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Viva voce – the trainee-examination? *The Tavistock*

Sara Barratt, Laura Glendinning and Gillian Hughes

Caveat: In writing this article, for the sake of simplicity, we have used the noun, *viva* as a verb. We apologise for this but hope it does not detract from the main ideas of our article.

In many years of organising systemic courses in different training programmes at the Tavistock Centre in London, we have been mindful of the terror that arises for students at the time of the *viva*. When done well, *vivas* are potentially an extremely valuable form of assessment. They offer the opportunity for dialogue about a student's work, and can allow those who are less confident in expressing themselves in writing to shine. However, we know panel members have their own 'favourite' issues and students may feel constrained in presenting their work in their preferred style. Alongside this, colleagues joining our staff group have described their anxiety about conducting *viva* exams for the first time. We realised we needed to include training on how to conduct them for practitioners who are learning to be supervisors and trainers.

Family therapists attending supervision courses are usually experienced practitioners who already have supervision experience. On our courses, we emphasise the importance of co-constructing the context for supervision with supervisees. However, we notice a punctuation when trainee supervisors nearing the end of the course, face THE EXAM and have to prepare for their *viva*, in which a piece of tape is shown and they are expected to present and discuss the purpose of their interventions.

In writing this article, we were influenced by Roper-Hall (1998) and Burnham *et al.* (2008), who use the social GRRAACCEESS to consider ways in which power relations are interwoven in the educational context. Mindful of the need to comply with the AFT guidelines for assessment, we consulted with our trainees about using a framework for their *viva* examination in which they became the evaluators of one another. We hoped that, by re-positioning them in the role of

evaluators of each other, we might disrupt the hierarchical relationship we held as course trainers and allow new possibilities for learning to emerge.

Developing skills and confidence in evaluation has always been an important component of our supervision courses. Trainees are expected to write a paper about how they negotiate with their supervisees what should be evaluated in the supervision relationship, and how this should be conducted. We felt trainees' skills in collaborative evaluation could be further developed if they presented an example of their supervision to one another in the *vivas* at the end of the training programme. Together, we devised a structure so that students would have an opportunity to assess, and be assessed by, each other and for the staff members to observe and provide feedback to the assessors. To ensure this was an ethical process, it was important to agree what they and we would be assessing, and how we might do this (see the section, *Supervisory challenge 12: Evaluating supervision* in Storm & Todd, 1997, pp. 180-208).

The structure we developed is as follows:

Each trainee has their *viva* with a course colleague, in pairs designed to maximise opportunities for trainees to work with different course-colleagues. There is a feedback form for those in the position of assessor, with broad headings to guide the process. These are:

- What was your intention (of a specific intervention) and how did it go?
- Theory – practice links
- Self-reflexivity
- Ability to attend to social GRRAACCES and power.

We asked that each student provide written feedback under each heading when they were in the assessor position.

supervisor voice – collaborative Tavistock Centre experience

The framework for the tutor feedback was:

- Time management
- Enabling and positive stance
- Areas of learning that the assessor managed to bring forth for the person they were assessing.
- Hope for future learning

Feedback and a reflective meeting, which included the course tutor observing each pair, followed the vivas. The tutor offered feedback from her perspective, and invited the trainee assessor to talk about their experience.

There were eleven family therapists on the course, from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds. We asked them to respond to a series of questions, reflecting on the viva experience, which were sent after the course had finished. Eight of the eleven trainees responded.

The questions were as follows:

1. In what ways did the viva process contribute to your learning?
2. What most surprised you about this experience?
3. What were the biggest challenges and how did this enhance your learning?
4. How did the experience of leading your colleague's viva and of being "viva'd" influence your thinking about relationships of power and collaboration?
5. How did this process shape your personal story as a supervisor and trainer?

Their responses were varied and interesting.

1. In what ways did the viva process contribute to your learning?

Trainees described the importance of clarity in setting the context for the viva, especially as the person presenting the work. In this setting, some said they were more comfortable in the position of being examined than being the examiner, and this highlighted the power and ethical issues in relation to evaluation. The majority of trainees felt that, despite

the anxiety, the experience of viva-ing and being viva'd by colleagues was an important learning experience where they recognised the benefit of having looser guidelines around how to conduct evaluation, because this gave more space for those being evaluated to shape the process in creative ways. One trainee felt the lack of clarity about the process led to confusion and was critical of the different messages they felt came from staff members. This was not reflected in the feedback of others, who understood the process as a new experiment and did not feel constrained by the rather loose instructions.

One said: *"I have personally always found the objectives of the viva process somewhat unclear or subjective movable (sic), but felt this process was helpful in starting to make these clearer. But more so, I found it helpful in terms of thinking about evaluation as a supervisor and in how best to position myself in this process"*.

Another said, about the benefits of the process: *"I think it was viva'ing someone who I had not really done very much with, by way of exercises and so forth, over the course. Giving good feedback was a challenge too, striking a balance between saying what I liked, [with] what else I would have liked to see; it brought to mind how anxiety used to shut down my curiosity when with a new family! I was very aware that the person I was viva'ing is, to my mind, a very highly skilled clinician and so my relationship to challenging was challenged in that respect, too"*.

