

A RESPONSE TO BOLIN, SERGIOVANNI, HOLLAND, AND GRIMMETT

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In this brief article, I respond to the four reactions to my article, "Toward a Scholarship of Practice," all published in the Spring 1990 issue of this *Journal*.¹

As anyone familiar with the structure of the Talmud knows, it consists of one Talmudic scholar interpreting one part of the Law, which is then commented on by other scholars whose comments, in turn, may be commented on by others. I most certainly don't pretend to be talmudic in my thinking or in my debating skills and only mention this point to suggest that my article, the four reactions printed, and my response to them follow a structure that, in the long run, if it continues in other forums, may help the professoriate and even in some way the field. That is, the arguments in the Talmud had, among other purposes, one of shedding light on a problem.

A couple of the responses were fairly gentle; Grimmett's was scathing but, I take it, friendly. My ego is still fully intact, made somewhat stronger by a written comment of one of the original reviewers of the manuscript who noted that if the article was published with some suggested changes (which I must admit I didn't make), "we may well have published the most important paper yet of our brief history." To whom should I pay attention? Probably everyone, which I suppose is what being an academic is all about.

Let me offer just a few brief thoughts about the responses to my article, then, and let it go at that. (I suspect, incidentally, that if we convened this group of authors for a discussion in a public arena, it would be the performance of the century—certainly in the field of supervision.)

I think Frances Bolin and I have a somewhat similar view of the part of the supervisory world with which I dealt, and I also think her suggestion (or

¹Arthur Blumberg, "Toward a Scholarship of Practice," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 5 (Spring 1990): 236-243, Frances S. Bolin, "The Status of Supervision Scholarship," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 5 (Spring 1990): 244-246, Thomas J. Sergiovanni, "An Emerging Scholarship of Practice," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 5 (Spring 1990): 247-251, Patricia E. Holland, "A Hermeneutic Perspective on Supervision Scholarship," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 5 (Spring 1990): 252-254, Peter P. Grimmett, "Toward a Practice of Scholarship Beyond the Private Cold War Metaphor," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 5 (Spring 1990): 255-259.

my inference) that things will not really be set straight until our society changes the basis for valuing schools and teachers is correct. But let us not hold our breath.

My friend Tom Sergiovanni comments that he imagines the article would “hardly elicit a yawn among the many who are hard at work restructuring supervisory theory and practice” (p. 247). I think he has put his finger precisely on a major point. My own view of things is that all those “who are hard at work” have been working, indeed, but for the most part on the wrong things, *if* what they have in mind is developing ideas about supervision that will encourage the field to engage with and think about those ideas. Read over the tables of contents of the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* from its first issue to its latest issue; little has changed. True, we use the concept of reflection a lot. Heavens, if you don't reflect, you aren't “with it.” I'm fairly confident, though, that we will do to reflection what we've done to other potent ideas. That is, though people are probably tired of hearing me paraphrase the British psychiatrist Bion, “the surest way to kill a good idea is to give it a name and pretend it's a thing,” I think we may be well on the way to killing reflection by pretending it's a thing. Professors, because they tend to be so verbal (myself included), have a few equals when it comes to “talking a good game.”

I'm not sure I know what to do with Patricia Holland's critique. Apparently, I have missed the boat because I didn't ground my thought in something called *hermeneutics*. Even though I've looked up the word in a number of different references, and I *think* I understand its meaning in action, I find myself not quite understanding what all the fuss is about. For example, when I was at the recent American Educational Research Association convention, I attended Noreen Garman's roundtable session. I asked her whether I, in my work, “do hermeneutics.” I think she said, “Probably.” So I said to myself, “How can you be able to ‘do hermeneutics’ if you've never studied hermeneutics?” The answer is, apparently, that outside of discussions that resemble “How many angels can stand on the head of a pin?” the subject of hermeneutics—one dictionary I have refers to it as the “science of interpretation” and this definition certainly gives me problems—doesn't offer much substantive help for the struggling professor. I suspect that those who hang their hat on hermeneutics have established a common language they use to communicate with each other but with few other people, least of all with people in the field. Perhaps it might not be a bad thing if hermeneutics as a methodological “thing” goes the same way as reflection, vision, and Theory Z. That may be an unduly harsh statement—I know and respect Garman, and Holland, I believe, was a student of hers—but please, let us not criticize my thinking and writing because I don't become a slave to hermeneutics, or anything else.

I really don't think I can any longer, if I ever could, measure up to Peter Gmmmet's notion of being a scholar or producing things that satisfy his criteria for good scholarship. Though I do read and have read many references he cites, I have not read them all. Incidentally, in the pre-publication review of

Roland Barth's new book *Improving Schools from Within*,² Harold Howe is quoted as follows: "It's really good news when a university faculty member writes a deeply insightful and thoroughly readable book about schools with not a single footnote." Well, books are books, and scholarly journals are—I'm not sure what. Except that I am sure they are published, particularly in our field, primarily as a vehicle for professors to promote their careers. I must confess that I have made good use of that vehicle over the years. Please pardon my current heresy. I am, as well, quite aware of the problems junior professors face and their need to publish in the "appropriate" journals. In effect, though, to quote our friend Pogo, "We have found the enemy, and he is us." What do we do now that we have found "us"?

A final point on Grimmert's critique: He suggests that I've not taken into account the changing nature of the educational context over the last few years, nor do I seem to be "aware of or concerned about the progress other scholars in the study of practice have made." It's hard for me to discern any change that has taken place in the education of youngsters that may be a function of the structural, fiscal, or political changes that have occurred in the name of educational reform. In fact, fragments of evidence seem to indicate the contrary. As I understand it, for example, in the city of Rochester, which is reputed to have made one of the most thorough-going restructuring efforts in the country—a teaching ladder, master teachers, empowerment, school site management, and all those "good" things—the union president has acknowledged that results have not met expectations, so far, at least.

On the "progress of other scholars" issue, another perusal of this *Journal's* tables of contents suggests that we are still in business for ourselves. I guess I'm not really sure what *progress* means. But I rather take the position that progress would mean that anything we professors study and then write about would or could be read by practitioners who would find relevance in it for their own work. Nothing we are involved in should be so esoteric that a supervisor, school principal, or superintendent would not be able to find it useful. After all, we are not engaged in studying how to construct a space shuttle, send it into orbit, and bring it back to earth. Now that's complicated!

I could go on and on. Congruent with my mouth that seems to be perpetually open, my pen (I do not use a word processor) never seems to run out of ink. But enough. Perhaps the argument has been joined in its most appropriate form.

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²Roland Barth, *Improving Schools from Within* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990)

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