# SUPERVISOR REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPING DOCTORALNESS IN PRACTICE-BASED DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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SUPERVISOR REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPING DOCTORALNESS IN PRACTICE-BASED DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Abstract

This paper shares the reflections of a group of 5 academics who started supervising practice-based doctoral students at a similar time in the same institution. The supervisors engaged in a collaborative research process themselves exploring their supervision practices, due in part to the relatively limited literature available in the field, and in part as a support mechanism to help them understand what they were doing. As the first students have now completed, the learning from taking students through the cycle from start to finish for the first time is also now complete in itself. While the supervisors continue to learn both from and within the supervision process itself, that initial experience of supervising doctoral students is now complete and the supervisors within their own institutions are now considered ‘experienced’. This paper offers insight into the doctoral development process from the supervisor’s perspective, and offers reflections on the supervision process itself, as well as insight into the difficulties that can be encountered when researching your own practice.

Introduction

The 2008 Australian government reviews (Bradley; House or Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation; and Cutler) and subsequent policy documents on Higher Education (Australian Government, 2009 & 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) highlight both the need for an increase in the number of research students and the need for further development of the future academic workforce. The Vision for 2020 promulgated in the Bradley Review specifically calls for ‘the education, training and development of world-class researchers across a wide range of intellectual disciplines’ (p6), while noting that the number of people completing higher degrees by research has grown only ‘modestly’ in the last five years and the ‘stock of people with higher degrees by research needs to increase to replace the large group of ageing academics and to expand Australia’s research and innovation workforce’ (p11). To help support this workforce expansion, the government has budgeted a fourfold increase in the 2009-10 funding level for 2010-11 to develop sustainable research excellence in addition to introducing funding for collaborative research networks (TAHES, 2009: 25).

New and emerging research areas have specific needs as they lack a critical mass within a community of practice by the nature of their comparative newness and emergence as disciplines offered at research degree level within universities. The research areas included in this category tend to have evolved from practice-based professions and associated professionally oriented higher education degrees, such as in Business and Management, Performing and Creative Arts, Nursing and Allied Health Professions, and the practice rather than more theoretically focussed areas of Education (e.g. teaching). Within these emerging research areas, the academic communities have developed from a practitioner and professional base, rather than through a more traditional academic career route, and the potential supervisors are themselves developing their own academic and research identities alongside their professional identities (LaRocco and Burns, 2006). The nature of the research students tends to be somewhat different to those in the more traditional academic disciplines. For example, a higher proportion tend to be part-time, and returning to research studies after establishing their professional careers. As a consequence, the student population that the supervisors are working with can be more diverse in their academic preparation. Their pathways into research degree studies and expectations of the research degree experience and outcomes are different from those of the traditional full-time PhD student cohort who have proceeded directly
from an honours degree into a research degree. Furthermore, academics in these emerging research areas need to negotiate a number of challenges that are more pronounced than in other more traditional disciplines (Kogan, 2002), such as workloads that include responsibilities for large undergraduate programs and comparatively high class teaching loads, a less intensive immediate research environment because a lesser proportion of colleagues are likely to be highly research active. Furthermore, for those who are comparatively new to the university environment, there is often a lack of confidence in academic ability in comparison to professional competence. As such, the difficulties that all supervisors face in developing their supervisory skills are exaggerated within this community.

Prior to the most recent fIRST project (fIRST, 2010), Christine Bruce led an ALTC fellowship team in 2008/9 to look at developing pedagogy of supervision in the technology disciplines, and while this was a discipline-focussed study, many of the findings are likely to be generic. For example, the need to create opportunities for supervisory conversations around pedagogy to promote communication about supervision as a teaching and learning practice, and the need to create development opportunities for less experienced supervisors (Bruce, 2009). In another ALTC funded project, the cross-cultural context project, they found that the cross-cultural context for international students magnified the intensity and complexity of the supervisory arrangement and developed a range of resources, including a ‘readiness’ measure, for universities to draw on prior to engaging in supervising international students (Homewood et al, 2010).

