Evaluation of the London Deanery Training Course

Supervision Skills for Clinical Teachers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Background

The importance of educational supervision and training for supervisors is recognised in PMETB/GDC standards. In the London Deanery supervision skills training for clinical teachers is integrated within its Professional Development Framework.

The rapid expansion of teaching activity by the Faculty Development Unit of the London Deanery resulted in their call for an independent evaluation to establish the effects of the training beyond immediate post-course satisfaction assessments. Focused on a three-day 'Conversations Inviting Change' supervision skills training course, the primary aim of the evaluation was to seek to understand the benefits and challenges of the educational input in terms of its ability to change and improve supervision practice.

The approach to supervision which is adopted in the training encourages the discussion of ambiguity and complexity in an attempt to develop a particular attitude of mind. From this, the course aims to teach specific questioning techniques used to elicit stories and critically reflect on them. Informed by the work of Tomm (1988), supervisors are encouraged to adopt a perspective of the world as comprising *circular processes* (rather than just lineal), whereby the influence players (interactants) have on one another is reciprocal. Within this perspective they are urged to take a *neutral and non-judgemental stance* towards the issue at hand and towards their supervisee. These fundamentals have been summarised as 'the seven Cs': the value of focused *conversation*, the power of *curiosity*, the importance of *context*, the use of *creativity*, the recognition of *complexity* and the need for challenging with *caution* and *care*.

The principal teaching technique is small group *real* supervision practice with course participants adopting the role of supervisor, supervisee and peer observer and with a trainer acting as a coach. In these quadratic interactions (supervisor, supervisee, trainer(s) and observer(s)), the supervisor is encouraged to break and receive feedback from the observers (including the trainer). Other teaching methods include demonstration by an experienced trainer, role play, paired speed supervision, video and power-point presentations of theory and large group discussion. Additionally, new trainers (trainee-trainers) are simultaneously trained by more experienced 'super-trainers'.

Aims and Method

The overarching aim of this evaluation was to examine how participants take on new perspectives and techniques during the course, their sense-making and reflections on the course and their development as supervisors.

The specific three-day supervision skills course took place during June-July 2010 and was attended by 14 participants for all three days. Two trainers, two trainee-trainers and one main super-trainer were also present. With consent, data were collected by means of audio and video recording and field notes.

The evaluation drew on narrative enquiry situated within a symbolic interactionist framework, an approach which was consistent with the course philosophy. Kirkpatrick's model of programme evaluation was used to organise the research questions and to guide the data gathering and reporting. Within this model, LEVEL 1 concerns the participants' reaction or satisfaction with the programme. The focus of LEVEL 2 is the demonstration of learning (perspectives and techniques). LEVEL 3 considers the extent to which new learning is applied to practice. The specific research questions were:

LEVEL 1: REACTION OR SATISFACTION WITH THE PROGRAMME

1. What aspects of the course are perceived by participants to be more or less effective?

LEVEL 2: DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING (PERSPECTIVES AND TECHNIQUES)

2. How are perspectives and techniques delivered and received?

3. In what ways do participants demonstrate a change in perspectives and techniques along the lines of the course ethos?

LEVEL 3: EXTENT TO WHICH NEW LEARNING IS APPLIED TO PRACTICE

4. What is the impact of the course on participants and others in contact with them (supervisees, patients, others)?

5. What issues arise for participants as they use the perspectives and techniques from the course?

To address Level 1, data from audio diaries were collected and analysed. Interaction analysis of the video and audio recorded quadratic interactions/ paired supervisions provided Level 2 evidence. Findings relating to Level 3 were derived from a narrative analysis of the audio diaries.

We collected more data on the three course days than we could analyse within our time frame. In total, ten participants provided 201 minutes of audio diaries (ranging from 5 to 58 minutes). For the quadratic interaction /paired supervision, we recorded approximately 401 minutes per supervisor and supervisee plus 466 recorded minutes per feedback (observers plus supervisor and supervisee). Two case studies were selected for the interaction analysis: David and Mary. Our selective use of the data was driven by the research questions. We studied all the data; the extracts subjected to interaction analysis raise points of discussion which were evident elsewhere in the data. All audio diary data were thoroughly interrogated.

