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Team supervision of the doctorate: managing roles, relationships and contradictions

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Working in teams is widely recognised as an important skill across a range of occupations and professions, with the teaching of teamwork now a feature of the higher education curriculum (Drake et al, 2006). The success of teamwork, however, depends to a large extent on the mediated management of complex variables such as individual conduct, collective action, technologies, space and communication. Leathard and McLaren (2007) make the further point that the concept of teamwork may itself be subject to contradictory ideas about the meaning of teamwork and how teams ought to be structured.

It is against this background that there has been an increase in the use of teams for doctoral supervision, in part reflecting a growing trend towards interdisciplinarity as part of the twenty-first century knowledge economy (Manathunga et al, 2006) and also as recognition that it is unlikely that a single supervisor will have the full range of knowledge and skills to support complex doctoral work. Specific methodological skill as well as subject knowledge is relevant and Phillips and Pugh (2000) discuss arrangements put in place by some universities whereby supervision involves external academics working jointly with internal ones. Thus supervision teams of two, three and four members are not uncommon and the charge to doctoral students made by Rugg and Petre (2004) to manage their supervisor(s) is therefore more challenging in light of the team dynamic that may not be cohesive or harmonious. This article considers some of the challenges and benefits of the practice of team supervision within postgraduate research education focusing on roles and relationships within the team and on the issue of conflicting views and expectations amongst supervisors that can both stem from and give rise to role tensions.

Conduct of supervision – roles within the team

The current trend for doctoral research to be supervised by more than one supervisor has been influenced by a greater attention to accountability within academia with students increasingly having the status of consumer as well as that of student within the broader commercial higher educational context (Waghid, 2006). Team supervision is thought to reduce the risk of incompetence increasing the likelihood of successful completion (Rugg and Petre, 2004). This is acknowledged within 'good practice' guidelines from research councils and within policies issued by individual universities with an increased emphasis on appropriate frequency of supervision and delineation of supervisors' duties and responsibilities within the team.

The composition of the team may be shaped by a number of factors though most universities require each team to have at least one member who has supervised to completion. One model is an experienced supervisor working with a novice who, although having expertise in the subject or method, has not acted as a supervisor previously. This can be understood as a 'coaching' or 'mentoring' model (see Manathunga and Goozee, 2007) whereby the supervisor new to the role is both

supporting the student and being supported by their academic colleague in developing the particular skills of effective supervision practice. This learning role on the part of the novice supervisor clearly can give rise to status differentiation within the team, with the experienced supervisor taking the lead in both the pace and conduct of supervision. The extent to which this hierarchy will result in harmonious working will depend on the individuals involved but this model may have greater potential for smoother functioning than teams of supervisors with peer status where the issue of power dynamics is less clearly delineated. Indeed, Phillips and Pugh (2000) argue that a model of a first supervisor who takes the lead and a second supervisor, who gives support, has advantages over a model of supervisors of equal status. My experience of working as a member of a 'horizontal' team, however, has been very positive due, in the main, to a shared commitment within the team to student-centred supervisory practice. This has resulted in comfortable working relationships that have directly benefited the student because their best interests have been to the fore. In addition, mutual respect and a willingness on the part of supervisors to learn from each other have created a teaching and learning environment characterised by intellectual generosity.

Supervision is comprised of intellectual, methodological and pastoral elements and the significance of each of these will alter during the course of the research project with Firth and Martens (2008) highlighting the need within effective supervisory practice for an appropriate balance between emotional and rational elements. Where the research develops in ways not anticipated at the outset, changes to the supervision team can be required in order to support the revised shape of the project. For example, a significant change to methodology, with expertise in a particular method not represented amongst current supervisors, can result in the recruitment of a new member to the team with their special methodological experience bringing benefit to the student. This can lead to a notional division of labour within the team as a function of supervisory knowledge and skill diversity. What is important is that all members of the team (and the student) are clear about who is doing what and that agreement is reached about respective responsibilities (Phillips and Pugh, 2000).

Very little has been written about the ways in which the venue for supervision can affect the conduct of the session with the choice of venue seen as a component of the team power dynamic. Where supervision takes place in the office of one of the supervisors their role as 'host' can come to the fore and, even where supervisors are of equal status, this hosting function can result in a 'host as lead' model. This should not be seen as detrimental but understanding of the ways in which ownership of supervision space can influence the conduct of the session merits attention. With, in many universities an increasing pressure on the use of meeting rooms (as neutral space), the use of personal offices for supervision is unlikely to change. A mitigating factor in some institutions, however, is the trend for academics to share offices with a rise in 'hot desking' a feature of some office arrangements in the sector.

Relationships and interaction with the student

The issue of power represented in relationships between supervisors and students as part of postgraduate pedagogies has been widely discussed (see, for example, Bartlett and Mercer, 2000) with this adding to the complexity of the doctoral supervision

process that Sambrook et al (2008) characterise as a web of a range of relationships. Rugg and Petre (2004) argue that doctoral supervision is a relationship not a service and that interactions between supervisors and their students, as well as between supervisors in the team, need to be managed. The issue of experienced versus novice supervisor discussed above is one feature of the team power dynamic; another is the part played by external supervisors who may feel that they are 'guests' within the team, with lack of clarity about the nature and extent of their contribution influencing their relationship with the student.

