

Comment

TOWARD A SCHOLARSHIP OF PRACTICE

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This *Journal* published an article by Frances Bolin in the Summer 1988 issue: "Does a Community of Scholars in Supervision Exist?"¹ The article is based on data from telephone interviews with people who, through their writing, have developed a reputation for making scholarly contributions to the supervision field.

Here I intend, first, to analyze Bolin's article more for what it didn't say than for what it did say and, second, to propose that professors who study and teach supervision need to change how they think about their work. These professors absolutely must discard the idea that they are involved in creating a science, or even an applied science, of supervision in favor of the idea that they are involved in creating a scholarship of practice. This distinction is not merely semantic nit-picking.

Although I write in the context of supervision, both the field and the work of professors, I am writing about any practice—teaching, administration, medicine, dentistry, or law. Ultimately, my concern is the study of practice—what practitioners do and how they think about what they do.

Bolin's article requires close reading. It is a "sleeper." Much more is there than meets the eye. On one level, the article reads like a digest of some professors' reactions to Bolin's questions. From this reading, we conclude, for various reasons, that in the field of supervision there is no community of scholars but, as one respondent said, "a community of *professors*."² As any honest professor will admit, the latter does not equal the former. On another level, though, the "sleeper" effect takes place. The responses Bolin quotes, taken together, seem to add up to cries of loneliness, of uncertainty about one's self-worth, of not being appreciated by the academy, of yearning to achieve academic legitimacy, and of not a little bit of anger. Somehow these

¹Frances S. Bolin, "Does a Community of Scholars in Supervision Exist?" *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 3 (Summer 1988): 296-307.

²All quotations that follow may be found on pp. 298-303 in Frances S. Bolin, "Does a Community of Scholars in Supervision Exist?" *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 3 (Summer 1988): 296-307.

problems should be more critical to us than whether or not a community of scholars exists in the field.

Let me note some quotations from Bolin's paper that lead to my interpretation. What follows are selected excerpts from the interviews. The phrases in italics are my doing for my own emphasis.

- There are some distinct points of view about supervision, partly because *the field is not a very strong field*.
- We *pretend* to be scholarly as a group. *There are some scholars in it*.
- I think the field of supervision is in *great decline*.
- It [the field of supervision, its study and teaching] really *didn't have much status at the university*.
- It is *just neglected completely*.
- It *doesn't have its agenda for inquiry*. It doesn't have its *theory* well-defined.
- I think you find *people* who would rather not do research, finding themselves in a position where they may have to, *producing work that is not scholarly*.
- The issues that *they [scholars in supervision]* have dealt with haven't been important. *They have dealt with the trivial. They haven't been theoretical*.
- *Educational Leadership* . . . is more of a *practitioner's magazine* now.

What are we to make of all this? These comments certainly do not suggest a vibrant field of study, let alone a vibrant community of scholars.³ Quite the opposite—what seems to dominate is deprecation of one's field and the work of one's colleagues—what amounts, in the final analysis, to self-deprecation. A longing for legitimacy, to be seen as scientific, to be theoretical, and thus to gain access to and be respected as a member of the scientific community comes through. The comments clearly express a turning up of the nose at the whole idea of being concerned with practice, best symbolized by the remark that *Educational Leadership* "is more of a practitioner's magazine now."

To repeat, what are we to make of all this? Why are we treated to a sort of group breast-beating by some people who are nationally and, in some cases, internationally known scholars and authors and who, for the most part, consider each other friends as well as colleagues? How can we understand the problems implicit in Bolin's study? I want to point out where I think lies the genesis of these problems and how would-be scholars (myself included) have willingly colluded in creating the sad situation that Bolin made evident, even though I think that was not her intent.

BEING SCHOLARS AND DOING SCIENCE

First, the ground most of us rest our concept of self and our work on is the university—but not just any university. According to the folklore, scholars of most any stripe are not likely to be found in the East Stroudsburgs or St. Clouds of the world, excellent institutions though they may be. No, they

³I was one of Bolin's respondents, but I have not been able to pick out any particular comment I may have made among those she quoted.

are to be found at the major research universities—the Penn States, the Pittsburghs, the Georgias, the Syracuses—the supposed home base of some of our supervision scholars.

