INTERN SUPERVISION: HOW TO SUPPORT SUPERVISING TEACHERS BETTER?*

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Supervising interns is an important part of the work of technical program teachers and poses specific challenges that set it apart from teaching in the classroom or workshop. Yet there is little literature on this activity and an apparent lack of detailed knowledge on this aspect of a teacher's work. We therefore conducted a research project to develop an accurate profile of college intern supervision. The findings reflect a complex activity with several unique characteristics that extend beyond the educational relationship and confront supervisors with occasionally contradictory concerns. Considering this, the supervision of interns needs to receive greater support. To this end we have identified several intervention approaches to support college teachers in this activity.[1]

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNSHIPS TO THE WORK OF TEACHERS IN TECHNICAL PROGRAMS

An internship is a period of training that takes place in a company or organization. It gives students the opportunity to practice their chosen profession or trade in a real work setting. Depending on their place in a program, internships may play differing educational roles, such as observing a workplace and putting into practice program-specific competencies. In particular, they help students validate their career choice and transfer their learning into an authentic situation. The form these internships take vary between programs, from direct supervision, in which the teacher mentors the intern at all times in the internship setting, to indirect supervision, in which the teacher supervises the student from outside the work environment, often through personal interviews or small group activities.

Internship supervision accounts for a significant part of some technical teachers' workload. It often accounts for close to half of the resources devoted to teaching in various technical subjects that are allocated to this task. This proportion can even rise to 80 percent in programs such as Nursing.[2] Thus, many technical teachers will be required to supervise internship activities during their career.

Despite the importance of internships in technical training, teachers are not well prepared to supervise interns in the workplace. The various college teacher training programs in Quebec currently pay almost no attention to this specific duty of teachers. This lack of initial training is in direct contrast to the major challenges supervisors face when supervising interns, especially since their own prior experience as interns is often the only resource that supports them in this activity.

THE SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE RELATED TO THE SUPERVISION OF INTERNS

Supervising interns is a separate teaching practice requiring specific skills of various supervisors (Portelance *et al.*, 2008) and is particularly complex for several reasons. First, supervisors must adapt their interventions to the characteristics of each intern and to the specific context of the establishments where internships are conducted (Cohen, Hoz and Kaplan, 2013). This complexity therefore requires supervisors to be very adaptable. The assessment of competencies also entails significant challenges, especially the difficulty of obtaining a clear picture of an intern's performance under indirect supervision, and the standardization of assessments, notably those concerning professional attitudes (Baartman and De Bruijn, 2011). Several studies also highlight the importance of relationships in supervisory activities (Cuenca, 2010; Goldstein and Freedman, 2003).

A friendly relationship with supervisors and the impression of being permitted to make mistakes motivates interns to innovate in, and adopt a more critical approach to, their practice. However, some supervision situations can become conflictual, and the relationship may then affect the quality of interaction and the attainment of the internship training outcomes. Finally, the supervisor's interactions with a representative of the internship setting also increase the complexity of this educational

[1] Editor's note: Several of the approaches proposed might also be suitable for teachers who supervise students in a teaching clinic or any other similar setting.

[2] Depending on the breakdown of subject allocations in technical programs at Cégep de Sainte-Foy.

practice, as many problems have been noted in this area. These are caused in particular by trainers with opposing visions of their role (Beck and Kosnik, 2000, 2002; Cartaut and Bertone, 2009) or by differences of opinion regarding what approaches to use with the intern (Bullough and Draper, 2004).

In general, many authors have noted that the supervision of internships is a part of teaching that has received little study (Cuenca, 2010; Portelance *et al.*, 2008). This is even more obvious when examining the specifics of the college setting. There is recognition, however, that support for an occupational activity is more effective with the support of scientific knowledge of the practice and real work situations, and must factor in the work as experienced by the people involved, not just as a standardized, prescribed, simplified or idealized profile of their activity (Durand, Ria and Veyrunes, 2010).

We therefore conducted a research project under the PAREA program, with two objectives:

- Produce a description and an analysis of the supervision of interns by college technical program teachers.

- Identify approaches for providing better support of this activity, in particular the provision of professional development to teachers who supervise interns.

This analysis and the support approaches also must consider the specific context of college-level education.

▌ THE PAREA RESEARCH PROJECT

To attain our objectives, we chose a theoretical framework that was suited to producing a profile of supervision of interns in real situations, with emphasis placed on the supervisor's perspective on, and experience of, this task. This is the semiotic framework of the course of action (Theureau, 2004), which takes a broad approach to a given activity and does not limit itself to a specific aspect nor compare it to a prescribed or idealized standard. In this framework, the activity can be analysed in a way that highlights its undercurrents from the perspective of teachers-supervisors: their concerns, the knowledge and concepts they apply, and the sensory information they perceive in the environment.

