SUPERVISION AS CULTURAL INQUIRY

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This article describes a framework for practicing what a colleague and I have referred to as "culturally responsive supervision." The larger context of recent theoretical developments calls for new models of supervision firmly anchored in the concept of culture. Sergiovanni, a leading figure of the movement, argues that the subjective nature of teacher evaluation requires a shift in the conceptual foundations of our work—from the physical to the cultural sciences. The crux of his argument lies in recognizing a distinction between behavior and experience. Behavior is directly observable and can be objectively measured using standards common to the physical sciences. Experience, however, must be inferred on the basis of judgments informed by "thick" description and interpretation, the primary tools of cultural analysis.

Yet my purpose is not simply to repeat these arguments. Nor do I dispute the thesis that they provide a strong theoretical foundation from which to advance supervision as a form of disciplined inquiry. Instead, I hope to build this work by extending the epistemology of culture into the practical realms that guide a supervisor's observations, discussions, and evaluations of classroom teaching. As Sergiovanni notes, "The key to present-day theorizing about supervision is in trying to figure out how the process of reflection-in-action unfolds . . . and how to inform it." In this spirit, I focus on the substantive elements of culturally responsive supervision. What does this approach look like in practice? What does it suggest supervisors pay attention to while observing a teacher's performance? What guidelines does it offer for giving teachers feedback?

We have been slow to answer these questions because a culturally responsive orientation presents certain challenges when faced with the practical demands of supervision. But to understand these challenges, we must first consider an even more fundamental question: What do we mean by culture?

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A DEFINITION OF CULTURE

Here I follow Geertz’s approach to thinking about culture as the “templates” or “webs of meaning” by which we organize “social and psychological experience.”4 From this perspective, culture is neither restricted to particular spheres of human activity (i.e., the arts) nor the sole property of particular groups (i.e., “primitive” societies). As the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo writes:

From the pirouettes of classical ballet to the most brute of brute facts, all human conduct is culturally mediated. Culture encompasses the everyday and the esoteric, the mundane and the elevated, the ridiculous and the sublime. Neither high nor low, culture is all-pervasive.5

Thus, we might view culture as the basic scaffolding by which we all construes meaning from our own lived experiences.

This understanding allows us to define cultural differences in relation to a broad continuum of social categories. At one end of this continuum are macro-level categories such as ethnicity, class, and gender, at the opposite end are micro-level categories such as family, neighborhood, and friendship group. Therefore, as Margaret Mead pointed out some time ago, even two individuals raised in the same family may hold different cultural beliefs, and there is no way that they could hold truly identical ones. This point opens the door to recognizing cultural diversity within classrooms that might otherwise be viewed as homogeneous. “Multi-culturalism,” Goodenough writes, “is present to some degree in every human society.”6

Yet when we do turn to the classroom, the ubiquitous nature of culture presents supervisors with the dilemma of having too many options from which to select a reasonably focused set of concerns. Consider that a supervisor’s observations in the classroom must always be selective. Observations must always be observations of something: the structure of a lesson, at-task behavior, or the teacher’s rapport with students. But if culture is everywhere all the time—in every nuance of one’s thought and behavior—how do we go about attending to it? What prevents us from throwing up our hands in the frustration of not knowing even where to begin? At least when it comes to observing a teacher’s performance, the omnipresence of culture is as much a vice as it is a virtue.

Closely related to this dilemma is yet another. Because culture is everywhere all the time, we generally take it for granted. For most practical purposes, it is invisible to the untrained eye. Much like a windowpane, culture works for the very reason that we cannot see it, and the better it works, the

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less likely we are to become aware of it. This “transparency” strikes at our most basic level of understanding—recognition. Here the dilemma involves making explicit the same patterns of meaning and experience that we have spent most of our lives learning to ignore. In short, we are not accustomed to recognizing the obvious, and this skill does not come naturally.

The all-pervasive and tacit characteristics of culture reveal the particular challenges associated with developing a framework for culturally responsive forms of supervision. On one hand, these challenges caution us against expecting that cultural awareness will be quickly or easily gained. On the other hand, they stress the practical need for identifying areas of focus that will help us bring forward the cultural dimensions of classroom life.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SUPERVISION

Although culture is found in all forms of human expression, we can still bring cultural awareness to bear on specific aspects of classroom instruction. After all, some concerns are more central than others to teachers’ day-to-day activities. Communication processes qualify as significant because they are the only means we have available for carrying on social interaction. This section focuses on three culturally based aspects of communication: metaphor, nonverbal communication, and framing. These topics capture some of the most robust features of classroom instruction, and they are informed by relevant bodies of literature from educational anthropology and sociolinguistics.

