The Bigger Picture: Supervision as an Educational Framework for All Fields

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Until we assume authorship of ... narrative events our experience tends to be of them happening to us, rather than by our intending them. (Parry, 1997, p. 122)

Abstract

Supervision is a key aspect of learning/teaching; the authors discuss educational perspectives and the place of supervision in training and continuing professional development. The nature of supervision as a significant experiential learning process for both parties is explored and diagrammed. Some differing approaches are considered as part of a metaperspective that includes the various functions of supervision. A cocreative viewpoint and methodology are presented together with several new models that conceptualize the process and practice of supervision as an example of mutual experiential learning. As well as providing models for supervision in the educational and organizational fields, the authors argue that all supervision is primarily educational.

Supervision is part of the educational and learning process, perhaps the most important part in the development of a trainee or the continuing professional development of a practitioner. It can be seen as a key to the most “real” part of learning, where growth happens through reflection on the trainee’s individual, lived experience. Supervision of the application of transactional analysis is an important component of trainees’ learning process, not only through formal requirements for becoming certified transactional analysts in their particular field, but ongoing, as part of professional development and ethical practice. If we are committed practitioners with integrity, then learning is a lifelong process, and we learn all the time from our experiences.

Our aim in this article is to offer a specifically educational perspective on supervision, relating it to transactional analysis and other writings, and to offer a philosophy and method for conceptualizing the supervision process.

The Nature of Learning

One definition of learning that we use is taken from Tough (1971), who studied adult learning in several different cultures and concluded that only 3% of intentional learning is within a formal setting. He differentiated between intentional learning—that is, learning we have planned to do—and incidental or unplanned learning that happens through hindsight on our experiences. The latter is sometimes referred to as a “windfall.” Learning, he concluded, is about change in one or more of the following domains:

- Skills—our performance of behaviors
- Knowledge—our understanding, involving both know-how and know-why
- Attitudes—our values, beliefs, and mindset (frame of reference)

The Functions of Supervision

The classic functions of supervision are (1) management, (2) support, and (3) education or development (Kadushin, 1985). These correspond to the normative, restorative, and formative functions suggested by Proctor (as cited in Tudor, 2002, p. 46). In transactional analysis training, the management function comprises the contractual responsibilities toward clients, in whatever field, and compliance with codes of ethics and practice. The support function enables trainees to reflect on and manage their own feelings and responses to their work in an empathic context. The education function promotes supervisees in taking on new challenges, creating their own identity as practitioners and moving forward.
These three functions need to be kept in balance for supervision to be ethical and effective. Figure 1 indicates the consequences of too much emphasis on any of the three aspects. If there is too much importance given to rules and standards or a sense that there is only one right way, trainees will feel impotent or restricted and fail to thrive. Too much stress on supportive supervision can lead to a lack of growth, while too much weight given to development, especially in terms of “milestones,” can be stressful if trainees do not feel able to grow at their own pace.

Support is currently an acceptable function; however, judgment is often reacted to with discomfort. Yet we are all continuously engaged in judgments about what to do or say (or not) based on our perceptions, which are, in turn, informed by our personal unique histories, including our scripts. Berne (1977c) usefully described it as follows (note that in this original pre-transactional-analysis article his ideas about what we now think of as an integrating Adult ego state can be spotted—and there is a strong hint of constructivism):

By judgment is meant an image of reality which affects behavior and feelings towards reality. An image is formed by integrating sensory and other impressions with each other and with inner tensions based on present needs and past experiences. By reality is meant the potentialities for interaction of all the energy systems in the universe; this implies the past. (p. 72)

To avoid the parental and pejorative associations of “judgment,” we use the term “critique” (as shown in Figure 2). By this we mean looking at all aspects of the task or issue in hand—taking a “360-degree view.” The specific supervisor roles, and the processes then engaged in, can thus be described on a continuum, which is depicted in Figure 2.

This continuum offers a developmental picture of ongoing supervision, moving from a more management focus (intervene, assess) at the lower end to a more supportive focus (facilitate, cowork) at the other.
We can consider various approaches to supervision described in the transactional analysis literature from the point of view of different philosophies of education (Napper & Newton, 2000, pp. 10.16-10.18; Newton, 2003) and of the functions of supervision just outlined. These philosophies are liberal, dogmatic, progressive, technological, humanistic, and radical; of these, the most relevant to supervision are the latter three.

