

Reflective Practice in Improving Doctoral Supervision Skills

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Abstract. This paper proposes that doctoral supervisors could benefit by adopting practices used in personal counselling to achieve a balanced student-supervisor relationship. The processes used in counselling a client – such as preparation, getting started, active listening, problem identification and clarification, reframing and challenging, exploring options and facilitating actions, and termination and handling of ethical issues – are also important in the doctoral supervision process. By adopting good practices used in counselling, doctoral supervisors could develop effective boundaries with their students, learn to be more assertive, learn to reflect, and increase their own self-awareness and emotional awareness in the supervision process. This is particularly useful when the candidates have taken up doctoral studies at a mature age and are no longer fulltime students at university, but are doing their doctorate part-time while working fulltime and have a family to support as well. Work-life balance issues add stress to these students, preventing them from concentrating on their doctoral research. This paper will describe and reflect on the experiences of a doctoral supervisor who attempted to use some of the concepts he had learnt from attending a postgraduate course on counselling to improve his own doctoral supervision work. The paper will conclude with an evaluation of the experiential learning process and close with some suggestions to doctoral supervisors who would like to take a similar journey.

1. INTRODUCTION

Doctoral supervisors are usually competent in providing intellectual advice to their students, which is part of their responsibility as academics. While supervisors have expertise in the content area of the candidate's study area, due to their prior education and training, universities often provide them with support for the research and student administration processes. Supervisors also have a pastoral responsibility to help improve their students' confidence and morale, so that they can successfully complete their studies. However, supervisors are not offered any training in this role. Facility in this skill is often gained through experience [1, 2].

This paper describes how a doctoral supervisor adapted the skills he learnt from a counselling course to improve his doctoral supervision process and provide social and emotional support to his students, while at the same time establishing a boundary to achieve a balanced relationship.

The paper will conclude with some observations on what worked and what did not work, and suggestions on how to achieve a more balanced supervisor-student relationship.

2. BACKGROUND

I joined academia, in 1999, at the Graduate College of Management at Southern Cross University (SCU), after several years of experience in management, including senior management positions in industry. One of my responsibilities at the college was to supervise

doctoral students undertaking a PhD or DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) program. In 2006, I left SCU and joined the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), where one of my responsibilities is to supervise doctoral students for their PhD or DPM (Doctor of Project Management) programs.

Since I became an academic, I have successfully supervised or co-supervised 20 doctoral students. Initially, I tried to emulate my own doctoral research supervisors in my supervision process, but have also learnt some skills by talking to, or attending workshops conducted by, other experienced supervisors.

I enrolled in the Graduate Diploma in Counselling Program offered by the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP) in 2001, as I became interested in helping managers to perform better. The last module, called Theory of Supervision, which I completed in 2009, required me to do 144 hours of fieldwork. I decided to do this at UTS to improve my doctoral supervision skills as I could see parallels between the counselling and doctoral supervision processes. I was given recognition for prior learning for 50% of the fieldwork due to my supervision experience in industry and academia. One of my colleagues, who was not my line supervisor, but who had oversight of doctoral students in my school agreed to be my supervisor for the fieldwork.

3. GETTING STARTED

I had to prepare a proposal for ACAP on what I would do to improve my supervision skills during my fieldwork for their approval. This required me to review books and papers about doctoral supervision and counselling to identify the skills I would focus on improving.

After this review, I selected the following areas where I planned to improve my skills during the fieldwork, mainly based on a book on how to be a supervisee [3] by Carroll and Gilbert and a paper describing counselling practices involved in PhD supervision by Jockey [1]:

1. Learning to develop effective boundaries between my student and myself
2. Learning how to be more assertive
3. Learning how to give feedback
4. Learning how to reflect
5. Learning self-awareness and emotional awareness
6. Learning how to dialogue.

The following aids and processes were expected to be used in the fieldwork:

1. Review of books and papers related to improving doctoral supervision
2. Use of FIRST website that helps Australian university supervisors
3. Attending workshops conducted by UTS graduate school to help supervisors
4. Discuss with experienced supervisors at UTS
5. Regular meetings with fieldwork supervisor
6. Taping of supervision sessions for my own reflection.

A learning contract was developed with my fieldwork supervisor and submitted to ACAP for approval. During the fieldwork, the tutor of the supervision module interviewed my fieldwork supervisor and me to check if the fieldwork was proceeding smoothly. A closing report on the fieldwork will be prepared by the end of October to tick off what was achieved and what was not.

I agreed to keep a reflective journal for my own use but prepare a fortnightly summary of my reflections. As my fieldwork supervisor and I like to use diagrams, an artist's notebook (which had a blank page to draw pictures on one side and a ruled page to write on the other side) was used to prepare the fortnightly summaries.

