CHAPTER 1

Complex contexts, relations and practices: the space for research supervision

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The face of complexity

The face of research supervision has shifted in ways largely anticipated but increasingly complex. With growing attention to quality assurance processes and national research training schemes that focus on successful but also timely completion of research degrees, research supervision has now come under the spotlight for closer examination. In a context of performativity (Lyotard 1984) where performance is linked to economic gain, we find ourselves supervising within a knowledge economy where knowledge is a central input but also a significant output (Green and Usher 2003). Hence, the context in which supervision occurs is under increased pressure—pressure to yield knowledge in forms that count and in timelines that fit with relatively newly created and tight boundaries. Always a complex task, even when viewed strictly from the traditional expert scholar/apprentice model, supervision is now situated within a pressured performance context in terms of research training, but also within a context incorporating broadening research degree frameworks and modes of presentation across global communication possibilities. Further, with growing attention on the demands of risk management in a litigious world, research supervision treads on ground less smooth than once known. However, despite the changing face of research supervision given the shifting pressures, degree types, modalities and so on, research supervision still remains one of the most rewarding (and always challenging) roles within the university (and now beyond with our industry partners and the professions). The need for critical and careful consideration of the space that we allocate to research supervision is now argued prior to an overview of the other chapters within this book.
Space for supervision

The need for space for supervision, particularly in this pressured higher education context, has been argued for in terms of the relational, the intellectual and the physical (Green 2003). Each aspect will be discussed in turn. These spaces are seen as crucial elements of research supervision: each notion of space is inextricably linked with the others.

Relational space

Space for the relational aspects of research supervision is crucial. Without such space so called supervisory practices, by definition, cease to fall into the realm of supervision. Instead they become instances in which students work in isolation without the appropriate feedback, guidance, mentoring, critique and so on.

Relational space refers to the time and place in which the complexities surrounding the supervisor–student relationship take shape. This notion of relational space is based on the assumption that supervision is social practice. Decades ago, Scribner and Cole (1981) defined practice as ‘a recurrent, goal directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge’ (p. 236). While this definition was developed with regard to literacies, it does have applicability to supervision. This definition of practice, like the Research Training Scheme in Australia, needs to be located in terms of the social so as to take into account the relational elements of supervision. Supervisory practices need to be situated as part of wider social practices that position people in various roles and networks, rely on given discoursal practices and occur in relation to cultural practices in specific settings.

The nature of the research journey of the student relies on relational elements between supervisor and candidate whereby roles and responsibilities are made clear and revised, where ‘zones of uncertainty’ (Laske and Zuber-Skerritt 1996) are exposed where possible, and where a committed, consistent (although admittedly dynamic) approach can be forged and maintained. As Delamont, Parry and Atkinson (1998) warn, the relationship between supervisor and student is indeed a delicate one. As such it needs time and space to develop so that subtle shifts can occur that hopefully enhance trust and respect, clarify roles and expectations, moderate work habits, formulate timelines and manage progress. Further, the trust that comes only with extended interactions needs time to develop. Without this,
it is unlikely that the student will be able to come to terms, to even a minimal level, with the inherent power differentials. This needs to occur to some degree if students are to be positioned such that they feel able to state their views, and argue the point as they become the ‘experts’ in the given discipline(s). Thus, to further elaborate this last point, space is needed for the student to become the autonomous ‘other’ (Lee and Williams 1999) or what we would term the professional scholar. The movement from relative dependence on a supervisor to an independent or autonomous academic position takes time but is absolutely crucial for doctoral students. The need for relational space is both literal and metaphorical. Relational space sets the scene for, and provides the momentum to, the intellectual aspects of a higher degree (Green 2003).

**Intellectual space**

The intellectual space for supervision can be seen as the time and place needed for the generation of ideas anew. As Bowden and Marton (1998) note: ‘Trying to find out something that nobody has found previously is different from trying to find out what somebody has found out earlier’ (p. 10). Clearly, the pursuit of new knowledge takes time. Simply finding out what others have noted or researched, and even critiquing their work, is not sufficient within the doctoral journey. Supervisors aspire to create an intellectual context in which new ways of thinking are found.

