

Reflections of a New Teacher - Peer Supervision in Teacher Development

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Peer supervision developed as a structured system for observing and conferring with teachers can be an important and useful tool for new teachers' professional development. This paper, written in the form of a journal, uses narrative to trace a novice teacher's personal and professional growth as she reflects on her experience of being observed and supervised by more experienced peers. The integration of "context-based", "people-based" and "process-based" factors in her experience serves to illustrate some of the basic principles of structured and successful peer supervision.

一名新教師的反思----同儕視導與教師發展

以同儕有系統地觀察教學及進行視導，是在教師專業發展上一種重要及有用的工具。本文採用敘事手法，以日記附加評語的方式，藉著一名新教師的反思，以具體情況、人物及過程為基礎，帶出師資發展中同儕視導的一些基本原則。

Note:

This paper differs from other academic articles in this volume in both style and format. First, it uses a narrative approach. Narrative inquiry is founded on the belief that human experience is basically storied experience. In narrative inquiry, researchers come to grips with the storied quality of human experience and record stories of educational experience. These stories directly represent human experience and are educationally meaningful for participants and readers.

The narrative is written in the first person, in keeping with other methods such as diary and journal writing in teacher development. This acknowledges that the practitioner utilizes his/her personal experience in making decisions. He/she draws on experience both in rational planning and in intuitive actions, resulting in what Connelly (1985) refers to as 'personal practical knowledge'. It recognizes that knowledge is shaped and reshaped during experience and leads to a personal reconstruction of meaning. Reading other people's stories is also an important form of experience.

The presentation is such that narration on the left side of the page is complemented by comments and questions on the right. The narration on the left not only reflects personal attitudes and beliefs, but also incorporates some objective explanations and academic references. The right 'Comments' column highlights relevant points and raises questions at suitable points of the narrative to help readers think about issues. 'Reflection' as an increasingly important theme in teacher development is illustrated in this integration of content, style and format as a new teacher traces her private journey of personal and professional development.

Introduction to Peer Supervision

I am a new English teacher at XXX School, having just completed some brief pre-service teacher training. I slept very badly last night because I was very nervous about being observed in class today. The panel chairperson of the school will observe my classes later on for the first time.

The principal, Mr. T. Chan, is a progressive and open-minded educational administrator. He was educated abroad and has introduced the concept of "peer supervision" in the school to help new teachers develop professionally. The idea is to make use of peers as supervisors and important resources that can offer assistance, guidance and insight to fellow teachers (Showers, 1985), a scheme which I find very useful as a novice teacher. Many of my friends who are new teachers in Hong Kong, once they start teaching, are thrown at the deep end with little professional support. Even when there is support, it tends to be informal and haphazard.

The principal introduced peer supervision "as a *structured* system for observing and conferring with teachers to help them improve instructional practices and teach more effectively" (Cogan, 1973; Acheson & Gall, 1981). Instead of the occasional observation of a teacher in action, the principal suggested that peer supervision should take on a "clinical" approach in which 1) the whole process is systematic, structured and organized; 2) there is a planned and deliberate focus on problem-solving, data-collecting and pattern-detecting, providing opportunities for both the observer and the observed to gain awareness of their professional practice (Glatthorn, 1984); 3) there is a 'diagnostic' as well as a 'nurturing' aspect on the part of the supervisor, 4) the supervision is on-going and cyclical in nature.

In fact, the kind of supervision proposed is related more to 'coaching' than to 'inspection' (Goldsberry 1984), i.e. it is more concerned with peer assistance than with formal assessment. This form of co-operative professional support taking place in a collaborative and collegial working environment can be a very useful means to reducing the discrepancy between actual teaching behaviour and ideal teaching behaviour, benefitting both the observer and the observee. To have the opportunity to observe as well as be observed by other teachers, and discuss with them what good professional practices are, will help me apply theory to practice. My pre-service teaching training only involved being observed in class twice throughout the entire programme, which was by no means adequate. Research has consistently shown that teachers depend informally more on their peers rather than principals or trainers for sustained support and instructional help in school.

