

REFLECTION-IN-ACTION: CASE STUDY OF A CLINICAL SUPERVISOR

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When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case.¹

In *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*, Donald Schon examines the puzzles that a professional would consider in reflecting on the impact of action. By giving thought to the actual content of the processes that we enact everyday in our interpersonal professional lives, we may evaluate and better understand what actually happens in communication and how we interpret its effectiveness. Then, if there is a desire for change, the professional may venture a calculated risk to take interactions in a new direction and thereby construct a new reality.

This paper reports an analysis of a series of conferences between a student teacher and her supervisor in which the supervisor attempted to follow the principles of clinical supervision.² Clinical supervision seeks to develop a teacher's own skills of analysis of teaching, with many similarities to what Schon has termed "reflection-in-action." This paper focuses on a clinical supervisor's reflection on her own professional behavior over a series of conferences that spanned two months. The inquiry explores the premise that the supervisor's own reflection-in-action is just as important as the reflection that the supervision attempts to foster in the teacher being supervised.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Schon stresses the extraordinary quality of reflection-in-action in an essentially Cartesian society in which such a process is not generally accepted as "a legitimate form of professional knowing."³ The cycle of reframing problems and testing new solutions can continue in a never-ending spiral. In

¹Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 68.

²This paper reports Lee Turner's efforts to work as a reflective supervisor of a student teacher Tom Russell and Jane Bowyer were active throughout the planning and analysis, listening to Lee's reflections on her actions and helping to frame the data analysis and the report. The opportunity for collaboration arose in 1983-84 while Lee Turner was completing her M.Ed. degree at Mills College and Tom Russell was at Mills College as a Visiting Scholar. We thank Julia Gordon for comments on the manuscript.

³Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 69.

contrast to an idealized image of rational and linear thought processes, a more subjective style is admitted and employed consciously. An educational practice worthy of this type of qualitative examination is that of clinical supervision. As described by Robert Goldhammer, the cycle of clinical supervision has five steps: pre-observation conference, observation, analysis and strategy, supervision conference, and post-conference analysis. The cycle's orientation involves self-initiation, self-regulation, inquiry, analysis, examination, and evaluation; the purpose is to assist a teacher in proceeding toward creating an individual teaching style. A system of "mutual inquiry" into a teacher-selected focus of observation is used, with teacher-selected coding choices (such as verbatim note-taking, audio- or video-recording, graphing or charting of classroom interaction) appropriate to the purposes of the lesson and to the teacher's current framing of the classroom context. Although one looks to the teacher for much of the initiation of perspectives, the clinical supervisor is active throughout the process, facilitating, suggesting, and even taking deliberate moves where catalytic action seems necessary and appropriate. As collector and mirror of data, the supervisor must become thoroughly familiar with the details of the data collected and with the teacher's objectives and underlying philosophy. Goldhammer recommends that the supervisor's plan for guiding dialogue with the teacher be based on recurring patterns in the data, selected on the criteria of "salience, fewness, and treatability."⁴

Applying Schon's concept of the "reflective practitioner" to the process of the clinical supervision cycle calls attention to that delicate interaction between teacher-supervisor and teacher-in-practice where focused time is spent with the purpose of extending the growth of both parties in the interaction. Though one may be guide and the other guided, the uniqueness of the clinical supervision cycle lies in its quality of teacher-centeredness, relying primarily on the teacher's initiative and willingness to expose certain aspects of his or her development to self-scrutiny and to the microscope of a supportive supervisor. The intrinsic quality of the motivation seems likely to produce greater long-term commitment to change. In this case study, both supervisor and teacher kept "reflective journals" throughout a series of supervision cycles, with a view to documenting both participants' thoughts on the nature of the content covered and the interaction between the two. Such data have potential for documenting the process of learning to teach and the process of learning to supervise. In this case study, the focus is on the reflections of the clinical supervisor.

SETTING FOR A CASE STUDY

The clinical supervisor is a graduate student in education. Her considerable experience in education includes nine years of classroom teaching,

⁴Robert Goldhammer, *Clinical Supervision: Special Methods for the Supervision of Teachers* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1969), pp. 94–113.

four years as a cooperating teacher receiving student teachers, and one year as a faculty supervisor of student teachers. This is her first effort to link the principles of clinical supervision with the perspective of the reflective practitioner. This case study is situated in an English class of grade 9 students in an upper-middle-class high school in northern California. The student teacher holds an M.A. degree in English. Prior to entering the teacher certification program, she had worked as a teaching assistant and had thereby acquired an initial teaching style.