Metaphor

Most of us were introduced to metaphor as a literary device commonly used in poetry and creative writing. Yet authors such as Lakoff and Johnson, Reddy, and Schön question this conventional view, claiming that metaphor is fundamental to all forms of language. Like culture generally, metaphor pervades cocktail chatter as well as poetry, research reports as well as short stories, and textbooks as well as novels. Consider the following excerpt from a science text (I have italicized the analogic metaphors):

The genetic code contains the instructions that determine how all cells develop. Cracking the code has led to one of the most important activities in modern biology—genetic engineering. Through genetic engineering, scientists have learned to cut apart...
the DNA molecules that *make up* chromosomes. . . Using this method, bacteria *cells* have been changed into *living factories* that produce large quantities of substances previously only made by human *cells.*

Terms such as *genetic engineering* may not strike us as particularly poetic, but they are metaphorical because they use a familiar domain of experience (e.g., engineering) as a framework for understanding an unfamiliar domain (e.g., altering genetic structures). This comparative process, what Gordon refers to as "making the strange familiar," is the essence of metaphor. It involves juxtaposing the similarities between two types of experience. The metaphor *computer memory,* for example, highlights the similarities between human memory (the ability to recall information) and the computer's accessible storage of information.

The power of metaphor to make the strange familiar offers a basic and potent teaching strategy for describing a complex phenomenon, particularly when that phenomenon cannot be directly observed. Consider another example taken from the same science textbook; again, the topic is genetic engineering:

Some bacterial DNA comes in the form of a ring called a plasmid. You might think of this as an unbroken circle of rope. Using special techniques, a scientist snips open the "rope." The scientist then removes a short piece of DNA from a human cell. You might think of this as a short length of rope. The scientist "ties" this length of "rope" to the cut ends of the bacterial DNA. Now the bacterial DNA forms a circle again.

Here the authors skillfully move back and forth between the common experience of tying rope (the familiar or source domain for this metaphor) and techniques used in genetic engineering (the unfamiliar or target domain). The authors evoke an image based on shared knowledge.

Supervisors must understand the process because metaphorical images do much more than simply describe new ideas; they also reproduce historically grounded and culturally specific ways of thinking. Schön refers to the process as the generative function of metaphorical language. The metaphor *genetic engineering,* for example, not only describes a process, it tacitly generates the conceptual boundaries that shape how we understand the process. These boundaries are represented by the source domain of engineering, which in most Western societies is viewed by laypersons as a highly

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technical endeavor. The implicit connotations associated with engineering (e.g., that it is politically, morally, and culturally neutral) are reproduced along with more explicit understandings of how the process works. Recognizing the connotations and understandings allows us to see a connection between the two science textbook excerpts that I have used as examples. Guided by the metaphor of *genetic engineering*, textbook authors describe the field of activity as a technical process (i.e., a matter of breaking apart ring-shaped DNA—the “rope”—to add new pieces).

In many respects, what scientists call *genetic engineering* is not inherently technical any more or less than it is inherently social, ethical, political, or economic. Yet our language leaves us with a technical image that distorts the many ways that creating life forms is not like designing a new bridge. This distortion may not be a problem for people who are already well acquainted with what the metaphor describes. Molecular biologists, for example, are often the first to acknowledge that, whether they like it or not, their work has all sorts of ethical and political dimensions. But for students being introduced to the topic, a danger exists that they will take the metaphor in its most literal sense, unaware that it is a metaphor. Then later these students may confront genuine difficulties in recognizing that activities such as genetic engineering do indeed have ethical, political, or cultural ramifications. Metaphors, unless used with some care, have the power to inoculate students against future learning.

Admittedly, if limited to a handful of analogic metaphors such as *genetic engineering* and *computer memory*, the power of words to predispose how we understand the world would not be vastly important. Yet another category of metaphors is far more pervasive in our everyday use of language. This category can be labeled *iconic metaphors* and includes the vast multitude of words associated directly with images: *work, play, science, art, time, space, individual, language, intelligence, home, school, family*, and *truth*.

Like analogic metaphors, these iconic metaphors reproduce or generate ways of understanding worked out in the past. They illustrate how language acts as a courier of cultural history. Consider the iconic metaphor *work*. Its recent history in English-speaking countries associates it primarily with the types of activities for which we receive monetary compensation. However, this steadfast image of work is today being challenged by feminist scholars who view it as overly masculine in its tacit exclusion of work that has traditionally taken place in the home. In short, we are engaged in a process of cultural renewal where particular groups are struggling to make explicit the otherwise taken for granted imagery embedded within this iconic metaphor. If they succeed, we should come to think and talk about work in new ways, and our language will then carry these new ways of understanding into the future.

Iconic metaphors tacitly convey a range of cultural beliefs. Consider our tendency (in cultural terms) to view art and science as related to gender—the
former as largely feminine, the latter masculine. Unspoken patterns of understanding guide us in thinking about intelligence, reason, and affect as individually centered, learning as an accumulation of facts, and knowledge as possessing physical properties (it can be given to others, put in books, lost, etc.). From still other cultural patterns, we tacitly learn to view change as progressive and language as a type of conduit or delivery system for transmitting our thoughts from one person to another.

