



Aspects of mentorship in team supervision of doctoral students in Australia

Margaret Robertson¹

Received: 21 December 2016 / Accepted: 20 July 2017 / Published online: 1 August 2017
© The Australian Association for Research in Education, Inc. 2017

Abstract This article examines three aspects of mentorship in collaborative supervision of HDR studies in Australian contexts. The first aspect of mentorship is what the doctoral student learns about supervision—positively or negatively—through the experience of being supervised (supervisor to student). The second aspect is understood as an experienced supervisor who oversees a novice supervisor as part of their rite of passage to becoming a principal supervisor, (expert to novice). Team modes of supervision, particularly collaborative modes open up new ways of performing mentorship within the supervisory context adding richness to the learning context for all participants. To address problems arising from the complexity of team supervision, a third aspect of mentorship might be considered productive (ex-officio mentor to team). The article concludes that mentorship about supervision in each aspect is enhanced through collaboration, though there are challenges for universities to make more systematic the mentor role of principal supervisors. The recommendations have implications for university policy and practices.

Keywords Collaborative team supervision Self-regulation Mentorship Doctoral supervision

Introduction

Supervision by more than one supervisor of doctoral students throughout candidature is now considered best practice, and is enshrined in policy across Australian universities and understood as team supervision. This follows trends in

✉ Margaret Robertson
mj.robertson@latrobe.edu.au

¹ La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

the UK (Pole 1998

experienced mentors to be available to teams, especially in the early stages of collaborative team establishment.

Concepts of mentorship about supervision in the literature

Learning about supervision of postgraduate students is available from a number of sources, including a growing body of literature. Increasingly supervisor training programmes are being made mandatory in Australian universities and co-supervising a student through to completion is becoming the norm (Kiley 2011). It should be noted however that there is a distinction between training for supervision and mentoring about supervision. Training is seen as more instrumental, focusing on policy, procedures and best practice advice that is removed from any emotional connections to the practice (Kiley 2011). Mentoring is understood as knowledge and guidance from a more experienced colleague to an inexperienced or less experienced individual and includes personal and career advice and access to resources such as professional networks (Pearson and Kayrooz 2004) in a particular context. The relationship between mentor and mentee(s) may also include an emotional connection (Pearson and Brew 2002).

In doctoral supervision literature it is apparent that the primary source of learning about supervision comes from supervisors' experience of being supervised (Guerin and Green 2015; Johnson et al. 2000), regardless of the mode of supervision. New supervisors are likely to mimic the approach taken by their supervisor as the only known model, though some with unsatisfactory experiences will deliberately attempt to develop other models (Lee 2008). Alternative or supplementary models may be made available to the novice supervisor under the guidance of a senior colleague acting as a mentor (Amundsen and McAlpine 2009). There are also examples such as Blass et al. (2012) where access to experienced supervisors was not available, and a group of novice supervisors worked together as peer mentors to develop their supervisory practices. In these contexts, mentoring about supervision occurs outside the supervision meetings, so the student sees little if any of this activity, experiencing only the performance of supervision.

Supervisor training provides a vital secondary or additional source of information about supervision. A number of studies have been conducted to examine supervisor training. Kiley (2011) observes that training programmes are reflective of the values and concerns of a university. Kiley's study examines training offered by a range of universities. It was found that many had programmes that were primarily directed at skilling and/or accrediting early career supervisors but little was available for experienced academics. Kiley's data indicated increased attention on the pedagogies of supervision however one aspect of training provided that was not commonly addressed was mentoring other supervisors. Where most universities have policies of accrediting new supervisors through supervised experience and courses, the lack of training in mentoring other supervisors suggests that there is an assumption that experienced supervisors already know how to do this or that it is not an important skill.

Another shortcoming in the training is on building research teams (Kiley [2011](#)).

However, the paper states that if 'a dispute arises, it almost always centres on events that occurred when two individuals were alone in a room having a conversation' (p. 3). This scenario is less likely to occur in collaborative modes of supervision where supervisors and students meet together.

The published Discussion Paper (NSW Ombudsman 2016) makes a number of suggestions to support doctoral students and improve the processes that underpin postgraduate studies. The first four of these suggestions highlight the need for the availability of 'a designated "mentor" as a part of each supervision team' (p. 13) through a graduate research office. Mentors were recommended for any team where a student had elected to change supervisors more than once, where a supervisor had multiple grievances made against them within a time period, and/or where anyone in close association with the team notes a significant deterioration in the functionality of the team. Little detail on the specific remit of the ex-officio mentor is given beyond the recommendation that 'a part of the mentor's role was to monitor the general supervisory relationship' (p. 13). The role of an ex-officio mentor of this type extends the role of mentorship in a third aspect effectively as a mentor to the team. The Ombudsman's paper stops short of requiring an ex-officio mentor for all teams, but rather suggests that these be made available. There may be an opportunity in the recent development of faculty Research Education Coordinators (REC's) to support research by acting as an ex-officio mentor to supervisory teams. This would extend their role of supporting students and nurturing research dispositions (Brew et al. 2017).

Study design

This study is framed as interpretive qualitative research (Cresswell 2007). In this section I explore Bandura's socio-cognitive theory (1986, 2000), and explain how this theory may be interpreted in the context of doctoral supervision and the potential for mentorship. Of particular interest in the study of collaborative team supervision are the concepts of self-regulation, self and collective efficacy. Self-regulation underpins self-efficacy, which is also crucial for individuals operating within team contexts to develop collective efficacy.

