

# **Inspiring moments in supervision. How to promote change. University in Stavanger, Norway, August 2011.**

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### **Summary of speech made at the conference**

The following is a presentation of some thoughts concerning powerful reflection based on my research on reflection in educational contexts. The overall questions will be the following:

- What does reflection mean – behind the slogan?
- Are we going to *learn* to reflect in supervision?
- How can we interpret reflection as *powerful reflection*?
- What does it take to appeal to someone's ability to reflect – some thoughts about educational sensuality?

This presentation is not a presentation of factual knowledge about reflection, supervision and change. My intention with this speech is to encourage further thinking and discussion concerning powerful reflection.

### **What does reflection mean – behind the slogan?**

In supervisory contexts we often hear that it is very important to reflect on a certain phenomenon, for instance reflecting on some earlier experience of the supervised. My own interest in reflection started to deepen when I asked supervisors in kindergartens and schools what they meant by using this word reflection. Very often I got answers like: "*do you really not know – you who are a supervisor yourself or don't you now, you who are working at the university?*" It seems to me that supervisors often take the meaning of reflection for granted and believe that all of us have a common understanding.

Let us have a look at the etymological background. The prefix "re" means "back," and "flection" means "bending" or "turning." The construct was originally used in optics, about the mirroring that occurs when a ray of light hits the surface of water. In supervision we use the construct of reflection metaphorically. It is not the light that is bent or turned backwards, it is our attention.

Reflection has also always to do with distance in time. It is something we do *after* something else, or as one of my informants once put it: *when I reflect I am thinking back on some episode, afterwards. This can happen some seconds afterwards or many hours later.*

Let us now summarize this first question by saying that reflection means to bend our attention back to something. And reflecting has something in common with dreaming: you cannot dream without dreaming of something, and you cannot reflect without reflecting on something. This means that reflection always has to have a content, and I will come back to what we turn our attention towards in my third question.

### **Are we going to *learn* to reflect in supervision?**

I would like to open this part of my presentation about powerful reflection by showing some the artwork of Louise Bourgeois, *The Welcome Hands*. These are distinct blocks of granite with varying configurations of intertwining bronze hands. It is located in central Paris. Louise Bourgeois herself once said that the hands were meant to welcome newcomers, new immigrants (Fielding, 2007). *The Welcome Hands* also invites us to sharpen our thinking about reflection and questions of what is a human being and what is the difference between us and other living beings.



I have often heard it said that it is very important to teach the students or the supervised to reflect. The ability of reflection seems not to be present before the supervisory process started. It seems rather that reflection appears as a question of learning something new, and not a question of training some existing ability. This touches questions such as what is a human being and what is the difference between human beings and animals. The Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1996) answers by comparing the claw of an eagle with the human hand. The claw of the eagle is a specialized organ, well shaped for catching animals, fish or birds. But there are a lot of things this claw can not do, like for instance doing mechanical operations, hit other animals, hold a spoon or help a calf to be born into this world. All this – and much more of course, is possible for the human hand – this hand that is not specialized in the same way as the claw of the eagle. The human hand can be used for caring for someone, like the Welcoming Hands above, or hurting someone, such as hitting or even shooting them. The human being has to *choose* what to do with their hand, and we have to reflect being able to make our own choices of the meaning of right or wrong. In this way we can say that reflection is a human speciality. When asserting that reflection is to be learned as something new in higher education and not to be trained as an existing human quality, humans are reduced to from someone to a *something*.

