



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

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3 SUPERVISOR REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPING DOCTORALNESS IN PRACTICE-BASED DOCTORAL  
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9 **Abstract**

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

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28 The 2008 Australian government reviews (Bradley; House of Representatives Standing Committee  
29 on Industry, Science and Innovation; and Cutler) and subsequent policy documents on Higher  
30 Education (Australian Government, 2009 & 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) highlight both  
31 the need for an increase in the number of research students and the need for further development  
32 of the future academic workforce. The Vision for 2020 promulgated in the Bradley Review  
33 specifically calls for 'the education, training and development of world-class researchers across a  
34 wide range of intellectual disciplines' (p6), while noting that the number of people completing higher  
35 degrees by research has grown only 'modestly' in the last five years and the 'stock of people with  
36 higher degrees by research needs to increase to replace the large group of ageing academics and to  
37 expand Australia's research and innovation workforce' (p11). To help support this workforce  
38 expansion, the government has budgeted a fourfold increase in the 2009-10 funding level for 2010-  
39 11 to develop sustainable research excellence in addition to introducing funding for collaborative  
40 research networks (TAHES, 2009: 25).  
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44 New and emerging research areas have specific needs as they lack a critical mass within a community  
45 of practice by the nature of their comparative newness and emergence as disciplines offered at  
46 research degree level within universities. The research areas included in this category tend to have  
47 evolved from practice-based professions and associated professionally oriented higher education  
48 degrees, such as in Business and Management, Performing and Creative Arts, Nursing and Allied  
49 Health Professions, and the practice rather than more theoretically focussed areas of Education (e.g.  
50 teaching). Within these emerging research areas, the academic communities have developed from a  
51 practitioner and professional base, rather than through a more traditional academic career route,  
52 and the potential supervisors are themselves developing their own academic and research identities  
53 alongside their professional identities (LaRocco and Burns, 2006). The nature of the research  
54 students tends to be somewhat different to those in the more traditional academic disciplines. For  
55 example, a higher proportion tend to be part-time, and returning to research studies after  
56 establishing their professional careers. As a consequence, the student population that the  
57 supervisors are working with can be more diverse in their academic preparation. Their pathways into  
58 research degree studies and expectations of the research degree experience and outcomes are  
59 different from those of the traditional full-time PhD student cohort who have proceeded directly  
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3 from an honours degree into a research degree. Furthermore, academics in these emerging research  
4 areas need to negotiate a number of challenges that are more pronounced than in other more  
5 traditional disciplines (Kogan, 2002), such as workloads that include responsibilities for large  
6 undergraduate programs and comparatively high class teaching loads, a less intensive immediate  
7 research environment because a lesser proportion of colleagues are likely to be highly research  
8 active. Furthermore, for those who are comparatively new to the university environment, there is  
9 often a lack of confidence in academic ability in comparison to professional competence. As such,  
10 the difficulties that all supervisors face in developing their supervisory skills are exaggerated within  
11 this community.  
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15 Prior to the most recent fIRST project (fIRST, 2010), Christine Bruce led an ALTC fellowship team in  
16 2008/9 to look at developing pedagogy of supervision in the technology disciplines, and while this  
17 was a discipline-focussed study, many of the findings are likely to be generic. For example, the need  
18 to create opportunities for supervisory conversations around pedagogy to promote communication  
19 about supervision as a teaching and learning practice, and the need to create development  
20 opportunities for less experienced supervisors (Bruce, 2009). In another ALTC funded project, the  
21 cross-cultural context project, they found that the cross-cultural context for international students  
22 magnified the intensity and complexity of the supervisory arrangement and developed a range of  
23 resources, including a 'readiness' measure, for universities to draw on prior to engaging in  
24 supervising international students(Homewood et al, 2010).  
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27 Essentially, the purpose of the research degree supervisor is to support the research degree  
28 candidate in the completion of their research degree. The Research Graduate Skills Project  
29 acknowledges the role of the supervisor in the development of research graduate capability  
30 (Cumming and Kiley, 2009). Recent research at USQ found that doctoral students' and supervisors'  
31 views differed on the students' needs for connectedness, their needs for learning support, and their  
32 preferred use of communication media during their studies (Erwee and Albion, 2010). One way of  
33 addressing this discrepancy trialled at USQ was the development of online Communities of Practice –  
34 a development that is continuing beyond the scope of the study as it appears to be presenting a  
35 benefit.  
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### 38 **The need for and value of new supervisors being supported**

