

Philosophy of Graduate Supervision December 2014

I supervise and teach graduate students in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary. In particular, the students who study with me are students interested in family nursing, pediatric oncology, grief and loss, or the research method of hermeneutic phenomenology, a topic on which I have just co-authored a book. I have supervised 39 master's and doctoral students, been on supervisory committees for 38 students, and sat on over 200 comprehensive, candidacy, or thesis written and oral examinations.

The late German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, suggested that something becomes meaningful through interpretation and understanding, and these are inseparable from self-application. To engage graduate students meaningfully, I believe one must invite them into the course being taught or the student/supervisor relationship around learning and research in such a way that the content begins to matter to them and that there is applicability and utility to it. This involves acts of reciprocity and shared understanding of learning what is meaningful to the students as well as learning how they best work. An invitation is much different than a demand or command and the ways supervisors create cultures of invitation and openness are varied. From my own experience, I think this culture must be tethered to a climate of mutual respect, humor, and the willingness of the supervisor to be open, authentic, and humble. It involves a recognition that teaching/learning happens in relationship, in the acknowledgement that such an event occurs in reciprocity, where the supervisor is as much a learner as she/he is responsible to offer information, knowledge, and guidance. There is a provocative quote in a Pat Conroy novel that resonates (in part) with my philosophy of graduate supervision:

I developed The Great Teacher Theory late in my freshman year. It was a cornerstone of the theory that great teachers had great personalities and that the greatest teachers had outrageous personalities. I did not like decorum or rectitude in a classroom; I preferred a highly oxygenated atmosphere, a climate of intemperance, rhetoric, and feverish melodrama. And I wanted my teachers to make me smart.

A great teacher is my adversary, my conqueror, commissioned to chastise me. He leaves me tame and grateful for the new language he has purloined from other kings whose granaries are filled and whose libraries are famous. He tells me that teaching is the art of theft: of knowing what to steal and from whom.

Bad teachers do not touch me; the great ones never leave me. They ride with me during all my days, and I pass on to others what they have imparted to me. I exchange their handy gifts with strangers on trains, and I pretend the gifts are mine. I steal from the great teachers. And the truly wonderful thing about them is that they would applaud my theft, laugh at the thought of it, realizing they had taught me their larcenous gifts well.

What resonates with me in Conroy's fictional writing is that, in graduate supervision, I want my students to be smarter than me, to write better, to conduct better research, to extend what I have done and know. I do not agree with the notions he suggested of being an adversary, conqueror, with

commission to chastise, nor do I agree with leaving students tame and grateful. Rather, I want to leave them strong, confident, and wanting to “exchange handy gifts with strangers on trains.”

I do not believe that people learn through criticism but rather through direct, gentle, and well-intended invitations and perturbations. That said, I believe that being honest and direct with students is important but never in a way that could be personalized or is hurtful at a personal level. Having a background in family therapy helps me in my work allowing me to “read” people well and to be constructive in attending to relational aspects. Some of the work in marriage and family therapy done by John Gottman is very important and transferable to the supervisory relationship. One example is that, from studying hundreds of what Gottman calls “master marriages,” he has identified what he calls the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” that indicate the prediction of relationship demise. These horsemen are: 1) Criticism; 2) Contempt; 3) Defensiveness; and 4) Stonewalling (refusing to discuss or confront an issue). Of the first behavior, criticism, he maintains that it is not that one cannot be critical in a relationship but that every criticism must be balanced with a least five commendations or recognitions of strength. This practice that serves healthy marriages also serves healthy supervisory relationships. Of the four horsemen, Gottman identifies that it is the behavior of contempt that most often indicates or precipitates a relationship failure. When true contempt leaks into any relationship, there is little to no recovery possible.

Finally, my philosophy of graduate supervision mirrors the philosophy of my research method: hermeneutics. Hans-Georg Gadamer claimed, “hermeneutics is the answer to a question that could have been answered differently” and also that “the possibility that the other might be right is the soul of hermeneutics.” How I conduct my research and interpret data in my research is correlated directly to how I believe I work with students. Every question can be answered differently and the possibility that the other might be “right” is the “soul” of supervisory relationships.

Supervision Strategies

1. Engagement in my program of research and other projects: I see this as essential; it is less of a strategy than a philosophy. All of my graduate students become actively engaged in my own research, either in the capacity of research assistant work or just through invited participation. In this way, they become involved at many levels: developing strong and current literature reviews on topics that are related to their own foci of study; observing first, and then conducting, hermeneutic interviews and focus groups; transcribing interviews as a means of carefully listening to, and learning from, a good interview; working with the transcripts to develop skills at analysis; participating in research team meetings to discuss interpretations and analysis; participating in writing of findings for publication and receiving co-authorship opportunities; and finally attendance at relevant conferences and involvement in conference presentations of research. When I founded the Journal of Applied Hermeneutics, I invited two doctoral students to serve as Journal Managers and Assistant Editors, with the intention that one day they will assume position of Editor.

