CHAPTER 4

Collaborative knowledge management and the art of coaching: reflections on the diverse roles of the successful supervisor

Jo Reidy and Pam Green

Research degrees in times of change
Throughout the past decade, university educators and educational policy makers in Australia have sought to understand and improve the policies and practices upon which research degrees have been founded. The changing context of the research training landscape has been examined and the role of the research supervisor has received increasing attention as far-reaching changes are made to policies, research imperatives and expanding research degree frameworks (Green 2003; Green and Usher 2003; Pearson and Cryer 2001).

Research supervision is a complex activity in which the supervisor and the candidate embark on a journey together along seemingly separate, but inextricably entwined, pathways. This we all know. Those of us who supervise understand the complexities deeply: not only from our experiences as supervisors, but also as people who have been candidates in the past. Although the passing of time or our own research histories may make our own student experiences somewhat remote, they are still memorable and, according to the study by Lee and Williams (1999), continue to resonate, having a direct impact on the ways in which we supervise current research students. The need to consider the ways in which our own student experiences of supervision colour our supervisory practices is more imperative than ever given the context of higher education with respect to research degrees.

This chapter seeks to look once again at supervision and supervisory practices, but from the viewpoint of an experienced supervisor
(Green) and one of her successful doctoral candidates (Reidy), now ready to supervise doctorates for the first time. We consider briefly the current context in which our supervisory space resides, namely, higher education in Australia. Secondly, we look at supervision in terms of collaborative knowledge management. Thirdly, we move to critically reflect upon our own practices as supervisor and as supervisee and the journey that has taken us from coach and novice, mentor and mentee to friendly professional colleagues. In the chapter, we present some close-grained work based on interviews and the resulting transcripts. In doing so, we aim to generate further insights into supervision practices, the candidate’s journey and the strategies by which one can enrich the other, in the hope that readers might find some applicability to their own reflections upon their supervisory practices or their experiences as a candidate.

**Research training in the context of Australian higher education**

The current situation in higher education in Australia, which centres on the Research Training Scheme (the RTS) (introduced midway into 2001), is such that academics in Australia have been placed under increasing pressure to supervise ‘well’ and to ensure also that the research student reaches completion as speedily as possible. Given that we are consequently positioned in a context of performativity (Lyotard 1984)—that is, a context in which performance is rewarded by fiscal gain (to the university in this instance) and precious research places—we must supervise well but ‘fast’ (Green and Usher 2003). Under the RTS, Australian universities are rewarded for successful, timely completions. Arguably, this creates pressure on supervisors and candidates. Hence, in this period of ‘fast supervision’, it is even more crucial than ever before to consider the nature of supervision from the perspective of both supervisor and candidate.

Predictably, given the changes sketched in above, in recent times there has been an increased focus on supervisory practices. Australian universities, like our counterparts in the United Kingdom, have introduced supervisory ‘training’ (Pearson and Cryer 2001), or rather what we would prefer to term increased professional development of research supervisors. This has occurred during a time in which degree frameworks have extended considerably. Most Australian universities have expanded their research degree options. For instance, at RMIT University (the university where both supervisor and candidate were situated when the candidate was enrolled in her PhD), academic staff oversee a comprehensive range of research
degree offerings including PhD, PhD by project, PhD by publication, professional doctorates, masters by research and masters by project. While it is outside the realms of this chapter to consider the ramifications of supervising across such an array of options, it does highlight the increasingly complex nature of the context in which research supervision is pursued.

If the past decade has seen a broadening of the diversity of the doctoral programs on offer (Usher 2002), recent discussions of the changing context of higher education have also highlighted the increasing diversity of the students coming into universities to take up postgraduate places (McWilliam, Singh and Taylor 2002), and the variation in both students’ reasons for deciding to enrol in a doctoral program and their subsequent ‘career plans’ (Harman 2002, p. 179). While in the past a masters or doctoral degree often opened the door to an academic career, with postgraduate students engaged in studies that ran parallel to their first experiences of university teaching as a tutor, many people now enter research programs, such as Massey University’s Doctorate of Business and Administration (Lockhart and Stablein 2002) in order to refine and transform the understandings they need to strengthen their role in already-established careers outside the halls of academe.

However, while changes in the student body have both influenced, and in turn been influenced by, changes in entry schemes and the types of study on offer, several core emphases of the doctorate, including the significance of the search for ‘new’ knowledge and the candidate’s need to grow in independence, still underpin the degree. Furthermore, although the introduction of professional doctorates has incorporated coursework (or in some cases portfolios) into programs, the production of a substantial written text is still the end point of most doctoral work.

