Teach early, teach often: mentoring and coaching as enablers of supervisory development in early career researchers.

Abstract

Supervision is often described as the most important determinant of doctoral success and is therefore an important academic skill-set. Early career researchers play a key, role in the support and development of doctoral students, yet are often excluded from taking on doctoral supervision responsibilities. How then, do they learn how to supervise? This study documents the early supervisory development of seven postdoctoral researchers via a Thesis Mentoring programme. Through observations of their practice and through thematic analysis of interview data, this paper documents how their supervisory skills have developed and comments concurrently on their understanding of the enablers and disablers of doctoral writing. This study demonstrates that early career researchers can develop supervisory skill sets that facilitate the building of learning alliances concurrently with developing a greater understanding of the enablers and disablers of doctoral writing. Gaining early supervisory experience through 'being a mentor' ensures both early and 'writing-aware' development.

Context

Institutional and sector pressures on the doctorate, on doctoral supervision, and on academic practice, have increased in recent years, and supervision is just one element of academic practice in an increasingly high demand 'all-rounder' academic role. Supervision, and the supervisory relationship, is often described as the most important determinant of doctoral success and is therefore an important academic skill-set. However, it can be overlooked as an essential skill when appointing new faculty members.

Early career researchers (post-doctoral research staff) play a key, if frequently unrecognised, role in the support and development of doctoral students. Post-doctoral researchers themselves view any experience of supervision and teaching gained during the post-doctoral period, as core to succeeding with an academic career (Akerlind, 2005). Development of an academic sense of self is in part a result of being offered the right formal institutional responsibilities and resources (McAlpine *et al.,* 2013) yet, post-doctoral researchers as a group aren't always included formally in institutional Learning & Teaching strategies, seen as educationally valuable, or understood to possess specific skills or the right experience to supervise. Post-docs are often excluded from taking on doctoral supervision responsibilities due to the nature of their fixed-term research contracts. How then, do they learn how to supervise?

Supervision is a complex and uncertain practice and a key influencer of doctoral success (Anderson, *et al.*, 2006; Emilsson & Johnsson 2007; Murphy *et al.* 2007; Lee 2008; Amundsen & McAlpine 2009; McAlpine *et al.* 2012, Zeegers & Barron, 2012, Halbert, 2015), that can 'make or break' a student (Lee, 2008). Emotionally competent leadership, as well as technical and intellectual mentorship is required of academics, and the need to establish good rapport and 'high-quality' student-supervisor relationships has been emphasised (Ward & Gardner, 2008; Kiley, 2011;

Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Looking solely to new supervisors' own prior experiences (Hammond *et al*., 2010) to inform their practice is unlikely to be sufficient as an approach to determining or developing good supervision, especially in a rapidly changing research context.

Formal training and development of supervision practices is therefore important, but when should supervisor development start, and how can we encourage development that is reflective, self-aware, and relational? To build trust a supervisor must have the skills to respond to the student's individual needs and circumstances and develop a discipline-appropriate practice (Torka, 2016). And while there is a growing literature about enabling doctoral writing, and separately on supervisor training, Guerin *et al*. (2017), call for "a strong framing of these two literatures together". This is the approach that has been taken at the University of Sheffield.

Pedagogical framing

The Thesis Mentoring programme (University of Sheffield, 2017) was developed in response to an identified need for enabling conversations around doctoral writing. The programme pairs doctoral writers who self-identify as 'stump-ed' (**st**ressfully **u**nable to **m**ake **p**rogress) with a post-doctoral researcher trained in the ethical practices of coaching & mentoring. Over a 16-week period the pairs meet to discuss the barriers to thesis writing progress, and to co-create bespoke solutions. The mentoring programme offers a space for open dialogue about thesis writing, for reflection on the affective and motivational side of writing, and for problem solving – with the support of an independent staff member.

Research Question

How are supervision practices developed through participation in a thesis mentoring programme?

Methodology

This study documents the early supervisory development of seven postdoctoral researchers who were trained and practicing mentors on the Thesis Mentoring programme. Through observations of their practice and through thematic analysis of end of programme interview data, this paper documents their perceptions of how their supervisory skills have developed, and comments concurrently on their understanding of the attitudinal and affective enablers and disablers of doctoral writing.

Findings

(1) Mentors develop supervisory awareness and skill sets that facilitate the building of trusting learning alliances. Postdoctoral mentors described how they had learned to build trust and rapport with their doctoral mentees by: Working with clear role descriptions and shared understanding; Paying attention to the mentee's objectives and expectations; Defining boundaries and limitations; Co-creating solutions to writing blocks. Postdoctoral mentors also reported how they had actively worked to develop their skills in active listening and in demonstrating empathy. This aligns with Halse & Malfroy's (2010) argument that a supervisor is responsible for nurturing the learning alliance by cultivating respect, flexibility, clear communication,

shared engagement in scholarship, and for setting out clear roles and responsibilities.

(2) Mentors develop greater understanding of the enablers and disablers of doctoral writing. Specifically, mentors described how, through listening to 'stumped' writers, they had developed a greater awareness of the role of the supervisor in: encouraging early and frequent writing and embedding a sense of drafting and refinement as a continuous or cyclical doctoral process; Giving feedback that builds confidence as well as competence in writing; Building students' self-awareness and problem-solving skills by taking time to engage in a critical reflective dialogue. Mentoring and coaching approaches are being increasingly seen as useful in developing attributes related to doctoral independence e.g. self-awareness, agency, and communication, and coaching has been demonstrated to impact upon doctoral progression (e.g. Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2015; Kearns *et al*, 2008; Gardiner *et al*. 2012).

Conclusions

This study adds to our understanding of how supervision practices can be developed in early career postdoctoral researchers. Formal training and practice in coaching techniques allowed postdoctoral researchers to develop better practices in building trusting educational alliances, in helping students to self-evaluate, and in giving feedback. Importantly, this study shows that a formal opportunity to engage in supervision practices related to doctoral writing, can also raise awareness of both the challenges that doctoral writers face, and the impact of enabling, and learner-centred supervision on thesis writing motivation and progress. Formal coaching or mentoring programmes can be leveraged to provide a way for doctoral candidates to link into independent support for proactive planning and self-management. Additionally, being a mentor will ensure early and 'writing-aware' development of practices related to building quality supervision relationships at the early career stage, and before primary supervisor responsibilities are expected.

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