Assessment of the early childhood practicum: What can we learn from tertiary supervisors’ silences?

Michelle Ortlipp
Charles Sturt University

This article presents results from a study that focuses on tertiary supervisors’ perspectives on practicum assessment. The discussion of results in this paper is restricted to one of the key themes evident in the data - silence. The different ways of understanding silence according to the literature provides the theoretical framework for an exploration of tertiary supervisors’ moments of silence during the assessment process. Examples from focus groups, individual interviews and journals are used to illustrate how two different forms of silence expressed themselves in the data. The poststructuralist concepts of discourse, subjectivity and power are used to explore what the silences might mean and what we can learn from them.

Introduction and background to the study

This paper discusses results from a study that explores how tertiary supervisors from TAFE and university early childhood courses understand and practise practicum assessment. The methodology for the study has been reported on elsewhere (Ortlipp, 2002). In overview, data were generated through four focus group interviews, each with four to five tertiary supervisors and individual interviews with 10 of these tertiary supervisors. Supplementary data were obtained from reflective journals, questionnaires and assessment documents from the supervisors’ institutions. Data were examined for themes guided by a poststructuralist conceptual framework. This paper focuses on one of the key themes identified - silence in the triadic assessment process. The tertiary supervisors’ silences are explored using a theoretical framework drawn from the literature on the different ways of understanding silence, and poststructuralist theory, specifically the concepts of discourse, subjectivity and power.

The issue of silence

I first became interested in the notion of silence in practicum assessment when I reviewed the literature on the early childhood practicum. Researchers in this area claimed that there was a lack of open critique or critical feedback in the early childhood field in general and in the process of triadic assessment specifically (MacNaughton, 1991; Veale & Rikard, 1998). MacNaughton (1991) questioned the idea that the triadic approach enabled all participants to have an equal say in assessment because of the distribution of power that serves to constrain student input. Tertiary supervisors also reported a reluctance to disturb the relationships in the triad through critical discussion (Veale & Rikard, 1998). These concerns were reflected in the current study. For example, during a focus group interview, Olivia, who had 12 years experience as a TAFE and university tertiary supervisor and practicum coordinator, said:

The other thing that bothers me about the idea of the triadic assessment is that it’s based on the principles that there will be consensus and I don’t think in any group there is ever consensus, I think what happens is that there are some things you can say in a group and some things you can’t and the dynamics of people coming together means that sometimes you can speak and sometimes you sit silently because it’s strategic to remain silent at that particular point.

It was these initial issues around silence that prompted me to explore this further in individual interviews. I asked the participants if they had ever felt they could not say what they wanted to say
Ways of understanding silence

Silence is written about, explored and explained in many ways, from within a range of different discipline areas - psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, poststructuralism, education and feminism. Within this literature, silence is seen in multiple ways. It is understood as an effect of oppression, as repressive, as a sign of resistance, as actual, as powerful, as strategic, as an effect of power relations and as safe (Davies et al., 1997; Ellsworth, 1992; Foucault, 1984; Gold, 1994; Silin, 1999). Silence can mean many things, and cannot be seen in binary opposition to speaking, with speaking being the privileged term. In the words of Jonathon Silin:

Silence can signal resistance as well as oppression, voice can create new moments for social control as well as for personal efficacy. And words are notorious for concealing and transforming as well as revealing the truth of our lives (Silin, 1999, p.44).

It is not possible within the scope of this article to discuss all of the ways that silence can be understood. I have chosen two ways of understanding silence from the literature and illustrated how these were expressed in the data with representative examples. This forms the basis for an exploration of what the silences might mean and what we might learn from them.

Silence as strategic

Foucault (1984) understood silence as ‘an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses’ (p.310). In poststructuralist theory discourses determine who can speak, when, with what authority, to whom and how (Davies, 1997). Silence should be considered with and in relation to what is said, for in determining who can speak discourse also determines who cannot speak (Foucault, 1984). According to Foucault:

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case (p. 310).

The strategic element of silence was also identified by Bronwyn Davies and her students (Davies et al., 1997) who, in exploring their silence as women, talked about strategic silences in which their words were unspoken and silences were used to protect self and others. Silence was at times chosen knowingly and strategically, because to speak at the time the words were thought would not carry as much impact as to speak at a later time. These women spoke about choice, discretion and careful reading of situations when exploring, explaining and coming to understand their silences. Silence was something that they 'used and can use powerfully' (p.5). Not speaking co-existed alongside speaking out.

Discretion and careful reading of the situation are obvious in Glenys' explanation for why she often chose not to speak up about students’ minor breaches of requirements:

I'm sort of there to represent the university and make sure the requirements are met and so then, I suppose it comes down to the judgement on my part about whether you know, if a few things aren't there, am I going to sort of upset the apple-cart and what does it involve if I do...and it's a bit of a public relations thing I think, you know, whether the people out in the field will think 'Oh God, here comes the academic who doesn't know the real world and all the rest of it, and we think she's fine and what's she worrying about with the written work?'

