

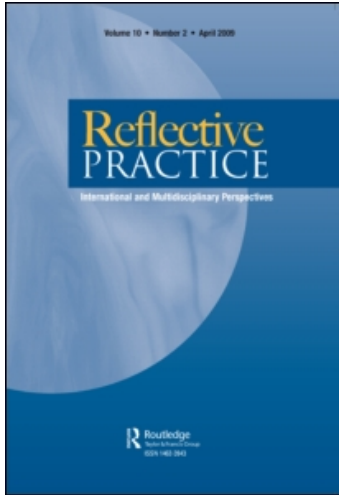
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Reflective practice at a distance: using technology in counselling supervision

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Reflective practice at a distance: using technology in counselling supervision

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the experience of using technology (telephone, asynchronous email, Skype) for counselling supervision at a distance. Different styles of communication are required and some surprising changes in practice emerge in this dialogical study which takes place in Aotearoa New Zealand. Reference is made to the international literature on online therapy, reflective practice and supervision. One of the findings is that clear contractual expectations are essential, a working agreement which can be flexible enough to accommodate distance practices. Finally, we evaluate the benefits and challenges of using technology for the purposes of professional supervision.

Keywords: technology; supervision; contracting; reflective writing; distance practices

Context and contracts

Professional supervision is a primary resource for every counsellor in the maintenance and development of safe, ethical and effective practice. Supervision includes personal support, mentoring professional identity development and reflection upon the relationships between person, theories, practice work contexts and cultural perspectives (NZAC, 2008).

Drawing on both the traditions of critical, intentional self-reflection in writing (Bolton, 2005, 2010) and the writing as inquiry practices which have emerged in the social sciences (Richardson, 2000), this dialogue between two experienced counsellors/supervisors is the result of geographical distance, small communities of practice and the necessity to use technology to communicate at a distance. Both authors prefer the ‘presence’ of face-to-face communication but indicate how using the telephone, Skype and asynchronous email can overcome some of the obstacles of distance. The benefits of supervision online may not be apparent for novice practitioners.

In some countries, including the UK and Aotearoa New Zealand, it is a professional requirement to be in a supervisory relationship in order to teach or practise counselling and psychotherapy. This paper, featuring an extended conversation which took place at a distance and in writing, indicates the need for further research about how technology, and especially the Internet, enables and impacts on supervisory practice (Goss & Anthony, 2003).

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Necessity to reflect on practice may be the mother of this paper, just as necessity is one reason why technology is increasingly used in Aotearoa New Zealand and other parts of the world to access appropriate supervision. Populations of qualified practitioners are dispersed in New Zealand, especially in some rural areas, creating a difficulty, especially when novice counsellors are looking for more experienced supervisors.

We are writing as two experienced counsellors and supervisors in the form of a dialogue, a written conversation which was spaced between supervision 'sessions' over a year-long period.

Jeannie (JW), a recent migrant from the UK, found comparisons between Aotearoa New Zealand and practice in isolated places like the Shetland Islands, Scotland, useful when she was first considering how to access professional supervision (Casemore & Gallant, 2007). She was, in fact, lucky to be living in a relatively densely populated part of the North Island of New Zealand and to find a supervisor of similar experience and worldview. We share both a pluralistic theoretical stance in counselling and psychotherapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2007) and a feminist worldview (Enns, 2004) which was an important 'match'.

Face-to-face supervision is our preference, but, living a three-hour return drive away, means a face-to-face appointment seems at times to be an unaffordable luxury. So, after about a year of meeting face-to-face, for pragmatic reasons, Jeannie asked Frances if working by telephone, or online, using email and eventually by Skype, a voice-over Internet platform, would be possible. It is also Jeannie's habit to use 'self-writing' (Wright, 2009) and this ease with catching thoughts and feelings on paper or on screen was part of the request to move to alternatives to the 'face-to-face'.

