Re-Designing Supervision in Clinical Dietetics Education

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Introduction

The practicum is an integral part of studies in Nutrition and Dietetics. Yet it has been a component for which students and supervisors have had very little preparation. This has resulted in considerable verbal and written feedback on the practicum. Much of the feedback suggests that personal matters, as well as logistic ones, influence the successful outcome of the practicum. The present research project aims to examine some current practices in practicum supervision, to document both the personal and practical events. This material will be used in future to better prepare both students and supervisors for the practicum.

Background on Dietetics Education and Practicum Supervision

Since many of the people attending a AARE conference do not come from the field of Nutrition and Dietetics, it is appropriate to provide some background on dietetics and dietetics education before talking about the study itself.

The profession of dietetics contributes to the promotion of health and the treatment of illness by optimising the nutrition of communities and individuals. It utilises scientific principles and methods in the study of nutrition and applies these results to influence the wider environment affecting food intake and eating behaviour. Some parts of this definition apply particularly to the area covered by this study, in that Clinical Dietetics utilises scientific principles and methods in the treatment of illness, by optimising the nutritional status of individuals.

The dietetics professional body, the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) has a lot to say about dietetics education in its “Education and accreditation manual” (DAA, 1994). The salient policies and activities of Professional Practice Programs are that they: are the final objective of training; use competency-based standards; are of specified, minimum duration: clinical cases, 10 weeks; community programs, 4 weeks; food services, 4 weeks; elective, 2 weeks. The DAA also: recognises the academic independence of universities; supports diversity in teaching approaches; defines competency-based standards for entry-level dietitians as prerequisites for membership; accredits courses; accredits sites for suitability for student placements. The DAA also acknowledges a joint commitment with universities to provide excellence of supervision in professional practice placements, and, therefore prescribes the professional experience needed by dietitians who would be supervisors, but, it has no role in the supervision process itself. For example, the accreditation of supervisors refers to dietetic experience, not to supervision knowledge and skills, and the DAA does not offer professional development in student supervision. This presents some significant rationale for the present study. Further, education is rarely a field of expertise for placement supervisors. There is no professional development in student supervision. The university’s role has often been to advise supervisors of practical issues. Therefore, supervisors have been left to develop their own styles, with variable success. Anecdotal feedback has been variable, and some has been poor.

The university provides tutors to support placement supervisors. University tutors frequently find themselves in teaching and mediation roles, doing extra, remedial work with weaker
students. University financial constraints make it unlikely that this resource will continue. The university’s teaching expertise could be more efficiently used coaching supervisors.

It is probably a good idea to know two things before trying to advise supervisors on how to supervise. The first would be what the literature says good supervision is, and the second would be what supervisors presently do, and what, if anything, needs to be changed.

What Should Good Supervisors Do?

Good supervision is the product of many variables, which include: the practicum context; the supervisory style preferred and adopted by the supervisor and the student; and, the personalities of the supervisor and the student.

The first of these, the context, refers to influences coming from the physical and personal characteristics of the practicum site (Rogers, 1986). Relevant factors include: the physical setup of the practicum site; the stage of professional socialisation at which the student is located, and how well this process is managed; the physical preparations made to accommodate the student; the practicum timetable, which considers not only the theoretical content but personal considerations.

The second issue is supervisory style. Both supervisors and students might have expectations of what the process should be like. The education literature has provided the material for the following discussion, as it is far more extensive than that of nutrition and dietetics. Supervision might be seen as a continuum between two intrinsically different styles, the authoritarian and the collegial.

Historically, the supervisory style of teaching inspectors relative to practising teachers was an authoritarian relationship (Wiles & Bondi, 1991). In an authoritarian relationship, power is derived from five bases (French & Raven, 1959):

1. Reward power, or the ability to mediate rewards, wherein a student might believe “the supervisor can give me good grades”, or, “the better I do, the better the chance of a job.”
2. Coercive power, or the ability to mediate punishments, where failure is a reality, a student might believe that “the supervisor can make me fail”, or, “they won’t give me a job here”.
3. Legitimate power, or the legitimate right to prescribe behaviour, where a student believes that “the supervisor has the right to tell me what to do”, or, “if I want to be a dietitian I ought to ...”
4. Referent power, identification with the other person, based upon the belief that “I am like ..., so I will behave like ...”, or, “I want to be like ..., I will be if I behave like ...”
5. Expert power, having special knowledge or skills, “the supervisor knows more than I do”, or, “tell me what to do”.

The authoritative approach has been replaced in more recent literature by theoretical frameworks based on collegiality, such as Clinical Supervision (e.g. Cogan, 1973; Turney, 1982), Coaching (e.g. Kinlaw, 1989), and Mentoring (Cohen, 1995). The work by Cogan and others on Clinical Supervision was highly significant in its time, as the relationship between a supervisor and student became collaborative rather than the previous hierarchical arrangement. The supervisor was seen as having functional roles: manager; counsellor; instructor; observer; feedback; evaluator, in a supervision process which was a repetitive cycle of pre-observation conference, observation, analysis, and post-observation conference. The roles of a supervisor described by Coaching and Mentoring approaches place an even greater emphasis on relationship functions, for Coaching being: counselling; confronting; mentoring; tutoring; and for Mentoring being: relationship emphasis; information emphasis; facilitative focus; confrontive focus; mentor model; mentee vision.

