

## **Signature pedagogy and beyond: Reflections on Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020)**

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### **Abstract:**

In a response to Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020), I expand on the term signature pedagogy and illustrate how clinical supervision satisfies the criteria for this designation in the counseling field. I then suggest an alternative term, “pedagogical foundations” (from Baltrinic and Wachter Morris), to ground work towards the authors’ goals of asking the ‘right questions’ about the ‘best things’ underlying counselor education practices and research. Finally, I outline some additional avenues (toward the same goals) via explorations of traditional learning theories and science of learning principles that emphasize student learning processes in the classroom - how students learn.

**Keywords:** signature pedagogy | clinical supervision | pedagogy | science of learning

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## Signature Pedagogy and Beyond: Reflections on Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020)

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In a response to Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020), I expand on the term *signature pedagogy* and illustrate how clinical supervision satisfies the criteria for this designation in the counseling field. I then suggest an alternative term, “*pedagogical foundations*” (from Baltrinic and Wachter Morris), to ground work toward the authors’ goals of asking the “right questions” about the “best things” underlying counselor education practices and research. Finally, I outline some additional avenues (toward the same goals) via explorations of traditional learning theories and science of learning principles that emphasize student learning processes in the classroom — how students learn.

*Keywords:* signature pedagogy, clinical supervision, pedagogy, science of learning

Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020) provided a passionate and convincing call for “better understanding the fundamental elements of pedagogy used to prepare counselors and counselor educators” (p. 10) in their essay, “Signature Pedagogies: A Framework for Pedagogical Foundations in Counselor Education.” Even casual readers of the relevant counseling literature would have difficulty arguing with their central thesis, whether, “as a profession, we are asking the ‘right’ questions and studying the ‘best’ things to increase our collective understanding of the pedagogical foundations in counselor education” (p. 1). The authors echoed findings of two content analyses of teaching literature (Barrio Minton et al., 2018; Barrio Minton et al., 2014), the report of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) Teaching Initiative Taskforce (2016), and assertions of other counselor educators (e.g., Korcuska, 2016).

In this response to their essay, I first seek to build on Baltrinic and Wachter Morris’ (2020) presentation of “signature pedagogy” by highlighting additional characteristics of the construct. Then, applying these characteristics, I expand their examination of clinical supervision, which is widely regarded as counseling’s signature pedagogy. Third, I propose an alternative term, pulled from Baltrinic

and Wachter Morris’ own words, that seems to better capture the essence of their proposal. Finally, I offer suggestions, based in the broader pedagogy literature, that point to some “best things” to explore through some “right questions,” all in support of Baltrinic and Wachter Morris’ call for enhancing teaching and learning in counselor education.

### Signature Pedagogy: Complexity, Depth, and Vulnerability

As a starting point, from my perspective “signature pedagogy” is, by definition, singular: one unique (signature) example of the art and science of teaching (pedagogy). This characterization has prevailed in scholarly writings about signature pedagogy across two decades (e.g., Chick et al., 2012; Gurung et al., 2009), in line with Shulman’s (2005a, 2005b, 2005c) original conceptualization of the term. In fact, emerging fields seek their own signature pedagogy as an indication of their professionalism (e.g., Carson & Walsh, 2019). Of note, a field’s (singular) signature pedagogy is not the same as a field’s (multiple) pedagogical foundations or theories, a distinction pertinent to suggestions offered later. Thus, I refer to a singular signature pedagogy throughout my response.

In their presentation, Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020) focused primarily on the *deep, surface*, and *implicit* structures as well as the broad and specific features of signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005b). Shulman (2005b) noted these dimensions help define what a profession's signature pedagogy is and what it is not, while also pointing to "common features" (p. 56) across professions. These structures were particularly helpful for Baltrinic and Wachter Morris' proposed framework to guide needed reflections around the "what," "how," and "why" of teaching in counseling (see their Table 1). In this response, I build on their discussion by highlighting additional characteristics, including those that seem particularly relevant to counselor education — and that seem to capture the art and "soul" of a signature pedagogy.

