Supervision as a Creative Act

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By characterizing supervision as a creative activity, I want to focus on the creation rather than the discovery of meaning. Instead of uncovering something implicit in teachers' practice, I want to explore the opportunity *supervision* provides for educators to remake their image of themselves and of their professional practice.

We begin with what is, but we are not limited by it. Re-creation begins on the ground and pushes through present horizons into new territory. It begins as two educators (usually a teacher and a supervisor) come together to ask ground-breaking questions about teaching as they know it. These questions enable them to get at the roots of their professional practice and to stimulate the growth of fundamentally new understandings. One such question might be, What is it to be a teacher in this time and place?

Such a question is neither asked nor answered casually. It is difficult to formulate questions with recreative potential and to pursue them in ways that go beyond present boundaries. The mode of inquiry appropriate in such a quest is reflection—not on framed or reframed "problems of practice"[1] but on the limitless and perpetually changing "ground of practice."[2] Ground is what is basic, fundamental, foundational. It is a source for professional practice in the same way that it is a source for existence. It encompasses ends and means, as well as what exists before goals are formulated and means devised to reach them. In its fullest form, reflection on the ground of practice leads to a deepened

awareness of self-as-teacher and of self in an ever-expanding context. It leads to a reflective state of mind, to reflective practice, to praxis.

To explore possible meanings of supervision as a creative act, ways of facilitating it, and what it might lead to, I have revisited my experiences of reflecting with teachers on the ground of professional practice over the last eight years. I have participated in these ventures sometimes as a university teacher and sometimes as a researcher, in all cases working with teachers who practice in schools or colleges. Although I am not called a supervisor, I relate to the people with whom I work the way supervisors typically do. Like a typical supervisor who works in a school district, I am someone from outside the practice setting who comes in to facilitate reflection and who is perceived to have some measure of power over the teacher because of the responsibility to evaluate what is revealed. Like all supervisors, my ultimate aim is to contribute to the educational good of both students and teachers.

Beginning

Any act of creation is no more than a beginning. It is an invitation for a response that, when made, complements the initial act and in turn invites a response from the initiator.[3] Supervision that leads to praxis cannot be required or imposed. It must await a response.

The first person I invited to reflect on her practice was an elementary schoolteacher and vice principal who, by enrolling in a master's program in curriculum studies at the University of Victoria, had indicated a disposition to reconsider her own practice. Pat, and the approximately 70 others I have since worked with either in their schools or at the university, were all pre-disposed to think critically about education in general and about their practice in particular. I admit to and make no apology for working with willing participants. Why not choose people with whom a project is likely to succeed? Others are not excluded. All who come are issued the same invitation.

Invitations to reflect must be phrased carefully. An invitation issued by someone perceived as a superior always carries extra weight. Recipients feel obliged to accept. My invitations for teachers to reflect on their practice derive added force from my strong belief in the value of calling all of professional practice into question and of calling on all professionals to answer for their actions in personal, social, and political terms. To answer is to give an answer, not the answer. Reflection as often leads to uncertainty as to certainty. It is only fair to declare this caveat on the invitation.

For a long time, I have wrestled with what right I have to move teachers to critique their practice. This question has no easy answer. I cannot not do it. I can, however, be open to whatever response teachers

make and try to respond in kind, nudging, encouraging, challenging, questioning, but always respecting what teachers reveal. In my experience, teachers' responses to these proddings have always been positive.

Sharing responses can build a community of reflective practitioners Showing some what others have accomplished (with their permission, of course) is not only inspiring but instructive: it is impossible to tell someone what it means to reflect on the ground of practice. Reflecting is more a state of mind than a set of skills. Its attributes can be shared, but the condition itself must be developed by each who would experience it.

Therefore, anyone who wishes to facilitate others' reflection must herself be reflective. Instruction in reflection is by example. As a facilitator, I participate side by side with teachers, questioning my practice as they question theirs. Although my practice is usually not the focus of our shared attention, my reflective attitude is crucial to their accomplishments. It makes me sensitive to their experiences of reflecting (which can be disconcerting when comfortable assumptions are torn asunder), and it reduces the status differences caused by our roles.

Relationship

The relationship between supervisors and teachers is the key to the beginning of reflection. Supervisors who hope to facilitate reflection must strike a careful balance between their own authority and teachers' self-determination. They must negotiate (and often renegotiate) the balance with each teacher individually.

Entering into the negotiation means leaving behind traditional role definitions and striking out into unknown territory. It means that supervisor and teacher meet each other as human beings in a place where there are no established ground rules, no predetermined role descriptions to fall back on. Their common ground is their shared concern for the educational good of themselves and their students.

