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BEYOND THE MIRROR: An Exploration of Artistic Expression Driving Deeper Self-Reflection in the Practice of Partnership Brokering



The author's background as a singer has taught her that song can often express mood and thought in a way that is hard to duplicate using other methods of communication. Mentorship and self-reflection helped the author find the strength to express her learnings through song thereby finding deeper meaning and connections to her work. The author hopes this exploration will help partnership brokers be open to embracing courageous new ways of strengthening their brokering practices through artistic expression. This paper suggests that incorporating artistic expression into self-reflection and partnership processes can open the mind to insights in professional practice.

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**Beyond the Mirror: An Exploration of Artistic Expression Driving
Deeper Self-Reflection in the Practice of Partnership Brokering**



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Partnership Broker Association Accreditation Programme

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Introduction

“Reflection gives the brain an opportunity to pause amidst the chaos, untangle and sort through observations and experiences, consider multiple possible interpretations, and create meaning. This meaning becomes learning, which can then inform future mindsets and actions” (Porter, 2017).

Professionals hear often about the importance of self-reflection. I would hazard a guess that the majority of people understand the value this practise can bring to both them as individuals as well as to their work. But how many of us make the time to do it? And why don't we, when we know the value it can bring? Are we too busy, too indifferent, or is it perhaps that we will we not like what we see if we look too closely? Reflection, truly courageous self-reflection, isn't easy—and there isn't one formula for doing it. Perhaps the mirror you look into is rose tinted, or cracked. How would that distort the reflection? Would you look away? How can you push yourself to look beyond and really examine what the mirror is showing you? Are you ready to see it?

I was one of those professionals who, though I considered myself to be an introspective person, didn't make regular time for true self-reflection. When tasked with creating a self-reflection log book to tell the story of my accreditation journey, I struggled to get to the level of reflection that I knew was going to produce the best benefit in my practice. I wasn't ready and didn't know how to look deeply enough into the mirror. When we truly see ourselves we also need to be ready to take accountability for the needed changes. It's hard work, it's scary, and vulnerable. And, as I learned through this Partnership Broker Accreditation process, necessary. Over the course of this process I have come to understand that regular self-reflection will strengthen me and, in turn, my partners through my practise of brokering. I went about my self-reflection, accidentally, in quite a strange way and I am looking forward to exploring in this paper how my unorthodox method might be of interest to my partnership brokering colleagues. This paper seeks to explore the concept of artistic expression as a tool for a partnership broker's self-reflection and how that might strengthen brokers' practises. As with deep self-reflection, art is an expression of one's soul and I believe my journey may resonate with others. For me, it was music that helped me finally look beyond the reflection in the mirror.

Why Music? Context

I am a Partnership Broker with the Partnership Centre of Excellence at the City of Edmonton. I broker complex, multi-stakeholder partnerships between the City of Edmonton and a variety of government, crown corporation and Non-Government Organizations. My brokering work includes process design, systems change, facilitating process, and change management. During my accreditation journey I chose to focus my reflective log book on only one of the projects I am brokering: The Domestic Violence Justice Response Project. In this project I work with a group of six partners to restructure the victim serving side of the Criminal Justice System in Edmonton. Throughout this work I was responsible for designing and facilitating the process to bring the partners together and solidify their new partnership through the creation of a Memorandum of Understanding and a Partnership Understanding. We also designed the new service delivery model and engaged with the victim serving agencies in the city to gain consensus and insight. I chose to focus on this project because I meet with the partners regularly to explore what the partnership needs and felt that the log book and my accreditation journey would benefit from this as an example of the brokering I plan and facilitate.

Outside of my career with The Partnership Centre of Excellence, I am a professional singer. I began my study of Opera at the age of 12 and it's a big part of who I am in my personal life.

Until now, it hasn't been a part of who I am as a Partnership Broker. I've been brokering partnerships in a professional capacity for the past two years, but realised when I came into this job that this is the work I have been doing for much of my life, just without the title or recognition of the concept. I never seem to remove my partnership hat either professionally or personally. I'm always looking for ways to strengthen people to benefit their relationships and enable them to do more together than they could individually.

I broker in a full time capacity and also continue to perform in community Opera and Musical Theatre here in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. These mediums have taught me that a song can often express mood and thought more deeply than the recited word. I love moving stories forward through my vocal performance. Through the talent of the composer and lyricist, the orchestration, and the interpretation of the singer, music can drive deeper thinking that is hard for me to duplicate using other methods of communication.

Perhaps for you, it will be a different artistic expression: fused glass, dance, yoga, cooking, or Taekwon-do. Be open to what your method might be. What energizes you and gives you a place to engage your whole self? How would you best tell your story? For me, it's music.

