"Supervision" as a Collaborative Learning Community

Harlene Anderson

At the heart of my philosophy and practice of "super-vision"* as a collaborative learning community are three Cs- connect, collaborate and construct: Supervisees and supervisors developing relationships that invite jointly creating knowledge (Anderson, 1998; Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Goolishian, 1990; Anderson & Swim, 1997). By knowledge I mean that which is new and unique to each participant. This view is based in the premise that knowledge is not imparted by another or a knower who bestows on a not-knower. Rather, knowledge is fluid and communal, yet personalized. When we share our knowledge with one another, we cannot know what each brings to the sharing; determine how each will interact with the shared knowledge; nor predict what each will create with it. Whatever the outcome, it will be something different than either started with, something socially constructed.

I place my philosophy and practice under a postmodern umbrella (Anderson, 1997). Briefly, by postmodern I refer to an ideological critique of the tradition of meta-narratives that represent universal overarching truths and the inherent risks in this certainty tradition. Postmodernism includes itself in this critique and owns the same risks. A notion of postmodernism is language and knowledge as relational and generative. Central to this notion is dialogue as a dynamic creative conversation with room for all voices, with each person unconditionally present and with a full sense of belonging. Dialogue also entails two-way exchanges and crisscrossing of ideas, thoughts, opinions, and feelings. What is put forth in dialogue is interacted with and interpreted by the other. New meanings, understandings, and knowledge are inherent in dynamic dialogue.

Conceptualizing language and knowledge as generative invite collaborative learning communities that maximize new and individually tailored learning. I will briefly describe and highlight selected aspects of one collaborative learning community– a seminar for supervisors. (See Peters and Armstrong, 1998 for an excellent discussion of collaborative learning communities.)

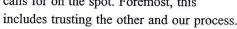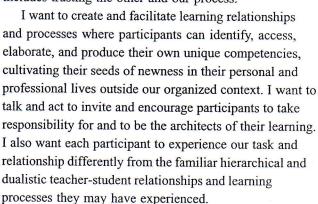## Connecting, Collaborating and Constructing in a Supervisors Seminar

Participants

Diversity among participants enhances the quality and quantity of learning that is produced. Each person brings differences in terms of age and life stage, personal and professional experience, degree and discipline, theoretical orientation, work and educational setting, learning style and agenda, or any of the diversity "isms." Varieties of voices provide a richness of perspectives and realities. A seminar might include experienced and rookie supervisors supervising in various clinical and educational settings with sundry degrees, each coming for distinct reasons. Often half the participants have completed the "required seminar" and continue in the next seminar because they value the experience.

Relationships and Conversations are Inseparable and Influence Each Other

To invite and maximize collaborative learning I must act and talk consistent with my philosophy. I must live it, being genuinely and naturally collaborative. This includes respecting, inviting and valuing each voice, being flexible and responsive, and creatively doing what the occasion calls for on the spot. Foremost, this includes trusting the other and our process.

I want to create and facilitate learning relationships and processes where participants can identify, access, elaborate, and produce their own unique competencies, cultivating their seeds of newness in their personal and professional lives outside our organized context. I want to talk and act to invite and encourage participants to take responsibility for and to be the architects of their learning. I also want each participant to experience our task and relationship differently from the familiar hierarchical and dualistic teacher-student relationships and learning processes they may have experienced.

Being collaborative does not mean that I deny or ignore my wealth of ideas and experiences, but that I too must be a learner, believing that I can learn as much as the participants. Importantly, collaborative teaching and learning challenge participants and me to reconstruct how we think about teaching and learning.

Nor as critics and skeptics of postmodernism often believe does the perspective discount previous knowledge and experience. Participants find that this is not the case. The difference is the intention with which that knowledge

and experience is used

Towards these ends collaborative learning begins with the first conversation I have with each participant whether in person or by telephone. I show a keen interest in learning about the person and preview my expectations and agenda for the seminar, being forthright about my prejudice for learning and knowledge from a postmodern perspective are also important.