I have found that this engagement has direct impact on learning. It is a way to coach, model, create networking opportunities, and offer experiential learning. My experience is that the graduate students develop a sense of confidence and competence as their sophistication in these scholarly endeavors grows. When possible, I endeavor to fund them either as research assistants and to cover the costs of conference attendance. As examples, I have funded graduate students’ attendance at international conferences in Thailand, Iceland, and Japan, as well as conferences in North America. I myself learned to be an Editor by being an Editorial Assistant with my supervisor’s journal. I believe this

prepares students with a direct impact on learning in an experiential way.

2. Method of candidacy preparation: Doctoral students are expected to be prepared for the very daunting and important event of candidacy exams, which are intended to determine if the student is well prepared and positioned to begin research. All of the experiences in the first strategy aid in this preparation but there are other things that I do quite intentionally and perhaps differently than other supervisors. My rationale is simple: Writing is a practice and good writing takes practice. My method is less simple: I have the students start to write, and write, and write. I look at everything they write, I edit, I make comments, offer questions, and suggest other readings. I know that many Faculties and supervisors prepare for candidacy by requesting a reading list and then have regular meetings with students to discuss the readings. I work under the assumption that the readings that are necessary will show up in the writing and if they do not, then that is when I help the student determine where they need to go in research, conceptual, and theoretical literature to find what they need to know. I also tell them that it is not unreasonable to anticipate general areas they will be required to write about for candidacy exams. For example, it is to be expected in our Faculty that they will receive a candidacy question on their topic and the relevant literature, on their research method, and on philosophy. A part of candidacy preparation is that they can start writing in those areas now and not only in the three weeks given for the written component of the exam. They then have the advantage of being able to show me their work, receive feedback, discuss, and continue to refine it. As a result, when the time comes for candidacy, they have very solid drafts of pieces of paper and they are not starting from scratch.

The direct impact on learning that I have seen as a result of this approach is that the students come to candidacy with very solid papers and having discussed many of the issues related to the questions they receive in the oral exam. I have had my students report that they felt well prepared for the candidacy exam and this in turn somewhat diminished their anxiety around it and allowed them to participate in the oral exam with more confidence.

3. Very direct and clear relationship engagement: I enter into the supervisory relationship with a frank discussion of style, working out how the students tend to learn best, their work style, and their differing needs around assistance and independence in their learning. I also discuss my preferred ways of working with students and assess if there is a fit between us. For example, I have learned that some students do their best work when you simply get out of their way! For this kind of student, to offer a micro-managing style would be to stifle creativity and growth. Of course, there is always the possibility that the students who want you to get out of their way, in fact, need more guidance and direction than they are admitting and this is a discernment that needs to be made based on the evidence on hand and a discussion and re-negotiation of the relationship may be required. The key to all of this, I believe, is an open, frank, and respectful relationship.

The impact on learning of this way of being in relationship is that it clears away the debris of relational problems and allows the focus on to be the work. In my experience, students work and learn best when there is a fit between what is being learned and their learning style.

Critical Reflection

Reflection is defined as the action of turning back on oneself or producing an image to be regarded. Reflective supervisory practice involves the rigorous practice of regarding the image and critically allowing it to have something to say to what produced the image. Although the word supervisor

implies to stand over and to have a vision from above, I think it is the real act of supervision to be able to guide without standing over. In order to do this, supervisors must be open to the reflective image of themselves and often the only way we can do that is to ask others. Therefore, it is my regular practice to consult graduate students and ask for feedback.

In family therapy, it is a common practice to conduct what is called “process evaluation” in addition to the final evaluation of the work. This involves a regular process of “checking in” with the family to see how things are working in the clinical work together. Has the work been useful or not? What has been most and least useful? Are there any concerns in terms of the direction the work is taking? Any concerns with the therapist? These questions invite both the family and the therapist to take a meta-position around the relationship and move into a mutual evaluation of both content and process of the therapeutic work. I employ this technique within my supervisory relationships, routinely and regularly checking in with the students about the relationship and asking similar kinds of questions as posed above. This really is an invitation to critical reflection for both parties, and an opportunity to re-evaluate and perhaps, if necessary, renegotiate and recalibrate how we are working together. Critical reflection too occurs in conversation with colleagues. I learn from discussing and watching my colleagues in their supervisory practices things that I want to incorporate into my own practices and also things that I want to avoid. Sitting on supervisory committees and participating in exams within one’s own Faculty but also external to it and external to the university is an opportunity to learn in this way.

Critical reflection involves a willingness to be open to new ideas and to make changes, rather than becoming mired in established ways of working in the capacity of supervisor. It involves a willingness to suspend certainty and to be willing to learn from our students. Humberto Maturana, a Chilean neurobiologist, stated:

To know with full confidence is the enemy of reflection. Reflection is when what you claim to know has the ability to step back and take another look.

The “development of scholarly supervisory practices” is just that - - it is a *development*, something that changes, shifts, and grows over time and that needs to be responsive to differences, context, times, expectations, and people. Without practices of critical reflection that happen in relationship with other colleagues and students, the capacity to grow and develop as a supervisor would be diminished. As I continue to develop my scholarly supervisory practices, I am constantly vigilant about maintaining the “ability to step back and take another look.”



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