**Introducing the data**

One of the authors of this chapter (Green) supervised the doctoral research of the other (Reidy) in the period 2000–2002. Each author was interviewed at the end of 2003 by an external researcher (with substantial expertise in, and knowledge of, research supervision and open-ended interviewing). The authors’ reflections on their intertwined experiences as supervisor and candidate were able to provide a variety of perceptions on the degree, its significance and the challenges facing those who embark upon it. While candidates have in the past offered accounts of their studies midstream, this section explores
those aspects of the supervisor–candidate interaction that contributed to the candidate’s success when success is measured by ‘timely completion’ and a text that was judged to be excellent by both. For simplicity of language, the authors are referred to as supervisor and candidate in the remainder of this chapter.

As has been pointed out, the supervisor–candidate relationship is a complex one because, within a relatively short space of time, the interaction must foster the development of original understandings and new ideas, or, in other words, the production, dissemination and use of knowledge. Although these words have been drawn from various discussions of knowledge management and its processes (see Rowley 1999), they describe a large part of the work that constitutes the doctoral experience. However, while these terms capture the processes that characterise the doctoral experience, they do not encompass all of the ways in which the supervisor teaches so that the candidate may learn.

In the following analysis, it is argued that the process of knowledge management is a collaborative enterprise conducted by supervisor and student. As the managing of this form of knowledge occurs within a narrowly specified time-period, the supervisor is crucially important if the knowledge-oriented goals are to be achieved. Although it is the supervisor who ‘makes the running’ in the early phases of the candidature by setting up the intellectual and practical scaffolding in which the candidate’s work unfolds, the real achievement of these phases can only be measured in terms of the extent to which the candidate has been able to achieve autonomy and independence by the time the final phase of the degree has been reached.

During the research journey then, the supervisor–candidate interaction must undergo a series of changes as the candidate moves along the path to completion. Like the god Proteus, who was able to assume many different shapes according to the demands of the situation, the supervisor has to be flexible enough to anticipate and encourage the candidate’s growing expertise and independence. However, good supervision rests upon the notion of the willingness or the ability of the candidate to take up the challenges that are only glimpsed as enrolment takes place. Hence, especially in the early and middle stages, the student has to be able to accept and make use of the intellectual and practical coaching that is offered by the supervisor. Predictably then, it is not only the supervisor whose ‘shapes’ or roles must change, but also those of the candidate. The following account draws on these ideas in order to explore the journeys made by supervisor and candidate—from coach and novice to colleague and independent researcher.
The project

Although it may have been possible to elicit the ways in which the interaction between supervisor and candidate worked in informal discussions, it was decided that independent interviews would allow a supervisor and a candidate to reflect on the experience from their positions as stakeholders situated in very different positions in the Australian academic community. In order to explore this particular supervisor–candidate relationship, retrospective in-depth interviews were conducted with the supervisor and then with one of her recently graduated PhD candidates. The supervisor was ‘experienced’ in that she had been the primary supervisor for over 20 research candidates. The doctoral candidate interviewed had followed conventional academic paths in that she had already completed an honours and a masters degree before enrolling in the PhD. However, the doctorate was her first experience of empirical research as the other research studies had been text-based.

The interviews were conducted on separate days by an experienced interviewer known to both people. While the interviewer was familiar with the literature on supervision, the interviews were conducted in an open-ended, relatively unstructured way. This enabled each interviewee to raise issues that might not have been anticipated by the interviewer. Each interview lasted for approximately two hours. During this time, the candidate and the supervisor were not only encouraged to give accounts of their own supervisory experiences, but also took the opportunity to reflect on their own practices. At times, the interviewer raised topics of interest—inquiring, for example, about the degree to which the supervisor should intervene in relation to the exact focus of the research questions, a topic that has also received some attention from Hager (2003). However, while having the freedom to raise issues, the interviewer made no reference in the candidate’s interview to anything that had been said in the earlier interview with the supervisor. Neither the candidate nor the supervisor had an opportunity to listen to the audiotapes of the interviews until after the transcripts had been completely typed up. At that point, both agreed to share the data openly and in full.

The existence of common concerns

An exploration of the interview transcripts showed that there were many common issues that the supervisor and the candidate raised at the end of the 3.2 years that the doctoral candidate had taken to com-
plete the degree. (Interestingly, Heath [2002] also found that the median time taken by the full-time candidates in his own study was 3.2 years.) Each of these issues was analysed, so that by the end it was possible for both participants to provide a series of reflections of interest, reflections that complement the work of such writers as Evans and Rennie (2003), who recently reported on a set of draft guidelines for ‘best practice’ in doctoral education sponsored by the Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies.

