
PRACTICE NOTES

Serendipity – Surprises in critical reflection on supervision

Helen Simmons and Charmaine Wheeler

Helen Simmons is a Professional Clinician in the Massey University Social Work Programme. Charmaine Wheeler moved to New Zealand five years ago with her husband and completed her Bachelor of Social Work in 2008. She commenced study for her Masters degree at Massey in 2010. Helen was the external supervisor for Charmaine's fourth year placement, which was conducted at a New Zealand secondary school, having taught her in second and fourth year papers.

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Introduction

Do we know what happens in supervision and how it matters? Through the process of preparing a conference presentation on another kaupapa, a fieldwork supervisor discovers a story that her supervisee wants to tell. This paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge about fieldwork supervision from a supervisee perspective. It highlights the effects of using learning styles to encourage the integration of practice and theory with a social work student. The presentation utilises a dialogue format to mirror what unfolded when the supervisor asked her supervisee 'What was it about supervision that was so important to the success of the placement?'

How the presentation came about

Helen - We were busy preparing our paper 'Loitering with intent – a model of practice in a NZ secondary school' for the Asia Pacific Social Work Conference and I could not understand why Charmaine wanted to go on about the supervision so much. My focus was on wanting to share the fabulous work she had done on her community development-focused placement. Serendipitously I asked the question 'What was it about supervision that was so important to the success of the placement?'

Charmaine - I replied that the supervision was far more important to me than the actual placement. In fact over the course of putting our first presentation together I checked on my placement worksheets as I wanted to reflect on what supervision had meant to me at the time.

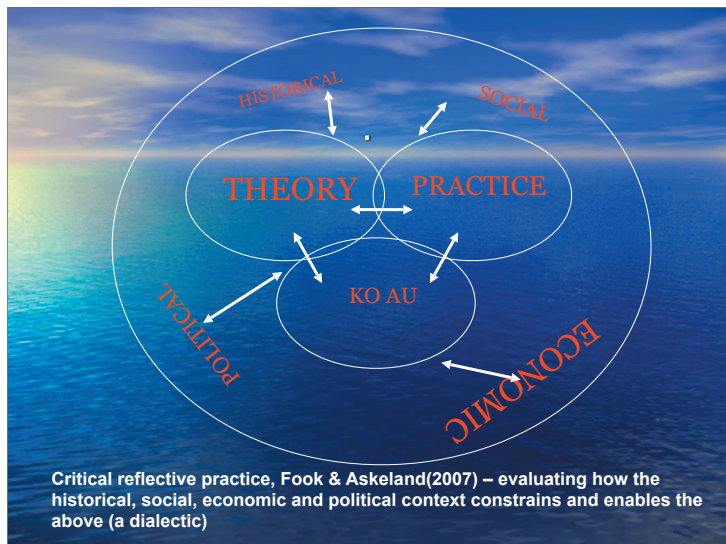
Helen - I was quite shocked when I heard this from Charmaine as I was fixated on the work she had done. I had already convinced her to record the story about the placement on video so I could show third year students further examples of community development. However,

as I listened, I realised there was another story to be told and another potential paper in the making!! I said to Charmaine 'Would you be interested in presenting another paper on this?' You could have pinched me when she responded without hesitation 'Well, yes I would.'

Charmaine - I think this surprised Helen as she knew I didn't like public speaking, I only did the previous conference because of our relationship. If it had been anyone else it would have been a resounding 'NO'!

Setting the scene

Helen - I teach the Reflective Practice session for the fourth year placement paper. Students need to complete the Honey & Mumford's (1986) learning style profile and identify their dominant learning style preference. They then get into groups to consider how this influences their way of reflecting. I explain the potential of reflective practice and how this can be enabled and constrained by environmental factors.



Charmaine – We were split by learning styles into three groups – pragmatists, theorists and reflectors. There can't have been any activists. The pragmatists sat and chatted about how we worked. One of the things we discussed was assignments. We said when an assignment was completed we hit a download button. This meant the information had been deleted from our memory. There are only a couple of assignments I remember doing. One was counting pedestrians for a social research assignment and second, the fourth year video assignments. If anyone ever asked me about a completed assignment I genuinely had no idea what I had written or even the question asked. During our discussion I looked around the room, the reflectors were all quietly reading. This made me laugh. It also made the learning concrete for me as it wasn't just an exercise. The groups were acting in ways that the learning profiles described.

