

Developing skill ambitions

By
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This paper addresses some of the dilemmas and contradictions experienced in teaching and supervising narrative therapy within a western educational institution's culture of assessment and describes a supervision structure used to address the predicament. The paper also takes up the ideas of Michel Foucault about the constitution of self as moral agent and uses these ideas to elaborate the author's learning aims and a path towards them.

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I completed a form for a US family therapy journal yesterday, which required me to fill in my name, job title and the following instruction: 'State Degree'. Not 'What would you like to tell us about yourself?' or even 'Do you have any relevant qualifications?' but "State degree". Embarrassed and slightly humiliated, I was forced to confess to not having earned a degree and wondered what privileges or opportunities this might now bar me from. As a degree-less family therapist, I have experienced a frequent failure to measure up in peer settings. One family therapist said, 'You wouldn't get anywhere in my country'. I felt myself shrinking before her eyes as I realised I'm not properly qualified at all.

How is it I'm not asked about my practice skills? Or the experience that people who consult me have? Such concerns count for less, it seems, than whether I have a degree or not.

Degree-free, I have a keen interest in the culture of evaluation through categorisation. This interest is encouraged by my participation in university-based family therapy courses. I agree to mark and evaluate written and practice performance and, in doing, support the culture that has measured me and found me wanting.

Marking written work is, I find, unsatisfying and somewhat distasteful. I try to frame comments about written work in terms of what I like and why I like this - avoiding the notion of what is 'good'. But this still doesn't escape the measurement of performance according to normative criteria and the conclusions of personal adequacy or inadequacy. Constructing trainings that (a) look attractive to potential students, (b) appeal to agency managers as worth funding their staff for, (c) fit with people's cultural notions of what might contribute to new career opportunities, and (d) fit with narrative practices and principles, has been a dilemma that I have, thus far, only managed by compromise.

Feedback about family therapy practice is different. When I became interested in narrative approaches to supervision, I tried to just comment on practices I liked. This, I thought, was working well enough until I invited one training group to comment on my practice and added 'and don't leave out the critical edge'. They immediately replied that I always left out the critical edge in my comments so why were they being asked to include it? I attempted to justify this differential practice by referring to the different positions we held in relation to evaluating each other in the university

hierarchy, the different amount of licence we might feel and different influence our evaluations might have. But they were right that I was asking for something that I wasn't willing to give back.

Following this, I decided to try and be much more specific and collaborative about feedback whilst trying to keep an 'edge'. In relationships where I offer supervision, I have started interviewing the supervisee about the particular skills they most want to develop and establishing steps on the paths to these skills that might be visible to an observer. (I have found that therapist's skill ambitions are invariably relevant to typical course requirements.)

These interviews are informed by ideas from the 'statement of position map' (White 2002) and 'remembering conversations' (White 1997).

A typical such interview might include the following question areas:

- a) What are your current hopes and commitments in relation to possible skill developments? What names would you give to these? What are the connections between these?
- b) What might be the effects of these skill practices on you and on those who consult you?
- c) Why are these effects important to you? What is your own experience of such effects?
- d) What is the social history of these hopes and commitments in your life? How might we make them more visible within this supervision relationship?

The conversations that flow from these sorts of questions give me a richer appreciation of the significance of the steps trainees take. As I watch a trainee work, I try to keep a critical focus on their practice and the ways I see their skills in action. I note examples of other practices that may also reflect their hopes and commitments. I aim to check in before each supervision session to update my understanding of their skill ambitions. At the end of a 'live' supervision meeting, I want to undertake a brief collaborative evaluation of their progress towards identified skill ambitions and whether the meeting has been 'transporting' of these ambitions and of who they are. In future, I hope to experiment with a practice where the families are invited to observe these brief discussions (for discussion of a similar practice see Freedman & Combs 2002).

One person said she wanted to develop 'aimlessness' in her practice. We discussed how a more aimless or less 'agendered' discussion might look and how skills in following feedback might be relevant to her hopes for her practice. I noticed some developments in these specific skills of 'aimlessness' in her very next interview. Another person said he wanted to keep the 'statement of position map' more to the forefront of his thinking. We made a list of the kinds of interests, questions and question sequences that might reveal progress in this area. His next interview, in my view, gave little opportunity for such questions but we reviewed this and renewed the commitment for next time.

