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Uneasy translations: taking theories of supervision into teaching

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Graduate supervision is a puzzling pedagogy requiring a thoughtful response from its practitioners. In this article, I reflect upon teaching theories of supervision produced through my own research with the aim of galvanizing the imaginations and practices of supervisors. I address a curious reluctance to introduce those theories that require significant translation to be relevant or acceptable to my audience, a reluctance that turns on uneasy issues of translation along with a sense of severance between my teacher and researcher selves. I close by considering what this reflection has to say about the demanding condition of the contemporary academic who must not only teach *and* research 'excellently' but also somehow link the two.

Keywords: supervision; translation; teaching–research nexus; academic identity

My intentions

Theorizing graduate research supervision is pointless without a return to practice. This seems particularly the case when the theorist of supervision not only works as a supervisor but also teaches her fellow academics how to be supervisors – as I do. For me, supervision is an intriguingly ambiguous object of research and practice: it is not only implicated in the liminal space between studentness and independent scholarliness, but it is also flavoured with intimacy and personality as much if not more than it is framed by institutional expectations and regulations. Supervision is also a target of institutional concern, largely because of external changes to the way graduate research education is funded. This concern filters down to new supervisors who, aware that the world of higher education is rapidly shifting around them, often approach supervision with considerable uncertainty. And so, as an academic developer with some responsibility for preparing new supervisors to work with masters and doctoral students, I find myself in the position of translating my carefully crafted theorizations of this complex pedagogy into teaching moments with more or less success. Uneasy issues of translation arise between theory and practice, research and teaching. In this essay, I reflect on my experience as an academic working in this field and find a reluctance to teach those theories that seem to require significant alteration to be relevant to my audience. In closing, I comment briefly on what my reflection might suggest about the contemporary condition of being an academic who must not only research *and* teach excellently but also industriously make connections between the two. Against this presumed coherence, I find a sometimes severed subjectivity that resists the integration demanded of us (see Greenbank 2006).

In such a reflexive account of my work, I wish to contribute to the project of 'thinking otherwise in academic development' (Holmes and Grant 2007, 1). By self-consciously moving between theorizing and practice, I am trying to expose some of the dilemmas and hesitancies that mark my work as an academic developer who teaches supervisors. Touched by Tai Peseta's

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observation (2007, 16) that 'much of the research produced in academic development about its work does not adequately convey how the work itself feels', I am trying to write so that the tenor of the work as I experience it (as interesting but difficult work where I am often unsure of how to conduct myself) is revealed. At the same time, the insights offered here should have relevance to academics more widely. They too struggle with unceasing demands to make their teaching more successful, to focus more on process and less on content, to solve the problems of their unwieldy workloads by bringing their teaching and research together into a seamless whole. This essay offers a point of critique in relation to such demands.

Translating theories of supervision

The roots of supervision's ambiguity lie in its unusual (for higher education) blend of the dependent and the independent, the personal and the academic (often expressed in uncertainty about what is being supervised – student or project), as well as the rapid changes that graduate research education is undergoing in its student-subjects and purposes. An effect of this ambiguity can be to increase the uncertainty some new academics feel about how to be a good supervisor, an uncertainty that cannot easily be alleviated in the absence of experience. Yet uncertainty might well be a good basis for beginning to supervise, especially if the alternative is the confidence that 'what worked for me will work for my students'.

In my research into supervision, I engaged 'with the actual practices of teaching' as Tamsin Haggis has challenged higher education researchers to do (email to ITL-CAD, 8 September 2005). I entered the world of other people's supervision exchanges (specifically those of several masters supervision pairs in the arts, humanities and social sciences) and collected transcriptions of audio-taped supervision meetings, notes from the protagonists about those meetings, plus follow-up interviews. It was a rich, if sometimes overwhelming, experience – and I am grateful to the supervisors, especially, for the opportunity. Taking up a poststructuralist interpretive strategy that attends to the production of 'local, small-scale theories' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 11), I composed several distinct and sometimes contradictory theoretical interpretations for this particularly local but widespread pedagogy. While emphasizing the radical incompleteness of each interpretation, I wanted it to illuminate some aspects of supervision's contested and complex workings. These theories do not exhaust the possibilities of supervision, but were powerfully suggested to me by the data I gathered and reviewed – not only the empirical material described above but also academic and popular writing about supervision and institutional policy documents.

