If supervision is an intervention to help supervisees learn, it is important to know what kind of learning is needed, and what supervisors and supervisees can do to facilitate that learning. What sort of learning does supervision support and facilitate? Is all learning of the same type or level? A review of the supervision literature indicates little concern with the learning aspect of supervision. Most supervision is based on unconscious models of learning that have not been articulated and are rarely questioned. This lack of clarity about what ‘kind of learning’ is being facilitated within supervision suggests that supervisors are haphazard in the methodologies adopted to encourage that same learning. MICHAEL CARROLL reviews the historical concepts of learning that have underpinned supervision in the past, as well as some modern influences on learning. A model of transformational learning suitable to contemporary supervision is presented.

Alice: ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’
The Cat: ‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.’
Alice: ‘I don’t much care where.’
The Cat: ‘Then it doesn’t much matter which way you go.’

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Carroll, 1994

A recent doctoral dissertation concluded that ‘…there was no coherent theory of learning which could be systematically applied to supervision’ (Pampallis-Paisley, 2006). While an even more recent dissertation has taken up that challenge (Fielden, 2008), a review of the supervision literature seems to indicate little concern with the learning aspect of supervision i.e., if supervision is an intervention to help supervisees learn, then what kind of learning is indicated, and what do supervisors and supervisees do to facilitate that learning? On that basis, then most of us who are supervisors and supervisees work with unconscious models of learning that influence our work, but probably are never articulated and presumably never questioned. Learning may not be totally left to chance; but it would seem that the type of learning we are hoping to achieve is neither formulated, nor set up as a clear destinational guide. Being unsure or unclear about what ‘kind of learning’ is being facilitated within supervision would suggest that supervisors are haphazard in the methodologies adopted to encourage that same learning. If the destination is fuzzy then the means of getting there will be unclear—not unlike Alice in the quotation above.

This article reviews the historical concepts of learning that have underpinned supervision in the past (albeit unconsciously). Some modern influences on learning are reviewed. Finally, a model of transformational learning suitable to contemporary supervision is presented using the work of Mezirow (2000) and Scharmer (2007). In particular, attempts are made to answer two questions adapted from Hawkins (1991):

What sort of learning does supervision support and facilitate?
Is all learning of the same type or level?

Supervision and traditional learning

Supervision has always been connected to learning and development. From its earliest days within the psychoanalytic tradition supervision was separated from personal work (counselling or psychotherapy) and from the formal training programme (pedagogy). It was considered a different kind of learning to formal pedagogy or the insights that emerged from personal psychotherapy. Not that it did not at certain times veer towards one or the other of these.

In the counselling or psychotherapy-bound models of supervision, from the 1970s through to the late 1980s, it was
If supervision is an intervention to help supervisees learn, then what kind of learning is indicated, and what do supervisors and supervisees do to facilitate that learning?

...if supervision is an intervention to help supervisees learn, then what kind of learning is indicated, and what do supervisors and supervisees do to facilitate that learning?

Illustration: Shannon Rose

Illustration: Shannon Rose
The emphasis is clearly on the learning style, learning intelligence and individualised learning formats of the supervisee. Supervisors, not supervisees, are the ones who accommodate, who move, become flexible and adapt their supervisory interventions to meet the learning styles of supervisees. Peter Hawkins (2007) used a telling phrase that makes this point: ‘...if you are saying the same things to more than one of your supervisees, the chances are you are supervising yourself’.

More modern definitions and descriptions of supervision emphasize these aspects as can be seen from the following:

‘Supervision interrupts practice. It wakes us up to what we are doing. When we are alive to what we are doing we wake up to what is, instead of falling asleep in the comfort stories of our clinical routines and daily practice. We have profound learning difficulties when it comes to being present to our own moment to moment experiences. Disturb the stuck narrative. The supervisory voice acts as an irritator interrupting repetitive stories (comfort stories) and facilitating the construction of new stories’ (Ryan, 2004).