Inviting Collaboration by Doing

Collaborative relationships and processes spontaneously emerge out of the experience itself, learning by doing rather than through lecturing about or instructing participants on how to be collaborative. At the first seminar I say that I have many ideas and experiences to share but that I need their help in selecting what to share. I do not want to unilaterally select. To learn about them and allow them to learn about each other, I invite participants to form small conversational clusters. I might pose beginning questions such as: What are your expectations of supervision and of me? What is your learning agenda? How do you learn? What do you think is important for us (I tend to use collective language) to know about you and your everyday contexts that would help us best meet your learning needs? I do not expect answers; the questions serve as starters. Clusters might respond to all questions, address only one, or talk about something different. I ask each to record the generated material on a large tablet, a small pragmatic action that enhances engagement and conveys my serious interest in their voices.

The clusters reconvene and share the highlights of their conversations. I post their tablet sheets on the wall. We might ask questions to make sure that we understand their thoughts or participants might clarify with each other. Through this process, and at each meeting thereafter, participants add to our agenda and prioritize agenda items and ways to address them.

Selecting and Addressing Content

Collaborative learning occurs within a broad context of expectations, including credentialing and licensing bodies, professional associations, work settings and the discourse of top-down knowledge. I keep in mind that multiple investors hold distinct assumptions about the learning purpose and how learning will be accomplished. I also realize that my role bestows power and authority on me as a teacher and supervisor, placing me in hierarchical position. I hold the personal freedom, however, to choose how to exercise that power and authority. What I am most interested in is how can I position myself within these contexts and assumptions to best offer what I have to offer, and for the learner to summon control over his or her own learning.

I give participants seminar syllabi that include a variety of topics required by external institutions and those deemed important by me. Participants have a voice regarding agenda and forum. One may volunteer, or I might invite someone to share a supervision experience related to a content area and to choose the way to address the experience and content. For instance, she may seek a consultation, or request another participant interview her, followed by a general discussion, a reflecting process in which the participants listen "as if" they were a part of the cast of characters in the supervisory dilemma (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Rambo, 1987). Participants may bring their supervisees to a session. The supervisor and supervisee direct us in how we might be helpful to them– whether performing their supervision as usual with us as reflectors, or being interviewed by another participant. They might simply want a fresh perspective or they might have a specific question. If there is no preference we might offer suggestions and they tailor a choice to suit their needs.

A primary vehicle for content is dialogue, sometimes occurring in relation to a reading, videotape, experiential exercise, consultation, or shared information by facilitator or participants. Content is seldom entirely covered in a discrete time frame or as a discrete entity. Instead, a variety of content weaves throughout each session and throughout the seminar in various ways. The content agenda is always so full that participants do working lunches, clustering around content topics. As one participant put it, "Agenda building is a great tool... to state what is important, puzzling, exciting... so that everyone's needs are stated, even though there may be too many items to address!"

Reflecting Promotes Self- and Other Dialogue

An important part of learning is reflecting with oneself and others, putting silent thoughts into spoken or written words. I incorporate reflections in a variety of ways. Throughout each session I openly reflect on our process and relate it to my postmodern bias and their learning. I have designed various experiential and consultation exercises with reflecting components.

I give participants a reflection sheet at the end of each session, asking them to share their after thoughts at the

next session. Reflections might focus on their experience of the last session, how they used their learning, new thoughts or questions, new agenda items, or recommendations for my role as facilitator. Participants say the reflection sheets are a valuable learning tool. Writing the reflections provides a way to keep the seminar process alive and a forum for self-dialogue. The reflection process furthers several interrelated purposes. It consistently builds in continuous self, other, seminar, and teacher evaluation. It encourages learners to be active and purposeful in their learning and in determining its direction. It encourages reflection as part of everyday practice among supervisor and supervisee, and among therapist and client.

I silently read their reflections at the beginning of each session and incorporate what I learn. Importantly, the reflection process helps me continually learn the participants' changing needs. Their reflections provide an opportunity for me to improve my teaching/facilitating and adjust my style to best serve their individual and combined needs– to accommodate to what each group, occasion, circumstance, and relationship calls for at any one time.

