

UBUNTU

Teacher Education for Global Citizenship



DIALOGUE DAY 2025

Creating safe and brave spaces for self-awareness - the role of the facilitator

Session 1

Mary Fitzgerald, Consultant Psychotherapist

**Dr Joanne O'Flaherty, Research Lead,
Ubuntu Network**

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Mary is a humanistic integrative psychotherapist and reflective practice facilitator. She holds a BSc in Analytical Science and a BSc in Counselling and Psychotherapy. Through her work with the Ubuntu Network, she supports teacher educators in exploring the emotional and reflective dimensions of Global Citizenship Education. Mary brings a grounded, compassionate presence to her facilitation, informed by a deep commitment to personal and collective healing. She is especially drawn to the power of dialogue to

foster insight, connection, and change. Currently training in Somatic Experiencing, she continues to deepen her work at the intersection of body, mind, and social justice. Mary lives in rural Ireland and values quiet, nature, and spaces that honour complexity and care.

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Joanne is an Associate Professor at the School of Education, University of Limerick and Research Lead for the Ubuntu Network (www.ubuntu.ie). She has a primary degree in Physical Education and English. Joanne has worked in a variety of educational settings, including the formal post-primary sector and the NGO sector, before joining the University of Limerick faculty. Her research interests include teacher preparation, social justice education and social and emotional learning and she has published in these areas.

 pure.ul.ie/en/persons/joanne-oflaherty



Overview of the Session

During this session, Mary Fitzgerald offers participants an opportunity to engage with her deeply personal narrative grounded in her experiences as a facilitator within a self-awareness and personal development group comprising teacher educators focused on critical GCE. Drawing on her background in psychotherapy, she emphasises the emotional depth and reflective self-awareness required to hold safe and transformative spaces. Her reflections highlight the significance of vulnerability, active listening, and the psychological insight necessary for effective facilitation. Complementing Mary's narrative, Dr. Joanne O'Flaherty presents preliminary research findings from a longitudinal study examining how facilitators are experienced by participants in an international Community of Practice focused on Critical Global Citizenship Education (GCE). Joanne shares insights into the competence's facilitators may require - spanning knowledge, skills, and attitudes - and acknowledges the emotional and structural challenges involved in facilitation. Participants will be invited to reflect on their own experiences in relation to the insights presented, fostering dialogue on the internal and external dimensions of facilitation, and the role of the facilitator.

Reflections from a Facilitator: Witnessing Transformation Through Reflective Practice

Mary Fitzgerald, Psychotherapist & CoP Facilitator

When I first joined this Community of Practice (CoP), I had no intention of becoming a facilitator. I was invited as a “critical friend”. A role that felt safe, peripheral, even observational. But as the group deepened into reflective work, something shifted. What emerged wasn’t a formal title or a designated task, but a very human invitation to show up in a different way, to help hold the space for others, not with authority, but with presence.

As a psychotherapist, reflective practice is woven into everything I do. It’s not a tool or a technique; it’s the fabric of the work. We are trained and continually challenged to know ourselves intimately, to become attuned to our inner landscape so that we can meet others with authenticity. My psychotherapy journey has been steeped in group process, personal therapy, and supervision, a triad of reflection that forms the ethical backbone of the profession. I had always held this sacred within therapy rooms. But the Ubuntu CoP opened a doorway for me to explore what reflective practice might look like in an educational space, among teacher educators, many of whom were unused to turning their gaze inward.

This work was not without its challenges. The group was diverse, intellectually accomplished, and at times hesitant to step out of the “knower” role that academia often requires. There was fear of judgement, of being exposed, of the discomfort that can come with asking deeper questions of oneself. My task was not to instruct or direct, but to gently support the group in unlearning. To create a space where not knowing was not only allowed but welcomed.

Facilitating this process required drawing deeply on my therapeutic training. I listened not just with ears, but with my whole body. I tracked emotional undercurrents, watched for non-verbal cues, and remained sensitive to the group’s collective energy. I learned to trust silence, to hold it without rushing to fill it. I learned when to speak and when to simply witness.

What was most moving for me, though, was observing how people changed not in grand, performative ways, but in quiet, inward shifts. Through structured prompts, solitary reflection, and shared dialogue, participants began to lower their guard.