Helen - While Kolb's (1984) theory of adult learning is constructed to suggest that learning begins with experience, my belief and experience suggest that people with a clearly dominant learning preference, focus the cycle of integrated learning at whatever part in the cycle that is dominant for them. Activists begin with experience because for them experience can be everything, whereas reflectors like to focus by mulling things over and having plenty of time to think. Theorists like to break things down into systematic parts before beginning their doing, whereas pragmatists just want to get on with it. No reading manuals and finding out how the safety gear on the flying fox works (as one student explained to me one

day) – just get on, give it a go and find out through that experience whether you got it right or not!!! Some of you are probably horrified at the recklessness of such a suggestion but I have witnessed such approaches out of the mouths of students! I believe that consideration of how we, and our students, approach learning and the process of integrating theory and practice is essential to working together effectively in supervision.

Charmaine - I was being externally supervised every two weeks by Helen. I had to be able to link theory to practice. I tried very hard to explain to Helen that I wasn't good at this but she didn't buy it and said I had to if I wanted to be a professional. It was then I realised I wasn't going to have an easy ride

Negotiating learning styles and the video story

I am a doer. I like to be doing things. I do first and think later. It's after I've done something I think about how it could be improved and what I could do better. I have found if I think about things too much before I do something I end up 'over thinking' the process.

Helen - I can clearly remember marking Charmaine's first video assignment where the task was to conduct a role-played interview and then analyse the skills utilised according to Heron (2001). Heron's framework classifies skills as to whether they are predominantly prescriptive, informative, catalytic, cathartic, confrontative or supportive.

Charmaine - In four years at university this was by far my worst assignment. When I first read the assignment my mind went into overdrive and my ears burnt with the awfulness of having to video myself. I thought 'a video?' I don't have a recorder. Even if I had one, how would I work it? Where would I film myself? How could I film myself? What was I to do for 15 minutes? The time would have to be full of a professional interview. I didn't think Helen would accept a singing and dancing routine to fill in time. Who would share this experience with me? Thankfully I had a friend who was in the same boat so we came to an agreement. We would interview each other for both videos on one condition. We would never mention it again. The date was set. I spent the night before making up questions I could ask and I was just hoping they would be enough, but what if Haley didn't talk much? Should I have extras just in case, but what? No more questions would come to mind.

Helen - For someone who doesn't 'do' theory Charmaine was making a real fist of preparing, breaking down a task, and getting well prepared, much like a theorist would! Didn't she just say that a pragmatist would just get on and do?

Charmaine - The day of filming our videos arrived and I went first. My mind was completely inflexible, my focus was my questions. I couldn't follow what Haley was saying so I couldn't ask follow-up questions. I was worried I would lose my place on the question sheet or that when she finally shut up, my next question wouldn't flow from what she had said. And finally, could I fail my degree now? After four years? Even though I'd managed to get through four years of social policy? The time eventually ended. Then home to analyse my work!! I put the DVD in my player, nothing. I tried my computer, nothing. This was the closest I've ever been to hyperventilating. I texted Haley, had she tried hers? No she hadn't but said she would. She texted back, nothing.

She tried the technicians at Massey, they had no ideas. Would I have to do all this again? My husband stepped in and said he'd take it to someone who had a video to see if they'd help 'Alright,' I said 'but please don't let them watch me!!' Apparently we hadn't formatted it at the end. A press of a button and there we were. Then writing it up! I typed up my assignment with horror; it was like a comedy of errors. I had fidgeted, scratched and kept looking at my watch. I sent it in with a heavy heart. Helen would have to view my humiliation.