The behavioral or technological perspective (Newton, 2003, pp. 327-328) emphasizes competence and the criteria toward which trainees are working (see, for instance, Zaleman & Cornell, 1983). What criteria do we maintain and what evidence demonstrates that the supervisee is achieving them? This approach tends toward the management or normative function.

“Competence” is a catchall term that includes a mixture of skills, knowledge, and attitude. Increasingly common in all areas of education in Britain during the 1990s, competence-based criteria permeated many areas of employment as a means of providing a checklist of minimum standards of proficiency. More recently, it has received criticism as being reductionist and mechanistic. However, this is not the place to debate the validity of such a powerful tool. Competence is a key part of our transactional analysis examination process in providing a set of descriptors for assessing readiness to practice at all levels of practice, including for trainers and supervisors.

The humanistic perspective emphasizes the personal needs of supervisees and their individual growth (Erskine, 1982; Evans, 1998; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). What support is needed and what kind of practitioner is this person? This approach tends toward the support or restorative function, nurturing supervisees as they move through stages of growth. These stages are variously named by authors, and two related examples are given here.

Learning has been memorably described (Howell as cited in Napper & Newton, 2000, p. 11.16) as a process whereby we move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence when, through an incident, we realize that we are not competent in some way. If we then decide to learn more, we may go through a process of becoming consciously competent and be very self-conscious in our practice in the initial stages of development, prior to becoming unconsciously competent (note the terms “conscious” and “unconscious” seem to be used in an everyday sense here). Clarkson (1994) described what seem to be archetypes for these stages: the fool, the apprentice, the master, and finally, the mechanic. She regarded unconscious competence as dangerously similar to complacency, and she added an extra layer, which she described as accomplishment, as when we become a mentor. This role is similar to that of the supervisor, usefully described as someone who is perceived as stronger and wiser.

The radical perspective (Newton, 2003, pp. 328-329) emphasizes mutual learning, autonomy, and empowerment (Allen & Allen, 1997; Clarkson, 1991; Cox, 1998; Summers & Tudor, 2000). What is the key to transformation for this person? This approach tends toward the education/development or formative function (which might better be called the transformative function). We are always engaged in unconscious negotiation. The radical model involves making this process overt as far as possible. An effective supervisor will create a climate of safety and permission in which this may occur.

Most recent Transactional Analysis Journal (TAJ) articles on supervision (Tudor, 2002) reflect the growing interest in cocreative transactional analysis. This echoes the general interest in social constructionist approaches—which, of the three educational philosophies mentioned earlier, are most closely associated with the radical. It is with this perspective in mind that we discuss the learning process in supervision from here on.

We see supervision as a cocreative process that emphasizes mutual development. In this process, both the supervisor and the supervisee are learning; together they are creating new knowledge and information through discourse and through their relationship. The supervision discourse is a descriptive process. All our experience is mutually constructed. The supervision process provides a forum in which we can
jointly explore and cocreate a new description of events. Clarkson (1991) suggested this transformational process in her article “Further through the Looking Glass.”

The skill of the supervisor lies in keeping in mind the importance of management and support needs while being engaged and totally present in the mutual learning process that is happening in the reflective space. Cox (1998) expressed this well when she asked herself, “How come I’m the one that’s getting paid?” as she engaged with a skillful supervisee.

Cocreating Learning in the Supervision Process

The learning cycle developed by Kolb (1984; see also Newton, 2006, pp. 188-189) describes well a process that can be usefully employed within supervision to create experiential learning. Supervisees bring their experiences to the supervision space, which provides an opportunity to reflect on them. Kolb described reflective observation as an internal process by the person who was engaged in the experience. As supervisors we employ verbs to encourage this task, such as ponder, wonder, and associate.

Abstract conceptualization, or analysis, is the application of theory to the reflections on experience; this can be provided by theories (such as transactional analysis concepts) or models already held or newly created by the individual concerned. However, Kolb (1984) suggested caution by describing someone apprehending concrete experience and then comprehending it without the internal process of reflection as operating in a prehensile way, that is, grasping at learning (p. 58). He implied that genuinely experiential learning is deep learning that involves transforming the experience through internalizing (reflection) and externalizing though “active experimentation” (p. 59) (action planning).