Central to this essay is the conflicted experience of trying to translate my own scholarly work into a form that is more easily understood, or less likely to be resisted, by those whom I teach and that will then offer insight into how we might actually *conduct* supervision. In thinking about this, I have turned to Walter Benjamin's essay *The task of the translator* (1970). In Benjamin's view, the task of the (literary) translator is not that of conveying or transmitting the *message* of the original text; instead it is to find the intended effect upon the target language (the language of translation) which echoes the *intention* of the original (1970, 76). Not only must the translator sense the intention of the original text and be able to capture that in her translation, but she must also ensure that her translation has its own kind of intention. For Benjamin, the hallmark of the bad translator is to be motivated by readers who do not understand the original and so translate to 'perform the transmitting function' (1970, 69). In contrast, a good translation is transparent: 'it does not cover the original, does not block its light' and its fidelity consists in giving 'voice to the *intention* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony' (1970, 79, original italics).

Reading Benjamin has sparked several connections with my present reflection: first, my theories are intended to be more like literary works than scientific models. They don't purport to

be transparent representations of the truth of supervision but are instead creative interpretations of various forms of empirical and textual data. Like Benjamin's view of literary works, their 'essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information' (1970, 69) but their capacity to point towards 'the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic"' (1970, 70) of supervision. Indeed, these theories are also already translations which owe considerable fidelity to the data from which they originated. Moreover, they are my creations, so in this case the author and the translator are one (an academic who is both researcher and teacher): Benjamin doesn't consider this particular circumstance and the complexities that might attend it, in particular issues of contradictory desires and attachments. One monstrous desire that lurks in many academic breasts, even those with a poststructuralist heartbeat, is for our theories to have the status of Holy Writ, which for Benjamin is the text that alone is 'unconditionally translatable', where translation is *only* needed (in interlinear version) because of 'the plurality of languages' (1970, 82). Lastly, and perversely in terms of Benjamin's understanding of good and bad translation, I am also considering the issue of translation within university teaching, an activity that has been traditionally concerned with the transmission of knowledge, and in a context where my concern is that the 'students' cannot understand or accept the original. So there is a sense in which teaching and 'good' translation, in Benjamin's sense, are at odds with one another.

Vexed issues of translation in teaching theories of supervision

I turn now to reflect upon my experience of teaching theories that diversely characterize supervision as: (1) a map of layered relations; (2) the object of competing and contradictory discourses; (3) the bondage of master and slave; and (4) playful improvisation. Each account opens with a brief description of the theory followed by a description of my teaching practice interlaced with regard to issues of translation. In bringing my own theoretical work to my teaching, or considering that possibility, my intention is to excite not only the imaginations of the supervisors I work with but also their practice. I want them to look again at this familiar aspect of academic life and to find it strange, so that their preconceptions, often built on limited experience, come under scrutiny. Readers who are interested in the empirical data that was interpreted to compose these theories will need to look elsewhere (see Grant 2003, 2005a, b, 2008) as space precludes their inclusion here.

A map of layered relations

The intimate, triangular relations between supervisor, student and thesis can be mapped as unstable layers (Grant 2003). Different from earlier, typically more distant, relations between lecturer, student and student's academic work, the 'new' institutionally mandated relation between supervisor, student and thesis carries a distinctive set of expectations, some institutionally prescribed, some the product of individuals' past experiences (including previous experiences of supervision and of being otherwise taught in higher education). At the same time, older layers of psychosocial relations lie beneath, such as that of social positioning: the ascriptions of gender, class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and so on that we carry on our bodies and in our psyches. Or the ever-present relations between each person's conscious and unconscious 'selves', relations of ignorance, need, desire and anxiety that spill into social relations in difficult-to-detect ways. These older relations are not simply overruled by the institutional arrangement but unpredictably erupt into supervision. Moreover, as actions on the actions of others, all the layers of relations in supervision are power relations (Foucault 1986) that keep the dynamics of supervision constantly moving. In this understanding, the elusive thesis is the third contributor to those dynamics: it embodies disciplinary norms and expectations (often themselves contested) as well as student and supervisor hopes and desires.

