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Exploring the doctoral journey and good supervisory practice

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Abstract

Drawing from a reflective analysis of my own doctoral journey, this paper examines some of the key challenges facing doctoral students and what such challenges mean for good supervisory practice. Some of these challenges include high levels of pressure and uncertainty during the PhD, resulting in often strong unmet emotional needs made visible through feelings of imposter syndrome. These challenges can also be manifested in writing, in part because writing is complex, involving a writing-into-being of the professional self and authorial voice. These kinds of challenges appear to be commonplace in the doctoral journey, indicating that good supervisory practice must account for students' different contexts and relationships to their current and emerging professional identities.

Keywords

voice; doctoral student; supervision; identity; writing; imposter syndrome

Introduction

Research supervision requires a serious commitment on the part of the student as well as on the part of the supervisors, yet this process also often involves high levels of uncertainty as doctoral projects take shape and are cultivated over time. This can lead to a tense dynamic for doctoral students as they wrestle with new modes of thinking and both personal and professional expression. Examining this experience is important for better understanding good practice in research supervision, as well as the points along the journey that really matter. To explore these, I have chosen to look at my own doctoral journey, from academic outsider to insider, as a case study of the role of supervision in the relationship between authorial voice and professional identity. This is an important process for making sense of my own experience, and without assuming equivalences across very different contexts, such a process can also help identify what important components of good supervisory practice might be, in line with ethically promoting student development and excellent professional practice.

The themes and reflections emerging from this examination of my own experience raise broader questions about academic practice and supervision. Most notably, there are gaps between the literature and experience, particularly concerning doctoral students' emotional needs, along with the many complexities of writing. One of the greatest of these complexities is relationship between writing as vehicle for the authorial voice, and as part of the process of writing one's professional self into being. These gaps and complexities raise important questions about what good supervisory practice entails, and although 'good practice' may be unique to every student's individual needs, there are some shared commonalities worth identifying. For example, perhaps the most important starting point is establishing a shared understanding of the needs, expectations, and agreed steps of both the supervisee and supervisor, followed by regular check-ins and on-going updates. While supervisors must protect their work life balance, they must also exercise awareness and sensitivity to the

emotional aspects of the PhD as well their supervisee's unique relationship to the academic context, particularly in terms of where students are positioned in terms of their own authorial voice.

The doctoral journey: Self-reflection

In my case, I began my doctoral journey by moving across an ocean, which was on its own a life-changing endeavour in many ways. The move to London from a much smaller Canadian city was not only geographic and cultural, but also disciplinary. I went from a Sociology department in a mid-range institution to a world leading Media and Communications department, leading to a deep culture shock. Not only was I in a massive new city full of strangers, but my new department was dazzling with big city lights marked by high expectations, all-star faculty and a never-ending parade of visiting academic celebrities. In addition, the first year of my PhD involved constant juggling between the demands of coursework, paid research work, and many cultural and social adjustments. All in all, it was a difficult move, requiring a lot of adapting, which set the tone for my doctoral experience. Over the course of my doctorate I had three supervisors. One passed away, tragically at the height of his career. The other moved to another institution, and the third welcomed me and my project despite their own demanding schedule. Each supervisor was highly accomplished and each brought very different expertise and focus to the supervision and to my research journey. While I benefitted from these different perspectives, I also had to personally balance different supervisory approaches, each reflected in my research, my thinking and my experience. In combination with the twists and turns of my project accumulated over time, the final challenge was in stitching together a coherent dissertation.

All these factors meant that in addition to adjusting to many high-level changes, I also wrestled with imposter syndrome and struggled, for many years, to find my own voice. In some ways these struggles felt like they had little to do with my circumstances – or supervision – and were instead rooted in deeply personal self-beliefs that took a long time to shift, requiring active attention through multiple strategies.

