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Abstract

If we say we ‘deliver feedback to teachers,’ we most likely subscribe to a traditional approach to instructional improvement. In this approach the principal or supervisor treats the teacher as passive recipient who is expected to act on feedback that is too generic to be useful, and promotes a simplistic view of teaching and its improvement. In this essay I examine instructional improvement, a vague and taken-for-granted concept. I then identify what complicates our thinking about it, pose two competing approaches, and acknowledge our challenges. The essay concludes with a call to focus on teacher learning, if supervision scholars profess instructional improvement as our common purpose.

Keywords

supervision; instructional improvement; teacher learning

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Introduction

Did you ever wake up one morning still dark and shrouded by yesterday's thoughts and clouded by the weight of the approaching day's tasks? There you sat alone in the safety of your porch staring out into an unknowable dark, hearing the sounds of the first bird, watching the trees and clouds gradually take form. This is how the day emerges from the black and comes alive at first light. This is how an idea comes alive as I make the invisible, visible in my mind. And this morning, I began to see the field of supervision with new eyes and in first light. As I reflect on my career, I find myself wanting to see supervision anew. As I retrace my journey, I find myself imagining how we should think of instructional improvement, and how this might take form as we look at supervision in a new light.

I started my career in pre-service supervision, thinking about clinical supervision with Morris Cogan and practicing it with Noreen Garman in summer experiences learning to supervise Masters of Arts Teaching interns who themselves were learning to teach in a local summer school. Then I became a public school supervisor in-service practicing clinical supervision in a school district, spending 70 percent of my time in classrooms helping teachers to study and improve their teaching without being involved in their evaluation. The superintendent and school board, based in a northern state rich in labor history and collective bargaining, agreed with the proviso that, if a teacher had to be dismissed, I (and my data) would be involved in that process. Fortunately, that time never came.

After completing my doctorate I became a university professor, preparing and then supervising principals and superintendents, and studying supervision and evaluation for most of my career. I differentiated and reconciled them by definition:

I think of evaluation and supervision as similar, yet not identical, as fraternal twins – similar yet not identical; different enough to tell them apart – their concepts, practice and dilemmas... Since they both require evidence, involve judgment and being in the classroom, they are forever entangled (Hazi, 2012, p. 8).

Thus, the bones of my house were solidly built, in both thought and practice, of supervision and evaluation.

Unknowingly, I had also lived in two cultures of supervision: both pre-service and in-service. While I had lived in both, it was the ideas of in-service supervision that dominated my early thinking. When I entered the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision (COPIS), it was one culture: in-service supervision influenced by educational administration. Even within COPIS' monoculture there were clashes between the world of ideas and the world of practice. Membership had been limited to professors, until the Kahrs, who were practitioners, were admitted in 1988.

When teacher educators were voted into COPIS, it became bi-cultural to include pre-service supervision. This first knock at COPIS' door was when Ken Zeichner was nominated for membership. Teacher education formally became a culture when progeny like Lee Goldsberry (student of Tom Sergiovanni) and subsequent generations from Penn State established their

foothold in COPIS. Those monocultural scholars willingly embraced its new members and united behind a common purpose because they had to admit new members to keep COPIS alive. Here, too, other groups have since entered COPIS for the same reason: the ‘instructional leadership culture,’ or who Mette (2019) calls the ‘leadership for learning’ group, i.e. those who are interested in the learning of principals to promote instructional improvement, along with a critical supervision group who examine race, power, and privilege in supervision practices. As time went on and cultures collided, as we would expect, the improvement of instruction bound the two together. The field could not come to consensus on how to define supervision, but we could agree upon improvement of instruction as our common purpose.

However, I’m obliged to point to a major crater in our path. Instructional improvement is so taken-for-granted that we tend not to discuss it. In fact, I cannot recall talking about it at any COPIS meeting (though memories fade). As a scholar of the field, I wanted to study this taken-for-granted purpose of supervisory practice. My study helped me see two influences that complicate the improvement of instruction in teacher evaluation.