‘Supervision is the creation of that free space where the supervisee lets herself tell back so that she hears herself afresh and invents in imagination how she can best be for her client in their next session’ (Houston, 1990).

These definitions present supervision in a different light to the more traditional, more rigid versions that have a focus on the supervisor and the supervisor's responsibilities as central to supervision. The above versions make the supervisee the central focus, emphasise learning and bring out the elements of spontaneity, creativity, invention and imagination that are part and parcel of interactive learning. From this perspective a number of supervisory principles emerge:

- learning in supervision is transformational (not just transmissional) i.e., it results in a change of mindset, or behaviour rather than simply being the transfer of ideas or knowledge alone;
- the medium of learning is critical reflection—reflecting is the main learning tool used;
- experimental learning is the heart of supervision;
- supervision interrupts practice;
- supervision aids unlearning as well as facilitating new learning, and sometimes it is necessary to unlearn before learning can take place;
- supervision helps make new connections;
- supervision helps supervisees to think systemically;
- supervision (like experiential learning) is for the future;
- learning includes finding a voice;
- supervision is conversation-based learning;
- supervision entails moving from ‘I-learning’ to ‘we-learning’;
- creativity flows from the supervisory relationship;
- in supervision how can the shift in the supervisee take place and can it take place in the supervisory room? (Hawkins & Smith, 2006)

With these background principles, we can now look at some of the influences on learning theory that leads us to understand what transformational learning means. Transformational learning is dependent on supervisors providing:

- the relationship and environment to enable supervisees to stay in optimal learning mode;
- a focus on experience as central to learning in supervision;
- critical reflection as the mode of learning involved.

**Forms and levels of learning**

A number of authors have devised taxonomies to make sense of the various levels of learning (Bateson, 1973, Argyris & Schon, 1978, Hawkins & Smith 2006). Hawkins and Smith (2006) in a chapter on coaching connect four focus points of learning to interventions used by different coaches. These are:

1. **Skills or competencies** (a competency is defined as the ability to utilize a skill or use a tool). By and large a skill is the ability to do something well. Skills training can be set up by managers, friends, parents etc and usually is taught through instruction.

2. **Performance and capability** (a capability is the ability to use a skill at the right time, in the right way and in the right place): moves away somewhat from skills (inputs) to helping individuals advance more in their jobs. It could add to skills in helping an individual be more assertive, or manage conflict in their team or be more proactive in dealing with colleagues. With a performance focus the individual needs to be connected to skills and behaviours that make an increase in their ability to do their job well. Instruction, coaching and training would be the normal interventions used here.

3. **Developmental learning** is somewhat longer term and helps individuals think and act more holistically—as a person and as a professional. It is wider in its focus and could help a manager prepare for a more responsible role in the organisation. Coaching and mentoring would be the educational process involved at this stage. Hawkins and Smith (2006) might call this a capacity (a human quality such as flexibility, warmth etc).

4. **Transformation learning** enables individuals to shift gear into another way of perceiving. Part of the process in transformational learning is the evaluation of old mind sets and mental maps. With transformational learning comes new ways of perceiving and looking at situations. Thinking is more systemic and allows individuals to connect more to the bigger picture. Calling developmental learning a 'capacity in levels'; Hawkins and Smith (2006) see transformational learning as capacity between levels.

This model can be connected easily to the learning frameworks as outlined by Bateson (1973), Argyris and Schon, 1978 and more recently Scharmer's types of learning (2007) resulting in a synthesis:

**Zero Learning:** Information that is not learning in itself (i.e.}
does not lead to change or action. Often characteristic of people in survival mode, zero learning is about information or knowledge that may be interesting in itself but has no impact on the person or on change or action within the life of the person.

