

Troubling conversations around research supervision: what do supervisors bring to and want from supervisor development? (0224)

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Research supervision is an academic practice that has only recently been brought into the limelight of scrutiny. It has traditionally been a private practice (Manatunga, 2005) in that it often only involves the novice researcher and their supervisor, and in that relationship, it draws on a history of conversational pedagogy. Focus on attrition and completion rates of research students (Booth and Satchell, 1995) is but one factor that has generated a need to look more intensely at this particular aspect of academic practice. Supervision has therefore increasingly become a focus for staff development (for example Taylor 2016).

In the UK in the early 90s (for example Phillips and Pugh, 1987; Salmon, 1992), research supervisors began to make transparent their research supervision practices by publishing their own research supervision experience as guides/illuminators of the practice. In Education practice this reflecting on one's own practice aligns with Stenhouse's (1981) notion of Practitioner Research. In the broader professional practice agenda it is often referred to as the 'practice turn' (Schatzki, Cetina and von Savigny, 2001). Reflective practice is seen as valuable for any professional (Schon, 1983). In research supervision is a useful part of the professional development repertoire as it helps to bring critique to the initial knowledge about research supervision. We have in this paper used the term Reflexivity to indicate the professional looking at them self as compared to a broader reflective practice agenda in which professionals look generally at practices such as research supervision. In many ways this mirrors recent developments that encourage supervisors to audit their own practice – for example the questionnaire approaches of Lee (2012) and Taylor (2015). At Birmingham City University, our approach however has been slightly different, taking the reflexivity itself from a private practice to a communal one whilst maintaining the personal and individual focus.

Communities of practice (Wenger, 2001) are one way of drawing on practitioner knowledge and lived experience to create a reflective community. In this professional development initiative we adopted two different communities of practice models, with which to date over 100 supervisors have engaged. In both models groups of supervisors with differing levels of experience and different disciplinary backgrounds were brought together to encourage community reflection on practice based on the individual practitioner's lived experiences. One model was delivered over six sessions, one per month. This community of practice culminated in participants presenting the practitioner inquiries they had undertaken into their own research supervision practices. A second model was delivered in one-day programmes with an agenda of exploring the issues rather than initiating practitioner inquiries. The discourse surrounding research supervision presents it as a complex practice with different and sometimes dissonant notions of what it means to be an effective or good supervisor, and increasing expectations of supervisors (Taylor 2015). Research supervisors were both affirmed in their practice and challenged to think critically about what they do under the auspices of research supervision within the contexts of professional practice and institutional policies.

In both programs participant input was solicited, inviting research supervisors to talk about the troubling they experience with the practice of research supervision (the sorts of questions they bring to a community of practice around supervision) and their level of expertise (prior knowledge and skills in their professional repertoire) that can support them going into the practice. As well as functioning as staff development, these community of practice conversations have generated rich data about supervisors' expectations and concerns about research degree supervision and supervisory development. From an analysis of the questions brought by supervisors we can determine their agendas for staff development and their attitudes towards it. This agenda-setting by supervisors also reveals concerns about the changing landscape of doctoral education, the bureaucratisation of research processes and impacts of professional practice and practice-led approaches to doctoral research. As their questions arise from their lived experience of supervision, we can examine whether attitudes and agendas differ between novice and seasoned supervisors and also shed light on the real issues that prove troubling. In re-examining collectively the supervisors' own self-identification of expertise, skills and prior knowledge brought to supervisory practices, can we produce a ground-up definition of the supervisory role – one informed by supervisors' perceptions of what it requires of them?

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