsible for designing and delivering assistance to move from working within the familiar terrain marked by the boarders of human services to the less familiar and less controllable territory of typical work and ordinary social life. There are many reasons that person-centered planning does not commonly inspire the journey into valued social roles and indicate the path that people with disabilities and their assistants can take to inhabit them. Moving past these limits requires two kinds of work: one, systematic effort to remove service imposed constraints on people forming

new relationships and taking up new roles; and, two, learning ways that the person-centred planning process can mobilize more courageous and creative action.

### **Constraints on Inclusive Roles and Relationships**

Policies are incoherent. Common examples: benefits systems create disincentives to employment; schemes for risk management inhibit ordinary relationships; and labor agreements conflict with workers re-skilling and re-deploying outside the walls of services that contain people.

Many available services are not designed to provide tailored supports to people in valued roles in ordinary settings. Instead, they are frequently designed as machine-bureaucracies whose products are the physical care, supervision, or instruction of people in groups and whose processes churn on mindless of the values they are supposed to serve. Existing supported employment services are often unable and unwilling to assist people with substantial impairments to find jobs that match their interests.

Public funds are limited, often inflexible in their uses, and usually beyond the effective control of the people who are served by them. Absent individual budgets that are easy for people to get and use, it is hard for people and their allies to make up for mismatches between their needs for assistance and what current services offer or to meld available natural supports, benefits, and mainstream resources with a fair allocation of service related funding to make the best of what is available (Duffy, 2005).

Ordinary people and workplaces are often perceived to be unwelcoming to people with disabilities if not downright dangerous to them. It is often difficult to think about risks.

Because settings and people outside services are unknown before a person engages them, its easy to inflate the dangers of moving beyond a familiar routine and discount the lost benefits of sticking with familiar settings and roles. Uncertainty about the possibility of success in building a more inclusive social network or taking a job can lead people to leave these good things off their list of chosen goals or even to explicitly choose not to pursue them. This can seem like a bind to support workers who want to promote inclusion and to respect people's choices and avoid imposing on them. It can also seem

like a relief if the choice to avoid new roles and relationships allows support workers to stay in their own comfort zones.

There is, as the evaluation research shows, substantial opportunity in people's lives to improve such important matters as choice, contact with family and current friends, and community activity without reaching out to take up new roles with new people. Stimulating people to pick this low hanging fruit can generate high levels of satisfaction with person-centred planning as it is, with the limited results it creates.

To follow the path of least resistance, accept these constraints as limiting conditions on person-centred planning, justify ignoring the policy objectives of access to work and more inclusive social networks as reflecting people's choices or as unrealistic fantasies, and focus on making planning meetings enjoyable (and brief). To make person-centred planning more effective, focus on learning how planning can contribute to building the courage and imagination necessary to generate paths to good jobs and greater inclusion, encourage work toward difficult goals, and advocate to dissolve, or at least loosen, constraining conditions.

### **Straightening the way to positive roles and relationships**

Changes in the way the service system functions will increase the number of people who have good jobs and more inclusive social networks by reducing the constraints that people experience from incoherent policy, services that congregate people, inflexible patterns of assistance, and demoralizing habits of social exclusion. Widespread limits in the results of person-centred planning strengthen the case for changes along the following lines and should motivate those who facilitate person-centred planning to add their energies to those of other advocates for a straighter, simpler way to community inclusion.

Concerns for safety, health and privacy, and procedures for risk management have slipped their mooring to commonsense and float aimlessly in many disabled people's lives, blocking the channels to full community life. Responsible person-centred planning identifies people's vulnerabilities and designs intelligent responses to them, but the

larger context of action needs to shift from attempts to bureaucratically protect every detail of people's lives to a search for ways to offer people the dignity of risk.

Efforts continue to unpick the knots that entangle people in avoiding income for work that they can do in order to maintain benefits that pay for disability related supports that are too costly to afford on the salary they can earn.

There is much more to learn about providing individually tailored supports in ways that allow people with substantial impairments to succeed in jobs that match their interests and build stronger and more inclusive social networks, but much more is known about how to provide supports for personal inclusion, than is commonly practiced (see, for examples, Fratangelo & Strully, 2002; O'Brien & Lyle O'Brien, 1998).

Individual budgets that allow people to exercise effective control over their supports accord people the dignity of responsibility for deciding how to make the best use of their fair share of public funds and increase the flexibility with which people can focus their paid assistance on helping them occupy roles that matter to them. (For a thorough and thoughtful approach to self-directed services, see [www.in-control.org.uk](http://www.in-control.org.uk))

Many communities and some governments invest in ways to overcome social exclusion and open the responsibilities and benefits of citizenship to people who have historically been marginalized (O'Brien & Towell, 2005). Aligning with these efforts will energize and extend the work of overcoming social distance.

