CHAPTER NINE

Developing skills: practice, observation, and feedback

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“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced”

(James Baldwin)

Neela is doing her first observed practice session on a supervision training. As her peers and tutor observe her work she’s nervous and uncertain, as if her years of experience as a counsellor are turning to dust. She fears being judged as incompetent and a fraud. She reproaches herself: surely as a counsellor of some professional standing she should already know what to do.

Neela’s experience may resonate for you. Certainly I can relate to it. Enrolling on a supervision training could be seen as a statement that we have achieved a certain level of practitioner competence. So, when practice is exposed to observation and feedback, we might feel there is much more to lose than on our core practitioner trainings, and be startled to revisit old feelings of inferiority, shame, and confusion. Yet, there is no running away from it: being observed in practice, and experiencing feedback is a fundamental part of effective supervision education.
Openness to challenge and feedback as essential ingredients to good practice has been well confirmed by Miller, Hubble, and Duncan’s (2008) extensive research into aspects of therapeutic change and practitioner excellence. After tracking the outcomes of tens of thousands of clients and therapists, it would seem that success is not determined simply by a practitioner’s talent or by gaining years of experience. These alone can actually create a false sense of confidence, with mistakes no longer noticed, and, as a result, learning opportunities are lost or stagnation occurs.

Their findings identify that excellence involves two key aspects that challenge the idea of “natural talent” or “technical prowess”. Success involves simply working harder than most at improving performance, and “spending time specifically devoted to reaching for objectives just beyond one’s level of proficiency”.

In addition, Miller and his colleagues state, “to reach the top level, attentiveness to feedback is essential . . . this extra step lets the person understand how and when she is improving” (ibid., p. 6).

Keeping engaged, even in the face of challenge, is the crucial skill here.

*Facing fears and building courage*

Miller, Hubble, and Duncan’s research underlines what I believe needs to be at the heart of effective supervision education: plenty of opportunity for observed practice that challenges the participants to stretch themselves to engage in new processes, accompanied by very regular and clearly structured feedback to enable mistakes to be made without shame and blame.

Central to these processes (and, ultimately, for all effective supervision) is feedback that provides encouragement. “En-couragement”, with the building of “courage” at its heart, involves having our strengths acknowledged, alongside appropriate rigorous challenge. This provides a potent combination that helps us to face our fears and have “the courage to be imperfect” (Dreikurs, 1970). It is different from the use of praise or rewards, which create extrinsically motivated behaviour and a pattern of winners and losers. Encouragement enables people to develop an inner sense of satisfaction and motivation. For this to happen, a climate of equality and
collegiality needs to be created from the outset of the supervision training.

Chris, reflecting on a supervision practice writes,

The session has been a very useful if painful learning experience. It has helped me to appreciate the consequences of not sharing my thoughts and feelings in the session and given me the impetus and deep motivation to rectify the situation. The key is encouragement—both to myself and in how I appreciate the other. Encouragement becomes the container within which everything else occurs.

Equality: creating a climate of imperfection

“To be human means to have inferiority feelings” (Adler, 1933 [1964], p. 54). Adler suggested that the development of inferiority feelings result in large part from subjective childhood comparisons with other family members. As these feelings are so uncomfortable, we compensate by striving to overcome them through such patterns as superiority and perfectionism. Experiencing inferiority feelings and then compensating for them through some form of “acting out” response happens to most of us when under some stress. The challenge for us all is that if this dynamic is not appropriately identified and addressed, a power imbalance is perpetuated. This, in turn, is likely to create problems in both the training and supervisory relationship.

As an educator, I need to face my own fears and limitations, be ready to share my imperfections and capabilities, and also be open to the skills that participants on the supervision training bring with them. As Caro Bailey has identified in this book, by enabling this mix of competence, humility, ability to learn from experience, and congruence, we are also aiding the development of an inner authority, essential for effective supervision.

The way we observe others, and give and receive feedback, commonly reflects our early experiences. Our interpretation and response to the guidance, discipline, and feedback given at home and school is very likely to be echoed in the here and now, particularly when being observed.
Openly sharing fears and fantasies about receiving and giving feedback at the beginning of a supervision training course can help to dispel the fiction that everyone else feels confident, capable, and in control. It also models a process that can be used in a modified form at the start of a new supervision contract. This can prevent misunderstandings and be particularly helpful in the relationship with participants who might otherwise seem lacking in insight and resistant and defensive around receiving feedback.