Additional background information helps to set the stage for the analysis that follows. Teacher and supervisor had become acquainted in a shared class in education. During the next semester, the supervisor was expected to work with this and one other student teacher, as part of the regular supervision of student teachers by the teacher education institution. She made seven visits to the teacher's classroom, at weekly intervals, to observe a 50-minute lesson, which was usually followed by a supervisory conference. The first visit did not include recorded observation or a conference, since organizational arrangements were being worked out, including an explanation of the principles of clinical supervision. On two occasions it was necessary to postpone the supervisory conference until later in the week.

The teacher's goals were to examine her ability to cover the content adequately, to check the students' comprehension of the content, and to study the distribution of her attention to individuals. With guidance from the supervisor, the teacher selected two data collection techniques—running verbatim of classroom dialogue and a participation graph based on the seating chart. In the first visit, the supervisor and teacher discussed the ideas of mutual inquiry, clinical supervision, and reflection-in-action as a basis for events to follow. They agreed to keep individual journals, focusing on the supervisory interaction. They recognized that a relationship characterized by mutual inquiry would require some time to develop.

PUZZLES: ISSUES FOR INQUIRY

Schon highlights the practitioner's attention to "puzzles" and the framing of problems. To see the meanings of puzzling behavior, Schon says, is to "give reason" to occurrences that fall outside the range of ordinary expectations.⁵ Immediate puzzles that concerned the supervisor included patterns in the beginning teacher that implied contradictions in her goals for teaching. For example, before the supervision process began, she had commented to colleagues in the education class that her intent was to complete a Ph.D. program in her field of English. She had also commented that many teachers simply hand out information, not caring if the children "get it" or not. When asked

⁵Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 68.

at the time whether she wished to be that kind of teacher, she replied that she did not, yet once the supervisory relationship began, she seemed to resist efforts to discuss methods of getting at student comprehension. Later, she stated that she had no intention of studying for the Ph.D. degree, and left the supervisor with a basic feeling of confusion about her present and future plans.

The supervisor's first contacts with the beginning teacher suggested an attitude of avoidance on the part of the novice. Initially, there was no desire to share in any of the preparation of transcriptions of the supervisory conferences, and little interest in picking up clues to possible areas (such as student participation) to be examined within the lessons observed. As the supervisor conducted her own search for patterns in the lessons, the salient features seemed to be those of a generally "didactic" mode of instruction with a tendency toward monologue about personal concerns, with little student participation or student-student interaction. Conveniently, an examination of student comprehension seemed likely to lead simultaneously into the issue of her talk in proportion to that by students, if she could consider how to elicit from students clues about their comprehension. The task of assessing comprehension might require more time listening to students' comments about the material covered each day.

THE SUPERVISOR'S EARLY REFLECTIONS⁶

At the outset of our interactions, I was cognizant of the personal maturity of this beginning teacher, as well as the contradictory messages that had appeared in her statements about teaching goals. At our preliminary conference, she seemed unwilling to share the task of preparing verbatim transcriptions of our conferences. After one attempt to obtain cooperation, I accepted her reluctance at face value rather than threaten the basic trust and clear communication that were my priorities. At our next conference, a turnabout occurred, and the student teacher offered to help in the preparation of one or two transcriptions. At this point, with "technicalities" resolved and observation of teaching under way, we settled into a series of clinical supervision cycles.

On most occasions I supplied my verbatim transcriptions of lessons to the teacher in advance of our conferences and then asked her if she had noticed any particular areas or patterns that she would like to comment on or discuss. In this way I attempted to encourage self-initiated evaluation. She usually responded by saying that the lesson was "pretty much as I remembered it," with no further comments or signs of self-inquiry. I then tried to direct

⁶Please note that in the remaining three segments of the paper—The Supervisor's Early Reflections, The Supervisor's Later Reflections, and Interpretive Summary—the rhetorical convention of the first person will be used so as to keep intact the personal sense of the reflections. "I" refers to Lee Turner as reflective supervisor and author as outlined in Footnote 2.

attention to the time-line of the lesson and to the transcribed dialogue, questioning the teacher about the proportion of time she saw the students engaged in dialogue compared to her own speeches. She seemed to feel that there was a fair balance, but a simple visual estimate showed that this was not the case in the first few lessons. The student teacher estimated student comprehension to be "at least 90 percent," based on the fact that students attested, on the honor system, to doing the reading, and on the fact that they seemed to be able to answer questions in class.