In teaching this theory, translation issues have hardly arisen. I have regularly presented its original form (a series of triangular figures overlaying one another to make a kind of map) in workshops with new supervisors to explore the play of difference in supervision. The map invites discussion of the unreliability of supervising the way you were supervised (or not), or always in the same way (on the grounds of fairness for example). It also illuminates the swirl of unexpected complexities and intensities that surround the intimate interactions of supervision and offers a reading that questions easy assumptions of individual culpability that often feature in accounts of experience. When we talk about how issues of biography might intersect with how we take up the position of supervisor and what we expect or hope from the student, supervisors become animated, as they do when we talk of their relations with (feelings and thoughts about) the thesis. There is a kind of visual drama as each layer makes things more complex and unpredictable: the supervision plot visibly thickens and it lends itself to small tales from the field (mine and others'). The triangularity of the map and its layeredness together make it theoretically rich, but the 'real theory' (Foucault's view of power relations) remains comfortably in the background, possibly because it reinforces the supervisors' sense of themselves as not particularly powerful, and maybe no more powerful than their (demanding) students. In many ways this interpretation remains close to everyday experience and so 'rings true'. By the end of the session, the visual version of my theory stands whole and vivid on the screen – and I am invigorated by its reception, the researcher–teacher in me simultaneously delighted.

The object of competing and contradictory discourses

In quite a different theoretical interpretation, I have construed supervision as the historical object of competing yet often contradictory discourses. The force of the theory relies on a specific understanding of discourses as socio-historical systems of meanings and knowledges that, 'intertwined with power, create speaking–acting subjects' (Foucault 1974, 47). Modern 'talk' about supervision (published literature, institutional documents, practitioners' descriptions) is largely enabled by a small group of dominant discourses that I have typified as the traditional-academic, the psychological, the techno-scientific and the neo-liberal (Grant 2005b), although there are other, more marginal discourses in circulation as well – for example radical (including feminist), psychoanalytic and indigenous discourses. Each discourse not only figures supervision differently but also hails supervisor and student as different kinds of normative subjects. For example, the psychological discourse constitutes 'proper' supervision as an interpersonal relationship of developmental support in which the psy-Supervisor is primarily a caring, expert professional and the psy-Student is in need of guidance and motivation in order to realize their full potential. Trust and respect for the personhood of the other are central and all students who enter advanced research should be able to succeed *with the right kind of support*. Compare this to the norms of the traditional-academic discourse which construes supervision as an intellectual apprenticeship, possibly marked by formality and distance, very likely by a kind of challenging rigour. The Trad-Supervisor is a proven scholar and master of the discipline; the Trad-Student is the promising disciple who learns by being *confronted* with the limits of her/his understanding. Rightly, the student may or may not prove able to survive such confrontations. Between the psychological and the traditional-academic understandings of supervision lies a world of different assumptions, values and practices that produces many possibilities for talking past, even judging, each other.

Encouraged by colleagues who read the original work and found that it helpfully reframed tensions within supervision as symptoms of different but meaningful standpoints, I have tried teaching this interpretation in its original form. I usually begin by fleshing out the discourses one at a time and then look at how they play out in selected texts (institutional documents or

interview data) to produce various tensions and possibilities. Yet I never feel that this theory teaches easily. My energy flags and the responses of others are flat, perhaps because the core ideas are derived from an unfamiliar, unwanted even, epistemology. Of this kind of shift in worldview, Joan Cocks (1989) remarks:

> … the third and longest step away from immediate experience is taken by 'discourse theory' when it claims that the secret basis of a system of power is to be found in the categories of ordinary thought… categories that singly and together police the boundaries of what can be imagined, thought, desired, said and so done. (1989, 105)

In suggesting supervision as an object of competing discourses, enmeshed within a system of power, the separation of theory from experience is acute. The readily available interpretation of 'discourse' as talk works to remove much of the critical force of the Foucauldian view that, rather than being agents and authors of our own destinies, we are only intelligible to ourselves and others through a limited array of subject positions. Moreover, in foregrounding the normative force of discourses, this theory suggests that supervisors and students are always potentially dangerous to each other because, unpredictably positioned within contradictory discourses, they will misunderstand and then judge each other as abnormal and wrong-headed. Such judgments not only make them vulnerable to institutional sanction, but by implication there is no final standard of 'right supervision'. Yet, such a standard is something that new supervisors and graduate students often desperately seek. After teaching with this theory a couple of times, and finding it required more teacher-talk than I was comfortable with in a workshop, I have abandoned it. Revisiting the experience through the lens of Benjamin's view of translation, it would seem that there is no easy way around an original that is hard to understand, unwelcome even: there is only the 'bad translation' that sacrifices the intention of the original in the interests of transmitting its surface content.