Let us not be naive enough to think that these major research universities, although they may grant their faculty incredible freedom in what they do and how they do it, have no set of norms about what kind of work is and is not valued or about what it takes to achieve professorial legitimacy in the eyes of the campus community. The university's normative value structure finds its roots in the arts and sciences and in applied fields (e.g., engineering) that have bona fide scientific credentials. But education has no such credentials, even though education professors may see themselves engaged in scientific endeavor.

Thus, though a physicist readily acknowledges the importance of an English literature professor's work to the university, even though this professor is not "doing science," the same physicist is not as likely (he or she may indeed be loathe) to attribute similar importance to an education professor's work, even though that professor may be "doing science." Most particularly, the same physicist is not likely to accord much worth to a school of education (which consumes a disproportionately large amount of scarce resources better used by physicists, of course), even though he or she may value the work of a particular professor. I am talking about the "some of my best friends are Jews, blacks, Hispanics, etc.," phenomenon here. Indeed, once a friend of mine, a chemist, at my university half-jokingly asked me how were all the second-class citizens down in the School of Education—all, that is, except me. I don't think he was joking at all.

I believe that we professors in university-based schools of education have colluded, unwittingly to be sure, with our natural and physical science colleagues in creating the image of ourselves and our institutions as second-class citizens. We have done so by trying to create the illusion that our field is a science and that we advance it by "doing science." The genesis of our efforts to achieve legitimacy and respect at the university by trying to be perceived of as scientists probably is of recent vintage, although it has old roots. For example, almost 150 years ago in New York State, a superintendent of schools referred to education science as the stock-in-trade of the "normal School in Albany."⁴ For sure, the image of education as science held then is not the same as the one bruited about today, but people in the field were starting to look to the "scientists" for answers. Further, not too many years passed before the early part of the 20th century, when along with developing and refining modern statistical methods, Cubberley held out the promise that soon we could answer all the important questions about schools and schooling

⁴*Annual Report of the Superintendent of Common Schools of the State of New York* (Albany: Commissioner of Education, 1945).

through science.⁵ Cubberley, perhaps the country's leading educator of his time, was indeed a true believer in the efficacy of a science of education and undoubtedly was able to get many of his acolytes to believe along with him. The position was seductive because of the country's growing faith that science would solve everything.

Reality, however, has not matched Cubberley's prediction of 65 years ago. Despite research funding that must total in the millions and resulting statistical findings by the thousands that yielded differences beyond the .05 confidence level, what specific administrative or supervisory practices have changed because of all the research? What changes have resulted in more productive schools—schools where teachers teach better and students learn more?

Our efforts to influence the field by "doing science" have been largely futile, although for numbers of us these efforts have resulted in career advancement as our articles have been published in the appropriate scholarly journals. This last point is important, as young professors come to know, particularly if they are at these major research universities, that only publication in a scholarly (translation, refereed) journal counts. I recall a professor laughing at another who had published an article in the *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, an unrefereed and a practitioner's journal to boot.

"Doing science" has failed us on both counts. Education professors as a group have not achieved legitimacy in the eyes of their arts and sciences colleagues, even though we may be friends and even, as individuals, have our work admired. Further, our efforts to influence the field through our "science" seems to have borne little fruit, at least as that harvest may be observed in the thoughts and actions of practitioners. Former students have told me that their experience in graduate school profoundly affected their work. But although I acknowledge with thanks their compliment, I carefully shy away from asking them to tell me about any research in school administration or supervision that they have found particularly helpful. I don't want to embarrass them (They wouldn't be embarrassed, incidentally, because they don't know the research. They simply don't use it because for most intents and purposes it is irrelevant to their daily work life.)

Why this state of affairs? Surely the answer does not lie in our lack of or inability to use sophisticated research methodology or statistical techniques. Quite the contrary. We have professors on our faculties who are highly skilled and sensitive methodologists and statisticians. The answer to the question, I believe, lies in another direction. We have been trying to make a science out of a practice; this attempt is impossible.

