

Troubling Practices and the Academy: Dialoguing Educational and Clinical Supervision

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Abstract

This paper contrasts the practices of educational and clinical supervision, which have different histories and clientele. Educational supervision -- of new teachers or of thesis researchers-- has some surprising resonances with clinical supervision practices involving support for professionals in mental health fields. Both involve complex practices of economic accountability within organisations. Both are widely perceived to be beneficial to educational practice, and are argued on ethical grounds. Using an analysis informed by a Foucauldian discursive framework, we argue that there are fruitful possibilities for a new academic practice that draws on both traditions in addressing the unacknowledged 'pastoral' work of academics. Such a practice, which we term reflexive supervision, acknowledges the tensions and contradictions between support, inclusion, critique, accountability and power within organisational spaces of the university.

Background

More and more students seem to be struggling to remain within tertiary education. Helping students deal with this struggle has become the unacknowledged 'pastoral' work of academics. With this in mind, we began to explore the possibilities of a more clinical form of supervision for teachers and academics involved in educational supervision. However, we soon found ourselves viewing both forms of supervision as "slippery process[es]" and "deeply uncertain practice[s]" (Grant, 2005, p.337). We became intrigued by the wider discourses around supervision and the opportunities that such a view provided to foreground several problems. We find that a comparison of the two forms of supervision highlights an ambiguous philosophical base that can be manipulated to advantage a conservative economic agenda. We think supervision can be viewed as a last ditch attempt to shore up the shaky façade of the autonomous, "self"-reflective individual in a world that is crying out for community. In this paper we explore the fault lines and fractures that cross the supervisory terrain in order to find possibilities for a more radical and inclusive practice.

Philosophical Traditions

Both clinical and educational supervision represent divided practices, drawing on different philosophical traditions. These practices have confluences through reference to Foucault's (1977) concept of surveillance and Rose's (1989) analysis of the discourses that create the psychologically influenced ("psy") professions in producing manageable subjects for certain systems of power. Drawing on Foucault's (1968/1998) genealogical approach, we considered the contradictions that inform both practices, noting how these tend to support an agenda that is more likely to advantage the already advantaged, than either the less privileged people of Mair's (1989) client "underbelly" (p. 282) or the educational goal of meeting community needs. We start by sketching the two versions.

Educational supervision has two main traditional forms: the supervision of new teachers and the supervision of student researchers. Both are traditionally founded in scientifically based developmental approaches that tend to produce expert practitioners/theorists and (consequent) grateful apprentices. There have been a number of critiques of foundational principles in developmental psychology (e.g., Burman, 1994). The fixity of linear notions of progress as foundational to development are, in these critiques, linked with the modernist assumption that chronologically earlier forms of life (whether children or "primitive"

peoples) are necessarily deficient in comparison to later forms (see Morss, 1996). In this view, the latest is always best, and old-fashioned necessarily second-rate. A more postmodern view of development focuses on the multiple engagements people make at every point of their lives, since everyone is enmeshed in complexities of familial, societal and wider cultural groupings (e.g., McNaughton, 2005). Here the issues that surround a young child are no less complex or differentiated than those surrounding the child's fully grown adult parent. However, this notion seldom appears in supervisory practices. Supervision is not yet available for lecturers already assumed to be 'experts' in their fields.

Clinical supervision, as Holloway (1995) points out, was not recognised as a unique or distinct practice until the 1980s. Since then there has been an exponential growth in the number of models with supervisory interventions paralleling the various waves of therapy (Jevne, Sawatzky & Pare, 2004). Daniels and Uhlemann (2004) point out that supervision has historic origins in both psychoanalysis and Rogerian person-centred existential humanism. However, Feltham (2000) notes that even the earlier psychoanalytic supervision was torn between its educative and therapeutic functions. In drawing on these enduring traditions, current clinical supervision perpetuates the contradiction between hierarchical expertise and collaborative reciprocity, re-producing an ambivalent practice (Fairclough, 1992) that both holds accountable and supports advanced and novice practitioners alike. The incompatibility of the two positions devolves a dilemma on both supervisor and supervisee, and gives rise to a debate, which is currently alive in a number of countries (e.g., Crocket, 1999).

The potential for slippage in this theoretical domain is easily manipulated to fit economic goals. Although the realms are not mutually exclusive, we note two disjunctures between educational and clinical supervision and consider these as sites worthy of ethical scrutiny. First, in our experience financial incentives reinforce different forms of educational and clinical supervision. Secondly, we note that supervision invites more supervision, setting in motion chains of accountability that are much more obvious in clinical settings.

Accountability: Simply a Financial Matter?

In the educational arena, Grant (2005) finds increasingly popular "psy" supervision aligned to a "neo-liberal" economic rationale that privileges narrow financial goals supported by individual accountability. In using the term "psy", Grant draws on Foucault's (1991) description of the psychological discourse as a vehicle for understanding ourselves, our feelings and our moral capacities in order to achieve self-fulfilment. "Psy" supervision, therefore, has as its focus the care of the whole person. Rose (1989), who coined the term, notes the role of the "psy" disciplines in creating "possible subjects for a certain system of power" (p.130). Our concern here is that the "system of power" that supports supervised subjects may not be as liberatory or beneficial as is commonly supposed when it enables fully self-actualised expert selves to administer regimes of accountability on other selves. It is Scheurich's (1997) view that when ethical responsibility is thus devolved upon individual practitioners, institutions can escape responsibility. In an increasingly litigious environment, this ability to allocate responsibility may benefit providers more than supervisees.

