

To T for interest

To G + M + D (G , the magazine does not carry ads but it might be worth asking them if they would when this article comes out, or maybe accept a flier)

To D

to J and Iva

I have sent this article to Tess [REDACTED], editor of the BC magazine, Perspectives, edited from Prague for at least the Czech Republic. The article is partly in response to my having been invited to a conference of Moravian teachers in September)

I wrote first and asked Tess if she wanted something.

Joe made me aware of the mag. I do not know how far it reaches beyond Czech lands.

WHY THREATEN THE TEACHER WITH OBSERVATION?

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

Imagine a physicist who wants to observe the refraction of light in a pond. She wades into the water to get right close to what she wants to study. Unfortunately her boots stir up mud and leaves and the water becomes murky and clouded. Entering the pond has powerfully changed the way the pond is.

The "observer effect" created when an outsider trespasses onto the territory of a group can be very powerful in the minds of both the teacher and the students.

If the observer is the teacher's hierarchical superior the teacher is likely to be keenly aware of the person's presence. The teacher is likely to feel herself to be in a relational triangle :

ME

BOSS/TRAINER

GROUP

She is no longer in the normal two-way communication with her students. A certain intimacy is gone. A hidden relationship is made public by the observer's presence. In a very real sense the observer may become the protagonist in that lesson, in the minds of the teacher and the students.

If the observer is from right outside the school, as is the case with a Ministry Inspector, then there are many possible scenarios in the minds of the teacher and the students. With the representative of the State in their classroom the students wield a great deal of power: they may decide to show their teacher up or they may rally round and defend her, helping her give the best lesson she can. By stepping over the classroom threshold the inspector rules out the chance of witnessing a normal lesson. His or her presence radically changes the relational situation in the room.

BUT OBSERVATION IS NOT EVALUATION

Because people typically first met the phenomenon of classroom observation in the context of a superior observing an inferior it is, at first, hard to divorce the idea of observation from that of evaluation. And yet observation is, in its nature, clearly different from evaluation. The observer can usefully take accurate notes on one aspect

of a lesson and report on this aspect to the teacher at the end of the lesson, and this without technical moralising or advice-giving.

Let me offer you some ways in which an observer can non-judgementally see and hear a lesson:

- The observer may take accurate notes on the feet movements of one row of students over a 10 minute segment of the lesson.
 - They may note of the posture changes of two students the teacher has asked them to observe.
 - They may map the parts of the classroom the teacher spends time in during the lesson, so they can present her with a charting of her use of space over 45 minutes.
 - They may observe which students volunteer interventions and which students are cued to intervene over a 15 minute period. (this is not relevant, though, in cultures where nomination is the normal rule)
 - They can transcribe everything the teacher says when presenting a grammar point.
 - They may take notes on the way the teacher's voice changes tempo (speed) volume and pitch through the different phases of the lesson.
- etc....

If the observer does a good job and fully focuses on their task then the information collected will be accurate. In the post-lesson interview the observer reports their findings to the teacher, without comment, advice or evaluation.

This is not as easy as it may sound, since most people have an urge to do one or more of the following things, in place of just reporting observed facts:

- they project their own feelings
- they interpret
- they hallucinate and invent things they did not see or hear
- they select the parts of what they observed that make sense to them.
- they report in terms of what they feel was good and what was bad.

Accurate observation, reported without comment or evaluation, is much less threatening to most teachers than judgemental feedback. It may throw light on areas of the lesson the teacher was unaware of and enrich her knowledge of what was going on. Judgement-free feedback leaves the teacher the option of looking at the part of her lesson that has been mirrored back to her and drawing her own conclusions, or not, as she decides. The power of the mirror lies in its non-prescriptive silence.

And yet observation, even when clearly distinguished from evaluation, still invades the teacher's space and the students' space and modifies their interaction. More seriously it offers the observer his or her own mapping of the lesson. " Of course it does " I hear you object , " why should they observe if not to achieve their own mapping, their own impression of the lesson. ? "

And here we reach the central proposition of this article:

THE OUTSIDER'S MAPPING OF THE LESSON IS TRIVIAL

THE ONLY MAPPING THAT COUNTS IS THE TEACHER'S OWN

The easiest way a teacher can improve her teaching is from WITHIN her own vision of what she is doing. People charged with helping her to improve her work only need to understand the way SHE sees and feels her lesson. If they have their own mapping of the lesson this is a major handicap in looking down her end of the telescope. To understand her mapping they have to subordinate or forget their own. If this is the case then why should they waste time and effort sitting in the back of another person's classroom, disturbing the teacher's relationship with her students?