This literature speaks strongly of the importance of establishing relationships in effecting a good working partnership between student and supervisor. Because this is so striking, and because some anecdotal feedback from our own students suggested that personality factors
were important determinants in the quality of the partnership, personality characteristics per se have been examined. There are many reports, from a variety of professions, in which personality characteristics have been related to student performance. For example, MacKenzie (1997) reported on personality characteristics described by the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs Myers & McCaulley, 1985) and their relationship to fieldwork performance of occupational therapy students.

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a useful way of looking at personality. Although there are many authors and models for describing personality, Jungian-based models such as the MBTI relate to normal behaviours. The MBTI describes to ways of receiving and processing information, which has relevance to student learning. It is an objective instrument, with demonstrated validity and reliability, and is widely used, so that comparisons can, therefore, be made with other work using this framework. Key word descriptors of the personality characteristics illustrate the basis of the MBTI (Freeman, 1993).

The Four, Dichotomised Scales of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Freeman, 1993).

The Focus of Attention and Source of Energy:

Extraversion, E: “talkative”; “action”; “outward”; “people”; “expressive”; “do-think-do”.
Introversion, I: “reserved”; “reflection”; “inward”; “privacy”; “quiet”; “think-do-think”.

The Ways of Collecting Information:

Sensing, S: “facts”; “realistic”; “specific”; “present”; “practical”. Intuition, N: “ideas”; “imaginative”; “general”; “future”; “theoretical”.

The Ways in Which Decisions Are Made:

Thinking, T: “analyze”; “head”; “objective”; “criticise”; “fair”.
Feeling, F: “understand”; “heart”; “subjective”; “praise”; “merciful”.

The Preference for Collecting Information or Deciding:

Judgement, J: “systematic”; “organised”; “decision”; “plan”; “closure”.
Perception, P: “spontaneous”; “flexible”; “information”; “wait”; options”.

The work on context, supervision styles, and personality make useful frameworks against which the actual practices of supervisors can be viewed. And so, to the present study ...
The dietetics department of one large, metropolitan hospital agreed to participate in the study. Four students, which was the total student group on practicum at the one time, and six of their supervisors participated. Because direct observation or recording of the supervision process was not feasible, indirect data collection about the process was carried out. Students completed an MBTI, logs, reflective journals, student evaluation of teaching used by QUT, questionnaire on supervisor interaction and students’ satisfaction questionnaire (Wubbels & Levy, 1993), and a semi-structured interview. Supervisors completed an MBTI, principles of adult mentoring scale (Cohen, 1995), supervisor role questionnaire (Pareek, 1980), and a semi-structured interview. Final analysis will be made using Orientational Qualitative Inquiry described by Patton (1990), in which the collected data is examined for manifestations of theoretical frameworks, as described above, regarding context, supervision and personality.

Findings So Far

Immediate Outcomes

There were three immediate consequences of the collection of data for this study. First, when MBTI feedback was given to the study participants, the remainder of the staff at this practicum site wanted to know about it, and a workshop for them was held. This means that all of the staff at that site now have an awareness of some of the relationship issues which affect supervision, and they have the opportunity to use this in their own supervision.

Second, all students in the course have taken the MBTI. Although students find it interesting, they are not always aware of its potential use. However, on a number of occasions, knowledge of personality preferences has been an advantage in helping weaker students to resolve issues which would be barriers to success (Stormont, 1997a). The most common personality preferences by the total student group were ISFJ (19.0%), ESTJ (13.7%), INFP (10.5%) and ENTJ (8.4%) (Stormont, 1997b). A high percentage of ISFJ preferences is common in caring professions, and this differs from the proportion found in the general population. However, the competencies on which students are assessed in their practicum rely heavily on S, N, T, J and P personality preferences. This discrepancy presents real issues for some students (Stormont, 1997a). For example, students with ISFJ preferences like structure and have a strong preference for an ongoing personal interaction with one supervisor. They can have difficulty adjusting to a practicum timetable in which they face a large variety of daily tasks that cannot be prepared ahead of time, or if they have multiple supervisors and a constantly changing environment. This has real implications for improving the practicum context for students.

Third, the style of supervisor preparation provided by the university for practicum supervisors changed. Previously, supervisors had been invited to the university to attend supervisor workshops. This had resulted in very low attendance rates. To foster better participation, a “travelling road show” containing not only pragmatic information, but also some literature background on important supervision issues, has been assembled, and taken to all of the practicum sites. This has been timetabled at the convenience of the site, again to encourage maximal participation, and, for example, might be time-slotted in the usual, weekly, journal club meeting. Although this has been more costly in university staff time, the verbal feedback from supervisors on this procedure has been universally positive.
Student Perspective

When asked about desirable attributes in supervisors, students rate clinical problem-solving skills and making constructive criticism most important. However, many of the issues raised in interviews and journals relate to the practicum organisation and personality.

Supervisor Perspective

All supervisors, even those who do not usually enjoy favourable feedback on their supervision, had positive intentions about supervision. Some supervisors’ descriptions of their style of supervision matched the style of supervision which they had received when they were students.

Conclusions

The literature says that context, supervisory style and personal interactions are important issues in the practicum. The preliminary analysis of data from this study provides comment on the importance of context and personality. Supervisory style has not received direct comment from study participants. However, when participants describe events that occur in their supervision, prior experience of supervision as students appears to be an important determinant of style. This is not surprising, since many supervisors do not go to university-based workshops on supervision, and receive no input from the profession.

The significant influence of context and personality in the perceptions of the participants appear to overwhelm the actual process of supervision itself. This imbalance makes it imperative that a structured process to help supervisors develop an appropriate supervisory style be implemented. Interest in improving supervision skills from the supervisors at the study site has been encouraging.
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