

The Bigger Picture: new perspectives on supervision for all

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Supervision is part of the educational and learning process, perhaps the most important part in the development of a trainee. The classic functions of supervision are management, support and education or development (Kadushin 1985); in TA training the management function comprises the contractual responsibilities towards clients, in whatever field, and compliance with codes of ethics and practice, the 'support' function enables the trainee to reflect on and manage their own feelings and responses to their work in an empathic context. These three functions need to be kept in balance for supervision to be ethical and effective.

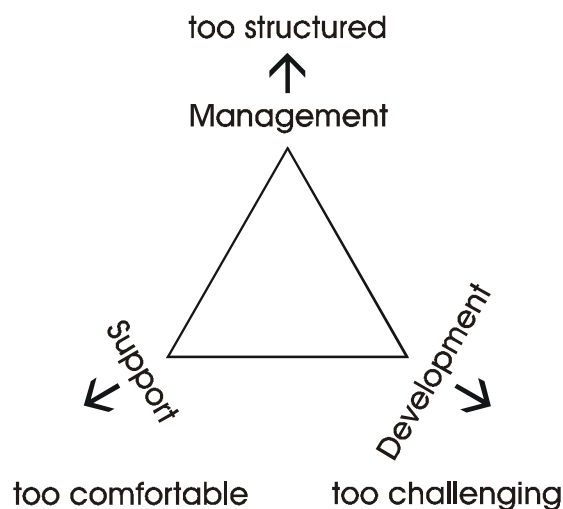


FIG 1

We use the term 'supervision' but coaching, mentoring, consultancy, facilitation can also be considered from this perspective. In each of these relationships someone is 'stronger and wiser' for a specified purpose; everyone involved will be learning.

Supervision is a key to this learning process; development happens through reflection on the trainee's individual, lived experience. It is truly experiential learning, the reflective process shown here as the 'learning cycle'.

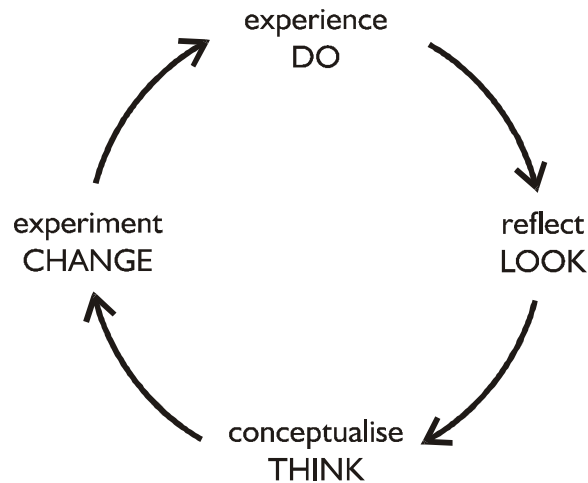


FIG 2

Although in the last few years several articles about supervision have been published in Transactional Analysis Journal and elsewhere (Tudor 2002, Evans 1998, Cox 1998) overall the subject has been much less considered than the theory and practice of TA. Since supervision plays such a large part in training this is surprising. There are some 'classic' articles – Cornell & Zalcman 1983, Clarkson 1991 etc). Tudor (2002) suggests a way of classifying these articles as presenting different *aspects* of supervision; here we will consider these from an educational perspective.

Several different philosophies of education (Newton 2003) are demonstrated in the various articles:

- The *behavioural* perspective emphasises the criteria towards which trainees are working (Zalcman and Cornell). What criteria to maintain

and what evidence demonstrates that the supervisee is achieving them?

This approach tends towards the management function.

- The developmental, or *humanistic*, perspective emphasises the personal needs of the supervisee and their individual growth (Evans, Erskine, Stollenberg & Delworth). What support is needed and what kind of practitioner is this person? This approach tends towards the support function.
- The *radical* perspective emphasises mutual learning, autonomy and empowerment (Clarkson, Summers and Tudor, Allen, Cox). What is the key to transformation for this person? This approach tends towards the development function.

We see supervision as a co-creative process of mutual development. In this process the supervisor as well as the supervisee is learning; together they are creating new knowledge and information through discourse. The supervision discourse is a descriptive process. The trainee describes a situation in which s/he feels stuck or is experiencing difficulty; the supervisor listens for clues. The description will include both facts and perceptions and will tell the supervisor about the level of skill, practice and knowledge/information of the trainee. This description is linked to previous experience, to understanding, and to levels of self-awareness and knowledge; together these comprise a 'thick description' (Browning 1991). This represents the trainee's current understanding of reality. 'We change reality by re-describing it' - this is exactly what is happening in the process of supervision.

'Description' is a concept to which TA can contribute a great deal of understanding.

Through a process of naming, describing, and explaining we make clear our world

to ourselves in our life-script. We create for ourselves the description of our context that continues to inform our experience. We have constructed this understanding and we can reconstruct it - and we do not do it alone. All our experience is mutually constructed. The supervision process provides a forum in which we can jointly explore and co-create a new description of events. This may be a surprising experience for both participants (Cox 1998). Clarkson (1991) suggests this transformational process in her article 'Further through the looking glass'.