Essentially, the purpose of the research degree supervisor is to support the research degree candidate in the completion of their research degree. The Research Graduate Skills Project acknowledges the role of the supervisor in the development of research graduate capability (Cumming and Kiley, 2009). Recent research at USQ found that doctoral students’ and supervisors’ views differed on the students’ needs for connectedness, their needs for learning support, and their preferred use of communication media during their studies (Erwee and Albion, 2010). One way of addressing this discrepancy trialled at USQ was the development of online Communities of Practice – a development that is continuing beyond the scope of the study as it appears to be presenting a benefit.

The need for and value of new supervisors being supported

The assumption that established the collaborative research project outlined in this paper was that there was a need for and a value in our being supported as a group of new supervisors. As there were no experienced supervisors within our immediate group, we set about providing this support collaboratively. The mandatory institutional supervisory training provision covered the legal and administrative procedures relating to research degrees only. Note, however, we did each have an experienced supervisor on the teams of our students, but these were located in other faculties within the university, hence our starting point of supporting each other. Moreover, these experienced supervisors typically had gained their experience by supervising PhD rather than professional doctorate students. Carr et al (2010) suggest that the demands of praxis that the latter involves requires new pedagogical approaches to be developed – accentuating the value of collaborative learning in this new context. Our experience does not seem to be unique.

Amundsen and McAlpine (2009) found that there is minimal systematic development preparation for supervision, which Austin (2002) found is reflected in the students’ experience. Lee (2008) notes that the literature about doctoral supervision has concentrated on describing the functions that must be carried out rather than developing a conceptual approach towards research supervision. She suggests that, in addition to the functional, there is the need for the enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation and development of quality relationships to be included.
Lee (2008) also notes that tensions arise for new supervisors in developing their professional and supervisory identities. If this early supervisory experience also occurs pre-tenure, or while on some form of probationary contract, the supervisor has the additional pressures of being isolated, experiencing high stress and a lack of role definition (Schrodt et al, 2003), with a compounding impact on their supervisory action. Yet the pressure to engage in supervision is strong for career focussed individuals. Promotion channels can be relatively limited in some spheres without a number of doctoral supervisions to completion.

Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) note that the role of the supervisor has changed over time as doctoral studies have developed and expanded, to the point that supervision can be considered a pedagogic method, and the Swedish government now requires some postgraduate supervision training be completed before a doctoral supervision team is constituted. They explored the process of supervision on supervision, that is, supervisors being supervised in their supervision practice, and conclude that the shift from theory to practice in supervision does not happen quickly from reading a book, but is developed over time. This suggests that a quick-fix, pre-supervision course is not sufficient for new supervisors, but rather they need some on-going support mechanisms that they can return to over time. Such mandatory intervention is not currently enforced by the Australian government, although some Higher Education providers do have some form of compulsory training for new supervisors. It was an on-going support mechanism that we attempted to achieve in our own support network that is the focus of this paper. While we may be moving towards a recognition that there is a pedagogy of doctoral supervision, this is under-theorised and kept in a ‘secret garden’.

While the Swedish study concentrated on the nature of the development of the supervisor, Halse and Malfroy (2010) focussed their attention on the facets of professional work that doctoral supervision entails. They suggest that, in preparing for the work of doctoral supervision, academics need to consider the learning alliance, habits of mind, scholarly expertise, techne and contextual expertise. Such professionalisation opens the door to the competence of the supervision being distributed amongst different members of the supervisory team rather than each member being competent in every field. This somewhat lessens the burden for the new supervisor, but increases the tensions that may arise for them when working with more experienced colleagues whose competence lies in a different area. Again this was something that this current study covered. All the collaborative researchers were qualified teachers who considered themselves education professionals prior to joining the Academe. The teams which were constituted to supervise the students placed them in the principal supervisor role, but added experienced supervisors from other faculties as second supervisors to help oversee the supervision process. This, in itself, was identified as an area in which new supervisors need support and guidance, particularly in managing the various feedback and relationship processes (Lawson, Hein and Stewart, 2010). An added difficulty is that there is no measure or template of supervisory excellence (Nulty, Kiley and Meyers, 2009), and hence it is unclear what the new supervisor is aiming to achieve with regard to supervisory competence.