While studies such as that of Heath (2002) have shown that candidates can have reservations regarding the quality of their supervision, it is argued on the basis of the interviews described in this chapter that the candidate and the supervisor should be considered in relation to one another and that, in the most productive interactions, a ‘fit’ can be achieved that makes the journey both short and relatively trouble-free. The achievement of such a fit needs both scrutiny and celebration because, in most cases, it is the interaction between supervisor and candidate that will determine the quality of the experience for both people. It is also argued that even if this fit seems to have been established early on, it has to be sustained by effective practices on the part of both candidate and supervisor throughout the research candidature.

The management of knowledge

During the undertaking of a doctoral degree, supervisor and candidate can be seen to be playing roles similar to those played by the knowledge management experts or agencies employed by or incorporated into large companies. Hence, together the supervisor and the candidate must ‘manage’ the knowledge that is under construction while simultaneously managing the time-lines and family demands faced by most professional people.

Demerest (1997) describes the processes that typically accompany knowledge management. According to Demerest, knowledge management involves the processes and phases of knowledge construction and knowledge embodiment, knowledge dissemination and knowledge use. However, while the terms are helpful when thinking about the processes involved in the management of knowledge during a research degree, such descriptive labels cannot fully capture nor account for the teaching and learning interactions between supervisor and candidate. In this chapter, two further concepts are used to explicate these. The first idea is that of coaching, while the second, that of change, is necessarily implied by the first.
The initial phase: coaching as giving direction

At the beginning of any research candidature, the emphasis is on knowledge building as the candidate reads, writes and becomes aware of the ‘territory’ they have inherited as part of their study. The risky open-endedness of the first phase, caught during the interviews by the candidate’s observation ‘So we started off’ (p. 24), reaches its climax with the presentation of a well thought out research proposal. Although the first phase of the candidature will necessarily foreground significant intellectual issues such as topic definition, elaboration of research questions and the literature to be surveyed, the ways of being a candidate, of actually ‘doing’ a doctorate, must also be learned. Hence, the complex mesh of activities that make up the doctoral candidate’s lived experience must be both mentored and managed by the supervisor as coach. In ways that are disconcerting for some, the candidate as novice has to become a willing participant in the process even if they have already achieved great expertise in other workplaces and roles.

From the evidence provided during the supervisor’s interview, it is clear that the supervisor was particularly skilled at ‘getting the show on the road’. Her expertise in this area can be attributed to her prior supervision experience. However, the interview transcripts also revealed that her own negative experiences of supervision during the initial stages of her master’s degree provided her with insights into what not to do when supervising. The difficulties she experienced during her master’s degree were summarised when she commented that she had had a supervisor who ‘was not reading [her] work and was not available for meetings’ (Supervisor, p. 1). She contrasted this experience with her doctoral supervision, commenting that her supervisor not only had a deep interest in methodological issues, which stimulated her own interest in this area, but, on a more practical level, was always available for her and the other doctoral students he supervised. She described his readiness to be involved both intellectually and practically in the following way:

Supervisor: On occasion, there would be some sort of question, which you needed to engage with someone else before you could move on. And he was always in his office because all he did was supervise his students. You could just walk in—he was very amiable...he was always there—you wouldn’t get that nowadays. (p. 1)
However, the supervisor was not simply a friend. The supervisor’s portrait of her ‘amiable’ supervisor was given depth when she described the ways in which he was able to move her beyond her present levels of expertise. He was not simply pleasant to work with, but was also able to ‘push’ her (p. 2):

**Supervisor:** He knew what a thesis was and had supervised students beyond completion in areas beyond his area...And so there was this confidence there that I could actually move out of my area...and talk to someone on other levels—theoretical levels. And I really liked that...And he would always have books for me to read and I would always read them. So I think he pushed me to do things I wouldn’t have otherwise done. And I really respected that. And I really enjoyed the conversations we had when we’d both read a text. And so, I think because of that, I did a lot more within my [doctoral] degree that I would have normally. (p. 2)

Significantly, the words ‘push’ and ‘pushing’ were used by both the candidate and the supervisor whose reflections are explored in this chapter. The supervisor used both words approvingly in order to articulate her sense that her experienced former supervisor was able to encourage her ‘to do things [she] wouldn’t have otherwise done’ (p. 2). The candidate also commented on features of her own interaction with her doctoral supervisor, offering the following account of the re-write of a completed chapter of the dissertation:

**Candidate:** I think I battled with the Methods chapter. I know that sounds really basic, but I actually wrote that chapter twice. I wrote it as a Schön-ian reflective thing first and she said, ‘I don’t like that much’. And I thought ‘My God, I’m going to have to write this whole thing again!’ And it was much better the second time...I got really interested in those issues. (p. 25)

However, the demands made by the supervisor were matched by a similarly intense level of input and involvement, so the supervisor was seen as someone who was appropriately goal-directed, rather than simply autocratic. Indeed, the match between the supervisor’s expectations and the candidate’s commitment meant that a relationship of professional trust could be built throughout the research study. Hence, the candidate’s observation, ‘I think she put on a certain
amount of pressure’ (p. 27) was balanced by a sense that the supervisor was taking the work very seriously: even in the very early stages of the research study, the supervisor annotated the written drafts ‘minutely’ (p. 27). The candidate framed these interactions positively, not only because she accepted her initial role as a novice, but also because a great deal of the advice was framed as suggestions to be considered rather than directions to be followed.

