The role of trust in the student-supervisor relationship: developing authority and authorship in doctoral candidates.

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INTRODUCTION

Self-reported barriers to progress in academic writing can have a range of origins including cognitive foundations, and importantly also in attitudinal, emotional, or motivational roots (Cotterall, 2013; Jairam and Kahl, 2012; Wellington, 2012; Kearns *et al*, 2007). The interpersonal nature of progression in writing in an academic setting is also to be considered (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004), and indeed much of the doctoral experience involves 'informal learning' which is derived from interpersonal interactions in the workplace. PhD students expect emotional, as well as technical and intellectual support from their supervisor, and the need to establish good rapport with an academic supervisor has been noted (Jairam and Kahl, 2012).

The context and working relationships of the student can be understood as key influencers of writing performance viewing academic writing as a socially-situated practice (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Good working relationships play a critical role in workplace learning and the emotional dimension is significant (Eraut, 2004). A great deal of workplace learning and development requires the learner to engage in new challenges, and the confidence to accept challenging tasks is dependent on how well supported learners feel in their endeavour, and the quality of the feedback they receive on their achievements (Eraut, *et al*., 2000; 2004). The PhD is an immersion for doctoral candidates, into unknown territory, their successful passage through determined by the relationships that provide points of contact into the wider organisation. Trust as in intra-organisational phenomenon can be defined as a willingness to accept uncertainly and make oneself vulnerable in the face of insecurity (Hope-Hailey *et al*., 2012), and is implicated in effective workplace learning (Hughes, 2004). The presence or absence of trust in an organisation stems from the behaviours of direct managers (Hope-Hailey et al., 2012).

Students who are able share with others their emotional and motivational barriers to writing (as well as the cognitive) are able to better develop their approach to writing (Wellington, 2010) and one-to-one or group coaching activities can provide a forum for reflection and open discussion of difficulties in writing the PhD thesis in the event that the student-supervisor relationship cannot. A thesis writer is to some extent enabled or disabled by the trust present in their relationship with their supervisor, and that extends beyond technical competence in their research field. Demonstrating trust behaviours in the form of benevolence, integrity, and predictability, also factor (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006).

Positioning doctoral students in the context of the whole organisation, this study furthers understanding of thesis writing process. Firstly it demonstrates a role for trust development in building an effective student-supervisor relationship that enables development of an authoritative writing voice in the doctoral candidate. Secondly, it demonstrates that an off-line mentoring relationship can be successful in helping repair a relationship with the doctoral supervisor through engaging the student in elements of relationship coaching pertinent to their personal writing barriers.

APPROACH

This study has utilised a solutions-focused approach to overcoming barriers to thesis completion collated *via* thematic analysis of the issues and contributing factors described by 10 'stumped' (<u>st</u>ressfully <u>u</u>nable to <u>m</u>ake <u>p</u>rogress) thesis writers during 1:1 coaching sessions with the author (4h per student = 40h over 8 weeks). Additionally, following a 4-month Thesis Mentoring programme, questionnaire data (n=56) and interview data (n=14) were analysed using a trust behaviours framework.

OUTCOMES

Many of the barriers to thesis writing productivity were found to be contextual, and were inextricable from the areas of trust development relationship with the supervisor. Factors that contributed to the students feeling unable to make progress in completing the PhD thesis are grouped into three broad areas and discussed below.

Unclear expectations and lack of defined goals
Students reported being unaware of multiple types of expectation placed upon them. In many cases, in line with Hyatt's (2005) work, a number of unclear expectations were defined by open dialogue with the PhD supervisor, and students reported that having taken control of the dialogue was empowering. The presence, and sensitivity of supervisor feedback was critical in developing the students' ability, confidence, and trust in the supervisor.

Lack of confidence
Self-sabotaging behaviours stemming from a 'high stakes' activity (Martin *et al*, 2003) and associated low confidence (Kearns *et al*, 2008) were apparent. Interestingly it was clear that students were suffering not only from self-sabotage, but also from feeling powerless to to prevent 'sabotage' by others – usually the supervisor. Trust, and confidence were strongly influenced by supervisor behaviours and taking steps to manage the habits, routines, personal values and priorities of the supervisor was effective in defining a predictable working relationship.

Isolation in the academic environment
Physical isolation was a common barrier with students choosing to 'keep away' from the research environment to avoid contact with an untrusted supervisor. This often led to intellectual isolation, being cut off from a community of practice in which to test ideas and discuss progress (Wenger, 1998). In some cases, supervisor, or department policy had determined the students' physical isolation during writing up time, neglecting to consider the social component of progress (Aitchison & Lee, 2006) as a function of workplace learning (Eraut, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

This study used a coaching approach to investigate barriers to thesis completion, taking a holistic view of the student in the context of their position in the organisation. In general students were easily able to find ways to overcome their writing barriers when given the opportunity to reflect and discuss, and once a student had been able to solve a problem, they gained confidence. Many of the barriers to productivity were inextricable from the quality of the relationship with the supervisor. Encouragingly, even students who had reported a total breakdown in communication with their supervisor found it possible to renegotiate a working relationship.

The outcomes of this work will be useful to supervisors and to universities in defining ways to re-invigorate PhD progress, and this study provides practical

recommendations for designing effective learning and development services for research staff and students across the HE sector.

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