We associate deeply held images with particular iconic metaphors (e.g., art, science, knowledge, change). To understand just how teachers and textbooks function as cultural gatekeepers, we must recognize these images. What flows into the classroom or is kept out through the language of instruction constitutes a wide spectrum of culturally specific beliefs—some educational, some miseducational. This gatekeeping role is easily recognized in the practical decisions of what content to include in a lesson or which text materials to use. Yet teachers may not necessarily be aware at a conscious level of how language itself reproduces cultural patterns of thought. In particular, the patterns (change as progressive, reason as individually centered, knowledge as objective, etc.) represent a level of understanding that ordinarily remains implicit in our everyday efforts to communicate with one another.

In teaching science, where iconic and analogic metaphors work together, we see this tacit participation of language in regulating our conceptual environment. Consider that most American students learn to regard science (an iconic metaphor) as an activity set apart from other domains of experience, including politics. This implicit lesson is neither one that science teachers sit down to plan out, nor is it explicitly stated in any textbook. Instead, it is taught (at least in part) by the analogic metaphors common to science and science teaching. Metaphors such as discovery, radioactive decay, half-life, periodic table, sound wave, natural resources, and genetic engineering provide little opportunity for emphasizing the politics of science.

Because we generally take such cultural gatekeeping for granted, understanding this dimension of classroom teaching requires a special effort on the part of teachers and supervisors alike. Our challenge is to develop a sensitivity to language as culture. In practical strategy, we give explicit attention to the source domains (images) of the key metaphors used in a classroom. We must recognize the metaphors that provide a sense of conceptual coherence to a lesson, explanation, or textbook chapter. Once we identify particular metaphors as metaphors, teachers and supervisors may then ask two questions. First, how adequately do these metaphors capture what the students are expected to learn? Second, how well do these metaphors match up with the students' own cultural background and assumed knowledge?

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The first question urges us to examine the conceptual boundaries of a given metaphor. On this point, Frost commented:

[If you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and weaknesses, you don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science, you are not safe in history. . . . All metaphor breaks down somewhere.]^{14}

Recognizing where a metaphor “breaks down” requires close attention to the full range of connotations associated with its source. Does the metaphor natural resources, for example, imply that nature is “in supply,” available to be drawn and “used” in whatever way we regard as beneficial?

My second question asks about the appropriateness of metaphors in relation to the students’ background knowledge. In describing the president as “like a quarterback,” a social studies teacher makes certain assumptions about the students’ experience. These metaphors often have wide currency. Yet the range of cultural differences within a classroom should remind us that we cannot take for granted that all students share the teacher’s background (as a source for many iconic and analogic metaphors) even the students who appear to be members of the same language community as the teacher. Where differences in assumed knowledge exist, metaphorical language can quickly lead to confusion and miscommunication.

Although no teacher can or would want to avoid using metaphorical language, an awareness of these concerns helps us identify situations that call for introducing alternative metaphors. The teacher who begins a lesson by telling students, “We can describe this [a poem, historical event, mathematical function, etc.] in many different ways . . .” may be engaged in just this task. The task requires imagination, but a practical approach to fostering alternative metaphorical outlooks is to locate key metaphors historically or in relation to a cross-cultural perspective. Examples might include the science teacher who calls attention to the historical development of scientific beliefs, the U.S. history teacher who explains how European historians view the American Revolution, or the art teacher who explores the cultural dimensions of post-impressionism. These perspectives simply remind us not to take metaphors such as static electricity, deep space, political independence, the industrial revolution, or artistic vision in their most literal sense.

Sensitivity to the metaphorical nature of language offers guidance to culturally responsive supervisors by raising specific questions:

- What are the central analogic and iconic metaphors used in this lesson?
- What conceptual boundaries do these metaphors establish? What do they bring into focus, and what do they neglect? Taken together, do they

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provide a broad conception of the curriculum, or are they narrowly focused on a single point of view?

- Does the teacher introduce alternative metaphors when appropriate to supplement text materials or common ways of describing a topic?

- Are the source domains of key metaphors accessible to a broad range of students? Are students likely to be familiar with what the teacher's language assumes?

- Does the teacher call attention to how two metaphorically related domains of experience differ?

- Are cross-cultural or historical perspectives introduced to remind students of the connections between metaphorical language and assumed knowledge?

These questions help foster a sensitivity of the cultural patterns conveyed to students through the pervasive use of metaphor. To recognize these tacit dimensions of instruction, however, words alone do not tell the whole story.

**Nonverbal Communication**

Body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and other forms of nonverbal communication are such commonplace aspects of social life that we often overlook their significance. Nevertheless, they have an immediate and often pivotal influence on how we understand one another, both in and outside the classroom. The anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell estimates that nonverbal behavior accounts for at least 65 percent of our face-to-face communication.¹⁵ I casually glance at my wrist watch, and that simple action changes the entire footing of our conversation. Your friend’s eye contact, tone of voice, and the way she nods her head lets you know that she is genuinely interested in what you have to say. These everyday examples begin to suggest what we take for granted—the power of nonverbal communication. Three categories of nonverbal communication include proxemics, kinesics, and prosody.