Essentially new supervisors are influenced by two factors when approaching supervision: their conceptualisation of research supervision, and their own experience as a doctoral student (Lees, 2008). While reflecting on their own experiences may be a source of development, they cannot change the experience that they themselves had. Their conceptualisation of supervision, on the other hand, is something that can be developed. Smith (2001) warns of the danger of representing such a conceptualisation within an administrative frame of resolvable rational problems, such as the training provided by the institution where the research was conducted, when the reality is more one of developing a complex and chaotic pedagogy (Grant, 2003).
In terms of alternative approaches to supervisor development, the use of stories (McCormack, 2009) and critical self-reflection over a period of time have been found to help supervisors develop a more theorised and considered rationale to supervision than a short course intervention might offer (Manathunga et al, 2010), as have communities of practice and peer learning experiences (Strackle, 2010). Hence the focus of this paper was a collaborative research project developed amongst a group of new supervisors who were wanting to explore and develop their own practice.

What transpired, and is represented in the remainder of this paper, was that the supervisors themselves went through a process similar to that of the doctoral development of the students. Firstly, as the research progressed, a number of the participants ‘dropped out’ of the process, as is often the case with PhD students. Secondly, the research question was, to a degree, ill-defined at the start. Thirdly, the methodology was interpreted differently by different members of the group and hence adapted to fit needs and individual requirements. The story is outlined below....

Finding the research question: an effort to reach agreement

As this project started as a collaborative research project, with a small group of supervisors all experiencing a similar cycle of activities, it would be fair to say that most of the participants entered into the process with an assumption that there would be some consensus, similarities, and a shared agenda between the members of the group. As early as the first meeting, this proved not to be the case. In fact, on the first day that the group met, they could not even agree what their research question was. For one, it was to do with the supervisory process and how we supervise in terms of processes; for another it was about how we supervise personally, and what it means to us; for another it was about creating the space in which students learn through the supervision process; or it was about managing the supervisory relationship; or it was about achieving an outcome. The group quickly realised that they did not have a shared understanding of what supervision was, never mind the supervision process itself, and hence discussion shifted to the purpose of supervision. Going back to the roots of defining the key terms is something that every doctoral student has to do at some point, at least once, and hence it should not have surprised us that we spent a whole day getting to this point.

In trying to express ourselves, metaphors became a useful tool at this point. One saw supervision like a string of pearls; with the supervisor helping the student thread the pearls together. Other metaphors related to chains and links; or journeys and travellers. The metaphors were all very positive. At a supervision session shortly afterwards, one of the group asked their student for a metaphor on the process and they offered that they come to tutorials like a lump of cheese, and they leave having been firmly grated! While this was the source of some hilarity in the group at the time, it is an interesting point to reflect on. The supervisor may intend the supervision process to be one thing; the student may find it something completely different, supporting Erwee and Albion’s (2010) findings. And in the same way that the group could not reach agreement on what their research question was, so too the student might find that the supervision is disagreeable.

After much discussion, and in true academic fashion, the group could not reach agreement on their question. However, did this matter? In the same way that many doctoral students amend their question as their research progresses, so the group decided to continue without an agreed question; with each person taking forwards their own question within the group discussion.

Towards a methodology: answering multiple questions simultaneously

The group had started this process as a collaborative research project and the commitment to the collaborative spirit was perhaps the single point of consensus other than having acknowledged that the doctoral supervision process was complex and hence the mix of research questions. Quite what
this meant methodologically, the group was not sure. Initially they met for periods of time to share, discuss and question each other with regard to the notion of ‘supervision’. While these meetings were always thought provoking and interesting, they tended to lead to more questions than answers. Again, this is something that is often reflected in the student’s experience of supervision meetings.

In an effort to achieve some sort of outcome that could be recorded, the group decided to individually reflect on and scribe something (written or drawn) about the ‘notion of supervision’ and then come back and share this with the group. The outcome focussed members of the group felt this would help lead to a productive outcome that could somehow be ‘written-up’. In the same way that the doctoral students focus on writing their chapters, some of the group were continually conscious of the need to produce a ‘publishable paper’ from their research activity. Their focus on a ‘scribed’ input resulting in a workable outcome dominated and, of course, this turned out not to be the case. In much the same way that the first draft of thesis chapters often do not hang together, the ‘scribbles’ lacked a coherent thread. One person wrote bullet points; another wrote a personal reflection; another tabulated how they differed between students; and yet another found an article that spoke to them about the notion of supervision. It was difficult to find any points of direct comparison between the offerings as their form differed so greatly. However, they did lead to further interesting discussions on how difficult it was to pin down this notion of supervision. The personal nature of the supervision process started to rise in prominence at this point, and this then became central to the research itself with the next attempt at collaborative iteration.

