Will We Ever Have a TRUE Profession?



Photograph by Mark Rogers

Some view teaching as throwing pitches into a learning outcome zone.

What will it take for teaching, supervision, and evaluation to evolve into a disciplined field of inquiry and practice? This is a major question asked by educators who dream of building a profession comparable in its discipline to the sciences.

The answer, in my opinion, is that it will take shifting how we inquire into and practice our profession from a rationalistic to a rational approach. By that I mean we must be truly rational, not just give a superficial appearance of being so, which is rationalistic.

Understanding Rationality

Before we can make this shift, however, we need a better understanding of rationality. A rational science of teaching and supervision gives more emphasis to developing strategies that reflect a higher concern for values than goals, for patterns of learning than discrete outcomes, and for learning how to ride the wave of teaching. Our present attempts to research and build models of teaching and supervision fall short of the standards of rational professions working with multiple goals. Theirs is a mode of inquiry and practice more like surfing than linear thinking, where subjective reality is linked to human perceptions and decisions. It's a mode of inquiry where accuracy in pursuing solutions to problems is the first priority regardless of difficulty. Applied to our profession, the result is evaluation that will come from discernment and judg-

To develop a true profession of teaching and supervision, educators need to shift research, performance models, and practice from rationalistic to rational.

ment, and teaching at the semantic level of kn wledge development and use.

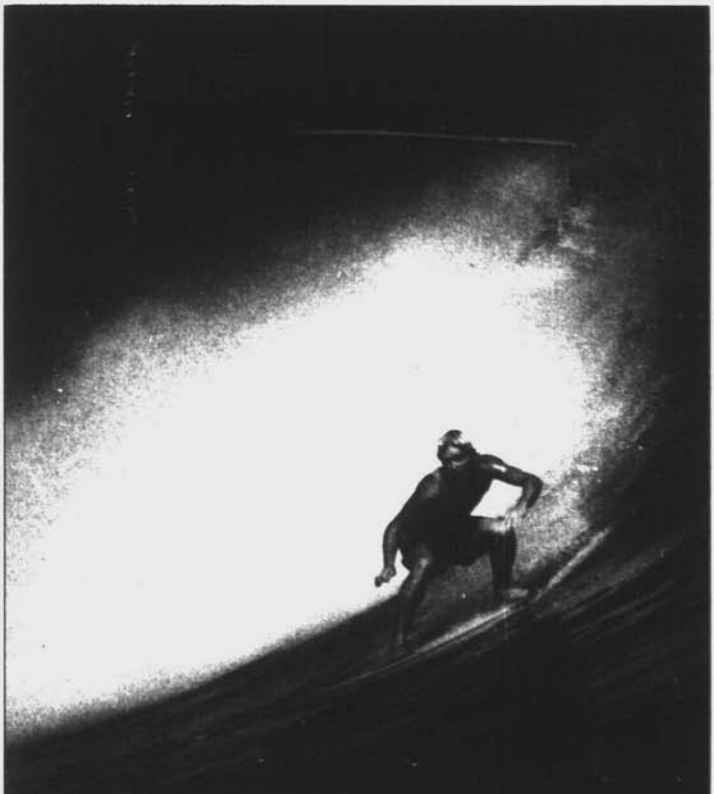
To change our approach from rationalistic to rational, we must first change our mindscapes of how schools work and how life unfolds in classrooms. Mindscapes construct our reality, and different realities lead to different teaching and supervisory practices.

The Game of Teaching: Baseball or Surfing?

It is common, for example, to view schools and classrooms as tightly structured forms and patterns of operation. In such a mindscape, a teacher can be compared to the pitcher in a baseball game who throws teaching pitches into a learning outcome zone. Because some pitches miss the zone, are declared balls, and therefore don't count in the final score, supervision focuses on increasing the possibility that teachers will throw strikes.

The emphasis in this pattern of operation is on programming and monitoring teaching to ensure that the process operates in a predictable manner. This is basically rationalistic, a mindscape that does not reflect the realities of teaching. It provides a limited and unsophisticated view in which the teacher's role is a regressive one.