A signature pedagogy essentially defines a profession, through both its pedagogical approaches (strategies) and its teaching goals: *habits of the hand* as seen in actions of professionals, *habits of the mind* in professionals' thoughts and thinking while acting, and *habits of the heart* through the values and ethics embodied by professionals in their work (Shulman, 2005a, 2005c). Thus, signature pedagogy is a mode of teaching distinct to a profession that bridges theory (taught in the classroom) and professional practice (what graduates will actually do in the field; Shulman, 2005b). It is pervasive across the curriculum and discipline (Shulman, 2005a, 2005c), a routine and habitual approach ("ritual"; Shulman, 2005a) commonly known by teachers and students (after induction). Within this routine, however, the content and process of the signature pedagogy are never the same, as "the novelty comes from the subject matter itself, not from constantly changing the pedagogical rules" (Shulman, 2005c, p. 10). It is based on public performance of professions, so that it is also highly visible and somewhat unpredictable, requiring students to be deeply involved and vulnerable (Shulman, 2005a, 2005c). In practice, signature pedagogy also is collaborative; students are accountable not only to the teacher but also their peers (Shulman, 2005a) in that they are asked to challenge and support each other (Shulman, 2005c). In short, signature pedagogy is one of *engagement*, *uncertainty*, and *formation* (building identity and character; Shulman, 2005a, 2005c).

With this backdrop, a first question is whether the counseling field has *a* signature pedagogy.

### Clinical Supervision: The Signature Pedagogy of Counseling

Bernard and Goodyear (2009) first declared clinical supervision as the signature pedagogy of the mental health professions in the fourth edition of their highly cited textbook, *Fundamentals of Clinical Supervision*; they noted in particular the uncertainty, engagement, and formation dynamics of clinical supervision. Their declaration echoed similar assertions, both earlier (e.g., psychology; Goodyear, 2005, 2007) and more recent (e.g., psychoanalysis, psychiatry; Watkins, 2014a, 2014b, 2020), from various other psychotherapies. (Social work continues to debate whether field education is their signature pedagogy [e.g., Larrison & Korr, 2013]; those who argue against this demarcation typically cite the lack of attention to clinical supervision in field education as their primary rationale [e.g., Wayne et al., 2010].) Similarly, Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020) noted psychology's endorsement of clinical supervision as its signature pedagogy and included citations of counseling literature (e.g., Borders et al., 2014) in the same paragraph. They concluded, however, that "further exploration of the broad and specific features of supervision as a signature pedagogy is needed in counselor education" (p. 4); most clinical supervision scholars would agree. For the purposes of this response to Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020), however, I will first examine how clinical supervision satisfies the criteria of a signature pedagogy for counseling before addressing areas for further exploration.

In line with Shulman, a major focus of clinical supervision is helping supervisees "think like a *counselor*" (cf. Shulman, 2005b, 2005c) in "conditions of inherent and unavoidable uncertainty" (Shulman, 2005a, p. 18), an apropos description of students' clinical interactions with actual clients during practicum and internship. In other words, supervisee development involves accessing declarative knowledge (e.g., content such as counseling theories, basic helping skills, evidence-based practices, multicultural concepts, ethical codes) through the development of procedural knowledge (e.g., how to actually apply that knowledge), conditional

knowledge (e.g., when to apply that knowledge), and conceptual knowledge (e.g., why it is appropriate to apply some specific knowledge with this client now; see Borders, 2019). Indeed, counselors must learn how to make such decisions instantaneously and constantly — to *think like a counselor* during counseling sessions. In other words, clinical supervision is when classroom instructors' oft-refrained “it depends” becomes the focus, so that — with intentional examination and reflection during clinical supervision — novice counselors begin to build their “accumulated knowledge/wisdom” (Skovolt & Rønnestad, 1992) toward clinical “adaptive expertise” (see Borders, 2019). Even more, to accomplish this learning, supervisees must make themselves visible, and vulnerable, by sharing recordings of their counseling sessions with their supervisor for review, critique, and discussion.