The following question thus arises: how can supervisors push students to find fresh ideas, and to therefore contribute significantly to their field, at a pace set by policy makers and therefore well removed from the nature of the research focus and the space required for such intellectual endeavours?

If we take into account the fact that supervisors do not necessarily supervise strictly within their discipline areas—given the impact of multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary research—then the demands on a supervisor are seen to be increased further. More and more, supervision demands, particularly with professional doctorates and project degrees, an understanding of the academic field, the industry context, and the practice based context, as well as the relevant methodological knowings and practices. Thus, the space needed for intellectualism, an essential aspect of the research degree, is hard to define. What seems clear, however, is that strict constraints may compromise the intellectual endeavours within the doctoral journey if we are not careful to preserve the intellectual space.
Physical space

Essentially the physical space for supervision, within the world of social science, is quite simple. While students may require resources such as computer access and a place to work, most Australian universities offer access (particularly for full time students). Communication at a distance can work (but perhaps not indefinitely); however, it is argued that face-to-face contact is vital (Green 2003; McWilliam and Taylor 2000). It is crucial in terms of motivation, reviews of progress, future planning, contracts where applicable, as well as to reduce the zones of uncertainty that are possible and the concerns that if unexposed can grow into challenges or even unsolvable problems. Thus, the physical space for supervision requires time and place.

An overview: mapping the offerings

This book is structured under three main areas related to research supervision:

1. Spaces and places for supervision
2. Supervision within changing research degree frameworks
3. Research supervision management and models.

As such the book aims to offer the reader an opportunity to consider theories, issues, and practices surrounding the relational elements within local and broader contexts, the degree options in our midst, and the management or supervision models available to us as supervisors, students, and research directors. Thus, it is hoped that this text will have relevance to those of us who supervise, those being supervised and those responsible for the management of supervisory development and training, as well as taking on the roles inherent in wider research management.

Spaces and places for supervision

Pearson considers the changing context for research education and in so doing raises issues surrounding the reconsideration or reconstruction of supervisory practices. She proposes three central aspects within the design of research supervisor development. The question as to the role of supervisor development is posed in terms of whether the aim is to improve existing practice or to rethink and therefore shape and
reshape existing practices. Highlighting both the need for, and the resistance that has existed to, moving into scholarly discussion of research supervision, Pearson’s chapter offers just that. Her chapter is a scholarly take on supervision within the current research context in Australia, and she delivers some practical possibilities with respect to research supervision. The chapter focuses on learning and considers three models of situated learning that provide convincing and coherent bases from which practice can be reflected upon and from which research supervision can be seen (and conducted) as collegial practice rather than isolated individual practice.

Fitzgerald takes us into the world of research supervision using a context of indigenous knowledge and indigenous research. Her chapter centres on the conduct of Maori research and the reproduction of Maori knowledge, as well as the conduct of research with and for Maori communities by postgraduate students in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The paper seeks to address, at least in part, the gap in the literature with respect to research supervision with Maori postgraduate students. Fitzgerald, as a Pakeha (white) woman academic, is positioned with responsibility for Maori students engaged in research within Maori communities, but she questions the legitimacy of her role. The challenges inherent in such a role are discussed. She uses the institutional case study of UNITEC Institute of Technology to illuminate her struggle with legitimacy and authenticity, and completes her chapter with an indigenous research partnership model. The reader is encouraged to step back after reading this chapter and consider the more general issues pertaining to research supervision, that is, to move from the particular or micro level to a more macro level. The following chapter looks at macro issues using the particular as illustrative. The chapter by Fitzgerald could be read or reread with this in mind.