**Level 1: Single-loop learning**

Skills and competencies. This simply adds to an existing pool of knowledge or skills or to the accumulation of existing information. Scharmer (2007) would call this ‘downloading’ where the emphasis is not on changing substantially but learning within what already exists. This form of learning projects existing knowledge onto new knowledge and moulds it to fit in with what already exists. It answers the question: *How can I do what I do better from within the existing skills and knowledge I have?* By and large, it is concerned with the *what* of learning and focuses on accumulating further ideas, theories, knowledge, skills and competencies to fit within existing frameworks. It makes for more efficiency but can also be characteristic of people in survival mode. Skills, competency and capabilities can all fall within Level 1 learning.

**Level 2: Double-loop learning**

is the same as Scharmer’s *Debating* (2007) or ‘I-in-it’ learning where we shift from outside ourselves and see other perspectives. We move out of our own stance and begin to look at other ways of doing things. We now look at the effectiveness of what we have, but the looking involves *how* we learn and not just *what* we learn? We begin to see how we download and begin to question the assumptions, values and beliefs that make us learn the way we do. We become aware of psychological truth as different from objective truth, and move from survival to competency mode with access to more frontal lobe and brain-compatible learning strategies (Materna, 2007)

**Level 3: Triple loop learning or experiential learning**

generative dialogue puts us within a much bigger domain and asks bigger questions. What is the purpose of this? Why am I doing it? How is it connected to other aspects of life? If Level 1 moves from inside out (to project onto the world our own thinking), and Level 2 moves us outside our frameworks to begin looking at other ways of thinking and learning, then Level 3 pulls us inside again to help us see the poverty of our systemic thinking. It then moves us outside to re-connect to the bigger picture with an awareness of new ways of thinking about. The change now is in the process of learning where mind shifts and mental maps and meaning-making processes are examined and changed. Hawkins calls this a movement from helicopter to satellite thinking (*The Spiritual Dimensions of the Learning Organisation*). If Level 2 is still about where we are looking, then Level 3 is about *how* we are looking.

**Experiential learning**

The *Experiential Learning Cycle* is the model of learning that underpins supervision and can be used in any of the four levels above from *Zero learning* to transformational learning. It involves four modes of learning (or knowing); moving from the present (reflection in action), to the past (reflection on action), to the future (reflection for action).

The types or modes of learning featured at each stage of the experiential learning cycle are:

*Doing* (based on tacit knowledge). Here knowledge is intuitive and allows the learner to access the store of sometimes unconscious knowledge already in existence. Supervisees move to being unconsciously competent so that they access their tacit knowledge and involve themselves in their work intuitively.

*Reflection:* Experiential learning involves using reflection. Reflection and critical reflection learning involves supervisees in honest consideration and investigation of their work. The supervisor facilitates this reflection in order to help the supervisee learn from their own practice. With open mind and open heart (Scharmer, 2007), supervisees are transparent, honest, aware and alert to what is happening as they reflect on the procedures, processes and relationships involved.

*Propositional or declarative learning* now emerges from critical reflection. Learning is articulated and connected to theory, frameworks, models and other intellectual definitions and descriptions.

*Practical or procedural knowledge* emerges in the final section of the Experiential Learning Cycle by finding ways to translate propositional learning into skills, capabilities, competencies and qualities of the supervisee that enables him or her to return to their work.

In their application of the Experiential Learning Cycle to coaching, Law et al (2007) outline three movements:

a) an internal to external movement.

The internal movement involves reflection and conceptualisation of new learning. This, in turn, leads to the second external movement from action/application of learning to new practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Competency learning mode</th>
<th>Critical reflection mode</th>
<th>Transformational learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig 1: Overview of the Stages within Transformational Learning**
b) a past, present and future movement; past experience is reflected on in the present which gives rise to new meaning that is then integrated into future work.

c) a ‘movement within’ which results in changing meaning—the meaning and interpretation of our experience changes as we hold it up to critical examination.