⁵Etwood P. Cubberley, *Public School Administration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916).

CREATING A SCHOLARSHIP OF PRACTICE

The definition of the concept of practice itself explains why efforts to create a science of practice are foredoomed. Consider two definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first, a noun, has to do, more or less, with conceiving of practice as enterprise. We speak of a physician's or attorney's practice as almost a corporate, faceless body. "How is your practice developing?" we ask a young lawyer, referring not to what he or she is doing but to the state of the enterprise. The parallel to the organizational function of supervisors or administrators is not hard to see. Minus the financial implications of the term, we can easily conceive of the supervisory function in a school district as an enterprise. Obviously, we cannot have a science of practice defined that way.

The second *OED* definition of practice comes closer to our concern. It is a verb form and is defined as "to perform, do, act, carry on, execute, exercise (any action or process)." To practice in this sense refers to an idiosyncratic doing of something in the service of some goal, and we cannot create a science of "idiosyncratic doing." The way a central office supervisor, for example, engages in his or her practice is a particularistic matter. We have gone astray, in our desire to be scientific, in trying to be universalistic about practice through "science." For many reasons, this effort has failed, not the least, as Rosenberg points out, is that our "science" can in no way account for or predict an individual's intentionality at any particular point in time.⁶

I do not intend to suggest that we cannot study the practice of supervision or administration—or an individual's practice of supervision or administration—rigorously and systematically. But the ends of that study, of necessity, should not include attempts to develop a science of practice. If not a science or an applied science of practice, then, where do we go? An answer, one I obviously prefer, lies in the direction implied in the title of this article—conceiving of and developing the notion of a scholarship of practice.

Bolin writes, "To be scholarly is to act as a learner, to be learned, erudite."⁷ A scholar, then, is a person who acts as a learner, is learned, erudite, and the results of these activities, if somehow they get transferred to the printed page, is scholarship. Nowhere does Bolin refer to being a scientist, to employing scientific methods. What, then, does creating a scholarship of practice mean, and what would an individual scholar do? Further, and most important, if we reject the notion of science, the search for universal truths, as part of this scholarship, what will count as nontrivial knowledge?

⁶Alexander Rosenberg, "The Human Sciences. Obstacles and Opportunities," *Syracuse Scholar* 4 (Fall 1980): 63–80.

⁷Frances S. Bolin, "Does a Community of Scholars in Supervision Exist?" *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 3 (Summer 1988): 298.

A slight detour is necessary here, though in truth, the detour forms more of a backdrop for what follows than anything else. When we speak of the practice of supervision, we are speaking of the practice or exercise of a craft—not an art and most certainly not a science or an applied science.⁸ Serious craftspeople are interested in usable knowledge, knowledge that helps them practice their craft better—knowledge that makes them able, through their own somewhat general understanding of the nature of their work, combined with their highly personal skill, to produce a more highly refined product than they had been able to do previously. Craftspeople, then, are doers who are interested in becoming more skillful, and they are interested in the type of knowledge that will help them do just that.

Two general categories of knowledge are relevant to the work of our supervisor-craftsperson, categories of knowledge that are nontrivial. The first relates to the nature of the craft itself and the circumstances it is practiced under. The second relates to a type of knowledge that focuses on self-understanding and personal skills. The first type of knowledge is easily amenable to scholarly pursuit. The second type is much less so, if it is at all.

This last point needs elaboration. Try to imagine a plausible agenda for studying these two types of knowledge. First, we attend to a study agenda related to the nature and practice of the supervisory craft, keeping in mind the idea that a scholarship of practice should probably result in an eventual body of knowledge, but not necessarily a body of universal truth. A scholarship of practice should be descriptive, explanatory, and where appropriate, speculative and interpretive. Most important, a scholarship of practice needs to deal with problems that practitioners can relate to experientially. The more esoteric the statement of the problem, the less relevance it will have for practice. Scholars of practice must learn to speak the language of practice, as well as learn to use it in the way they define problems for study.