Glenys' silence is about her reading of the situation – the public relations element of practicum assessment and her discretion in not speaking. Her strategic silence protected her from being seen as 'the academic who doesn't know the real world' and it protected her from what might happen if she 'upset the apple-cart'.

The notion of silence as strategic can be glimpsed in the following example:

Joan: ...I couldn't say that it's [the student's lower than expected level of achievement] a lack of support, or the environment, or the lack of this or whatever at the centre, because you can't
criticise the centre, I mean, though in that situation I couldn’t say what I wanted to say, but I said it afterwards to the student that you did very well in that situation, given that environment...

Michelle: What makes it so difficult?

Joan: Well, because we are guests in that centre. That centre is providing a free service for us and we value that, and it would be very discourteous for us to make any comment at all...they're providing the environment...and yes, we can say we don’t want our students there again, but it’s becoming more and more difficult to find placements for the students...

Foucault (1984) talked about tact and discretion in what is said to whom and in what circumstances. There is discretion required here because Joan is a guest – guests don’t criticise their hosts. Davies et al. (1997) also talked about discretion, where silence is chosen knowingly and strategically to protect the self and others. Joan knowingly chose not to speak during the triadic discussion but to speak later, when she had the student alone. Joan used silence to protect herself from being seen as discourteous, and to protect future student placements.

Drawing on Foucault’s (1984) view of silence as a strategy connected with discourses, Joan’s silence could be understood as a strategy that allows her to position herself within the discourses of practicum assessment as a guest. Official practicum documents, which are a part of this discourse, refer to supervision and assessment by tertiary supervisors within the context of a ‘visit’ (School Experience and Professional Practice, 2001).

Joan’s subjectivity as a visiting tertiary supervisor (a ‘guest’) is constituted through the discourse of practicum assessment as a result of her act of silence. As she takes up the subject position of ‘guest’ and begins to act and speak from within it she exercises a form of discretion that leads to silence because she knows that to say anything at all ‘would be very discourteous’. Joan knows it is difficult to find placements for students and this produces relations of power that impact on what can be said in the context of practicum assessment. As a guest, Joan is positioned as powerless because the host centre can exercise the power of not inviting the tertiary supervisor and her students back for placements.

Silence as actual

A study by Gold (1994) utilised the poststructuralist concepts of discourse and power, and feminist theory about giving voice to explore the silences of minority groups during courses in school management. She identified a form of silence that she called ‘actual silence’. Nothing is said because the would-be speaker is not able to enter the dominant discourse. Gold proposed that silence in this form arose from insecurity, an apparent lack of knowledge, or the need for more time to think before responding. This is in keeping with Foucault’s (1984) view of silence as connected with discourse. When tertiary supervisors cannot take up a position within a particular discourse from which they can speak with some authority then silence is the likely effect.

Tertiary supervisors intimated that they did not have the knowledge that would enable them to speak about a student’s competence. They had not ‘seen’ the student do what the field supervisor or the student claimed and therefore they had nothing to say. When the silence is actual, whose knowledge or way of knowing is privileged and acts as the truth upon which a judgement is made? Can the tertiary supervisor enter the discourse of assessment of early childhood practice when all she has ‘seen’ is the written work, when she is, as Glenys said, ‘the academic who doesn’t know the real world’? The following examples from the data illustrate actual silences that are the effect of not being able to enter particular discourses of early childhood practicum assessment.

Carol and Olivia silenced their views on student competence from within a discourse of practicum assessment that uses the observation of the student’s practice over a certain period of time as the truth upon which a judgement of competence can be made. Carol disagreed with the field supervisor’s assessment of the student’s level of achievement but was silenced because:

I didn’t have anything to contradict, but I couldn’t validate anything that they said because it was all stuff I wasn’t there to see.

Olivia had similar reasons for silencing her
assessment of a student's achievement:

I've taken a risk at times in agreeing that a student pass when I really felt like maybe she wasn't. And then I also think, well, I have only seen her for two hours. What would I know?

Glenys' silence is consistent with what Gold (1994) called 'actual silence'. It involves insecurity, an apparent lack of knowledge, and the need for more time to think of a response:

I would've liked to have pointed some things out to the students, but I didn't want to offend the teacher because it would've involved some sort of criticism of the way things were happening in the room, and so I didn't feel able to . . . it's . . . my perception of what my role is, which may be wrong . . . or maybe my lack of experience in this system . . . . What I would like to have done in that situation is that I could have quickly thought of a tactful, positive way of expressing my views, which would not have offended the field supervisor.

