

A collaborative enquiry into a Ph.D. researcher and supervisor relationship.

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A paper presented at AERA, March 1997, in Chicago, U.S.A.

## Context

Jackie Delong registered as a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Bath in September 1996 to carry out an action research enquiry into her professional life as a Superintendent of Schools in Brant County, Ontario. The discussant has a copy of the first research report produced by Jackie in February 1997. This paper was submitted to a Validation Group at the Act, Reflect, Revise Conference held in Brant County 27/28 Feb. 1997. The purpose of the Group is to offer constructive comments on the report as part of the process of testing the validity of the researcher's claims to know her own educational development and of helping to take the enquiry forward. We will focus our collaboration on the events surrounding the Validation Group within which we both experienced ourselves as living contradictions.

The process of constructing the paper includes Jack's comments on his views of his work as a Supervisor before the group met, his learning from the shock of recognising himself as a living contradiction in the way he set the ground rules for the validation meeting. Jackie's emotional and intellectual responses to the experiences in the validation meeting and finally a collaboration on how to take Jackie's enquiry forward (and maybe even Jack 's learning forward!).

Jack produced the following comments two days before the group met.

How do I make sense of my influence as a supervisor of a Ph.D. researcher and her action research programme?

The sense I make of my influence is itself influenced by my history of supervising research degrees. I want to share my understanding by referring to the educational values I imagine I bring into my supervision and by referring to the evidence, from Jackie Delong's first research report submitted to her validation group on 27th February 1997, which I think demonstrates some of my influences in supervision.

### 1) Placing 'I' at the centre of the research

In supervising action research programmes I am conscious of the tension which all my students have faced when I encourage them to place their 'I' at the centre of their research and to use the personal pronoun in their research question. The titles of the five theses below will illustrate what I mean through the inclusion of 'I' and 'My' in the enquiries:

Hayward, Paul. (1993) How do I improve my pupils' learning in design and technology. M.Phil. University of Bath.

Eames, Kevin. (1995) How do I, as a teacher and an educational action-researcher, describe and explain the nature of my professional knowledge. Ph.D. University of Bath.

Evans, Moyra. (1995) An action research enquiry into reflection in action as part of my role as a deputy headteacher. Ph.D. Kingston University.

Hughes, Jacqui. (1996) Action Planning and Assessment in Guidance Contexts: How can I understand and support these processes? Ph.D. University of Bath.

Laidlaw, Moira. (1996) How can I create my own living educational theory as I offer you an account of my educational development? Ph.D. University of Bath (under examination).

The title of Jackie's first research report 'My Learnings through Action Research', demonstrates my 'insistence' that researchers whose action research I agree to supervise, acknowledge that they are studying their own learning in their social contexts as they work at improving their professional practice.

## 2) Retaining integrity in I-You Relations

The second influence can be understood in relation to Martin Buber's (1923) poetic communication of the nature of the 'I-You' relation. In my educative relationships with my students I try to embody, what Tony Ghaye (Ghaye & Wakefield, 1993) calls ontological authenticity in valuing my own integrity in a way which does not violate the integrity of my students. I try to communicate with my students in a way which they recognise that I will subordinate my own views to their particular educational needs. The nature of this influence was shown by Peggy Kok (Whitehead, 1993, p. 170), in my supervision of her Master's dissertation 'The Art of an Educational Enquirer' (Kok 1991), where I hold back from imposing my own educational values as she works at defining her own.

In relation to Jackie DeLong's first research report I think the evidence is clear that she is insisting on expressing herself within an I-You relation in acknowledging the importance in her account of her learning of direct communications with the 'You' of her supervisor:

"The only other major point to look at is how I address my readers. In particular, you will remark that except for the introduction, I address "you". The "you" is Jack Whitehead. I have written this paper as a series of letters similar to the style of Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles (1995) ".. we offer our correspondence as windows into our thinking and responses to our roles as writers and as examples of our ongoing dialogical reflection on our practices" .

I need to do this because of my need to show the importance of the direct relationships with those I am working with. You may find this alienating because you may feel excluded from an acknowledgment of the importance of my relation with you. I need your advice on how to communicate the importance of the personal within a professional research report." (DeLong ,J.1997)

### 3) INFLUENCING THE VALIDITY OF CLAIMS TO KNOW

One of the main influences I intend to have with research students is that of enabling them to develop their confidence in the validity of their claims to know what they are doing in their professional practice. I focus on the decision recommended by Polanyi (1958) to understand the world from their own point of view as individual's claiming originality and exercising their judgement with universal intent. The important epistemological criteria are the unit of appraisal and the standards of judgement. Each researcher is encouraged to understand that the unit of appraisal is the explanation of their own professional learning. This unit is clearly shown in the account of Jackie's own learning. The standards of judgement are more complex. I have been influenced in the four criteria used by Habermas (1976) in his theory of communicative action where he talks about the importance of:

- i) the comprehensibility of the communication or account
- ii) justifying propositional claims to know in relation to evidence
- iii) explicating the normative (values) background of the account.
- iv) judging the authenticity of the account - he says that we could only judge the authenticity in terms of the individual's interaction through time to see if the individual truly believes what they claim.

There is an indication on page 18 of the report that Jackie is becoming more aware of the importance of providing evidence to justify the claims being made:

"First, this is a very good leader who doesn't like the superintendent interfering and who is very supportive of his staff. No problem with either of these. Second there is a level of trust between us that allows us to discuss a delicate topic and to work it out. Did I affect behaviour. Yes. Was the relationship maintained? Yes. Will it improve things for children. Yes. (I know, show me the evidence)".