The middle phase: coaching as encouragement

Throughout the interviews, the supervisor’s coaching was described in two different ways by the candidate. Firstly, the coaching was seen as directive, ranging from ‘pushing’ (p. 24) to the subtler giving of an ‘extra little nudge’ (p. 26). Secondly, the significance of verbal encouragement was commented on many times. In two instances during the candidate’s interview, the supervisor’s encouragement is summarised in the phrase ‘You can do it’ (p. 26), the candidate commenting that the supervisor ‘really understood’ when the challenge of undertaking the research became a struggle—as it did when the candidate was trying to find a diverse sample of people to interview for the pilot project.

The significance of professional trust

In both interviews, there is evidence to suggest that as the candidature progressed and the dissertation began to take a coherent shape the candidate required reassurance more than anything else, especially through the crucial collection phase which was built around the collection and analysis of a large set of 50 interviews. By trusting that the supervisor thought that she could accomplish the data collection, the analysis and the writing, the candidate was empowered to carry out the next step in each.

Supervisor: [The candidate] would often say to me, ‘Do you think I’m doing well? Do you think I’m working hard enough? And I’d say…’Just acknowledge what you’re doing—you’re doing terrifically well, you’re making great progress’. (p. 2)

However, at the same time that the candidate was receiving reassurance, her independence and autonomy as a researcher were also being fostered. In the third and final phase of the candidature, the regular meetings became less frequent as the candidate wrote according
to her own schedule of drafting and revision. The seeds of this kind of independence had been sown during the data collection period when the candidate had realised, 'I had to do it myself' (p. 30). Towards the end of the interview with the candidate, the interviewer commented that she had displayed 'a very interesting mix of independence and dependence' (p. 30). However, by the end of the journey the candidate perceived that she had achieved autonomy as a researcher, writer and decision-maker—so much so that a 'new kind' (p. 25) of independence had been reached, a 'more genuine independence' (p. 30). By the end, the student had acquired the sort of independence expected of competent researchers.

Hence, the candidate and the supervisor worked together to facilitate the construction of knowledge while setting up mutually satisfying work routines. While this was happening, the locus of control was shifting in a very marked way from supervisor to candidate. Although the supervisor influenced the initial period of the relationship in crucially important ways, she also promoted the candidate's growing ability to control the direction of both the reading and the data collection. The skilfulness of the coaching in this period seems to have had its roots in the supervisor's own experiences as a student. Importantly, a mixture of both positive and negative experiences had enabled her to develop very effective supervision practices.

‘Every time we met, we’d always put the next time in the diary’

The building of trust between candidate and supervisor was strengthened over time by regular meetings. Very early in the three-year candidature a predictable pattern of interaction practices was established and then adhered to. Although the patterns were summarised in the supervisor's interview when she said that her supervision practices followed a 'You write–I read–we meet' pattern (p. 18), some further details have been included at this point because a knowledge of these patterns was assumed rather than elaborated upon during the interviews. Yet, as the supervision sessions and the drafting and re-drafting were at the heart of the knowledge construction, these may be of special interest to both supervisors and novice researchers.

Throughout her candidature, the student took a newly drafted section of a chapter to the supervision meeting, having received the prior draft by post. In contrast to some current practices that place great stress on electronic exchanges of both text and comment, hard copies of the chapter drafts were exchanged and were then annotated by the supervisor. In retrospect, it is now possible to see that the
supervision meetings had four 'segments'. In the first few minutes, the most recent draft was handed over to the supervisor. Then the supervisor and the candidate discussed the annotated draft that had already been returned by post. In the third stage, the candidate explored some crucial reading or her own ideas with the supervisor. Finally, the candidate discussed the next stage of the research project, refining with the supervisor’s assistance short-term goals related to the next piece of writing and the next set of interviews.

Usually, the supervision meeting was structured informally by the supervisor and candidate, the former by further explaining some of her annotations on the draft under discussion, the candidate by bringing a typed list of concerns or new tasks to each meeting. Through these means, very focused discussions were achieved and all significant issues were covered within the space of just over an hour. Both the candidate and the supervisor commented on the efficacy of these meetings, the interviews revealing that the meetings were enjoyable as well as productive.