Surfing, on the other hand, describes more accurately how teachers think and act. Teachers ride the wave of the teaching pattern as it unfolds,



Surfing describes more accurately how teachers ride the wave of the teaching pattern.

Photograph courtesy of Randy Rarick

accommodating to shifting circumstances. When riding the wave, models of teaching and learning are used rationally to inform intuition and enhance professional judgment; not rationalistically to prescribe practice.

Experienced observation shows that teachers are just as likely to discover goals and objectives as they teach as they are to set them in advance. Teachers, in general, adopt a more strategic than tactical view of learning and rely on identifying a worthwhile outcome after the teaching-learning encounter, not before. Most do not discard a worthwhile accomplishment as valueless simply because it was not anticipated in advance. This reality is not sufficiently accounted for in rationalistic models of teaching and supervision.

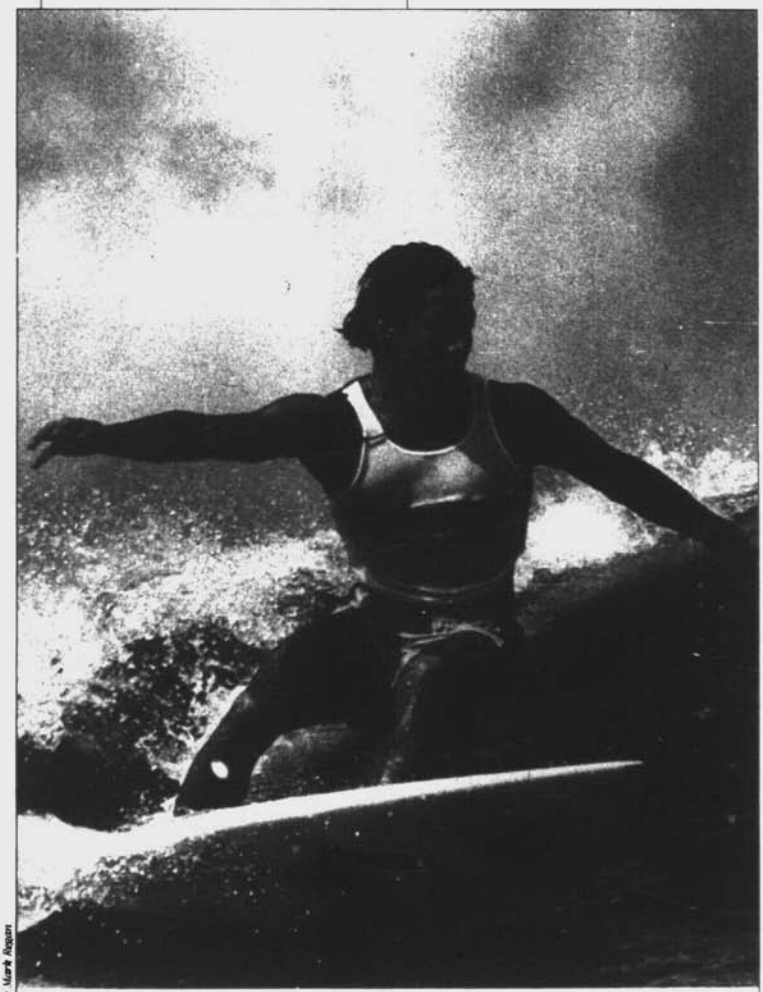
In teaching conceived as pitching, advanced planning for specifically detailed goals and objectives is critical. Typical teachers, however, do not think nor act according to discrete outcomes as much as they do value patterns. For example, in teaching reading, teachers are as much concerned with the students' ability to synthesize and extend as they are with mastery of reading fundamentals. In addition, they recognize that these goals need to be pursued in ways that make reading a joyful experience.