We (Newton & Napper, 2004) have described this use of the learning cycle in supervision as follows:

Each “piece” brought to supervision provides an example of an experience. This may also be described as the supervision problem. The supervision session provides a forum in which the reflective process can take place. This may be extensive and include information-giving, question-posing, comparisons with other situations, exploration of personal process and emotional experience. Out of this “thick description” new meaning begins to emerge. There will be opportunities for applying established principles and concepts and for exploring new ones. This is the point at which practice and theory come together; knowledge as theory informs the experience and the experience offers an opportunity for adjusting theory. From this discussion the supervisee then can devise fresh plans for action in the future; these will feed into consequent experiences with the client and also similar experiences with other clients. (p. 6)

It is in this process—through the retelling of what happened, the experiencing of this second-hand by the supervisor, and the mutual exploration of these layers of experience each now has—that a new description of events is cocreated. As Cox (1998) suggested, this may be a surprising experience for both.

This cocreative process is mutually constructed, and, as Summers and Tudor (2000) point out, emphasizes the transactional and relational and is “elaboration or construction based on hypothesised cognitive and affective operations. That is, there are many consensual realities and we organise ourselves and our experiences through the stories or narratives we tell about ‘reality’” (p. 23).

Linking Learning and Cocreation with Transactional Analysis

Drawing on the articles of Summers and Tudor (2000) and Allen and Allen (1997), we suggest the following extensions to describing cocreativity in a way that has parallels with the learning cycle, linking this with transactional analysis theory. These “layers,” added to the learning cycle, are diagrammed in Figure 3.

- **Meaning** involves reflection through recall of the inner experiences before, during, and after the active concrete experiences. This is often the early stage of bringing a piece to supervision and involves the structural Adult ego state listening in on...
the Child ego state’s personal history and possible rubber-banding to the original experience brought to the supervision. A may play a key part here in articulating—but having no logical evidence for—the mind-set held in relation to the experience. Reflection requires insight.

- A metaphor is then created via making sense of the experience plus reflection through discourse, which creates a new system. Transactional analysis provides an excellent interlocking range of concepts for working through this process in such a way as to create a principled understanding of the external world and also the internal relationship and mind-set regarding this. However, as transactional analysis in itself is a set of metaphors for describing the world, this process engages the Adult ego state in the present to draw out logically a structured understanding of presenting patterns. This involves hindsight.

- As a result, the supervisee, in conjunction with the supervisor, creates a map, the value of which is to either find out how you got where you are now or how to get where you want to be instead. A tremendous value of transactional analysis is to provide useful diagrams that are essentially maps. In this way the Adult is drawing on Parental introjects from the transactional analysis culture, perhaps from transactional analysis trainers, and possibly from Berne himself. Thus, foresight is co-constructed.

- This leads to the next experience of a meeting by the supervisee of his or her client. If fully engaged, then all ego states are present, with the Adult in executive and real self. As supervisees become more competent, their capacity for midsight in the present moment of the meeting is enhanced.

Figure 3 collates these perspectives on supervision to create a process framework.
Applying the antithesis of the discounting levels to this model, we can say that when fully engaged in the experience with a client, the supervisee fully accounts for his or her own existence and that of others and the situation. When reflecting, supervisees are then pondering the significance of the aspects of the experience that they have selected and are able to separate what belongs to their own script and history from what might belong to the situation or the other(s) involved. Through analysis they are able to problem solve and hence to determine their personal capacity to bring their learning into the next experience with their client.

Inevitably, such cocreated learning between supervisee and supervisor is in the present “weness” of the supervision—and after the actual original incident. From the discussion in supervision reflecting on the experience of the incident emerges intentions, which may have been out of awareness at the time. The discourse reveals interpretations that allow for the invention of options that lead to new experiences (incidents). The supervision dialogue usually progresses through these four aspects, although not necessarily in a strictly linear way.

Prior to the innovation of transactional analysis, Berne (1977a) studied intuition and eloquently described the difference between being intuitive and being unconsciously competent. In the former, it is not possible to verbalize the “hunch,” whereas a specialist or expert will make a judgment or act without conscious logical thought; with hindsight, this can be analyzed. He wrote that such behaviors “[are] probably functions of preconscious systems, since they can be brought into conscious analysis relatively easily” (Berne, 1977b, p. 3). Nowadays, we might describe this process in transactional analysis terms as the Little Professor in conjunction with the structural Adult ego state.

We might also now describe this use of unconscious competence as being one of the cornerstones in transactional analysis supervision in that the space that is created between supervisor and supervisee is a space for using hindsight, where the supervisor can verbalize the evidence for his or her insights regarding the recounted, tape-recorded, or videotaped application of transactional analysis by the supervisee and thereby model for and encourage the supervisee to do likewise. As a result of this safe reflective opportunity, foresight is gradually developed by the supervisee. However, supervision can be more than this.