When turning to the pedagogical literature on doctoral students and research supervision, these experiences are not unusual. Many argue that “frequent change”, including “doctoral orphans” who lose or change supervisors, is common to the PhD student experience (Wisker and Robinson, 2016, p.125). What is striking to me is not only the quantity of literature that puts “emotional support” as an essential component of supervision but its direct links with successful PhD completion. In addition, it is not just “support” but connection that is vital to intellectual growth, research development and a sense of meaningful work. Reflecting on my own experience, I am also struck by the relative absence of this topic within my own the doctoral experience (e.g. Mantai, 2017; Kamler and Thompson, 2014; Broussine and Watts, 2014).

For example, one of the more common experiences of “imposter syndrome”, understood as “an inability to internalize academic success,” has been attributed to the high emotionality of the doctoral process exacerbated by rigorous standards, rather than about the level or quality of emotional support (Cope-Watson and Smith Betts, 2010, p.1; Kamler and Thompson, 2014, p.16). In my own experience, imposter syndrome was very real, for myself and for my peers. Indeed, it was a running joke amongst my cohort, most often used as shorthand for complex anxieties related to high expectations and workload stress.

While the emotional dynamics of *being* a doctoral student were apparent as I was experiencing them, there seemed to be no formal recognition of – or support for – the many emotional moments related to doctoral education, such as moving for work or study, receiving critical feedback, and high stakes assessments like registration and confirmation. Given the absence of acknowledgement for “the

emotional” dynamics in my own experience, it is surprising to see these elements represented so strongly in the literature.

From a supervisory perspective, the question that arises is how to address the emotional needs of doctoral students, while also maintaining a reasonable workload balance. This is a complex issue, and there is no easy solution for it. I was able to seek and find support in my PhD cohort, in early career networks, in professional associations, and through informal partnerships with others (e.g. critical reading groups, mutual coaching support, and exchange of drafts for reading, editing and sense checking). These were essential not only for my project, but also for my intellectual development and on-going struggle with feelings of “imposter syndrome”. Looking back, my experience is more in line with Lillie Mantai’s research, who found that “supervisors are largely absent as students draw on multiple individuals on and off campus in assuming a researcher identity” (2017, p.637). This is not to say my supervisors were absent, just that these other sources were where I sought and found emotional connection and support.

However, my experience and Mantai’s findings also likely reflect a resource rich context. In my own case, this included a department that had a large PhD cohort year on year, and an active, vibrant research community. In more teaching intensive contexts, it may be much harder to access these supplementary communities and mutually supportive relationships. Drawing from work on the role of the supervisor, it is important for supervisors to openly discuss student needs as part of the agreed dynamics of the supervisory relationship (e.g. Deuchar, 2008; Richards and Shiver, 2020).

The other theme emerging from a close look at my own experience is that of voice. “Coming to voice” is a common theme not only for doctoral students, but also for those who have had to work to claim and articulate their identity (e.g. Brown *et al*, 2014; Kamler and Thompson, 2014; Mabokela and Green, 2001; Pete, 2018). This is a complicated issue, one that is deeply personal and subjective but is also shaped by institutions and environments, and as such, is also public, social and systemic. As Mann so powerfully documents, students who feel voiceless, may also feel alienated and disengage from supervisions and institutional processes (2001).

While there are many approaches to voice, there are two elements which I have found particularly useful in relation to doctoral supervision. The first of these is the connection between writing and identity, and the second is the relative lack of pedagogical support for *writing*, not unlike the lack of emotional support in doctoral education.

From text-work to writing-as-identity-work

In the first instance, Kamler and Thompson argue that writing, what they call “text work”, is also “identity work” (2014, p.15). Part of the reason writing can be so hard, they argue, is that the identity work – the thinking, drafting, crafting, and re-crafting involved in writing – is not only invisible, but is also about writing the researcher self, the doctoral self, the professional self, into being. This kind of identity work is also about positioning, as writing “is never a solo act” and is also about negotiating place among a “community of practice” within disciplines, fields, and institutions (Kamler and Thompson, 2014, p.17). In this sense, in their writing PhD students are not only shaping their ideas but also their identities as researchers and their place within their field(s).