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40 The assumption that established the collaborative research project outlined in this paper was that  
41 there was a need for and a value in our being supported as a group of new supervisors. As there  
42 were no experienced supervisors within our immediate group, we set about providing this support  
43 collaboratively. The mandatory institutional supervisory training provision covered the legal and  
44 administrative procedures relating to research degrees only. Note, however, we did each have an  
45 experienced supervisor on the teams of our students, but these were located in other faculties  
46 within the university, hence our starting point of supporting each other. Moreover, these  
47 experienced supervisors typically had gained their experience by supervising PhD rather than  
48 professional doctorate students. Carr et al (2010) suggest that the demands of praxis that the latter  
49 involves requires new pedagogical approaches to be developed - accentuating the value of  
50 collaborative learning in this new context. Our experience does not seem to be unique.  
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54 Amundsen and McAlpine (2009) found that there is minimal systematic development preparation  
55 for supervision, which Austin (2002) found is reflected in the students' experience. Lee (2008) notes  
56 that the literature about doctoral supervision has concentrated on describing the functions that  
57 must be carried out rather than developing a conceptual approach towards research supervision.  
58 She suggests that, in addition to the functional, there is the need for the enculturation, critical  
59 thinking, emancipation and development of quality relationships to be included.  
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3 Lee (2008) also notes that tensions arise for new supervisors in developing their professional and  
4 supervisory identities. If this early supervisory experience also occurs pre-tenure, or while on some  
5 form of probationary contract, the supervisor has the additional pressures of being isolated,  
6 experiencing high stress and a lack of role definition (Schrodt et al, 2003), with a compounding  
7 impact on their supervisory action. Yet the pressure to engage in supervision is strong for career  
8 focussed individuals. Promotion channels can be relatively limited in some spheres without a  
9 number of doctoral supervisions to completion.  
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12 Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) note that the role of the supervisor has changed over time as doctoral  
13 studies have developed and expanded, to the point that supervision can be considered a pedagogic  
14 method, and the Swedish government now requires some postgraduate supervision training be  
15 completed before a doctoral supervision team is constituted. They explored the process of  
16 supervision on supervision, that is, supervisors being supervised in their supervision practice, and  
17 conclude that the shift from theory to practice in supervision does not happen quickly from reading  
18 a book, but is developed over time. This suggests that a quick-fix, pre-supervision course is not  
19 sufficient for new supervisors, but rather they need some on-going support mechanisms that they  
20 can return to over time. Such mandatory intervention is not currently enforced by the Australian  
21 government, although some Higher Education providers do have some form of compulsory training  
22 for new supervisors. It was an on-going support mechanism that we attempted to achieve in our  
23 own support network that is the focus of this paper. While we may be moving towards a recognition  
24 that there is a pedagogy of doctoral supervision, this is under-theorised and kept in a 'secret  
25 garden'.  
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29 While the Swedish study concentrated on the nature of the development of the supervisor, Halse  
30 and Malfroy (2010) focussed their attention on the facets of professional work that doctoral  
31 supervision entails. They suggest that, in preparing for the work of doctoral supervision, academics  
32 need to consider the learning alliance, habits of mind, scholarly expertise, *techné* and contextual  
33 expertise. Such professionalisation opens the door to the competence of the supervision being  
34 distributed amongst different members of the supervisory team rather than each member being  
35 competent in every field. This somewhat lessens the burden for the new supervisor, but increases  
36 the tensions that may arise for them when working with more experienced colleagues whose  
37 competence lies in a different area. Again this was something that this current study covered. All  
38 the collaborative researchers were qualified teachers who considered themselves education  
39 professionals prior to joining the Academe. The teams which were constituted to supervise the  
40 students placed them in the principal supervisor role, but added experienced supervisors from other  
41 faculties as second supervisors to help oversee the supervision process. This, in itself, was identified  
42 as an area in which new supervisors need support and guidance, particularly in managing the various  
43 feedback and relationship processes (Lawson, Hein and Stewart, 2010). An added difficulty is that  
44 there is no measure or template of supervisory excellence (Nulty, Kiley and Meyers, 2009), and  
45 hence it is unclear what the new supervisor is aiming to achieve with regard to supervisory  
46 competence.  
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51 Essentially new supervisors are influenced by two factors when approaching supervision: their  
52 conceptualisation of research supervision, and their own experience as a doctoral student (Lees,  
53 2008). While reflecting on their own experiences may be a source of development, they cannot  
54 change the experience that they themselves had. Their conceptualisation of supervision, on the  
55 other hand, is something that can be developed. Smith (2001) warns of the danger of representing  
56 such a conceptualisation within an administrative frame of resolvable rational problems, such as the  
57 training provided by the institution where the research was conducted, when the reality is more one  
58 of developing a complex and chaotic pedagogy (Grant, 2003).  
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3 In terms of alternative approaches to supervisor development, the use of stories (McCormack, 2009)  
4 and critical self-reflection over a period of time have been found to help supervisors develop a more  
5 theorised and considered rationale to supervision than a short course intervention might offer  
6 (Manathunga et al, 2010), as have communities of practice and peer learning experiences (Strackle,  
7 2010). Hence the focus of this paper was a collaborative research project developed amongst a  
8 group of new supervisors who were wanting to explore and develop their own practice.  
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11 What transpired, and is represented in the remainder of this paper, was that the supervisors  
12 themselves went through a process similar to that of the doctoral development of the students.  
13 Firstly, as the research progressed, a number of the participants 'dropped out' of the process, as is  
14 often the case with PhD students. Secondly, the research question was, to a degree, ill-defined at  
15 the start. Thirdly, the methodology was interpreted differently by different members of the group  
16 and hence adapted to fit needs and individual requirements. The story is outlined below....  
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### 18 **Finding the research question: an effort to reach agreement**