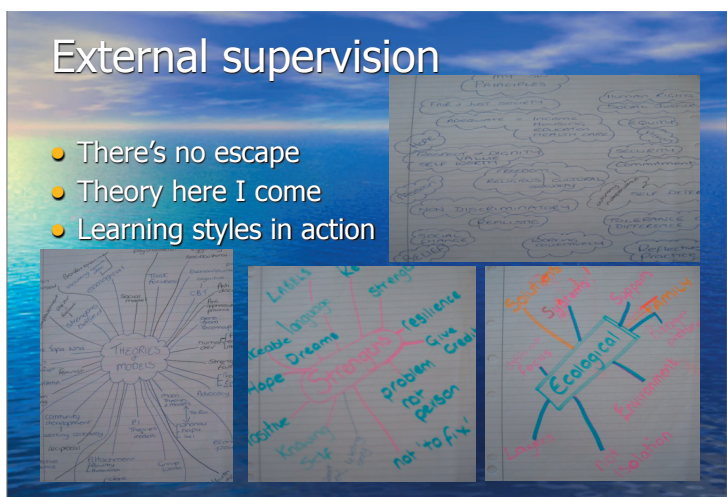
Helen - What became apparent to me in marking this assignment was that Charmaine had got so overwrought about her experience of the whole assignment that she let herself down by not actually answering the assignment question. While the interview may have appeared stilted I was not aware of the internal torture that Charmaine was experiencing while she was being videoed until I read her assignment.

So how does this link with supervision?

When Charmaine said to me in our first supervision session 'I have found if I think about things too much before I do something I end up over-thinking the process' I knew she was for real and this was not just a student trying to fob me off.

Charmaine - Helen was very good about this. She used the strengths-based approach and we negotiated that I could act first, and keep a record or diary of what I was doing. For my homework I had to link my actions to theories. I knew I could work in this way. So after the first session I knew two things. One, Helen wasn't going to be fobbed off; apparently she's clever and tough. The second was that if I wanted to pass I had to make sure I did my work and come prepared to the sessions. I was dealing with a woman who wouldn't be intimidated by my verbal skills, quick wit or charm!

So I went home and got all my social work extra-mural folders out. I looked through every one and listed all the theories and models we had learned about. I checked through assignments to see if any were mentioned in them. Next to the theory I put some of their key points down. It was a lot of work, but I had to do it. A few times every week I would think about what I'd done and I would methodically go through my list of theories. I would then write a new list with my action then the theories that fitted in with it.



Helen - Alongside this experience with Charmaine I had a parallel experience. I was asked to supervise a student who appeared to be having a learning style clash with her fieldwork

educator. This student was a strong reflector and needed appreciation that her reflective time was not 'doing nothing' but important to her preparation and analysis before she began a particular task. This experience, alongside others in my professional supervision practice, has highlighted to me the importance of understanding just how the worker prefers to attack learning based on their learning style and to try to make allowances for this in terms of how it sits with my own activist/ reflector style.

External supervision

Charmaine - I found that I much preferred external supervision. It was a good chance to link my theories and practice, though I wouldn't have believed that at the start! It was good to get confirmation that I was on the right track. On a one-to-one I wasn't threatened. It made it slightly more comfortable for me to talk as I felt supported. External supervision gave me a great opportunity to reflect on what was happening in the school environment.

Worldview

Helen and I are both married to teachers so we appreciate that their focus with students is quite different from social work. We compared notes on how teachers speak about students. I could clarify points with Helen. She helped me discuss issues, making me think

and reflect on what was happening for me. I was given homework and this was always discussed at the next session. My reflection with Helen was far deeper than it would have been if I had been reflecting on my own.

Helen - Hearing this was quite affirming for me. In the final section on the teaching preparation for

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Question

- Kögler(1996) – 'How can we be both situated in our contexts and sufficiently distanced from them to be truly critical at the same time?'

reflective practice I use the work of Kögler (1996). I ask the students who will be their relative outsider on placement helping them to critically reflect on their own context while being in it; this need not necessarily be the supervisor.

Charmaine - As part of supervision Helen gave me other opinions to consider. She was clever enough to

A slide with a blue and green background. The title "Kögler's ideas" is written in white at the top. Below it are three bullet points in white text.