What We Have Learned About Collaborative Learning

Although collaborative learning is often mistaken as unstructured learning, participants find it is simply another kind of structure. Participants overwhelmingly report that the learning process is more important than the content. Participants consistently report amazement at the richness and meaningfulness of the process. They comment on the generativity of the conversations, the emergence of new learning, and the surprising changes in their thoughts and practices. They express gratefulness for the opportunity, although at first unfamiliar and challenging, to be thoughtful active learners. They appreciate and develop the richness of possibilities as they move from a need for certainty and closure to a sense of being comfortable with uncertainty and the yet-to-come. In one participant's words, giving "a new sense of self-confidence." As a learner in group supervision put it, "The atmosphere beckoned to me, 'Take a chance'."

Participants report that the new learning is useful in their everyday work. They learn to appreciate what their supervisees bring to the table– listening and hearing it differently. As one participant said, "respect for the supervisor-supervisee relationship as well as for each of their positions– that no one position is of greater impor-

tance than another." One said she valued learning to talk about supervisees and clients with "critical thinking and compassion" rather than with a pejorative and judgmental attitude. Another said, "I am constantly amazed at how my supervisees change, as they are willing to learn more about their client's lives, their struggles, their histories. Their negativity usually reduces in proportion to their openness. I amaze myself when I am willing to be more open-minded as well." And another reported, "My supervisees have reported that my non-hierarchical and collaborative model of supervision is refreshing compared to previous supervision in which the supervisee felt intimidated and judged." These experiences with supervision as a collaborative learning community reported by supervision seminar participants and their supervisees are consistent with other accounts of supervision from a postmodern perspective (Caldwell, Becvar, Bertolino & Diamond, 1997; Anderson, London & Punsky, 2000).

Also noteworthy is that participants express pride of ownership in the seminar and accountability for their learning. They also describe a new sense of responsibility to each other, congruent with McNamee and Gergen's (1999) notion of relational responsibility. That is, as one positions oneself differently with another– as I position myself differently with learners– we boldly experience that no one holds sole responsibility. When responsibility is shared– as participants connect, collaborate, and construct with each other– the learning relationship and process are more mutually gratifying and rewarding.

*I prefer to use "consulting with" or "having a conversation about" in my daily practice, rather than the words "supervision" or "therapy".

Harlene Anderson, PhD, is an AAMFT Approved Supervisor and a founding member and faculty of the Houston Galveston Institute and Taos Institute. She has published several articles on supervision from a postmodern perspective and is doing research in this area. Along with Saliha Bava, she will be presenting the session "'Supervision': A Collaborative Language Systems Approach" at AAMFT's Annual Conference.

References
Anderson, H. (1998). Collaborative learning communities. In McNamee, S. & Gergen, K.J. (Eds.), *Relational responsibility: Sources for sustainable dialogue.* (pp. 65-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Anderson, H. (1997). *Conversation, language, and possibilities: A postmodern approach to therapy.* New York: Basic Books.

Anderson, H. & Goolishian, H. (1990). Supervision as collaborative conversation: Questions and reflections. In H. Brandau (Ed.), *Von der Supervision zur Systemischen Vision*, (pp. 69-78). Salzburg: Otto Muler Verlag.

Anderson, H., London, S. & Punsky, N. (2000). Postmodern Supervision in Two Countries. Presentation at the Texas Association for Marriage and Family Therapy annual conference, Jan. 27-30, 2000, Houston, TX.

Anderson, H. & Rambo, A. (1987). An experiment in systemic family therapy training: A trainer and trainee perspective. *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies. 7*, 54-70.

Anderson, H. & Swim, S. (1995). Supervision as collaborative conversation: Connecting the voices of supervisor and supervisee. *Journal of Systemic Therapies. 14* (2), 1-13.

Caldwell, K., Becvar, D.S., Bertolino, R. & Diamond, D. (1997). A postmodern analysis of a course on clinical supervision. *Contemporary Family Therapy. 19* (2), 269-287

Peters, J.M. & Armstrong, J.L. (1998). Collaborative learning: People laboring together to construct knowledge. In *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (pp. 75-85). No 79, Fall 1998. New York: Jossey-Bass.