

## **A Responsive Evaluation into a Small Group Approach to the Supervision of BEd (Hons) students**

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the findings of a project that developed as a result of an 'Open Forum on Supervision' at the University of Wollongong (September 2002), where the discussion centred on the need to explore different forms of doctoral supervision. An important element of research supervision however that appears to be significantly overlooked within the current research is the supervision of the research student at the undergraduate honours level. This highlights the need for appropriate measures to assist in developing alternatives to the traditional approach to supervision that focuses on ensuring the needs of novice undergraduate research students are met. With this in mind, this project set out to conduct a responsive evaluation into the efficacy of developing a small group approach to the supervision of undergraduate education honours students. Four academic staff and four honours students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong were involved in the inquiry with data collected throughout the use of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and journal entries based on observations. Findings highlighted that these beginning research students were provided with an optimal supervisory experience underpinned by a balance of support, encouragement, autonomy, and flexibility.*

### **Introduction**

The undergraduate research year is a significant transition stage for students in which they undergo not only changes in status from undergraduates to potential postgraduates with increased work demands, but changes in which they are expected to display a degree of independence, initiatives, self discipline and scholarly potential (Hawes, 2000). With a diverse range of students drawn from a wide range of disciplines as well as cultural backgrounds (Juniper, 2002) who are now undertaking research studies, questions have been raised about what actually constitutes effective supervision (ERIC Clearinghouse, 1998).

Although Australian universities generally follow the traditional British one-to-one supervisory model, it would appear that concerns are now arising as to the effectiveness of this approach. Soliman (1999) discusses a number of these concerns from a student perspective as including supervisor unavailability, lack of direction and guidance, non supportive or failure to provide timely and critical feedback. Supervisor concerns however centred around students who lack motivation and avoid the supervisor, fail to produce written work, or have unrealistic goals (Grant and Graham, 1994: 165-166). This paper presents the final results of an evaluation into the efficacy of developing a small group approach to the supervision of undergraduate education honours students undertaken throughout 2003 at the University of Wollongong.

### **THE LITERATURE**

In searching the associated literature on the development of a small group approach to supervision, it soon became apparent that there was a dearth of literature available in the area of undergraduate research students. Therefore it was necessary to draw on other associated areas of literature to guide the inquiry. This meant in order to create coherency for

the review, it was necessary not only to draw on alternate areas of literature, but to organise it into logical framework. In creating this framework, the two key areas of supervision and collaborative group learning were considered to be the most relevant to the inquiry, and thus were explored.

### ***Traditional research supervision***

Prior to 1970 attaining a research degree in Australia was comparatively rare, however during the 1970s a mushrooming of educational research came about with the introduction of education faculties within new universities. This saw not only an increase in postgraduate enrolments but an ‘acceleration’ throughout the late 70s and into the 80s (Holbrook & Johnston, 1999:4-5). Due to this rapid growth in enrolments, a chain effect has been created with pressure now being placed upon the higher education sector to position itself competitively on the international student market. In addition to this it has also rendered the postgraduate research ‘training’ context as that of a national and international one, which has inevitably led to bureaucratic pressures being placed on the accountability for what this ‘training’ can effectively achieve (Sheehan, 1996:1).

With a diverse range of students drawn from a wide range of disciplines as well as cultural backgrounds (Juniper, 2002) who are now undertaking research studies, questions can be raised about what actually constitutes effective supervision (ERIC Clearinghouse, 1998). With Australian universities generally following the traditional British one-to-one supervisory model, doubts have now risen as to the effectiveness of this approach, which has now been rendered as of some concern (Yeatman, 1995; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Burnett, 1999). This traditional approach to the supervision of research students has been referred to as the ‘Apprentice Master Model’ (AMM) which has been given the almost redundant cliché by Yeatman (1995: 9) in which she refers to it as a centuries old practice in which the ‘master inducts the new apprentice into the mysteries of the craft’.

Although Latona and Browne (2001) have discussed the traditional approach to supervision as a process that is likely to benefit institutions, they provide no indication as to how institutions may benefit, nor what the benefits may be. On the other hand they also contend that one on one supervision can also be a disadvantage to both supervisors and students. They discuss these difficulties as residing in the areas of time factors, neglect of other work, supervisor directed relationships, misunderstandings (jealousies) of the supervisor-student relationship by others, supervisors not keeping commitments to the student, and supervisors taking credit for students work.