In rationalistic practice, these goals often compete, but too much emphasis on one can negatively affect the others. The issue for the teacher is how to achieve a balance, and the appropriate rationality is not linear as in the baseball analogy, but a pattern of outcomes as in surfing. Some experts, such as Hills (1982), refer to this as *patterned rationality*. Since teachers are concerned with outcomes that produce sensible patterns, it is ineffec-



Photograph courtesy of Ronald Kanick

When teaching pitches miss a predetermined learning outcome zone, they don't count in the final score even though students benefit from the activities.



As the teaching pattern unfolds, teachers accommodate to shifting circumstances as surfers accommodate to movements of the wave.

Photograph by Mark Reuss

tive to ask them to think in terms of this or that discrete outcome.

What Is a Pinch? Phonetics and Semantics of Teaching

Teaching and supervision can be examined at two levels: (1) observed behavior and (2) meaning and understanding. Observed behavior represents the phonetics of teaching; meaning and understanding, the semantics. Phonetic teaching is easily observed and can be reliably measured. Semantic teaching is more difficult to observe and measure because it deals with meanings that people attribute to and derive from teaching behaviors and classroom events.

For example, the common prescriptions for teaching are to communicate expectations, monitor to ensure compliance, solicit frequent responses, provide corrective feedback, and reteach as necessary. These phonetic prescriptions leave several questions unanswered: What does this approach mean to students? How are these prescriptions understood by teachers and supervisors? What useful personal meanings can different students derive from the same teaching?

To illustrate semantic teaching, consider the meaning to a woman of being pinched when she is on a New York subway and when she is in Rome's Piazza Navona. A pinch is a pinch, phonetically. But then again, one pinch is not the other pinch. Semantically, the two pinches have different meanings.

Teaching, too, needs to be understood and evaluated according to its circumstances. The common prescriptions for teaching listed above may be good teaching when students are learning simple, noncontroversial skills, but when they are required to

discern and judge, synthesize and extend, create and solve problems, the prescriptions are rationalistic. From a rational perspective, as teaching circumstances change, teaching takes on different meanings and must be understood and valued differently.

Subjectivity Important in Supervision

An important step toward developing rationality in supervision would be to acknowledge the existence of subjectivity rather than try to stamp it out. Accepting that there is no such thing as objective evaluation would put us on a comparable footing with our colleagues in the basic sciences and other more established fields.

As psychologist Joseph McGrath (1982) states, "... we can never know anything independently of the ways we found it out; empirical knowledge is always contingent on the methods, populations, situations, and underlying assumptions." The idea that advances of knowledge (i.e., finding out) are based on human decisions is widely accepted in other professions and, thus, what counts as scientific evidence is often little more than an artifact of these decisions. This is not sufficiently reflected in the mainstream of supervisory thought.

Evaluation systems are the result of human decisions. Somebody decides to define "effectiveness" in a certain way; thus, "good teaching" becomes an artifact of that decision. In the research on "teaching effectiveness," the indicators are artifacts of how the researchers decided to define "effectiveness." Had they defined it differently, different indicators would have been discovered.

Building generic models of teaching and supervisory practice based on the "teaching effectiveness" research is an example of rationalistic rather than rational thinking. This research shows that the explicit teaching model is an effective way to teach basic reading, computation, and mastery of simple subjects to elementary school children. To apply this method to all learning is hardly a rational approach, yet "experts" have been quite successful in convincing many policymakers and professionals that explicit teaching is, indeed, the same as effective teaching. In medicine, this would be comparable to saying the same diagnosis can be reached from all symptoms; therefore, the same treatment can be used for all ailments. It would apply with equal effectiveness to a cold, to appendicitis, or to cancer.

Confusing Evaluation and Measurement

Rationalistic thinking is encouraged by the current confusion between evaluation and measurement. Much of what is accepted as evaluation is really measurement. Suppose, for example, you want window blinds. First, you need to know the window size. Let's say it's 22" wide by 60" long. These figures are now your standard. Using a ruler, you measure several blinds you find in the attic and learn that none "measures up" to your standard. Although you play a role in this process, the ruler is really more important. Someone else using the same ruler with the same figures as the standard would reach the same conclusion.