**Proxemics.** This term refers to the social use of space. Whether we find ourselves in a classroom, in a business office, at home, or driving down the freeway, space is organized for us in clearly discernible ways. In the classroom, this organization most likely involves the teacher standing at the front-center of the room and the students sitting in evenly spaced rows of desks. Of course, these patterns of spacial organization change, but the new patterns signal changes in the nature of classroom activities. Variability in classroom organization tends to emphasize that we associate different spacial arrangements with different communication patterns. Teachers organize reading circles, for

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example, on the assumption that the arrangement affords different types of interaction than whole-group instruction or individual seatwork. Spacial arrangements help signal what is culturally appropriate to do or say in a given situation. As Hall says, "Space speaks."\(^{16}\)

What space speaks about is most typically our relationships with one another. We express these relationships metaphorically—for example, "I just don't know where I stand with Peter." A teacher, to provide a more literal example, is likely to stand rather than sit in reprimanding a student, a position physically above the student. Classroom research also suggests that where students sit in the classroom relates to how much attention they receive from the teacher and how often the teacher calls on them or establishes eye contact. Students who sit in the front and center rows are likely to receive more of the teacher's attention than are students seated on the sides or at the back of the room.\(^{17}\)

These findings suggest that supervisors pay close attention to whether a teacher's comments and questions are directed to particular zones within the classroom, thus giving some students more opportunities than others to participate in class discussions. Another implication involves recognizing that different people may interpret the messages associated with spacial patterns in different ways. A student's conscious or unconscious efforts to draw away from a teacher and maintain physical distance may signal dislike or admiration, for example, depending on what and whose cultural patterns are taken as the frame of reference. A student called to the front of the classroom and praised by a teacher may interpret being made the center of attention as either welcomed recognition (a reward) or as dreaded embarrassment (a punishment). Culturally responsive teachers and supervisors recognize that both interpretations make sense as cultural forms of understanding and that a student's reactions should not be automatically attributed to personality traits such as shyness or hostility.

**Kinesics.** More popularly known as body language, this category includes facial expressions (as well as largely involuntary responses such as blushing), hand gestures, and posture. The crucial importance of kinesics in interpersonal communication is suggested by the comments of Arnold Beisser, an author and professor of psychiatry, who at the age of 25 found himself paralyzed by a severe illness:

> My paralysis made gestures impossible, and I was amazed at how profoundly that compromised my ability to communicate subtly. I could no longer convey mixed meanings or mute aggression by hand signals, and many jokes were completely impossible to tell without them. It is also hard to find a substitute for pointing to clarify


direction, and it is hard to show resolve without standing firmly. As a result, I felt awkward when I spoke now, almost as though I were tongue-tied.\(^{18}\)

When gestures and other kinesic signals are synchronized to reinforce a verbal message, they clarify its meaning and create a sense of the speaker’s presence. When they contradict a verbal message, they introduce confusion and doubt. At times, kinesic patterns may even completely override the meaning of a spoken message. If someone with a rigid posture, clinched fists, and tight jaw muscles says “Nothing’s wrong,” we believe the body language, not the words.

Like other forms of nonverbal communication, kinesics illustrates two central themes. First, we can use kinesics in a highly conscious manner (e.g., when I conspiratorially wink at my friend standing across the room). Yet the conscious use of kinesics is the exception rather than the rule. We generally interact with one another and engage in conversation without giving explicit attention to our hand gestures, facial expressions, or body posture. Kinesics, in short, is usually taken for granted. Second, the meanings of kinesic messages are concerned not with things (e.g., the weather, one’s health, a problem at work, or vacation plans) but with relationships. In particular, the messages often signal differences in social status. The teacher who rests his hand on a student’s shoulder while explaining a math problem is not likely to make a similar gesture in talking with the school principal.

Although it may not always be sound advice, the professional folklore “don’t smile until Christmas” suggests that most teachers already recognize at least the symbolic importance of kinesic messages in effective classroom management. The smooth orchestration of ongoing classroom activities and the typically high rates of interpersonal interaction in teaching require an ability to rapidly distinguish between a wink and a blink, between a sigh of relief and a sigh of frustration, or between a smile of joy and a smile that signals embarrassment. Learning to read such kinesic signals is a matter of skilled communication that all of us practice to varying degrees. Yet teachers and supervisors have a professional responsibility to move beyond basic social competencies by recognizing the cultural as well as individual differences in how we understand kinesic patterns. Birdwhistell has noted that although some similarities between cultures exist, researchers have failed to discover even a single gesture or facial expression that means the same thing in all societies.\(^{19}\) A long list of research makes explicit cultural difference in kinesic patterns (e.g., smiling, eye contact).\(^{20}\) These differences, if not recognized, can

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\(^{20}\) See, for example, Frederick Erickson, “Talking Down. Some Cultural Sources of Miscommunication of Interracial Interviews,” in *Nonverbal Behavior Applications and Cultural Implications*, ed. Aaron Wolfgang (New York: Academic, 1979), Kathryn Hu-Pei Au and Cathie Jordan,
easily become the source of miscommunication among cross-cultural participants. An unaware teacher might misinterpret a student's downcast eyes, for example, as signifying inattentiveness when that student's cultural background dictates the behavior is a sign of respect. Supervisors must therefore be alert to varied patterns of interpretation and to the teacher's skill in adjusting her own kinesics depending on what patterns (of eye contact, facial expression, and posture) are most effective with particular groups of students.

