

Model of Student Unit Supervision

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For the past three years the Application des Mesures Department has supervised some of its students in student units which consisted of 4 students and a unit supervisor. During the period from September 2003 to June 2005 I had the privilege of supervising 2 student units and this paper outlines the model of unit supervision I developed during this period.

In developing a model of student unit supervision I, of course, drew upon my past experiences in related areas. I have, in the past, supervised teams of workers, supervised many students and taught at the CEGEP level. I have also done quite an amount of group work and my approach to all my work has always had a large “cognitive” component to it. All of these activities spanned a period of over thirty years and as a clinical supervisor I had developed a team model of supervision with a large teaching component.

The model of unit supervision presented here grew directly out of the above team model of supervision, modified to take into account that the model deals with students and not workers and therefore the teaching component was enhanced.

Supervision historically has been defined as consisting of three main functions:

- 1) Administrative - the promotion and maintenance of good standards of work;
- 2) Educational - the educational development of each individual worker;
- 3) Supportive - ensuring that the worker is not left to carry unnecessarily difficulties, problems and stresses alone. (1)

This, of course is an over simplification of a very complex process however the supervision of workers places the emphasis on the administrative and supportive functions while the supervision of students focuses on education and support.

This is not to suggest that both types of supervision should not include all three functions - it is simply to say that the supervision of students is quite different than the supervision of workers.

In developing this model I saw my function as unit supervisor as consisting of two roles: that of a teacher and that of a team leader. My goal was to provide the students, within a team framework, with an enriched and safe learning environment where they would be able to learn from each other as well as from their supervisor.

(Please note that throughout this paper I will use the terms “unit” and “team” interchangeably and that when I use either word I am referring to a unit or a team consisting of students and their supervisor.)

Developing the Team – The Supervisor as Team Leader

A unit functioning as a team is not simply a group of students who get together once a week with their supervisor to discuss their cases and other issues. A team is a group which reflect the following qualities:

1.) Mutual Trust.

Team members must feel that they can state their views and differences openly without fear of ridicule or retaliation and permit others to do the same. No one on the team will "cut the other guy's throat."

2.) Mutual Support.

Team members must feel that they can get help from others on the team and give help to them without being concerned about secret agendas.

3.) Mutual Respect.

Team members respect individual differences. They don't push each other to conform to central ideas or ways of thinking. They accept members' different "world views" understanding that they were developed out of different life experiences.

4.) Open Communications.

Team members must feel that they don't have to be guarded and cautious about their communication. Because of mutual trust, support, and respect they can say what they feel. When they communicate, they know the rest of the team is listening and will work hard to understand them. They also must be committed to listening to and trying to understand other team members. (2)

Operationalizing the above concepts takes time and "team spirit" is something that grows slowly as students begin to feel safe within their group.

I began the process of developing a safe environment by setting only two expectations of the students.

First I made it clear that I expected that they respect group confidentiality. This meant simply that what was said in the team stayed in the team. This gave team members “permission” to speak freely about themselves, each other, the system, the school etc. (The exceptions to this “rule” were that the supervisor reserved the right to discuss problems the student might be having with the appropriate people either in the system or at the school and that students also had the right to discuss problems the student might be having with the supervisor with the appropriate people.)

Second I also expected that the students be honest with me and with other unit members about their work so that they would be able to learn from their mistakes as well as from their successes.

I also made it clear that while I was the team leader and supervisor I was also a member of the team and I would also follow these two expectations.

On their first day at the agency each student was assigned a case, asked to read the files and be ready to report back to the group the details of their case. Before our first meeting the students were asked to “trade” files so that they were all acquainted with each other’s cases.

This practice was followed with all case assignments that were made throughout the year. Although each student was responsible for their own cases each member of the unit “owned” all the cases and backed each other up.

When appropriate cases were “split” with, for example, one student working with the child and another working with the mother. Students were also expected to assist each other in difficult situations and would accompany each other to meetings or to difficult interviews.

While we met as a unit for team supervision once a week to review all the cases, supervision was an intensive process which occurred on a daily basis. The students all shared a large office and whenever possible I would come by at least once a day to discuss what was happening on their cases. These ad hoc meetings often turned into discussions of clinical issues or discussions of what they were learning in class. Having the students together in one room was important as it enhanced their learning from each other as well as their knowledge of each other's cases.

There was no planned individual supervision but students were always free to meet with me individually if either they or I felt the need. I made myself very available and students were free to see me anytime if they had a crisis or problem.

Each student has her own individual learning needs and issues and it is important that the supervisor is aware of these and that they are dealt with appropriately. However, most of these can be addressed within a group context as long as the student feels comfortable using the group for this purpose.

For example, one of the students had an issue with "boundaries" and she would do things such as give her clients money from her personal funds. She felt safe enough to discuss this during unit supervision and the advice and support she received from the other students was much more meaningful than had she simply dealt with it in individual supervision.

It might not be appropriate to deal with some more serious issues within the unit, out of respect for a student's confidentiality, however these would represent the exception rather than the rule.

In reality each student met with me individually on the average of once a week and while the model emphasizes team supervision my availability ensured that each student's individual learning and personal needs were dealt with as a part of the supervisory process.

The Supervisory Process – The Supervisor as Teacher

While teaching is primarily the responsibility of the teaching institution it is also a major function of the student supervision process.

