Response

AN EMERGING SCHOLARSHIP OF PRACTICE

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I speak for many who are grateful to Art Blumberg for his wisdom, for his many provocative ideas over the years, and perhaps most important, for his unselfish friendship. His comments in “Toward a Scholarship of Practice” on the ill-fitting nature of scientific knowledge in supervision and teaching and his plea for developing a scholarship of practice are compelling. The work that many of his ideas are drawn from, School Administration as Craft, is seminal. I was inspired by the book and felt privileged to write the Foreword.

Nonetheless, “Toward a Scholarship of Practice” is a bit anticlimactic. Had it appeared eight or even five years ago, it might have caused a stir. Today, I imagine, it hardly elicits a yawn among the many who are hard at work in restructuring supervisory theory and practice. At the heart of this restructuring is replacing the now discredited notion that supervisory knowledge exists separately from person and context and directly applies to practice with a view of knowledge that takes two general forms: metaphorical and personal.

As metaphor, the standard for judging knowledge validity changes from truthfulness to usefulness. The test of knowledge usefulness is whether it results in startling insight on the one hand and changes in the practical theories of supervisors and teachers on the other. The purpose of useful knowledge is not to prescribe but to inform intuition and professional judgment.

Personal knowledge, as Blumberg points out, focuses on accumulated self-understandings and personal skills and, I would add, the bundles of assumptions and beliefs and correlated cognitive maps of how the worlds of supervision, teaching, and schooling work that function as governing mindscapes. These mindscapes program the actions and behaviors of teachers and supervisors. Metaphorical and personal knowledge constitute the engine that fuels the process of reflection and decision making as teachers and supervisors solve problems in the light of particular contexts.

1Arthur Blumberg, School Administration as a Craft: Foundations of Practice (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1989).
The key to present-day theorizing about supervision is trying to figure out how the process of reflection-in-action unfolds (Blumberg's book helps) and how to inform it. The works of Schön and Argyris and Schön on reflective practice represent important breakthroughs. Schön, for example, argues compellingly that the heart of professional practice is not "theory" but the process of "knowing in action":

Practitioners of such professions as law, management, teaching, and engineering deal often with uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict. The nonroutine situations of practice are at least partly indeterminate and must somehow be made coherent. Skillful practitioners learn to conduct frame experiments in which they impose a kind of coherence on messy situations and thereby discover consequences and implications of their chosen frames. From time to time, their efforts to give order to a situation provoke unexpected outcomes—"back talk" that gives the situation a new meaning. They listen and reframe the problem. It is this ensemble of problem framing, on-the-spot experiment, detection of consequences and implications, back talk and response to back talk that constitutes a reflective conversation with the materials of a situation—the designlike artistry of professional practice. Schön believes that this process is learnable and coachable but not teachable—a position I suspect is close to Blumberg's. Schön's work is important not for providing answers but for providing the kind of alternative mind-scape that has resulted in high-yield thinking, inquiry, and dialogue on understanding, developing, and using practical theories of action. A summary of his ideas and reactions from others appears in the form of a symposium in the Fall 1989 issue of this Journal.

Shulman and Tom both give somewhat different but equally important concepts of reflection. Significant work in Britain has studied teachers as researchers of their own practice. Elliott, for example, reports that reflection and improvement are the likely results when teachers derive their own theories of practice from studying their teaching. Supervision, in this mold, is a process of helping teachers to understand, test, and reconstruct their own

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theories of teaching. Whitehead proposes a “living educational theory” as an alternative to scientific theory construed as a set of propositional relationships. This theory would take a dynamic and living form, with the content changing as conversation develops among those involved with its creation. This living theory is not something captured in a book or workshop or on instruments but is “an organic view ... which is living in the public conversations of those constituting professional practice.” It is thus growing in the living relationship between teachers, supervisors, students, and others.

Other Europeans seem also to be moving in this direction. In their useful book, Promoting Reflective Teaching: Supervision in Action, Norwegians Handal and Lauvås point out that good supervisory theory is practical, not scientific.

Every teacher possesses a “practical theory” of teaching which is subjectively the strongest determining factor in her educational experience. Counseling [supervision] with teachers must consequently originate in each teacher's practical theory, seeking to foster its conscious articulation, and aiming to elaborate it and make it susceptible to change.

The term “theory” commonly refers to an interrelated set of hypotheses or statements which can be used to explain or understand phenomena or situations or to predict what will happen when certain conditions or premises exist. This is the scientific use of the term. “Practical theory” refers to a person's private, integrated but ever-changing system of knowledge, experience, and values which is relevant to teaching practice at any particular time. This means, first of all, that “theory” in this sense is a personal construct which is continuously established in the individual through a series of diverse events (such as practical experience, reading, listening, looking at other people’s practice), which are mixed together or integrated with the changing perspective provided by the individual’s values and ideals. “Practical theory” may be regarded as a “complex bundle” of all these elements.

Our personal experience, transmitted or mediated knowledge experiences, and values are the three governing variables in practical theories of supervision and teaching. Handal and Lauvås’s work involves developing supervisory strategies that can help teachers develop, critique, and change their practical theories and ultimately their teaching practice.

In an approach similar to Blumberg's, the management theorist Mintzberg tackles the problem of reflection and the bonding together of “head,

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6Ibid., p. 9.
heart, and hand" to produce something by using the metaphor "crafting strategy." Another line of inquiry in this same vein seeks to understand and use the process of interpretation. Relying on hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, and the role of metaphor, the issue is how to go from brute to sense data, from picturing what is to discovering and disclosing what events mean to teachers and supervisors.

How does meaning change as metaphor changes? How does this process frame our practical theories of action? What are the consequences for understanding and improving teaching? The works of Garman, Holland, Zimpher and Howey, and Smyth are examples. The works on chaos and loose coupling and culture are also important because they broaden the discussion of professional practice from the inward reflective process to the sociological, organizational, and political context in which reflection must take place. Finally, the moral dimension in supervision and teaching probes still another important aspect of theories of practice.

All this work seeks to establish the sort of scholarship of practice that Blumberg advocates and is developed enough to take us beyond the plea for "toward" to "emerging." For me, a good theory of practice needs to measure up to four criteria. It should fit the frequently messy, nonlinear, subjective, and loosely connected world of supervisory and teaching practice. It should

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17Thomas J. Sergiovanni, "Developing a Practical Theory of Educational Administration" (paper presented at the National Congress on Educational Management, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg, September 1989).
be useful to Bill and Barbara (practicing supervisors and teachers). It should be good as well as effective, and if it can’t be both, it should be good rather than effective. It should possess aesthetic qualities, or as Mintzberg notes, it should be beautiful.

On the question of a community of scholars, I suggest that Bolin asked the wrong people. Her respondents were the Blumbergs and Sergiovannis of supervision. In many respects, we represent the “over the hill” gang. Had she surveyed the new generation of scholars (for example only—Peter P. Grimmett, Carl D. Glickman, Patricia E. Holland, James F. Nolan, Nancy Zimpher, Lee Goldsberry, John Elliott, John Smyth, Ed Pajek, Paulette Lemma, Joyce Killian, Alan R. Tom, Gillian Cook, Helen M. Hazl, Cheryl G. Sullivan—among others) and had she been a respondent in her own study, I believe the response pattern would be different. I suspect she would have found that these scholars are comfortable building a new supervision, are spirited in their work, and are optimistic about the future.

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19 Ibid. Language is one important dimension of beauty. Contrast, for example, the teaching and supervisory issues that come to mind when classrooms are viewed as “instructional delivery systems” with “learning communities.”