Frances (FG) was much more cautious. Her preference as counsellor and supervisor is to work 'in the present'. This overlap between approaches to therapy and supervision has provided her with a sense of coherence (Lowe, 2004) of practice. If the counsellor and supervisor are not in the same room then Frances considers that she cannot respond as fully in the moment to what is being said. There is more chance of this on the phone, which is in real time, than in writing / emailing. However, the lack of the visual means she finds it more difficult to know what to respond to. Her philosophy of counselling and supervision includes the belief that the body gives important information that may be unspoken but adds to the picture of what is being presented. The visual is a two-way process, with the practitioner also able to have a direct experience the supervisor's response. In face-to-face supervision, this can be explored by agreement. Her preference for working 'in the present' means that she feels less congruent (Lowe, 2004) and, she fears, less effective when working other than face-to-face.

However, having accepted the necessity of supervision by distance, on occasion, Frances saw writing about this as a useful opportunity to reflect on her values and practices as a supervisor overall and to explore, with Jeannie, what constitutes 'effective' and for whom. She saw this as a collaborative process involving 'two competent professionals engaging in a professional task' (Crocket, 2004, p. 161), wishing to extend their experiences and understandings of the supervision process.

We have used these 'distance technologies' now for over a year and agreed to record our impressions and observations of the process in the form of a dialogue.

JW: There is a vulnerability in the 'new' and the 'unknown' which our supervisory work has addressed at times for me as a relatively new migrant. So, I have chosen to use individual supervision rather than alternatives, such as group or peer supervision.

I respect the critiques of this form of ‘intimacy’ (Cornforth & Claiborne, 2008) however, at this point, individual supervision meets my needs in various ways. Although accredited as a ‘senior practitioner’ elsewhere, at this point in migrating to a new culture, I am noticing how much more input and information is required in supervision than was the case in the UK where I had been practising for over 20 years. Biculturalism is an obvious gap in my experience and knowledge and all sorts of cultural learning has been stimulated and implied by the move to work here (Durie, 2007).

FG: We had set an initial contract to facilitate critical reflection through negotiated processes, goals and boundaries (Morley, 2007) and respectful of the power relations inherent in supervision (Crocket, 2004). We have reviewed this from time to time. However, the contract did not include expectations for supervision by distance as this has been a more recent development.

JW: Yes, and I had no idea how emotionally demanding the move here would be. My expectations were more theoretical, for example, that the contribution of narrative and other postmodern approaches is central in Aotearoa New Zealand (Crocket et al., 2007) and less dominant in the UK, and that we could discuss my reaction to that, but there has been more of an emphasis on personal issues than I had anticipated. I have felt at times, we have been involved in a complex blend of a coaching and supervisory relationship (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010).

Methodology and ethical issues

This paper has used writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). The extracts from our emails have been monitored carefully for any ethical or ‘boundary’ issues (Bond, 2004). The content of our supervisory work is not the focus of this paper; we are analysing the process of our professional relationship separate from supervision itself. Therapists and supervisors are bound by the code(s) of the professional association(s) of which they are a member, regardless of where they or their client is based. Each section of the following will include some of the ethical issues involved in communication at a distance, and resources for dealing with them.

What have been our experiences of telephone supervision?

What may be implications for future practice?

JW: I like to see the people I am talking with. Although I am more comfortable as a writer/emailer than a talker/phone user, and have found the phone conversations we have had an enormous effort, they have felt like a real lifeline at times. Searching for ways to learn about others’ experience, I found some UK-based research (M. Robson & Whelan, 2006) specifically about telephone supervision. Overall the result of this piece of dialogical research was positive, although Maggie Robson has written about the potential dangers of therapeutic practice using the Internet (D. Robson & Robson, 1998) The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Guidelines were also practical and helped me shape the telephone work we have done (Payne, Casemore, Neat, & Chambers, 2006).

Essentially I prefer writing because it gives me time to reflect (and backspace). When I was practising online in the UK (Wright, 2002) I developed some useful habits which have transferred well to telephone and email supervision, e.g. preparing for our phone supervisions by writing a list to clear the chatter in my mind and writing or drawing

some key points after the phone call. One of the reasons I like writing rather than the 'real time' of the phone is that I do feel more in control. I can express whatever I like on paper or on the screen and then re-read and edit before anyone else sees the writing. Maybe we have both been out of our comfort zone in the phone sessions?