Candidate: My meeting was once every two weeks, on a Monday, at 12.00. And that…was crucial. But that was my time. And the goal was coming up. If I’d had a good week, it was almost done by the weekend. If I’d had a bad week, I knew I had to slave that weekend, or if I had reading to do, but that was that magic time, that Monday…The other thing was that she gave me her absolute full attention. I’m sure that some weeks she would have a mountain of emails and a mountain of phone calls. Not once did the phone ring, and she never looked at her emails. (p. 31)

Hence, it can be seen that the supervisor’s knowledge did not simply include her expertise as an intellectual mentor, but also reflected her experience as a skilful coach who was able to set up routines and work practices that provided the framework within which the large task of seeing a piece of research through to completion could be undertaken by a novice researcher. The significance of the supervision sessions was emphasised again at the end of the candidate’s interview when she stated that the meetings had the ability to ‘empower’ her so that she was ‘lifted up and excited and challenged’ (p. 32). The supervision meetings then were the hub of the experience—they were ‘enabling things’, meetings that had ‘enough fuel in them’ to carry the candidate along for another two weeks (p. 32).
Knowledge construction and textual practices

From the very beginning of the candidate’s doctoral journey, tasks were undertaken in order to further the production of a written text. Writing began almost immediately, whereas some of the candidates in Heath’s (2002) study did not have to submit writing ‘for a year or more’ (p. 46) after their initial enrolment. The supervisor’s expectations that the submission of a written piece would structure each period of time was responded to positively by the candidate, who had written a successful honours thesis using the same type of ‘You write it–I read it–we meet’ pattern of interaction, a pattern that had not been replicated in her much more protracted masters degree. However, the candidate was also proactive in setting goals that had to be reached by the next meeting, and agreement with respect to expected tasks (from both sides) was negotiated openly at each meeting. These were noted down by both the supervisor and the candidate and were rarely changed.

Thus far, the roles assumed by supervisor and candidate have been complementary ones—as the supervisor coached, the candidate responded. Especially in the first eight months of the degree, and again at crucial stages during the data collection phases, the supervisor’s coaching enabled the research student to set up the research study, present the proposal to a committee and collect significant amounts of data.

The work of Schön (1987)

In these phases, the interaction was very similar to that described so famously by Donald Schön (1987) who, in describing the relationship between the expert Quist and the novice Petra, captured the ways in which an experienced mentor teaches and encourages the novice to expand their own repertoires of practice by giving the novice opportunity to reflect on work already undertaken. In Schön’s work, novices or apprentices acquire a fully professional competence or ‘artistry’ (p. 19) by entering situations and interactions in which ‘the use in practice of applied science and technique’ (p. 13) is expected. Novices move forward in such situations because they can ‘learn by doing’ (p. 37).

The images of the novice and the learner who reflects ‘in’ and ‘on’ action assume the dyad of the learner and the coach or teacher. In the case of the problem-solving novice, a more experienced person must be relied upon to prepare, obtain and discuss the problem that
the novices will solve. In the case of the reflective learner, both the skills-oriented debriefing session and the modelling of the professional language and implicit attitudes to work and workplace come from Quist. Although Petra talks and shows the drawing that she has prepared as part of her architectural training, she understands much more about the various qualities of her production by hearing these articulated by her coach, Quist. Hence, the mentor, coach, teacher or supervisor is charged with the responsibility of re-shaping the novice’s work and implicit attitudes, while the candidate has equal responsibilities except that these lie in the effort to both ‘do’ and to learn to reflect on that doing.

Knowledge construction and the fostering of a strong work ethic

Schön’s (1987) Quist displays the necessary ‘artistry’ that good coaching involves, much of the power of which is built on his greater experience, knowledge and expertise. Schön’s portrait shows us that novice and coach are different, not only in the degree to which they can realise their goals, but also because the coach can actually talk about the work with greater insight. However, in the interviews conducted with the supervisor and the candidate described in this chapter, it was shown that two common issues united supervisor and candidate. These common areas of experience, a commitment to the efficacy of ‘hard work’ and an understanding of each other’s position as women in contemporary society, underpinned the relationship and made it easier to sustain over a long period of time.