How it Started

As I previously stated, this reflective method started accidentally. In my first week of mentorship, which was also the first week of the year, I was experiencing a lot of new beginnings. I was starting the second phase of the project I intended to focus my accreditation process on, our team was doing a reorganization to establish internal teams to enhance focus and efficiency, and I was looking forward to shaking off 2017 and embracing what 2018 was going to bring.

As I wrote my first log book entry and readied it for submission to my mentor in this accreditation process, Rafal Seraphin, I kept hearing Nina Simone's version of "Feeling Good" echoing in my head, "It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me and I'm feeling good" (Bricusse & Newley, 1964). My brain seemed to be telling me something and it felt important to record it. I added it at the bottom of my log book entry and entitled it: My Jam This Week. It was a snap decision that felt a little cheeky, with an added thought that maybe Rafal would enjoy the song.

On the following meeting with Rafal, he asked about the song and I explained about my background in music and the song seemed to be linked to the week's work for me, so I had included it as part of my reflections. We had an interesting conversation on the inclusion of a

song, but still, at that point, the music seemed like a fun addition to the log book but not core to the process. Oh, how wrong I was.

The Light Bulb

The concept of a reflective log book is not one that I have used regularly in my career. I understood, logically, the benefits that could come from recording professional self-reflections, but I hadn't made it a daily practise. As I started the log book, I was excited to try the practice but found that I struggled seeing beyond the daily happenings on the project, what was driving the behaviour, and how I felt about it. I seemed to be missing the clarity self-reflection could bring and was starting to feel frustrated. I wasn't getting everything possible from this incredible and life changing opportunity that I had been granted when accepted into this accreditation programme.

In sessions with Rafal, I described that I was feeling stuck and it turned into a beautiful conversation where I learned that he saw three deepening levels of partnership awareness. The levels are:

1. **Tactical** - What is happening day to day in the partnership?
2. **Partnership** - What is driving the partners?
3. **Fundamental** - What questions does this particular partnership issue raise about partnership work as a whole?

He helped me see that I had been stuck at the Partnership Level and his explanation was a "light bulb" moment for me. I had been glancing in the mirror, but looking away too early. I couldn't see beyond.

At that point, I began to push myself to look past the partnership level and explore the deeper meaning and connections between what I was experiencing and what it may mean for the theory and practise of partnership brokering. As I pushed myself to not shy away from the mirror and as the log book progressed, I continued to find songs that spoke to my reflections on the work each week. I began to realise how important self-reflection through music was becoming to the process. The music added an interesting texture and dimension to what I needed to say. I was able to more clearly express the highs and lows that I was experiencing in the brokering work. As in an Opera, the music started to strengthen the story.

During the three months of mentorship and self-reflection, I found strength in expressing my deeper feelings about the process through song and lyric. I didn't start out to do it intentionally, this was the first time I had thought to combine my two passions of partnerships and music. As the months progressed my musical self-reflection became more and more integral to my practice—I didn't always understand right away what it meant but the music became a thread that ran through the storyline of my work on this brokering project. I began to wonder if the concept of marrying artistic expression to self-reflection might be of interest and use to other brokers in their practices.

My Method

I offer this approach as an example of what worked for me in this exploration. The hope is that other brokers will be able to see themselves in this method and find their own ways to apply it to their own artistic and reflective expression.

As the weeks progressed I continued finding songs to match the work, mood, and reflections for each week. As mentioned above, I lead between three and nine concurrent brokering projects at any given time, so for simplicity in this accreditation process, I focused on recording only one of those projects. It was important to me to create continuity in the process, so the song reflected only what was happening in the work I was recording in my log book that would be submitted at the end of the 12-week accreditation process. After finishing my log book entry, I would reread it focusing on the overall mood of that week's entry. Sometimes as I read, I realised that my surface impression of how the week had gone wasn't upheld by how I'd written about it. The entry may be more pensive, uplifted, frustrated, or hopeful than I had initially thought. What did that mean for me? Was I able look at the week as a whole and not let one part of it colour my impressions and lessons?

As I ruminated on the breadth of the week's work and the feelings it invoked, I would begin to write my reflection section. It was here that I started to explore what the happenings and drivers in the partners were telling me about brokering as a whole; questions arose: perhaps around personal agendas skewing partnerships, or how to expect the unexpected, or partnership contingency planning. What did these questions tell me about myself, my partners and how to elevate my work?