As with students, the beneficial aspects for supervisors using the traditional approach to supervision are also considerably limited, due to a number of factors which Leder (1995) describes as:

- increased numbers of research students placing considerable pressures on human resources available for supervision
  - ever present pressures to take on, and continue supervisory roles that affect other aspects of their work
  - time limitations in which they are expected to effectively nurture the student / supervisor relationships
  - stress and tension felt by the supervisor if the relationship becomes too time consuming
  - the lack of perceived reward for the extra time that contributes to an already demanding workload that carries no added financial benefit
  - students becoming dependant on the supervisor in which they expect the work to be done for them
  - the possibility of the supervisor becoming possessive of the student by not permitting them a say in their work.
- (Latona and Browne, 2001).

With supervisory pressures, responsibilities for shaping new courses, balancing teaching with research, supervising other students, contributing productively to departmental meetings, editing books and journals as well as having to convince publishers and funding bodies that their research project is worthwhile (Maddern, 1996), the traditional model of supervision cannot be seen as an advantage to the workload of academics. Therefore, with the traditional approach to supervision yielding no apparent advantages to either supervisors or students according to the negative elements that predominate the literature, emphasis must turn to reinforcing the need to develop new approaches to supervision in particular those at the undergraduate level, who are undergoing the transition of developing their knowledge and experience within the area of research.

### ***The need to reframe supervision***

Perhaps one way of reinforcing this need is to look at the scrutiny that the traditional model of supervision has come under over the last few years in relation to its levels of efficacy (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000). However, according to the perspective of Burnett (1999), while the traditional model has been effective in serving students in the past, new concerns relating to completion rates, and some supervisory practices, must act as a means to developing alternative models.

In an investigation into higher degree research supervision, and its reshaping from both within and outside universities, in which the traditional AMM approach to supervision is challenged, McWilliam and Singh (2002) concede that the continuance of disciplinary knowledge and one-on-one supervisory relationships will remain. In spite of this however, they strongly maintain that it is unlikely this approach to research supervision will retain its dominance within the new higher degree research training landscape.

With research education being largely owned by academics, the need has arisen for the restructuring of supervisory practice away from these traditional models, where the supervisor is presumably an expert in all things relevant to the student's research (Doecke and Seddon, 2002). Consequently this raises the issue of how to develop alternatives to the traditional approach to supervision while ensuring the provision of quality supervision, and catering to the individual needs of both supervisors and students.

A report to the University of Wollongong Education Research Committee (Wright, Wells, Fox, Hampton, Seberry, Wypych, and Coral, 1997) aimed at developing recommendations on supervision, referred to the apprenticeship model of supervision as:

‘denying ‘autonomy and flexibility necessary for contemporary supervision and implying deference to a particular individual rather than a research team and a collective research question/problem’ Yeatman (1995; cited in Wright et al. 1997: 5).

It must be taken into consideration however, that use of the apprenticeship model alone may not be solely responsible for denying student autonomy and flexibility. Instead, thought must also be given to this denial of flexibility and autonomy as possible results of the supervisory style and traits of particular supervisors. Dye (1994), proposes a relevant argument in his acknowledgement that beginning research students do need high levels of encouragement, support, feedback and structure to be provided by their supervisors. His acknowledgment however, neglects to include any reference to the supervisor also needing to provide the student with an element of autonomy and flexibility.

This appears to be a particularly important issue within the current debate on supervision, as novice research students also need these added elements if they are to develop and attain a sense of independence. The principal benefit of a flexible supervisory approach that promotes student autonomy is that students are provided with the encouragement to begin making approximations in considering and articulating their preferred approaches to research. Not only may this promote the development of higher order thinking skills and risk taking within the student, but may also support the active participation of students within their own learning, leading to them being able to assume ownership of their research and final thesis.

In her guide for supervisors of postgraduate students, Moses (1985), appears to have struck a balance between the previously mentioned views to the supervision of research students. By acknowledging that structure is needed in what she terms the training of research students, Moses adds that it must be one of a flexible nature that simultaneously provides a framework of support for students. This framework she emphasises, should serve to facilitate, rather than disadvantage students by hindering their development and creativity.