Results

LEVEL 1 ANALYSIS

THEME 1: PRACTISING SUPERVISION

The audio dairies provided clear endorsement of the opportunity to practise supervision skills in the paired supervisions /quadratic interaction. Although participants found practising the new questioning techniques challenging, they valued the high quality feedback that was generally provided by the trainers. There was some indication of variability in how that role was performed and some trainers were thought to be more skilled than others. In addition, the value in the observer role was noted. While those in the role of supervisee generally appreciated the benefits of having their own problems discussed, perhaps because of lack of experience or difficult, emotionally charged scenarios, there were occasions when the supervisee could be left with unresolved issues and feelings of discomfort.

There was mixed praise for the speed supervision activities. Seven minutes was insufficient time in which to develop understanding of the techniques and to explore complex problems, so risking unresolved feelings and raising the ethical issue of participant vulnerability. In contrast, it was noted that speed supervision exercises recognise that the normal interactions within workplace settings can be time-limited. In addition, the use of speed supervision within the contact days brought energy to the day.

The diarists reported varied reactions to supervision practice using role play scenarios which appears to be due to a complex interaction of issues including the under-developed nature of the scenario as provided to the supervisee, the relative skill of the supervisor, the open nature of the exercise with numerous observers and the emotional engagement of the participants. The experience of one supervisee was described in terms of interrogation rather than supervision. Our main finding from the data on role-play, however, was to recognise the important part played by the emotions within the interaction, a conclusion that runs in contrast to the underlying assumptions regarding the neutrality of the exercise.

THEME 2: LEARNING THROUGH LECTURES, GROUP WORK, DEMONSTRATIONS AND ROLE MODELLING

While the audio diaries were replete with reactions to practising and observing supervision skills, far fewer comments were voiced about other aspects of the course. Where other learning activities were mentioned, responses varied and it seemed that the specific mix of trainers and trainee-trainers had a powerful effect on participants' learning and their emotional reactions to activities. The transparent role modelling between trainers and trainee-trainers could provide positive endorsement of the approach but only where it expressly concurred with the espoused ethos of the course. We note below how this was not always the case and the effect that had on participants.

THEME 3: ENGAGING WITH THEORY AND TECHNIQUES

The theoretical underpinning of the approach and the questioning techniques were highlighted by a few of the diarists. For the most part, the theory and techniques were something that participants engaged with and understood to varying degrees by the end of the course.

THEME 4: SUGGESTED CHANGES

Changes suggested by individual participants were recorded in their audio diaries. The one popular recommendation was for the inclusion of some kind of recorded reflection within the process of the course. One participant suggested the use of pre-scripted scenarios with the trainer playing the supervisee role. A common criticism concerned the limitations of the big room which became noisy when multiple groups were working simultaneously.

LEVEL 2 ANALYSIS

Conversations involve both content and delivery of talk. Trainers employed variously complex and different styles of delivery and, in relation to Tomm's (1988) model and the 7Cs, we noted four main types of talk-combination:

1. HOLISTIC CONGRUENCE

This is an aligned and holistic position leading to co-production in the interaction. The talk type (relating to Tomm's questions) and the effect of this is in full congruence with the course ethos of an holistic approach and greater attention is paid to the 7Cs through both the content and structure of talk.

2. AUTHORITARIAN CONGRUENCE

This position is aligned to a reductionist, authoritarian and didactic style leading to a unilateral approach within the interaction. In this talk-combination the content of the talk is assertive and lineal and the speaker's position becomes oppositional. The speaker adopts a forceful tone in their delivery. The effect on the respondent is constraining and conservative invoking a corrective and investigative situational frame.