FG: There seem to be two threads here: the use of the phone and use of reflective writing. My experience of telephone supervision set me off re-exploring issues of power and control in the supervision relationship. Your preference for writing as a form of reflection presented some significant questions for me to consider as well: how to read the other's writing? How does supervision encourage reflective practice at a distance compared to face-to-face? What newly-generated knowledge might influence my practice and lead to further inquiry?

I would also be interested to know in what ways phone conversations can be 'an enormous effort' and whether there is something I can contribute as supervisor that would make the experience less difficult?

I consider supervision to be a respectful and rigorous joint process (Crocket, 2004) undertaken in a spirit of open inquiry (Hawkins, 2008) where both parties contribute to co-creating an environment in which each continues to learn from the other (Shohet, 2008). My spontaneous response to the telephone experience, therefore, required some thought and follow-up with my own supervisor. I found myself asking whether I had been assuming a position of power since I regretted not having 'access' to more than your disembodied voice. Was this a means of your taking control of what might be available for consideration? And, if so, why should not you?

I think these situations provide a great example of the usefulness of the self-sustaining practitioner at work (Lowe, 2004) alongside conventional supervision practice. Your systematic exploration of a concern, informed by theory, principles and practice is the proactive, reflexive (Carroll, 1996) work of an experienced professional. My response highlighted a mismatch between my stated position and the actuality of the moment and led to 'ruminating and exploring' (Wheeler, 2001, p. 175) issues of power with my own supervisor. Supervisors are no less likely than counsellors or other practitioners to have 'blind spots'!

What is different for me supervising by phone? I take notes while you are speaking which I choose not to do when you are in the room because I find this a distraction from being 'in the moment'. I find myself more likely to respond quickly, perhaps because I cannot judge the quality/ timing of the silence without visual clues. Sometimes I am more likely to be more pragmatic (doing rather than being?) and I wonder if this relates to what you choose to put on the agenda for phone conversations as opposed to face-to-face?

JW: For me there has been a definite shift towards the more pragmatic on the phone. I have noticed, in this reflection, how that came about. For example, I would wait until seeing you face-to-face if I had anything of emotional depth to explore. This 'setting aside the more fraught' was not a deliberate decision.

FG: This raises a question for me. I am wondering what might be the implication for a counsellor's on-going practice if the balance of distance sessions outweighs the face-to face and 'emotional depth' gives way to the pragmatic over time.

Implications for practice

FG: Conversations about these experiences could usefully inform the contracting of the initial working agreement, especially with an experienced practitioner. I would

continue to value and articulate the supporting of practitioner autonomy as a function of supervision. In addition, I would want to negotiate how together we might notice and inquire about any perceived imbalance in what is presented for discussion.

While it is common to contract for the development of respectful, collaborative practice, appropriate boundaries and goal setting to foster autonomy and the development of self sustaining practitioner (Porter et al., 1997), the lived experience and growth of trust in the process take time to develop. In order to feel safe enough to take risks (Shohet, 2008), those new to supervision and critical reflective practice (and those with new supervisors) must not feel criticized themselves by the process (Morley, 2007). Because of this, I would consider the telephone as a medium for occasional supervision only after establishing a trusting face-to-face relationship.

What have been our experiences of email supervision?

What may be implications for future practice?

JW: I notice that when I am working online with counselling and supervision clients there is much more control in the client's or practitioner's hands (Lago & Wright, 2007). However, the other side of that highlights for me some of the benefits of that increased 'autonomy'. For example, in having to sit down and compose an email, I find all kinds of 'aha' moments in the clarity of thinking that the writing produces. It slows me down to write through an ethical dilemma, for example. By the time I have spent an hour working out on paper what the various options are and which ethical principles I have addressed or left out, I often reach a point where I no longer need to talk through what it was that worried me enough to put it on the list for supervision. Writing takes longer of course, and that is something we have talked about. It is also more solitary than our meetings – less fun!