In education, facilitation of holistic development, through a focus on personal support rather than content expertise, brings in a greater diversity of learners. An educational supervisor who facilitates the process of learning can thus take on board many more thesis students than Grant's (2005) "traditional" supervisor chosen for expertise in their field. The dream of "mass higher education as an extension of the privileges and status of the elite to the whole population [is] a dream which drives many students, employers and governments" (Grant, 2005, p.347). Yet "expert", "excellence", "privilege" and "status" are not inclusive terms. The individual who strives for them may well benefit providers rather than achieve a personal goal. Writers such as Jonathan (1990), Rose (1997) and Young (1995) note the subtle ways in which, under the guise of notions of choice and autonomy, a market-focussed state is enabled to maintain ever-tighter control.

In clinical supervision the axis is reversed. Tighter control is achieved through impending professional registration, accompanying restricted practices, and the development of chains of “unilateral responsibility” (Crocket et al., 2004). These are argued on different ethical grounds: those of protecting, rather than benefiting, the public (e.g. HPCAA, 2003). Here supervision draws on discourses of expertise, and results in compulsory regimes of accountability.

What can we take from our observations that state policies encourage supportive, facilitative forms of supervision for educators and, in contrast, expert, educative forms of supervision for therapists? In both cases, the drivers are resisted by many of those on the frontlines of practice. However, it is difficult to resist a dualism that locates “expertise” or “support” in individual bodies rather than as fluid, movable, collective and componential. Our next observation implicates supervisory practices in perpetuating this dualism through its intense focus on bounded individuals.

Chains of Accountability

Where clinical supervisors are required to be themselves supervised (e.g., BACP, 2002; NZAC, 2002), no such demands are made of educational supervisors. Initially, we perceived this as a lack, but we have come to view supervision as a systemic acknowledgement of the problems of autonomy and individualism. A commitment to supervision in its traditional form may be a commitment to shoring up the self’s shaky façade. Our comparison of educational and clinical supervision views the “metaphorical chain of accountability” in supervision more like a set of Russian dolls – each attempting to contain the previous “self”. There are far fewer dolls in the education set, and we are tempted to add more. In this view supervision becomes a set of desperate emergency measures put in place to prevent leakage through perforated boundaries. If, as Rose (1989) proposed, the “psy” discourse has a constitutive role in producing individual subjects, responsible for regulating their “personal identity, [a]moral responsibility and [a] social solidarity” (p.130), then one must now question its effectiveness. The discourse of “psy” supervision has come to be its guarantor that both supports and makes this individual accountable. But, one could argue that neither the “psy” discourse nor supervision has managed to relegate the complexity of “human difference” (Rose, 1989, p.123) to the individual responsibility of the bounded, “self-reflective practitioner”.

In education, the growing popularity of “psy” supervision – and our own observations of the impossibility of relating to students without lives outside the academy – invites the insertion of another link in what is at present a chain with only two links. We would like supervision in order to discuss our concerns as supervisors. However, we question whether such a move would not be seeking to cure with more of the same. This intense focus on individual subjectivities in the intimate setting of the dyad does not encourage reflection on where the benefit lies.

There is another similar set of nested dolls in the education chain, in a process similarly fuelled by an ethic of self-reflection. McWilliam (2002) notes this chain and draws parallels between “Third World development and the on-going development of professional workers” (p. 289). She views lifelong learning and associated technologies as a narrow form of pedagogy that benefits institutions more than participants. It works to locate individuality in a desire for more, whilst selling its produce under a seemingly ethical brand. McWilliam goes so far as to argue that this philosophy supports a more sinister global economy that depletes natural resources and contributes to the disempowerment of the “Two Thirds World” outside the highly developed countries. We also note that it was, after all, the oppressive singularity of one vote /one property / one landowner that helped destroy more collective societies in colonisation of countries from Ireland to North America to the South Pacific. In continuing inequities we have seen the unjust effects of this imposed individualism, with indigenous minorities such as Māori over-represented in morbidity and mortality statistics, and amongst our clients in hospitals and prisons.

These multiple perspectives do open a space for potential change from another direction: educational theorising about the place of critical reflection in the learning process (e.g. Beddoes, 2004; Redmond, 2004). Key educators and philosophers of the twentieth century, namely Dewey, Habermas, Friere and Mezirow, “all played important roles in developing a view of learning as a transformatory process through which individuals are encouraged to critically assess their interpretations of experience” (Cranton, 1994, p.48). Such critical reflecting has also become central to supervisory processes.