3. HOLISTIC INCONGRUENCE

Aspects of the speakers' talk appear to be in congruence with the course ethos of an holistic approach but the way in which the talk is delivered places the speaker in an oppositional or judgemental position, exerting a constrained and conservative effect on the recipient of their talk. The speaker does attempt to mitigate this incongruence through paralinguistic talk features associated with the 7Cs and so remains unilateral in the interaction.

4. AUTHORITARIAN INCONGRUENCE

The talk type of the speaker is assertive or lineal, but the effects on the respondent and the situational frame are incongruent with that didactic and authoritarian approach. The respondent appears liberated and generative and the conversation continues within an exploratory and facilitative frame. The speaker softens their approach through role modelling of the 7Cs both within the content and structure of their talk features leading to successful co-production within the interaction.

This analysis led us to question the capacity of the Tomm's (1988) model to predict responses and to emphasise the importance of the 7Cs both in the content and structure of talk. Even poor modelling by the trainers and poor questioning skills by the practising supervisor at times elicited detailed responses from supervisees and produced positive outcomes when the 7Cs were attended to through appropriate features of talk.

One of two case studies demonstrated a change in perspectives and techniques along the lines of the course ethos (i.e. Mary). While she struggled with using the course techniques she managed to persevere, resulting in her successfully using an Holistic Congruent talk-combination by the end of Day 3. The other case study, David, revealed how the effective use of talk (i.e. within the Authoritarian Incongruence talk-combination) led to a masking of authoritative questioning, resulting in inadequate feedback. This was probably due to the resulting exploratory and facilitative framing of the conversation upon which his trainer and peers focused. Ultimately, this participant did not show any evidence of working within an Holistic Congruent talk-combination and demonstrated no change over time.

LEVEL 3 ANALYSIS

Here we focused on the impact of the course to affect change. Based on the thematic and narrative analysis of the audio diary data, impact was demonstrated on all four groups under consideration: themselves (n=24 Personal Incident Narratives or PINs), their colleagues and supervisees (n=16 PINs), patients (n=8 PINs) and others (n=4 PINs). Four themes were identified.

THEME 1: CHANGE IN PRACTICE

The extent to which participants narrated a change in practice (rather than mere attempts to utilise the techniques) varied greatly. Of the six participants with at least three PINs over different time periods, five narrated progression in terms of their perceived development, with the remaining participant narrating stability. Amongst the five, positioning analysis revealed that not all progression was equal.

Simon cited a broad application of the techniques and seemed to have embodied this way of being, demonstrating an impact on himself as a person. For others, the change appeared to be enacted rather than embodied where the questioning techniques appeared to be utilised, sometimes in a manner that was contrary to the ethos of the course. For example, Mary appeared to employ the techniques as a way of bringing the interactant around to a

prescribed conclusion rather than enabling them to explore fully the situation for themselves.

Change for Mai was not straightforward. We classified her change position as stable. She appeared to struggle with mastering the techniques admitting a tendency to revert to her *normal mode of working.*

THEME 2: FACILITATING IMPACT

Attempts to apply learning in practice facilitated further impact and learning and action was an important step towards the embodiment of new ways of working. This was particularly evident when participants experienced a direct change in others' perspectives and understandings through use of the questioning technique. This highlighted the wider impact of the course on the supervisee (or other interactant) in terms of the potential *therapeutic benefit* that shifting their perspective brings.

THEME 3: MITIGATING IMPACT

By far the most common concern was the additional time involved as they questioned, explored and empowered their interactants to come to their own conclusions regarding their issues. However, the issue of time was not straightforward: choosing *not* to use the techniques because of time-pressures could result in an unsatisfactory conclusion which would demand further time later.

The level of engagement of their interactant with the process could have a limiting effect. If the other person was reluctant to engage in this form of conversation then it not only took longer, but sometimes became impossible to continue. Impact was also restricted for some participants who experienced difficulty in remembering the specifics of the course techniques.