The bondage of master and slave

Hegel's figure of master and slave served to shed light on the troublingly asymmetrical institutional[1] architecture of supervision (Grant 2008), which is overlooked by the common figuration of supervision as apprenticeship, and not elucidated well by the ideas of layered relations and competing discourses. Briefly, Hegel's account (1977/1807) is an attempt to explore the emergence of human self-consciousness: this process is always accompanied by a struggle for recognition between two consciousnesses bound together in an ambiguous and contradictory relation of domination and subordination. The emergence of self-consciousness *requires* this difficult relation as knowledge of the self and the world is motivated by its very desires and struggles. In theorizing supervision as analogous to the master–slave relation, I draw a parallel between the processes of emergence for a general state of self-consciousness and those for the disciplined self-consciousness of the scholar/researcher.

The master–slave figure brings several subtle yet decisive elements of supervision into focus. For one thing, the supervisor (master) and student (slave) are bound together – they depend on each other's recognition to exist. In this sense, access to the pleasures of being a supervisor *depends* on the very existence of the graduate research student whose pleasures in being supervised likewise rest on the authority and status of the supervisor. For another, this inescapable asymmetry produces a latent structural disposition towards domination and subordination, the grounds for the conflictual condition of supervision. Further, while the thesis is desired by the supervisor, often as much at it is by the student, the supervisor's relations with the thesis are mediated (the student is 'in the way') and therein lies the ground for considerable frustration and anxiety. In contrast, the student often feels as if the supervisor knows what the thesis should be but is cruelly withholding. Importantly, the master–slave

relation is productive of far more than just struggle and inequality: it also produces in *both* supervisor and student the committed (obedient and diligent) work required to get the research and the thesis finished. Advanced academic work is no picnic – it requires courage, stamina and 'mental tenacity' (Di Bills, HERDSA discussion, July 2007). To this end, the master–slave relation works *for* supervision – and without this tension supervision would likely be a much less potent pedagogy.

So far I have not brought this challenging theorization back into the realm of teaching. If the discourse proposition slithers uncomfortably close to the dark side of supervision, master–slave falls into the abyss – at least for supervisors (students respond to it with cathartic enthusiasm). My own supervisor never really liked the interpretation, and my thesis examiners found the inclusion of two master–slave chapters somewhat problematic: their responses suggest a failure in my ability to explain the intention that drove the original act of translation from empirical data to theoretical construct. More uncomfortably still, the woman supervisor whose dialogue with a student was used to illustrate the theory (Grant 2008) did not like the connotations at all and I felt an uncomfortable sense of betrayal in using her data to make my argument. The discomfort deepened when I presented the work (with the data) at conferences only to find that other academics/supervisors judged her harshly as a 'bad' supervisor. (One respondent claimed that she would never supervise like that, nor would anyone in her discipline, but later sought me out to tell me a 'funny' story about a doctoral student called Dave the Slave who, needing money, worked as a jack-of-all-trades in the lab.) Making the argument to academics that the master–slave relation is *not* about the 'inadequacies' or 'immoralities' of real people but rather about the institutional and cultural framing of supervision has proven to be difficult whenever I have attempted it. There has been too much resistance to allow the core idea, the intention, of the analogy to surface: that is the way in which the institution positions us as powerful in supervision *whether we like it or not* and the way in which academic work and subjectivity is marked by problematic forms of docility. I wonder about the strength of these responses. Perhaps the idea of master and slave is so affronting to our modern liberal consciousness (and so potently linked to ugly aspects of colonial history) that we can't even think about the argument. Or perhaps it affronts our sense of ourselves as agentic subjects of the liberal university (we would *never* be that authoritative or 'masterful'). Or maybe such responses can be read as a repression of what we do not want to confront about the troubling ambiguities of supervision.

Despite these responses, I want to find a way to translate the master–slave interpretation of supervision so that I can teach it. There is an obligation, I think, to confront beginning supervisors with the complex and contradictory – and *inescapable* – ways in which academic culture qua the institution has already set the terms of supervision. Students are mostly alert to the dynamic of asymmetrical power; supervisors are usually not (except in relation to their own powerlessness vis a vis their head of department or dean). Colleagues have suggested I translate it into the more commonplace and less affronting idea of apprenticeship but this lacks the potential of my original to make the familiar strange and disturbing, to see what there is about our positions as supervisor and student that we do not want to know but which comes back to haunt every supervision in some way. The same goes for the delightful suggestion that I emphasize the (high-camp) bondage rather than painful enslavement implications of master and slave: although I can immediately imagine some interesting teaching props, the playful connotations would also sacrifice the intention of my original. And, as I am becoming aware, in spite of my teacherly desire to find a way to make the material more palatable to my 'students', the researcherly self finds such a loss difficult to countenance: it would amount to the failure to give 'voice to the *intention* of the original'. In Benjamin's terms, it would be a bad translation.