The following exercise aims to enable this exploration:

1. **What does observed practice and receiving feedback mean to me?**
   - Share responses in pairs and then in the whole group.
   - How do I feel about being observed in practice sessions?
   - What are my hopes and fears about being observed and receiving feedback from a) peers b) trainers?
   - What makes it easier for me to receive feedback?
   - What is particularly difficult for me, when receiving, feedback?
   - What are my developmental aims for receiving feedback?

2. **What does giving feedback and observing practice mean to me?**
   - What are my hopes and fears about observing and giving feedback to (a) peers (b) trainers?
   - What makes it easier for me to give feedback?
   - What is particularly difficult for me, when giving feedback?
   - What are my developmental aims about giving feedback?

**Observed skills practice**

When observed practice is carried out with peers, it provides opportunities for the group to come together with a common goal. Offering a clear statement at the outset of the training that making mistakes is inevitable and valuable frees participants to take risks, fall down, pick themselves up, and discover their own strengths and those of others. This can create a real sense of community rather than competition. Donna illustrates this development in a reflection made early on in the supervision training:

I did initially feel some angst around returning to “student” mode and working alongside some others who, unlike me, have been
working in supervisory capacities for some time. However, I felt the playing field quickly level and while our existing experiences may have differed, our desire to learn and personally grow and develop was very similar. This realization enabled me to have confidence to participate more fully than on the first day, where I had felt a little overwhelmed.

On our courses, tutors work to equalize a potential power imbalance by also offering live supervision demonstrations in front of the group. We face our own fears, expose both our skills and imperfections, and aim to provide a base for participants to move on to their own observed practice sessions by critiquing and commenting on the demonstration.

In my experience, when this kind of encouraging environment is created, despite participants’ initial fears, the observed skills practice is most consistently identified as being the most beneficial part of the course. Some common forms of this are as follows.

1. Groups of 3–4 participants plus (or minus) a tutor. Each participant takes a turn being: (a) supervisor, (b) supervisee (bringing a real issue), and (c) observer. The tutor (if present) and observer provide more detailed verbal and written feedback to the supervisor. The supervisor and supervisee offer immediate verbal feedback.

   The “supervisor” shares their experience, first identifying what went well, and only then identifying what areas they wish to develop further. This is followed by feedback from the supervisee, then the observer(s), then finally the tutor, if present. All are encouraged to give descriptive feedback using specific examples first of what went well, followed by suggestions for learning edges there could be for the future.

   Whenever possible, recording the sessions will offer additional learning opportunities for the participant in the ‘hot’ seat of supervisor.

2. Interpersonal process recall (Kagan, 1980). This method is most effective for processing and evaluating very recent video or audio recordings of supervision. The participant and a facilitator (tutor or peer), jointly review the recording, stopping it as it prompts experiences that could otherwise be forgotten. The
facilitator explores further by asking focused lead questions (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004, p. 221).

3. The participant provides a recording (and possibly a written transcript) of a supervision session held outside the course, with an accompanying written reflective analysis. Tutor and/or peers look/listen to it and offer their own feedback.

4. The Goldfish bowl: two participants work together as supervisor and supervisee in front of whole training group. The tutor facilitates feedback from the “supervisor”, “supervisee”, and group members regarding the supervisor’s work.

Each course will have their unique emphases for practice. However, there are core skills and processes generic to most supervision. Wheeler (1999) has created a guide for reflecting on supervision practice that we have found helpful on our courses (Figure 9.1). Although it is unlikely that the whole range of skills described below will be needed in each session, it offers a useful focus for reflection and feedback.

Observation through differing lenses

Having guidelines about what we want to observe is all very well. The real challenge comes in dealing with the many and varied lenses through which each of us sees the world. From my Adlerian base, I draw on the concept of “private logic” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). This refers to our uniquely created and biased perception of self, people, and the world that we created during our early relationships. Most of us continue to use aspects of this “private”, rather than “common”, logic, even if outdated, to guide our movement in our present day life.

Despite the inevitability of our biased perceptions, the more encouraged or secure we feel in the relationship with others, whether as an educator or course participant, the less distorted our vision of the world and others will be. Here, there are parallels with Bowlby’s (1988) attachment ideas and “internal working models”, where he suggests that those who have experienced more secure attachments are likely to be more flexible and open in their responses.
Creating the relationship
1. Is there a contract between the supervisor and supervisee that creates a working alliance?
2. Does the supervisee feel comfortable to share vulnerability?
3. Is the relationship appropriate to the stage of development of the supervisee?