In her interview, the supervisor summed up her early impressions of the candidate by saying that she was a ‘hard worker’ (p. 12). From the beginning there was a shared appreciation that research involved dedication and resilience, although there is some evidence to suggest that the candidate’s appreciation of the exact nature of the amount of work required at each stage increased as the research study progressed. This is understandable given that neither of her previous research theses had involved the collection of data. The actual struggle involved in working very hard for a long period of time is hinted at rather than developed in many different parts of the candidate’s interview. She states that she caught the flu after her proposal, that she ‘slaved’ before supervision meetings and that she regularly presented drafts some 5,000 words in length to her supervisor. These hints are matched by the supervisor’s comment that she trusted that the work would be completed. The supervisor stated that in this particular can-
didature there was no need for an intense level of ‘scrutiny’ (p. 19) because ‘there was an absolute level of trust that what we were saying was happening’ (p. 19). Hence goals were set in the meetings and then adhered to and met within a certain time frame. The supervisor also showed a keen appreciation of the cost of the work undertaken: ‘there was one time when [the candidate]…just couldn’t write…I think she’d just become exhausted’ (p. 22).

**Knowledge construction and the significance of gender**

However, while the discussion thus far has focused on the explicit construction of understanding through reading, writing and intense discussion, another important element of the relationship made its presence felt in subtle ways. Such tacit knowledge concerned the supervisor’s appreciation of the pressing demands of home and family, demands which, in Australian society, still tend to be managed by the female partner who accepts responsibility for the ‘second shift’ referred to in feminist perspectives on work practices and access to leisure.

As all knowledge is social, it is also gendered. Leonard (2001) points out that many women have to juggle their doctoral study with ‘young children, needy partners, elderly relatives’ (p. 79). Hence, whether alluded to in a direct way or not, gender-related issues can complicate both the research itself and the supervisor–candidate interactions. In the relationship discussed throughout this chapter, it was the supervisor’s deep, but largely tacit, understanding of these issues that enabled topics such as the struggle to meet the demands of study and family responsibilities to be relegated to a rather minor place in the supervisory sessions. However, importantly, the avoidance of such topics was not based on indifference, but on the perception that the interview sessions were short. From the beginning, the supervisor was aware of the difficulties the candidate had faced in the past:

**Supervisor:** And they had always said that it would be [the candidate’s] turn [to study on a full-time basis]. And I always wondered, to be honest, whether that would happen. And so when it seemed like this was going to happen, I was really delighted for her. (p. 12)

The candidate appreciated the largely tacit understanding the supervisor displayed: ‘I said…“The kids are so intense at the moment…I want to be realistic.” And she understood. But she said, “Just think about it.”’ (p. 24). Again, the supervisor’s own framing of
the interaction helped the heavily committed candidate achieve some sort of distance from her responsibilities so that discussions about family matters did not dominate the meetings. The supervisor described both her own perspective and their fortnightly interactions in some detail. In the following extract from the supervisor’s transcript, the emphasis on the words ‘knew’ alludes to the shared understanding both had, while the repetition of the word ‘work’ reveals the strong work ethic that united supervisor and candidate.

Supervisor: We never talked about [gender] explicitly but we knew—there was almost this respect...You’re there to get on with your work and to focus on your work while you’re at work. And to keep the rest of your life private...And [the candidate] did that just intuitively. And that allowed us just to get on with our work. And I knew she was a great mother, great whatever. But that’s not what we were meeting about. (p. 20)

Such silent understanding allowed both supervisor and student to achieve a certain space. Rather than feeling that this was an unsympathetic distance, the candidate saw this as an enabling space, a freedom from being perceived negatively as a person who would not be able to accomplish either short-term or long-term goals.

Candidate: Somehow we never got really close socially. I think that was a real freedom...when people hear about my life...I’ve got this big household to run and they get sympathetic and then they put less demands on me, demands that I could, in fact, achieve...the crucial thing about us not getting close [over the three year candidature] was that she never saw how big my home life was day-to-day. So she could always say, ‘Okay, do you think you’ll have another 5,000 words ready by the next meeting?’ And I could always say ‘Yes’. It was brilliant. (pp. 26–7)

The final phase: achieving a timely completion

It is obvious that all doctoral candidates need good coaches, coaches who are as astute, as committed and as skilled in their professional fields as the Quist described in Schön’s (1987) work. However, as supervision is a long-term relationship conducted over a period of several years, the management of time intrudes on this relationship in
a more forceful way than it does in the more short-lived interactions of Quist and Petra. In the case of the supervisor and candidate interviewed, the success of the relationship can be attributed to the skilled ‘coaching’ of the supervisor, especially in the areas of foregrounding the significance of time and the importance of scholarly conversations. However, just as important as the supervisor’s skillfulness in coaching was the candidate’s ability to focus on completion and her willingness to write lengthy texts almost as soon as the initial, settling-in period of the candidature was over.