Educationally this radical approach derives from the ideas of Paulo Freire (1972) The power relationship between teacher and students (or supervisor and trainee) is addressed. This attitude towards supervision can go a long way towards answering such issues as shame in supervision, game playing and the idea that there is only one right way.

Lets deconstruct that quote above about re-describing reality.

We implies joint responsibility for process and outcome, mutuality and co-operation are the key, the supervisor and supervisee are partners

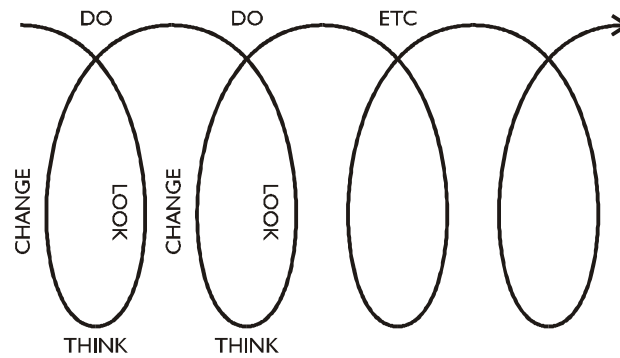
change implies learning, whether in knowledge, skill or understanding (and the contract can be about any one of these)

reality - because we construct our reality (we know this as script) supervision is about exploring and expanding this reality

by - the supervision is the means of change

re-describing - mutual re-framing, adding information and insights

The model below (FIG 4) offers a visual way of describing this process. It combines Kolb's learning cycle (1984) and a mentoring continuum (see, for instance, Hay 1996). The learning cycle provides a way of imaging this learning process as a reflexive activity. It is in fact a spiral with experience and practice continually



informed and updated by reflection and change , as shown above in FIG 3.

The mentoring continuum serves to include the management and supportive functions of supervision and the responsibility of the supervisor.

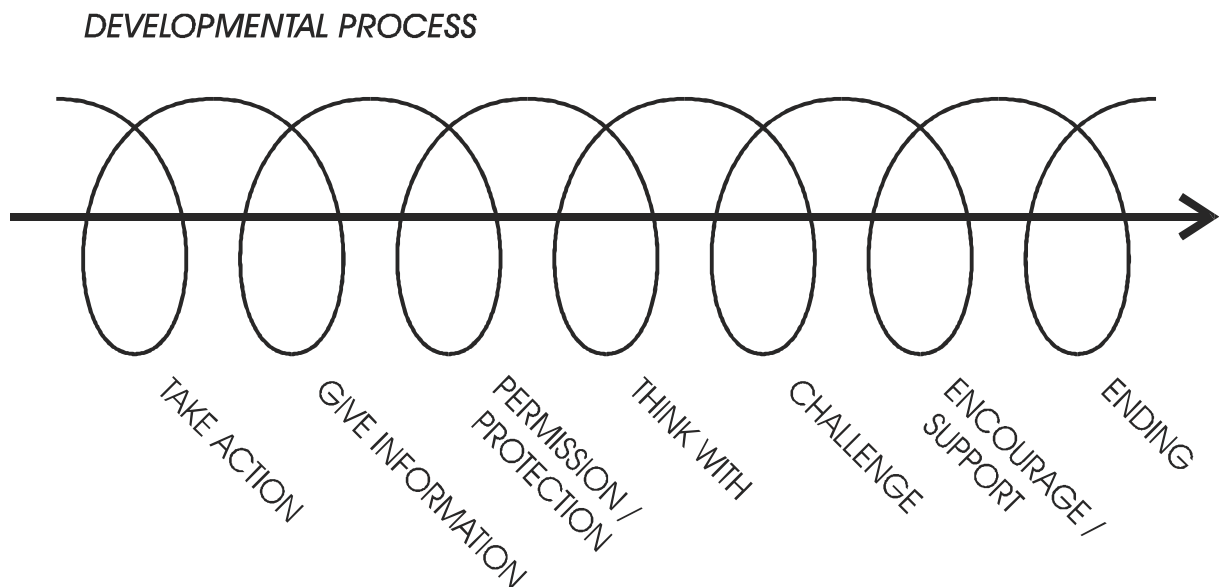


FIG 4

The learning cycle is a way of explaining experiential learning, a pattern which underlies most human experience. By reflecting on what happens, relating it to

theory and general concepts we can make new decisions about how to act in future. This process also underpins models of creativity, problem-solving, scientific investigation; it is a meta-model which describes the way that human beings learn, 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.

The initial contract pertaining to 'what the supervision is about' is agreed early in the cycle. The 'contract for change' is agreed later, most likely as part of the meaning making stage of the cycle, certainly before new plans are made and probably before the more theoretical part of the supervision.

How does the supervisor know what is appropriate intervention for each supervisee's personal needs and stage of development? The mentoring continuum is useful here. The continuum moves from 'take action' at one end to 'end supervision' at the other. This supervisor's "scanning search light" (Evans 1998) over the whole continuum decides the point that is most appropriate for the

supervision piece. In an ongoing relationship the appropriate point will move along the continuum (although it may sometimes slip back) whereas in a one-off piece of supervision the supervisor will estimate the appropriate point, check out suitability and adjust if necessary. Whatever point is chosen the actual process of supervision follows the learning cycle; the contract will be related to the key issue in the supervision.

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