Overview of transformational learning

Fig 1 provides an overview of the stages in transformational learning. When the conditions are right, we automatically move into an optimum learning modality that allows us to access the part of the brain that involves us in reflection and transformational learning. What conditions are needed? Maslow defined these as physiological and security needs that when met move us out of survival, or what he called deficiency mode. Then, in competency mode, when relationships are good, the context is helpful, we feel safe – we can begin a process of critical reflection. This cannot happen where we have to deal with major issues of rejection or isolation e.g., Jack is a supervisee who is a trainee and very experienced Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) practitioner. However, he has come up against a few areas in his work where CBT does not seem to have the long term effects he was expecting and hoping for. This has made him reflect critically on the limitations of CBT. However, when he shared this in his Advanced Training CBT group he had some negative reactions from others regarding his loyalty to the orientation and was made to feel that it was his fault it was not working rather than a comment on the approach itself. The process of critical reflection now becomes a danger for Jack and is putting him at odds with his community of practice. He feels pressure to conform or align himself with his tutors, whom he respects enormously. In this instance, the environment does not support critical reflection because the consequences might be too dangerous for the reflector and the community (e.g., that the person leaves the fold, or dilutes the pure form of the orientation, or causes others to become uncomfortable in his challenge).

Creating the conditions for critical reflection is not easy. It demands openness and ‘indifference’ to where the outcome will lead. For those already committed to an existing outcome or destination, critical reflection can become impossible. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) describe this trap well: ‘If someone has dedicated almost all her academic career to a particular theory, then her repertoire will be restricted. Pre-structured understandings dominate seeing. The capacity for reflection, if not altogether eliminated, is at least reduced. If one has worked a lot on a particular theory, one becomes, as a rule, emotionally attached to it. The empirical material will tend by and large to confirm the theory.’ (p.250)

This is where ‘downloading’ becomes a substitute. We find and interpret information that sustains our existing stance. We change within the mold rather than allow ourselves to question the mold itself.

Other conditions are equally important e.g., the absence of shame and embarrassment. Both these have a dramatic affect on learning and curtail the ability to be vulnerable and to ‘not know’ or at least to admit to myself or others that I do not know.

Critical reflection

Critical reflection begins the journey of moving to discuss and hold up to the light the very ways we learn. It is the method by which we focus on, question, mull over and consider the thinking behind our thinking (Moon, 1999). It helps us look at the meaning making processes that influence how we interpret events in our lives. This process is captured well by Steedman (1991):

‘Nothing means anything on its own. Meaning comes not from seeing or even observation alone, for there is no ‘alone’ of this sort. Neither is meaning lying around in nature waiting to be scooped up by the senses; rather it is constructed. ‘Construced’ in this context, means produced in acts of interpretation.’ (cited in Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p.54).

Moore (2008) outlines stages in this interpretative process:

- the empirical—which engages with life experience;
- the hermeneutic—which seeks out the underlying meaning of the experience;
- the ideological—which engages with the knowledge and power relationships that dictate acceptable or control possible meanings; and
- the post-modern—which challenges any overarching ideology or authority championing the local, pragmatic and ‘fit for purpose’ nature of meaning.

These are also the stages in transformational learning in supervision: moving from experience (our practice), to reflection on that practice (the underlying meanings), which result in learning. Critical reflection then permits us to engage in the ideological and post-modern stages that ask us to challenge how we make meaning itself.

Activating critical reflection

The springboard for critical reflection can appear in a number of ways:

- a disorienting experience or dilemma that makes us rethink our existing ideas and theories (we disconfirm);
- strong feelings and emotions that start the process of thinking through again (a health scare, redundancy, a failed relationship);
- the discovery of assumptions on which I have based my values, life and thinking (e.g., that we are right and everyone else is wrong);
- a feeling of discontent with what I have inherited from others;
- an awareness that I am living out other peoples’ values and scripts;
- a realisation that there are other psychological truths besides mine. (Carl Rogers recounts how his visit to China as a young man resulted in a transformational learning experience helping him make the distinction between psychological truth and objective truth).