**Prosody.** Changes in voice tone and rhythm add a third category useful in sorting out the complexities of nonverbal communication. Like proxemics and body language, prosody is a largely tacit feature of what we assume are natural ways of speaking. Prosody is also critically important to both the quality of our social interactions and to how we understand verbal messages. Prosodic cues tell us, for example, whether a spoken message is serious or playful, whether a question is rhetorical or a genuine request for information, and whether a person's comments are intended to be supportive or disparaging.

Furthermore, the tone, pacing, and pausing of talk are equally important to the flow and conventional patterns of turn taking. In everyday conversations, we must tacitly gauge the tempo of our interactions to judge when others have finished speaking, when it is appropriate for us to contribute, and when it is best to wait. In the classroom, turn-taking patterns become a key factor in shaping the amount of student participation and the degree of ownership that students share in class discussions. Edwards cites research that demonstrates how these patterns can often signal unequal communicative rights by reinforcing the teacher's ability to monopolize classroom talk. In particular, he describes patterns where the teacher's language is characterized by starters, elicitations, directives, informatives, and evaluations while the students' language is limited to bids for attention, acknowledgments, and replies. These common patterns reinforce a recitation-style format that puts teachers in the role of telling students when to talk, how to talk, and what to talk about.

Research on the relation between language and the formation of enduring attitudes further suggests the significance of prosody. Scollon's work, for example, indicates that fast speakers (relative to other participants in a discussion) tend to perceive slow speakers in negative terms (i.e., as distrustful, indolent, and uncooperative). These findings are important because they

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make explicit some of our most deeply held stereotypes. In particular, we often use the metaphor slow to suggest low intellectual ability ("Terry is a slow student") and quick to suggest high ability ("Chris is certainly quick in math") Yet culturally specific beliefs held by other groups (e.g., certain Native American cultures) associate long pauses and silence with different characteristics—wisdom, knowledge, and cooperation. These nondominant cultural views do have interesting empirical support on their side. Research reported by Rowe suggests a strong positive correlation between the wait time of teachers and, among other variables, (1) the length of student responses, (2) the number of student inferences that are supported by evidence and logical argument, (3) the number of questions that students ask, (4) the degree of student-student interaction, (5) the variety of voluntary student participation, and (6) a reduction in the teacher's disciplinary actions.25

Prosody brings forward a variety of issues relevant to teaching and supervision. An understanding of prosody should alert us to the dangers of stereotyping students on the basis of speech patterns. Longer pauses and slower tempo may be related to cultural differences, not intellectual ability. We need to plan and conduct lessons so that students have adequate time to be involved. In practical terms, flexibly pacing instruction allows teachers to be attentive to fast and slow talkers alike.

A supervisor might consider these specific questions in the context of observing a teacher's work:

- Is the teacher attentive to students sitting at the sides and back of the classroom as well as to students sitting in the front and center of the room?
- Does the teacher interact with individual students in a manner that recognizes their comfort zone for various types of interaction?
- Is the teacher's body language (eye contact, gestures, posture) clear to students? Is it consistent with spoken messages? Does it convey appropriate levels of interest and engagement?
- Is the teacher sensitive to reading students' body language?
- Does the teacher's voice tone and rhythm encourage appropriate levels and patterns of student participation?
- Does the teacher provide adequate wait time after questions, explanations, and class demonstrations?

Proxemic, kinesic, and prosodic patterns are deeply ingrained in how we interact with others daily. Yet careful feedback and coaching can be highly effective in changing old habits (e.g., increasing wait time). A more difficult task involves learning to recognize the many different levels at which we understand the words and actions of those around us.

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The term *framing* is used by scholars working in a number of related fields. Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist, uses the term in his work to identify the primary footings on which we interpret everyday social interactions. Likewise, the social psychologist Erving Goffman identifies frames with the particular presuppositions that are explicitly addressed whenever we ask, "What is going on here?" From this perspective, frames allow us to predictably organize such common experiences as attending the theater, watching television, reading a newspaper, or playing a game of cards. Deborah Tannen, a sociolinguist interested in the language of interpersonal relationships, views frames as representing the levels of understanding at which verbal and nonverbal messages provide us with information about the nature of our involvement with others.

In keeping with the work of these authors, I focus here on frames as a foundational aspect of communication. Like picture frames, communication frames are rarely the direct focus of our attention. When visiting an art gallery, we look at the paintings, not their frames. Or as Tannen says, "Frames do their work unnoticed and unnamed." Our words and behavior frame social interactions such as work, play, humor, or teaching, but we typically do not announce: "This is work," "This is play," "This is a joke," or "This is a lesson."