Thus, measurement-oriented evaluation systems diminish the role of the evaluator. Principals and supervisors are less important than the measurements they use. Further, when a measurement-oriented evaluation system is distorted, principals, supervisors, and teachers forfeit the right to decide what good teaching is; that is, the kind of teaching that makes sensible patterns or *patterned-rationality*, according to the characteristics of their community, students, goals, and aspirations.

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Evaluation, by contrast, is a rational process, involving human discernment and judgments within a value system and a context. In evaluation, we need to stop measuring window blinds and look at the whole house. In decorating it, your decisions are a matter of preference, taste, and purpose. What effect do you want to create? Do you prefer a soft or bold look? Warm or cool colors? In a rational evaluation system, the evaluator's judgment, given the effects desired, is what counts.

Research: Accurate or Precise?

Accuracy and precision are the standard criteria used by the more established disciplines to judge the adequacy of researchers' claims of knowledge and the applicability of these claims to practice. Accuracy refers to the relevance and importance of the problems investigated and the resulting findings. Precision refers to the cogency and rigor with which those problems are investigated.

In established disciplines, accuracy generally is not sacrificed to relevance, nor are important questions sacrificed to trivial ones simply because they can be readily incorporated into a scientific research design. The Nobel Laureate P. B. Medawar (1984) said, "It has been shrewdly observed that an experiment not worth doing is not worth doing well." In this context, emphasizing precision over accuracy is like the fellow who lost his keys in the middle of the block but looked for them at the street corner because the light was better.

We make a rationalistic decision every time we choose teaching and supervisory models because they are clearly stated, easy to learn and use, and because the behaviors they describe are readily observed and measured regardless of whether they address the important elements in teaching. A rational approach prefers an approximate answer to an important question, no matter how vague, than a precise answer to a trivial question.

Rationalistic models are appealing because they look scientific, they are tight, and they are easy to use. Too often, that's all that seems to matter.

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Rationalistic Leads to Bureaucratic

Our rationalistic emphasis on discrete objectives, teaching pitches, simplistic objectivity, measurement-oriented evaluation, and phonetic teaching guides us toward a bureaucratic rather than a rational profession. Bureaucratic evaluation is more concerned with control than understanding. Bureaucratic teaching is more concerned with following than creating.

Professionals and bureaucrats function differently at work. The work of bureaucrats is programmed by the system, and they are subordinate to it. Professionals, too, are part of a system, but their work emerges from an interaction between available knowledge and individual needs. Professional work requires that practitioners be *superordinate* to their system and use it to make sensible decisions according to the situations they face.

In bureaucratic work, supervision and evaluation are used to condition people to produce predictable behaviors and outcomes that conform to the system. In professional work, supervision and evaluation are used to increase knowledge and understanding and thus enable professionals to make decisions that reflect *patterned rationality*.

Can We Shift from Rationalistic to Rational?

If we are to shift from rationalistic to rational, we must all play a part and each—researcher, synthesizer, model builder, and practitioner—assume responsibility for the change.

Researchers must become more school-based and practice-focused as they seek new knowledge. Synthesizers of knowledge must be more realistic, open, and modest as they order and relate research findings and theoretical generalizations. They need to present a more accurate picture of available knowledge in their books and articles.

The greatest threat to rationality in teaching and supervision comes from the "middlemen" who translate the syntheses into models of practice that teachers and supervisors adopt. At this point, theoretical and research knowledge has already been interpreted by two different groups: synthesizers and model builders. Rationality requires that the models be offered as frames of reference that can enhance the vision of professionals at work and inform their intuition and judgment as they practice; not as truths to be applied.

Finally, the guardians of rationality must be the professionals engaged in teaching and supervision. They have a right to expect more than rationalistic prescriptions from the researchers, synthesizers, and model builders, and an obligation to demand more. Whether supervision and teaching as a profession shifts from a rationalistic to a rational approach depends on the extent to which supervisors and teachers exert their rights and fulfill their obligations.□

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