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21 As this project started as a collaborative research project, with a small group of supervisors all  
22 experiencing a similar cycle of activities, it would be fair to say that most of the participants entered  
23 into the process with an assumption that there would be some consensus, similarities, and a shared  
24 agenda between the members of the group. As early as the first meeting, this proved not to be the  
25 case. In fact, on the first day that the group met, they could not even agree what their research  
26 question was. For one, it was to do with the supervisory process and how we supervise in terms of  
27 processes; for another it was about how we supervise personally, and what it means to us; for  
28 another it was about creating the space in which students learn through the supervision process; or  
29 it was about managing the supervisory relationship; or it was about achieving an outcome. The  
30 group quickly realised that they did not have a shared understanding of what supervision was, never  
31 mind the supervision process itself, and hence discussion shifted to the purpose of supervision.  
32 Going back to the roots of defining the key terms is something that every doctoral student has to do  
33 at some point, at least once, and hence it should not have surprised us that we spent a whole day  
34 getting to this point.  
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38 In trying to express ourselves, metaphors became a useful tool at this point. One saw supervision  
39 like a string of pearls; with the supervisor helping the student thread the pearls together. Other  
40 metaphors related to chains and links; or journeys and travellers. The metaphors were all very  
41 positive. At a supervision session shortly afterwards, one of the group asked their student for a  
42 metaphor on the process and they offered that they come to tutorials like a lump of cheese, and  
43 they leave having been firmly grated! While this was the source of some hilarity in the group at the  
44 time, it is an interesting point to reflect on. The supervisor may intend the supervision process to be  
45 one thing; the student may find it something completely different, supporting Erwee and Albion's  
46 (2010) findings. And in the same way that the group could not reach agreement on what their  
47 research question was, so too the student might find that the supervision is disagreeable.  
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51 After much discussion, and in true academic fashion, the group could not reach agreement on their  
52 question. However, did this matter? In the same way that many doctoral students amend their  
53 question as their research progresses, so the group decided to continue without an agreed question;  
54 with each person taking forwards their own question within the group discussion.  
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### 57 **Towards a methodology: answering multiple questions simultaneously**