Sometimes a song, phrase, lyric, or melody would pop into my head as I wrote and reflected, as it happened the first time, but sometimes I needed just to sit and think until something came to me. It felt important to the process to not force the finding of a piece of music to encapsulate the week's work. I also didn't want to search for songs and find something that I hadn't previously known. I wanted the songs to come from my own repertoire of music. After finding that week's song, I'd listen to it a few times and ask myself: Why this song, was it the rhythm, melody, lyrics? What did the music tell me about how I was feeling? And what did what I was feeling tell me about my questions from that week, my brokering practice, or about the industry as a whole? As I sat with the song, and thought about the questions that arose during my reflective time, I began to evaluate what in the music was going to help me understand where I needed to focus my brokering work for the coming weeks as well as lessons I could bring back to my Partnership Centre colleagues. I could begin to see beyond the simple reflection in the mirror to the changes my practice needed me to make.

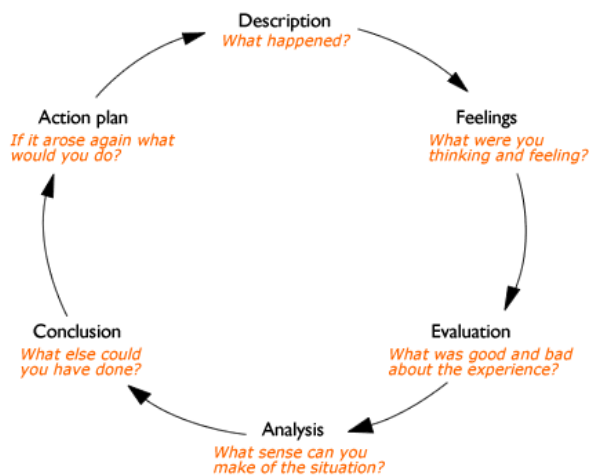
Self-reflection is one thing, but sharing your inner most thoughts, doubts, or celebrations with someone else adds another dimension to the process entirely. In my case, I was sharing with my mentor and sometimes I felt embarrassed to share the musical reflection with him. It felt like stripping away the polite society norms and bearing part of myself. It was raw, not always a pleasant experience, but one that has left me stronger on the other side of it. The act of sharing the reflection was an important part of keeping me accountable to the progress I was making. It helped greatly that Rafal never judged the musical reflection, only asked me what it meant and how I could apply it. Many times, I achieved even greater clarity as Rafal and I spoke about the reflections from the week before. It was as though the music helped me record what I couldn't verbalise and then the sessions with Rafal helped me finally find those words.

At the end of the 12-week accreditation process I went through each of my reflective songs in order. I didn't re-read what I had written again, just listened to the songs one after the other. The intention was to see if the soundtrack of my journey told the story with as much excitement, uncertainty, and celebration as I hoped it would. It was fascinating and exciting! And difficult. But it did tell my story. I was immediately brought back to the wins and losses, and the lessons of each week. I heard myself change through the music. I heard my confidence grow and falter, then expand again. It was intensely personal but solidified for me that this method of self-reflection was something worth talking about. I look forward to understanding if this reflective method will work for other brokers and invite them to adapt and improve upon it.

How Might Someone Else Try This Musical Reflection Method?

As this was an organic process for me it is difficult to put rigor around how one might approach reflecting through the use of music. This self-reflective method is attempting to adapt the artistic concept of abstract expressionism into a non-visual art form. I offer this as a potential way that someone without a background in musical study might try to achieve deeper self-reflective understanding and meaning through song.

Step One: Create a song list of music that resonates with you. Attempt to find songs that cover a variety of topics or emotions for you. Try to pull your list from songs that you already know and have a connection to.



Step Two: Reflect on the work or situation that you would like to find a root cause or deeper meaning for. I utilized the Gibbs Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) for my reflections. During your reflections gain a sense of your feelings on the situation.

Step Three: Analyse your feelings and try to understand the importance. Why do you feel the way you do? What does that emotional impression mean for you?

Step Four: Using your song list, is there a song that makes you experience the same feeling as your reflection? Or can you now think of another song that fits better? Think of the lyrics, chord progressions, keys, tempo, dynamics, melody/harmony. What is it about this specific song that takes you to that same emotional place?

Step Five: Now that you have identified your song, listen to it. Really listen. What is the emotion the song evokes trying to tell you? What does your subconscious know that your conscious might not? What does the song let you say that words alone cannot?

Step Six: What realizations come from the music? What do you now recognize about the situation you were reflecting on? What do you need to learn from it?

Step Seven: Now that you are viewing the original situation in a new light, what could you do differently next time to achieve a different outcome?

Step Eight: Talk to someone. I used my time with my mentor to help unravel my realizations and I found that in sharing I brought myself to a deeper understanding. It was hard to do but an important part of the process for me.