For me, writing-as-identity-work not only captures much of my own experience, but also helps me retro-actively make sense of some of my own early struggles with writing. For example, in my own experience there were weeks, even months, where I would plan and replan the same sections or chapters, inadvertently circling the liminal space between draft and completion, between “student” and “researcher”, between a whisper and a voice. Each sentence involved a dialogue with critical inner

voices, fueled by the sense of not-yet belonging. The writing-into-being approach helps situate the time required for the much harder process of negotiating these layers of uncertainty to come through and in the process, begin to articulate the professional self. Writing involves much more than just putting down words.

This leads to the second point, one that echoes the absence of emotional support in doctoral education. Given the centrality of writing in academic work, particularly in crafting the authorial voice in the PhD and in research, there seems to be little formal writing support embedded within the doctoral process (see also Kamler and Thompson, 2014). Writing remains one of those things that doctoral students are just expected to know, and while that may come easy for some, it is not easy or straightforward for others.

Patrick Dunleavy picks up on the importance of writing in *Becoming an Author*, where he outlines “authoring as a generic set of skills” crucial to the doctoral experience (2003, p.1). Although Dunleavy does not directly acknowledge the identity work involved in writing, he does argue that “authoring is more than just writing” and “involves acquiring a complete set of ‘craft’ skills’ including a ‘body of knowledge’” (2003, pp. 2–3). These are important points. Writing is at the heart of the doctoral experience, of teaching, of research, and of professional academic practice, yet it is only post-PhD that I have learned to question and understand the often-shared challenges related to writing, to identity-work and to voice.

Reflecting on my own doctoral experience helps surface what were important defining experiences in my early career. Yet my own experience is far from definitive and raises additional questions for those doctoral students with different experiences and relationships to their doctoral education. In the next section, I consider what it means to supervise research students with multiple professional identities.

Navigating multiple professional identities and good supervisory practice

For me, my doctoral education was bound up in becoming an author and professional academic. For those who are already established in their careers, the process may be somewhat reversed. Instead of coming to voice, the doctoral process is about learning a disciplinary vernacular as well as the academic conventions shaping one’s field. It is important to recognize the profound tensions caught up in this kind of pathway to a doctorate. Here, the link between text-work and identity-work still involves writing-into-being, but for those who are mid-career or coming from different cultural contexts, it can require a kind of un-making and re-making of both professional identity and authorial voice. This can be particularly painful for those who start from outside of the West and global North, and where this un-making may feel like an erasure or over-writing of one identity for another. As both Pete (2018) and Dennis (2018) suggest, academic standards are set and defined by colonial systems, where some voices, some perspectives, and highly specific markers of “education” and “knowledge” are privileged over others.

Doctoral researchers in these varied positions face unique challenges and require different kinds of support than those whose experience may be closer to my own. From the supervisory perspective, there are three points raised in the literature which are relevant here and can be implemented to support students across a wide spectrum of prior experience and cultural context. The first is to discuss and agree what approach would best support the student. While I find myself gravitating towards the “critical friend” approach, this may not suit all students. Thus clearly addressing the plan of action including appropriate support should be one of the first supervisory discussions (Deuchar, 2008; Richards and Shiver, 2020). The second is the emotionality of the PhD process, which is not only well documented but can be informally and formally supported by the supervisor and by a wider community (e.g. one’s doctoral cohort, research networks, and professional associations).

Encouraging doctoral students to engage with the wider community is an important part of the process, and one that can be mutually beneficial for doctoral researchers. Lastly, writing is closely tied to the formation and expression of one's authorial voice, and this can involve a process of writing-into-being for our professional selves. Engaging with your doctoral students' relationship to their authorial voice and (professional) identity through their writing practice, even if these means recognizing possible tensions and contradictions related to this process, can be important components of good supervision.

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Biography

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