

Protecting Teachers' Spouses

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In this article I intend to share with you a technique which may help you ward off boredom, de-motivation and burn-out, all quite frequent plagues of our profession. The use of *Mutual Supervision* is unusual among language teachers but perfectly normal among social workers and people specialised in therapy. It seems to make sense to borrow useful ideas from neighbouring professions in the 'helping' world.

To get you into the swing of this article may I ask you to answer this short questionnaire?

1. Are there any Monday mornings, say in January or February, when you just don't want to go to school? When did this feeling grip you last?
2. Are there times when you come back in the evening and can think of nicer things to do than correct students' homework?
3. Have you ever felt that a student was more than you could cope with?
4. Do you occasionally leave class feeling you are carrying a sort of weight the students have loaded on your back?
5. Have you ever despaired of really mastering English with its slippery exceptions and vast vocabulary?
6. Are there times when that monthly salary you get seems a paltry amount to live on, or maybe, survive on?
7. Do you have the need to open your heart to someone about all the challenges and problems that absorb you at work?

If you have answered all the above questions with a resolute NO, then please turn to another article in the MEXTESOL Journal. If you have answered some of the questions in the affirmative then this article is for you.

If you said YES to question 7, then I wonder who you open your heart to, who you unload on? I remember once asking a colleague about this and she said, "Well, I suppose I just go home and tell my husband everything that has happened at school during the day...used to be OK,... but now he's fed-up with me.... He switches off... but who can I tell if I don't tell him?"

The rest of this article is about protecting the spouses of Mexican English teachers from their partner's imperious need to "tell all" about the awful caretaker, the bossy head, the grotty colleagues and the difficult kids!

How to Set up a Mutual Supervision

1. Review the people of your acquaintance who you could choose as a "supervisor". The person you are looking for needs to be in the area of teaching and someone you can respect and get on with adequately. They do not need to be a "best friend" and they should not be a chirpy gossip-partner. They should be a person who is able to listen effectively.
2. Approach the person you have chosen and explain that you'd like a private 40 minute professional meeting with them once a week. For 20 minutes of the meeting time you would like to tell them about what is uppermost in your mind about the last few days at school. This might be in any of the following areas:
 - problems with students
 - a success with a colleague
 - worries about language
 - some achievement in balancing home and work life
 - worries about in-service training
 - the pressure of so many things on top of one
 - over-tiredness, etc...

There could be and are many other things I haven't dreamt of.

Explain to the person you have chosen that what you are proposing is an exercise in trust as they must guarantee you 100% confidentiality. No way can they go gossiping off to other people about what you have told them.

This will be the person you can unload onto each week, freeing yourself of any frustration, anger or fear you hold inside you. If you tend to have an unrealistically good self-image, talking to your supervisor about your successes may help you cut them down to size and be more realistic about them. If you tend to be an insecure person, talking about your failures may set them in a new and better light for you. For those first twenty minutes the supervisor's role will be to listen, ask the odd question and offer a brief comment here and there.

In the second half of the meeting you swap roles. Now it is their turn to speak, to open up and to get the relief that comes from sharing. You are now the supervisor, the receiver of the text, the empathetic listener. If you have never done this before you need to really think about it.

Maybe the best model for such listening is the mother who really wants her four year old to tell her what he experienced at kindergarten today. She delights (if it's a good day!) in the details he picks on, in the form of his expression, in the way he gets animated here and tails off there. She really wants to be taken into the child's world, into his mapping of it, into his feelings about it. She has no need to try and distort what he is

saying by thinking, "If I were you, I'd..." because a full, empathetic entry into her child's world is what she wants.

In your role as supervisor all you need is the genuine wish to be carried into your colleague's world, into their mapping of it, into their feelings about it. If you manage to partially enter their world, if you can see it a bit from their perspective, you will powerfully influence their ability to express themselves, to maybe discover new things by talking to themselves in front of you. If they have a problem, it is NOT your task to panic about how you can solve it. If a supervisor uses this sort of language it mostly means that they are pretty poor at the job, language like:

- In my view...
- The way I see it...
- If I were you,... (The fact is I'm not you.)
- Why don't you...
- I suggest...
- I strongly advise you to...

All the above phrases indicate that the supervisor is in the wrong world, their own world, where they need to be is in their colleague's world. Easier said than done.

One of the positive spin-offs from taking on the supervisor role once a week is that a person sometimes learns to listen better in other situations too and becomes a better listener as a teacher and as a colleague, at parent-teacher evenings, and even in the deepest situations, such as those at home. Once you have explained some of the above to your colleague, they may run a mile! If they don't, then all you have to do is fix an acceptable time for both of you for your first mutual supervision.

Odd Things about Mutual Supervision

1. It is not ordinary, natural discourse between two people. It does not have the ordinary give-and-take of conversation in which A's idea sets B thinking about something completely different. It does not jump from subject to subject as we do when chatting. In a supervision one person provides the main flow of words and thoughts and the other immerses themselves in this flow.
2. While the term "supervision" sounds strongly hierarchical (looking down from above), MUTUAL supervision is a very democratic procedure as both people take the powerful listening role. Schools can be quite hierarchical places and very democratic procedures may leave bosses feeling vaguely uneasy.
3. Given the strict rule of confidentiality, the stuff talked about in the supervision is like an island isolated from the flow of other conversations at home and at work. It is almost like a piece of interior dialogue that has only taken place in one person's head. It is in the private, not the public domain.

4. If the supervision goes well, it is a contemplative oasis in the hurly-burly of the school week, a time when you feel, move, sit and breathe differently. You enter a different state of attention, a different trance, in a good supervision.

What Have I Gained from Mutual Supervision?

Maybe it is too early to say as I have only been involved with it for the last 8 years in a teaching career of 36 years. I am still a new boy. What gains are apparent to me at 11:40 on June 4th, 2003?

1. In the presence of my supervisor, I really sometimes get a striking new angle on a problem that is bugging me. Sometimes a solution will occur to me in the course of the supervision that solves or mitigates the problem. Sometimes a solution will pop into my mind some time after.
2. The feeling and tenor of the supervision colours and guides my thinking processes between meetings. The supervision situation is somehow there in my head as I plan lessons and weigh them up after coming out of them.
3. When my supervisor is female, I am often made aware, just by her presence, of how absurdly male some of my thoughts, feelings and actions are. This is particularly the case if I am dealing with a problematic relationship with a younger male.
4. I think I have less need to take stuff from my work home to my wife and children. After all, she married ME, not my current language class or training group!

I now do not teach a language group or run a training course without going into supervision for the duration of that course. To do so would feel uneasy and a bit irresponsible. Most teachers go to school bathed or showered. I now feel this way about supervision.

A Cheeky Request

Can I ask you to get in touch with me if you do try the ideas outlined above? I am, of course, interested in successes but mutual supervisions that did NOT work out are even more interesting.

Which language will you have worked in? Trabajar en castellano parece lo más natural, but could English have a psychologically liberating effect, a stronger island/oasis effect? Maybe you will have constantly code-switched? I would be very interested to hear which language you used and how it went. I live in hope that I will hear from you.