

The supervisor as the supervised (0006)

Dr. Simon Stephens*

School of Business, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Letterkenny, Donegal, Ireland.

Abstract

This article reports on the supervision experience of doctoral students. The relationship (working) between postgraduates and their supervisors is key to a successful supervision process, degree completion rates, faculty research performance and postgraduate satisfaction with their doctoral education (Unsworth *et al.* 2010). Baker and Lattuca (2010) explain that 'while the purposes of doctoral education are widely debated, the need to better understand how doctoral programs shape teachers and researchers remain a key concern' (807). Furthermore, Lee and Green (2009) challenge us to think about the how the figure of the supervisor and the doctoral candidate appear in the literature and in stories of the experience. The perceptions of students have been studied (Drennan and Clarke, 2009) as has the experience of supervisors (Franke and Arvidsson). This paper explores the experience of doctoral students who themselves are supervisors. The outcome is insights in to how the student's experience of supervision is reflected in their supervisory practices.

Keywords doctoral students; research supervisor; supervision; academic practice

* Email: simon.stephens@lyit.ie

Paper

Barnacle and Mewburn (2010) explain that doing a doctorate changes you. Different people in different contexts and disciplines will change, of course in different ways. While this is a given, what can get overlooked is the significance of identity formation within doctoral education. Understanding how phenomena such as knowledge are required, held, shared and wielded within doctoral learning requires attending to the significant agents impacting on the knowing locations occupied by the candidate (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010, p. 443). Egan *et al.* (2009, p. 338) explain that there is no gold standard model of graduate supervision which can be applied in all situations, across all disciplines. Good supervisors have research knowledge, management and interpersonal skills and are: innovative; problem solvers; resource orientated; work-focused; technical experts; decisive and dependable Vilkinas (2002).

Drennan and Clarke (2009, p. 483) explain that although master's degrees have undergone extensive growth over the last decade, little is known of students' experience of research or research supervision. Academics may have excellent research skills and be highly respected in their field of study. However, there has often been little preparation for the role of supervisor which requires particular communication skills and personal qualities. Halse and Malfroy (2010, p. 80) report that doctoral supervisors actively fashion students' development to address deficits in expertise; deliberately intervening to ensure timely completion; purposeful provision of tutoring or research assistance work to minimize the risk of financial distress and withdrawal; and the deployment of personal networks to

facilitate completion and ensure employment. Baker and Lattuca (2010, p. 809) highlight that intellectual and personal change are intimately tied to one another and to the nature of students' learning experiences. Deep reflection on what was being learned appeared to influence changes in personal identity. In the doctoral learning process there is an indirect object that concerns how learning and the act of learning are formed and influenced by both the doctoral student and the supervisor (Franke and Arvidsson 2011).

The data collection and subsequent presentation of the data was informed by Delamont *et al* (1997). Supervisors' and students' experiences differ widely depending on what stage they are at in their research education as regards organisation and their thesis work, and thus related supervision (Franke and Arvidsson 2011). Therefore, this paper presents evidence from a interviews with doctoral students who are at different stages of their study. Eight of the interviewees are in year one/two that is pre proposal stage. Eight are in year three/pre submission, that is preparing to submit and a further four interviewees had successfully completed their doctoral studies. Interviews explored the doctoral students' experience of supervision and the impact that the supervision style they experienced had on their approach to supervision. The interviews were taped, transcribed, and superfluous material removed such as digressions and repetitions to assist the analysis. Narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996) is used to create a coherent story of the interviewee's experience(s).

The findings that emerge offer insights into how the supervision experience influences the students approach to supervision. There is evidence that the subsequent supervision style emerges as a reaction to both positive and negative experiences. Interviewees who

highlighted a negative experience indicated that their supervision style developed as an attempt to address the problems they experienced. Interviewees who had a mainly positive experience discussed how their supervision style has evolved to encompass the style of their doctoral supervisor. For some of the students their supervision style evolves subconsciously and for others it is a deliberate attempt to learn from their experience.

References

- Barnacle, R., and Mewburn, I. 2010. Learning networks and the journey to becoming a doctor. *Studies in Higher Education* 35, no. 4: 433-444.
- Delamont, S., P. Atkinson, and O. Parry. 1997. *Supervising the PhD. A guide to success*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education, Open University Press.
- Drennan, J., and M. Clarke. 2009. Coursework master's programmes: the student's experience of research and research supervision. *Studies in Higher Education* 34, no. 5: 483-500.
- Franke, A., and B. Arvidsson. 2011. Research supervisors' different ways of experiencing supervision of doctoral students. *Studies in Higher Education* 36, no. 1: 7-20.
- Halse, C., and J. Malfroy. 2010. Retheorizing doctoral supervision as professional work. *Studies in Higher Education* 35, no. 1: 79-92.
- Kvale, S. 1996. *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lee, A., and B. Green. 2009. Supervision as a metaphor. *Studies in Higher Education* 34, no. 6: 615-630.
- Unsworth, K., N. Turner, H.M. Williams, and S. Piccin-Houle. 2010. Giving thanks: the relational context of gratitude in postgraduate supervision. *Studies in Higher Education* 35, no. 8: 871-888.
- Vilkinas, T., 2002. The PhD process: the supervisor as manager. *Education + Training* 44 no. 3: 129 – 137.