To support supervisees' learning processes, supervisors choose from an array of instructional strategies appropriate to the supervision context and supervisee (e.g., supervisee developmental level, salient and intersecting identities, setting and clients). Appropriate supervisory interventions range from behavioral rehearsal and role play (for habits of the hand) to Socratic questioning (Overholser, 1991; for habits of the mind) to Interpersonal Process Recall (Kagan & Kagan, 1997; for habits of heart), among others. In other words, the effective supervisor leads the supervisee through an intentional and carefully scaffolded pedagogical exercise to illuminate thinking processes (habits of the mind) to inform, evaluate, and practice potential actions (responses and interventions, habits of the hand) that are in line with values and ethics of the profession (habits of the heart). In triadic and group clinical supervision learning contexts, everyone is responsible — and accountable — to contribute input and feedback (cf. Shulman, 2005a, 2005c). Thus, the supervisor, often also a learner, takes on the pedagogical tasks of providing the structure and procedures for members' engagement, maintaining an appropriate balance of challenge and support in feedback, and helping supervisees generalize and apply new learnings with their own clients (see Borders, 1991).

The essential point here is that this intentional and intensive process occurs only in supervision of

actual practice (signature), and that supervision is a pedagogical enterprise.

Of course, the previously mentioned description reflects the desired clinical supervision interchange based in research and best practices (Borders et al., 2014), which certainly is not reflective of every supervision session in counseling — or any other discipline. One likely culprit is insufficient pedagogical training for supervisors (and most counselor educators; e.g., Baltrinic et al., 2016; Borders, 2019). Thus, to effectively provide counseling's signature pedagogy, clinical supervisors must learn how to *think like a supervisor* (Borders, 1993). Supervisors must acquire knowledge and skills (clinical supervisors' habits of hand, mind, and heart) to understand supervisees' needs, create an intentional salient learning experience that fits within the supervisee's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; see also Shulman, 2005b), and then deliver the selected intervention(s), all while also honoring professional values and ethics. In other words, they must learn to think like a supervisor who makes constant and almost instantaneous decisions about how to adjust and adapt to supervisees' — and clients' — needs throughout a session. To achieve this goal, supervisors must complete their own training experiences of engagement, uncertainty, and formation. This educational process necessarily involves practice with actual supervisees, with the guidance of intentional and scaffolded supervision of supervision.

### **Counseling: A Leader of Clinical Supervision as Signature Pedagogy**

Although clinical supervision is a shared signature pedagogy among psychotherapies (and other disciplines; see, for example, Carson & Walsh, 2019), there is ample evidence that the counseling field is, and has been, a leader in professionalizing clinical supervision, even when not using the language of signature pedagogy. First, counseling authors have emphasized for some time that clinical supervision is an educational and instructional process (e.g., Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Borders, 1993, 2001). In describing supervision as a pedagogical practice, some have called for attention to pedagogical (learning) theories in supervisor train-

ing (Borders, 2010; Borders et al., 2014). Importantly, ACES has sponsored several clinical supervision taskforces over the years that produced the first standards (Dye & Borders, 1990) and curriculum guide (Borders et al., 1991) for supervisor training, and, more recently, evidence-informed best practices in supervision and supervisor training (ACES, 2011; Borders et al., 2014).

Second, from an accreditation standards perspective, counseling had the first requirement for doctoral-level supervision training, stated in the 1988 standards (Borders et al., 2014). Accredited programs also must make sure site supervisors have relevant supervision skills. In addition, most state licensure boards now require supervisors of licensure applicants to have completed at least some minimal training in supervision and, in many states, base their supervision on direct observation of supervisees' work with clients (see Borders et al., 2014). Although related psychotherapy disciplines certainly have issued their own standards and guidelines for supervision training and practice across the years (see Borders, 2014), counseling was the first in many areas.

Third, much of clinical supervision research in counseling is focused on the educational setting, particularly supervision of master's practicum and internship students (vs., for example, practitioners' needs in social work), as documented in two comprehensive reviews (Bernard & Luke, 2015; Borders, 2005). Supervisor development and training also have received much attention (e.g., needs of novice supervisors, their challenges providing feedback and dealing with gatekeeping, training programs for site supervisors of school interns). Certainly researchers in other fields have contributed to this knowledge, but again counseling took a leading role.