The play of improvisation

The development of advanced and original academic thought requires something more than the fixed and complementary relations of master and slave. There need to be other modes of address inviting the student into the subjectivity and desires of the scholar–researcher. Noticing moments in which students and supervisors engaged in a playful riffing of ideas, moments marked by a kind of relational symmetry, I elaborated an interpretation of supervision as improvisation (Grant 2005a).[2] This theorisation is attentive to those spontaneous, reciprocal and open-ended supervisor–student interactions that, springing from a space of 'betweenness' and 'open play' (Gurevitch 2001, 100), show a shared excitement and commitment to the project of *thinking about* the work. Unlike the prescribed roles of master and slave that feature in many institutional codes of practice, such dynamics are elusive and not amenable to regulation. The ability to improvise draws upon a combination of discipline, skill, practice, trust, inspiration, playfulness and camaraderie, along with a willingness to risk full engagement with the 'music' of thinking in all its uncertainty.

In supervision, improvisation moments are marked by rapid exchanges of ideas, interruptions on the part of both, half sentences completed by the other, sometimes by a sense of fun. Along with its pleasures (it is this aspect of supervision that many supervisors most enjoy) however, the messy interplay gives rise to uncertainty and a sense of risk: did we just waste a whole lot of time? Did I (the supervisor) just overly influence – or distract – my student's thinking? Did I leave her in a state of unbearable confusion? Yet, despite its inevitable ambiguities and tensions, drawing attention to improvisation as a mode of supervision reminds supervisors of the importance of opening spaces for exchanges of thinking in spite of many pressures not to in this era of 'fast supervision' (Green and Usher 2003). Such attention may usefully lead to consideration of what kinds of supervision relation would make improvisation more likely, what preparation and skills might be required, and what dilemmas might be associated with it.

To date, I have not taught this theory of supervision at all (nor presented it at conferences). In my mind it belongs with that of master and slave because the discipline of one is an essential corollary to the freedom of the other: the successful thesis lies in resolving the tension between these two modes of acting so that the freedom of the play of ideas does not overwhelm the need for a coherent argument and the discipline of getting the work done does not suffocate the spark of original work. While each is radically incomplete without the other, the master–slave is prior in the sense of being more fundamental to the culture of the institution. Teaching improvisation is overshadowed by the problems of the master–slave (described above) that I have yet to solve: it feels somehow dangerous to teach it alone. For one thing, a lot of supervision is not like improvisation even though we might fantasize that it will be. Neither can a supervisor simply *make* supervision improvisational because this requires active participation from the student who has many reasons to demur, at least some of which lie in the deadliness of the master–slave. Problematically for teaching this theory, its thematic framework is quite abstract and so, in a technical sense, problems of translation feel more acute than ever. At the same time, because the idea of 'improvisation' is a joyful or playful one in contrast to that of master–slave (and so less likely to be met with resistance), it seems easer to imagine ways to give voice to its intention to underscore the social dynamics involved in forging scholarly subjects who find pleasure in the uncertain processes of thinking.

Translation and the problem of the severed academic self

In reflecting on some difficulties with bringing my own theoretical work into my teaching, in forging a teaching–research nexus as we are all urged to do nowadays by our institutional masters, I have stumbled across thorny issues of translation. I have found that I very much desire to teach

the carefully crafted interpretations (originals) intact. I *resist* the implication – of others' discomfort with the master–slave, or their incomprehension over the idea of discourses – that I might change those theories into something less confronting or simpler. I am attached to my originals, almost as if they were Benjamin's Holy Writ 'where the text is identical to truth or dogma' (1970, 82). This may be because I have never fully plumbed the intentions of my own work in a way that opens up the possibilities of its translation; or it may be that only others that can do this in an uninhibited way. Yet despite my reluctance as a researcher to tamper with those originals and my sense (like Benjamin's) that a translation directed at those who do not understand the original is a 'bad translation', the work of teaching calls for greater flexibility and generosity. It seems valuable to find ways to entice the student to engage with even adulterated versions of our theories, especially given that we can never secure the reception of ideas in their original state in the minds of others.