Of course, any list of skill ambitions or possible 'mile-markers' on the way to achieving these ambitions will only be provisional and temporary but does:

- a) give a focus for measurement that provides feedback 'with edge';

- b) provide a collaborative and transparent structure to support a person's specific skill developments;
- c) encourage the revisiting of themes and the consequent acknowledgement and marking of progress;
- d) provide some fit with an academic culture of evaluation, whilst supporting self-directed skill developments and collaborative evaluation.

Developing a modest practice

This practice with others has encouraged me to develop my own skill ambitions. My ambition is to develop 'a modest practice' for myself. This aim emerges from the many examples of modesty that I have witnessed in others' practice and from the effects that I have seen and experienced. It also comes from experiencing myself as having responsibility for the effects of my practice on those who consult me in my work, and reflects my interest in relational ethics rather than rule-based ethics (Freedman & Combs 2002).

It has been interesting for me to map onto this ambition, Foucault's ideas about the four aspects in the constitution of self as a moral agent³. My practice is 'that which I feel I have to manage well', and so represents the first of these aspects: ethical substance. The second aspect, 'mode of subjection', consists of the things I refer to in order to judge the management of my practice.. I use the values of a de-centred practice, my experience of these values in action including ideas from books, videos and observation, and I measure my practice against these principles. The third aspect, 'asceticism', refers to the self and relationship-forming activities that contribute to a modest practice - or the means by which a modest practice can be achieved. This has included:

- a) Telling selected colleagues of this practice ambition and inviting them to help me review progress towards it. By placing this ambition in a more public domain, I raise my consciousness of it.
- b) Taking more time, during meetings, for reviewing and acknowledging, e.g. more time spent reviewing the things they tell me are important, more time attending to people who arrive with minority agendas (typically children who didn't want to come or fathers who would prefer a different kind of help), and more frequently asking family members how the meeting is going for them.
- c) Developing briefer and more focused questions.
- d) Asking the team about cues that I seemed to pass by, but that could have orientated me to different question areas.
- e) Starting meetings more punctually. I have tended to think that so long as I start meetings within 15 minutes of the scheduled time and apologise for my tardiness, this is acceptable. I want to reduce this to 5 minutes.

- f) Acting with more confidence. This might seem contradictory to modest practice, but I have noticed that when I feel confident in my practice I can more easily move to a de-centred position. A more modest practice does not mean a more compromising practice where narrative practice structures or processes are sacrificed. Rather, it is one that, with trainees and with families, readily clarifies the structures and principles I try to work to, how I thus hope things can be done, and invites others to join me in this. At the beginning of two recently established training clinics, I have both used and got more in touch with confidence by clarifying and establishing the ethics and principles I try to keep in mind and the meeting structures I follow. Such a clarification might centre me at the time but establishes a de-centring structure and ethos for future work.

The fourth aspect, 'telos', is about what I am aspiring when I am engaged in modest practice. I am aspiring to a modest life and the pleasure I experience in the moments when I judge myself to be achieving this.

Writing this short piece has helped me clarify what kind of practice I am out for, what I use to guide my practice actions, what these actions are, and what I'm aiming for. Just this afternoon, despite a difficult interview, I noticed myself asking more 'How is this conversation going for you?' questions that helped me adjust the conversational path we were taking. I attribute this directly to the thought and work that has gone into the elaboration of my ambition for a modest practice. I'm excited at the prospect of further developments in this direction of my work, at the prospect of interviewing others about their preferred directions, and how Foucault's and White's ideas can help. I am interested to explore whether such a deconstruction can provide further ways to measure practice skill developments along a self-set scale.

And I am keen to hear how others grapple with the dilemmas of evaluation involved in teaching narrative approaches inside a western academic institution.

Notes

1. Mark Hayward can be contacted c/o Erme House, Mount Gould Hospital, Plymouth PL4 7QD, UK; email: mark.hayward@phnt.swest.nhs.uk
2. I have omitted some of these conversational steps where I have talked in these ways with them before.
3. See Foucault (1994) quoted in White 2002a.

References

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