An in depth analysis of the supervisory relationship from the viewpoint of supervisor and doctoral student is presented by Reidy and Green. The complex aspects of the relationship between supervisor and candidate are explored alongside the notion of knowledge management as collaborative enterprise. The authors reflect on the ways in which the supervisor–candidate interaction undergoes a series of changes as the candidate proceeds along the doctoral journey towards completion. The transition from coach to colleague is developed across key phases within the doctoral journey, and strategies finding a ‘fit’ between supervisor and candidate are presented as food for thought.
Supervision within changing research degree frameworks

The second section of the book moves to the issues surrounding research supervision across a growing research degree framework. Boucher and Brooks present their learnings from the experience of supervising a PhD by project—purportedly the first non thesis PhD in an Australian business faculty. Being cognisant of the risks involved in such a journey but also of the potential benefits, the supervisors discuss how they worked within the institutional rules and norms to assist the candidate to complete the doctorate. The authors raise the issues pertaining to both management and examination processes, and provide advice to supervisors and candidates considering PhD by project.

Brearley reflects upon the research experience with regard to the substance and emotional intensity within. She presents the findings of an aesthetic research project with a view to challenging us as researchers and supervisors to be further aware of ourselves and our practices. In examining the PhD by project, Brearley takes a cross-disciplinary perspective and presents the implications arising for research supervision particularly for those working with students using expanded forms of knowledge creation and representation.

The supervisory experience within the professional doctorate is discussed by Morley using the Doctorate of Business Administration as an illustrative example. Morley views the professional doctorate as an opportunity, and indeed a necessity, for supervisors to move away from the traditional one-to-one supervisory model. Contrasting the DBA with the PhD, Morley looks at his own supervisory experiences in order to highlight differences in roles, ways of working and positioning in terms of the doctorate within academia, the professions and industry.

Rowarth and Green look at the professional doctorate in terms of the knowledge economy in which the university is now located. Given the context of performativity in which we now operate, where performance is tied to economic gain, there are pressures on supervisors to perform by supervising ‘on time’ and across degree frameworks. The context within which professional doctorates grew in Australia are discussed, and the authors then move to contrast the PhD with the professional doctorate per se with respect to main components, form, knowledge type, intake, and pathways as well as issues pertaining to supervision. Rowarth and Green conclude with a range of supervisory strategies that have relevance across various degree frameworks.
Research supervision management and models

While the chapter by Eckersley and Maunders could equally be positioned in the abovementioned section on degree frameworks, it fits well in this section on supervisory models for research degrees. The chapter looks at learning circles or learning sets within a cluster (or group) supervision model. Using an action research cluster of students enrolled in higher degrees by project, the authors reflect on learning theory from various theorists using action learning or research. The chapter presents the application of action learning circles to provide opportunities for students to become action enquirers. Relational aspects with respect to trust, ground rules and thoughtful behaviours within the group context are discussed, as well as preparation for the meetings.

Rowarth and Cornforth describe the experience of research supervision within the biological sciences. While most of the other chapters come from the social sciences, education and business, this one tells of a rather different journey. The authors liken the doctoral journey to a river crossing where there are numerous possibilities to explore as well as obstacles to overcome. The key responsibilities of the supervisor are discussed using the river journey metaphor. Along the way hazards occur and the authors acknowledge the inherent responsibilities of all involved. As the journey proceeds and conditions vary, the relationship between the supervisor and candidate shifts and, when successful, grows in terms of mutual trust and respect.

The role of supervisor as manager is the focus of the chapter by Vilkinas. Given the current focus on timely completions, she argues that the supervisor must act as a manager during the doctoral journey. Vilkinas sees this role as being crucial in terms of completion. Using Quinn’s competing values model, she modifies it to make it more applicable to PhD supervision. The chapter points to eight roles that a research supervisor might take: those of innovator, broker, producer, director, coordinator, monitor, facilitator, and mentor.

The chapter by Brooks and Merlot provides a model of another kind: one centring on candidature review processes. The authors discuss the change in candidature review processes from a paper based system to that of a review panel. The results of two surveys, one of panel members and one of students, revealed overall that the response to the new system was positive. While there were still some issues to overcome, generally it was felt that the panel system enhanced communication, provided students with greater support,
and served as a motivation towards timely progress. The important role of the supervisor within such processes is emphasised, and the argument that both senior and second supervisors need to be involved is strongly put. The impact for research training with respect to completion is also highlighted.

References