The learning contract was prepared in the form of a table shown in Table 1. Only the first task is shown in the table.

Table 1: Learning Contract

Learning Goals	Learning Tasks	Method of assessment	Period	Planned with
Developing effective boundaries	Develop a supervisor-student contract Use it with new students Send it to current students as well Check how the contract is working	Development of clear contracts Make improvements after use	Two months	Four students

4. SELECTING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

A doctoral supervisor has the dual role of providing intellectual inputs as well as caring for the student and has to balance these roles. Jockey [1:7] advocates that 'the role of the PhD supervisor contains within it a number of potential ambiguities linked to its intellectual and counselling dimensions, and being an effective supervisor requires managing these'.

One of the ways to start working on this balance is to agree on expectations from both the supervisor and the student. Dealmont et al. [4:24] suggest the following expectations.

The supervisor can expect the student to:

1. Turn up at appointments prepared for them
2. Write regularly and share the draft material
3. Tell the truth about work done and not done
4. Keep in touch – socially, practically (holidays, sickness, change of address etc.) and academically
5. Most importantly, do the research tasks that have been mutually agreed and scheduled.

In return, students can have expectations of their supervisors:

1. Regular supervision: A reasonable student can expect to see his or her supervisor twenty to thirty times a year (if full-time), for a private one-to-one discussion of the research.
2. Written feedback: A student can expect to have draft material read and returned with written comment within a reasonable time period.

I used these suggestions as the basis to draft a supervision contract with my students. I also looked at what UTS expected from me and the rights of my students as per the UTS Code of Practice for Supervisors, Advisors and Research Degree Candidates (<http://gsu.uts.edu.au/policies/codeofpractice.html>) and came up with a doctoral supervision contract included as Appendix A to this paper. My students did not have any issues with accepting this as our document to set expectations (or boundaries).

I often take on too many tasks without realising what I am getting into. My friends jokingly say that they should buy me a 'No' tie to wear. I realised that to be a good supervisor and to implement the boundaries I have set with my students I had to learn to be more assertive. I had been teaching assertiveness to my students in my classes on conflict management and like the idea of the 'I' statements recommended by the Conflict Resolution Network [5].

But I needed more than an 'I' statement. After looking at various books that promised to make one more assertive, I found some good ideas in a book by Bower and Bower [6] titled *'Asserting Yourself: A Practical Guide to Positive Change'*, and found the idea of preparing DESC (Describe, Express, Specify, Consequences) scripts to be very useful for dealing with my students. A typical script is as follows:

Describe: When I ask you to check your references I also provide an explanation on how Harvard Referencing style is used at UTS and point you to examples of how to reference at the BELL site. Yet when you send me a revised draft the referencing is still not correct.

Express: When this happens I get frustrated.

Specify: I want to find a way to solve this problem. I would like you to go to contact the UTS library and speak to a librarian on how best to use EndNote bibliographic software to improve your referencing skills.

Consequences: I will be able to provide more useful guidance on your drafts without having to worry about your referencing if you can do them as required.

Giving appropriate feedback can help learning as well as help change behaviour [3]. Both are important in doctoral supervision. I wanted to improve in this area as many students I supervise are not fulltime students. They often take up a doctorate as they feel they have something to

contribute but the doctoral journey is a tough one if you do not devote enough time to conduct the research. Research also needs a different attitude to doing coursework. I have had some surprises when I took on a doctoral student from an MBA program I was involved in teaching based on their performance in my coursework classes, only to find that they could not cope with the rigours of conducting research over the long haul.

It was important to learn how to reflect from the supervision process so that I could improve the process. As an action researcher, I valued reflection but I had difficulty writing down my reflections soon after a supervision session. I tended to hold my reflections in my memory which does not result in deep reflection. I came across two good books written by Jennifer Moon [7, 8]. The book titled *'Learning Journals'* provides a generic framework to improve reflective writing with clear examples showing the difference between descriptive and reflective writing. This was useful to improve my practice of recording my reflections after each supervision session and also discussing what happened with my fieldwork supervisor.

Carroll and Gilbert [3] point out the importance of emotions in counselling supervision which is equally applicable to doctoral supervision. They state (p. 95): 'Supervision is an emotional experience and how we deal with emotional side of supervisory relationships, of feedback in supervision, of assessment, evaluation and supervision reports – not to mention disputes, conflicts and disagreement is often not even considered on the supervision agenda'. I decided to take up two of the emotional intelligence skills for my fieldwork – learning self-awareness and learning emotional awareness. I have observed in the past that I tend to be task-oriented in my supervision mainly due to my technical and project management background and I am not proficient at the human side of supervision. Although I have changed over the years since I started work as an engineer and moved up into managerial positions I felt that I needed to improve further.