Complicating Instructional Improvement

Instructional improvement and our thinking about it (or lack thereof) are complicated by many things to include: process-product research (Russ et al., 2016) and giving teachers feedback (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). While these two complicate our thinking about improvement in teacher evaluation, the origins of supervision in our history may help us simplify and reconcile that thinking (Hazi, 2018). Each complication for in-service teacher evaluation is explained.

Process-product research has dominated our thinking about improvement in teacher evaluation

This is largely due to its use in both defining and measuring teaching. While process-product research has dominated teacher evaluation, pedagogical content knowledge may have influenced pre-service improvement. I’m convinced pedagogical content knowledge needs to get a foothold in teacher evaluation for progress to be made. Scholars, who study teaching out of the process-product perspective, studied behaviors that were low-inference (easily observed and thus, easily measured), generic (regardless of subject, grade, student ability, or lesson) and related to student learning (as measured by standardized tests). A generic view of teaching correlated to student achievement has dominated teacher evaluation instruments to date.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, researchers, influenced by behavioral psychology, studied generic pedagogical behaviors as teacher praise, criticism, questioning, wait time, giving directions, and use of advanced organizers. These were all independent, observable teacher actions, that somehow “together make up the coherent whole of teaching practice” (Russ et al., 2016, p. 393). Frequency of use was considered a measure of effectiveness. Once acquired through workshops, these researchers believed that the teacher could apply the generic skill to any content, lesson, time of year, and student.

Becoming an expert teacher, according to this perspective, was acquiring and regularly using discrete skills, and was considered to be “a fairly manageable task” (Russ et al., 2016). Once a

teacher acquired these skills, process-product researchers believed that these skills would be retained and always available for use in combination with all other skills learned. This represented a simple view of teaching and how teachers learned.

In turn, this view of teaching spawned a simple view of improvement. Since the instrument defined teaching, it also offered prescriptions for its improvement. Improvement was said to occur when the teacher adopted the behavior once deficient. Consequently, improvement was defined as a change in a teacher's pedagogical action as observed in a classroom.

In the 1980s researchers, influenced by cognitive psychology, began to prefer a constructivist view of teaching. This changed how teaching was defined in instruments, but not how it was measured and then changed. Elsewhere I have written about the rubric (Hazi, 2019a), a new design feature of instruments attempting a nuanced evaluation of high-inference behaviors. Danielson's *The Framework for Teaching* and Marzano's *Model of Teacher Evaluation* are examples (Hazi, 2014). Teaching was still generic and context-free, judged regardless of lesson purpose, content, or student-ability.

Feedback drives improvement in teacher evaluation

Instructional improvement of the teacher is said to occur when the principal delivers feedback after the classroom visit. The logic of this thinking is as follows:

- Feedback is given by an external agent to change behavior.
- Feedback must be frequent, timely, consistent, specific and private to be effective.
- The evaluator's feedback is presumed to be correct and what the teacher needs.
- Teachers must accept or "buy-in" to those identified weaknesses for improvement to occur (Hazi, 2019b, p. 152).

This advice is based on behaviorism and workplace psychology. Its logic is flawed because educators presume that their understanding about giving feedback to students applies to teachers, as if they were one and the same (Hazi, 2019b; Scheeler et al., 2004).

The use of feedback has been extensively studied in multiple disciplines (Sutton et al., 2012). Several thousand studies can be found in communications, counseling, clinical psychology, social psychology, business and organizational psychology, sports and health (Sutton et al., 2012), but they remain in their own disciplinary silos. The use of feedback to students has been studied extensively (e.g., Hattie, 2012; Hattie & Yates, 2014). More is written about how to deliver feedback than how learners use it to improve. In fact, knowledge of how learners use feedback is underrepresented in research. Winstone et al. (2017) indicate that learners have been given minimal responsibility and treated as "passive recipients" of feedback. Furthermore, they established this new research focus of feedback literacy skills. In contrast, the educational literature on the use of feedback to teachers is replete with "what works" (e.g., Myers, 2014) and "tips" (e.g., see for example Chapter 2 of Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). In fact, these writings explain how the principal should manipulate the teacher to "buy-in" and then act upon actionable feedback. Such thin logic has tended to ignore the teacher as a learner. Yet, supervisors and supervision were once most concerned about teacher learning.

