Practice Learning Qualifications (Social Services)
Communication Resource Development

Discussion of the supervision meeting

Stage 1

(i) Social context
TEXT: At its most simple, communication is 'social interaction through messages' (Fiske 1990:2). All communication takes place in a social context. The social context here is a supervision meeting: it is an arranged meeting, in an office setting, and the messages being conveyed are formal, educational ones. (Just imagine how different the meeting might be in a café or a bar!) What we see here is that it is Jean who tends to ask questions and Nazra who answers. Through this process of communication, Nazra and Jean confirm their positions as learner and educator. Of course this balance will have to shift as Nazra gains in confidence and develops professional autonomy. But this is an early supervision session and Nazra is, as yet, very much in the learning role.

(ii) Theories of communication
Thompson (2003) argues that communication is a highly complex activity which requires a range of social, interpersonal and organisational skills. While early research on communication was psychological, more recent research focuses on the social and sociological aspects of communication.

Further Information: Theories of Communication
Communication is, at its most simple, 'social interaction though messages' (Fiske 1990: 2). Thompson (2003) unpacks this further.

The 'social', he suggests, implies that communication takes place in a social context, and that context has a bearing on the success or otherwise of the communication and the nature of the communication. It is therefore not just about transmitting information from one setting to another; rather, it is about communicating a relationship. Thompson goes on to make a distinction between the 'basic' message we want to convey, and the 'meta' message (that is, how we want someone to take the message). He adds that how we convey the message might be intentional or unintentional (e.g. if we are nervous in a given situation).

Another way of thinking about communication is offered by Rosengren (2000: 38), who argues that 'we cannot not communicate'. This means that we communicate all the time – even when we are trying to convey as little as possible. We are 'prisoners of our physiology', because we will blush and show discomfort even when we try not to do so.

Thompson (2003: 12) also makes the point that our actions are based not simply on the objective world out there, but on our subjective interpretation of that world. So we have an interaction between the subjectivity of the individual, and her or his perception of the wider social world and objective dimension.

Thompson traces the development in models of communication from the earliest to the most recent:

- Process model – psychological research from the 1940s onwards understood communication as a process of a transmitter, a noise and a receiver – 'noise' sometimes gets in the way and interferes with the communication (e.g. distractions or emotions). This has been criticised more recently as not taking enough account of the social context or of meaning.

Transmitter   ⇨   noise   ⇨   receiver
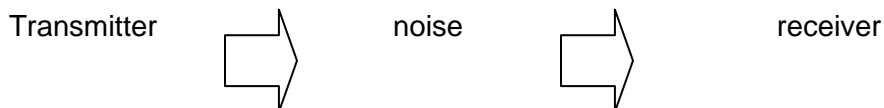
- Semiotics – offers a different approach, with a focus on symbols and meaning. So, words are understood as forms of sign, which tell us about culture, and about power. Thus some meanings are valued while others are not – there is a hierarchy of meanings, with some given more weight and acceptability than others. And some words and gestures will have different meanings in different cultures.

- More recent post-modern and post-structural approaches take this even further. For example, Foucault (1972) and other sociologists argue that power relations are embedded in discourses (in ideas and practices) which create and recreate the world which we know. Much of this is unexplored – we take it for granted - it is the 'wallpaper of our lives', unremarkable and simply the way we see the world. This approach to communication challenges us to examine this critically, perhaps for the first time – to realise that language does not simply reflect reality; it also constructs reality.

- On a similar vein, Bourdieu (1991) argues that some people have more 'cultural capital' than others. Through their education, upbringing and social class, they are in a stronger position to operate within a range of social situations and to communicate with them. So, we do not start on a level playing field, and, in the scenario, there will be interesting issues to explore in relation to Jean and Nazra's very different situations. Jean's working class background, and her lack of higher education, may make her feel less 'in control' than we might assume at first sight.

(iii) <u>Giving and receiving feedback</u>
TEXT: We see from the scenario that Jean introduced Nazra to the idea of feedback at the beginning of the practice learning opportunity, and then went back to it again, using a particular format for giving feedback. Doel et al (1996: 74) note that the art of giving and receiving feedback is not well developed in the UK; we often avoid giving negative feedback in case we are seen as too critical and we treat positive feedback with suspicion – what does he/she want from me? But in educational terms, receiving feedback is crucial to a learning process, and it useful to reflect on our own experiences of feedback as this will influence our attitudes towards, and skills in, this area of educational practice.

<u>Exercise</u>
Think about the last time you received feedback. Maybe it was a staff appraisal, or perhaps even a partner or child telling you what they thought of you. How did it make you feel? What were the ingredients that made it especially good or especially awful?

Further Information - Giving & Receiving Feedback
Doel et al (1996: 75-78) suggest that there are eight stages in giving feedback and six stages in receiving feedback. The following paraphrases the main points they make here:

Stages in giving feedback

1. Become aware of your own style of giving feedback – when did you last give someone feedback, was it easy, was it constructive, was it to a man or a woman, was it balanced?

2. Prepare the ground rules beforehand – just like ground rules for working with groups these are ways of creating a sense of safety in supervision, and they are important to respect once they been set up;

3. Understand the impact of differences in power – we know how this impacts on communication in general so it will around feedback too, as will the differences in culture, ethnicity, age, class which are present in our scenario;

4. Be clear about the purpose of feedback – it is important to ensure that the improvement in practice for the benefit of service users always underpins your purpose, so it is important to think about the consequences of not giving feedback;

5. Seek the views of the person to whom you are going to give feedback – you are always trying to evaluate a learner's insight into their own practice, so asking them about the practice first is important; notice that Jean provided Nazra with an opportunity to say more about the visit even though Jean may have had her own anxieties about Nazra's practice;

6. Be specific and giving reasons – you will notice that Jean explained why she was affirming of Nazra's honesty, she did not just say it was a 'good thing', she was specific about why – this explanation is important for learners;

7. The 'keep/change' rule – Doel el al state that this is a useful format for giving affirming and challenging feedback, and assists the educator to be balanced in giving feedback;

8. Review the feedback ground rules – it is always useful to review how the supervisory relationship is being experienced – perhaps half way through the practice learning – so reviewing how feedback is being experienced can be part of this review.

<u>Stages in receiving feedback</u>

1. Be aware of your own responses to receiving feedback – do you find it difficult to receive affirming feedback; do you become defensive in receiving challenging feedback?

2. Ask for feedback – you will notice that Jean asks Nazra for feedback, this gives Nazra the message that Jean is prepared to change what she is doing and it helps to lessen the power difference;

3. Do not become defensive – treat feedback as an important source of information is the most constructive approach, but sometimes difficult and it is important that the receiver feels constructive suggestions are being made about change;

4. Respond to unfair feedback – there can be many 'selves' in the practice setting, and various emotions attached to each one which can spill over into supervision, or be 'touched' by feedback perceived to be unfair or critical. Coming back to the ground rules for feedback will be important in these situations, and then exploring any gaps in perception between the educator and the learner;

5. Sweep up later – receiving challenging feedback (even if given well) can feel upsetting and it can impact on what you do next, so it's important to try revisit the feedback as soon as you can to gain some control over what changes are being asked for;

6. Report on changes brought about by feedback – giving & receiving feedback requires thought, planning, respect, energy, risk and trust. Jean would appreciate Nazra feeding back what had helped her change her practice and Nazra would appreciate feedback on what changes Jean sees in her practice over time. Both Jean and Narza will gain positively from this process.