Dialogue has been identified as the best method to use in a supervisory exchange in counselling. I think this applies to doctoral supervision as well, since an important role of a doctoral supervisor is to help the student think critically. Other forms of conversations are not conducive to help the student think critically as well as gain more confidence from the supervisory sessions. I supervise doctoral students who come with many years of experience in the areas they plan to conduct research in, and my role becomes more of a facilitator who helps the students with the process of research. I felt improving my capacity

to have a dialogue during my supervision sessions could be useful.

5. FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES

The fieldwork was planned to take place between May and September this year but it has lasted longer than planned due to other critical tasks that had higher priority at work. It will finish by the end of October, when I plan to submit my full report to ACAP.

I think that I have been able to progress in the following areas that I set out to improve.

1. Establishing boundaries

I have developed a contract that has been signed off by a couple of my doctoral students. However, some promises made have not been kept mainly due to other priorities that the students had which has prevented them from providing drafts when they were supposed to. I have also been unable to provide feedback promptly when I got busy during teaching block workshops. But it has made a difference in managing my time better. With one of my students I am trying to provide clear dates by which drafts are to be submitted and this is just beginning to make some difference. Establishing boundaries becomes a real challenge when the student you are supervising is also a colleague [9] and other considerations (like teaching load) begin to affect respecting the boundaries. While this contract was not a binding one, but a mutual agreement of roles and responsibilities, some candidates signed them off immediately but did not follow the contract. For example, they turned up at supervision sessions without submitting written work as agreed. They had to be reminded but still the contract was not honoured easily. I felt that they had signed off on the contract out of politeness but did not appreciate that it was intended for mutual benefit. Perhaps a discussion at an initial supervision session about the contract could help in clarifying the purpose and benefits of supervision contracts. Contracts also need to be revisited from time to time to check that they are functioning well, and not just when things go wrong as is the case with commercial contracts. The contract that I prepared had provision for adjustment to ensure that changes could be made after mutual discussion.

2. Assertiveness

This is certainly an area where I have made good progress. In the past, I used to edit draft materials each time I got them,

including checking all the references. I have become stricter now in asking my students to pay attention to checking their drafts thoroughly before they send it to me. It helps them to submit clean documents when they write conference and journal papers as well.

3. Giving feedback:

I have not been able to make good progress in this area but recently I found that another supervisor who was co-supervising a student with me demonstrated how to give good feedback to a student when we were trying to rush him through a deadline he had to meet administratively.

4. Learning how to reflect:

My journal writing has shown improvement but I find that the summary journal that I prepare for my fieldwork supervisor with pictures or diagrams works better for me. In terms of Moon's [8] classification of reflective journals I would rate myself as between 2 and 3 but I really need to reach level 4.

As an action researcher, I often use a set of questions to reflect on an event that I planned:

What did I plan?

What happened as per my plan? Why or why not?

What happened that I did not plan for? Why?

What can I do next time to improve my plans?

While I felt that I had used these questions, I was not happy about the depth of my reflection as described by Moon [8].

I think I recognised certain issues pointed out by Moon [8] as barriers to journal writing – the fear of self-disclosure in the journal and the sensitive nature of materials that would appear in the journal. I need to work to overcome these barriers. I think I will take up some of the advice offered by Moon [8].

1. Let words flow as once ideas flow others will follow. This is a good suggestion as I often find that once I start putting words on paper I can go on.

2. Dig deeper trying to discover “truths” you have discovered through your experiences. This is an area I have to work on to deepen my reflections.
3. Write things up as soon as you can. This is definitely an area for improvement as I tend to put it off.
4. Be selective and do not try and write up too much. This is also very good advice.

The main problem I faced in keeping up with my learning journals was setting aside time to write. I have taken on some voluntary work this year which has been overwhelming and I have decided to give it up next year to focus more on my academic work. I have also invested in a speech recognition software and hope to make use of it to record my reflections by voice, as I often find myself reflecting mentally but not writing down my reflections.

5. Learning EI skills:

I believe I have made progress in this area as I am now able to listen more actively as well as pay attention to verbal messages to become more aware of what else is happening besides our conversations. I can sense a difference in attitude towards one of my students at least, as I could relate to the tensions that this student was experiencing during supervision sessions due to external circumstances.

6. Learning to dialogue:

I had not been able to make much progress in this aspect mainly because three of my students were getting ready for their first assessment and the sessions required more direction setting and quick feedback than dialogue. However, recently an opportunity came up when one of my Master’s students, who was also doing some other work as part of a research grant, was trying to find a focus for her thesis. I started a dialogue with her on how she can look at the data she had collected to determine an area of focus for her. Soon, a couple of interesting ideas surfaced. I have also been able to persuade her to start writing a reflective journal about peripheral events when she collects data for the research grant, to get her to think more critically, and she has taken this suggestion on board.