THEME 4: LEVEL 4 OUTCOME POTENTIAL

Three participants (six PINs) provided us with rudimentary evidence that there was indeed a potential for organisational performance and patient outcomes to improve. Four of these six PINs came from Simon. An extended illustration seemed to demonstrate that by shifting the conversation Simon changed the power relations within an interaction, opening up space for the patient to 'connect' with the issue and gain control over his future actions.

Conclusions

Education is a complex, social event and causal links between a training programme and impact on participants' behaviour in the workplace are not readily assessed. We recognise the *softness* of impact-on-practice data but were nevertheless able to report that the narrative analysis of the audio diary data provided evidence of impact on the participants, their colleagues and supervisees, patients and others. The extent to which participants narrated a change in practice varied greatly. Some applied the techniques with success whereas others struggled. We were also able to present rudimentary evidence that there was potential for improvement to patient outcomes.

In terms of the approach to training, the emphasis on practising the supervision skills was clearly appropriate and good practice that should be acknowledged. However, our analysis also drew attention to the extent to which the trainers' behaviour was not always congruent with the course ethos and the model approach to questioning techniques.

We evidenced powerful emotional responses in all the key learning activities: in the paired supervision/quadratic interactions, in the speed supervisions and in the exercise which used role play scenarios. Emotions were recognised and sensitively handled by the

trainers at times but on occasion the response was insufficient. Sensitive handling of emotional responses is clearly acknowledged within the 7Cs which include *caution* and *care*. Caution refers to the delicate balance needed to challenge the supervisee *enough* but not *too much*. Achieving this balance between destabilising and stabilising is not easy particularly given that the participants were novices and this poses a danger that in practising these skills the supervisees are placed in a vulnerable position. The importance of this is recognised in the need for *care* which includes commitment to the supervisee's wellbeing.

Recommendations

These suggested recommendations should be read in the context of the good practice demonstrated in the course and it achievements in developing the supervision skills of the participants.

1. The course emphasis on practising supervision in the quadratic interactions should be retained (along with the course-team de-brief sessions).

2. All trainers need to strive towards an approach to training that is in harmony at all times with the course ethos. Specifically, trainers' use of the questioning technique and the transparency of the role modelling between super-trainers and trainee-trainers must concord with the course philosophy.

3. An increased emphasis should be given to understanding the dynamics of the 7Cs model (including for both the content and the structure of talk) with the limitations of Tomm's (1988) model being made more explicit.

4. Trainers should be alert to participant confusion and seek to address uncertainty or puzzlement. Confusion may be revealed in a number of ways including in participants' expression and in how, as novices, they employ the techniques which might, for example, reveal them directing supervisees to predetermined ends.

5. Trainers need to be aware of participant compliance and the role of the emotions and the potential implications these have for providing the practising supervisor with restricted feedback.

6. The course doesn't suit all. In recognising this, trainers should advise those individuals who demonstrate a lack of effort or commitment on Day 1 to leave the course.

7. The suitability of the approach, including the complexity of time factors, the appropriateness of speed supervisions, the need to be responsive to the interactants' responses (and possible disengagement, or feelings of interrogation) should be explored in more detail on the contact days.

8. Trainers need to attend to how they address the emotional responses of participants. This might include alerting potential course participants, setting aside time specifically for recognising and addressing the emotional responses provoked by the discussion of real-life dilemmas and, more frequent use of trainers playing the role of supervisee, using their own dilemmas.

9. Venues should have sufficient space or break our rooms to accommodate small group activity without noise levels becoming disruptive.

10. The trainers/programme director might consider the possible integration of some form of reflective process that could be employed between course days. This might include the use of portfolios and/or audio diaries. How to facilitate further reflection, post-course could also be reviewed.

11.   Given the inclusion of two trainee-trainers, a super-trainer and two trainers would seem to be required for the duration of the course. In the longer term, the course teams should review the benefits and drawbacks of including trainee-trainers.

12.   Where possible, training teams and participants should remain constant for the duration of each course day.