Critical reflection combines both an emotional experience and a cognitive one, very often in that order. With unrest, confusion, unease, dissatisfaction, shock or even wonderment comes a process of thinking through what values and
principles and untested assumptions underpin our life and beliefs.

Transformational learning results from critical reflection. It has been called ‘subjective reframing…the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning making perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets etc) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they can generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action’ (Mezirow, 2000, 7–8).

We find and interpret information that sustains our existing stance. We change within the mold rather than allow ourselves to question the mold itself.

Critical reflection allows us to become aware of how we come to our learning and knowledge, puts us in touch with our ‘blind spots, deaf spots and dumb spots’, brings to the fore the conversations we do not have with ourselves and helps us get in touch with our own integrity and authenticity. There are stages in this process of transformational learning.

**Stages in transformational learning**

From the above we can now outline the sequential stages that characterise the process of transformational learning.

**Stage 1: Downloading**

We think as we have always thought—new knowledge and information confirms habitual judgements. We project our models onto the world and learn within existing frameworks and assumptions. Scharmer (2007) calls this ‘I-in-Me’ learning—what we see and hear depends on our habitual ways of doing so. At this stage we fall into the trap outlined by Ruth Benedict: ‘We don’t see the lens through which we are looking’. As a result we are not in touch with how we make meaning or the mental maps that process our information gathering, selection and interpretation. We simply see what we already know.

**Stage 2: Noticing outside ourselves**

and our ways of thinking and learning and making meaning initiates stage 2 in the transformational process. Called ‘I-in-It’ learning, we take a stance away from ourselves and can observe what disconfirms our theories and frameworks and models. Experience becomes a teacher to us. The movement from downloading to noticing and observing in a more detached way can happen through some of the triggers for critical reflection we mentioned above. This stance is mostly intellectual and the forms of conversation relevant to it are debate and discussion.

**Stage 3: Awareness and making sense of**

becomes stage three. We open ourselves to new ideas, thinking, theories etc. We use empathy to understand from other perspectives. We listen sincerely, with integrity allowing the new to influence what is already in our lives. This ‘I-in-You’ stance provides us with new perspectives from which to evaluate our own theories and makes us able to adapt and blend our theories with other approaches. Stage 3 is characterised by reflective listening and dialogue where we are open to the psychological truths of others, not just with an open mind but also with an open heart.

**Stage 4: Critical Reflection**

We now begin the process of consideration, sifting, thinking through, connecting, discussing, and debating. We see our meaning making processes and we recognise the meaning making frameworks of others. We question the very way we make meaning. The ‘I-in-Now’ stance permits us to be systemic in our thinking and be open to the demands of the present. Generative dialogue (Isaacs, 1999) opens doors to collective wisdom and communities of action.

**Stage 5: Transformational learning**

We are now in touch with the frameworks that help us understand the processes by which we learn. We are in a position to change these to make them more open to new living, or to adapt to new insights or learning. We have new ways of making meaning of our experiences and the experiences of others. We are in touch with the assumptions that underpin our learning.

With transformational learning comes openness to the contexts in which we have learned to make meaning, and the awareness that we have the power to change the ways in which we make sense of our world and the world of others.

Scharmer (2007) talks about the process of ‘letting go’ and ‘letting come’. This notion captures what happens in transformational learning. The learner has to ‘let go’ of much of what has sustained learning up to now. Courage is often needed to commit what Zuboff and Maxmin (2002) have called ‘small murders’—saying goodbye to values, ideas, theories and ideologies that have been central to our lives for so long. ‘Letting come’ also involves courage and ‘indifference’ that with open mind, heart and will, we are prepared to embrace the consequences of this new way of thinking. Courage and resilience play a part when our new meaning making process puts us at odds with our own community, the loyalties and relationships that pre-exist and are sustained by communal beliefs and psychological contracts (Carroll, 2005).