In sum, much work has clearly established clinical supervision as counseling's signature pedagogy.

### **Alternative Avenues Terminology: "Pedagogical Foundations"**

To be clear, none of the previous discussion negates Baltrinic and Wachter Morris' (2020) central premise. They call attention to a critical need ...

that just needs a term distinguished from "signature pedagogies." One obvious possibility is their own oft-used term "pedagogical foundations." This term seems befitting as, in reading their essay, their focus is primarily on the counseling classroom (particularly master's level, per their examples). This focus is evident in much of their wording, such as "teach these topics" (pp. 6-7), "curriculum and programming" (p. 7), and the call for "instructional research" (p. 10), all of which seem aligned with "pedagogical foundations." The term also is central to their key goal to enhance knowledge of "the fundamental elements of pedagogy" (p. 10) in counselor education through new research questions. Additional support for adopting this term is described next.

### ***Learning Processes: The "Why"***

To date, instructional research questions in counseling have been focused on *what* content counselor educators think should be taught or *what* they are teaching and *how* (i.e., what they are doing in the classroom; Barrio Minton et al., 2014, 2018). Both Barrio Minton et al. (2014, p. 173) and Korcuska (2016, p. 156) termed the latter a "bag-of-tricks," particularly in light of the authors' lack of attention to pedagogical foundations underlying the instructional approaches they described. Such foundations would also explain "*why* counselor educators should use a specific method or present content in a specific way" (Barrio Minton et al., 2014, p. 173, emphasis added). Similarly, noting the connection among what, how, and why questions, Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020) added an essential element in stating that "we as instructors and faculty do not examine what instructors are doing and the impact of practice on the *learning process*" (p. 9; emphasis added). Learning processes are key because they describe what must happen if instructors are to be effective in teaching and students are to be successful in learning, regardless of the content or topic. Herbert Simon, a leader in the field of cognitive science, summarized this point well:

Learning results from what the student does and thinks and only from what the student does and thinks. The teacher can advance learning only by influencing what the student does to learn. (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 1)

In short, learning processes undergird *how people learn*. Learning processes, then, point to some “right questions” and “best things” to study that can “increase our collective understanding of the pedagogical foundations in counselor education” (Baltrinic & Wachter Morris, 2020, p. 3).

**How People Learn.** How people learn is the core subject of traditional learning theories (see Schunk, 2016) and the science of learning (e.g., Ambrose et al., 2010). These theories are based in growing scientific knowledge about brain functioning underlying learning processes (e.g., cognitive load, information processing) as well as evidence-based instructional environments that encourage critical thinking and deeper learning (see Ambrose et al., 2010; Borders, 2019; Tangen & Borders, 2017). Consider the application of several principles of learning from Ambrose et al.’s (2010) highly accessible explanations and applications of science of learning principles. For example, counseling students’ *prior knowledge* can both enhance and impede their learning of basic counseling skills (principle 1). In a simplistic example, if students believe they should be a counselor because friends say they “give great advice,” instructors will have to help them unlearn this view of their new role — and do so without damaging students’ motivation and self-efficacy (principle 3). Instructors can enhance students’ learning of basic (and more complex) skills through deliberate practice (principle 5), which involves deconstructing components of skills and scaffolding practice of them accordingly. The complexity and uncertainty of counseling is reflected in several science of learning principles, particularly those around how to recognize when to apply which skills with what client (i.e., think like a counselor, principle 4). The underlying goal of such evidence-based instruction is to help novice counselors develop metacognitive processes (i.e., learn how to monitor their own learning; principle 7) and progressively move toward expertise. The bottom line is, the scholarship of teaching *and learning* in counseling could be greatly enhanced through in-depth exploration of traditional learning theories and science of learning principles. Evidence-based theories and principles could also contribute to greater rigor in research on teaching and learning in counseling (Baltrinic & Wachter Morris, 2020; Barrio Minton et al., 2014, 2018).