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They wrote with more honesty. They spoke with more vulnerability. They started to question long-held assumptions, and with that, their capacity for empathy and self-awareness expanded.

In many ways, this work mirrored therapy. It wasn't always comfortable. At times, it was messy and raw. But it was real. And from that reality came insight, connection, and perhaps most meaningfully growth.

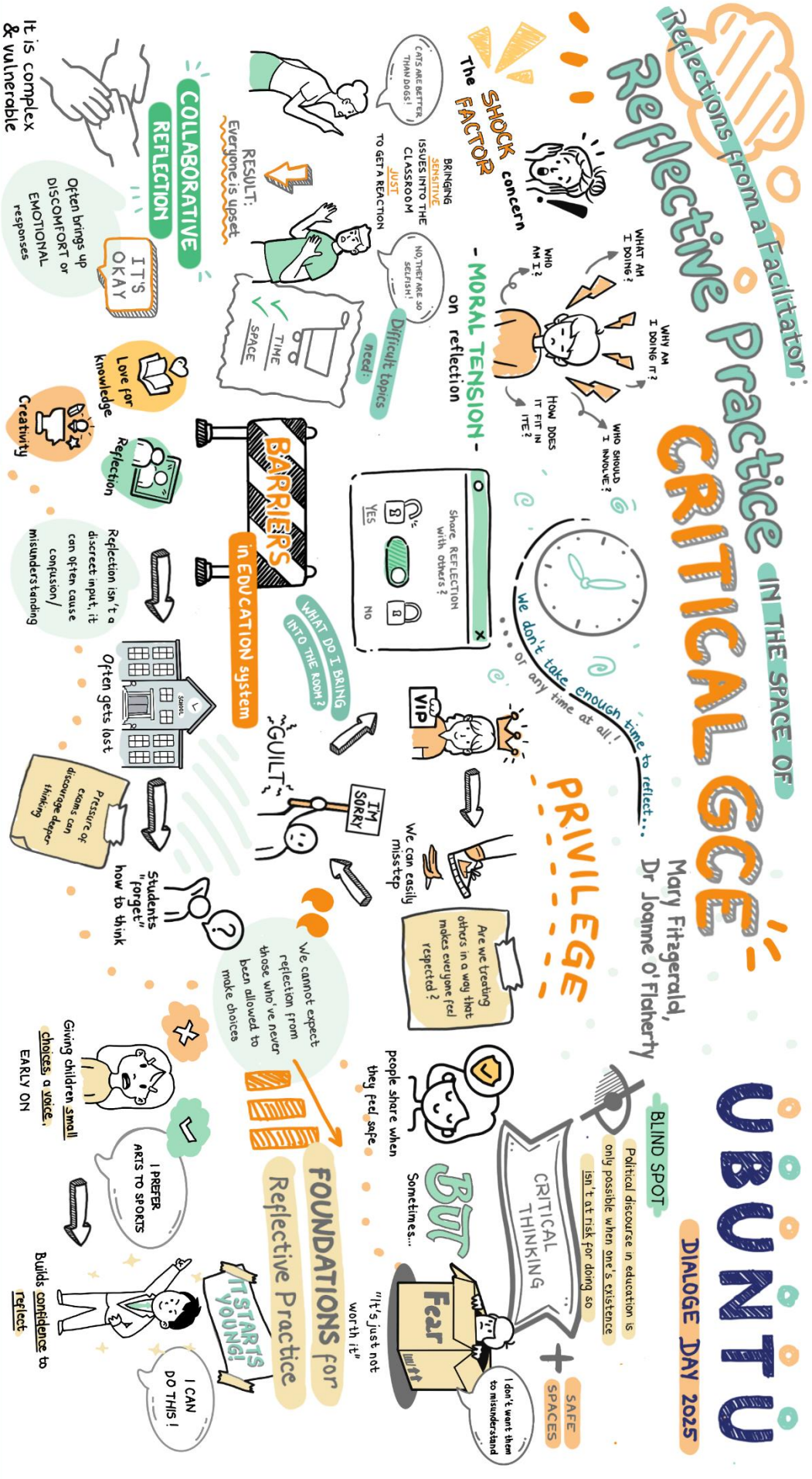
For me personally, the project has left a deep imprint. It reaffirmed my belief that reflective practice, when held with care, can be transformational across contexts, not just for therapists or clients, but for educators, leaders, and communities. It also challenged me to stretch beyond familiar roles, to sit with

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my own uncertainty, and to embrace the vulnerability of stepping forward without a map.