In her role as coach, the supervisor modeled the ways in which a timely completion is just one way of meeting the institutional demands of the situation and that time-lines and planning are crucial to the success of any major task including research. Both interviews stressed the degree to which regular appointments and meeting times characterised the whole period of the candidature, an emphasis that concurred with Heath’s (2002) finding that ‘regular, formal supervisory meetings, preferably at least every two weeks, are important’ (p. 52). The supervisor commented that the ‘You write–I read it–we meet’ rubric worked because the submission of each draft demonstrated progress and provided a focus for each discussion. The supervisor’s high expectations provided a framework which strengthened the candidate’s own desire to achieve her goal in a more orderly and less stressful manner than her masters by research.

However, in what was one of the biggest learning experiences of her candidature, the candidate came to realise that completion was a very different process from that of researching or writing drafts. The supervisor supported this realisation in two ways. Firstly, she not only involved herself in the intellectual or theoretical coaching, but also took a deep interest in what she referred to as the pragmatic aspects of timelines, timeliness and general professional punctuality. While talking about another aspect of supervision, she referred to distinct phases of the supervision as ‘that tough time of doing the proposal’ and the ‘final writing up time’ (p. 24) as two of the most demanding times of the process for both supervisor and candidate. Secondly, the supervisor expected to receive high quality drafts—the candidate commented that her supervisor had even corrected a slip in the use of ellipsis in an early draft. Again, that had been modeled during the supervisor’s doctoral candidature as the primary supervisor had been ‘good at reading drafts and so on in a very timely manner—and providing feedback that was quite detailed’ (Supervisor, p. 17). The candidate articulated her growth in understanding in the following key section from her interview:
Candidate: At the beginning you start off doing this big three-year project, and you think: ‘I’m doing it’…I think of it now as switching gears in a car. At some stage, you have to switch into fourth gear and think: ‘Now I’ve got to get completed.’ And it’s different. I think it was very skilled in retrospect…It was this skilled supervisory thing that actually pushed me to complete rather than to have a…fun-time reading. But I recognise now…that in some aspects of my life I’ve been very able during them, but have I actually tied the bow? I think sometimes not. And what I’ve learned from my contact with her was something I would never have thought about as a key issue in choosing her as a supervisor—I didn’t know the [issue of completion] existed. (p. 24)

Hence, the learning accomplished during the study afforded both supervisor and student the opportunity to reach great insights into the nature of work and their own profiles as working people. The candidate, especially, seemed to have reflected on the exact nature of the more generic learning that she had accomplished. However, the supervisor also saw herself as benefiting quite directly from her experiences as a supervisor, remarking that she enjoyed supervision even though it was taxing because, inevitably, ‘You both stretch yourselves—you both learn things…I probably see supervision now as a privilege’. (p. 4)

Knowledge dissemination

While both people agreed on the excitement and interest of the candidature, the dissemination of the knowledge in the form of published papers was the one issue raised during the interviews that seemed to cause both the candidate and the supervisor some anxiety. However, it is argued here that this was due to the situation of flux in which such issues are being discussed in Australia and beyond, rather than because either the candidate or the supervisor had not cooperated effectively in relation to this topic.

Completely focused on finishing, the candidate did not publish any papers during the candidature, although she presented a paper on methodological issues at a conference held for research students at her own university. Although Heath’s (2002) study found that a similar pattern was quite common for students enrolled in social science and education degrees, this can be contrasted with other disciplines in which, according to Heath, it is common to have two, three or even
four papers published by the conclusion of the program of study. Hence, the research degree experience is a complex one because timely completion may inhibit the extent to which a student can prepare and present well-argued papers at seminars and conferences. However, as the changes already made to the research environment gather pace, it may be argued that in the near future every supervisor’s repertoire of coaching strategies will need to include ideas on how to encourage students to prepare and present papers and published works during their candidatures.

In her interview, the supervisor made explicit reference to these issues, but seemed undecided about the co-writing of papers and whether or not such activities should be seen as an essential part of any supervisor–candidate relationship or something that came about only if the candidate was capable and/or enjoyed writing (p. 30). Once again, the supervisor returned to her own experience as a doctoral student to comment on this issue, saying that although she had respected her supervisor greatly, she had ‘never’ (p. 2) published anything with him and wrote only one paper during her candidature. Yet, during her master’s degree, a different supervisor at the same university had successfully mentored her ‘into the world of publishing’ (p. 9), so that she had been able to publish a book based on her master’s thesis. She went on to reflect on the significant issue of publication in the following way:

**Supervisor:** I have tried to give my students opportunities to write, but not in any systematic way. I think now we need to get more systematic in doing that. And now...having had time in R & I and working with other people around the University, it seems to me that other people do that much better than we do in Education. Even to having a deal that we will do X number of papers...maybe it shouldn’t be a bonus. Maybe it should be an expectation about writing papers. But then I feel torn particularly about students who are working part-time—how they fit that into their lives. (p. 30)

Her final conclusion was that these matters need to be discussed and agreed upon at the beginning of the relationship ‘before there is anything to fight about’ (p. 30), so that if the supervisor offers a pact such as ‘I’ll be the last author’ (p. 30), the intellectual property issues have been acknowledged ‘up front’ (p. 30).