Importantly, traditional learning theories and science of learning principles are not a replacement for counselor educators’ preferred pedagogical foundations, epistemologies, or paradigms. Rather, these evidence-based theories and principles are meant to enhance effectiveness in applying these frameworks in the classroom — bolstering how and why they do what they do toward successful outcomes.

### ***New Research Questions***

In fairness to teaching researchers in counselor education (and in line with Baltrinic and Wachter Morris’ [2020] call for “further exploration” [p. 9]), all of the previous discussion also applies to clinical supervision. Using Shulman’s (2005b) signature pedagogy language, most supervision research to date is focused on surface (interventions supervisors use) and implicit (values addressed in supervision, such as gatekeeping and cultural responsiveness) dimensions, with much less attention on its deep structures (e.g., pedagogical foundations). Indeed, despite a large body of supervision literature in counseling journals, research about both supervision practice and supervision training rarely are grounded in pedagogy (Bernard & Luke, 2015; Borders, 2019), not unlike supervision literature in other professions (e.g., Gosselin et al., 2015; Olds & Hawkins, 2014). Perhaps ironically, more work is needed to understand the pedagogy underlying counseling’s signature pedagogy. Research based in traditional learning theories and science of learning principles, then, also suggests some “right questions” and “best things” to better understand “how learning occurs in supervision and how best to support such learning” (Borders, 2019, p. 77).

Tying these points back to Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020), current scholarship in evidence-based teaching suggests turning attention away from the *what* — teaching strategies and content being taught — to give priority to the *how*. At the course-level (cf. Baltrinic & Wachter Morris, 2020, Table 1), individual faculty would ask questions such as the following: What concepts do my students have difficulty understanding? What questions about the content do I get each time I teach this content? What do students’ questions suggest are interfering with their learning? How then might I better scaffold their learning? What organizational

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frameworks and analogies help them retain, recall, and apply this content? Are students' responses more accurate when I intentionally employ an evidence-based teaching strategy relevant to the topic?

Based on explorations of these questions, conversations among groups of faculty could then suggest some larger considerations. Questions to explore at the program-level and the professional-level could include the following: What are students' common misunderstandings and misapplications of key concepts in counselor education (e.g., cultural responsiveness, strength-based approaches)? What are students' consistent hurdles in grasping knowledge and skills being taught in counselor education classrooms (e.g., appropriate use of immediacy, the nuances of confidentiality)? How do prior knowledge and experiences of students of color and white students influence their learning processes in the classroom? How does a classroom's social and cultural environment both preclude and support collaborative conversations and learning? What changes and innovations do science of learning principles suggest to address these learning challenges? When students are asked to "think like a counselor," in what ways do their thoughts and cognitive processes mirror those of experts? In what areas do they need further instruction and development?

Clearly, these are not the only important and relevant questions for counselor educators to ask. They do, however, seem to point to key aspects of teaching and learning currently missing in conceptual and empirical pedagogical literature in counseling. They also point to different methodologies that, for example, explicate students' thinking aloud about their problem solving and reflections, analyze their small group conversations and interactions in class, as well as study how these differ and change with varying classroom conditions (e.g., teaching strategies).

### Considerations from Signature Pedagogy

#### Scholarship

I offer two additional points for consideration drawn from the signature pedagogy literature that seem relevant to counselor educators' efforts to enhance understanding of their pedagogical foundations. First, and of necessity, a signature pedagogy

is always evolving (Ciccone, 2012; Shulman, 2005a, 2011); Shulman (2005b) wondered how technology might enhance teaching approaches (e.g., "computer-mediated dialogues," p. 59) characteristic of a field's signature pedagogy. In addition, political and societal landscapes certainly change over time. In turn, professional practice settings and norms also change — as do learners. This is certainly true in clinical supervision (Bernard & Luke, 2015); prominent issues today (e.g., attachment in the supervisor relationship, broaching and cultural humility, pervasive client issues such as trauma) rarely entered into my early supervision conversations. Similarly, societal and political changes have also influenced counselor education (e.g., counseling's increasing emphasis on social advocacy; Ratts et al., 2015) and its pedagogical leanings, yielding a multiplicity of epistemologies, theories, paradigms, and lenses that are enriching the counseling field. Historically, the field's *pedagogical foundations* have evolved, from skills-training to developmental and constructivist pedagogies (Baltrinic & Wachter Morris, 2020) to critical pedagogies (Barrio Minton et al., 2014, 2018), and — by necessity — they will continue to evolve.