### **How can we understand reflection as powerful reflection?**

When asking the question what is behind the slogan of reflection in the beginning of this presentation, I underlined that reflection has to be related to a particular content: you can not reflect without reflecting *on* something. I bring this in because my research (and others) shows that reflection most often is seen as synonymous to thinking, a kind of deeper thinking. The turning of the attention back is then to a former episode and how this was treated. It could be reflecting on our own former action on something else. One example is when a student is asked why she did her teaching in a special way, and she answers: “because the curriculum says so”. This is an important answer. However, we may say that the answer mirrors a kind of deeper thinking. She is bending her attention back to the former thinking, and she is developing the content that is already there, done before, by someone else. We get more of the same - a sort of conserved thinking that maintains what is already known. I prefer to call this immanent reflection. I have done this because it makes it possible to make a distinction between reflections in general and the powerful reflection. I characterize the latter as transcendental reflection (Søndenå, 2004). Going back to the student working on her teaching again, we could ask her “what did you think about when you were planning your lesson yesterday?” Then we force the attention back to earlier thinking and not direct to the earlier doings. This latter question will nourish more powerful reflection and critical perspectives because it gives an opportunity to *change* the thinking connected to the doing.

I quote the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986) to illustrate this distinction between immanent and transcendent or powerful reflection. Here she describes her own childhood:

*As soon as I opened my mouth, the others got the power over me and once more locked me up in a world it had taken me years to escape from. Where everything had it's unambiguous name, it's place and function, where hate and love, evil and good were as separated as black and white. Where everything was organized, categorized, known, understood and irrevocable judged: a world full of sharp edges, swaddled in a ruthless light, never touched by a shadow of doubt.*

Beauvoir, 1996: 169, my translation from Norwegian.

What is illustrated here is de Beauvoir's ability to transcend earlier thinking. She bends her attention back to what was the way of thinking in her childhood. She did not reflect on what she *did*, rather on what was the thinking and the meaning of her upbringing. Summarizing the question of powerful or transcendent reflection I would like to underline that the powerful reflection is to turn your attention back to earlier thinking of your own or of other human beings. This implies a distinction between deep thinking and reflection. The latter is closely related to the philosophic understanding of the construct of wondering, in the meaning of opening up, favouring unfinished thinking and dialogue and closing down fundamental practices.

### **What does it take to appeal to someone's ability to reflect – some thoughts about educational sensuality.**

When I use the expression educational sensuality it is either limited to an erotic understanding or to a separate feeling. It is linked to an understanding of the body in supervisory contexts as "Leib". I am referring to a wider understanding of the body, which the philosopher Husserl (1859-1938) and later Merleau-Ponty (1908-1960) and de Beauvoir (1908-1986) developed further. This means that the body is either conceived as nature or as "geist" (spiritually). The body is situated in the world in a way that makes it possible to say "I am sitting by my desk writing on an essay" and not "The body is sitting by my desk writing on an essay" (Søndenå, 2002).

One way to illustrate is to go to the teacher of Helen Keller (1880-1968), Anne Sullivan Macy (1866-1936). As we might remember Helen Keller was deaf and blind and as time went on, she also became mute. When she was seven years old, she got Ann Sullivan as her teacher. It took about one month to establish contact between the supervisor and the supervised. Then one day the teacher poured water over Helen's hand, and then made the sign for water in the hand. By this action Helen understood that all phenomenon had their own name. She realised that water was water – wherever water was found. A very important discovery for Helen, and now she wanted to learn the words in the world. Before this epiphany there had been a lot of aggression and frustration and Ann Sullivan had

been close to giving up, as several earlier teachers had done before her. But, due to her persistence, she succeeded and opened a new world for Helen Keller.

Another illustrating example of educational sensuality is the professor Anna-Lena Östern's project titled Living Moments (2006). In this project students were asked to write about when they felt most alive during their education (in one particular week). This project made it possible to get in contact with existential dimensions and with feelings involved in the processes of reflection.

Leaning on the philosopher Axel Honnet (2003), educational sensuality could be described as *caring*, in a very wide perspective. It concerns *attitudes which strengthen our consciousness about the Other*. Central to this is the ability to listen, to give emotional support and to encourage creativity and the development of a distinctive character. It has to do with the ability of the supervisor to accept impressions, evaluate them and act (in common), accordingly from the point of educational wisdom and further on to develop dialogue together with the supervised. We might say we are near to the core of supervision.

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