In undertaking this reflection, I have become aware of a tension-ridden movement between the 'self that thinks abstractly and the self that thinks in its practical life' (Cocks 1989, 107) that may be particularly likely in the lives of academics who research and teach. As researcher–scholars, even where we engage with the messy demands of the empirical world, we also experience the bliss of time for reading, thinking, imagining and writing, of solitude and sociality with peers, of being able to impose patterns on the hubbub of everyday life, of a significant degree of autonomy. Many academics have described this to me as the pleasurable core of their identity: there are delights in producing relatively enduring forms of 'knowing' (the book chapter, the journal article). Despite episodes of doubt, this is a powerful state through which we name the world, and often seek to change it. In contrast, as teachers, we are embedded in the 'vicissitudes of context' (Tai Peseta, personal email 3 December 2007): an unruly domain of the contingent and fleeting, the practically possible, the interpersonal and connected, the unsettling power relations between teacher, curriculum and student. There are the pleasures of the well-taught class, of the inspired moment of teaching, of the students who grab ideas and run with them, who seem to love the subject as we do. But there are also the frustrations of those who do not, who *will not* love the subject, who use it to no good effect, mangle it even – and the fear that somehow we have failed. (I sometimes see this fear starkly in new academics but, I hate to tell them, it is always a possibility within teaching.) Despite the real possibilities for productive interdependence, in academic life the selves of researcher and teacher often feel severed. This is not just a function of their competing for time but of their different bodily modes, ethics and power relations, pleasures and anxieties, excitements and frustrations. Indeed they often require quite different conditions to flourish.

One effect of this severance is that attachment to our own theoretical work and our disciplines as bodies of knowledge may be a problem for us more generally as teachers. Reflecting on my experience of working with supervisors, I find that the love of my own work, *my originals*, has been thwarting my practice in a hidden way. Finding some ideas unwelcome to those whom I teach, and rather than teach them 'badly' as translations that miss the intention of the original, my solution has been to put them aside or even avoid teaching them altogether. This is despite my expectations that advanced 'students' (as my academic colleagues surely are) will apply themselves to challenging material, will be willing to look beyond their initial resistance or confusion. My frustrated response is not so different, I think, from the way my academic colleagues resist the teaching-and-learning messages that academic developers (my tribe) earnestly want to give them. Academics in our workshops often say, 'How *can* I make space for communication and learning activities in class when there is just so much precious content that must be got through?' or 'The content is the most important thing, I don't want to dumb it down – translate it – to spoon-feed poorly prepared students'. The subtext is 'Stop making unrealistic, unethical even, demands on me through your teaching development workshops!' (They, in turn, face students

who complain about the excessive demands made upon their time and attention by their teachers and courses.)

In spite of widespread and sometimes unconvincing suggestions for how to create a stronger nexus between research and teaching, the love of knowledge that should be the hallmark of the committed researcher–scholar may well be at odds with the work of teaching. Dealing with this tension may mean, at times, *restraining without erasing* the researcher's consuming attachment to ideas in their original form in order to make space for the teacher's work of translating them into more graspable, desirable even, ideas in order to engage the student. This means that, in the moment of teaching, we privilege the vocation of the teacher. We forego our desire for the work to be 'Holy Writ', to be in Benjamin's terms 'unconditionally translatable', and embrace the demanding task of making conditional translations that echo the intention of their originals as faithfully as possible. Sometimes though, more disruptively in the current order of 'consumer knows best', we may need to take a different path. Recognizing that translations can be treacherous, we will insist upon teaching the originals. At such times, we might welcome resistance as signs of life rather than read it as pedagogical failure. We might also remind our students (our colleagues, if we are working as academic developers) of the confronting truth that higher education is a privileged burden, that making sense of difficult or unwelcome ideas is always hard work.

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Notes

1. By 'institutional' I mean the system of higher education in the west. Supervision in the arts and humanities in particular is akin to some of the earliest accounts of intense pedagogical relations – see, for example, George Steiner's *Lessons of the masters* (2003).
2. Other researchers have used improvisation to theorize aspects of academic life – see for example Humphreys and Hyland (2002) on improvisation in teaching and Oldfather (1994) on improvisation in research.

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