### 4) INFLUENCING COGNITIVE RANGE AND CONCERN THROUGH THE WRITINGS OF OTHERS.

I do attempt to influence the learning of those I supervise by encouraging an engagement with the ideas of others who may have useful insights in relation to taking the enquiry forward. An example of this influence can be seen on page 8 of the report, 'Building a Collaborative Community of Learners'. In a previous draft I asked Jackie to refer to the ideas of those who had influenced her in terms of her collaborative enquiry with the Principals. The next draft contained some four lines of reference to the work of those who had influenced her. I asked for an outline of the ideas which had influenced her. The final draft (pp.8/9) contains a description of these ideas.

5) Acknowledging the Supervisor's learning - reflecting on my learning after the validation meeting 1/3/97.

In developing a research-based approach to professionalism in education I am often surprised at what I am learning in the process of supervision. Because my research students do not often come to a tutorial with the intention of 'teaching' me something, I do think it is important to acknowledge that I am learning something important from my students.

From Jackie, I am learning about the importance of seeing one's actions and enquiries in relation to a 'system' responsibility in education. As Jackie shows me her learning as she engages with the work of Andre Dolbec, Lorraine Savoie-Zajc (1995) and with the Principals in a Collaborative Action Research Project, I am learning to take more account of such understandings of 'systems' in order to more fully integrate action research approaches to professional development within the institutional contexts in which the enquiries are taking place.

I am also learning more about the importance of 'tolerating' if not fully 'accepting', 'embracing' or 'integrating' relationships between the personal and the professional. In constructing an authentic account of an individual's professional learning, I am seeing more clearly the ways in which it is important to acknowledge and integrate personal experiences which significantly influence professional practice.

For example, in the validation meeting of the 27 Feb 1997, I can be seen on a video-tape of the session, explaining to the group that we would focus on the text and that the aim was not to focus on the writer of the report but on what was actually written.

However, in the introduction to the report Jackie DeLong had explained the importance of relationships in her enquiry. In establishing the 'ground rules' for the validation exercise as focusing on the narrative of her educational development as 'text', I totally denied the implications of her own insistence on the importance of relationships. Another example in which I experience myself as a living contradiction!

6) Jackie's Intellectual and Emotional Responses

While feeling unprepared for the process of the validation group meeting, except for the fact that I had heard Jack make a passing comment some months earlier that this was not to be some bloody love-in, I was surprised by my reaction to it. I was frustrated by being unable to engage in the dialogue or ask questions of clarification and felt totally divorced from the proceedings which were attending to my thoughts and learnings. Let me get this straight: MY thoughts, MY learnings, MY words but I'm not there! Only the text exists.

I felt "beat up and confused". Here am I - Miss calm, cool, collected, always in control - watching myself from the outside and feeling totally helpless and disempowered. Excuse me, but didn't I say right at the beginning of the paper that the relationships were of paramount importance in my practice and in the process of reporting? I guess I wasn't clear enough!

To add to the tension that I was holding inside at the end of the hour, I had allowed no time to talk it out nor any other means of release. I needed to vent and the show had to go on. Also it's not good to beat up your supervisor in a public place. So I continued what is not an unusual schedule of 2 additional consecutive meetings and for the next day and a half, the running of a provincial Action Research conference and a parallel video-taping with all the expected continuous pressures.

How could I have managed this better? I could have asked more questions of Jack to clarify in my mind at least the process if not the content. I know full well that I am a holistic thinker and need to conceptualize the process so I can deal with the pieces. I could have set my mind and emotional responses more realistically if I'd better prepared myself for criticism . I could have and should have allowed time for dialogue and release of tension after the session.

I was, however, able to recognize in the validation group meeting that of the eight people there, only one understood what I did as a superintendent. That person was my boss the director who had been a superintendent and who still held a similar position. That meant that I was failure as a communicator and I thought I was good at it. In that text I had not communicated what I do to anyone who had not done it. I guess I, too, am a living contradiction.

I must say that reviewing the videotape on the 1st March was actually therapeutic and very insightful and the supervisor remained intact!

#### 7) Agreeing on ways forward

We then reviewed the video-tape of the validation meeting on the 2nd March, Jack jotted down what he perceived as the constructive responses by the participants and we are agreed that Jackie will aim to strengthen her next research report in the following ways:

- 1) To draw an overview of what the job of Superintendent entails in a way which can be understood by those who have not experienced the job.

2) To set the next report within the voices of others in relation to her own.

3) To attempt to work from the connectors to the learning rather than the other way round. By connectors Jackie is referring to the values or principles which help her to see and understand what she does as a integrated whole, within which she can see the relationships between the different parts and which she uses to explain her professional learning and educational development. These connectors include:

i) developing relationships,

ii) quality of communication,

iii) a curriculum which is focused on learning outcomes, all students, integrated learning, excellence and equity, accountability and standards, collaboration,

iv) sensitivity to positional power,

v) increasing the quality of involvement - including parents/community members/students/principals/teachers/

support staff/board members/ senior administrative staff,

vi) the nature of collaboration,

vii) building a culture of reflection which includes teacher research with a focus on improving the quality of student learning,

viii) creating a context of support for risk taking,

ix) honouring teacher professionalism and acknowledging the values in what they do.

These connectors have been produced as a list.

In the next report Jackie will be showing the relationships between the connectors as she develops them as her living, professional standards of practice. She will show how her standards of practice can be understood as their meanings emerge and develop both in her professional practice and in her account of her educational development as an educator and Superintendent of Schools.

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