The balance sought is delicate. It is not the balance achieved when the supervisor provides a ready-made framework (e.g., an action-research spiral) and invites the teacher to fill it in. This arrangement leaves the supervisor in control because the supervisor has defined what counts as reflection here (i.e., identification and solution of an isolated problem of practice). Nor is the desired balance achieved if teachers are invited to be reflective and then left to their own devices. Somewhere in between these two extremes, supervisor and teacher find a place where their efforts complement each other, where the creation of insight begins.

I have found this balance particularly difficult to strike because of the responsibility I feel for teachers' "progress" in their reflective journeys. Supervisors who are also line officers in the institution are

likely to feel the same anxiety about the quality of the educational program teachers provide. The temptation is to provide too much guidance, in an effort to keep control and prevent mishaps.

Guidelines for reflecting on practice can be debilitating rather than enabling. Because they come from someone perceived to be a superior, the teacher can take the vehicles provided for reflection as the definition of the process. Reflection becomes what is done when these vehicles are used. The ultimate aim is not that teachers should master a set of techniques for reflecting but that they should become reflective.

The role of the supervisor, after initiating the reflective process, is to reflect back to teachers the meanings they make, commenting in ways that urge teachers to probe further, but leaving the ultimate judgment of the worth of the creation to the teachers themselves. If reflection is to enhance teacher autonomy, to empower teachers as many of its proponents advocate, then teachers must take control of what and how they learn about their teaching—only then are they in a position to decide what to do in their practice and to be able to answer for their actions.

How is an appropriate balance struck between teachers and supervisors, a balance that facilitates but does not direct teachers' reflection on their practice? I have found it important to try to provide space, both physical and psychic, and vehicles that will enable teachers to become reflective.

Space

Making space means providing times and places for teachers to contemplate what it means to be educators in their situations. Making space is relatively easy when teachers commit themselves to a long-term professional development project with a set timetable (e.g., a course or a graduate program or a collaborative action-research project) and more difficult when individually they try to steal time from their teaching days. However, self-generated group schedules can sometimes compete successfully for part of a teacher's busy day.[4] Time scheduled with someone else is more easily preserved than time scheduled to be alone with one's thoughts.

In the experience of some of the teachers I have known, reflection goes through cycles of intense involvement (usually coterminous with involvement in a group or individually subscribed project) and frustrating withdrawal (when best intentions are overcome by the press of daily routine). Sometimes supervisors are powerless to override the downturn in the cycle; sometimes through creative time management, they can make a space where the pressures of daily teaching duties are held at bay.

More crucial than the physical space and time for reflection is the psychic space where it can happen. Teachers who feel that a supervisor knows better than they themselves do what they should be doing or who feel they will be held to behavioral specifications of their jobs are not likely to ask the kinds of penetrating questions that reach down to the very ground of their practice. Common sense attests to the superior persuasive power of a feeling of self-confidence, which is stimulated by due measures of trust and respect.

Indiscriminate respect is a contradiction in terms. The tone that invites teachers to enter into a reflective space is a discriminating respect balancing appreciation for the already-developed with positive expectations for the not-yet-developed. A respectful tone is established when supervisors genuinely appreciate teachers' goodness and their work, trust teachers to make their own sense out of what they encounter, and acknowledge the legitimacy of teachers' conclusions. Respect is simply treating teachers like professionals. Here again, supervisors must balance the contribution they can make with teachers' responsibility to direct their own learning. Supervisors must provide for a direction without setting the direction. For this purpose, they must devise vehicles that liberate rather than enslave.

Vehicles

No guarantees come with vehicles that facilitate creative reflection. The only safeguard is continuous reflection on the efficacy of various alternatives. Regardless of the enthusiasm and conviction with which they are presented, the suggestions that follow are simply that: suggestions that arise from my own reflections on my experiences with teachers over the last eight years.

A key decision in designing structures to facilitate reflection is choosing where to start. In my work with teachers, I have determined that beginning with vignettes or stories from teachers' daily practice is crucial to developing insights firmly anchored in teachers' everyday realities. The starting point is practice rather than imported theory because insights that originate in someone else's theory are often difficult to connect to one's own everyday actions. Thus, the theories of hegemony and reproduction of the critical theorists are not eligible starting points because they separate teachers from the daily events of their practice and direct their attention to someone else's construction of reality. Nor do I suggest that teachers begin by seeking the theories implicit in their practice, for these too have a shape that is not the teachers'.

The aim is for teachers to theorize, not to theorize about, their own practice—to capture the qualities of their teaching and of themselves as teachers that enable them to see where they stand. Already established

theories are useful to this project, but they come second. They are used selectively and idiosyncratically to deepen and to extend teachers' understandings of themselves and of their own situations, as teachers move dialectically between the particular and the general.