Social devaluation and prejudiced behavior are enduring, exhausting realities, but these monsters need not block all paths to valued roles and good relationships. Systematic investment in structures like Partners in Policymaking ([www.partnersinpolicymaking.com](http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com)) that promote person-to-person and family-to-family learning about what is possible and how other people with disabilities have found their way into work and other valued social roles. These forms of learning strengthen people's desire and resolve as it expands their sense of what is possible and informs their efforts.

## Strengthening Person-Centred Planning

The desire to experience a good life in a society and system that aspires to inclusion but too often operates to produce segregation sharpens the life-question that person-centered planning wants to help people explore. Reducing the constraints on finding a way to valued roles and relationships reduces the drag on a person's life, but it leaves a central question pending. That central question is, ***what particular conditions allow this unique person to show up in ordinary life as a contributing citizen and a valued friend.***

Fortunately, the way to a good enough answer to this question is not as ponderous as the question sounds. In fact, approached competently, there is often enjoyment as well as power in pursuing it. Enjoyment flows from the camaraderie that grows as people work hard to honestly explore important matters together, even when those matters have painful or frightening or angry aspects. The power comes from the alignment of energy that results when a group of people generate clarity about possibilities that embody their highest purposes.

There are several reasonable approaches to person-centred planning, and each is as capable of liberating the power that comes from faithful exploration of the central question as it is of slipping off into debate about less vital and less powerful questions. The differences among approaches chiefly lie in the sort of information people will attend to as they seek the clarity that demands positive action. Under one approach, a group may look attentively at the person's preferred ways of making their way through life's routines. Under another, they may seek aesthetic expression of a person's identity and highest possible future. Under another, they may carefully work their way through a person's history. Under another, they may draw an arrow to the heart of a hopeful goal. Under another, they may listen to a person's dreams and nightmares for the seeds that can grow into a contributing life.

Whether a plan leads to positive action or not depends on the ways that four kinds of knowledge come together: knowledge of the person's gifts, capacities, and dreams; knowledge of what values the person wants to steer her or his life by; knowledge of the

possibilities for supporting the person's participation and contribution through such strategies as arranging adjustments to the physical or social environment, using adaptive equipment, offering systematic instruction, and providing tailored personal assistance; and knowledge of community opportunities.



How these different sorts of knowledge emerge, shape and blend with each other to generate positive action depends on how well the planners can create positive answers to at least six questions.

- Does the person at the center accept the invitation to plan?
- Do the people who gather to plan come with an openness to a different future for themselves?
- Does the group have sufficient leadership to face the hard work necessary to achieve the clarity that demands action?
- Does the group include people with some awareness of the possibilities for individually tailored supports?
- Does the group include people who want the person at the center to experience the good things that come from valued social roles and an expanding social network?
- Does the group include people with some awareness of community opportunities?

These six questions remain alive from the moment the idea of planning comes up until action toward new possibilities produces new experiences. Actions taken in preparation for a planning meeting can greatly increase the odds of positive answers, but accepting or declining the invitation to plan can shift as the process unfolds and so can openness to change, awareness of possibilities and opportunities, and the leadership to mobilize creative action. Like any performing art, person-centred planning draws some of its energy from living with the risk that the company might not be able to synchronize its moves when the curtain goes up.