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59 The group had started this process as a collaborative research project and the commitment to the  
60 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

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3 this meant methodologically, the group was not sure. Initially they met for periods of time to share,  
4 discuss and question each other with regard to the notion of 'supervision'. While these meetings  
5 were always thought provoking and interesting, they tended to lead to more questions than  
6 answers. Again, this is something that is often reflected in the student's experience of supervision  
7 meetings.  
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10 In an effort to achieve some sort of outcome that could be recorded, the group decided to  
11 individually reflect on and scribe something (written or drawn) about the 'notion of supervision' and  
12 then come back and share this with the group. The outcome focussed members of the group felt this  
13 would help lead to a productive outcome that could somehow be 'written-up'. In the same way that  
14 the doctoral students focus on writing their chapters, some of the group were continually conscious  
15 of the need to produce a 'publishable paper' from their research activity. Their focus on a 'scribed'  
16 input resulting in a workable outcome dominated and, of course, this turned out not to be the case.  
17 In much the same way that the first draft of thesis chapters often do not hang together, the  
18 'scribbles' lacked a coherent thread. One person wrote bullet points; another wrote a personal  
19 reflection; another tabulated how they differed between students; and yet another found an article  
20 that spoke to them about the notion of supervision. It was difficult to find any points of direct  
21 comparison between the offerings as their form differed so greatly. However, they did lead to  
22 further interesting discussions on how difficult it was to pin down this notion of supervision. The  
23 personal nature of the supervision process started to rise in prominence at this point, and this then  
24 became central to the research itself with the next attempt at collaborative iteration.  
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### 29 **Finding the core: the personal nature of supervision**

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31 Having discussed how their notions of supervision varied so greatly, the idea of observing each other  
32 in supervision meetings arose as the next attempt at a common methodology. It was agreed that  
33 observations would occur in pairs, and that they would only occur with the advance informed  
34 consent of the supervisee. The collaborative researchers paired up, and the observation process  
35 took place.  
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38 The observations served to raise self-awareness in the supervisors in a manner that had not been  
39 anticipated. While all the students had supervisory teams, so there was often more than one  
40 supervisor in the room, having someone formally observing rather than participating left the  
41 supervisors being acutely conscious of their behaviour as supervisors, and questioning themselves  
42 somewhat as they went through the meetings. This heightened self-awareness was discussed at the  
43 next group meeting and highlighted the uncertainty, and hence for some the insecurity, that the  
44 group members felt about their performance within the role of supervisor. Because there is no clear  
45 direction in the literature on how to supervise, nobody was sure if they were doing it 'right'.  
46 Because the process is so personally challenging as it stretches the supervisor to their intellectual  
47 limit, members of the group started to question whether they were 'good enough' to do it or 'good  
48 enough' at doing it. While the door was always closed and the meeting was between the supervisor  
49 and the supervisee nobody else knew what was occurring, and hence no judgement could be made.  
50 The supervisor simply had to meet the expectations of the supervisee. As soon as a third party was  
51 in the room, many of the insecurities and anxieties held by the supervisor came to the surface and  
52 the supervisors felt a combination of being revealed, having insecurities voiced, and hence feeling  
53 exposed. In addition, though, there was recognition of a positive benefit being achieved from the  
54 third party presence, if only heightened self-awareness in the following discussions, through the  
55 complementary expertise that others can offer to help reduce anxiety.  
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59 At the collaborative group meeting after the observation process, conversation centred on these  
60 feelings. One person shared that they had never really questioned whether or not they could