My own identification of "teacher directness" as a salient feature of the predominant mode of teaching during my observations raised questions about the judgment of full or considerable comprehension. Although my charts of attention dispersion were completed after the observation of the lesson, because of the difficulty of simultaneously recording verbatim and constructing a flowchart, the teacher's attention to individuals during class worktime is fairly indicative of question-response sequences during lessons. The charts revealed that in the initial observations only a small portion of students were attended to by the teacher, with some extension of her attention to others as the weeks went by.

Having completed the series of observations, I felt that we did share in the framing of problems for study in our conferences, but during the early weeks of our work together I noticed a sense of confusion in my reactions and reflections. This confusion centered on why it seemed to be so difficult to make any headway in having the teacher initiate serious examination of the goals that she herself had chosen to consider. Reviewing the tape recording of one conference left me feeling that I was somewhat more directive than may be ideal within the principles of clinical supervision. Yet an overall feeling of frustration at the stagnation occurring in our work and at the "flatness" of the teacher's responses bothered me deeply. Of course, I had control only of my own reflection-in-action, and I was attempting to ignite a sense of self-inquiry in my partner in the clinical supervision cycles. I was puzzled that a teacher-in-training would not be eager for more information about herself as a teacher, yet some feeling of "closedness" did seem to prevail. Though she was complying with the regulations of her placement school, some sense of being "already set in her ways" emerged regarding opinions of educational processes and research. When I asked the teacher about the progress of her own reflective journal, I learned that she had not yet begun to keep one.

In search of assistance with this set of puzzles, I read more deeply in the case studies of clinical supervision provided by Goldhammer⁷ and realized that definite directive moves were taken by supervisors at times, to act as a catalyst when signs of avoidance or resistance were noted. Hesitant to pass judgment prematurely, I was still uncertain that avoidance was the issue, yet

⁷Robert Goldhammer, *Clinical Supervision. Special Methods for the Supervision of Teachers* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1969).

I did see clearly that this practice teacher (unlike many novice teachers with whom I have worked) seemed to have a rather closed "set" about a basic style of teaching and was not open to suggestions for its extension. For example, in our supervision conference on March 15, discussing breakdown of teacher dialogue versus student participation, we eventually arrived at the topic of word definitions.

Supervisor: I noticed . . . I believe in here you used that technique as well, saying, "Well let's go with that," and putting it on the board . . . Is it usual . . . is it a kind of combination of students or your own decision as to what word you're going to go with when you do that? Is it a consensus kind of feeling you come to?

Teacher: I would like to think it's a consensus.

S: Uh—huh.

T: When in reality it's a benevolent dictatorship . . . [laughter] but I don't really care . . . I mean I don't want them to have a wrong definition.

S: Of course not.

T: But I don't want to stand up there and say, "Well, what was your opinion? Well, that one that I chose is the one we're going to use and that's the way it is." Because then they're going to feel that all the time they've spent looking up the word is a waste of time, and it's been proven that the more time they spend looking up the words the better they do on the test.

S: I wonder will they not notice when you put a word on the board if it's not the word—don't you think they know it's a word you've decided on in that case?

T: I'm sure they probably do, and that's why I'm known as a teacher.

My personal frustration with the apparent block to further progress became the impetus for action that would produce change. With a desire to solve the puzzle we shared, each as practitioner in her own right, I was cautious not to hamper future communication by being overly directive. Yet I felt strongly motivated to summon courage to "move" us on somewhere else. What I did not realize fully about my technique was that I intended to make the teacher confront herself more directly. In this initial experience of combining reflection with supervision in an intentional manner, I was still too engrossed in analyzing role definitions and the "total rights" of a teacher to initiate. Nevertheless, my instincts sensed the avoidance issue as separate from teacher trauma, and I was left with a strong emotional urge to probe more deeply.