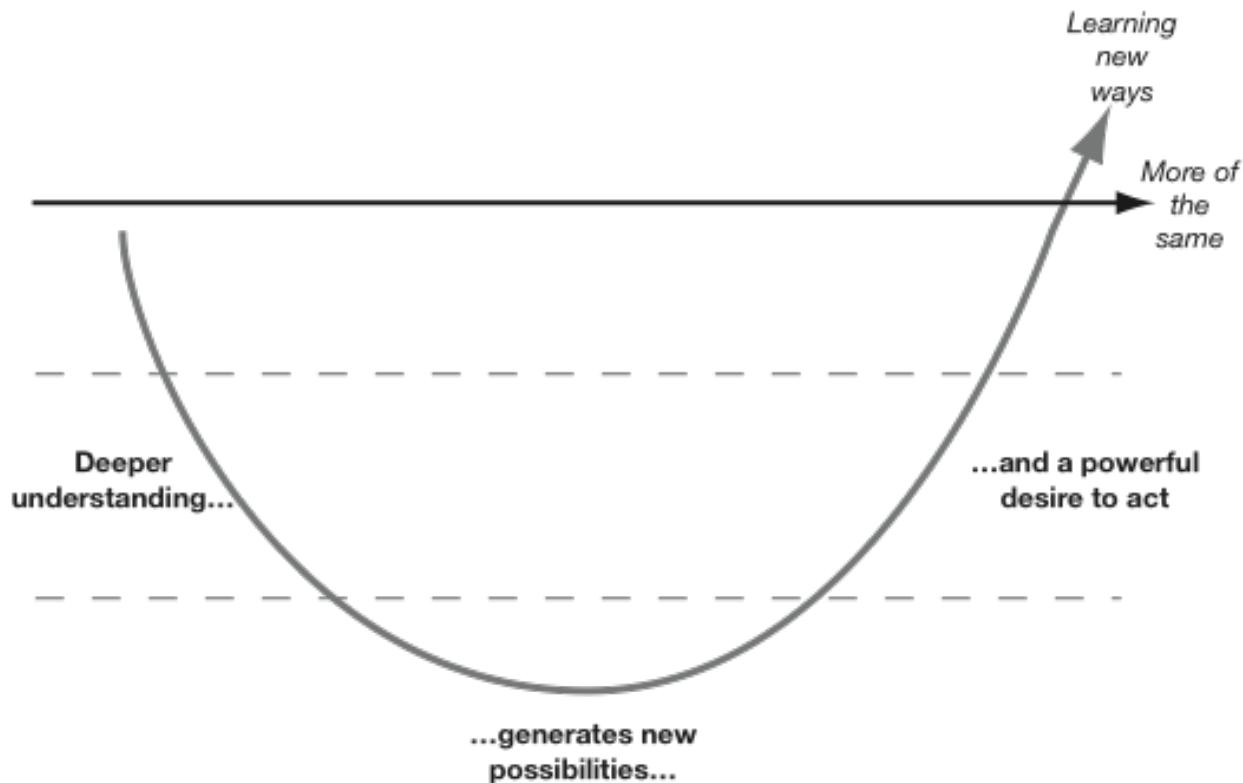
One way to improve the chances that person-centred planning will lead to positive action is to complement efforts to refine the various approaches with a search for fruitful ways to understanding the process of generating new possibilities. One such way of understanding is called the “U-Process”, an understanding of social creativity developed by Claus Otto Schermer. The rest of this essay will explore its relevance to person-centred planning.<sup>2</sup>

The U-Process raises an important question. Will we find what we desire by proceeding in a straight line from where we are, taking our direction from our past and doing more of what we are already doing, or do we need to invest time and energy in moving beneath the surface of our current understanding of the person and the possibilities for ac-

---

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to the 2004 participants in the University of Salford’s graduate seminar, *Organizing to Encourage Effective Direct Support*, whose reflections on their learning projects collided with my reading of Claus Otto Schermer’s description of the U-Process to begin my exploration of mapping person-centred action in terms of Schermer’s framework. What follows is my attempt to understand my work by adapting Schermer’s terms to my own experiences of facilitating person-centered plans when things flow (and sometimes they do not). He isn’t responsible for any confusion that I create here and, while I acknowledge his work, I recognize that he might be appalled by how poorly I understand its subtleties. Until Schermer’s own book appears, the best explanation of the U-process that I know is Senge, Schermer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005.

tion? Experience shows that people can spend a great deal of time and money on person-centred plans that proceed forward in a linear way without producing what we desire –a substantially greater number of people succeeding in work roles and enjoying a widening social network. What we desire embodies a purpose above what we can reach by moving straight ahead. To reach above, we will have to move deeper.



The first step deeper opens us to a new understanding of this person in the context of ordinary community life: a better glimpse of the person's identity, capacities, gifts, and dream. This is a process of gathering-in all sorts of information by carefully observing the impressions of the person and the connections among impressions. This is a moment of collecting and contemplating the words and images and intuitions about the person and their relationships and roles that the circle can hold in common.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> As I use it here, “circle” simply refers to those who gather to plan. The content the group considers –like each of the other moves depicted below– is shaped by the ap-