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3 supervise before, they had just naively, or arrogantly, assumed that they would be able to do it.  
4 Now they were starting to question whether they could.  
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7 The meeting became subdued as the group reflected on their own personal insecurities. Perhaps, it  
8 was proffered, this is why nobody writes about going through the supervision process – because it is  
9 too personal? Perhaps, went the discussion, the group too would not write about the supervision  
10 process because it was too personal. Would they want to share these feelings with the ‘Academe’?  
11 Maybe, just maybe, they were right. Maybe they weren’t good enough to be doing it. Much like  
12 many doctoral students often question their ability to complete their thesis, the group started to  
13 doubt both their ability to supervise to completion, and their ability to complete the research –  
14 whatever completion looked like at that point in time. Interestingly, the group never met again in  
15 that format after that meeting.  
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### 18 **Reflecting the student’s doctoral process**

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20 Now, we can reflect that this point, which the group reached in their enquiry directly reflects the  
21 doctoral journey of their students. Now, it is clear that the group had reached the base point value  
22 judgement on which everything else was neatly balanced, which is what happens to almost every  
23 practice-based doctoral student as part of the doctoral process. The nature of practice-based  
24 doctoral enquiry is that the student researches their own practice through asking questions, delving  
25 deeper and deeper until they find an answer that allows them to conceptualise their practice base in  
26 a manner that can contribute to the practice of others. This is what the group had done. They had  
27 questioned their notion of the practice of their supervision down to the core, and right in the core  
28 they had found themselves – the supervising practitioners.  
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32 Whether it was actually ‘themselves’ or a practice imbued within their self was unclear, and to a  
33 degree it may have differed between the individuals involved and how they identified themselves as  
34 ‘supervisors’. Whether as a practice stemming from supervisor’s identity or a reflection of their  
35 identity itself, supervision was about them, the supervisor, and how they guided, related to,  
36 supported and questioned their supervisees.  
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39 At the core then emerged the question of what made anyone think they were good enough to do it  
40 to a level that would allow their supervisee to gain the ultimate qualification of doctorate? Or does  
41 the supervisee gain their doctorate in spite of their supervisor?  
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44 One of the points that was discussed in the collaborative meetings was the issue of students crying  
45 during supervisions. That point when the supervisor challenges something that is so fundamental to  
46 the supervisee that they stop and suddenly question something that they have relied upon possibly  
47 for their whole working life. And in questioning it, they suddenly doubt it; and in doubting it, the  
48 world suddenly seems like a very unsafe place and they start to question every decision they have  
49 made based on that assumption that now may not be true. This realisation that there are no  
50 absolute rights, truths or givens in the world is part of the doctoral development process for  
51 practice-based researchers.  
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54 Now that the group have seen their first supervisees complete, they can see that they have all come  
55 to terms with that realisation; and it is the ability to make sense of the world knowing this that is  
56 what makes them doctoral. Their enquiry into their own practice had revealed the same pattern; a  
57 point where they questioned their supervision practice, realised that they may not be ‘right’;  
58 questioned the value they were adding and the conversations they had had in previous tutorials; and  
59 worried about whether they were helping the students find the right doctoral path. This challenged  
60 their core as supervisors and the weight of responsibility within the supervision process became

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3 increasingly evident. While it is the student's thesis and doctorate, the awareness of the burden of  
4 the role of the supervisor became heightened.  
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### 7 **Taking the learning forwards: abandoning the literature review**