FG: As we began to use email as a form of communication, I found I had questions about how best to respond, with some of these questions influenced by my own experiences of writing. My experience of receiving writing from you, as part of our supervision at a distance, led me to re-consider autonomy, power, meaning making and implications for practice.

As a practitioner, if I am writing only for myself there is less need to be explicit about the context, therefore I can focus on the essence/idea/problem of interest. My purpose in writing can be direct: recording, exploration, reflection, argument, making meaning and so on. The lack of constraints (e.g. gaze of another) allows freewheeling, creativity, with the possibility of following emerging ideas, making room for an ahah! I can take ownership of timeframes for writing and thinking about writing, including night time thoughts noted on paper on the bedside table for future consideration. Though I am also much less likely to edit during the process of writing for myself, technology provides the facility for organising thoughts, clarifying ideas and language as I type. I then have a record available for reflection that contributes to my self-supervision. Such reflection supports me as autonomous practitioner.

In writing to convey a message or an idea for an audience, however, my self-critique button automatically switches on during the process. The combination of writer and editor roles in the same moment is both functional and restrictive for me. It is functional because the audience needs to be clear about my meaning; it is restrictive because imagined value judgements about the content emerge. Once I have produced a 'text', I know that understanding of it is inevitably mediated through the reader's own preconceptions. Therefore, if my purpose is self-reflection or exploration

open to others, I am likely to act as my own translator (Gadamer, 2004, p. 387) from writing for self to writing for an audience. How then, as supervisor, do I usefully and respectfully read the work of another who may well have undertaken this process and is seeking feedback?

JW: I see you as a kind of ‘witness’ in the narrative sense (White & Epston, 1990), a person offering non-judgemental ‘presence’ in the Rogerian understanding of self in a relationship (Rogers, 1980). I am also aware that writing can be of value in itself, without an actual, but more of an imagined audience (Hunt, 2004).

The most powerful ‘self-supervision’ writing I have done is where I have not been able to say to anyone what is haunting me. So, there was the time in the UK when one of a family, head-lined in the local press as part of a ‘Satanic abuse’ ring, a ‘notorious case’ appeared at my door in the form of a very thin young man who was a student at a local college; or there was the rape I could not get out of my head, again a young person, a 14-year-old girl who had attempted suicide twice since the attack. These are traumatic experiences which, research indicates, can be managed more effectively for some through writing (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Internal supervision is one way of writing ‘the unspeakable’, but the ‘restorative’ qualities are sometimes missing.

In a long email to you dated July 2007, I was reviewing the experience of coming to Aotearoa New Zealand to take up a counsellor education and research post. I had found some counselling practice in a community agency and, after a year, was weighing up the sense of making ‘a new life’. Re-reading, to go back and reflect on those words, is extremely valuable for personal and professional development and illustrates one of the most important benefits of writing in the supervision process. The extract reads:

Re-reading this, I sound rather flat and tired – accurate after the workshop and with a bad cold to boot. Hopefully the energy will return. Supervision has been enormously supportive and stimulating Frances and I thank you for that.

I feel more energetic (even with jet lag!) than just before I left so that has to be a good thing.

Had we met face-to-face on that day, I might have been able to express that weariness more powerfully, but I would have had no record of it, no sense of a pattern or of the experience changing.

FG: Yes, I see the value of the written record, too. I have also reviewed some reflections of the process:

My experience of email correspondence – I find I can’t measure the weight of ideas/their impact/emotional content in writing and find I may be overemphasizing aspects of my agenda. I’m concerned that the lack of immediacy in response/verbal and body messages/ from you as practitioner and in me may create unwanted, out of kilter thinking that is unhelpful and may have residue that is out of proportion to the ideas expressed. This leaves me with thoughts about who takes responsibility for what in distance correspondence. I’m uncomfortable with leaving unfinished business.