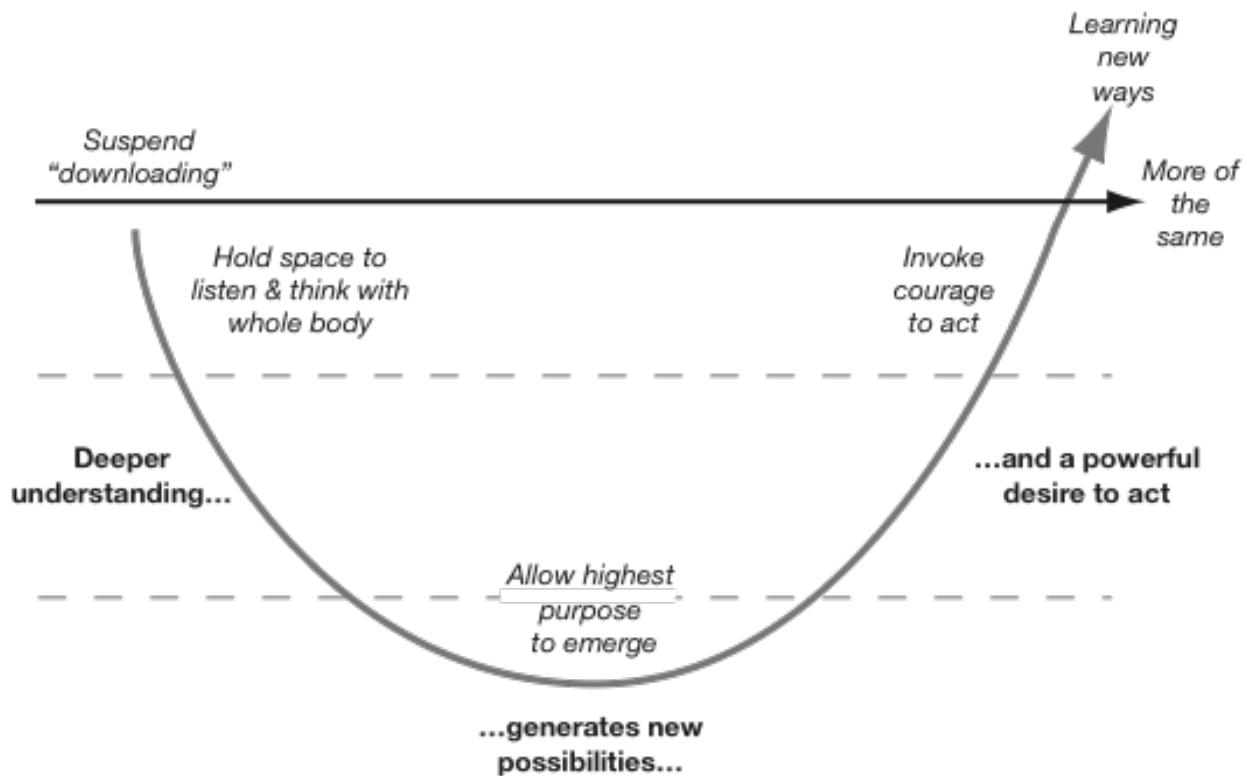
The crucial turn comes when the group purposely opens to the future. Asking, with openness, what good things can come to be for this person if the person and all those gathered with him or her act from their highest sense of purpose invites a desirable future into the circle. New possibilities typically emerge as a commonly felt sense of direction rather than as a detailed architectural model. The feeling is, “this is the way for this person to move forward in life” .

The test of how carefully the circle has formed its understanding of the person and how open the members of the circle have been to higher purpose is the strength of the desire to act to realize the new possibility. When the process is at its best, this desire is not simply for a baby step toward the desirable future, it is a hunger for a prototype experience: something that we can do together that will embody the new possibility, even if briefly, partially, or symbolically. We want a memory of at least a tracing of the new possibility as soon as we can have one.

The U-Process can't be forced, but there are disciplines that will encourage the emergence of a strong desire to learn new ways.

---

proach to person-centred planning the circle follows. I have not tried to map the steps of any particular approach onto the U-process, just my experience of how the process sometimes goes when a group is at its best, regardless of approach.



To move below the surface of the straight line to more of the same, the circle practices suspending “downloading”. The metaphor suggests a computer program downloading a module that will allow the routine performance of a defined task: more of the same, over again. A person-centered planning group is downloading from the prevailing human service culture when it organizes information about the person in a way that slots the person into something that is already available (or available after a wait or the location of more funds or a minor modification) –more of the same. “She is ready for a referral to supported employment.” “We need the volunteer coordinator to locate a befriendeer for him.” “He needs a change in his morning routine.” A person-centred planning group is downloading from consumer society when discovering people’s desires for consumer experiences, like a trip to Disney World, satisfies the group that a full understanding of the person’s dreams has been achieved. A person-centred planning group is downloading from a disability devaluing culture when it is too timid to imagine the person taking up a valued social role and angrily defensive of its low expectations for the person. Constant sorting into binaries accompanies downloading. The discussion bounces be-

tween poles as people disagree about whether a suggestion is unrealistic/realistic; unaffordable/affordable; right/wrong.