Extending the supervisee’s learning
1. Does the supervisor offer a framework for understanding the client?
2. Are appropriate suggestions/information given in the session?
3. Does the supervisor offer the supervisee an opportunity to reflect on suggestions—and also the safety to reject them explicitly if they appear inappropriate to the supervisee?

Working with personal issues
1. Does the supervisor help the supervisee become aware of personal issues emerging in relation to their counselling work?
2. Does the supervisor respond to the supervisee’s personal issues appropriately?
3. Does the supervisor keep the client in focus for the appropriate proportion of the session?

Consultation
1. To what extent does the session focus on each of the 7 eyes (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006)?
2. Does the supervisor take account of issues of difference and diversity?

Monitoring professional and ethical issues
1. Does the supervisor recognize the ethical/professional issues in the supervisee’s presentation?
2. Does the supervisor respond to the ethical issues appropriately?

Evaluation
1. Does the supervisor offer the supervisee appropriate feedback? (Use of encouragement and authority.)
2. Does the supervisor provide the opportunity for the supervisee to offer feedback about the usefulness of the supervision to him or her? (i.e., is the relationship equal enough?)

Administration
1. Does the supervisor pick up and work with institutional issues raised, and understand the context in which the counselling takes place?
2. Are appropriate boundaries kept in the session?

Figure 9.1. Guidelines for reflecting on supervisory practice. Adapted from Wheeler (1999).
Another essential aspect to address when preparing for the skills practice and feedback process is building more conscious awareness around issues of individual, developmental, and cultural differences between the observed participant, peer observers, and tutor. Where possible, these need to be addressed openly early on. This involves clear and transparent contracting about the process of feedback and assessment prior to the observed practice that includes clarifying meanings and needs around feedback.

This contracting will be further supported by open adherence to a set of ethical values, principles, personal moral qualities, and guidance of good practice, such as described in the BACP Ethical Framework (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2002). This can then create a safe meeting point for direct and clear educative feedback.

*Feedback as a meeting point*

Feedback is a central activity of supervision. It supports therapeutic competence and safeguards client welfare. As this is such an essential skill, modelling good practice during supervision training is vital. Taught modules related to “giving feedback” are useful; practice, however, is essential. The feedback structures offered as part of the ongoing formative assessment, have, in my experience, made the most impact on participants’ learning.

I believe that most of our actions are socially embedded. As such, feedback can be seen as an interaction, or a *meeting point* between individuals, rather than something that one person gives another. Claiborn and Lichtenberg (1989) have identified feedback in supervision as an ongoing process between supervisor and supervisee, the quality of the relationship between the two parties being central to the way feedback is received. One-sided feedback in supervision invariably creates a power imbalance. Page and Wosket (2001) have described how, even when the supervisor shares positive comments, if it is only one-sided, this can still become a misuse of power. Equally, if the supervisee or course participant is the only one sharing their experience, they are left wondering what the other is actually thinking or feeling.
Communication of feedback

Creating structures for regular feedback between all the course participants as well as the tutors from the very start of the course builds a learning culture. The feedback process then becomes a norm that is not attached to the individual’s whole personhood, but can become a valuable, rather than dreaded, part of their ongoing development.

For the observed practices on our training, one tutor stays with a group of four participants throughout the sessions in each module. We aim, as tutors, to demonstrate clear, direct, encouraging, and challenging feedback from the outset. We have found the participants themselves soon also offer each other feedback that is specific, balanced, and encouraging, including useful challenge. So, as well as offering valuable input to their peers, they are developing the skills of offering encouraging feedback that will be essential to them as supervisors. Hawkins and Shohet’s (2006, p. 134) acronym “CORBS” offers a helpful reminder to the participants of the key principles for giving feedback: it needs to be Clear, Owned, Regular, Balanced, and Specific.

Encouragement is a complex process that is much more than simply expressing positives (Millar, 2007), and for this discussion I will focus on one key aspect. Different from praise, encouragement is largely non-evaluative, focusing on what the person is doing, rather than how the person compares with others. Encouragement can be achieved by avoiding the use of adjectival labels such as “good”, “unethical”, “clever”, “non empathic”, and also by keeping in mind the assets and positive intentions of the supervisee.

Instead, by using descriptive language and paying particular attention to verbs, feedback offered is very specific, identifying what the course participant has actually been doing, without needing to evaluate it. From this base, the tutor can invite the participant’s thoughts, add their own view, or provide educative information as appropriate. Here respectful use of “signposting: is helpful: e.g., “I’d like to discuss the ethical issues that may be involved in this situation . . . can we look at this now?” Further space can then be given for two-way discussion with the participant.