To gather this data, we videotaped a supervision meeting with each of the seven experienced internship supervisors participating in the project (three women and four men; six in indirect supervision and one in direct supervision), each working in a different program. We gathered the participants' spoken responses to being shown the written records and

videos of their activity. The participants also contributed in a group meeting to a collective verification of the validity of the preliminary analysis and identification of approaches for supporting the supervision task. The full analysis of the information gathered revealed characteristics specific to the college internship supervision activity, seven of which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERN SUPERVISION

1 *An activity focused on developing the competencies of interns that is also adapted to their individual characteristics*

The research findings indicate that internship supervisors focus on developing the program's associated competencies. They consider their interns to be undertaking a training process, not merely demonstrating skills developed in a scholastic setting or completing a final assessment, as representatives of some internship settings might believe.

Supervisors also tend to believe their interns have individual characteristics that set them significantly apart from each other, such that the supervisors must adapt their interactions and supervision interviews to allow for these traits. These may be either a) factual information on each intern that helps explain certain aspects of that person's internship performance (e.g. the person has already completed a similar internship, or is returning to school and has slightly outdated theory training) or b) personality traits that reflect each intern's confidence level or response to criticism (e.g. by choosing to redo a self-assessment by a student with low self-esteem to help the student become aware of personal strengths).

2 *Concerns related to internship conditions*

One key objective of supervisors who took part in our study is to establish internship conditions that promote learning. Since those providing indirect supervision are not actually present in the internship setting, they cannot easily obtain a satisfactory appreciation of the learning conditions. They manage to get over these difficulties by asking the interns about the nature of their reception by various people in the internship setting, their integration into the professional team, the specific training received on site, etc. However, when they deem these conditions inadequate, the solutions seem limited to liaising with the site representative, or withdrawing the intern from the internship site, which usually has a major impact on that student's academic progress.

3   *A significant unplanned element and follow-ups to carry out over extended periods of time*

Most of the actions performed by supervisors throughout the research were neither planned nor anticipated, an indication of the high level of responsiveness required to supervise interns. Supervisors actually have little control over how supervision meetings with their interns proceed, because they constantly must adjust their interventions to the points raised by the intern during the discussion. These factors primarily consist of accounts of activities performed in the internship or anecdotes of experiences, questions asked directly of supervisors or particular aspects of the tone of voice, such as being slightly hesitant when using a technical term.

Nevertheless, supervisors generally manage to plan follow-ups for difficulties encountered by their interns, questions left un-answered after the last meeting, or progress made in learning. Unfortunately, this follow-up is often provided at meetings held much later, so each time, supervisors must delve back into the situation, re-establish the links with prior meetings, and place their remarks back into a context that has lost much of its meaning for them as well as their interns.

> *Supervisors tend to guide interns toward mobilizing their theoretical knowledge and engaging in meta-reflection, to help them resolve on their own any problematic situations encountered in an internship.*

4   *Forging links between theoretical learning and internship experience*

Helping interns draw links between knowledge acquired in class and practice in an internship is a constant concern of supervisors, who focus on encouraging interns to apply their theoretical knowledge and engage in meta-reflection, to help them resolve, on their own, problematic situations encountered in an internship. In this regard, supervisors see great potential in their students' internship experiences for enhancing the theory courses in the program. In particular, they may ask students in class for practical examples encountered in their internship to illustrate the theory. At group meetings, super-visors also encourage the sharing of each person's experiences to expose interns to other practices and methods.

The research findings reveal as well that supervisors seek to prepare their interns to view the practice of their future occu-pation as it exists in the workplace. This concern is especially apparent when supervisors show interns how practice of the

occupation often involves "tips" that differ from the "ideal" practice taught in the program, or is highly systematized, often for assessment purposes.

5   *Managing the emotional aspect and building trust*

The supervision of interns entails considerable involvement by supervisors in coaching learners through their emotional ex-periences, which includes building confidence and preventing psychological burnout, in addition to providing support and empathy when interns are coping with positively or negatively charged emotional situations.

Supervisors who took part in the study sougt to build trust in meetings with their interns, especially to facilitate this emotional coaching, but also because they see a need to fill both their assigned roles: support interns in their learning and assess them. In both cases, teachers in an indirect supervision context must rely on accounts from the interns, especially on the difficulties they encounter.

6   *Challenges associated with assessment*

The research findings also show how assessment of interns poses specific challenges, including indirect observation of interns' performance, the application of an evaluative judg-ment that is fair and standardized among colleagues, and between settings, and finally, the assessment of professional and interrelation attitudes.

7   *Preoccupations of the internship placement setting*

Finally, a characteristic that extends beyond the framework of the pedagogical relationship lies in the fact that supervisors are constantly focused on ensuring that the establishments that host interns are satisfied. This is essentially to preserve internship placements for future students. This concern is especially evident in the desire to relieve the people hosting interns of part of their duties as well as in the contribution to recruiting staff for the organization, or even directly for the internship setting's mission.