Second, the interdisciplinary nature of a signature pedagogy is considered an asset to its evolution and improvement. Scholars of signature pedagogy do not approach their work with "extreme assumptions that the ways of thinking in one discipline are inapplicable to others" (Chick et al., 2009, p. 12). Rather, they suggest "wandering into ... disciplines similar to one's own can be revealing," as "the best pedagogical practices ... across disciplines will help faculty better examine and assess their own teaching" (p. 12; see also Shulman, 2005b). For example, in explorations of signature pedagogy across disparate disciplines (e.g., geography, creative writing, music theory and performance, human development, computer science), Ciccone (2009) found common themes of inductive reasoning and helping students deal with complexity and ambiguity; these themes certainly seem relevant to counselor education. Thus, it may be that similar explorations of related disciplines could shine a light on "both recognizable ... and distinct" elements (Baltrinic & Wachter Morris, 2020, p. 6) in pedagogical foundations of counselor education. For example, with the increasing focus on a counselor's social advocacy

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role in counseling practice, what might we learn from other disciplines where this is also a priority? How would counseling's approach be similar to and distinct from those efforts? Interactions with colleagues in other mental health disciplines about their pedagogical underpinnings, teaching practices, and research methodologies — even interdisciplinary research — could be fruitful for enhancing counseling's pedagogy — including its pedagogical foundations as well as clinical supervision.

### Moving Forward

In contrast to Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020), I have not proposed a “unifying theoretical framework” (p. 1) to guide dialogues and research for exploring pedagogical foundations in counselor education (see their Table 2), and the questions I proposed earlier are specific to *how students learn*. Actually, other than deleting the plural “signature pedagogies” term, the authors' questions are a solid start for counselor educators' reflections about their teaching and pedagogical foundations, as well as areas for further exploration. To supplement the sample questions in their Table 1, I summarize some take-aways for consideration at individual, program, and professional levels:

- Claim clinical supervision and celebrate the field's leadership in developing its (singular) signature pedagogy.
- Use Baltrinic and Wachter Morris' questions to identify pedagogical foundations propelling one's classroom teaching; become even more deeply conversant in one's preferred pedagogical theories.
- Explore, individually and as a profession, how traditional learning theories and science of learning principles act as underlying learning processes at work in every counselor education classroom (and supervision session).
- Pay attention to/investigate students' learning processes — what and how students do and do not learn — in one's classroom.
- Experiment with evidence-based instructional strategies to enhance student learning in one's counseling courses; collect data on student outcomes.

- Conduct studies investigating to what extent students are “thinking like a counselor” (in the classroom, with clients). What areas of thinking seem to need specific instruction? Why are these areas challenging for students to learn (i.e., what's happening in their learning process)?
- Devote some time to interdisciplinary pedagogical dialogues with colleagues in related (and unrelated?) disciplines.
- Continue to be open to innovation and evolution in the field's pedagogical theories and practices, with an expectation that these will be bolstered by empirical work.
- Explore implications of all of the above for doctoral training in pedagogy and pedagogical foundations of the field, while also including in-depth attention to traditional learning theories and science of learning principles, as well as research methods for investigating learning processes in one's classroom.
- At the professional level, consider a version of ACES INFORM to offer guided opportunities for counselor educators to share, discuss, debate — and devise collaborative research about — pedagogical foundations of counselor education.

In line with Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020), I look forward to the ongoing dialogue around the art and science of our (singular) signature pedagogy as well as our (multiple) pedagogical foundations. Such dialogues certainly will benefit counseling students, as well as their clients, as “the way we teach will shape how professionals behave — and in a society so dependent on the quality of its professionals, that is no small matter” (Shulman, 2005b, p. 69).

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