Communication frames are also like picture frames because they function as boundaries separating various types of reality. In the more literal case, a picture frame divides a representation of reality (i.e., a real oil painting, watercolor, or photograph) from the real wall on which it is hung. Metaphorically, frames separate work from play, a joke from the conversation in which it is told, and teaching from other forms of social interaction. In each case, frames tell us what to expect.

*Cultural grammar.* We can also think of frames as the codes, or grammar, that we use to make sense of everyday social experience. The French anthropologist Rasmonde Carroll provides an example in describing how proxemics and behavior frame appropriate patterns of interaction in a French cafe:

I can go with someone, remain at the counter, and speak only to my companion, I can meet friends there, in which case we sit at a table, or the first one to arrive sits at the table we will occupy. We talk among ourselves. I can go alone and take a table if I want "to be left alone," and I can read, write a novel, or write letters, without speaking to anyone except the waiter (and even then, only to order). If, however, I do nothing but drink whatever it is I am drinking and look around me (or at someone in particular)

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27Ibid., p. 85.
insistently, I give the impression that I am there for a “pickup” (a continual source of problems for unsuspecting American women). If I feel like having a conversation, I’ll settle in at the counter, where I can chat only with the owner of the cafe or whoever is standing behind the counter. I can also start up a conversation with someone at the counter, but only via the cafe owner, and only if I am already a regular customer; if not, my move will seem suspicious.28

Carroll’s description gives us a sense of how context—where we are and with whom—creates the frame for what we come to regard as appropriate patterns of communication. The frames, however, do more than simply provide occasions for talk; they also shape the meaning of spoken and written messages.

Consider a second example, more directly relevant to teaching and supervision. A high school student, Nathan, is working at his desk on a set of algebra problems. He shifts nervously about in his chair, squints his eyes, and furrows his brow. His teacher reads these nonverbal cues as a signal that Nathan may be having trouble with the assignment. She walks to Nathan’s desk and looks over his shoulder as he works, quickly recognizing the source of Nathan’s difficulties, the teacher says, “Here, let’s begin this problem by factoring . . .” A simple verbal message. If we were to ask the teacher at this point what she is doing, she might respond: “Helping Nathan. I want him to understand how to go about solving these problems.” Her frame, then, might be represented visually as follows:

My words, “let’s begin by factoring,” are an offer of assistance.

I have written out the example in this way to emphasize that we are dealing with two messages, not one. The first message, “Let’s begin by factoring,” is about mathematics. It is surrounded, or framed, by a second message. “My words are an offer of assistance.” This second message Bateson refers to as a metamessage, communication about communication.29

Although unspoken, metamessages are essential to understanding even our most routine social interactions. In the example above, they help us understand the teacher’s initial surprise when Nathan responds to her offer of assistance by pulling away, grimacing, and loudly stating, “Can’t you see I’m working!” Our task now, along with the teacher’s, is to explain (and thus frame) Nathan’s defensive reaction. Is there something in Nathan’s character or personality that leads to what clearly seems intended as a hostile response? Another explanation, the one I imagine is the case here, is that Nathan is reacting to a metamessage different from the one his teacher assumed. His interpretation may well run along these lines:

My words, “let’s begin by factoring,” are a command.

Here the teacher's assistance is read (or misread) as an expression of power and perhaps as a lack of trust in Nathan's ability to do his own work. In short, Nathan may feel that he is simply being told what to do. Recognizing this alternative frame is important because it allows us to see the logic in behavior that might otherwise appear to be without reason or provocation.

But how did this miscommunication occur? Was it in the teacher's tone of voice or in her body language? Was it in her particular choice of words? We know that any combination of these factors might have contributed to how Nathan interprets the teacher's frame. Therefore, teachers and supervisors should be sensitive to patterns of language and nonverbal communication used in the classroom. However, another relevant issue involves recognizing that behavioral patterns are embedded within a cultural milieu much broader than the immediate classroom. Consider, in particular, Nathan's status as an American adolescent. Our dominant culture defines adolescence not in terms of chronological age but in terms of a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. As a result, an adolescent's identity involves various degrees of ambiguity, particularly in sorting out individual rights and responsibilities. Thus, within this cultural system, the question of who's in control often becomes central to adolescent-adult interactions. On this point, cultural factors add yet another layer of meaning to how Nathan and his teacher end up framing and reframing their interaction.

**Mixed messages.** For practical reasons we should pay close attention to how cultural assumptions frame verbal and nonverbal messages. Framing guides whatever interaction takes place following the particular message being framed. If the teacher in our example frames Nathan's response as hostile, she is most likely to act on the basis of that frame by reasserting her authority (e.g., "Look Nathan, I'm offering help, and you'll take my help whether you like it or not"). This response actually confirms Nathan's framing of the teacher's initial message as a command. It also sets the stage for an escalating confrontation where both teacher and student interpret each other's metamessages as unreasonable demands for power. If, however, the teacher recognizes Nathan's reaction as a misinterpretation of her frame (i.e., as a logical response to being told what to do), she may clarify her frame and confirm her own rationality as well as the rationality of her student (e.g., "I can see that you're working hard, Nathan, and I didn't mean to interrupt. Let me just make a couple of suggestions, then you can get back to work . . .").