Supervisors were once considered teacher educators and expert teachers

Supervision scholars have extensively detailed the history of the field, most recently with the review Gordon (2019) conducted. In recounting of supervision history, Barr et al. (1938) remind us that the workforce consisted of untrained females, and that teachers were either retained or released. Improvement did not become an option (and supervisory concept) until the last quarter of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century America. Furthermore, Harlan Hagman, in the forward to Lucio and McNeil's (1962) *Supervision: A Synthesis of Thought and Action*, explains that supervisors were called to be teacher educators, especially since teachers had limited pre-service preparation:

The task of the supervisor was to teach teachers, to demonstrate, to teach, to direct. The supervisor was expected, because of professional preparation and successful experience in classrooms, to be able to help teachers who were less prepared, less experienced, less qualified to teach. (p. viii)

A few early supervision texts, such as Burton's (1923) *Supervision and the Improvement of Instruction*, were written for both supervisors and teachers whose training was inadequate and could both "profit from a study of the principles of method, the principles of learning and the discussion of subject matter" (p. ix). Burton organized his book around problems of practice that included subject matter content, lessons, and teaching problems.

In *The Supervision of Instruction*, Nutt (1920) believed that supervisors should be expert teachers "of the lines of work that he [sic] undertakes to supervise... [and] demonstrate by actual performance the sort of teaching efficiency that he [sic] is striving to develop" (p. 26). Nutt expected supervisors to know the course of study that (s)he supervised well enough to adapt it to the needs of the pupils as well as demonstrate techniques such as questioning. Among the principles of supervision, Nutt espoused the importance of common knowledge so that "teacher and supervisor must come to think in similar terms, and to talk the same language in the interchange of ideas (p. 36)." Without common knowledge, the result would be "unsympathetic, caustic criticism on the one hand; and resentful prejudiced antagonism on the other" (Nutt, 1920, p. 36).

Unfortunately, influencers of scientific management soon moved supervision in a different direction. According to Barr et al. (1938), supervision texts moved away from writing about teaching and learning, to focus on what was considered then to be "the modern" notion of supervision. Many moved away from focusing on the teacher for "the narrow and limited aim of improving teachers in-service," to looking instead at the total teaching-learning process:

This means, of course, that the proper sphere of supervision is the whole range of elements affecting teaching-learning situations. The teacher is removed from her embarrassing position as the focus of attention and assumed her true position as a cooperating member of a total group concerned with the improvement of learning... [and not] the trivial aspects of classroom procedures. (Barr et al., 1938, pp. 21-22)

The “trivial,” i.e., that of teaching and learning, was omitted. Texts began to focus on the supervisor’s job and emphasized, instead, principles, devices, and techniques. As supervisory scholars became enamored with the science of management, they also began their quixotic search for efficiency and the objective instrument. In supervisory texts and in practice, instruments and supervisory methods replaced teaching and learning. I call this approach an *evalu-centric view of improvement*, i.e., one that focuses on the evaluator or the evaluation instrument (Hazi, 2018). This approach starts with the assumption that the evaluator or the instrument is central to identifying effective teaching, and the source of improvement—not the teacher.

We in supervision need to return to our teacher education roots where we started, as early scholars remind. In this essay, I returned to mine. When I started reading Darling-Hammond and Sykes’ (1999) book about teacher learning, I identified what might have been missing in my taken-for-granted thinking about feedback. Here I realized that there are competing theories about improvement.

Competing Approaches to Improvement

There appear to be at least two competing approaches to instructional improvement in teacher evaluation. They are written here with language to show how they differ, although they may share elements such as use of feedback. One approach I call traditional and is based on change theory and classical behaviorism (e.g., Guskey, 1986, 2002; Hazi 2019b). At its root is the belief that teaching involves common sense and that teachers need updating as a result of changes in curriculum, standards, and assessments. A view of obsolescence has long influenced efforts to improve teaching practice. According to Ball and Cohen (1999),

[t]eachers are thought to need updating rather than opportunities for serious and sustained learning of curriculum, students, and teaching. Instead they are offered one-shot workshops with advice and tips of things to try, catalogues filled with blackline-master activities for the latest educational ideas . . . six-step plans for a host of teaching challenges, and much more. (p. 4)

Operating within this approach, teachers attend workshops, and the principal attends to ensure teachers do what workshop consultants recommended for their classrooms.