The process was intended to enable emerging supervisors to see themselves as potential trainers: also, to recognise the responsibility that comes from making judgments of trainees, as in all trainings, which is challenging but also essential to ensuring that qualifying practitioners will be safe and ethical in their future work with vulnerable families.

Responses included: *"I think it has made me appreciate power and ethical issues around evaluation in relation to*

the profession and the families we see. I also learned that I am currently more comfortable in the 'vivee' position than in the position of examiner; it is the slight change in power relations which is both about curiosity AND assessing competence ..."

"It felt intense ... and a huge responsibility to give my colleague something helpful for their learning. It was very useful to have the experience of being on the 'other side'. It felt like an immersive experience as we were also doing our viva."

2. What most surprised you?

All of the respondents said they found the experience of viva'ing enjoyable and felt that presenting to their peers enabled them to co-create something very helpful.

"... having a peer evaluation increased my sense of collaboration and contributed to a less anxiety-filled experience of being viva'd".

Scaife (2009) says that the recipient of feedback needs to be open to engaging in the feedback, or it will have little effect on their learning and can push people into feeling defensive. We hoped the process of peer evaluation where the hierarchical relationship is flattened would facilitate this.

Feedback included:

"How much less anxiety-provoking and more enjoyable this process was than previous [viva] experiences. I am not sure how much this was down to the change in power dynamics of being evaluated by a peer (given the tutors also evaluated our evaluation), not having formal marks, or that the process felt so much more transparent than previous experiences. But the result was that it felt much more conducive to reflection on my journey to becoming a supervisor."

3. What was the biggest challenge?

For one trainee, the lack of clarity was challenging; feeling the tutors were not clear themselves about the process and naming *"... the difference in attitude toward*

the marking process by the supervising tutors. This did make us [trainees] wonder how joined up the supervisors [tutors] were about the process; I found it hard as I then couldn't work out what the criteria were for a 'good' piece of work." This trainee suggested more preparation and practice in conducting vivas beforehand would have been helpful.

One trainee described the pressure she felt to ask questions that enabled her colleague to bring forth her knowledge. Others talked about the challenge of giving feedback. For example: "It enhanced my learning as I had always struggled to give sufficient feedback but ... this was a great learning curve for me to be analytical about what I was noticing both in the theory and practice".

"... it gave us an experience of how difficult this can be, and helped us to formulate our evaluation into something more concrete..."

Some were able to integrate the whole experience:

"Anything that involves practice, reflecting in and on action, joining theory and practice, practice as performance, awareness and use of self, embodiment, positioning (physically, emotionally, professionally, and a host of other approaches methods and techniques) were implicitly useful."

4. How did the experience influence your thinking about relationships of power?

Of course, the observation by the course tutors added an additional element to the power relationship and our request for feedback to include a notional mark was particularly challenging; the majority of trainees did this with great sensitivity and were able to provide clear explanations for their marking. Fine and Turner (1997) talk about the supervisor's power and hierarchy and the students were mindful of this, which may be why all the students passed their vivas and they were all awarded a merit mark. In at least one situation, the tutor had thought the student could have been awarded a distinction. In no situation did the tutors feel a student should have got less than a pass mark. "Having to give a peer a mark for their viva certainly highlighted an uncomfortable sense of power in what would normally be a more collaborative relationship."



Left to right: Gillan Hughes, Laura Glendinning and Sara Barratt

5. How did this process shape your personal story as a supervisors/ trainer?

Feedback from all respondents to this question was that this was a positive learning-experience. They felt it was more interesting than the traditional viva format, was more respectful of their experience and that it helped them to think further about themselves as trainers and evaluators. It was also important in helping them prepare any supervisee facing viva exams on their training courses. From the trainers' point of view, we felt it brought the whole viva process alive, and offered many opportunities for learning.

One trainee said: "It was yet another experience that helped me move from therapist to trainer within the systemic context. It also again emphasised the power relationship and responsibility."

Another: "I found the feedback process very enriching. It made me further reflect on how I position myself in relation to the giving and receiving of feedback and also strengthened my resolve to continue my supervision practice within a collaborative frame of supervision in which I position myself in ways that flatten the hierarchy in individual and group contexts. I felt the process enabled me to embody and be transparent about my fears, doubts, shame and anxiety and having the confidence to name moments of impasses, stuckness and difficulties in supervision that would help shift discomfort and tension that are also inherent

in individual supervision and live supervision group functioning."

"I really appreciated the creativity of the tutors in giving us this opportunity. I will always remember this when I do vivas as it was a rare opportunity to experience it from both sides and this gave it a special quality of experiential learning that for me is invaluable. There was also something very enabling about doing it all in the morning and spending the afternoon giving feedback that meant it was contained to one day which was very helpful in terms of a huge piece of work collaboratively woven together by the students and tutors."

Conclusion

For us, observing the vivas was a huge privilege – seeing the sensitivity our trainees showed one another, the way they facilitated each other's learning, and the confidence they had developed in themselves as supervisors. As course tutors, we learned that we will need to think more carefully about our voice in the feedback process and ensure that, whilst supporting trainees, there is a context for thinking with them about what needs to be developed further. We believe that we will need to fine tune the framework for undertaking vivas and continue to challenge ourselves to further clarify process, but that, broadly, it was a huge success and our trainees are more confident in thinking of their new identity as systemic supervisors and trainers.

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