Offering assistance to individuals and groups of students is one of the most common frames of classroom teaching. The potential for miscommunication at this level, however, is by no means restricted to any single type (or frame) of student-teacher interaction. Forms of address, humor, questioning strategies, and praise always involve metamessages that are open to potentially conflicting interpretations. Praise, which I have touched on in earlier examples, illustrates this point. Like offers of assistance, praise is not welcome if it
is perceived as conveying a mixed message. Its ambiguity stems from framing praise as a form of evaluation. Although its message communicates approval, its metamessage signals one person's right to judge another.\textsuperscript{30} At the level of framing, therefore, praise often reinforces differences in social status.

An awareness of this interpretation helps us understand why praise is sometimes shunned. It also alerts us to the importance of other cues, including body language, tone of voice, and the particular choice of words used to express messages of approval. A teacher who wishes to minimize the evaluative framing of praise might want to rephrase a comment such as “You did a nice job on this essay,” to something along the lines of “I like your essay because it uses a lot of supporting examples.” The latter praise does not entirely avoid implied evaluation, and much depends on the particular circumstances. Nevertheless, such modest changes in wording and focus can make a differences in how the student understands the praise.

The mixed messages associated with praise and offers of assistance simply remind us that words do not speak for themselves. An example from the work of Noddings illustrates the point.\textsuperscript{31} A student tells her mathematics teacher, “I hate math!” Again we have a simple verbal message. But just what is the student’s metamessage?

1. My words, “I hate math,” are an expression of hostility.
2. My words, “I hate math,” are an affront to you as a math teacher.
3. My words, “I hate math,” are an honest statement, and I try to be honest with the people I like.

This process of framing, as Schön points out, is at the heart of how we define a problem.\textsuperscript{32} In the first two sentences above, the student is the problem. In the third sentence, the student has a problem that she is sharing with the teacher. If the teacher assumes this latter frame, he not only confirms the student’s best motives but also recognizes the student’s feelings (a dislike for mathematics) as an acceptable problem. From this point on, the teacher and student are on the same side, working together to resolve the issue in some way that honors both the student’s honesty and the teacher’s expectations.

The previous examples suggest the importance of framing in communicating where we stand in relation to others. Yet appreciating the implications that this type of frame analysis holds for the practice of teaching and supervision may still be difficult. At stake is not simply student-teacher rapport but also the basic professional knowledge that allows us to accurately assess the appropriate use of various teaching strategies and classroom management.


techniques. My final example highlights this highly contextualized form of professional knowledge. The literature on classroom management commonly recommends that the teacher post a set of class rules in a conspicuous place at the front of the classroom to give students explicit information about what is and is not considered appropriate behavior in that classroom. Without discounting this function, the concept of framing alerts us to the tacit metamessages that this action communicates to students. Again, one metamessage signals the teacher’s authority to make decisions about student behavior. In certain cases, this metamessage of authority may be exactly what the teacher wants to communicate. But first the teacher must be in a position to recognize the metamessages. Only at this level of awareness can teachers and supervisors make informed judgments about the effectiveness of these techniques.

These specific questions might guide a supervisor’s observations of a teacher or class lesson:

- Does the teacher adequately provide an opening frame for the lesson? Do students clearly recognize the teacher’s introductory comments and nonverbal cues (gestures, tone of voice, standing at the front of the classroom, etc.?)
- During a lesson, what tacit information does the teacher’s verbal and nonverbal cues convey about how students are expected to participate? Are these metamessages conducive to student learning?
- Do the teacher’s directions or established routines adequately frame the transitions between different types of activities within a lesson?
- Does the teacher adequately frame the closure of a lesson by providing a summary, overview statements, or connections with upcoming lessons?
- Does the teacher frame praise, offers of assistance, humor, and explanations in ways that avoid confrontation and maintain appropriate levels of student-teacher rapport?
- Does the teacher interpret frames in ways that recognize differences in cultural background?
- Is the teacher sensitive to the metamessages associated with various teaching methods and classroom-management techniques?

SUPERVISION FRAMES

My primary purpose in considering metaphor, nonverbal communication, and framing is to suggest a framework for conducting classroom observations. This same framework, however, also promises to inform a second major aspect of the supervisor’s work—providing teachers with the feedback that will lead to improved classroom teaching. This vital task calls our attention.

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to how the supervisor's own communication is framed by metaphorical language as well as nonverbal cues.

Consider first some common metaphors used in discussions of teaching—*classroom management, teaching strategies, on- and off-task behavior,* and *teacher accountability.* Like the term *genetic engineering,* these analogic metaphors do more than simply describe, they generate particular images of teaching and tacitly communicate the images to the people we interact with. The term *supervision* is also a metaphor that generates an image of professional practice. In its immediate source domain, business and industry, the term signifies the responsibilities of one person to oversee the work of others. When we apply the concept to the business of running a school, its cultural baggage is not lost in the transition from one field to another. The vocabulary supervisors use to describe their work and the work of teachers makes a difference in shaping the most basic lessons of our professional development.