The Context

Mrs. Yeung, the English panel chairperson of the school, is a very experienced teacher, highly responsible, committed to her job, popular

Comments

- teachers, even experienced ones, worry about being observed - a common phenomenon. Why is that? What exactly are they worried about? What can be done to minimize worry?

- to be observed by teacher trainers is common, but to have peers as supervisors to help teachers grow is as yet not too common in HK - a feature worth thinking about and a possible direction for principals and teachers as we explore different avenues for teacher development

- lack of systematic support for new teachers
- in what way can the novice benefit from the professional expertise of the experienced teacher? How can the school help in this?

- the importance of sharing - not just skills, but also ideas, beliefs, experiences etc. to maximise benefits of supervision

- why depend on peers more? Are they just more easily available, with fewer status and power considerations?

- panel chairperson is usually in a position of authority; if also acts as a supervisor - what

among staff and in many respects my mentor. I get along well with her. The principal has designated her as my 'supervisor' in school who will observe my classes and help me improve my teaching.

Ever since I joined the school, Mrs. Yeung has made it clear that she would only observe my classes when I felt I was ready. I was glad that she respected my feelings and let me decide when to invite her for observation. The fact that right from the start, she made it plain that supervision would be conducted in a non-threatening atmosphere was very reassuring. For me, observation and supervision have been associated too much with evaluation, and though formal evaluation does have its place in teacher development, it can be intimidating to an inexperienced teacher. New teachers are often seen in a "defective" light (Eraut, 1987), lacking awareness and perception of how change can be brought about, of how improvements can be made, of not willing or able to take up responsibility for change. Such a view inevitably places great strain on the relationship between the supervisor and the novice teacher.

I am glad that no such strain exists between Mrs. Yeung and me. She explained to me that the supervisor's task is threefold: 'diagnostic' to find out the teacher's level of professionalism and identify areas for improvement, 'tactical' in adopting a directive, collaborative or non-directive approach to solve problems, and 'strategic' to help accelerate the teacher's level of abstraction and commitment (Blumberg & Stevan Jonas, 1987). Ideally, she said, the supervisor should help the new teacher become a reflective, self-directed, autonomous individual with the ultimate goal of making the novice less and less reliant on the supervisor and finally taking charge of his/her own improvement.

The Lesson to be Observed

Today, I shall try out a new unit that May and Lisa, two of my colleagues, had adapted from the textbook. Mrs. Yeung had been invited to observe the class.

May, Lisa and I had planned a unit of speaking activities in English for a Primary 4 class. The students would use English to buy and sell items of their choice. The items ranged from clothing and toys to food and stationery, and would be brought into the classroom by students and teacher. Paper money and paper coins would be used in transactions which would involve the language of numbers, of buying and selling, and certain English vocabulary items. Grammatical structures such as question patterns beginning with "which" would be practised. Students would have the freedom to choose what they wanted to buy and sell and would be involved in various role-play activities. "Comprehensible output" in English by students would be examined.

Because May and Lisa were more experienced teachers than I was and had attended in-service retraining courses, they were much better at gauging students' second language competence and anticipating their reactions. They knew how well the students could cope with the

implications? Experienced teachers often assume a sense of authority and superiority. Also, Chinese society reveres authority - can equality among peers be achieved in school? If so, how?

- some teachers/trainers prefer knowing in advance when observation will take place, but others prefer not knowing. What are the merits and demerits of the different approaches?

- importance of a non-threatening atmosphere for professional growth - what advantages/disadvantages for the observee?

- what should be the relationship between "observation", "supervision" and "evaluation"? How are they different? What is the difference in nature and emphases between peer assistance and formal evaluation?

- what autonomy and professional expertise does the observer and the observee have? What initiative lies with each of them?

- what should be the relationship between the supervisor and the teacher being supervised - issues of power, status and interaction relationships affect peer assistance and supervision programmes.

- value of collaborating with colleagues on curriculum and materials development; much potential for peer assistance exists

- what traditional peer interaction patterns were in effect among the teachers in the school - how do they affect teacher

complexity of certain vocabulary or grammatical structures, something which I was unsure of. We worked together as a team and there was a genuine spirit of co-operation and collaboration as we refined our concepts regarding the latest trends and developments in language teaching and the needs of our students. I soon realized that a lot of modifications had to be made to our original lesson plan in order to make it workable in the classroom.