This movement downward to the ground of practice and outward beyond present horizons takes place through language. Both teachers and supervisors need a language for voicing their reflections, to themselves as well as to others. They need a language that enables them to break through the bounds of technical construals of teaching. They need a new but not alien language that enables them to speak of being as well as doing, of feeling as well as knowing, of imagining as well as remembering, of creating as well as reproducing, of integrating as well as differentiating.

Existing literature of many kinds can be a source of such language, including theoretical writings. It serves this purpose, however, only when teachers are allowed, indeed required, to make their own sense of it, to filter it through their own experience and to make their own judgments of its worth and pertinence. As teachers appropriate the language of others, they must be encouraged to use it for their own purposes. Thus, a space is created where teachers can find their own voices.

Language without form lacks meaning. Our search for suitable forms for expressing our understanding of the ground of teachers' practice has wound through many byways: the construct-theory alley, the personal-practical-knowledge road, theory-of-action paths, and the autobiographical tunnel. In the early part of this journey, we compiled charts of teachers' constructs, which were listings of the qualities they attributed to students, curriculum, the teacher's role, the learning process, and the institution where they worked (Schwab's familiar commonplaces). We called these images of the commonplaces of practice, and we linked them with general principles and specific routines for enacting them. Along with their goals, teachers' images were taken to represent their beliefs and intentions, all of which functioned as reasons for actions. To represent more clearly the tone and pattern of a teacher's images, we later composed paragraphs describing each teacher's practice in metaphorical terms (e.g., teacher as an orchestra conductor or as a synchronizer of students' learning).[5]

In spite of their apparent efficacy, their capacity to show subsurface dimensions of practice that had been unknown to teachers and to enable teachers to reconceive their practice in significant ways, none of these forms of expressing the ground of practice was satisfying. All have been discarded as indefensibly restrictive. They restrict the expression of reflective awarenesses in the same way that theoretical starting points restrict the course of reflection. The comforts offered by the procedures of positive science have been difficult to forego. The obsession with marking out definable paths to reflective awareness and with finding categories

into which we could conveniently slot the discoveries that came from reflection has been difficult to overcome. We have had to curtail the desire for order and certainty so we could learn to accept the impossibility of predicting the route to reflective awareness or the form in which these awarenesses will be most forcefully expressed or even the value of the reflective journey.

The indeterminacy of a reflective venture means that it is wiser to use an all-purpose vehicle rather than a special-purpose one for the journey and that the successful use of a vehicle depends more on creativity than on technique. It also shifts the responsibility for the journey closer to the teacher's side of the balance. Facilitators can suggest a starting point, but they cannot map out the journey on behalf of teachers. Facilitators can only accompany teachers on their journeys. The journey begins not when some particular aspect of practice is made problematic but when a thoughtful attitude is adopted. The signal of this attitude is the tendency to direct attention toward what appears not to be problematic.

Facilitators' responses to teachers' thoughtful reflections must be equally thoughtful. The nature of a reflective journey is shown rather than explained. Examples come from facilitators or other teachers who are reflective. The examples are seen in how these people live their professional lives.

Of course, reflection is not entirely formless, and facilitators are not simply empathetic companions. Facilitators can do more than mark a starting place and respond to teachers' responses. They can give teachers the benefit of their own understanding of reflection, which is likely (or ought) to be informed by their wider experience and reading. My understanding of reflection has led me to encourage teachers to write as a concrete means of moving deeper into the grounds of their practice. I have found both unstructured journal writing and more structured reflective writing particularly fruitful for this purpose.[6] Sustained writing requires investing a substantial amount of time and energy; commitment to an identifiable collaborative project makes the investment more likely. Most of the teachers I know who have reaped substantial benefits from reflective writing have committed themselves to 36 hours of credit course work in a university setting.

The reflective writing that has been the occasion for significant insights into self and practice has proceeded in three stages (developed after years of trials and errors): (1) detailed, literal descriptions of actual events from daily practice from an insider's point of view; (2) review of the descriptions seeking a deeper understanding of what is there and what it means, that is, seeking their ground; and (3) another reconsideration, this time expanding the horizon of both the inquiry and the inquirer, pushing the inquiry into the future tense and the inquirer into the nexus of social and political interests in which his practice is

embedded. Journal writing provides the raw material for this more structured writing and an opportunity to share reflection-in-process with a responsive audience, usually but not solely the facilitator.