My proposal is the simple and time-saving one that DOS's and teacher trainers should stop wasting time viewing lessons. Instead they make available a good half hour shortly after the lesson when they can sit down and listen to the teacher's own account of her lesson. To help the teacher really tell the full story as she sees it, it is important for the trainer/DOS to be in as available a state of mind as possible. They should prepare to listen absorbently and empathetically, not critically and ferretingly. Clarification questions are fine but investigative, direction-giving questions are distortive of the speaker's need and intention.

It is useful for the listener to feedback to the speaker what they have understood, every now and then, to reassure the speaker that she is being understood fully and as she intends.

In short, the trainer/DOS listens in a Rogerian or counselling mode.

For the teacher who has just come out of her class this is a dynamic way of reviewing what went on. Since she knows she is free of trainer comment or criticism she can develop her own thought as the story unfolds, unbattered by praise or blame. (both praise and blame can be aggressive and sometimes invade the other's territory. Both can infantilise).

For the supervisor the 30 minutes listening is fully focused on understanding the lesson from the teacher's point of view. They do not have to fight their own preconceptions and schemata about the lesson since they did not see it. They learn about the lesson from inside the teacher's world, the only place from which lasting change or improvement is likely to come.

The supervisor has upped productivity by doing better work in 30 minutes than they would have done (had they observed the lesson) in 75 minutes.

THE COUNSELLING SUPERVISION MODEL

In the counselling and therapy worlds the supervisor rarely observes a therapy session since the "observer effect", mentioned above, would be ridiculously strong.

The supervisor is only interested in the counselling session through the eyes, ears and feelings of the counsellor. When listening to the counsellor describe a therapy session with a given client the supervisor has no own mapping of what the session was like and what the counsellor "should" have done, had they been the supervisor. The only mapping of the therapy session the supervisor has is the counsellor's. There is none of the confusion between two mappings that you get in the typical trainer-trainee feedback session after an observed lesson.

Since there are interesting parallels between teacher supervising and counsellor supervising, let us look at the ways some therapy supervisors structure a supervision. Hawkins and Shohet, 1989, suggest six areas of concern in a supervision, four of which I want to deal with here:

1. Reflection of the content of the therapy session

What actually happened? How did the clients present themselves? What did they choose to share etc.... The aim here is to help the counsellor to pay attention to the client, the choices the client is making etc...

2. Exploration of the strategies used by the counsellor

What interventions did the counsellor use, when and why? The supervisor may ask the counsellor to develop alternative strategies and to anticipate their possible outcomes. The main aim of this area of supervision is to increase the counsellor's choices.

3. Exploration of the relationship between the counsellor and the client.

The focus of attention here is on what is happening consciously and unconsciously between the counsellor and the client as people, at a symbolic and metaphoric level. The supervisor will pay a lot of attention to changes of voice and posture in the counsellor as they speak about the relationship.

4. Dealing with projections

Here the supervisor concentrates on whatever is still being carried by the counsellor, both consciously and unconsciously from the sessions with the client. There may, for example, be negative things from the counsellor's own previous experience that have been activated by the work with the client, but which have nothing to do with the client's problems. The counsellor needs to work through these, but not at the client's expense.

Thank you for reading this far (of course the assumption that you are a linear reader may well be wrong). To some readers the proposal I am making that trainers and DOS's should try "absent observation" and give the counselling supervisory model a whirl may seem far fetched . Some will say " to discuss a process seriously both people need to know what went on- if one person led the process the other must at least have witnessed it".

However I am pretty sure that trainees or recent trainees will be interested in the idea that they might have more power in the post-TP feedback sessions. Many people prefer the role of protagonist and story-teller to that of being the corpse on the table ready for evaluative dissection.

Some trainers, too will understand the problem of being caught between their own mapping of the lesson as they observed and the way the trainee maps the same territory. A few will see how the counselling supervisory model allows them an

alternative to this divided attention, and this conflict between their own egoism and their attempt to enter the other person's world.

My feeling is that it is more than time we looked at the way on-going training happens in fields parallel to teaching and took from such fields things which seem efficient, humane and renewing.

If any readers of Perspectives want to discuss any of these ideas directly with me, fax me at Pilgrims : or e-mail me on [http:// www.pilgrims.co.uk/](http://www.pilgrims.co.uk/).

You may want to discuss these thoughts with other people who read the magazine. If so, then write to the editor. She might publish you even without having observed you teach!

References:

Hawkins, P. and Shoet, R. 1989. Supervision in the helping professions. Milton Keynes, UK. Open University Press.