To work in a school in which staff are willing to try out new ideas and share experiences with one another means a lot to me. Such a school climate has much to do with the attitude of the principal, who is dedicated to the improvement of professional practice and encourages mutual support. Recognizing that our work load is heavy, he makes sure that administrative staff give us a lot of support, allowing us time to participate in peer assistance programs. Staff are given freedom as well as opportunity to start co-operative projects of our own. He believes that developing peer assistance relationships should not be seen as "time added" to what we are already doing, but rather "time that added to the quality of what we are doing" (Goldsberry, 1986).

Pre-observation

I had a *pre-observation conference* with Mrs. Yeung last week and explained to her the purpose and content of the lesson I would teach today. I told her how I thought the lesson should best proceed, what resources I would be bringing into the classroom, what materials I would be using, how I would adapt the content to suit the level of the class etc. She was very attentive and gave me a number of constructive suggestions as we discussed appropriate teaching styles, methods and the role the supervisor or observer would play.

I felt less nervous after talking to her, secure in the knowledge that she would at least understand my reasons for doing things in a particular way. For example, I explained to her that even though group work was important in encouraging peer interaction among students, I would nevertheless be limiting its use in this instance. Although she was not in full agreement with me, she respected my professional judgment. It was apparent that we did not always agree on everything, but I remember Kilbourn's (1988) point about the importance of "giving reasons for things", and so I explained my reasons for doing things as much as possible. She also gave me her reasons for disagreeing. We would discuss and often compromise. She would generally respect my decision on how to conduct the lesson in a way I felt comfortable and appropriate to my teaching style. I would also reflect on some of her constructive suggestions and adapt accordingly. The pre-observation conference clarified to both of us what was intended and why certain things were important, and showed me how professional development can be a two-way process in which the supervisor who takes the initial lead also benefits (Glickman & Gordon, 1987).

Mrs. Yeung had asked whether I would like to be videotaped. As I felt a little uncomfortable with this first observation, I suggested that

development?

- politics and personnel differences often found in school. What is necessary to give staff freedom and encouragement to take up development for themselves, with assistance from school administration?

- modification and compromise necessary in collaborative effort

- importance of teachers defining and shaping their own peer assistance programmes - should ideally be voluntary i.e. those who participate truly want to do so; programmes must receive administrative support, and should be allowed to evolve slowly and naturally

- what kind of conditions in the school environment and school culture would allow for peer assistance programmes and peer clinical supervision to take place?

- what kind of leadership is necessary for teachers to develop? What should be the attitude of the principal and other colleagues towards teacher development? Administrative support is crucial for successful peer assistance programmes - how can administration contribute to peer assistance and peer clinical supervision?

- perception of staff regarding difference between "time added" and "time added to quality of work" is often different - how to change the perception of teachers who do not support development?

- importance of pre-observation conference; need for clearly defined goals and observation that is structured

- how to establish trust and rapport between supervisor and observee?

- what kind of attitude should the supervisor and the supervisee have? Respect for professional judgment necessary. What makes people feel comfortable about the way they do things?

- new teacher needs to develop confidence in doing things - what teacher beliefs, what decisions are relevant?

videotaping could be done later. I was relieved that she agreed. I like her supervision style because, in respecting my autonomy in decision-making, she made me feel that I had some part to play in the supervision process.

We also discussed, defined and operationalised what would be observed. e.g. I suggested examining "student talk" in a second language speaking activity to monitor carefully how much peer interaction took place, how much English each student actually used and what kind of English was actually spoken. We worked out appropriate observation strategies for fulfilling this objective, and a chart with headings and categories was developed for the observation, data-collection and pattern detection. This joint decision-making regarding what to observe helped clarify to both of us what our purposes, intentions and desired outcomes were.