Knowledge is external to teachers, remote and delivered. “Research-based” evaluation instruments define effective teaching. Teaching is made up of discrete, observable behaviors. Some instruments contain as many as 76 items within 4 domains to be rated at 1 of 4 levels on 104 pages (Hazi, 2014). While teaching was considered generic for the purposes of research, it became generic in evaluation so that the principal would not need content knowledge to have credibility in evaluation (Ellett, 1987). The principal evaluates then provides feedback to the teacher, who then is expected to change behavior. Once acquired through workshops, it was believed that these behaviors would always be available for the teacher to use and apply to any student or classroom to be effective. Improvement is defined as a change in teacher behavior that

then results in an increase in standardized test scores. The traditional approach has dominated the way we think about improvement.

Change theory is used to explain teacher resistance to feedback and to new programs (e.g., Burstein, 2019). It is closely aligned with the ideology of behaviorism where supervisors are expected to be change agents (e.g., Raths & Leeper, 1966). Kurt Lewin (1935) is also said to have influenced this thinking. Lewin who was largely influenced by psychotherapy, had been used to understand why and how teachers resist change. It is believed that teachers want “specific, concrete, and practice ideas” that they can use in their classroom. Educators presumed that teacher beliefs had to change first, before change in practice could occur. In response, Guskey (1986) posited an alternative model of teacher change---one where attitude changed after use. His thinking was that when they saw students succeed, teachers would then adopt and retain an instructional practice. However, one flaw of this thinking is that it fails to see teachers as agents of their own learning about and from their practice. This traditional approach to improvement, once useful when we had a limited understanding of teacher learning, has continued to dominate the thinking of practitioners and policymakers alike.

Another approach to improvement in teacher evaluation is that of teacher learning in which the teacher is considered a professional. It is influenced by cognitive psychology, teacher education, and pedagogical content knowledge. This approach, emerging in the specialty of teacher evaluation, suggested that if policymakers want to improve teacher quality, they need to treat teachers as learners and provide the necessary infrastructure in schools to foster teacher learning over their career (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). Ball and Cohen, (1999) argue that:

A great deal of learning would be required for most teachers to be able to do the kind of teaching and produce the kind of student learning that reformers envision, for none of it is simple. This kind of teaching and learning would require that teachers become serious learners in and around their practice, rather than amassing strategies and activities. (p. 4)

One example is when teachers experience curriculum-focused professional development where they can teach colleagues, as if they were students, so that they experience mistakes that students make first hand and learn how to modify instruction (Hill, 2020). This approach may be emerging in networked improvement communities (LeMahieu et al., 2017) in schools where improvement science is valued.

Then, teachers do not necessarily learn when the principal provides feedback that is generic regardless of the subject, the lesson’s purpose and student abilities. Teachers may find principal feedback unusable. Instructional improvement may require situated knowledge where the “teacher as learner may need to work with the specifics of their curriculum, their school, and their students in order to acquire knowledge usable in their teaching” (Sykes, 1999, p. 163).

Because the focus is on sustained teacher learning, teachers take an inquiry stance (Yendol Hoppey et al., 2019), studying their classroom practice and generating knowledge that is situated in their practice. The classroom is complex where subject matter, grade level, and the varying abilities of 30 or more students make inquiry challenging. While they discover “local” knowledge from inquiry and other teachers, they may also find “delivered” knowledge from

research helpful. Content pedagogy most likely influences their reflections. Here locally generated lesson artifacts and student daily work provide more insight than once-a-year standardized tests. Teacher improvement may be an insight, a new way of thinking about a problem or practice, or a change in student or teacher behavior. Progress may not be easily measured in standardized test scores, but may be made nonetheless. Teaching and its improvement involve uncertainty and a lot more complexity.

To assist their learning, teachers may form study groups in the department or school or networked improvement communities with teachers in other schools or districts. These communities offer safe spaces to study their classrooms. Teacher learning may occur as experiential cycles of teaching, assessing student learning, reflecting, experimenting anew, and re-assessing as they learn from their teaching and other teachers.