And so to supervision

From the above, it would appear that there are a number of supervision conversations all of them involved in learning and each a step on the ladder towards transformational learning. All these conversations are worthwhile and all valuable in their own right. A supervisor’s task is to know which conversation to have with a particular supervisee and be able to engage in that conversation when needed. Let us run an example through the four supervision conversations below. Janice works as a counselling psychologist in a busy GP surgery. She is worried about one of her clients, Emily, a 20 year old
single woman who has shared that she was sexually abused by her grandfather when she was a child. Emily is now worried that her two nieces (aged 4 and 6) are beginning to spend more time with their grandparents and anxious in case what happened to her might happen to them.

Supervision Conversation 1: Help me with a problem! This is a simple problem solving conversation that helps the supervision find a solution to a problem. In the above example, Janice shared with her supervisor that she does not know whether or not to disclose information she has received from Emily that indicates two children could be in danger. The supervisor and Janice work together and decide she will support Emily in telling the appropriate authorities. Janice solves a problem.

Supervision Conversation 2: Help me change my behaviour as a practitioner. In this earlier supervision conversation Janice wants to know what she is doing or not doing that keeps Emily coming to the edge of disclosing, but not doing so. She knows Emily wants to talk to her but cannot do so just yet. Her supervisor helps her relax, accept the situation, continue to build the relationship and rapport with Emily and wait with the client until the client is ready. Janice changes her behaviour.

Supervision Conversation 3: Janice feels that the theory she works from is not that helpful with Emily who is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the childhood abuse. She asks her supervisor to help her look at other theories that might be helpful. As a result she goes for training in EMDR. Janice changes her thinking.

Supervision Conversation 4: The GP surgery in which Janice works is in a very deprived area of London. She has been shocked and quite horrified by the kinds of problems and background histories of his clients. It has raised all sorts of issues for her around her own values, loyalties and ways of thinking and she is discovering all kinds of divergences between what her experience is teaching her and what she has learned from her training and studies. Janice asks her supervisor to help her look at how to make sense of what is happening to her in order to be more authentic about whom she is and what she does. Janice changes the way she thinks (the thinking behind her thinking) and moves from a less judgemental place that individuals are totally responsible for what happens to them to a realisation that environments and relationships impact immensely on individuals abilities to take charge of their lives.

These different supervisory conversations focus on different forms of learning: from problem solving to transformational learning.

Conclusion
This article presents experiential learning as the learning theory that underpins contemporary supervision. Supervisees learn from their own experience. The main task/role of supervisors is to facilitate that process and the method they use to do so is reflection. Reflection becomes the medium through which learning takes place when experience is the focus. Reflection leads to different forms of learning all of which are the appropriate domain of supervision. The deepest form of learning used in supervision is transformational learning which combines both personal and professional learning. In transformational learning, supervisees reflect critically not just on their experience, but the way they construct their experience. In doing so, they open themselves up to new transformational learning which creates new mental maps or meaning-making frameworks that help interpret their experience, learn from it and go back to their work with new insights and new behaviours. This is supervision at its creative best.

References


AUTHOR NOTES

MICHAEL CARROLL PH.D. is a Fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, a Chartered Counselling Psychologist and a BACP Senior Registered Supervisor. A counsellor, supervisor, trainer and consultant to organisations in public and private sectors, he specialises in employee well-being. He has lectured and trained nationally and internationally, and is an excellent presenter with a great sense of humour. Michael is Visiting Industrial Professor in the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol and the winner of the 2001 British Psychological Society Award for Distinguished Contributions to Professional Psychology. He is author of numerous books including Counselling Supervision: Theory, Skills and Practice, Integrative Approaches to Supervision, and On Being a Supervisee: Creating Learning Partnerships.

For more information visit www.supervisioncentre.com