Again, music may not be your “go to” for artistic expression so these steps are offered simply as a way for the curious to try the method that worked for me.

What Does it Mean?

The realisations I made through employing this artistic reflection process and sharing my thoughts with Rafal are ones that I will carry with me. By using my passion for music to push myself to look beyond I was able to find deeper meaning and connections to my work. One of my biggest takeaways from my journey is that change is constant. This realisation has important implications for partnership brokering. To truly help build the strongest partnerships, we can begin to build resilience into our partners so that they bend as the winds change rather than snap. Planning every aspect of how you are going to approach a partnership, while admirable, has its limitations. For example, if I had stuck to the Action Plan I had outlined at the beginning of this accreditation process, I would never have gotten the full benefit of the opportunity. Leaving myself open to more of the “art” in the “art and science” of partnership brokering, allowed me to find the beauty in embracing change as a constant. For me this means that I can be open to not only finding new ways to broker and ways to help partners examine what they want to achieve but also, what contingencies might they want to include if things don't go exactly to plan. This idea has helped enormously in my practise. While only in the early stages, already my clients are reporting that they feel more prepared for the “what ifs” and, in turn, are stronger in their partnerships. If I hadn't been open to this reflective method, I don't believe I would have found this way to elevate my work.

Another example from my accreditation process: in week seven I was feeling strangely torn by the team of partners starting to need less guidance from me. This was a confusing feeling as I work very hard to build capacity in my partners and yet there was a tiny part of me that was conflicted about them working ahead without me. I joked with my colleagues here in Edmonton

that it felt like walking a tightrope between being extraordinary and extraneous. My song that week was Eva Cassidy's cover of "Over the Rainbow" (Arlen & Harburg, 1939). Her masterful use of minor chords and unexpected changes to the original melody and phrasing give the song a poignant edge that leave this listener with questions rather than answers. That's where I was in week seven, with so many questions about my conflicting thoughts. It took me until week nine to really dig into the root cause of that feeling. My ninth song was Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground". The phrases that really resonated for me that week were "People keep on learning" and "I'm so glad that I know more than I knew then, Gonna keep on tryin', Till I reach my highest ground" (Wonder, 1973). It struck me through my reflection that my self-competitiveness was causing me to struggle to relinquish governance of the project. I'm not a person who competes with others but, for better or for worse, I do hold myself to a very high standard. I never would have thought of myself as a person who expected to hold a tight rein on the work and yet, there it was. The resolve and driving chord progressions coupled with powerful lyrics and the tiniest edge of dissonance in "Higher Ground" gave me the clarity and courage to make that realization. From there I could see how my self-competitiveness might hold the partnership back and I began to work more overtly to build capacity in my partners. I found solace rather than conflict in the fact that they were beginning to not need a broker on the project. This now meant that I had passed along valuable information and the ability to be resilient to change. If I hadn't pushed deeper to find that root cause I wouldn't have been able to make the changes I did to benefit my partners. I am endeavoring to employ this renewed focus on building capacity in all of my brokering projects. My clients have already seen the benefit of the new approach to my work and are excited about the concepts they are learning and applying.

By adding artistic expression to buttress my self-reflections, I was able to use my passion for music to help me get to the root cause on my reactions in my brokering practice. This helped me look beyond the mirror, thereby finding the connections and ramifications for building better partnerships and more confident partners. I posit that other brokers may strengthen their own reflective practices by opening their minds to new possibilities and theories. It may even allow them to realize which changes they might want to make, as it did for me.

Application to Partnerships as a Whole

Using music as a self-reflection tool was an effective way for me to find the deeper meaning in the process. It's not an entirely new concept, as indicated in the study of musical therapy. In 2011, Baker and Krout noted that "within the complementary field of music therapy, music and

lyrics are often used in the classroom to support deeper self-reflection while students are engaged in moving from theory to practice and applying skills to practice” (Baker & Krout, 2011). The concept was also upheld by Davis and Pereira in 2016. They wrote:

This reflection [music] is a crucial factor as it supports student integration of theory, research from the field, and skills based knowledge. The literature on music therapy also provides rich examples of how engaging in creative arts activities can enhance student development of clinical skills and higher levels of professional decision making. (Davis & Pereira, 2016)

I haven’t been able to find any references to self-reflection through music or the arts in a professional setting outside of the study of musical therapy, but see many correlations between the practices used in therapeutic settings and my experience through this process as detailed in my accreditation logbook (Waye, 2018).