In their critique of approaches to team supervision Delamont et al (2004) highlight how relationships between supervisors can both positively and negatively affect the student's experience of the doctoral undertaking. They point to problems arising where teams are characterised by intellectual and personal divisions. In such circumstances supervisors may use the student in order to score points off each other as part of their own power struggles (Phillips and Pugh, 2000) resulting in the student becoming distracted and confused. A student in the middle of such supervisor interactions should be advised to consult an independent third party (in my institution this role is that of third party monitor) who is usually expected to act confidentially in supporting the student and only referring the matter at the express wish of the student. Often, being able to talk through these issues can help the student develop strategies to deal with tensions within the team obviating the need to directly confront supervisors, itself a potentially highly disruptive act that could fundamentally derail the whole project.

Communication is at the core of relationships and this takes a variety of forms, with email increasingly the dominant form across supervision teams, particularly where there is cross-faculty collaboration. There are different types of supervision meetings for different purposes across the stages of the candidature but, in an ideal world, before each supervision the student would be expected to circulate an agenda and a current piece of work for critical comment with supervisors communicating with each other before the meeting about their views on the student's work and overall progress. One motivation for this pre-supervision communication between supervisors is to try and ensure a broadly agreed 'line' to the student, ironing out differences of opinion beforehand wherever possible. Such pre-agreement helps to build trust in the supervision relationship avoiding splintered messages to the student. The reality, however, is often very different with students missing agreed deadlines and submitting their work late and supervisors, in balancing a range of teaching, research and management demands, unable to give this their full attention prior to the meeting. Such constraints point to the supervision team as both a human and temporal resource with the potential for fragmented supervision and the voicing of differences amongst the supervision team. This is considered below in the context of managing a number of potential conflicts and contradictions.

Managing tensions and contradictions

Although relationships between student and supervisors are principally supportive and collegiate business relationships, because of the often emotionally charged nature of the doctoral undertaking, these relationships can break down. So too can relationships between supervisors, despite their supposed base as one of academic partnership. From the student's perspective, continuity of the team is usually preferred and this

sometimes will be difficult in light of both role tensions and intellectual disagreements. These disagreements may arise when supervision takes place without the presence of the whole team that Rugg and Petre (2004) argue is a more common occurrence than students may anticipate at the start of their research. Phillips and Pugh (2000) suggest that the probability of students seeing all their supervisors at the same time is considerably less than that of seeing them separately. In these circumstances the potential for students to be given conflicting advice is therefore not inconsiderable, giving rise to frustration and uncertainty for the student. One model I have come across that attempts to address this issue is an agreed ground rule whereby absent supervisors consent to broadly support feedback given to the student at supervision. Only where there is substantial disagreement is this to be conveyed separately to the student but with the full knowledge of the team.

A question raised by the issue of conflicting advice is whether there are benefits for the whole supervision process of supervisors airing their differences of opinion with the student as a way of helping to develop critical thinking about practical issues and ideas. In my experience disagreements between supervisors can provide opportunity for deeper critical reflection on both ideas and process often eliciting the student's opinions as well as enabling them to ask questions and demonstrate their knowledge. The key to this is the *way* in which differences are shared: if the discussion takes what I will term a 'competitive turn' this is likely to be counter productive leaving the student feeling unsettled. An underpinning cause of this 'competitive turn' can be strong hierarchy differentials in the team such as professor over lecturer and ultimately, despite good intentions, these status issues cannot be ignored as they are likely to influence the workings of the team.

Conclusion

Although as Delamont et al (2004: 85) point out some supervision teams are bureaucratic fictions that exist only on paper, others are intellectually and practically engaged cooperatives operating in the best interests of the student. The question remains, however, of whether doctoral team supervision is preferable to the classical model of single expert supervisor; also does it offer students more benefits than disadvantages? The most common difficulty associated with team supervision is that there is less likely to be one person who is willing to take an overall view of the project (including the thesis) in a way similar to the task undertaken by the external examiner who will make the final judgement of its appropriateness and worth (Phillips and Pugh, 2000). In terms of the breadth and depth of subject and methodological knowledge available to the student through team supervision, provided that any disagreements within the team are carefully managed and not allowed to be disruptive of the student's progress, this approach offers considerable added value.

One important issue not debated above is that of illness/unplanned extended leave for supervisors and, very rarely, the death of a supervisor that Delamont et al (2004: 84) characterise as an 'intellectual bereavement'. Where this loss occurs within the context of team supervision, the student is able to benefit from some measure of continuity and consistency from the remaining team members. Team supervision clearly protects students from the traumatic upheaval caused by the loss/withdrawal of

a supervisor who is the only supervisor on the project and, given the duration of the doctoral project, this benefit should not be underestimated.

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