To create a deeper understanding, the circle practices holding a space that allows whole-body listening and thinking. The gift of the idea of whole-body listening, and the most concise expression of it that I know, came to me from Christine Meyer, who summarized, in these words, what she has learned from years of struggles in company with people committed to offering her good support (O'Brien, Lyle O'Brien, & Jacob, 1998, p. 71):

*If you are going to work with me, you have to listen to me.*

*And you can't just listen with your ears, because it will go to your head too fast.*

*If you listen slow, with your whole body, some of what I say will enter your heart.*

Whole-body listening to the person builds a shared sense of this unique person. Patterns that bring out important themes in the person's life begin to emerge, usually with the support of graphic facilitation. These patterns become more vivid and deeper as the circle draws forward knowledge of potential community opportunities and knowledge of possibilities for support and as people speak up for the value of challenging social exclusion by claiming valued social roles.

As awareness of life themes, opportunities, and possibilities for support inter-weave it becomes possible to ask, "What is the best future we can imagine for this person, a future that the person and all of the circle members would feel proud to work to create, a future that would express this person's highest purpose?" Finding a good answer to this question requires a silence, a moment in which the people in the circle rest from the compulsion to download a quick fix and listen to the future. This notion of listening to the future sounds more abstract than it is. It is in fact a felt sense that this expression points to the next important step in the person's life journey, and that this step offers the person the best possible chance to show up among other people as a contributing citizen and a valued friend.

Sensing the next step toward good things in life is one thing. Taking that step is another. Taking the next step engages all the constraints and contradictions that shape the person's world. Some of these constraints and contradictions are internal: habitual ways that we nail our own feet to the floor at the moment we want to dance. Others are external: social and systemic expressions of the prejudice that faces disabled people as they claim their rightful places in the world. Before breaking the planning circle, people will summon their courage by committing themselves to taking action and supporting one another to deal with contradictions and constraints.

Almost always this action includes engaging people outside the planning circle, discovering more detailed knowledge, gathering resources, and making—trying—revising more detailed action plans in order to figure out how to follow the direction that the person-centred plan indicates. As thoughtful action allows exploration of the direction that emerged from the plan, that sense of direction grows and changes.

Overcoming the limits in the current practice of person-centred planning involves both change in the service system and development of the strengths in person-centred planning. One approach to improving person-centred planning is to increase the number of ways we can represent the flow of an effective process for social innovation. The U-Process suggests both a way to understand the process of person-centred planning and a set of disciplines whose practice stand a good chance of improving its power to summon creative and courageous actions.

## References

Duffy, S. (2005) *Keys to citizenship (Second edition)*. Birkenhead, UK: Paradigm.  
[www.paradigm-uk.org/](http://www.paradigm-uk.org/)

Fratangelo, P. & Strully, J. (2002). The challenges of person-centered work. In J. O'Brien and C. Lyle O'Brien, Eds. *Implementing person-centered planning: Voices of experience*. Toronto: Inclusion Press Pp. 355-372. [www.inclusion.com](http://www.inclusion.com)

O'Brien, J. & Lyle O'Brien, C. *Members of each other*. Toronto: Inclusion Press.  
[www.inclusion.com](http://www.inclusion.com)

O'Brien, J., Lyle O'Brien, C., & Jacob, G. (1998). *Celebrating the ordinary: The emergence of Options in Community Living as a thoughtful organization*. Toronto: Inclusion Press. [www.inclusion.com](http://www.inclusion.com)

O'Brien, J. & Towell, D. (2005). *In the mainstream of life? People with Learning Disabilities and the national policy agenda*. London: Centre for Inclusive Futures.

Robertson, J., Emerson, E., Hatton, C., Elliott, J., MacIntosh, B., Romeo, R., Knapp, M., Sanderson, H., Routledge, M., Oakes, P. & Joyce, T. (2005). *The impact of person-centred planning*. Lancaster: Institute for Health Research, Lancaster University.

[www.learningdisabilities.org.uk](http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk)

Routledge, M., Sanderson, H., & Greig, R. (2002) Planning with people. In J. O'Brien and C. Lyle O'Brien, Eds. *Implementing person-centered planning: Voices of experience*. Pp. 373-390.

Sanderson H., Kennedy J, Ritchie P. and Goodwin G. (1997) *People, plans and possibilities: exploring person-centered planning*. Edinburgh: Scottish Human Services Trust.

Senge, P., Schermer, C.O., Jaworsji, J. & Flowers, B. (2005) *Presence: An exploration of profound change in people, organizations, and society*. New York: Currency.