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Title Metaphors and images as tools in doctoral supervision

Submitter Dr. Sian Vaughan, Prof Evonne Miller

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As thesis supervision is a complex and fluid academic practice, metaphors abound in the literature as a tool for explaining the processes and challenges in this research journey (McCulloch, 2013; Lee & Green, 2009). Indeed, as supervisors, we often use metaphors and analogies to capture and convey the nuances, challenges and frustrations of thesis supervision in our daily chats with colleagues. Metaphors can also help our students understand the often private and mysterious doctoral experience, offering a tangible, direct and often humorous way to connect.

Almost a decade ago, Lee and Green (2009) noted that idiosyncratic figures such as midwives, cooks, gardeners and mountaineers dominated the supervision literature, with the metaphoric landscape populated by “bridges, chasms, mountains and archways, and traversed by a plenitude of journeys, punctuated by juggling and balancing, marked by rites and rituals, and filled with darkness and light” (p. 617). Marital metaphors are commonly employed in discussions of supervisory styles and relationships (Bastalich 2017, p.1147) and metaphors abound in what Kelly (2017) has described as the cultural imaginary of the PhD, that is in how doctoral research, students and supervisors are imagined and depicted in film, literature and other spaces outside the academy. A frequent example is research as crime detection, and the researchers, supervisors and students, as detectives (Gough 2010, Kelly 2017). In the growing online spaces for supervisor and student peer-support, poetic and often humorous metaphors are used to highlight the emotional and affective dimensions of research degrees, for example *The Valley of Shit* and *The Swamp of Sadness* on Inger Mewburn’s *Thesis Whisperer* blog (Mewburn 2012, Trot 2016). As well as identifying metaphors and thus naming commonalities of experience, there is growing critical analysis of metaphors. The journey metaphor in particular has been subject to criticism as individualistic and heroic (Hughes & Tight 2013, McKnight 2017, Thompson 2015).

To date, however, there has been little explicit comparison of how both thesis supervisors and students use and understand metaphors, especially in an international context. Thus, this qualitative research (with research students and their supervisors in the UK and Australia) contributes to this relative knowledge gap, drawing on two creative and underutilized methodologies: photovoice and research poetry. Photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) is a creative medium where people take and share photographs, as a means of communicating and advocating on a specific topic, while research poetry is the process of creating poems (or poem like prose) from qualitative data. The aim is to develop a repertoire of illuminating and useful metaphors that enable connections and conversations between students and supervisors, identifying practical ways the more explicit use of metaphors can be tools for supervisors.

Methods

Building on a literature review and social media analysis, this qualitative research compares and contrasts metaphors used by thesis supervisors and students in the United Kingdom and Australia. In each country, interviews and focus groups with

three dyads (supervisor and their student; n=12) explicitly examined, reflected on and recorded their use of metaphors in informal and formal supervision discussions – both with each other and in other contexts. First, following an individual interview about metaphors, a photovoice process was followed with each student and supervisor asked to visually capture and photograph any metaphors they used. Second, in focus groups, these narratives and images were shared and discussed. Finally, the photograph, interview and focus group data were analysed thematically, as well as with research poetry. Various labels for poetic transcription, found poetry or transcript poems, research poetry is when researchers create poems (or poem-like prose) from qualitative interview data. In many regards, the research poetry process can be viewed as an extension of qualitative analysis, as typically established narrative markers (e.g., “I”, “we”) are utilised to identify and group themes.

Results and Discussion

As well as highlighting what metaphors are in common use by British and Australian supervisors and students, this research has identified generational differences, preferences and several useful yet uncommon metaphors. Like other researchers in this space (McCulloch, 2013; Lee & Green, 2009), our participants described frequently using ‘a journey’ as a metaphor, for example describing the thesis as a bus where the student was the driver but the supervisor had the map and knew the terrain (thus, they were like a tour guide). Other key passengers on a functioning (not stalled or lost) ‘PhD bus’ included other academics, professional staff, fellow students and family. Interestingly this inclusion of other passengers counters the individualistic, quest narrative more typical of the journey metaphor.

Similarly, many described the thesis journey as like rafting a river, as the student goes up and down rapids, exploring tributaries (ideas) along the way - some turn into dry gullies that go nowhere but others connect and turn into major waterways. Participants’ photographs highlighted this, with one student photographing her ‘messy room’ to highlight how her mind was chaotic like a ‘busy, messy room’ (ideas) that she could not ‘tidy away into drawers’ (articles/thesis chapters). This sparked a conversation, online and in the focus group, about having minds that felt like ‘junk shops’ but there was hidden treasure there. Other metaphors included a rollercoaster, garden, birthing the baby and juggling balls (like a circus clown), with participants’ photographs evocatively capturing these diverse metaphors and triggering reflective conversations on the value of metaphors in the research supervision process.

Combined, the photographs, poems and narratives about the use of metaphors in two academic contexts (Australia and the UK) contribute to developing a repertoire of illuminating and useful metaphors that help enable connections and conversations between students and supervisors.

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