By the end of his or her placement each student had a good working knowledge of, at least, the following tools and concepts:

- The Youth Protection Act
- Working with non-voluntary clients
- The use of authority
- Risk assessment
- Permanency planning
- Concurrent planning
- Parental capacity assessment
- Attachment theory
- Cultural sensitivity
- The foster care system
- Use of PIFAs and Intervention Plans
- Recording (progress notes, reviews, court reports etc.)

These concepts, as well as many others that the student was introduced to throughout the year, was the content of what the student must learn and they were discussed during unit supervision. I always tried to link them to cases the students were carrying and usually provided the students with articles concerning the selected concept prior to discussing them.

However learning the above concepts was far from enough to prepare the student to enter the youth protection field and one of my major goals was to help them learn the process of applying risk analysis to the problem solving process.

Students learnt:

- 1.) How to define a threat within the meaning of the Youth Protection Act;
- 2.) How to determine the most likely level of harm that the threat will cause;
- 3.) How to determine the probability that the threat will occur;
- 4.) What strategies to develop to reduce the risk;
- 5.) What tactics to use in order to apply the chosen strategies.

In order to do these students had to learn how to think strategically as well as learn what tactics to use in a given situation.

In a nutshell, *strategic* refers to the "what and why" and *tactical* refers to the "how".

Strategical Thinking

Strategic thinking, planning, and actions reflect the student's ability to consider the big picture, recognize patterns, set priorities, anticipate issues, predict outcomes, and have appropriate alternatives to fall back upon. Strategic issues deal with the goals of the case. Clear and focused psychosocial assessments are dependent on clear and focused strategical thinking so it is imperative that students develop strong skills in this area.

In order to help students learn how to think strategically I focused on the thinking process itself. Three types of thinking were encouraged; creative thinking, flexible thinking and critical thinking.

Creativity is the ability to imagine or invent something new. Creativity is not the ability to create something out of nothing but the ability to generate new ideas by combining, changing, or reapplying existing ideas. Some creative ideas are brilliant, while others are just simple ideas that no one seems to have thought of before.

Flexibility is the ability to change one's mind in the light of new evidence. This new evidence may consist of new facts about the situation or may be new creative ideas.

I encouraged students to think creatively and flexibly by helping them look at many different solutions to a problem and not only at what appeared to be the most obvious solution and by inviting them to "look outside of the box" for creative solutions.

I attempted to keep my own thinking process transparent so that they could see that even a very experienced worker changed his mind many times during the problem solving process as new information was collected and analysed.

A simple definition of critical thinking is that it is deciding rationally what to or what not to believe.

Students were helped to develop a critical thinking style that allows them to:

- 1.) use evidence skilfully and impartially
- 2.) organize thoughts and articulate them concisely and coherently
- 3.) distinguish between logically valid and invalid inferences
- 4.) suspend judgment in the absence of sufficient evidence to support a decision
- 5.) understand the difference between reasoning and rationalizing

- 6.) attempt to anticipate the probable consequences of alternative actions
- 7.) understand the idea of degrees of belief
- 8.) see similarities that are not superficially apparent
- 9.) habitually question their own views and attempt to understand the assumptions that are critical to those views
- 10.) be sensitive to the difference between the validity of a belief and the intensity with which it is held
- 11.) be aware of the fact that their understanding is always limited, and often based on incomplete information
- 12.) recognize the fallibility of their own opinions, the probability of bias in those opinions, and the danger of weighting evidence according to personal preferences (3)

Critical thinking is contagious. Students “catch” good thinking habits both from the supervisor and from each other and I used the team as a tool to ensure that this happened. As the year progressed more and more time was spent “thinking things through” so that the tactics that were used could be more focused.

Tactical Thinking

Tactical refers to the hands-on part of getting the job done in order to make sure that the strategic goals are met.

I believe that most of supervision, both for students and for workers, deals with strategic planning and little time is given to the tactical level. This would be the same as teaching a surgeon all about anatomy and not teaching him or her how to use a scalpel.

As social workers our main tactical tool is interviewing and students learnt interviewing techniques which basically means:

- 1.) What to say;
- 2.) What not to say;
- 3.) When to say it;
- 4.) When not to say it;
- 5.) Who to say it to;
- 6.) Who not to say it to;
- 7.) How to say it;
- 8.) How not to say it.

When you consider that these concepts are different when applied to different client populations (children, adolescents, hostile clients, depressed clients – to name just a few) it is obvious that a large part of the students' learning should focus on this area.

Tactics were discussed during unit supervision and we did a lot of role playing to illustrate different interviewing techniques.

Because I am a firm believer that when teaching “showing” is much more effective than “telling” I accompanied the students on many of their interviews and when it was necessary for me to call one of their clients I always tried to do this from “the student office” when the students were present.

After making an intervention we would always discuss what I did (or what I should have done) and why I did it.

Conclusions

"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."

Benjamin Franklin

The basic concept on which this model rests is synergy, which simply means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Students supervised in a team have the opportunity of learning from each other as well as from the supervisor and they also learn how to work within a team framework.

With a supervisor who is both a skilled clinician and a skilled teacher this approach, I believe, provides the students with a learning experience that is both enhanced and intensive and which is not available through individual supervision.

References

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