To respond as readers of teachers' reflective writings, facilitators must be pedagogues before they are evaluators. Their first mission is to understand what teachers are trying to say, to find the meaning behind the words, and to suggest how deeper meaning might be created and then be clearly expressed. Only at a time and under circumstances that both teachers and facilitators agree do facilitators judge the depth and clarity of teachers' writings and reflections. The ultimate value of reflection, however, is judged by its practitioners. They bear the final responsibility for its success and enjoy the benefits of its creations.

Creations

For the 13 teachers whose experiences of reflecting on the grounds of their practice I have studied in depth, reflection has led to the creation of self-confidence. This self-confidence is more than the reflections of self seen in the eyes of others. It permeates the core of their being. Developing this kind of self-confidence locates them in the tension between understanding and not understanding. To know what we do not understand is at once disconcerting and confidence-inspiring. Knowing that there is much that we do not understand gives us confidence in what we do understand. Knowing what we do understand gives us the confidence to live with incomplete understanding, and it alerts us to the possibility of creating new understandings with every act.

In the writings of some of the teachers who shared their reflections with me early in the course of my work, self-confidence initially manifested itself as confidence in decision-making ability. Pat wrote:

> There has been an improvement in my ability to make decisions. It has become easier for me to make good decisions (i.e., decisions that are consistent with my beliefs), since I am no longer relying on emotion or some vague feelings about an issue for guidance. Further, I have more confidence when presenting an argument for or against an issue because I know that there is something of substance behind my opinions.[7]

Roger wrote about a deeper form of self-confidence:

> I had not felt that my practice was wrong, but I had been "unsure about the rightness of it." By understanding more clearly my own intentions and the sense of the good I was working toward, I felt more sure of the "groundsense" of being from which I taught and of the grounds with which I could justify curriculum decisions. As a result, some of the uncertainty about my practice and the use of research knowledge was

> alleviated; I understood better how I could make adjustments in instructional or management technique to make my teaching more effective because I choose only those things that fit what I do and value and work toward as a teacher. These techniques do not change my aim or ground; if they did, I would not consider them.[8]

Susan's more recent experiences reach to even greater depths:

> When I completed the description of my teaching practice, I experienced an awareness of who I was, as a teacher, as a human being. I wrote, "What I am learning. . . is that the choices I have been making, but not articulating, are good ones and have something to do with the real voices with which my students speak." The consequences for my practice of such a recognition, while indirect, are profound. What does it mean for a teacher to recognize within herself the source of her authority to teach? For me, the awareness deepened my commitment to the quality of each encounter with the children in my care.[9]

Reflection not only changes our perspective, it gives us perspective on change. It enables teachers to locate themselves in larger institutional, social, and political contexts and to identify the points where their personal efforts to change their practice come up against already-established structures and norms. This realization is often frustrating: "My increased awareness has led to some uncomfortable feelings in addition to all the benefits discussed above. I have become acutely aware of all the compromises I have to make to continue my job."[10] Pat went on to pinpoint conditions under which "my beliefs would be compromised to the extent that I would have to leave the teaching profession."[11] Tom, another teaching principal, laid out in more detail the layers of reality that he had to penetrate to significantly change the lives of students and teachers:

> When I am standing in front of my 5/6/7 class and "teaching" a lesson about the structure of Roman government, I am also (concurrently) doing the following as well: implementing my interpretation of my school's interpretation of my district's interpretation of a program that was handed down by the Ministry and that represents its interpretation of history, filtered through a political process.[12]

Reflection is also about the creation of new possibilities. Roger expressed in subtle terms his commitment to fundamentally remaking the educational system: "What we do as teachers. . . is to be, as far as possible, the kind of teacher we might have wished to have in school, had we known it was possible."[13] Tom voiced an equally ambitious intention to change the nature of education in his classroom by acting on his newly created commitment to be "a teacher who cares for his or her work and

students, who brings passion (a key concept) to the classroom, and shows that caring and passion in everything that happens in the room.[14] He determined to abandon "the kind of education we have now, … based on the misunderstanding that we can take a child, with all that child's early experiences, and then reinterpret that child's world by providing different vocabulary and experiences rooted not in the child but in the mind of the teacher."[15]

These few excerpts hint at the possibility for teachers to remake their images of themselves and of their professional practice through reflection. In so doing, they show the promise of supervision as a creative act.[16]