JW: I like the way you tend to ‘stay with’ the content of what I am writing. Sometimes your questions are very useful and of course I acknowledge that there may be misunderstandings so clarifying questions are necessary.

FG: Yes. Gadamer quotes Plato as having said that the specific weakness of writing was that no one could come to the aid of the written word if it fell victim to misunderstanding, intentional or otherwise (Gadamer, 2004, p. 393). Fortunately,

supervision allows us to make meaning and shared understanding through ongoing conversation. I find useful Gadamer's idea that understanding is a three-way relationship where one person comes to an understanding with another about something they both understand (p. xvi), leading to the emergence of something new (p. xvii).

I think of examples of two kinds of writing I have received from you: a well-considered case example and a more spontaneous piece written under pressure relating to a mix of work/family/professional concerns. My practice in each case was to write a preliminary response as these emerged from an initial reading. I then went back and gave a more considered response as well.

In the case work example, I offered the seven-eyed supervisor model (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000) through which I viewed what you had written as a way for you to reflect further on your practice, if that seemed useful to you. I responded to each of the 'items' with perhaps a greater focus on the restorative aspect of supervision and noting familiar themes that may have been useful to re-consider. I note my language use here:

I notice I use language like "I'm imagining ...", "I'm not sure if this is an unwarranted assumption ...", "for discussion, perhaps...", "that's not a facetious comment – email problem again!" and use question marks in relation to these since there is no possibility of immediate feedback to check if the response is useful to you. In fact there are many question marks linked to possible lines of thought/courses of action.

In another reflection, I noted:

I found myself making/ chose to make a personal disclosure and noted, "the experience of writing seems to need something of the personal to counter the lack of spontaneity in writing". I don't think I would have felt this need face-to-face.

Goss (2000, p. 178), in acknowledging possibilities and potential problems in email counselling relationships refers to the freeing up of constraints, allowing more openness more quickly. I am still curious about my response in the supervision context and wonder about the need to reconsider boundary setting in contracting for email supervision.

JW: In the email dialogues, we are both likely to feel more 'exposed'. Yet, I am well aware of being in control of the 'raw material' and of 'editing' before sending you the message. The writing enables me to explore new professional identities, values, new cultural learning. Reflective practice is at the core of this process, whether or not I work with the 'internal supervisor' or with you (Bolton, 2005, 2010).

Implications for practice

Some of the recent literature on online practice from the UK and USA is useful on ethical issues in particular, providing clear case-examples and flow diagrams showing how from the very first email contact with a new client, clear adherence to appropriate ethical principles is essential (Anthony & Goss, 2009; Jones & Stokes, 2009). For example, an additional factor in using online communication is the risk of technological breakdown and the need to ensure your firewalls, virus protection and all of those vital things to ensure ethical practice in this digital world are up-to-date.

It is also always worth checking the International Society for Mental Health Online website for their case discussions (www.ISMHO.org) including archived material and classic discussions on contracting online for example.

FG: Contracting: As the supervisor receiving writing from the practitioner, I need to have some clarity about what the practitioner expects in return so that the process of inquiry and feedback is negotiated. This may alleviate potential distortion arising from time lag between emailing the writing and receiving a reply.

Writing selves: While Gadamer (2004, p. 388) maintains we write about what is important, possibly playing down or suppressing other features, this is no different from face-to-face presentation. The balance of support and challenge around what is offered for discussion is part of the ongoing review of supervision practice.

JW: There is a whole other article (maybe a book!) to be written about how writing works in personal development. Some theorists would deny the possibility of therapeutic and reflective writing about 'self'. From a narrative or post-structuralist point of view (Gannon, 2006), strongly represented in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, more research is needed, especially case studies of practice in these unique localities.

FG: Time is a factor; reflection and writing need to be kept to the agreed time-frames for supervision sessions.

Of the two aspects discussed above, telephone and writing/emailing as part of distance supervision, I see writing readily translating to being part of the supervision process for beginning practitioners, if that suits their style. All of the positives about developing the self-sustaining practitioner via written personal reflection pertain. The risks of misunderstanding or inappropriate responses that may occur through time delayed emailing, however, may be exacerbated when two people are still negotiating a relationship.