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9 A sub-group of the initial collaborative group continued to meet informally to reflect on their  
10 completing supervisees in the year that followed the final formal meeting of the group. One of the  
11 points they reflected on was how they had a much better understanding of the doctoral process  
12 then than they did when they completed their own doctorates.  
13

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15 It did not matter, for example, that the supervisees hadn't read every single paper written on their  
16 subject area; the reason they started out trying to was to reach the point where they realise that  
17 there is no 'given', and hence they have to create their own conceptualisation of the world they are  
18 researching, from understanding their own epistemology and ontology. And it is this that is their  
19 conceptual framework within a practice setting. The process of selecting what to read says as much  
20 about the researcher and their conceptualisation as the literature itself does.  
21

22  
23 How will the group take this learning forwards? No longer will they talk about a 'literature review'  
24 as this implies a masters level type review of what other people are saying in the field rather than  
25 being embedded in the study or reflecting the thesis. While such a map of the territory is necessary;  
26 it is not sufficient. What matters is what the map of the territory says to them, and why. Which  
27 areas of the map are highlighted and what does this say both about the map and those who are  
28 presenting it?  
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30  
31 In terms of the collaborative research project, the group did not find any 'useful' literature on the  
32 development of supervisory skills. There are resources to help you administer and navigate the  
33 process, but the actual development of the process itself was found to be an area lacking in the  
34 literature. This may, as noted earlier, be to do with the highly personal nature of this development  
35 process which, the group concluded, cannot be 'off-the-shelf'.  
36

### 37 **Developing the thesis: conclusions of the collaborative group**

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39 As the first supervisees approached completion, the notion of their thesis became increasingly  
40 important. One colleague was asking 'what is the last line of your submission going to be?' This was  
41 a very good question, and one he asked his students to answer regularly, making them write it  
42 down, and reflecting on how it changes as their doctorate progresses. Since then, it has developed  
43 into the notion of being able to 'tweet' your thesis.  
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46  
47 Most practice-based doctoral students set out with a question and how they think they will answer  
48 it. Quite early on, they generally find they were perhaps asking the wrong question, and spend quite  
49 a bit of time refining exactly what their question might be. Next they start to realise that there is no  
50 perfect way in which it can be answered so they need to make decisions as to which areas they are  
51 prepared to compromise on. Finally they realise that they haven't managed to answer their  
52 question at all, but actually, they have found out something else quite interesting, and that in itself is  
53 a contribution to practice. That, and the journey to that point, is their thesis.  
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56  
57 This process was mirrored by the collaborative group. First they thought they would agree a  
58 question on the process of supervision and couldn't. Then they each proceeded with their own  
59 questions and struggled with methodologies (group discussions, writing reflections, observations) to  
60 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



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3 from that shock and see if this actually made any contribution to practice – and it does. The reason  
4 there is no literature around progressing through the actual supervision process itself is because it is  
5 not a process that can be documented, generalised, rehearsed or ‘taught’. Indeed, it probably  
6 cannot be perfected either. Supervision is about you – the supervisor – and how you support and  
7 guide your supervisees on their doctoral journey, and you are no more than a tour guide. You  
8 cannot ensure they reach the destination you or they want them to reach; you cannot ensure the  
9 journey is comfortable; nor can you dictate how long the journey will take, what path it will follow,  
10 or whether they choose to step off. All you can do as the supervisor is help them make sense of  
11 their reflection when they stare into the depths of the whirlpools they encounter on their way.  
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15 Each person will supervise differently. Is anyone good enough to do it? Let’s leave that up to the  
16 supervisees to decide – it is not our judgement to make, only a gift we can offer.  
17

### 18 **Acknowledgements**

19  
20 Thank you to the group of supervisors who participated in this collaborative experience. They shall  
21 remain anonymous but know who they are. Without them, this story could not be shared and the  
22 learning could not be shared. We are indebted to them.  
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