6. MENTORING, COUNSELLING AND COACHING?

As I started applying counselling skills to improve my doctoral supervision, I wondered what was the difference between counselling skills and other helping skills such as mentoring and coaching. Mentoring is often associated with teaching and supervising in educational institutions, while coaching has become more prevalent in sports and business. There is also debate about the differences between these interventions in the literature [10, 11]. According to Clutterbuck [10, p 9] ‘coaching in most applications addresses performance in some aspect of an individual’s work or life; while mentoring is often more associated with much broader, holistic development and with career progress’. Garvey [11] also compares counselling with mentoring and coaching. He differentiates between them by stating that [11, p 7-8] ‘Counselling is a highly skilled one to one helping activity which has an overt therapeutic purpose ... Coaching is also a skilled activity and its focus is on performance and skill enhancement. It can be both group or one to one ... Mentoring may be associated with induction, career and personal development, personal and career support change’.

I feel that all three play a part in effective supervision. With the emphasis on faster completion of government-funded doctorates, performance needs improvement, which seems to fall in the area of coaching. A doctoral endeavour is sometimes pursued for personal development and advancement in career. This is particularly true of academics who are being pressured by universities to have a doctoral qualification for career retention and progression. Mentoring is associated with professional, academic and personal development. Doing a doctorate is often a long and lonely journey with ups and downs along the way. I believe counselling skills will be useful for supervisors to keep candidates motivated along the way. I do not think supervisors have to undertake a full course in counselling, as I did, but some knowledge of counselling skills would definitely be useful to improve doctoral supervision. At this point, this is only an observation and it would be interesting to do some more research into the relative benefits of these three helping activities in doctoral supervision.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the concept of using my counselling knowledge to improve my supervision has been a useful exercise, and I think that my supervision process has improved and I am more confident of my supervision ability now. However, the time set aside to improve so many aspects has been short to achieve all that I set out to do. Pressure at work has not helped nor has the volunteer work I have

taken up. I do not plan to stop here but will continue to apply my counselling knowledge to my supervision techniques, as I think it will add value to my role as a supervisor. I also want to look at the relative merits of mentoring, coaching and counselling in improving my supervision skills.

At the end of the fieldwork, I plan to talk to some of my students and my fieldwork supervisor to check whether they have noticed any change in the way I have been supervising them and whether it has been a better experience for them.

8. REFERENCES

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Appendix A:

Supervision contract with doctoral students:

This is a supervision contract between
 Supervisor:
 Candidate

We both are governed by the code of practice for supervisors, advisors and research degree candidates published by the Graduate School at UTS.

What is supervision?

Supervision is a process used by supervisors and candidates to give/receive guidance on all aspects of the candidature where they give/receive both formal and informal feedback on the candidate's research work and help the candidate to be competent researcher.

Practicalities:

1. Time table for regular meetings
2. Study plan
3. Keeping notes and action items from meetings
4. What can the supervisor assist the student with?
5. Are ethical and IP issues clarified?
6. Are the assessment processes clarified?
7. Are the progress reporting processes clarified?
8. Attending useful sessions conducted by the University Graduate School
9. What is our understanding on publishing from the research?
10. How do we network with the larger community in the research area?
11. Agreement on confidentiality.
12. What happens when we realise the supervision is not working for either of us?

Procedures for communication:

At the start of each month we will agree on the dates for face-to-face meetings, for the moment based on a yearly plan that we have agreed at the study plan put together at the start of the candidature.

If a supervision session is postponed or cancelled by either of us we will agree to provide ... days notice.

Our contact details are as follows.

Details	Supervisor	Candidate
Work phone		
Home phone		
Mobile		
Email:		
In an emergency:		

Roles and responsibilities:

As a supervisor I will take responsibility for:

1. Time keeping
2. Managing the overall agenda

3. Giving feedback
4. Monitoring the supervisory relationship
5. Creating a safe place
6. Keep notes of the session
7. Preparing the candidate for assessment
8. Helping the candidate secure Human Research Ethics Committee approvals
9. Preparing the candidate for the examination
10. Read and comment critically on drafts including final thesis
11. Advise on support available from the university
12. Liaise with faculty and university staff as required to help with the progress of the research.

As a candidate you are responsible for:

1. Preparing for supervision sessions
2. Sending materials in advance of supervision sessions
3. Presenting during supervision
4. Keeping notes of supervision sessions
5. Submitting written work regularly
6. Taking action based on feedback
7. Preparing progress reports on time
8. Keeping track of milestones agreed upon.
9. At any time either party (supervisor or candidate) can initiate discussion around renegotiation of the contract or any part of it.

Details	Supervisor	Candidate
Name		
Signature		
Date		
Revision		