

Supervisor pedagogy, relationships and challenges

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This research investigated good supervisory practice at the UCL Institute of Education where a wide range of disciplines and approaches intersect. Ten closed and ten open questions were circulated as a survey via Opinio, gaining a response rate of 26%.

Practical issues, such as perceptions of co-supervision, the upgrade, workload and differences between the EdD and PhD, were bound up in personal, informal and formal learning across the lifecourse as well as wider conceptual understandings. Mutual learning as part of a holistic vision of doctoral supervision underpinned many of the comments. The supervisory relationship emerged as in need of continual re-negotiation, with tensions sometimes arising at points of change. Blending friendly relationships with a structured programme in which fostering independence and autonomy emerged as a central issue. This reflected a hankering after a sense of belonging and community which could be located in past and present and future.

Full paper

This presentation is based upon research that investigated good supervisory practice at the UCL Institute of Education which caters for over 700 doctoral students. Education studies is a complex field where a wide range of disciplines intersect with one another (McCulloch and Cowen 2018). Many education doctorates had traditionally been carried out part time by professionals in teaching, administration, NGOs and other agencies. This has continued although an increase in full time students has taken place attracting younger students from across the world and, in recent years, China. The doctorate has expanded as has academic literature on the topic (Taylor et al 2018; Woldegyargis et al 2020).

The paper explores how supervisors develop relationships with their postgraduate research degree students, the challenges they faced, how these were addressed in order to identify key tensions and contradictions. To capture this experience, ten closed and ten open questions

were circulated as a survey via Opinio to all listed supervisors at IOE. A response rate of 26% was achieved – in total supervisors wrote 60,000 words. The questions were informed with a knowledge of supervision at the IOE but also closely related to educational studies and key emerging issues in supervision (ESRC 2021/24 McCulloch and Cowen 2018). The research questions aimed to capture the relationship between the technical aspects of supervision and the cultural and social settings in which supervisors worked and their pedagogical approaches.

Supervisors raised a range of practical issues: perceptions of co-supervision; ambiguity about the nature and purpose of the upgrade; concerns about workload; and differences between the EdD and PhD. Unsurprisingly, there was a general consensus on the need for students to write regularly and set targets but rather more discussion on the level of editorial intervention that was considered appropriate which were related to the perceived needs of disciplinary frameworks, in humanities or social sciences – ‘good writing’ could be interpreted as either a form of cultural capital or an essential facet of academic production. In addition, learning from mistakes and observing principal supervisors were commonly valued although formal learning was underplayed which may a capacity in this area. A wide range of pedagogies were integrated into the lives of educators even if they were not foregrounded.

Each of these issues provided clues to deeper understanding and connected to contrasting motivations, to the life course and to competing conceptual meanings. Personal identities and experiences informed the supervisory relationship. Technical and organisational factors closely overlapped with cultural and social frameworks as well as key conceptual issues (Gallie 1956; McCabe et al 2018). A sense of ‘learning to be’ (Faure 1972) was implicit in the way that supervisors drew upon both their own life experience as well as, more specifically, their experience of supervision as well as a range of pedagogies with which they were familiar. Academic literature has emphasised the role of a supervisor’s experience of supervision but this research found a greater range of experience was brought to bear upon the relationship. Supervisors expressed a need to develop a critical distance; for the relationship to mature and develop over time in which to student gains increasing autonomy, self-determination and proficiency so that they became equals. This relationship often involved mutual learning (Thompson 1997) on both sides of the relationship. Informal support was a great benefit to those with access to it. The supervisory relationship emerged as in need of continual re-negotiation, with tensions sometimes arising at these points of change.

Underpinning the vision of supervision was a holistic connected set of ideas in which academic inductions and exchanges took place within a vibrant research culture. The sources for imagining this practice could lay in the past, in the future and in new technologies. Ferdinand Tönnies distinction between ‘Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft’ may be of use in conceptualising the problematisation of supervisory relationships where continual technical fixes and regulatory answers are not fully able to meet the complex desires for an ideal of academic work that is becoming harder to achieve. Blending friendly relationships with a structured programme in which fostering independence and autonomy was identified as a central issue. This reflected a hankering after a sense of belonging and community, the sources of which could be located in past, present and future. Thus generating spaces for intellectual discussion and engagement - the research culture – may benefit staff as much as students. There are also implications for

individuals able to create further spaces, discussion groups and opportunities for dialogue within and against the restrictions of the contemporary university.

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