I'm grateful to have been part of this work. It reminded me that facilitation isn't about leading from the front, it's about standing alongside, listening closely, and holding the space with integrity. It's about trusting that even in silence, something powerful is unfolding. In the end, this work isn't about having answers, it's about creating space for the questions.

Graphic Harvest of the Session:



Link to Powerpoint: [HERE](#)

The image displays a collection of 21 posters from the 2023 Ubuntu Dialogue Day, arranged in a grid. The posters are organized into four columns and seven rows. Each poster is numbered in the bottom left corner.

- Poster 1:** Creating safe and brave spaces for self-awareness - the role of the facilitator. Mary Fitzgerald (Consultant Psychotherapist) & Dr Joanne O'Flaherty (Ubuntu, SoE, UL). Ubuntu Dialogue Day June 10th 2025.
- Poster 2:** "If we cannot sit with the complexities within us, there is no chance we can hold space for the complexities around ourselves". Vanessa Andreotti.
- Poster 3:** Narrative. "The lived experience of the role of the facilitator".
- Poster 4:** Study Overview. Methodology: Collaborative Self Study. Participants: The CoP (n=48) comprises experienced Facilitators, Facilitator Observers, GCE, social justice educators, and early career leaders in the field of learning (2023, equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and professionalisation).
- Poster 5:** Prompt for Dialogue: Individually/Group: Have you had similar experiences (in your role as facilitator; or in your experience of reflective practice)?
- Poster 6:** Theoretical Framework. Critical Global Citizenship Education (GCE). Community of Practice (CoP).
- Poster 7:** Study Overview. Methodology: Collaborative Self Study. Participants: The CoP (n=48) comprises experienced Facilitators, Facilitator Observers, GCE, social justice educators, and early career leaders in the field of learning (2023, equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and professionalisation).
- Poster 8:** Core Domains of Competence. Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes.
- Poster 9:** Core Domains of Competence. Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes.
- Poster 10:** Knowledge. 1. Understanding of Reflective Practice and Self-Awareness. Facilitators require a robust conceptual and practical grounding in reflection, emotional literacy, and the psychological dimensions of learning.
- Poster 11:** Knowledge. Knowledge of Pedagogical Tools and Prompt Design. Facilitators must be able to know how to frame discussions and design prompts that are open, generative, and potentially uncomfortable.
- Poster 12:** Skills. Creating and Holding Safe, Non-Judgmental Spaces. Facilitators must create emotionally safe environments that support vulnerability, disagreement, and deep reflection.
- Poster 13:** Skills. Active Listening and Adaptive Response. Facilitators need the ability to listen deeply, read group dynamics, and adjust in real-time to emerging needs.
- Poster 14:** Skills. Facilitation of Group Dialogue and Reflection. Being able to structure and guide deep dialogue - especially around emotionally charged topics - is essential.
- Poster 15:** Attitudes. Humility and Willingness to be Vulnerable. Facilitators must model openness by embracing their own learning and uncertainties.
- Poster 16:** Attitudes. Commitment to Equity and Shared Voice. Facilitators must ensure every voice is valued and hierarchical dynamics are flattened.
- Poster 17:** Summary. Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes.
- Poster 18:** Challenges. Managing Uncertainty and Role Ambiguity. Facilitators often grapple with unclear expectations both from others and themselves, particularly in emerging or novel spaces.
- Poster 19:** Challenges. Supporting Diverse Reflective Styles. Facilitators must design prompts that invite deep reflection without becoming overly rigid or too broad - a delicate challenge.
- Poster 20:** Challenges. Flattening Hierarchies Without Losing Direction. Encouraging shared ownership while providing guidance is a subtle balancing act.
- Poster 21:** Prompts for Dialogue: Responding to the Findings. Conceptualising & Practising Reflective Practice.
- Poster 22:** Contact Details. Faculty of Education, University of Limerick.

Photos from the Day