As an example, here’s a tutor’s feedback to Alan, following a skills practice:

\[\text{DEVELOPING SKILLS}\]
Near the end of the session with B, you opened up some valuable exploration about her client’s sexuality that helped identify some issues she hadn’t previously addressed. What seemed harder to work with was B’s feeling of stuckness in the counselling, which resulted in you also feeling very stuck. I have some thoughts about the dynamics that might be going on here, and possibly how this might be worked with in your future sessions. Would you be interested to explore this further? . . . What do you think about what I’ve said?

The use of Socratic questions as a form of guided discovery can also help participants focus more deeply on their work, this also keeping a two-way flow of communication.

For example: “What do you appreciate about the way you handled that?”
“How might you do things differently in future?”
“What do you plan to take away from our discussion?”
“What has been useful from this feedback?”
“What has been less helpful from this feedback?”

Written feedback

Some education establishments may require the use of grades, ratings, and tick boxes, and these modes of written feedback can lose touch with an interactive feedback process. However, two-way feedback can still take place in written work, particularly when the course participant has also been invited to evaluate their own work and when the feedback principles described above continue to be addressed.

The following is an extract taken from a much longer piece of written feedback I shared with Suzanne after listening to a tape of her supervision work and reading her own reflections on the session.

Your written reflection demonstrates mature evaluation of the areas that went well and those you want to develop further.

In the session itself I particularly noted the following:

You provided a free space for your supervisee, X, to share her own reflections and feelings on the client.
You raised an important point when you asked X about the possibility of contacting the psychiatrist.

You helped X make a useful link between her early experiences and her experience now with the client.

You put forward some key insights about the client that proved very helpful to X, e.g., “being anxious is part of her identity”.

You drew attention to the need to address the boundary difficulties at the next session.

Learning edge: As you suggest, further focused questioning and clarification of X’s experience and inner processes could have enabled greater movement at an earlier stage. There was also a need to explore more openly with X a number of key ethical issues that you had noted, but didn’t feel able to address in the session itself. It seems that it was hard in this instance to allow your own considerable experience to be expressed here (maybe a parallel with X’s process?). Trusting in your own authority as a supervisor, and voicing it confidently will be an important area of ongoing development.

Wheeler’s guide was given to students beforehand, and I used it to structure my own observations and reflections on Suzanne’s practice (this extract focuses on the section “extending the supervisee’s learning”). I kept in mind the question “What is happening?”, describing the interventions and intentions I observed. Although I used some evaluative adjectives within the flow, the main focus is on verbs.

This process kept me focused on the specifics of her work and process, rather than falling into the trap of evaluating the person. I then noted and shared my thoughts on areas that I believed would be important for her to develop further. Engaging with Suzanne’s written reflections also helped to create a meeting point between us, so that even in written feedback, a two-way process was maintained.

Receiving feedback

Being able to receive feedback in a constructive way is a skill in itself. Whether in the role of educator or a course participant, we are
likely to experience some form of defensiveness in the face of feedback, but we can choose what we do with this discomfort. Maybe we experience old feelings of shame and defend ourselves by shrinking and losing our sense of capability, or perhaps we compensate for our feelings of inferiority and become aggressive. Either way, this destroys potential learning and growth. The challenge for us all is to be able to listen openly to the feedback, and identify how, if at all, this might support our future practice.

Receiving feedback is far from a passive process. Hawkins and Shohet emphasize that we also have considerable responsibility as “receivers” and offer the following guidelines linked with their acronym “CORBS”:

- If necessary ask for the feedback to be more Clear, Owned, Regular, Balanced, or Specific
- Listen to the feedback all the way through without judging it or jumping to a defensive response, both of which can mean that the feedback is misunderstood.
- Try not to explain compulsively why you did something or even explain away positive feedback. Try and hear others’ feedback as their experiences of you. Often it is enough to hear the feedback and say “thank you”.
- Ask for feedback you are not given but would like to hear.

[2006, p. 134]

**Challenges with giving and receiving feedback**

A bottom line for supervisors is to ensure the well being of the client. When feedback is given ineffectively or the course participant/supervisee is not able to receive it, there is a real danger of poor practice continuing, and this having an impact on the client.