Bandura's (1986) early work develops understandings of human behaviour

interviews and transcription were undertaken by the researcher and transcriptions

I'm trying to make up for the mistake of having to wait for 6 weeks and email

nothing. We are thinking OK I could be an academic with this, and then sometimes you look at them and go eeeww...is this really what I aspire to? Do I want to be like that person? You feel more let down because of that aspirational affective connect that you're projecting on to it (Jennifer).

Jennifer identifies the role model aspect of supervision, and highlights the implicit learning about behaviour and pedagogy that is embedded in the relationship between supervisor and student.

Second aspect

In the second aspect of a supervisor learning about supervision from a colleague, the examples were both positive and negative. In positive examples, the relationship is described as mentor/mentee. In negative cases, the descriptions are as a rejection of examples set by a colleague or as a negative role model.

The relationships between mentors and mentees, when they are enriching, may endure for long periods of time. Professor B. describes his experiences of a relationship that was framed from the beginning as a mentor/mentee:

When I joined this department I co-supervised quite a lot with this guy who's my mentor or who I had as my mentor who's still a good colleague of mine who's supervised a lot with 30 or 40 students. So we co-supervised a lot and that was much more about me helping him but I think I also learned a lot about supervision...

So co-supervision, there was really compatible points of view from the student's point of view but a lot of it was also about learning how to supervise for me (Professor B.).

The explicit framing of the mentor relationship appears to facilitate self-regulation by clarifying the power relationship. Dr H.'s experience as a mentee was also very successful. He explains:

there is actually a dual thing of co-supervision but also supervisory mentoring...so that we're both there to support the student but equally the supervisor, the more experienced supervisor, was there to help me enter the world of supervision as a supervisor. And that meant we had some conversations about our relationship with each other and that was framing it as a pedagogic one. I thought that was helpful. It gave it a purpose. It wasn't what kind of what kind of person are you, or how do you supervise because the answer is always it depends on the student and depends what's going on with the student. So I think that initially that explicit framing of a kind of asymmetry was very helpful because it was there anyway (Dr H.).

Explicitly framing the relationship as a pedagogic one clarifies the power asymmetry and gives it purpose by distancing personal aspects. However, not all primary supervisors are supportive of the co-supervisor. Professor A. describes one of his experiences:

He was a professor and he was the most dishonest, incompetent academic I've ever had the misfortune of having anything to do with and at the same time he was a [brown nose]. He would suck up to you effectively (Professor A.).

The professor's lack of professional and ethical behaviour is clearly rejected and casts the relationship as exploitative (MacFarlane 2017). As a role model this exemplar is categorically rejected and there is no suggestion of mentorship occurring.

Professor A., an academic of more than 40 years' experience, whose current role

Not all teams, however, are framed and conducted with such clarity. It is apparent in the findings that the explicit discussions about roles and expectations do not occur with the regularity and depth that would establish the team in such a robust manner. The Ombudsman's discussion paper (NSW Ombudsman 2016) raises the concept of mentors to teams made available through Graduate Schools. This would have policy implications for universities. Such mentors would be from outside the department or faculty and thus not part of the chain of command. The Ombudsman's proposal is directed at teams that have been identified as dysfunctional or at risk of being dysfunctional. From the brief outline of emergent patterns provided in the discussion paper, these mentors would support and monitor team progress. Clearly

teams may avoid difficulties if a team mentor was available as part of the team establishment procedures. Where mentorship becomes a fundamental part of the pedagogy of supervision and operates in all three aspects, teams are more likely to be effective.

References

- Amundsen, C., & McAlpine, L. (2009). 'Learning supervision': Trial by fire. *Journal of Management Education*, 43(3), 242–331. doi:[10.1080/14703290903068805](https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290903068805).
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (2000). Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy. *American Psychologist*, 55(2), 102–114.
- Blass, E., Jasman, A., & Levy, R. (2012). Supervisor reflections on developing doctoralness in practice-based doctoral students. *Journal of Management Education*, 46(1), 31–41. doi:[10.1108/09684881211198220](https://doi.org/10.1108/09684881211198220).
- Brew, A., Boud, D., & Malfroy, J. (2017). The role of research education coordinator in building research cultures in education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(2), 255–268. doi:[10.1080/07294360.2016.1177812](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1177812).
- Brew, A., & Peseta, T. (2004). Changing postgraduate supervision practice: A programme to encourage learning through reflection and feedback. *Journal of Management Education*, 38(1), 5–22. doi:[10.1080/1470329032000172685](https://doi.org/10.1080/1470329032000172685).
- Cresswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among multiple approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Guerin, C., & Green, I. (2015). 'They're the bosses': Feedback in team supervision. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(3), 320–335. doi:[10.1080/0309877X.2013.831039](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2013.831039).
- Guerin, C., Green, I., & Bastalich, W. (2011). Big love: Managing a team of research supervisors. In V. Kumar & A. Lee (Eds.), *Research supervision: A global perspective* (pp. 138–153). Kuala Lumpur: UPM Publisher.
- Johnson, L., Lee, A., & Green, B. (2000). The PhD and the autonomous self: Gender, rationality and postgraduate pedagogy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 19(2), 135–147. doi:[10.1080/713696141](https://doi.org/10.1080/713696141).
- Kiley, M. (2011). Developments in research supervisor training: Causes and responses. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(5), 585–599. doi:[10.1080/03075079.2011.594595](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.594595).
- Lee, A. (2008). How are doctoral students supervised? Concepts of doctoral research supervision. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 27(3), 333–344.

Pearson, M., & Brew, A. (2002). Research training and supervision development. *H*, 2 (2), 135-150. doi:[10.1080/03075070220119986](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070220119986).

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner.
Further reproduction prohibited without permission.