UNDERSTANDING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

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If Goldsberry acknowledges that

Sergiovanni is clear that reflective practice includes applying theoretical knowledge: “Professionals rely heavily on informed intuition ... Intuition is informed by theoretical knowledge on one hand, and by interacting with the context of practice on the other. When teachers use informed intuition, they are engaging in reflective practice” then I have difficulty figuring out just what his beef is with “Landscapes, Mindscapes, and Reflective Practice in Supervision.” For that matter, I have difficulty figuring out just where the beef is in his remarks.

Goldsberry is correct in asserting that I prefer the “practical mindscape” over the “theoretical.” I argue that advances in developing a science of supervision linked to meaningful professional practice will require us to abandon the now dominant theoretical perspective in favor of a practical one and for good reason. The theoretical perspective does not fit the realities of practice—a point to which I will return later. It is not reasonable to infer from this stance that I advocate an anti-scientific position or eschew the virtues of theory and research and resulting models of practice. Indeed in earlier papers I have called for an expansion of our view of what is science.¹ The practical perspective and the concept of reflective practice are examples of such an expanded view.

The issue is not whether theory and research is relevant to practice but how this evidence and information is used in practice. For example, within the theoretical perspective supervision is viewed as an applied science. In applied science knowledge is created through theorizing and disciplinary-oriented research. This knowledge is then used to build and field-test models of practice from which universal prescriptions and treatments are to be generated. These, in turn, are communicated to professionals for their use in practice. Applied scientists talk a great deal about knowledge development and utilization chains within which scientific knowledge is used to build practice models and standard practice treatments. Within applied science it is

thought that professionals bring to their practice a set of standardized skills linked to a series of scientifically verified standard practice treatments. The professional then searches the context in which she or he works, carefully diagnosing and characterizing contingencies and situations according to predetermined and standardized protocols. Throughout the process the decision-making prerogatives of the “professional” are reduced, and one becomes subordinate to a rather well-oiled and highly refined knowledge flow system. Within reflective practice, by contrast, professional judgment is considered to be key, and the professional enjoys a superordinate position with respect to available knowledge.

With respect to this theme Kennedy speaks of two important ways in which scientific knowledge can be used in making professional decisions: instrumentally and conceptually. When used instrumentally scientific evidence is presumed to be instructive, and the decision is relatively straightforward. The inadequacy of this instrumental view is well argued by many experts. When used conceptually, however, scientific evidence is not considered to be instructive but relevant for increasing understanding and enhancing reflection. As Kennedy states, “Whereas the central feature of the instrumental model is the decision, the central feature of the conceptual model is the human information processor...” and further, “Whereas a decision may follow almost automatically from the instructions contained in the evidence, information processors interact with the evidence, interpret its meaning, decide its relevance, and hence determine when and how they will permit the evidence to influence them.”

Perhaps the point can be made by differentiating between artificial and augmented professional intelligence. The aim of applied science conjured by its image is to establish a body of artificial professional intelligence. Scientific knowledge would be the key aspect of such intelligence. Supervisors and teachers would merely have to diagnose problems they face and draw from this intelligence standard treatments to apply. By contrast, reflective practice seeks to establish augmented professional intelligence. Practitioners themselves would be key aspects of this intelligence, for it would not stand apart as an abstract body of theoretical knowledge. Augmented professional intelligence is intended to inform the intuitions of practitioners as they practice. As this practice unfolds, practical knowledge is created in use as unique treatments are developed, applied, and refined. In reflective practice theories, research arrays and models of practice are not considered to be scientific evidence which predicts, categorizes, and prescribes but to be metaphors.

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from which supervisors and teachers construct their own unique accounts of changing situations. Though these ideas may seem novel to some readers, they are well accepted in the literature of educational theory and practice.5

Goldsberry acknowledges that readers should not interpret my use of the clinical mind illustration as an endorsement of this mindset. Given this acknowledgment, one wonders why he then proceeds to create such a fuss by discussing the virtues and evils of this reality in practice. A more promising stance, I would suggest, is to acknowledge the existence of the clinical mind, estimate the extent to which our present supervisory theories and practices account for this reality, and make the necessary adjustments in present mindscapes to close the gap. Goldsberry, by contrast, seems to suggest that we need to hang on to our ill-fitting mindscapes of teaching and supervision and work to change the clinical mind of teachers accordingly. This stance is not unusual, for the history of science reveals a distinct preference for trying to change the world to match the accepted theories of the day. Our mindscapes are indeed powerful and die hard.6

Since Goldsberry has difficulty with the clinical mind example of the mismatch between our theoretical mindscapes and the realities of practice, another will be provided. Related to the clinical mind of professionals at work is the reality that their practice is typically not characterized by attention to and pursuit of discrete goals and objectives but by a responsiveness to value patterns. This is an important point, for in applied science models of teaching and supervision, tending to discrete goals emerges as the linchpin in a chain of events which is presumed to characterize best practice. Tight alignment is prescribed between discrete goals and curriculum, curriculum and teaching, teaching and testing. Evaluation systems carefully monitor this chain of events to ensure that objectives are set and communicated to students, students are made ready to learn the objectives, teachers teach to the objectives, students are on-task with regard to these objectives, in-class assignments and home assignments reflect these objectives, and a testing system exists to measure student progress toward attaining these objectives.