When course participants seem unable to learn from feedback, and there is real concern about their readiness to become supervisors, it is often much harder to be direct and clear. This is particularly relevant when the relationship is not well established, or we fear the extremes of our own judgements. To compensate for this, we might push down our deeper concerns, resulting in feedback that comes over as vague, general, or inconsistent. Even more
serious is when we give only positive feedback, despite having serious concerns. It is always important to identify course participants’ strengths, but, as discussed previously, encouragement is also about enabling personal growth through challenge and confronting the areas for further development.

Scaife (2009, p. 325) defines challenge as an invitation to test one’s capabilities to the full, which can then generate new perspectives at a cognitive level, and create new options for action. She reminds supervisors that challenging does require them to own their own authority in the role by making requirements clear, using skills of direct communication. Usefully, she invites supervisors to take responsibility for their part of a difficulty in a working alliance: “Since the difficulty is being identified by the supervisor, it is the supervisor who is experiencing the problem and inviting the assistance of the supervisee in its solution”.

Similarly, in relation to unsatisfactory performance, Scaife (ibid., p. 328) distinguishes between problematic performance, incompetence, and unethical practice by trainees and qualified counsellors. She recommends preference and purpose statements that make the supervisor’s opinions and requirements clear. She is more explicit than most about when and how to fail a supervisee, reminding readers of the importance of record-keeping to ensure fairness.

When offering more challenging feedback in supervision, some of Munson’s (2002) suggestions also provide a helpful frame, as follows.

- Challenge only in ways that promote personal growth, and that enables the course participant to use the feedback to their own advantage and benefit.
- Focus only on behaviours that you sense can be changed and be specific in the challenge given.
- Offer the challenge as your opinion not a fact.
- Separate your personal feelings about the course participant from the need to challenge.
- Avoid accusatory comments.

In the following hypothetical example, Daniel has consistently moved into a teaching mode on the supervision practices. His tutor wishes to acknowledge his strengths while also clearly underlining
major concerns about his practice that could ultimately result in him not meeting the assessment criteria. Keeping in mind Munson’s frame, and using description rather than labelling, she shares the following feedback.

You have consistently shown well-developed skills in analytic and abstract thinking. These were used to good effect today when you identified possible organizational issues faced by your supervisee, and also in your understanding of psychopathology in terms of the client’s mental health. Your sincere wish to offer educative support to your supervisee comes over strongly.

These very skills are also creating difficulties for the supervisory process. During this last practice, you interrupted your supervisee to put forward an explanation of Bowlby’s attachment theory when she was expressing her concern about the client’s suicidal feelings and her non-attendance that week. Your supervisee responded by stopping talking about her concerns, and the discussion moved to a theoretical exploration of Bowlby’s ideas.

For your growth as a supervisor, and to meet the criteria to enable completion of this course, it will be essential for you to show further evidence of working with the supervisee’s process. My thoughts are that as a starting point it could be useful for you to review using core listening skills, such as summarizing and reflecting as a means to help you hold back from the teaching role, and so focus on the supervisee’s process.

What are your thoughts and feelings about what I have said so far? . . . How do you think you could most usefully build on these skills? . . .

It might be that, despite all apparent efforts, a course participant is still unable to respond well to the feedback process. In this instance, it would be important first to explore whether there is an organizational or systemic issue present. If this does not appear to be the case, then it is unlikely this person is ready to undertake a supervisory role and this needs to be communicated clearly and respectfully. The challenge might be that those who are not able to hear and use feedback to support their progress and development are often bewildered to discover that they have not met the requirements to complete the course.
Conclusion

Returning to Miller and colleagues’ research, their findings about practitioner excellence indicate good practice in supervision education. This includes a willingness to engage in repeated and deliberate practice, alongside effective regular feedback, where mistakes can be freely made and accepted as a basis for learning.

If we find ourselves confronting problems with course participants during their skills development, before finalizing our evaluative judgements of the supervisee, it is important first to reassess the feedback processes to ensure that they are not structured in a way that could be contributing to feelings of inequality and inferiority. To minimize power misuse (often occurring unwittingly) and model effective feedback skills, all supervision courses that offer observed practice need to ensure positive structures and processes are in place from the very beginning. Within a climate of equality and encouragement, course participants are able to take risks, make mistakes, and, most crucially, learn without fear. Learning is enabled when initial baselines are identified, effective skills are spelled out, practice is deliberate, and feedback is focused. A key issue is maintaining motivation and engagement in learning despite uncomfortable moments. When assessors can offer challenge in this spirit, all participants can also feel confident that the final qualification represents a fair and rigorous assessment that has not avoided difficult issues.

References

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2002). *Ethical Framework For Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Rugby: BACP.