What have been our experiences of supervision by Skype?

What may be implications for future practice?

FG: Our experience of using Skype has been more recent. The advantages, to me, have been the experience of real time conversation where we are each visible to the other. As a supervisor, I have found it possible to pace my comments/questions with more confidence than in telephone sessions because of what I can see of your responses.

At this stage, I have been aware of the confines of 'Skyping' from ones' workplace, but do not know whether you find this the case. One of the things I value about 'going to supervision' is the space this creates, physically and metaphorically. I wonder whether something of this thinking time is lost when you have to switch directly out of the 'busyness' of your work and onto another screen of the computer in your office?

I am not sure if it is patronising, but I wonder if I might be less likely to pursue the kind of deep emotional content you mentioned earlier if it seemed that anyone was free to walk into the room and interrupt the session.

JW: Yes, it sounds very simple but that inhibition has been a major difference in meeting you face-to-face and in Skyping from the office or even home. Seeing you in real time has been a major advantage though, even if the non-verbal cues are still relatively 'veiled' by the medium. I noticed years ago in online practice in the UK that I tended to move into more behavioural ways of working online. If a client described their anxiety in an email, for example, I would 'intervene' in my reply with lists of self-help materials, in a less collaborative way than in face-to-face practice. I see this as my own anxiety emerging, taking an 'expert' role rather than allowing the client to lead (Wright, 2004). Somehow Skype seems more 'functional' and less likely to elicit

strong emotions in me. That is why I prefer emailing, but cannot always make the time. Given that the Internet has only been integrated into our lives since the mid to late-1990s, these dimensions of practice and the physical space of Internet mediated practice has not been much researched so far in our field.

FG: Carroll (2001, p. 194) wonders: 'Is it possible that a supervisory attitude, viewing supervision as a reflective process that allows participants to think deeply and vulnerably about life and values, work and career, relationships and connections, might make an immense difference in how participants live?' I wonder, given the experiences outlined above, how technology might effectively contribute to such a position. Like Wilmot (2008, p. 98), I continue to value 'the immediacy of the relationship...and permission to comment on it, permission to be curious ...' that comes with face-to-face interactions and which remains, for me, fundamental to supervision.

Summary

In the context of working in 'the talking therapies' in Aotearoa New Zealand, necessity would seem to be a prime motivator for some practitioners beginning to use technology for supervision at a distance (Wilson, Craig, & Gardiner, 2005). This dialogue considers reflective practice and supervision using the telephone, online communication by asynchronous email and by voice-over Internet phone, e.g. Skype.

Reflective practice is the cornerstone of counselling and psychotherapy both for novice practitioners and for those who are experienced enough to be considered 'self-sustaining'. However, many would argue that reflective practice is standing on contentious ground, politically (Betts, 2004), ethically (Bleakley, 2000) educationally (Clegg, Tan, & Saeidi, 2002) and philosophically (Johns, 2005). Some would suggest that this form of 'intimacy' needs rigorous critique theoretically (Cornforth & Claiborne, 2008) and as a form of 'taken for granted' professional practice (Feltham, 1999).

In broader terms, in counselling, coaching and psychotherapy, supervision provides new and experienced practitioners with space and time to explore and develop their own identity as professionals, increasing competency in their chosen approach and linking theory to practice. Supervision is also an important part of 'self-care' preventing burnout and helping to maintain ethical practice. Research is urgently needed into how technology influences the supervisory relationship.

Notes on contributors

Jeannie Wright is associate professor in Counselling at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand. Fascinated by the potential of reflective and expressive writing as a vehicle for professional and personal change, her research interests include online counselling and supervision and the use of creative writing for personal development and as a vehicle for reflective practice.

Frances Griffiths is a former senior lecturer in Counselling at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. She has been involved in supervision for many years as practitioner and educator. Currently she offers supervision in private practice.

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