Due to the fact the second approach is more complex and requires resources of time and money in schools to implement, teacher educators, rather than policymakers and practitioners, tend to subscribe to it. These two competing ideologies will most likely influence practice as we enter a new era of improvement. Perhaps we do not have to choose. Both may be useful and easily co-exist. Table 1 summarizes and accentuates their differences.

The Continuing Challenges to Improvement In-service

In addition to the competing approaches to improvement in teacher evaluation, there are at least four challenges we must take as cautions. If we don't, we are bound to continue down the same dysfunctional path of teacher evaluation. These challenges include: the reductionist way we think about teaching, the focus on teacher change rather than learning, a compulsion toward uniformity, and how we measure improvement. These challenges face practitioners, policymakers and researchers alike. To face these challenges, all will be required to embrace principles such as complexity, variation, and emergence; all elements of improvement science (Bryk, 2015; Jacobson et al., 2016).

We have not moved beyond a reductionist view of teaching, i.e., dissecting teaching into discrete skills in order to capture its complexity. This view has been influenced by the process-product research. Sometimes a list of skills can be seen as “a disconnected series of behaviors which do not relate to one another” (Garman, 1975, p. 30). Instead, we may need to imagine teaching in roles and routines that combine skills. Role theory has been used to help organize otherwise fragmented behavior, and may help teachers to think in terms of developing *a repertoire of roles* that might range from teacher-directed to that of student-centered (Garman, 1975). The teacher's role changes when planning for, then conducting instruction in large or small groups, when instruction is individualized or connected to technologies, and when students reflect on their learning (e.g., Garman, 1975).

Classroom routines are enduring practices that facilitate and contain a teacher's instruction. They are “systems for determining how students will be called on, how materials will be distributed, how assignments will be collected and returned” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 83). A routine emerges when needed, then morphs as a teacher tinkers and shapes it. Teachers are most in tune with what is needed, when we provide them the time to study their students.

Table 1: Approaches to Instructional Improvement

	Traditional	Teacher Learning
Disciplinary influences	Educational psychology; classic behaviorism; educational administration; workplace psychology	Cognitive psychology; pedagogical content knowledge; teacher education
Improvement defined	Change in teacher pedagogical behavior; Increase in student learning	Personal definition ²
Event that prompts improvement	Annual evaluation with a deficiency in pedagogy and/or in student behavior or learning	A routine that no longer works, a concern over student response, behavior or learning
Rationale for improvement	Obsolescence External Change in curriculum, standards, assessments	Teachers are being asked to do complex teaching to produce complex student learning.
Assumptions re: teaching and its improvement	Teachers can control student learning. Teaching involves discrete teaching behaviors that can be identified, acquired & combined to become effective. Changing teaching is easy and can be controlled by the principal.	Uncertainties about teaching-learning abound. Teachers are but one of many influences on student learning. Content knowledge, pedagogy and knowledge re: student learning complicate teaching Teachers control their own improvement.
How knowledge conveyed	Delivered as advice, tips, activities, latest educational ideas in feedback conferences and in one-shot workshops	Discovered through opportunities for sustained learning and reflection and/or for complex conversations with other teachers
Who controls	Principal one-on-one with teacher	Teacher(s) individually or in groups/networks
Teacher role	Teacher as technician delivering content and skills to students	Teacher as learner and thinking of students as learners
Teaching behaviors	Low-inference, observable, generic, correlated to student achievement	Influenced and complicated by subject knowledge, learning of 30+ students that unfolds over time
Sources of knowledge re: teaching	Process-product research Student Achievement Data Generalized Received knowledge, remote knowledge	Classroom, students, other teachers Student performance, lesson artifacts Local, individualized Situated knowledge
Result	Superficial, fragmented, simplified	Complicated view of teaching & its improvement

² I offer this tentative personal definition: Teacher learning that results in progress in knowledge, behavior, and thinking about the pedagogy, curriculum, students, and their interactions.