Sometimes supervisors use rating scales, on-task charts, and other data collection devices to monitor this system. Throughout this process the importance of discrete objectives looms large. For example, complete transcripts of


verbal teaching interactions are often recorded and subsequently analyzed to
determine the extent to which teachers and students tend to the objectives
Answers to such questions as the following are important: Does the transcript
reveal that the teacher provides positive reinforcement when students are
tending to the objectives? Do instances exist when students and teachers stray
from the objectives? What can be done to get the class back on course? Are
students aware of what they are supposed to do? Has the teacher instilled in
students the proper mental set to learn the objectives at hand? Artifacts of
teaching are collected and evaluated similarly. Are the lesson plans specific?
Do the students know beforehand what it is that they're supposed to do? Are
materials selected to reflect these objectives? Is this the case also with in-class
and out-of-class assignments? For example, is "seat work" aligned with the
objectives at hand, and does the teacher monitor seat work to ensure that the
students are on-task?

The concepts of "objectives" and "on-task" are in many respects a mixed
blessing. It is often useful in teaching, for example, to define beforehand the
strike zone and to monitor pitching styles and techniques to increase the
likelihood of throwing teaching strikes. But if the strike zone is defined too
narrowly, many otherwise worthwhile teaching pitches are disqualified as
balls. Good teachers realize this and behind closed classroom doors teach
accordingly despite supervisory efforts to the contrary.

The facts of the real world of teaching and schooling reveal that profes-
sionals at work do not think and act in accord with discrete goals and objec-
tives. For example, from an organizational perspective schools do not work
to achieve goals as much as they respond to certain values and tend to certain
imperatives which ensure their survival over time. Chris Argyris pointed out
that in addition to goal attainment, administrators and other professionals
need to be concerned with maintaining their organizations internally and
adapting their organizations to forces in the external environment.7 To these
three can be added maintaining the cultural patterns of the organization, and
the four together constitute the universal pattern variables proposed by Par-
sons, variables which define the critical concerns of all "social systems."8
Whether one likes it or not, the reality is that schools, like other social systems,
tend to goal attainment only to the extent that this interest does not create
problems with respect to the other three interests. This explains why some
communities refuse to consolidate in the face of evidence which shows a link
between school size and student achievement. These communities are less
interested in goal attainment than they are in maintaining their way of life—
a cultural concern.9 This explains why school administrators sometimes settle

7Chris Argyris, Integrating the Individual and the Organization (New York: John Wiley,
1964)
8Talcott Parsons, Toward a General Theory of Social Action (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard
University Press, 1951).
9Alan Peskin, "Whom Shall the Schools Serve? Some Dilemmas of Local Control in a Rural
for less than the best student learning in making curriculum decisions if these decisions can be made by consensus among the faculty and result in high morale or at least in preventing low morale. This explains why school administrators may pay less attention to how well teachers are teaching and how much students are learning in classrooms, providing teachers are able to maintain control over students and are making their classes attractive enough so that students will continue to show up. In these examples community identity, faculty morale, and the school's custodial function compete with and sometimes take precedence over goal attainment purposes. In the world of practice professionals know that they must tend to all four of the critical interests. Hospitals, for example, do not cure as well as they can any more than do armies fight, universities teach and research, governments govern, or corporations earn optimally. Each emphasizes goal attainment within the limits of balance among the other three interests. This description of organizational life is not only real but desirable from the standpoint of maintaining the long-term viability of the organization.

Teachers face similar constraints as their practice unfolds. On the one hand they push for "maximum" cognitive learning from their students. But they cannot push too hard for fear that students will become dissatisfied and cause trouble or perhaps even drop out. Teachers need students as much as students need teachers, and this results in a negotiated learning tone in the classroom. Further, teachers are concerned with the psychological and social well-being of their students and recognize that pushing too hard in cognitive matters may incur costs in these important areas. Learning outcomes, for example, typically compete with each other. Too much drill and tedious workbook activity in teaching reading may result in students not liking reading and thus reading less in later life. Allowing students too much freedom in choosing reading material may result in omission with respect to important works.