### ***The collaborative small group as a means to supervision***

Adams and Hamm (1996) have stated that reliable research now points to collaborative learning as a viable means to improving social skills and academic instruction. Coupled with this they claim that this has led to a rapid growth in interest in collaborative models and their strategies used in the implementation of these models. The strategies to which Adams and Hamm appear to refer to, are based on the idea that acquiring and creating knowledge is an active social process, which students need to practice (Bruffee, 1984; in Cove & Love, 1996). Such collaborative learning models move away from the outdated ideas of learning where students assume the role of spectators, who sit passively and are expected to observe and absorb all that is said. Instead they are learning experiences in which students are active participants in their own learning which is further enhanced through incorporating social and affective dynamics between themselves and other students, as well as between students and faculty (Bruffee, 1993; in Cove & Love 1996).

Due to the archaic nature of current supervisory approaches, the more social approaches to learning need not be confined specifically to lecture and classroom contexts. Instead they may, and indeed should be, applied to the field of supervising beginning research students as well. One interesting and innovative way in which a collaborative approach has been implemented with research students, is evident in a pilot study undertaken by Burnett (1999), where a small group approach was introduced as a means of supervising the thesis writing of doctoral students at one Australian university. This approach underpinned the development of what Burnett terms the Collaborative Cohort Model' (CCM) and was undertaken due to rising concerns pertaining to completion rates and the quality of supervision. It is interesting to note that although many students complete the required coursework for their degree, almost half of these students do not manage to complete the thesis writing component (Hunt Ogden, 1993; in Burnett, 1999). While Burnett acknowledges that the traditional approach to supervision using the Apprentice Master Model 'has served many students well' (1999: 47), he also contends that although many students complete the required coursework for their degree, almost half of these students do not complete the thesis writing component (Hunt Ogden, 1993; in Burnett, 1999).

### ***Using the small group approach to supervision***

It is recognised that undertaking a research degree can be a daunting and uncertain time for undergraduate research students and their supervisors, particularly when it comes to the commitment of pen to paper throughout the writing

phase (McCormack, 1998). Therefore the development of a collaborative group approach to the supervision of Honours students could have a significant impact in providing novice research students with the encouragement and support of working together as they endeavour to accomplish the 'shared goal' of thesis writing (Adams & Hamm, 1996:3). It would also seem that this approach could be even more beneficial due to the enhanced sense of belonging to a community that is the group (Evans and Nicholson, 2003).

Taking into account the absence of research on the group supervision of undergraduate research students, results emanating from Christensen and Kline's (2000: 386) investigation into the group supervision of counsellors in training, showed the emergence of a 'theoretical conceptualisation' that they believe may enhance the practice and understanding of group supervision. Findings from this investigation are discussed by the authors where they classify four specific constructs that have emerged from their data, such as group supervision processes, participation anxiety, multiphasic learning processes and multiphasic learning outcomes. Christensen and Kline contend that these constructs provide 'empirical support' for many contentions about the benefits of group supervision as well as 'shedding light' on student anxiety, learning processes, and learning outcomes as experienced by group members (Christensen and Kline, 2000; 386). Unfortunately, Christensen and Kline conclude the discussion of their findings with only a cursory statement as to how the implications of these findings could be applicable to various professionals such as group supervisors, supervisees, and educators who have a commitment to group work.

Drawing on principles from other areas such as counselling, that could be applicable to the small group supervision of undergraduate research students, is the provision of an ideal experiential domain. By this it is meant that beginning research students are able to learn about group processes and development, within an environment that can foster co leader relationships, provide feedback, elevate group facilitation skills, and enhance self awareness (Corey, 1990; Newman & Lovell, 1993; Steadman & Harper, 1995; Yalom, 1995; in Christensen & Kline, 2000). Similarly, a study conducted by Ray and Altekruze (2000) into the effectiveness of group supervision within this counselling field, found that for many years, the implementation of a group approach to supervision has proven to be a viable method of supervision.

Bernard and Goodyear (1992; in Ray and Altekruze, 2000) have equated the individual one on one approach to supervising research students as being the cornerstone of traditional supervision. However, results of a study conducted by Ray and Altekruze (2000) in which the effectiveness of large, small, and combined supervision with students within the field of counselling was investigated, have found that collaborative approaches to supervision not only complements individual supervision, but can also be used additionally, and even interchanged with individual supervision as well. While such a suggestion has genuine relevance to ways in which both approaches can be integrated, the authors have not taken into consideration the contribution this approach would have in doubling the already demanding workloads of supervisors.