THE SUPERVISOR'S LATER REFLECTIONS

In this period of confusion, I began to realize that we actually were involved in a process of mutual inquiry, albeit one with many shortcomings and without one person clearly in control of the reins. At this stage in reflection on our conference actions, I felt as lost as my partner must have felt, and yet I was deeply excited that we could achieve a state of mutual inquiry, with many possibilities for further work. Very possibly, my feeling that we were finally cooperating in a scheme where neither had all the answers but both were willing to question had resulted from my willingness to risk the trust we had built and to push the teacher to question herself at a deeper level

than she had previously attempted. This seems to be an instance of Schon's risk-taking in creating a move-action. Though great solutions were not found that day, the teacher and I did survive a period of intensified introspective questioning and emerged still in communication. Over time, our interaction had moved gradually to more deeply meaningful content, including a greater investment in the reflective process. From my point of view as supervisor, a more satisfying inquiry into a teacher's practices had been achieved. I realized that her "teacher-directed" orientation was very different from my own style. My interest lay in helping her to further her own style by extending it to include student participation that would give credibility to her professed goal of student comprehension of content, enhanced through their in-class involvement.

At this stage I chose to "back up" and reassess with the teacher her investment in our collaborative arrangements, to ascertain whether continuing was worthwhile. I felt I had reason to doubt the value of our conferences, and an open expression of self-doubt seemed a potentially productive risk. I was asking her to attempt to reframe her teaching experiences, and I had to be willing to do the same myself. When I asked if the data I was collecting had been of any use to her, I received the following reply.

Oh, Lee, I think I'd like to tell you you've helped specifically in a couple of ways. Just your being here and our talking about it makes me aware that I should be eliciting responses from all of the students and not leaving anyone out. And I think about that constantly because that was one of the things I asked you to do. And the other thing I was thinking about, I am also very conscious about trying to stay on-task and get the lesson across. . . . So those two things, as a practice teacher, I really wanted to make sure I'm doing. That is, not calling on easy people and letting them carry it because I'm new to this and it's tempting (March 20).

Here was my first indication that real reflection was occurring with respect to our inquiry. At no previous time had any comments been offered that represented any real reflection on the goals defined as her focus at the outset. We had reached a stage at which I felt we were beginning to dialogue in a meaningful way about teaching style, comprehension, and attention distribution. I had no idea, however, whether the teacher had any interest in considering our research or reflecting on the evolution of her own goals outside the context of our supervisory conferences. The most exciting feature was seeing that she had actually reached a stage of inner personal concern and reflection on her progress as a teacher. This gave hope for the possibility of reflection that would continue after the supervisor had disappeared. Despite continuing signs of resistance, such as a comment as we left the classroom to the effect that studies of student-teacher interaction were "soft research" in her view, I felt that our efforts were of some worth to her. She was still willing to continue, and interested in doing so.

From the perspective of my own reflections, that supervisory conference at which I raised the issue of continuing marked a turning point in our

experience together. During my next observation, a film was shown as a conclusion to the study of a novel, this marked a clear shift from the usual didactic mode. Our next conference showed further signs of "extension" when the teacher shared her excitement that the contextual method of vocabulary definition seemed to have produced higher results on tests.

T: Writing the sentences. It really did work.

S: Do you know why?

T: Yes, you internalize it more. . . You have to take the word and turn it around, internalize it, use it in your head, and then do it correctly. And then you're also writing it again for the spelling. So, both vocabulary and the other. I graded that part of it, that was part one of the exam, and except for three, I think they all got 100. It worked. It worked (April 5).

At this point, the student teacher was settled in her placement and had "proven herself" to the school community. She had found (contrary to expectation) that the school was somewhat open to alternate styles of learning experiences, and she had begun to use small group discussion and student presentation in her lessons in the last week. Furthermore, in preparing for a section of poetry, she was interested in finding a more stimulating way to introduce this next phase of the curriculum. She was open to a suggestion of a debate format on the topic of which poems the students like and why.