Kögler's ideas

- Communication with a relative 'outsider' Kögler(1997(b))
- Who could be my relative 'outsider' while on placement?
- eg. Kaumatua, Colleague, Supervisor, client, fellow student, Heron, Saleeby....

challenge me and this enhanced my respect for her. Because of this I upped my game. I had to be prepared for my supervision sessions. They gave me things to think about when I was back at school. I felt I could be honest with her as there were no other conflicts. It was not her workplace and I was not talking about her job so it was not personal. It was a good format for me to work and reflect. It gave me a chance to be guided through the process. All my previous supervision had been with my line manager, which meant I went in with a list of jobs done and came out with a list of jobs to do!

Worksheets

As I said previously while preparing for our last presentation I went back to look at my worksheets as I didn't feel I was expressing myself clearly to Helen about how supervision helped me. Again I had pressed the download button so had to go back and look at my work. Supervision was mentioned on every worksheet. In fact by the time I got to the supervision worksheet I had to write 'please refer to worksheet number such and such'.

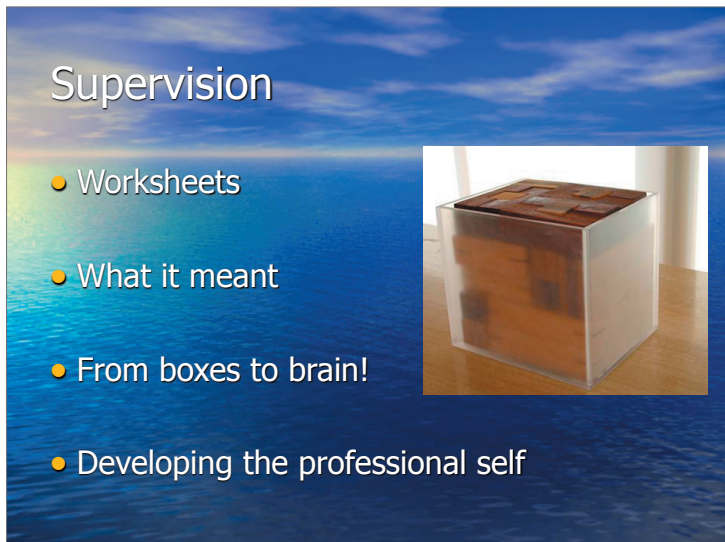
My supervision with Helen gave me confidence. I enjoyed her intelligence and enthusiasm and I trusted and valued her opinion. I wasn't an overly confident academic student. I didn't party madly or wait until the last minute to do assignments. I had to work long hours just to pass.

Sense of self

The world of academia wasn't easy for me. I have good verbal skills but my written work was not as good. Through my supervision I realised this was ok. It helped me realise I was a doer and this was ok. Previously I had seen myself as 'not academic'.

I thought of my work as 'instinctive' and not based in theory. In my mind my intuitive work and theory were in two distinct boxes, not related to each other. Theory was in a box of what you learn at university, stuff you have to know to be a social worker. Supervision helped to bring the two boxes together in a really easy way that made me think 'what has been my problem with this?' It all clicked. It was like supervision put a brain in me. I realised I was working

from basic human rights and that theory doesn't have to be complex with five theories working together at the same time! Supervision helped me clarify my beliefs and values around my practice. When I reflect now on my supervision sessions I realise I enjoyed them



because they were stimulating, fun, challenging and honest. It's been very hard to explain why I found them so important. If I'm honest it was because they made me feel like I got it, they made me feel clever, as though I finally knew what I was talking about. I would be reluctant to take a job where I could not have an external supervision. I found this integral to my success working in a difficult and stressful environment

Discussion questions

How might learning styles be used to aid a student's sense of confidence and competence? When might this not be OK?

Helen - It would appear that my recommendation that Charmaine diary her tasks and then record what theories she believed informed her actions was instrumental in transforming her view that she could indeed 'do' theory. Charmaine also reminded me that when we had our extramural contact courses this had been another opportunity for me to gain a sense of her worldview, and the values that were important to her. This also gave me confidence in giving her the OK just 'to do'. Charmaine was a mature student with considerable life and work experience. I knew she would not be reckless and knew to check her plans with the Principal.