Finding the core: the personal nature of supervision

Having discussed how their notions of supervision varied so greatly, the idea of observing each other in supervision meetings arose as the next attempt at a common methodology. It was agreed that observations would occur in pairs, and that they would only occur with the advance informed consent of the supervisee. The collaborative researchers paired up, and the observation process took place.

The observations served to raise self-awareness in the supervisors in a manner that had not been anticipated. While all the students had supervisory teams, so there was often more than one supervisor in the room, having someone formally observing rather than participating left the supervisors being acutely conscious of their behaviour as supervisors, and questioning themselves somewhat as they went through the meetings. This heightened self-awareness was discussed at the next group meeting and highlighted the uncertainty, and hence for some the insecurity, that the group members felt about their performance within the role of supervisor. Because there is no clear direction in the literature on how to supervise, nobody was sure if they were doing it ‘right’. Because the process is so personally challenging as it stretches the supervisor to their intellectual limit, members of the group started to question whether they were ‘good enough’ to do it or ‘good enough’ at doing it. While the door was always closed and the meeting was between the supervisor and the supervisee nobody else knew what was occurring, and hence no judgement could be made. The supervisor simply had to meet the expectations of the supervisee. As soon as a third party was in the room, many of the insecurities and anxieties held by the supervisor came to the surface and the supervisors felt a combination of being revealed, having insecurities voiced, and hence feeling exposed. In addition, though, there was recognition of a positive benefit being achieved from the third party presence, if only heightened self-awareness in the following discussions, through the complementary expertise that others can offer to help reduce anxiety.

At the collaborative group meeting after the observation process, conversation centred on these feelings. One person shared that they had never really questioned whether or not they could
supervise before, they had just naively, or arrogantly, assumed that they would be able to do it. Now they were starting to question whether they could.

The meeting became subdued as the group reflected on their own personal insecurities. Perhaps, it was proffered, this is why nobody writes about going through the supervision process – because it is too personal? Perhaps, went the discussion, the group too would not write about the supervision process because it was too personal. Would they want to share these feelings with the ‘Academe’? Maybe, just maybe, they were right. Maybe they weren’t good enough to be doing it. Much like many doctoral students often question their ability to complete their thesis, the group started to doubt both their ability to supervise to completion, and their ability to complete the research – whatever completion looked like at that point in time. Interestingly, the group never met again in that format after that meeting.

Reflecting the student’s doctoral process

Now, we can reflect that this point, which the group reached in their enquiry directly reflects the doctoral journey of their students. Now, it is clear that the group had reached the base point value judgement on which everything else was neatly balanced, which is what happens to almost every practice-based doctoral student as part of the doctoral process. The nature of practice-based doctoral enquiry is that the student researches their own practice through asking questions, delving deeper and deeper until they find an answer that allows them to conceptualise their practice base in a manner that can contribute to the practice of others. This is what the group had done. They had questioned their notion of the practice of their supervision down to the core, and right in the core they had found themselves – the supervising practitioners.

Whether it was actually ‘themselves’ or a practice imbued within their self was unclear, and to a degree it may have differed between the individuals involved and how they identified themselves as ‘supervisors’. Whether as a practice stemming from supervisor’s identity or a reflection of their identity itself, supervision was about them, the supervisor, and how they guided, related to, supported and questioned their supervisees.

At the core then emerged the question of what made anyone think they were good enough to do it to a level that would allow their supervisee to gain the ultimate qualification of doctorate? Or does the supervisee gain their doctorate in spite of their supervisor?

One of the points that was discussed in the collaborative meetings was the issue of students crying during supervisions. That point when the supervisor challenges something that is so fundamental to the supervisee that they stop and suddenly question something that they have relied upon possibly for their whole working life. And in questioning it, they suddenly doubt it; and in doubting it, the world suddenly seems like a very unsafe place and they start to question every decision they have made based on that assumption that now may not be true. This realisation that there are no absolute rights, truths or givens in the world is part of the doctoral development process for practice-based researchers.