However, if we trace the chain backwards we must question the logic of individualisation enabled by the taken-for-granted valuing of “self”-reflection. The viability of the autonomous, narrowly defined reflective practitioner, enhanced with the supporting stakes of supervision, may be questionable, a received truth ripe for deconstruction. In Butler’s (1997) view it is the doubling back afforded by “self-inspection” (p. 22) that forms subjectivities with insides and outsides. For Butler there is a loss accompanied by mourning in this inward turn. Others argue that what is lost in self-reflection is the sense of connectedness and community that reflexivity might revisit (e.g. Ixer, 1999; Lovelock, Lyons & Powell, 2004). Grant (2005) also makes the point that a postmodern, reflexive view is necessary in order to take advantage of the multiple possibilities of current theses supervision. The “self”-reflective practitioner/student, with bounded identity and individual expectations is more likely to be frustrated and disappointed in their attempts to find coherence and a stable match in searching for an appropriate supervisor.

We thus note that clinical supervision, educational supervision, self-reflection and lifelong learning are all argued on ethical terms. We note that they are self-proliferating processes, which, whilst economically advantaging providers, are argued to benefit recipients on ethical grounds. We are also concerned about the potential narcissism of self-reflection and wonder if it is possible to locate the pleasures of intimacy in more multiple, fluid and reflexive spaces.

Postmodern possibilities

As a consequence of the contradictions we have outlined in this paper, “supervision” is a troubled practice. The name itself invites a barrage of new designations to create a multitude of alternatives. Grant’s (2005) taxonomy of versions of educational supervision is paralleled by a variety of terms in the health and social sciences: double vision, personal-vision, local-vision, global-vision, co-vision, super-vision, extra-vision and so on.

We want to place supervision's entrenched emphasis on hierarchy and on vision – categories deeply entrenched in masculinist and reflective paradigms (Whitford, 1991) – under question, whilst retaining its possibilities as a space in which to connect with various others. Rather than create new terms, we prefer to highlight the possibilities emergent in the established term. In order to envisage possibilities for such a new form of practice, we offer the following suggestions.

1. We would thus like to reverse the top-down implications of “super”vision to instead envisage a reflexive, even somewhat ironic, supervision as an an opportunity, a form of cultural study that “is a contextual practice which is willing to take the risk of making connections” (Giroux, 1994, p. 18). This form of supervision would address the deconstruction rather than maintenance of boundaries and hierarchies, whilst providing opportunities to “collectively articulate a common affective vision of a shared political future, based on the politics of practice” (Giroux, 1994, p.20). We would aim to use a form of discursive reflexivity that resists forever “interpreting itself rather than the real political world” (Lovelock et al., 2004, p. 3) and avoids the “self-referentiality [that] breeds solipsism” (Burman, 1991, p.323). Re-working authority as a site for deconstruction, the critical supervisor (like the critical pedagogue) would “listen for the “stutterings” – the unexpected dialects and misspeakings, the unpredicted articulations - within the hegemonic culture that are capable of producing a minor and popular remapping” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Such remapping may spark the mobilisation of memories, fantasies, redirecting their investments

in politics and the other (Giroux, 1994, p.20). Taking this form, supervision becomes a form of identification with the excluded, yet within mainstream practice.

2. This renewed, more inclusive ethical practice could be the site at which moral issues and ethical codes engage in ongoing debate. We resist the set of power relations that would see this dialogue reduced to discussion of accountability, instead preferring to emphasise responsibility towards the object of manipulation: the client, the student, the class or the research subject. We seek to engage in a critical, collaborative practice that addresses the discursive construction of subjectivities, a practice that engages us all.
3. We thus see supervision as an intersection, a space, a gap, and a place of possibilities. Extending our poststructural figuration, we note the existence of supervision as a practice at the interface of borders. This space has political and moral implications, since “supervision”, in line with Lovelock et al.’s (2004) reflection, “stands back from”, rather than “above” (p. 4). Indeed, reflexive “supervision”, as a practice with no name, allows – calls for – many alliances.

In Conclusion

Our paper has mentioned a number of complexities involved in various practices of supervision. We think supervision could be better utilised in both academic and clinical spaces. The demands of a new knowledge economy do not appear to be reducing the ordinary problems of human living. We remain concerned about the effect of practices in which we engage.

We think a case can be made for the regular use of the space called “supervision” on ethical, academic and practical grounds. We think that this space could allow an interweaving of research, ethics, critical reflection, bodies and subjectivities, though examples of what such a practice might look like are thin on the ground. We are currently experimenting with one form in which an interdisciplinary group of practitioners takes a collaborative, critical, reflexive approach to troublesome situations and practices as we move together towards analysis, inclusion and publication. We have here used “our authority, mobilised through a pedagogy of risk and experimentation, to discover what the questions can be in the everyday lives of our[students] [and each other] and what political possibilities such questions open up” (Giroux, 1994, p. 20).

Our hope is that others may come forward with similar enterprises. We seek spaces in which norms and values meet in what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) call “the methodologically contested present” (p. 1116) of the Eighth and Ninth moments in contemporary research. Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) “new interpretive community” (p. 1118) is characterised by participation, caring and reciprocity. Situated in the borderlands, our hope is to provide a space out of which might emerge new and innovative solutions to problems that individual subjectivities have failed to remedy.

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