Charmaine - To be fair, I did have a plan of attack. I always had or have an overview of what I'm doing and the information that has to be gathered or delivered. As part of my Field of Practice paper I completed an assignment on Social Workers in Schools. This research was very useful as I gained insight and ideas about initiatives that could be implemented in a school. I ran ideas past the Principal to get approval, just the broad outline not the detail of how. As initiatives were being set up I kept in touch with senior managers so someone knew what I was up to. As I was thinking about the 'how' it led me to name the theories that informed my 'doing'.

Helen - Developmental factors have a role to play here. The work of Van Kessel and Haan (1993), and Brown and Bourne (1996) acknowledge the role that life experience plays in modifying the supervision style to best meet the needs of the supervisee. I would not use the same approach with a young student with a pragmatist learning style. Simply allowing the student to 'do' without first checking the safety concerns in regard to the plan of attack could be deemed professionally negligent. Previous knowledge (of younger students proceeding to seek interventions on behalf of clients without first getting them to consider all the ethical implications of their plan for all stakeholders with their Fieldwork Educator) serves as a caution that the learning-style approach is not a panacea for all supervision. An external supervisor is not in a position to do this checking. Knowing the student assists in this judgment call. My previous contact with Charmaine gave me confidence in her personal wisdom in approaching situations.

What enables or constrains finding out what really matters in student supervision on placement?

The power dynamic and assessment role of the supervisor may hinder the student in sharing what really matters. In this instance I was overly focused on task and content and did not spend time unpacking the meaning of the work and/or the supervision, this is despite it being part of my practice framework. When structuring sessions you need to allow time

for 'what does this mean for you?' Could I have known this earlier? What difference would it have made if I did? Celebration is part of my supervision framework but by not knowing what the supervision meant for Charmaine, an opportunity for celebration was missed.

Charmaine - I already had a good relationship with Helen; it changed and developed through supervision. When the idea of our first presentation was mentioned I was surprised as I still don't know what the fuss was with my placement and why people would want to hear about it, but I did it because I thought it would help Helen. I also did a video for her community development paper, and she had no idea what that meant! I have now co-presented two papers with Helen as part of giving back through re-sharing the experiences of a situation that changed my views of myself professionally.

Helen - I am so pleased I know about this now. It is wonderful to be a part of such a transforming experience in someone else's life. I have my own experience of this when I first came into feminism, when I realised I wasn't dumb but rather had a whole different way of knowing and processing information that didn't mean I was dumb, in fact it meant I was quite smart. I appreciate what this kind of transformation means for a person and how liberating it can be. It is great to savour this and celebrate its occurrence.

Could this happen in internal supervision i.e. the critically reflective process? What would make that possible?

Charmaine - From my perspective the important issues that stand out in regard to internal supervision are: I cannot always be honest in supervision as I may be discussing the supervisor's work environment. This can be especially hard when the supervisor is also the line manager. Much of what I might discuss can reflect on that person's work. This makes it a lot more complex and difficult to do. My contribution in the workplace, for better or worse, affects their workload if they are my internal supervisor. In internal supervision if I do not want to talk about theory I could easily deflect the conversation onto something else. In external supervision for a fieldwork placement the focus of supervision is the linking theory with practice so there was no getting away with it. I believe it is important to have both. Not everybody has the skills to be an effective student supervisor. From my perspective an internal supervisor needs to have a clear sense of their teaching role in supervision and a clear commitment to the student's learning needs. We are not just there as a work horse. They need to demonstrate integrity around the core values in social work so I can feel comfortable in discussing what really matters and that it is making a difference to my learning in supervision.

Questions for consideration

The oral presentation of this material at conferences has raised the following questions for consideration:

How might learning styles be used to aid students' sense of confidence and competence?
When might this not be OK?

What enables or constrains finding out what really matters in student supervision on placement?

Could this happen in internal supervision i.e. the critically reflective process? What would make that possible?

This paper provides insight on fieldwork supervision from a supervisee perspective and the supervisor's learning from this. It highlights the effects of using learning styles to encourage the integration of practice and theory with a social work student. At Massey University we are now making sure that fieldwork educators know the language of learning styles and practice frameworks. When students have been empowered with these understandings it is important that they and their supervisors have a shared understanding of the significance of this language.

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