▶ **CONFLICTING CONCERNS**

Highlighting the various characteristics of college internship supervision helped us identify many of the concerns held by teacher-supervisors regarding this educational activity. What emerges is the fact that some of these concerns contradict each other. For example, the role of assessor that supervisors must play conflicts with their desire to create an atmosphere of trust

during supervision meetings, where they want to encourage interns to talk about the problems they are experiencing. Similarly, the requirement to maintain the quality of the learning context provided by the hosts place supervisors under pressure, as they do not want to displease the internship host in order to maintain cooperation and thereby ensure the sustainability of internship placements for the program. Another contradiction observed is related to differences in the internship vision projected by the program (and supervisors) and that conveyed by the internship hosts. This occasionally places teachers in an awkward position where they must alternate between defending the program's vision and, once again, preserving internship placements for the future. These conflicting concerns sometimes place supervisors in harsh ethical dilemmas.

Even when there is no contradictory dynamic, the synergy between certain characteristics presented also creates a challenging tension for supervisors. For example, having to face a very emotionally charged meeting (managing the emotional aspect) with absolutely no opportunity to prepare (unplannable aspect) adds to the complexity of the situation.

> *The best way to support new supervisors in adopting a less directive approach (but somewhat counter-intuitive for them) would be a formula allowing them to observe its application.*

◗ **APPROACHES FOR SUPPORTING SUPERVISION**

Showing the characteristics of college internship supervision also enabled the supervisors participating in the research to identify a number of approaches that better support their professional activity.

The teachers first stressed that one of the challenges they face is to develop a vision for the program that is shared among all supervisors, above all in terms of the assessment, but also on their role and their approach to working with interns and representatives of internship settings. The participants voiced a greater need for opportunities for supervisors to meet and discuss matters directly related to their concerns. The profile of supervisors' activities that emerged from this project could form the basis for a productive discussion during these meetings.

On the challenges related to assessing interns, participants cited the approach of reducing the assessment role of internship hosts, because they often have little knowledge of the

program, and the requirement levels differ greatly between settings. They also cited the need for reflection on the relevance of assessments issued as a very specific percentage mark as opposed to a "pass-fail" system, which would lessen the need for a precise standardization of assessment practices.

Supervision is based on a range of concepts that supervisors have acquired through their experiences and through discussions with colleagues. Those starting to supervise therefore face the dual challenge of assimilating the program as a whole, particularly to address the concern for helping interns make the links between theory and practice, but also all the informal methods specific to their program. Participants described using a close mentoring approach with interns at the start of their supervision practice, in most instances directly suggesting solutions for problems encountered. They reported a gradual shift with experience to a less directive approach that they consider more effective in promoting learning. They now encourage their interns to find their own solutions, to develop methods of dealing with problems that will allow them, once they enter the labour market, to solve new problems not encountered in their internship. Participants believe that the most appropriate way to support new supervisors in adopting a less directive approach (somewhat counter-intuitive for them) would be a program that allows them to observe its implementation. This program might consist of observing experienced supervisors in a few meetings with interns. In situations where the presence of an observer is not desirable, observing a video recording of supervision sessions conducted by experienced supervisors could present an alternative.

Some participants pointed out significant benefits for the supervisor and interns from organizing workshops that gather several students at a time to foster the sharing and discussion of experiences. While this "workshop" formula is hard to apply in many programs, because interns are working far from the college, similar benefits could be achieved by giving students opportunities to support each other in handling difficulties encountered. These opportunities might take the form of meetings of interns or virtual communities for sharing experiences and support, with or without supervisor involvement.

Mainly, the approach presented here for analysing the activity could be repeated, not as a research procedure, but rather as a training method in colleges, inspired by activity analysis laboratories (Ria and Lussi Borer, 2015). In this approach, members of a group target professional development goals that concern them, gather evidence of their activity related to these goals (video clips, documents, etc.) and analyse them together, guided by a specialist in the procedure. For instance, a group

of supervisors concerned with interactions with interns who have shortcomings in their professional attitudes might decide to film themselves during internship sessions and select clips that illustrate this type of situation. These clips would then be analysed by the group or by pairs of supervisors, to share concerns and the strategies used by each, and to collectively identify avenues for development.

▶ **CONCLUSION**

Through an observation of supervision sessions and an analysis of spoken accounts, this research has identified a set of characteristics for the activities carried out by internship supervisors. We found that the act of supervising includes concerns that extend beyond those that teachers encounter in the classroom and those that are specific to the internship context. Supervision therefore merits its own form of support. Our research also targeted several avenues for action that reflect the specific context of supervision of college internships. We hope that this information proves useful to all teachers required to supervise internships in college technical programs. ◖

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