The entire orientation of the student teacher at this point had an air of "involvement" and activity that had been almost totally lacking in our earlier interactions. By the time we reached our final supervision conference (April 10), our dialogue had moved on to discussion of another salient feature that had been of only minimal concern to me: test orientation in classroom dialogue. A discussion of assessment ensued, with a tone of mutual respect and progress. The teacher's insight into her own predominance in the lessons (first revealed when she discussed her efforts to stay on-task as a result of data collected March 20) and her subsequent increase in confidence within the school (permitting her to extend her teaching style) now stand out for me as milestones in what appears to have been a definite evolution of this teacher's individual style of teaching. Certainly, my "backing up" to check my own doubts about the value of our conferences was a milestone in my own style of supervision and in the shared mutual inquiry that I was attempting to achieve.

INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY

As I look back on how clinical supervision is extended by the process of reflection-in-action, I cannot help but be reminded of the amorphous and complex nature of teaching, and see in my own journal keeping and verbatim transcription some of the pitfalls we face as supervisors. I am particularly impressed by the value of reflection-in-action as an evaluative check on the supervision process. For example, I was very aware of my own subjective bias

as I witnessed this student teacher's didactic style. I understood that a supervisor who favors a didactic teaching style would likely not have chosen that as a salient feature of the teaching. Thus my very choice of orientation as supervisor was dependent on my personal view, even though I did not wish to superimpose my own preferences but rather sought to help the student teacher reflect upon and extend her own style. Those who see this as a weakness in a supervisor's behavior may be caught up in what Roszak has termed "the myth of objective consciousness."

There is but one way of gaining access to reality—so the myth holds—and this is to cultivate a state of consciousness cleansed of all subjective distortion, all personal involvement. What flows from this state of consciousness qualifies as knowledge, and nothing else does. This is the bedrock on which the natural sciences have built; and under their spell all fields of knowledge strive to become scientific. The study of man in his social, political, economic, psychological, historical aspects—all this, too must become objective. . . .⁸

As I attempted to focus on my own reflection-in-action as I proceeded through this series of supervisory conferences, I felt that I was incapable of being in a state "cleansed of all subjective distortion," and came to realize that to not be aware of personal bias was an even more dangerous possibility.

In an interpersonal activity such as supervision, in which the data for discussion are obtained by one party observing the other, it is only too easy for the supervisor, trying to reframe and resolve a puzzle, to connect items in a causal sequence and be wrong. Sequences of observations and conferences, coupled with reflection by both parties, seem to be one good way to approach some kind of "truthful reality." Can we afford this kind of investment in our training process? Can we afford the results of a lesser kind of investment? Perhaps the long-standing criticisms of teacher education and the difficulties in demonstrating the effects of teacher education are related in some measure to the very limited supervision that is provided to student teachers. It would be unfair and inaccurate to suggest that reflection does not go on in the supervision process already. Schon's concept of reflection-in-action seems to take that process much further, with considerable benefit for both supervisor and teacher.

The reflective supervisor is likely to consider regularly his or her interaction with teachers, and to realize the need for interaction that extends over a significant period of time. However, memory and good intentions cannot substitute, in details or in accuracy, for verbatims and tape recordings of teaching and supervisory dialogue, to identify patterns (again selected for salience, treatability, and fewness) in supervision techniques as well as in teaching techniques. As Schon points out, the practitioner is *in* the situation he or she seeks to understand. Any mirroring devices that can shed light on

⁸Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday Co., Inc., 1969), pp. 208–209.

the situation are to be welcomed. It would be interesting to understand more fully the kinds and levels of experience and professional investment that develop a teacher's or a supervisor's intrinsic interest in reflection-in-action. Further assessment of "reciprocally reflective" interactions may produce exciting information for those engaged in teacher education.

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Eisner, Elliot W. "What High Schools Are Like: Views from the Inside." School of Education, Stanford University, 1986. 169 pp. (Mimeographed.)

Researchers studied life in four high schools in the Bay Area of California for two weeks. Students and teachers were shadowed and observed. Twenty-seven educational criticisms were prepared and analyzed. This "insiders' report" reveals how these schools functioned, the quality and character of teaching, and the nature of the curriculum. Emphasis is upon factors affecting learning and excellence in teaching and curriculum practices.

Hoy, Wayne K., and Patrick B. Forsyth. *Effective Supervision: Theory into Practice* New York: Random House, 1986. 350 pp.

The authors provide a systems model of supervisory performance and a diagnostic process for use by teachers, supervisors, and principals in developing techniques for evaluation and change. A Classroom Performance Model synthesizes theory and practice and offers a critical analysis of traditional clinical supervision.

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