Notes

1. Those familiar with the work of Donald Schön will recognize the allusion to his work on reflective practice in this use of the term *framed*. In contrast to Schön's project to develop a more accurate epistemology of professional practice, my work invites practitioners to break out of the confines of epistemology in order to attune themselves to other (especially ontological) dimensions of their professional practice.
2. I use the term *ground* metaphorically to refer to the place where one stands in the present, the locus of one's roots in the past, and the source of nourishment for the future. See Antoinette A. Oberg, "The Ground of Professional Practice," in *Proceedings in the Third Conference on Teacher Thinking and Professional Action*, ed. Joost Lowyck (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University, 1986).
3. This particular way of thinking about creating comes from Susan Underwood. See Antoinette A. Oberg and Susan Underwood, "Facilitating Teachers' Self-Development: Reflections on Experience" (paper presented at the Invitational Conference on Teacher Development: Policies, Practices, and Research, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, February 1989).
4. Mary Louise Holly, "Teacher Reflections on Classroom Life: Collaboration and Professional Development," *Australian Administrator* 4 (No. 4, 1983): 1–6; Terrance R. Carson, "What Kind of Knowing Is Action Research?" *Theory into Practice* (in press); Jack Sanger, "Awakening a Scream of Consciousness," *Theory into Practice* (in press).
5. The chronology of these efforts can be seen in the following sequence of reports: Antoinette A. Oberg and Pat Tucker, "The Personal Practical Knowledge of the Practitioner" (paper presented at the Meadow Brook Symposium on Collaborative Action Research in Education, Rochester, Ml, January 1985); Antoinette A. Oberg and Roger Field, "The Discovery of Practical Wisdom: An Experienced Teacher Reflects on His Practice" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1986); Antoinette A. Oberg, "Using Construct Theory as a Basis for Research and Professional Development," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 19 (January–February 1987): 55–65; Antoinette A. Oberg, "The Ground of Professional Practice," in Proceedings in the Third

Conference on Teacher Thinking and Professional Action, ed. Joost Lowyck (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University, 1986); Antoinette A. Oberg and Lonnis McElroy, "Quality of Care: An Educational Criticism of a Hospital Teacher's Practice (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 1988); Antoinette A. Oberg and Corey A. Blades, "Sound of Silence: Reflections of a Teacher" (paper presented at the Fourth Conference of the International Study Association on Teacher Thinking, Nottingham, England, September 1988); Antoinette A. Oberg and Susan Underwood, "Facilitating Teacher Self-Development: Reflections on Experience" (paper presented at the Invitational Conference on Teacher Development: Policies, Practices, and Research, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, February 1989).

6. Antoinette A. Oberg, "Building Self-Reflective Knowledge Through Journal Writing" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies, Montreal May 1985); Antoinette A. Oberg, "Encouraging and Recounting Reflection on Practice" (paper presented to the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies, Winnipeg, June 1986). For more on structured reflective writing, see footnote 5.
7. Antoinette A. Oberg and Pat Tucker, "The Personal Practical Knowledge of the Practitioner" (paper presenteed at the Meadow Brook Symposium on Collaborative Action Research in Education, Rochester, MI, January 1985), p. 24.
8. Antoinette A. Oberg and Roger Field, "The Discovery of Practical Wisdom: An Experienced Teacher Reflects on His Practice" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1986), pp. 25–26.
9. Antoinette A. Oberg and Susan Underwood, "Facilitating Teacher Self-Development Reflections on Experience" (paper presented at the Invitational Conference on Teacher Development: Policies, Practices, and Research, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronyo, February 1989), p. 20.
10. Antoinette A. Oberg and Pat Tucker, "The Personal Practical Knowledge of the Practitioner" (paper presented at the Meadow Brook Symposium on Collaborative Action Research in Education, Rochester, Ml, January 1985), p. 27.
11. Ibid., p. 28.
12. Antoinette A. Oberg and Corey A. Blades, "Sound of Silence: Reflections of a Teacher" (paper presented at the Fourth Conference of the International Study Association on Teacher Thinking, Nottingham, England, September 1988), p. 20.
13. Antoinette A. Oberg and Roger Field, "The Discovery of Practical Wisdom: An Experienced Teacher Reflects on His Practice" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1986), p. 25.
14. Antoinette A. Oberg and Corey A. Blades, "Sound of Silence: Reflections of a Teacher" (paper presented at the Fourth Conference of the International Study Association on Teacher Thinking, Nottingham, England, September 1988), p. 19.
15. Ibid.

16. While it is tempting to think that this work has finally brought me to a comfortable resting place, at a distance of only a few months from the last writing, I realize that I have moved already from the place where I was to another where I can yet again deepen my appreciation of that which I seek to understand. Some of the ideas in this paper also appear in Antoinette A. Oberg and Susan Underwood, "Facilitating Teacher Self-Development: Reflections on Experience" (paper presented at the Invitational Conference on Teacher Development: Policies, Practices, and Research, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, February 1989).