An agenda for studying the practice of supervision might deal with the following questions. The answers would constitute nontrivial knowledge

- What types of circumstances of a day's work may lead a supervisor to go home singing with elation?
- What types of circumstances of a day's work may lead a supervisor to go home in a deep depression?
- What kinds of things happen to make supervisors feel that what they do is important to the effective work of the schools? or not important at all?
- How can supervisors learn new things about their work?
- What about their work may keep supervisors awake at night when they should be sleeping?

⁸Arthur Blumberg, *School Administration as a Craft* (Neeham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1989).

● If we studied the “vows of things never to do again” that supervisors make to themselves, what might we learn about the practice of supervision?

What would emerge from inquiry devoted to these questions and any number of similar ones is a definition of the practice of supervision that would have meaning for those who engage in that practice—no small achievement. Perhaps most important, as the knowledge base grows, it will enable both practitioners and scholars to obtain a more sensitive concept of the essential humanity that is inescapably involved in the work of supervision.

Finally, the agenda I have proposed does not include any questions aimed at establishing statistically significant relationships between two or more variables. No question, for example, deals with comparing the efficacy of clinical supervision, peer supervision, or no supervision. No question focuses on the relationship between one’s need to control as measured by x and teacher satisfaction with supervision as measured by y . These are trivial questions, they have little to do with what the practice of supervision is all about. Studies built around such questions, if publishable, serve the career needs of professors but certainly not the needs of those who practice.

The type of knowledge that will come from answering the questions listed, though, is amenable to scholarly inquiry and to the development of a body of knowledge. This knowledge about a field of practice I classify as nontrivial. A second type of knowledge, which deals with self-understanding and personal skills, is much less amenable to the development of a body of knowledge. It refers to the idea of *know-how*, the idiosyncratic ability, based on knowledge and skill, to practice effectively.⁹ *Know-how* is an action concept, it refers to a particular ability to practice and includes skills, as well as predispositions, intentionality, and emotionality. Practice—how and why we do things—becomes a personal enterprise that is not subject to the laws of any science besides those that are so general as to be meaningless.

MOVING BEYOND A THEORY OF PRACTICE?

If supervision is a nonscience, what do we do about all our concerns for theory building? This question is near and dear to the professorial heart. What do professors do, for example, if they are not continually searching for a theory to explain and predict an important part of their field? If, when we refer to a theory of supervision, we are referring to *theory* as a scientific concept, then no theory of supervision is possible. According to Kerlinger, for example, “A theory is a set of interrelated constructs [concepts], definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of a phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the

⁹Vernon Howard, *Artistry: The Work of Artists* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982).

phenomena."¹⁰ The search for a theory of supervision defined in Kerlinger's scientific terms is an academic exercise, possibly productive, once more, for an academic career but little else.

A theory, however, may be defined in terms other than those used by Kerlinger. According to the *OED*, a theory is "in a loose or general sense: a hypothesis proposed as an explanation; hence, a mere hypothesis, speculation, conjecture; an idea or set of ideas about something; an individual view or notion." In particular, the last part of this definition, beginning with the words "an idea or set of ideas," lends itself well to our position. We are not talking about rigorously testing hypotheses to confirm or revise theory. Rather, we are talking about ideas, views, or notions about how to do something—ideas that we may revise as they do or do not meet the test of efficacy. Further, we are talking about individual views or notions, as well as more general ones. We each have our own theory of practice, our own ways of approaching people, our own ways of asking questions and providing answers, our own interpersonal tender spots. A theory of practice, in this sense, must be highly personal. In the sense of a practice as an enterprise, however, I do not believe we can have even an unscientific theory, though I do believe that we can describe and explain a great deal if we address questions like those raised earlier. As we describe and explain—as we are scholars of practice liberated from the compulsion to be scientific about a non-science—we enable ourselves to communicate with those who practice in ways that may benefit both of us. We may learn to ask better questions, and *they* may learn to understand their practice in ways they had not previously.

We return to the question raised in Bolin's article. If we take to heart the notion of a scholarship of practice, will we then have a community of scholars? I'm not sure, but the possibilities are greater than they are today. At least we would be able to communicate with each other in terms we can all understand and appreciate. The notion of communication, after all, is at the root of the idea of community.

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¹⁰Fred Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), p. 11.

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