Having some control over the purpose, content and procedure of observation meant a lot to me. I remember being observed at other times and feeling quite powerless, feeling that I was merely an object to be judged and not a person capable of developing and doing better. Mrs. Yeung's attitude was one of frankness and open-mindedness. Despite her years of experience and seniority, she did not assume an air of superiority; I felt I could talk to her on an equal footing. She was genuinely concerned about my personal and professional growth, about seeking ways to improve my teaching. She cared how comfortable I was handling a lesson and how much student learning took place. Because her attitude to supervision was more *developmental* than *judgmental*, I felt I could trust, discuss and negotiate matters with her (Glickman & Gordon, 1987). Not only is she convinced that teachers are capable of growth, she believes that they themselves have the power and control to do so, and can always move to higher levels of abstraction and commitment. Through the supervision process, we became more than just working colleagues; we grew to be trusting friends.

Observation

During the lesson, most things went according to plan, but certain things did not. For example, though students were actively engaged in all the tasks we planned, the excitement generated was sometimes so overwhelming that the 'English language' element was lost. Also, there were clearly occasions when the discipline could have been tighter for certain activities to proceed more smoothly.

My greatest achievement was in motivating the entire class to speak up, not be afraid of making mistakes and participate enthusiastically in the activities. Clearly the students liked the materials we designed. Even Jenny, the quietest girl in class became so involved in the activities that she forgot her shyness. The students were in fact so intensely involved in buying their favourite items and selling undesirable ones that they communicated naturally and easily in English with their peers. The classroom buzzed with excitement as they acted out their roles with enthusiasm and conviction. Our curriculum

- attitude towards videotaping - many do not like it. Should choice be given? In what way is videotaping helpful?

- what kind of supervision style best suits you? How are various styles different? What role does the observer and observee play in the process?

- importance of joint decision-making regarding what to observe, what is intended; what things are important etc.

- relevance of well-developed observation checklists for systematic and structured observation

- how to deal with the issue of 'control' for the personal and professional development of the individual?

- personality of supervisor - takes active interest in the person. Relationship between supervisor and trainee - basis of co-operation

- not all things always go as planned. Why? Is this a fault of inadequate planning? What conditions or factors need to be taken into account?

- what was good about the lesson? What are the teacher's strengths and weaknesses? What can be improved?

- what brings about student interaction?

objectives were attained -- the lesson went well and students did learn and practise grammatical structures, paying attention to 'meaning' as well as 'form' in a communicative context.

In the midst of the excitement I sometimes forgot the presence of Mrs. Yeung at the back of the room. Sometimes she seemed to be busy making notes, or was she completing the checklist we had worked out together? A lot of "student talk" and peer interaction was evident, an area that Mrs. Yeung and I agreed to examine closely, and I was happy to see the rewards of my efforts. Much of the students' interaction centred around agreement on the price of items, using the language of questioning and expressing preference. Not only was there a lot of talk among the various 'buyers', there was plenty of negotiation with the 'sellers'. It was, I felt, a successful lesson satisfying to both teacher and students.

Post-observation

It was the *post-observation conference* with Mrs. Yeung that was most rewarding. In my long session with her, she helped me look at the match as well as the mismatch between my impression of what happened in class with hers, carefully going through each category in the observation checklist we developed together. For example, in examining how to maintain a balance between controlling discipline and encouraging students to speak as much English as possible, it was interesting to note our different responses. I was nervous about the students getting out of control, but she taught me how control could be achieved through students knowing exactly what to do at a particular stage of the activity, what language items to use, and knowing what follows. Her class management techniques suggested alternatives which I had not thought of before.

We also shared different perspectives on the quantity and quality of "student talk" generated by the class as a whole and by individual students in particular. A 'clinical' approach was adopted whereby we carefully gathered data and detected patterns. I was soon made aware of my own inconsistencies in behaviour, which showed how I sometimes encouraged students to speak but other times did not. I soon realized how crucial my response was in generating English speech and extended English discourse from them. Without this scrutiny, I probably would have relied merely on intuition and speculation rather than an analytical and scientific approach to an understanding of my own teaching.