In their study into group supervision within the counselling field Ray and Altekruze make reference to Bernard and Goodyear's (1992; in Ray and Altekruze, 2000) list into the benefits of group supervision, as including:

- more student independence, therefore reducing student dependence on supervisors
- the promotion of a collegial relationships which leads to the diminishing of hierarchical issues between the supervisors and students

- increasing the variety of behavioural and experiential supervision strategies provided by the diverse range of experience provided by group members
- helping to alleviate the sense of intellectual and emotional isolation of students, through the provision of a community support network in which members are empathetic and supportive towards each other due to a sharing of similar experiences

(Bernard and Goodyear, 1992; in Ray and Altekruise, 2000:19)

With such an array of undisputable evidence appearing to emerge from the literature, it would seem that students in the counselling field, who are afforded the opportunity to undergo their supervision in a group are significantly advantaged, not only emotionally but academically as well. It would appear that with such noteworthy reports of success emerging through the use of this innovative approach to supervision questions must be asked as to what benefits might it have when employed as an approach to supervising undergraduate research students.

Despite the many contentions that support the efficacy of group supervision, Christensen and Kline (2000), argue that conclusive support research does not exist. However they do acknowledge that while many writers have encouraged exploratory and systematic examinations into group supervision, there still remains a lack of research addressing this approach.

In a review into the assessment of group supervisory issues conducted by Elks (1991), it was found that the most common issues included the provision of support and emotional awareness within an environment that facilitated personal growth and awareness. While collaborative supervision challenges the status and power that is exercised by professional researchers through a demystification of the research process, tentative research findings and significant support from the literature have both found small group supervision to be effective (Burke, 2002). In conjunction to this, there are a number of additional major advantages of using a small group approach to supervising, synthesised from a number of sources (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit 1982; Bingham, 1990; Cheatham and Lawson; 1990; Ennis, 1990; Ennis and Davidson, 1989; Gaber-Catz and Watson, 1990; in Imel, 1992), which include:

- allowing for the integration of critical thinking and other language processes such as talking, listening, reading and writing
- the creation of opportunities for learners to experience and observe the learning of others, and permitting them to expand their repertoire of learning strategies
- breaking down the feelings of isolation and providing peer support for learning
- enhancing learner's self-esteem by helping them understand that they have much to offer as a result of their experiences
- through the collective expertise of the group members, it makes available a wide range of resources, including the thinking, experience, help, and encouragement of other group members easing the distinction between supervisors and students by creating a collaborative, participative environment that is less hierarchical than environments produced by traditional approaches.

Further benefits of these small group learning communities to students are numerous, and extend beyond students, to faculty and the entire institution Kellogg (1999). Further explanation as to how these benefits might be passed on is not

provided by Kellogg. Instead he merely suggests that students involved in learning communities show an increase in academic achievement, retention, motivation, intellectual development, learning, and involvement and community while also reinforcing positive views of the institution (Kellogg, 1999).

Although little research has been done on the development of learning communities in higher education, "preliminary evidence suggests that group-taught models have higher pay-offs in terms of student engagement and learning" (Whatley and Canalis, 2002:479). This promising suggestion could be due to educators and students sharing their multiple identities, consequently leading to the establishment of trust, freedom for students to take risks, student engagement in intellectual exploration, and students envisioning themselves as teachers as they contribute to the learning of others. (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; in Kellogg, 1999:19) specifically define these learning communities as:

‘...one which actually restructures the curricular material entirely so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.'

Whatley and Canalis (2002) go on to further describe affective relationships such as these as being the foundation of any learning community. However, in spite of the wealth of praise within the literature supporting the development of small group community learner approaches within higher education, concerns are still raised. The concerns put forward by Smith (1993) specifically relate to the increased expense and a lack of faculty training and comfort with such a model. It is these concerns that Smith feels leads to the establishment of learning communities at the university level to be met with resistance by faculty and administrators Smith (1993). He is however firm in his belief that these issues must be challenged and overcome in order to provide undergraduate research students with the most promising instructional practices.

With the issues of institutions emphasising the importance of increasing their numbers of research students, yet concerns of possible institutional resistance to the development of community approaches, it would appear that institutions are creating a type of recursive dilemma. While institutions appear to be struggling with their own indecisions the question remains the same. How do institutions expect to be able to achieve their goal of raising numbers while they are resisting innovative ways of doing so? One way of ensuring that the needs of institutions, faculty and students are met could be met is through the forming of small group community approaches to supervision. Using an approach such as this ensures that student needs are met through the promotion of collegial interaction, support and encouragement of students while helping them connect to the culture of research inevitably leading to the satisfying of institutional needs by producing students who wish to undertake higher research degrees (Asmar and Peseta, 2001).