We have not moved beyond thinking about changing teacher behavior through delivering feedback that is generic and context-free. In its third revision since 1995, The Standards for Professional Learning provide *a focus on teacher learning*, calling for teachers to be active participants in the content, conduct and evaluation of their own learning (Learning Forward, 2011). The learning of in-service teachers will be costly in time and resources. District-wide professional development is cost-effective, efficient, and equitable, in times of scarce resources and in times when test scores are used to evaluate their professional development (Hazi, 2017; Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2016). Perhaps networked improvement communities of the improvement science movement in public schools will allow teacher learning to gain a foothold (LeMahieu et al., 2017).

We have also not moved beyond uniformity in looking at teaching. While we espouse uniformity, teachers are all different, as are our students, with different abilities and strengths. Yet we continue to evaluate them in standardized ways in the name of fairness. We need to imagine teachers with unique *teaching signatures* (Eisner, 1991). According to Eisner:

It is easy to distinguish between lecturing and discussing or between individual consultation and small group instruction. It is patently clear that criteria appropriate for assessing skill in leading a discussion differ from the criteria needed to assess or perceive the qualities of a lecture. What is more difficult to see and assess is the teacher's personal signature....that individual teachers give to their work. (p. 79)

Supervisors need to help teachers develop the strengths that come naturally and to cultivate productive idiosyncrasy (Eisner, 1991).

We have not moved beyond standardized ways to assess teachers that allow *mastery over time*. We need to imagine teachers mastering some skills more than others over time, and developing along a continuum. This will require an open rating system, where time is not a factor, and that allows for some teachers not yet ready to develop, as well as, those able to demonstrate a skill, role or routine. Some practice may not manifest until a future classroom lesson, while other practice may be observable and automatic. Still other practice may not be appropriate for a given subject, context, or group of students (Garman, 1975). Such mastery thinking may encourage teacher expertise to emerge along multiple points of the pre-service to in-service continuum.

A major challenge will be to imagine improvement beyond student test scores and change in teacher behavior. We need to value insight and teacher thinking, those qualities that accompany - but may not yet result in - changed performance. We should value these for student learning as well. This will require us to redefine what counts as evidence, especially as administrators make programmatic decisions on the basis of evidence, i.e., research-based practices, as required by the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. This challenge, in turn, affects how we define improvement, either narrowly as behavior change or broadly. In general I define *improvement* as evidence of teacher learning that results in progress in knowledge, behavior, and thinking about the pedagogy, curriculum, students and their interactions. However, each context may require its own definition of improvement.

Instructional improvement is a topic that is complex, crosses multiple discourses, and exists in combination with other practices in complex communities. We must move beyond the simplistic thinking about delivering feedback. I strongly believe, as I did at the beginning of my career, that the evolving knowledge base of supervision, depends upon the evolving knowledge of teaching and learning:

The systematic improvement of instruction, and clarification of the place and practice of supervision in such improvement must ultimately wait upon basic research on questions of this kind. When we have achieved more understanding of *what* and *how* to teach, and with what *special effects* on students, we will be much less vague about the supervision of these processes. (Mosher & Purpel, 1972, p. 3).

If we, in supervision, believe that its purpose is to improve instruction, then scholars must not ignore teaching and learning.

Conclusion

I am bi-cultural, of teacher education and of educational administration. For most of my career educational administration has influenced how I thought about instructional improvement. In this essay I returned to my roots in teacher education to understand what was missing from my thinking. There I discovered the most important thing of all, a focus on teacher learning. While a newcomer, I am trying to understand those concepts of teacher education that will move my thinking forward, and not simply engage in retro-scholarship, i.e., covering the same ground in the educational administration discourse, as if each day was as portrayed in the 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day*, never to advance new thinking.

As COPIS members look to our field of supervision, we must look with new eyes at our multi-cultures. I have named educational administration and teacher education, but there is also instructional leadership/leadership for learning, as well as a burgeoning and important group of critical supervision scholars.³ Does one dominate, or can they all co-exist? Can cultures be reconciled, recombined in new ways? Or is the melting pot a myth (e.g., Booth, 1998)? I alone cannot answer such questions, although I offer them for discussion. When we rethink seemingly simple concepts such as instructional improvement, we are obligated as scholars to make the familiar, strange, and the invisible, visible, so that we see them in new light.

³ We are also three branches with progeny extending out to other institutions: The Pennsylvania State, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Georgia.

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