These examples suggest that the tertiary supervisors were positioned (and positioned themselves) within particular discourses of practicum assessment as subjects who did not have the authority to speak about certain issues, and thus they remained silent. Other discourses circulating in and around practicum assessment (discourses of triadic assessment and teaching and learning) provide positions that tertiary supervisors might speak from. Olivia and Carol chose not to access the discourse of triadic assessment and take up the position of equal partner in assessment from which they could have spoken about the student's level of achievement. Glenys did not access discourses of teaching and learning within which she could have spoken from the position of teacher and used the practicum experience as a source of learning for the student.

What might the silences mean?

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992) used feminist poststructuralist concepts to explore speaking and silence in educational settings. She claimed that what is said, to whom and in what context 'is the result of conscious and unconscious assessments of the power relations and the safety of the situation' (p.105), thus silence can be safer. A safe space to speak, according to Ellsworth, requires a high level of trust and personal commitment to those who are a part of the group, which is gained partly through social interactions outside of the formal gathering of the group, away from the classroom.

What might this mean for the process of assessment in the early childhood practicum? Is it safe for everyone to speak? Is there a good level of trust between the participants? Is there a relationship that exists outside of the practicum? A number of the tertiary supervisors in the study felt that they did a better assessment if they knew the students as a result of teaching them, because, as Glenys said, you've established some sort of a personal relationship. Others commented that they were able to speak more openly if they had developed a rapport with centre staff. However developing relationships with students and staff may be difficult for tertiary supervisors to achieve given that: in many institutions sessional staff members complete much of the practicum supervision and assessment; in a number of TAFE institutions students are visited by a different supervisor each time because it is considered more objective; sessional university supervisors in this study claimed that they rarely return to the same centre.

These approaches deny the human element of early childhood practicum assessment, and work against the development of a level of trust and commitment that can create safe spaces in which to speak critically during the supervision and assessment process.

Silence, subjectivity and the 'nice ladies' of early childhood

The tertiary supervisors in this study avoided discussion and feedback during triadic assessment that may have been interpreted as criticism of centre practice. Their silences indicate that the problems associated with critical discussion in the early childhood practicum (MacNaughton, 1991; Veale & Rikard, 1997) are unresolved. Stonehouse (1994) attributed this lack of a critical approach in early childhood to the 'culture of niceness' that exists in what is predominately a feminine profession. Sixteen of the participants in this study were white women, and there was one white man. All supervisors who took part in individual interviews were women. As early childhood professionals, tertiary supervisors and educated white women they had access to the discourses of early childhood professionalism, practicum assessment and
middle-class Anglo politeness. Some of the subject positions made available through these discourses are 'nice lady', 'visitor' and 'courteous guest'. When tertiary supervisors take up these positions and act and speak from within them, the effect is silence on issues that would offend the practicum centre staff.

There may be alternative subject positions available within these and/or other discourses that tertiary supervisors can access and that may enable critical dialogue. Some positions, however, are more readily accessible or more desirable than others. Some discourses, because of their institutional location and wider social circulation, have more social and institutional power, suggesting that subject positions within such discourse may be more desirable, more justifiable, more accessible and accessed more consistently. Socially, historically and institutionally the subject positions available to (and produced by) early childhood tertiary supervisors who are educated white women constrain rather than enable a critical approach to early childhood practicum assessment.

In conclusion: What can we learn from tertiary supervisors' silences?

Achieving an equal sharing of voices is problematic if what can be said, when, how and to whom is a result of the discourses in circulation and the relations of power operating within these. The triadic assessment approach is based on the notion that there can be an equal sharing of voices and that consensus can be reached as a result of this process. The tertiary supervisors' silences demonstrate that consensus in many cases is an illusion because it is gained through someone's silence. Olivia, in her final journal entry, made a statement that raises serious concerns about the triadic approach to supervision and assessment of the early childhood practicum. She wrote:

My greatest concerns go back to the way my own involvement continued a status quo that I see as dangerous and limiting for how early childhood teaching is understood and practiced. My silent voice sits alongside the different strategic silences I am sure each student felt, and each teacher felt.

What we can learn from the silences of the tertiary supervisors in this study is that we must pay more attention to the human element of practicum assessment, to creating safe spaces for critical dialogue to occur. For example, tertiary supervisors could be assigned to specific centres, thus getting to know centre staff over time. Alternatively, tertiary supervisors could be assigned a group of students and supervise them over the duration of the course, thus developing a relationship with the students.

We also need a greater understanding of what goes on at the level of the subjectivity of those who participate in practicum assessment. How does the way that tertiary supervisors understand themselves as professionals and people impact on what they can say, how and to whom in the assessment process? Do we want practicum supervision and assessment to involve open and critical dialogue and the presentation of diverse views on early childhood practice? If tertiary supervisors exercise discretion and are strategic in how, when and to whom they speak, we cannot continue to view the current approach as the most useful way to assess the early childhood practicum.

References