Also of note is Surinder Hundal’s article on *The value of reflective practice for partnership brokers* in which she writes “Some reflective practitioners are visual / spatial learners and communicators, preferring to use pictures, images, and spatial understanding” (Hundal, 2016). In this article she explores several different methods of self-reflection including artistic methods specifically during the student experience such as the New York University (NYU) School of Medicine’s database of Literature, Arts and Medicine “LitMed”. During the students’ time in medical school, they are encouraged to explore their connection to arts and literature as “attention to literature and the arts helps to develop and nurture skills of observation, analysis, empathy, and self-reflection” (LitMed, 1993). Within this database, Hundal writes, students are encouraged to express themselves and their self-reflection in artistic ways, such as poetry. It’s interesting to hear that this concept has been used in the academic setting and hopefully many of the graduates from NYU continue the self-reflection into their professional medical setting.

The greatest lessons I’ve learned through my journey of self-reflection are to be open to the intangible—and sometimes uncomfortable, not shy away from the mirror of self-reflection, give my whole self to the process, and embrace change as a constant. All of these lessons can and have been applied to my life both professionally and personally.

What's Next?

Other brokers may find that their needs are different or that they don't have the same challenge with reflecting as I did. Perhaps other applications of the concept outside of as a reflective tool could benefit the brokering field. Could a broker find a way to bring artistic expression into the sessions with their clients? How would the partners react? I speculate that some partners would find enjoyment in the process and others would feel apathetic or dismissive of it. There are certainly challenges to introducing something like this to one's partners. I believe it might be difficult to dictate which expression of one's self was asked for in the session. Perhaps music may not resonate but poetry or collage might. I would suggest leaving it open for the partners to decide how they want to express themselves. Could there be an activity closer to the end of a broker's involvement in a project where the clients are asked to think back on the project and express themselves in whichever way they find most useful? Could the clients, as I did, find more clarity in their work and purpose by engaging more of their senses in the process?

As I continue this self-reflective process, I look forward to the further lessons I will learn. What lessons might my colleagues learn from trying this? While I don't think this method is for everyone, I believe it would be interesting for those curious enough to try it. Brokers who have struggled with the practice of self-reflection may try this and adapt it, or discard it, or find another new method that speaks to them. Perhaps someone will try engaging the arts within the brokering sessions and help their clients find new dimensions in the partnership. I'm not sure where, if anywhere, this concept might lead. But I do hope this exploration will give people the idea to be open to embracing courageous new ways of strengthening their brokering practises through artistic expression. And I hope they will share their method and lessons too.

Conclusion

I didn't set out to write this topic. This paper topic, like the concept itself, was serendipitous. Using music as a self-reflective tool to strengthen my brokering practise wasn't where I started out, but it's how I've ended and will continue to inform my journey in this industry that I love so much. These past three months have been an exploration of the abstract, of engaging all the senses, and giving my whole self to the process. I found, through this journey, that to be the best broker I can be, I couldn't compartmentalize my artistic self from my professional self. Self-reflection through engaging your artistic side can be a raw and difficult experience but I one hope others see value in trying. By pushing myself in this way, by forcing myself to look deep into the mirror and then beyond has been one of the richest experiences in my life. I've learned

so many lessons about my clients, my practise, my colleagues, and myself. I encourage my fellow brokers to bravely look into that mirror and find a way to tell their own story in their own unique way.

This paper has demonstrated a personal case study of a novel method of enhancing an essential practice for partnership brokers. It suggests that incorporating artistic expression into self-reflection and partnership processes can open the mind to insights in professional practise. In my view, the concept is worthy of additional study. My partnership brokering practise wouldn't be as strong without this process showing me the importance of self-reflection. And I wouldn't have looked as deeply without expressing myself artistically. And I wouldn't have known to look beyond the mirror if I hadn't shared.

My Jam This Week

Andre Braugher's a capella version of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "*Freebird*"

<http://cms.springboard.gorillanation.com/previews/58/video/549311/>

The Broker's Soundtrack Vol. 1

[Feeling Good- Nina Simone](#)

[Landslide- Stevie Nicks](#)

[The Long and Winding Road- Paul McCartney](#)

[I feel the Earth Move- Carole King](#)

[I Can See Clearly Now- Jimmy Cliff](#)

[Changes- David Bowie](#)

[Over the Rainbow- Eva Cassidy](#)

[When the Night Feels my Song- Bedouin SoundClash](#)

[Higher Ground- Stevie Wonder](#)

[Time After Time- Cyndi Lauper](#)

[You Raise me Up- Josh Grobin](#)

[Sull-Aria- Mozart](#)

Bonus Track: [Freebird- Andre Braugher](#)

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