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Title Changing Supervisory Practices - a case for transformative inquiry.

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A community of practice around research supervision was instigated in a post-92 UK University in 2015 as professional development initiative to support supervisors in a context of quickly growing doctoral cohorts. Accredited by SEDA, the adoption of a community of practice model of professional learning and alignment with individual practice-led inquiries can be positioned as innovative. Our evaluation of the first two years of this programme is situated in recognition that both ‘community of practice’ and ‘practice-led inquiry’ are contested terms in educational and organisational literature. Drawing on both the official data compiled for SEDA along with individual stories from participants, this case study examines the impact of this dialogic approach to developing an academic practice. In light of perceived changes in practice, the case study is also posited as an example of transformative inquiry and contributes to worldwide discussion on the evaluation of supervisory practices.

Paper

Research supervision is an academic practice that has traditionally been a private (Manatunga, 2005). Emerging HE agendas, specifically completions data requirements (Booth and Satchell, 1995), have brought research supervision into the limelight of scrutiny. Research supervision has therefore increasingly become a focus for staff development (for example Taylor 2016).

In parallel to early focus on research candidature attrition, research supervisors began to make transparent their research supervision practices by publishing their own research supervision experience as guides/illuminators of the practice (for example Phillips and Pugh, 1987; Salmon, 1992). These initiatives aligned with Stenhouse’s (1981) notion of Practitioner Inquiry. In the broader professional practice agenda these initiatives can be seen as part of the ‘practice turn’ (Schatzki, Cetina and von Savigny, 2001). Reflective practice features strongly in both practitioner inquiry and the practice turn, and is recognised as a threshold element of professional practice (Schon, 1983). In HE agendas, encouraging practitioner inquiry mirrors recent developments that encourage supervisors to audit their own practice – for example the questionnaire approaches of Lee (2012) and Taylor (2015). Collective reflection is seen as benefiting both individual practitioners as well as building up the organisational culture (Elkjaer, 2004).

This paper discusses one particular professional development model that is based in community of practice and invites each practitioner to undertake practice-led inquiry to share with the community. In 2015 a post-92 UK University instigated a professional development initiative to support supervisors in a context of quickly growing numbers of postgraduate research students. Gaining SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association) accreditation ensured benchmarking with sector-wide standards and provided national

recognition. In line with the community of practice ethos, the assessment is participatory and draws on a professional dialogue models (Pilkington, 2013).

Our evaluation of the first two years of this programme is situated in recognition that both 'community of practice' and 'practice-led inquiry' are contested terms in educational and organisational literature (for example, Drake & Heath, 2011, Kerno Jr 2008, Roberts 2006). Reflecting upon the rolling out this initiative enables us to examine and contribute to these critical debates. What in our experience are the consequences of taking the reflexivity itself from a private practice to a communal one for professional development? How can the reflective personal and individual focus be maintained in a communal dialogic process?

Sufficient time and participants have passed through this program to begin to examine the impact of this initiative on academic staff's research supervision practices. One source of data is the programme review required by SEDA that collates quantitative data alongside the elicitation of participant responses to the stated objectives of the programme. Another source of data are individual stories from participants about the way in which this intervention impacted on their practice collected informally through on-going community participation, focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Our evaluation of the community of practice model for supervisor development, and attempts to discern and evidence its impact, also engages us with current debates on how research supervision practices should or could be evaluated. While the traditional training model for professional development of structured learning and then accreditation provides a baseline or threshold measure, other methods for evidencing good practice are disputed. Mewburn et al's (2014) analysis of supervisors' untruthful approaches to student monitoring processes demonstrates that the official bureaucratic record-processes in doctoral education may not be accurate for a number of reasons. This then raises doubts as to their applicability as sources for evaluating supervisor practices and supervisor development programmes. In mapping the landscape of awards for excellence in doctoral education in the UK and Australia, Taylor and McCulloch (2017) are uncovering a diversity of practice as well as a general sense of unease in relation to criteria and evidence for supervisory excellence. The University of Adelaide has even evolved a sophisticated algorithmic approach that scores supervisors against a range of criteria to produce gradings and ranking of supervisors in a bespoke *Supervisor Classification and Reporting System* (Russell et al 2017), somewhat forebodingly known by the abbreviated name 'The System'.

In reflecting on our own practitioner research approach to evaluating the first two years of this professional development programme for supervisors, we argue that through communities of practice and providing on-going opportunities for professional dialogues amongst supervisors, it is possible to provide evidence of changed practice in line with transformative inquiry (Tanaka, Nicholson and Farish, 2012). The challenges of metrics notwithstanding, can a durational approach to fostering communities of practice and transformative inquiry present a way forward for meaningful supervisor development?

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