Now that the group have seen their first supervisees complete, they can see that they have all come to terms with that realisation; and it is the ability to make sense of the world knowing this that is what makes them doctoral. Their enquiry into their own practice had revealed the same pattern; a point where they questioned their supervision practice, realised that they may not be ‘right’; questioned the value they were adding and the conversations they had had in previous tutorials; and worried about whether they were helping the students find the right doctoral path. This challenged their core as supervisors and the weight of responsibility within the supervision process became
increasingly evident. While it is the student’s thesis and doctorate, the awareness of the burden of the role of the supervisor became heightened.

Taking the learning forwards: abandoning the literature review

A sub-group of the initial collaborative group continued to meet informally to reflect on their completing supervisees in the year that followed the final formal meeting of the group. One of the points they reflected on was how they had a much better understanding of the doctoral process then than they did when they completed their own doctorates.

It did not matter, for example, that the supervisees hadn’t read every single paper written on their subject area; the reason they started out trying to was to reach the point where they realise that there is no ‘given’, and hence they have to create their own conceptualisation of the world they are researching, from understanding their own epistemology and ontology. And it is this that is their conceptual framework within a practice setting. The process of selecting what to read says as much about the researcher and their conceptualisation as the literature itself does.

How will the group take this learning forwards? No longer will they talk about a ‘literature review’ as this implies a masters level type review of what other people are saying in the field rather than being embedded in the study or reflecting the thesis. While such a map of the territory is necessary; it is not sufficient. What matters is what the map of the territory says to them, and why. Which areas of the map are highlighted and what does this say both about the map and those who are presenting it?

In terms of the collaborative research project, the group did not find any ‘useful’ literature on the development of supervisory skills. There are resources to help you administer and navigate the process, but the actual development of the process itself was found to be an area lacking in the literature. This may, as noted earlier, be to do with the highly personal nature of this development process which, the group concluded, cannot be ‘off-the-shelf’.

Developing the thesis: conclusions of the collaborative group

As the first supervisees approached completion, the notion of their thesis became increasingly important. One colleague was asking ‘what is the last line of your submission going to be?’ This was a very good question, and one he asked his students to answer regularly, making them write it down, and reflecting on how it changes as their doctorate progresses. Since then, it has developed into the notion of being able to ‘tweet’ your thesis.

Most practice-based doctoral students set out with a question and how they think they will answer it. Quite early on, they generally find they were perhaps asking the wrong question, and spend quite a bit of time refining exactly what their question might be. Next they start to realise that there is no perfect way in which it can be answered so they need to make decisions as to which areas they are prepared to compromise on. Finally they realise that they haven’t managed to answer their question at all, but actually, they have found out something else quite interesting, and that in itself is a contribution to practice. That, and the journey to that point, is their thesis.

This process was mirrored by the collaborative group. First they thought they would agree a question on the process of supervision and couldn’t. Then they each proceeded with their own questions and struggled with methodologies (group discussions, writing reflections, observations) to help them answer their questions. Then they realised that their question wasn’t about supervision, it was about themselves and how they attended to their own practice. Then they had to recover
from that shock and see if this actually made any contribution to practice – and it does. The reason there is no literature around progressing through the actual supervision process itself is because it is not a process that can be documented, generalised, rehearsed or ‘taught’. Indeed, it probably cannot be perfected either. Supervision is about you – the supervisor – and how you support and guide your supervisees on their doctoral journey, and you are no more than a tour guide. You cannot ensure they reach the destination you or they want them to reach; you cannot ensure the journey is comfortable; nor can you dictate how long the journey will take, what path it will follow, or whether they choose to step off. All you can do as the supervisor is help them make sense of their reflection when they stare into the depths of the whirlpools they encounter on their way.

Each person will supervise differently. Is anyone good enough to do it? Let’s leave that up to the supervisees to decide – it is not our judgement to make, only a gift we can offer.

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www.first.edu.au. This project started approximately 10 years ago with a core group of 4 members that now has over 40 member universities, including some international. Their recent ALTC funded development has resulted in additional material being added to the fIRST website www.first.edu.au


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