Hence, some interesting issues were raised under the umbrella of knowledge dissemination. Although it was covered somewhat quickly,
both supervisor and candidate made comments that showed that this topic merited further attention. It is possible that the candidate had not thought about this issue deeply enough during the degree—she stated that she had put the goal of completing before anything else. As the supervisor remarked, ‘She was so focused during her time…I gave her a number of opportunities, but they weren’t right for her’ (p. 30).

As each of the three people involved in the interview situation (interviewer, candidate and supervisor) had stories to tell each other about the publication aspect of their various candidatures, the dissemination side of supervision needs further elaboration. In a climate in which products are often as important as processes, publication may become an essential part of candidate–supervisor contracts in the future. Such issues underline the need for supervisor and candidate to have agreed in quite explicit ways about various aspects of their relationship at the beginning of the journey. There will always be, however, aspects of the learning that cannot be anticipated.

The journey from coach to colleague

The transcripts of the interviews showed that in responding to the experienced supervisors’ preferred ways of working and interacting in meetings and discussion, candidates can be introduced to the sorts of attributes that they will require to complete the degree at hand and, if it is desired, to take up similar work in the future. Hence, it will be argued that in responding to the supervisor in her role as intellectual expert, leader or mentor, the candidate learns that depth and accuracy of knowledge are important and that becoming ‘the other’ requires substantial learning. In responding to the supervisor as coach, the candidate learns that resilience, persistence and hard work are valued attributes. In finding a sympathetic listener, the candidate also finds a friend within a community of scholars and so is introduced to the positive social aspects of the professional experience.

The future: food for thought

What then can we take away from these interviews for our own interactions with future candidates—if we are supervisors—and potential supervisors, if we are candidates? It seems obvious that the supervisor–candidate relationship is complex because of the many different competing demands that both must meet through the doctoral journey. Two of the most obvious tensions involve time and autonomy. The candidate constantly feels the pressure of time—as the interviews
showed—because she must read widely and yet write extended pieces of text. The supervisor faces great challenges in a rather different direction: she must guide, and yet not control or dominate, the student’s research endeavour. At the end of the study, the candidate should be able to take on independent research. If the supervisor has been too forceful or too nurturing, such independence will not be achieved.

It can be argued now that in the light of these interviews, it is the work of Donald Schön (1987)—and, in particular, his insights into the activities, practices and discourses designated in his work as ‘coaching’—that is the most useful way in which a successful supervisor–candidate relationship can be described. Such was the ‘fit’ (Candidate, p. 27) between the views of expert supervisor and novice candidate that in the interviews there is evidence to suggest that the relationship eventually attained the respectful sharing characteristic of peers and friendly colleagues. Further research is needed to establish the extent to which this is common or unusual. It is possible that this quality of interaction is achieved in the latter stages of many research candidatures as the candidate’s understanding of the field becomes greater and their own role moves from that of novice to that of expert, from the one who needs coaching to a collaborative peer.

Hence, in the most successful supervisor–candidate relationships, knowledge management—in particular the construction, use, and dissemination of knowledge—is at the fore bringing with it a complex array of roles and responsibilities. It is now clear from the interviews with both supervisor and candidate that both cooperated in the early stages of the candidature to set up mutually satisfying ways of working. While the supervisor often took the lead in setting up work-enabling practices, her ability to make the supervision sessions both energising and reassuring allowed the student to undertake a large project and then, having successfully completed the early stages of the candidature, to grow in autonomy and gain confidence as a researcher, thinker and writer.

The early stages of research candidatures are very significant. However, the interviews showed that it is not easy to predict which issues need to be discussed explicitly at the beginning of the candidature, although the supervisor stressed throughout her interview that the effort to do this is a central part of the supervisor’s role.

There is no doubt, however, that skilled coaching contributed greatly to the candidate’s successful learning and that such supervision deserves both close examination and further research. In particular, future studies need to explore the ways in which an experienced supervisor interacts in each supervision session in order
to both critique and encourage the student. Also worthy of scrutiny is the interpersonal ‘flexibility’ that enables a supervisor to adjust their own preferred patterns of supervision to accommodate individual students. For all these reasons and more, the subject of supervision deserves to remain high on the list of contemporary research agendas, both in Australia’s higher education sector and beyond its borders.

References