When Mrs. Yeung asked me how accurate the language produced by the students was, I must admit that in my concern to motivate them to speak, I did not pay sufficient attention to the accuracy of their language. Perhaps I thought making mistakes was not as important as speaking up. But then Mrs. Yeung inquired, why did I, when correcting the students' language, only do so sometimes and not at other times? Why did I correct only some students and not others? How aware was I regarding the 'quality' of the 'student talk'? These and other questions raised in our discussion enabled me to become aware of things I had not noticed before, and to reflect on my teaching as I had never done before. I remember having fleeting thoughts and instinctive reactions

- did the teacher achieve her lesson objective? How did the students react to the lesson?

- teacher needs to be involved in the lesson. Preferable if the personality and role of observer and supervisor not seen as a threat

- identify areas in the classroom worth closer scrutiny

- post observation conference - time-consuming but of utmost importance. Shared views - did the view of the observer's progress of the lesson match that of the observee's? What are the differences, if any, and why do they exist?

- how should one handle situations like discipline, especially when it interferes with progress of the lesson? What differences in approach are there?

- point out inconsistencies in behaviour; relevance of alternatives

- relevance of a clinical approach and the need for examining things in detail. What are some of the things that make the supervision 'clinical'?

- communicative language teaching - what are the implications of fluency vs accuracy?

about some of the issues as I was teaching, but it was Mrs. Yeung who helped bring out what I did to a conscious level, enabling me to strive towards the kind of "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" that Schon (1983, 1987) advocates in professional practice. I look forward to my next observation in two weeks, a regular feature with Mrs. Yeung now, which I know will be another illuminating experience.

- improved awareness and consciousness-raising through observation and supervision

- how are lived experiences different from the kind of supervision found in college's pre-service training program?

Factors Affecting Peer Supervision

Reflecting on my observation and supervision experience, conditions necessary for new teachers' personal and professional growth became clearer to me. Peer assistance has indeed made me a better teacher as I now become more conscious of what I do, of what others do, of alternatives and possibilities - *the effect is cumulative*. Indeed, the more one observes and is observed by others, the more conscious one becomes of one's decisions and actions, the better one gets at instructional practice and the more effectively one teaches. Peer supervision motivated me to examine my teaching in depth and detail. The benefits of communication, rehearsal, and awareness in a congenial environment helped alleviate my isolation as a new teacher, developed my respect and affection for my colleagues, and enhanced my self-esteem. One of the greatest benefits of the exercise has been the initiating of dialogue with other professionals about teaching and education. Even the content of my conversations with peers has changed.

In particular, I am aware of the absolute need for at least three factors to co-exist in order that optimum contribution to teacher development can be made. While my observations may seem to be generalizations based on limited experience, my journey as a new teacher plus extensive reading has convinced me that the following conditions when compatible would be very favourable to teacher development.

1. Environmental/School-Based Factors

The possibilities and limits of the environmental context is a crucial factor in assisting or hindering development (McFaul & Cooper, 1984). I am fortunate to be in a school that has a strong tradition of professional support - those in authority are genuinely concerned with teacher development, the sharing of ideas and resources is encouraged, and assistance and guidance from peers is seen as a valuable commodity. This results in a collegial and collaborative atmosphere among staff who collectively view supervision as a growth process, with teachers being given the opportunity, time and space to do so. It is often the organizational set-up that determines how favourable or otherwise school and staff development is (Little, 1981).

Four undesirable contextual patterns are often found: 1. isolation and fragmentation, 2. stratification, 3. standardization and 4. reactionism. They can be reflected in teachers, procedures, systems, and administration (McFaul & Cooper, 1984). If inappropriately manifested, such elements can easily lead to organizational inertia which leave teachers with little room for growth. The environment needs to recognize teachers as critical agents of change, and entrust them with a degree of power and control over their own development. Goldsberry (1986) points to the following favourable conditions for development - the importance of organizational consistency, readiness and introspection. These, present in the environment, would hold tremendous possibilities for teacher development, especially if meaningful organizational development is in harmony with other aspects such as curriculum development, staff development and teacher evaluation (Acheson & Gall, 1980).