The nonverbal behavior of supervisors raises equally important considerations. Here we might recognize a direct parallel between teaching and supervision. Both involve *providing assistance,* a frame that can be either reinforced or undermined by whatever kinesic, proxemic, or prosodic signals accompany verbal feedback. An aggressive posture or an accusatory tone of voice, for example, is likely to communicate far more than any spoken word. In addition, nonverbal communication includes such considerations as where supervisory conferences are held (on whose turf) and whether either party barricades himself or herself behind a desk. Even subtle differences in how the teacher and supervisor dress can tacitly influence the basis on which they interact.

When supervisors provide feedback in a written form, their messages are framed by such mundane (but not always inconsequential) factors as the quality of paper used and whether the report is typed or handwritten. Yet far more powerful in framing supervision are the particular formats that supervisors use in collecting and presenting information. To hand a teacher a tallied checklist of prespecified behaviors, a table of frequencies, a diagram of off-task behaviors, or some other scorecard on his or her teaching performance at the end of an observation is an act of communication in and of itself. The message it sends has much less to do with a good or bad score than it does with the notion that we can so easily reduce our work to a set of numbers.

When supervisors turn to narrative formats, still other factors become important, particularly the style and tone of the writing. As an illustration, consider two brief paragraphs that begin a sample report provided in the *School Administrator's Faculty Supervision Handbook:*

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54 These practices are commonly recommended. See, for example, Keith A. Acheson and Meredith D. Gall, *Techniques in the Clinical Supervision of Teachers,* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1987).
In keeping with the option allowed to us by school policy, the data gathered from my observations will not be repeated here since they are on the observation reports which you have already.

Other relevant data about you are: you participated in the school textbook committee, you were teacher delegate to the Parents Organization; when, infrequently, you were absent, you provided adequate plans for a substitute; you graciously performed all extracurricular tasks (chaperoning and class trips) assigned to you. We do not need to be well versed in expository writing to recognize the objective, factual style assumed by the author of this report. This style is achieved by an overreliance on the passive voice, single-sentence paragraphs, and a reference to authority (“school policy”) in the first clause of the first sentence. Consider also the author’s word choice of “data” rather than information, “observations” rather than visits, “participated in” rather than took part in, and “absent” rather than away. What this style communicates, assuming that the teacher and supervisor share our dominant cultural patterns, is professional distance. The supervisor possesses objective (unbiased) knowledge that he or she disinterestedly delivers to the teacher. Supervisors, of course, should strive to be fair and honest in assessing a teacher’s work. Yet this objective style of reporting is certainly not free of bias. In particular, its narrow focus on explicit behavior tacitly excludes the cultural dimensions of teaching and supervision.

The implications are directly relevant to the practice of culturally responsive supervision. As we develop this approach, it will necessarily involve learning new ways to talk with teachers, not at them. This concern is in keeping with the etymology that connects the word communication with the word community. Although impart, convey, and express imply a linear process of transmitting our thoughts from one person to another, communication implies a process of coming together. Metaphor, nonverbal communication, and framing illustrate this implied sense of community by highlighting some ways that communication functions as a relational and transformative process. By the same token, they offer a place from which to begin thinking about how both teaching and supervision do more than simply impart or convey factual information.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Recent developments in the field of supervision represent a sociocultural turn in theorizing about models of practice. Three substantive areas of cultural research—metaphor, nonverbal communication, and framing—inform what supervisors look for in the classroom, as well as how they provide teachers with feedback.

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Although the framework I am suggesting for culturally responsive supervision is neither complete nor comprehensive, it quickly raises far more issues than could be addressed adequately over the typically short periods available for supervision. Even under the most ideal conditions, professional development is necessarily an incremental process whereby the teacher and supervisor are able to place in the foreground only a select number of concerns while the vast majority of their professional knowledge remains in the background, well below conscious levels of recognition.

What culturally responsive supervision offers is not a list of essential considerations that can be checked off as individuals progress through a cycle of supervision activities. Instead, this framework simply extends the repertoire of conceptual tools useful in highlighting particular aspects of a teacher’s work. An understanding of analogic or iconic metaphors reveals the power of language to tacitly shape what we come to regard as matters of fact. Kinesics, proxemics, and prosody bring into focus channels of nonverbal communication that always accompany spoken messages but that also differ in meaning depending on a person’s cultural background. Finally, the concept of framing calls attention to the metamessages of our verbal and nonverbal communication that signal basic assumptions about how we expect social interactions to proceed.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this repertoire of cultural understandings is that we ordinarily carry on our day-to-day lives with hardly a second thought to the common metaphors we use in speaking with one another, our body language, and tone of voice. They are all taken for granted, at least until we find ourselves talking at cross purposes, until our intended class discussion somehow turns into a lecture, or until our offers of assistance are met with an unexpected rebuff. At least then we are likely to stop and reflect, to ask about unspoken messages and assumed understandings. Teaching and teacher supervision are a blend of both routine and reflection. Metaphor, nonverbal communication, and framing give us something to reflect about.36

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