As Hill suggests, it is not discrete goal attainment which the teacher has on her or his mind but rather "a conception of a pattern development on a number of mutually limited dimensions, with perspective gains in a given area having implications for other areas. Thus, while cognitive development is undoubtably conceived as pre-eminent, it is also conceived as preceding in conjunction with and in proportion to other areas (e.g., ability to form stable relationships with peers). From this point of view, the kind of instrumental rationality that is appropriate in education is rationality in pursuit of a pattern of outcomes, not discrete outcomes but however many kinds. Perhaps it might be termed "pattern rationality." Pattern rationality reflects a concern for costs

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11Ibid.
and benefits of one’s actions. Teachers have long known that “there is no such thing as a free lunch” as their teaching unfolds.

The importance of discovering goals and objectives in the act of teaching and of the post hoc assessment of teaching and learning to determine what has been learned and accepting this as one’s “objectives” is well established in the literature of evaluation. There is a certain arrogance, rivaled only by one’s degree of naivety, in the assumption that objectives must be set beforehand and everything else is decided as either a ball or strike depending upon whether it falls into this narrow strike zone. Through my clinical experience as a supervisor and in countless conversations with teachers, it is apparent that they adopt a strategic, not a tactical, view of goals and objectives. That is, they gear their professional practice toward a rather broad strike zone. Within this strike zone tactical objectives unfold in the act of teaching, and teachers rely heavily on assessing what it is that was worthwhile after learning encounters have been concluded. They are not so proud or foolish as to declare something worthwhile that is accomplished a “ball” and thus not counting.

There is a place, of course, for defining teaching and learning strike zones narrowly and for emphasizing tactical rather than strategic objectives, and, when this is the case, highly directive and tightly aligned teaching and learning and allied supervisory techniques make sense. It might be helpful, for example, to speak of “training” and “educating” modes in teaching and learning. The intent of training is to make a person proficient in the use of skill on behalf of highly specific predetermined objectives. To educate, on the other hand, is to develop persons mentally and morally. One’s education is considered to be the knowledge and development which results from teaching and learning. In this sense one does not really “educate” a person. Instead one provides the necessary teaching and experiences which result in a person becoming educated. When the emphasis is on education, students’ personal meanings and interpretations of learning experiences play a major role in determining what it is that they learn. For example, one might teach a classic novel with some “training” purposes in mind, but much of what will be of value to students will depend upon the sense they make of this experience. For this reason good literature teachers adopt a strategic stance when it comes to the issue of goals and objectives and define their strike zones, so to speak, broadly enough to allow for a variety of happy events many of which they might not have anticipated beforehand.

In this light the data collection schemes, transcripts of verbal interactions, and artifact collection techniques discussed above can all provide useful information. They can help teachers and supervisors assess what was learned, to understand how teachers come to grips with pattern rationality, to make sense of classroom events, to mirror teaching as well as to monitor and

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measure teaching allied to discrete objectives on those occasions when it is appropriate to do so.

Not only does teaching involve a series of interconnected choices in which teachers try simultaneously to maximize several conflicting demands, but in the real world no sequential assumptions are made about the relationships among discrete goals, curriculum, teaching, and outcomes. Indeed, any one of the four can drive the other three. Goals, for example, are selected as often as a result of materials available as are materials selected as a result of goals. Teaching styles and preferences determine objectives as often as objectives determine teaching styles and preferences. Outcomes become goals as often as goals determine outcomes. The issue for me is not whether this portrait of the real world of practice is good or bad. It is real.

To the extent that pattern rationality fits better than discrete rationality the ways in which goals and purposes are tended to by teachers in the real world, then reflective practice fits better than does applied science. In reflective practice teachers and supervisors seek to maximize certain (often competing) values within a highly dynamic context with costs and benefits of pattern emphases changing moment to moment. All of the knowledge available to the applied scientist is important to the reflective practitioner. But, since the task is not to pigeonhole discrete outcomes and apply standard practice treatments, teachers and supervisors, to use a surfing metaphor, need to ride the wave of the pattern as it unfolds. In riding the wave, knowledge is used not to prescribe but to inform the professional's intuition and enhance her or his professional judgment.

What does the future hold? We can continue to hang on to our existing and comfortable mindscapes and thus either ignore or try to "reform" the real world—our "winter of despair." Confucius is instructive here: "Truth may not depart from human nature, if what is regarded as truth departs from human nature, it may not be regarded as truth." Or we can choose "the spring of hope" and seek to build a better science of supervision and a more meaningful practice—a science which emerges from the practical perspective and a practice which is more reflective.

What is a reflective mindscape anyway? Goldsberry asks this question and provides a very suitable answer as he concludes his remarks. Perhaps I have found the beef after all.

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