

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0541

Mon 06 Dec 2021

12:35 - 12:55

'I Never Thought of This Work as Supervision, but it Definitely is!' Becoming Aware of Supervision Work as an Early Career Researcher

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Research Domain: Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

Abstract: Post-doctoral researchers offer support, guidance, and skills development to doctoral learners, yet often do not contextualise this as 'supervision', nor are they recognised or valued for the supervision work they contribute to universities. Yet their contribution is substantial and makes a unique pedagogical contribution to doctoral completion. This paper documents the development of supervisory practices for seven postdoctoral researchers who took part in a Thesis Mentoring programme. Through analysis of the outcomes of their practice, and interview data, this paper documents how their supervisory awareness, information seeking, and practice developed when offered formal opportunities to work 1:1 with doctoral researchers. This paper offers insight into their understanding of their role as a supervisor in enabling doctoral writing. It also demonstrates how early career researchers can develop keen supervisory practices before they take on formal supervision responsibility, and further, documents the value to institutions of offering postdocs formal supervisory practice opportunities.

Paper: Context

Supervision is a complex and uncertain practice and a key influencer of the doctoral experience (Emilsson & Johnsson 2007; Lee 2008; McAlpine *et al.* 2012, Zeegers & Barron, 2012, Halbert, 2015), but how academics 'enter into' the role of supervisor is still somewhat obscured (Taylor, Kiley & Holley, 2021). In today's context for doctoral education, new expanded pedagogies of supervision are required and supervision can be seen as an 'ecology' of multi-player, formal and informal systems (Bengtson, 2016) and agents of the hidden curriculum (Elliot *et al.*, 2020) who each contribute to the academic development, socialisation and wellbeing of doctoral researchers. Post-doctoral researchers, as such agents, offer a wealth of support, guidance, and skills development to doctoral learners, yet often do not contextualise their substantial and skilled work as 'supervision', nor are they often recognised or valued for the supervision work they contribute to universities. This paper argues that given the right opportunities to formalise their development as supervisors, post-docs can be seen as educational assets, in possession of supervisory experience, and of the awareness and skills to supervise well. Having experience of supervision is thought to be critical in

securing an academic career (Akerlind, 2005) and development of an academic identity is developed through being entrusted with academic responsibilities (McAlpine *et al.*, 2013). Emotionally competent leadership, establishing good rapport and paying conscious attention to 'high-quality' relationships has now long been emphasised (Ward & Gardner, 2008; Kiley, 2011; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Additionally, the sector is now responding to calls for doctoral supervisor development to be 'writing-centred' and to tackle the ubiquitous and thorny issue of learning to write as an academic (Guerin *et al.*, 2017; Caley, 2020).

Structures for becoming aware of supervision work as an early career researcher

To encourage experiential, reflective, self-aware, and writing-orientated development of supervisory practices a Thesis Mentoring programme was designed. In parallel this programme aimed to respond to an identified need for enabling conversations around doctoral writing. One-to-one mentoring or coaching (Kearns *et al.*, 2008; Gardiner *et al.* 2012; Godskesen and Kobayashi, 2015) can provide a space for critical reflection on writing difficulties, supporting resolution. The programme pairs doctoral writers who self-identify as 'stuck' with a post-doc trained in mentoring practices. Over a 16-week period they meet to discuss writing habits, progress, barriers, and enablers and the programme offers a space for dialogue about the affective and motivational side of writing.

Research Question

How is supervisory awareness, information seeking, and practice developed through participation in a thesis mentoring programme?

Methodology

This study documents the development of seven postdoctoral researchers, mentors on a Thesis Mentoring programme. Through evaluation of the impact of their practice on doctoral writers, and thematic analysis of end-of-programme interviews, this paper documents eight modes of supervisory practice development, and concurrently their understanding of the attitudinal and affective en/disablers of doctoral writing.

Findings

(1) Postdoc mentors develop skill sets that facilitate the building of trusting learning alliances through defining clear role descriptions and agreeing boundaries and limitations; empathetic listening paying attention to the mentee's experiences and expectations; co-creating solutions to writing blocks.

(2) Postdocs combine cognitive (lists, planning) and emotional/motivational (listening, empathy) strategies to support thesis writers: Encouraging early frequent writing; embedding a sense of drafting and refinement as a continuous process; and by giving feedback that builds confidence as well as competence; and building students' self-awareness and problem-solving skills through a critical reflective dialogue.

(3) Postdocs gain self-awareness and awareness of the skills, practices and tensions of supervision as a 'learned and developed practice', and actively seek information and new ways to learn to supervise. Eight modes of direct and indirect supervisory practice development were identified in the

interview data.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates how postdocs can develop as 'writing focused' supervisors, building partnerships and devising individualised solutions for enabling doctoral writing. In taking a more neutral, near-peer, non-judgmental approach to thesis support they make a contribution to doctoral writing development that supervisors cannot., complementing the supervisory team and enhancing the 'ecology' of multi-player formal and informal systems (Bengtsen, 2016). A formal opportunity to engage in supervision practices related to doctoral writing, can also raise awareness of the complex nature of supervisory practice, and inspire engagement with further self-directed development activities.

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