Both Clarkson (1992) and Hawkins and Shohet (2000) focused on the parallel process between the client and practitioner, which may be replayed between the supervisee and the supervisor. If the supervisor is functioning in a way that holds and contains the space so that parallel process can unfold, and he or she is able to keep his or her internal Adult fully present and integrating, then the supervisory space becomes the stage on which to act out the transferences and countertransferences engendered in the work. If there is a clear contract to allow this to happen, then this way of “re-creating” can lead to rehearsing for future meetings between practitioner and client. Supervision therefore requires a stepping back within the supervision space to observe and comment on the parallel process. At this point, the cycle of reflection and analysis is applied to the supervision process itself; this is what is often referred to as a metaperspective. This may result in an action plan for a different focus in the supervision next time, or a different supervisory function or set of functions, or for a particular emphasis on an aspect of the learning cycle.

Figure 4 offers, in a simplified diagram, a visual way of describing this process. It combines the learning spiral (Newton, 2006, p. 189) and a continuum based on the one shown in Figure 2. The learning cycle, and its development into a continuing spiral, provides a way of imaging this learning process as an ongoing, continual reflexive activity as a supervisee moves along in her or his development. Together, supervisee and supervisor can negotiate what is the most useful approach from the supervisor—to support or critique or some balance between the two—so as to enable flexibility and movement in the process rather than a fixed approach.

Deciding the Focus of Supervision

We can now put together the continuum
(Figure 2) describing the roles and processes enacted by the supervisor with another continuum of how the supervisor relates to the supervisee at different points in time in the supervision. On this continuum they can together locate the focus of a specific piece of work either on the person of the supervisee or on the task(s) the supervisee will undertake. This gives rise to different outcomes, all of which have their validity with regard to the changes in competence of the supervisee over time toward becoming a Certified Transactional Analyst or a Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst.

By creating this grid we show four different areas of focus:

- Providing support facilitates the individual supervisee’s personal growth.
- Support for how the supervisee can do the required tasks leads to learning and development of skills.
- Critiquing with the supervisee brings out issues of ethics and power.
- Critique of the supervisee’s task involves evaluation.

Figure 5 distinguishes growth from development; both involve learning, but with different emphases. Growth here is more personal and relates to the link between the supervisee’s inner world (attitudes, values, mind-set) and personal stance (both scripty and autonomous) and development linking to professional capacities (skills and underpinning knowledge) in carrying out the tasks required in work with clients.

In addition, the professional supervisor needs to evaluate the performance of the supervisee; indeed, our transactional analysis exam procedures provide competences that act as standards for such evaluation. Evaluation involves the supervisor and supervisee together critiquing the practitioner’s competence in carrying out specific tasks as counselor, psychotherapist, educator, or organizational consultant. The context for this is ethical practice, applied to the supervisor as much as to the supervisee and client. This is perhaps best summarized by McGrath (1994) as involving doing no harm (non-maleficence) and promoting good (beneficence), being fair (justice) and keeping promises (fidelity), and encouraging self-determination (autonomy) and avoiding self-seeking situations (universality).
Conclusions and Recommendations

The overall purpose of supervision could be regarded as enhancing the potency of both supervisee and supervisor, that is, maximizing their potential. A contract providing sufficient protection and permission is necessary to create the environment in which this can flourish. As a result, both parties will be able to develop their capacity for internal supervision—their third eye, or ear.

Such dialogue means integrating all structural ego states of both supervisor and supervisee to attend to the depth and range of meanings they generate, to create metaphors that extend their individual learning edges, and to generate options for mapping what comes next. This requires a process of reflecting on experience, thinking aloud, and creating action plans. One way to do this is to keep a learning journal, which in itself becomes an action research tool. For the supervisee, this will relate primarily to work with clients and to thoughts generated in supervision; for the supervisor this is likely to relate to the supervision process itself.

Hawkins and Shohet (2000) have suggested that the best supervision flourishes when there
is a culture of learning and development and “good practice is well-balanced in all parts of the learning cycle” (p. 175). Within transactional analysis we have a solid culture of learning. Putting our framework on both the supervisor and the supervisor as colleague through dialogue (cocreating meaning) allows us to shift from a philosophy that emphasizes, on the one hand, technological values through competence-based assessment via a humanistic philosophy of supervision in which the supervisor provides a Parent steer in order to together solve problems to, on the other, a more radical philosophy of cocreation whereby through their joint responsibility for increasing awareness there is a transformation of experience into learning.

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