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to evaluate the efficacy of this alternative approach to supervision, the choice of a methodology that would best 'suit the purpose of the inquiry, the questions being investigated and the resources available' (Patton, 1990:39) was required. Therefore, the design of the inquiry is that of a Responsive Evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

While many evaluation plans are more preordinate, emphasizing statement of goals, use of objective tests, standards held by program personnel, and research-type reports, Responsive Evaluation is less reliant on formal communication, but

more reliant on natural communication (Stake, 1975), and is aimed at increasing the usefulness of the findings to persons in and around the program. Additionally, with the inquiry relating specifically to the complex personal expectations that different people have in relation to group supervision, a naturalistic approach was deemed the most suitable due to it being carried out within the 'natural setting' of group meetings (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 187).

Participation in this group was on a voluntary basis, with the initial intention of developing a group comprising at least eight honours students and four supervisors from within the Education Faculty. However, due to unforeseen circumstances ranging from bureaucratic red tape to personal circumstances, this number was reduced to four students. A purposive sampling strategy was used in recruiting volunteer participants for the development of this small group. Due to the nature of the inquiry focussing on honours supervision, it was imperative that student participants were those at the honours level and were about to embark on their initial journey into the thesis writing process.

Academic staff members selected to participate within this inquiry were recruited by the project's principle co-ordinator, also using a purposive sampling technique, and were chosen due to their diverse ranges of experiences and expertise within the area of supervision. As all participants in the group had either worked or studied at the university over an extended period of time, most had previously developed positive relationships with one another.

### ***Data collection***

Data collected for this inquiry was performed through continuous data collection and analysis that provided an opportunity to continuously generate and refine emergent themes. This involved the collection of data through participant observation, journal entries, and semi-structured interviews. This approach to data collection not only enabled interpretations into the complex behaviours, interactions and viewpoints within the group to be studied from 'more than one standpoint' (Burns 1990:248), but also provided an opportunity to 'increase confidence' in the overall trustworthiness of the data (Roche 1999:86). Debriefing, and member checking with group members, also played a key role in the collection and analysis of data as participants were not only able to provide further insight into any data misinterpretations that may have been made, but also opened up the opportunity for participants to contribute their own individual interpretations of events and issues. Debriefing between student group members was not confined to group meetings, but was continual due to three of the four students sharing an Honours research room on campus, where interaction transpired on a daily basis.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis was an ongoing process, where the continual revisiting and re-examining of data eventually led to data being tightened and collapsed into three categories. This not only allowed the wealth of data to be condensed into more manageable parts, but also provided an organisational structure for the reporting of the findings.

- **The people:** Which included data comprising human elements, such as feelings, thoughts and concerns.
- **The place:** Encompassing environmental elements, such as the physical environment and physical make up of meetings.
- **The process:** This category, based on Tuckman's (1965) model of group development, referred to the changes occurring with the group's functioning over time, such as the development of relationships, conflicts, and other elements that appeared to have effected the groups progress.

## FINDINGS

By using the coding system described previously it was possible to break down and organise the data into three key themes based upon the perceptions of participating respondents, as well as my own understandings. For the purpose of this project these three themes will be used as the organisers for describing and interpreting the findings. As data was condensed it became apparent that participant responses, journal entries based on observations and discussions during peer debriefing sessions could all be categorised under the headings of People, Place and Process or, the 'three Ps' of the small group supervisory approach. In specific terms, in order to determine how data fitted each category it was necessary to constantly revisit the data (Merriam, 1991).

### The people

The findings of this inquiry showed that the small group approach to supervising undergraduate honours students provided high levels of much needed support and encouragement from both supervisors and other participating students and is demonstrated in Figure 1. It appears that the provision of such a support network may account for the alleviation of isolation that is so often a significant disadvantage to research students (Latona and Browne, 2001). This support seems to have shown students that the difficulties they may encounter were not limited to them, but were also experienced by others in the group, leading to a realisation that these experiences are an accepted part of the thesis writing process.