2. Leadership and People-Based Factors

Key players in the environment play a crucial role. My relationship with my supervisor is one of sharing and trust, collaboration and collegiality, as is also the relationship I have with the principal, and other colleagues like May and Lisa, who have as our aim what is best for our students. Although my principal and supervisor are far superior to me in

rank and experience, they are largely non-judgmental in style, particularly where supervision is concerned. More importantly, Mrs. Yeung is willing to give me a sense of power and control over the process of supervision and of my own development. Instead of viewing teachers as a homogenous group with shared common characteristics, she recognizes the wide diversity of teachers, the variation of needs, ability, experience and levels of professionalism, and focuses on the teacher as a distinct individual identity responsible for his/her own development (Glickman & Gordon, 1987). Her attitude and accommodating personal qualities clearly make a difference; her breadth of vision and depth of insight allow for mutual respect and joint problem-solving. In her I see a person who promotes equality while providing strong guidance. By being treated fairly as a colleague, I felt free to call upon her superior experience in ways which I never would have done otherwise.

My principal and supervisor help me see growth as more than just an improvement in methods and techniques, more than a mere focus on aspects of classroom management or the technical following of mechanics, but as something involving whole personal and professional growth as a teacher and as an individual (Gaies & Bowers, 1990). They help me see my peers as resources with great wealth of experience to be shared, help me recognize our responsibility for helping one another grow and improve. They show me that things do not always turn out according to plan in the classroom, and that even though plans may fail, there is value in experimentation and adaptation. Even though I have far less experience, they recognize that I still have a part to play and a contribution to make to the school (Blumberg & Stevan Jonas, 1987).

Effective leadership is a key to development. While contextual constraints sometimes inhibit leadership potential, effective leadership can influence the educational environment in a positive way and be a powerful influence on change and effectiveness. Effective leaders influence not just the environment, but also the performance of others. The "partnership in leadership" concept advocated by Goldsberry (1984) stresses a congruent and permeating spirit of personal commitment to growth through collegiality and collaboration, under strong leadership. An all-important 'fit' should exist between the values and assumptions of the leader and those that are led for optimal peer interaction to occur and for peer supervision to be truly successful.

3. Content/Process-Based Factors

I was clear about the content of the supervision process. The supervision procedures were well-set and we were focused on what to observe, and what the desirable outcomes should be. Findings were quantified and data collected, motivating me to examine my teaching in considerable depth and detail. Each phase of the supervision process had a clarity of purpose which led me step by step to a greater awareness of what I was doing and in what direction I should develop. The entire process involved the observer and observee attempting to understand what each other valued in terms of educational goals and procedures, and embraced such characteristics as the cyclical nature of the supervision process, the need for a data-based foundation and hypothesis generation and testing. Recognizing that the amount of attention paid to the design and implementation of a 'peer clinical supervision model' is crucial in determining the success or otherwise of such a programme (Goldsberry, 1984b; Krajewski, 1984), supervisors need to be amply prepared for the task, with emphasis on process as well as product goals, i.e. stressing those aims for establishing clear communication and collaboration with teachers, as well as those for changing classroom behaviour and practices (Goldsberry, 1984).

There is little doubt in my mind that the observation and supervision experience has been a most valuable one for me. Unless all three 'school-based', 'people-based' and 'content/process-based' factors are compatible with one another, a clinical supervision or growth development model would not be complete. The three factors are like three legs of a stool; they should all be there to maintain some kind of balance. Clearly there would be different emphases or focuses on one or the other aspects in different situations. Different contexts may also mean certain areas being more important than others. But for maximum impact, all three factors will have to be present to complement one another. Many examples of failed teacher development programs occur when either one or other element(s) is missing (Krajewski, 1984).

Conclusion

One must of course acknowledge the gap that exists between some of the assumptions made of peer clinical supervision and the reality of what happens in some school settings (Sullivan, 1982, McFaul & Cooper, 1984). The fundamental factor is whether what a teacher is expected to do is something that the teacher is willing and has been

prepared to do, and whether the ideal and the real are not too far apart for bridges to be built. The challenge is for teachers to be more aware of conditions necessary and conducive to development, and to act upon processes of change that would bring about the knowledge, power and responsibility for teachers themselves to take charge of their own development. As Gaies & Bowers (1990) point out, supervision is more than just a training process, it is an educational one related to total development. Reflecting on my own experience, I believe peer clinical supervision has a place in teacher development, and if done properly, will have lasting benefits for both experienced and new teachers.

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