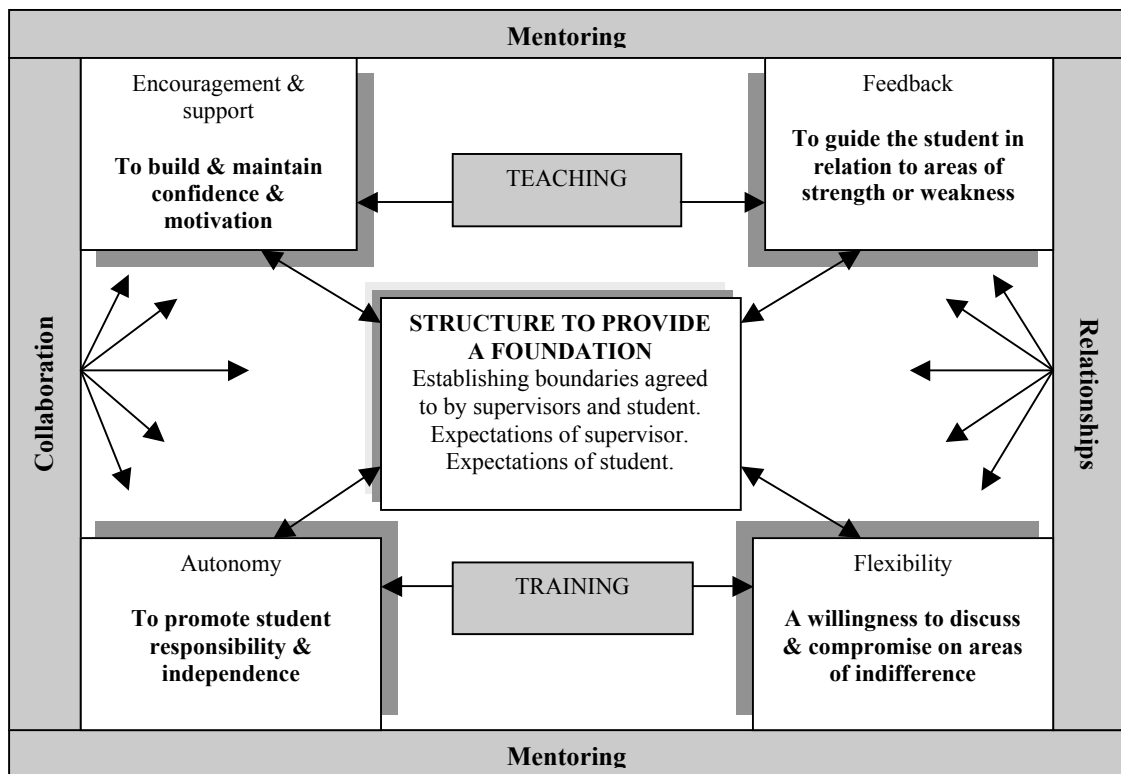


Figure 1: A balanced approach to supervising beginning research students

With emphasis being placed on students attaining ownership of their thesis the need for them to be independent was highlighted. Students in the group were found to have been provided with high levels of autonomy and flexibility by the supervisors which was evident in that not only were they encouraged to be independent in making decisions relating to their research and thesis writing, but were also afforded the opportunity to practice in refining these newly acquired skills (Turner and Knight, 1994). Students were further afforded high levels of flexibility through the provision of a framework of support (Moses, 1985), allowing them to discuss and compromise with supervisors on any areas of indifference. This could be seen as an element of training (Turner and Knight, 1994) where students could not only be responsible and independent in their research, but could also feel comfortable in discussing and compromising with supervisors any areas of indifference. It would appear that due to these levels of support, encouragement, autonomy and flexibility, the students had grown in many ways, and had taken significant responsibility for their research.

It seems that the mentoring students received and the forming of relationships with supervisors in the group diminished any hierarchical status between supervisors and students, and appears to have had a positive impact on the student members of the group. As they were able to interact informally, on an 'adult-to-adult basis' (Love and Street, 1998:154), with academic members, it is likely that students may have experienced a sense of acceptance in that they were now part of the research community, where they now saw themselves as being accepted more as colleagues than students. This is consistent with Imel's (1992) notion of easing the distinction between supervisors and students by creating a collaborative, participative environment, that is less hierarchical than environments produced by traditional approaches. One student however, felt that the hierarchical status had not been reduced in any way, and that she saw herself as a student and not a colleague. Her responses in relation to this unfortunately, seem to be based upon an issue of low self-esteem, a possible non acceptance of herself, and a lack of self worth.

A significant finding that emerged from the data is the amount of support that the group provided to a student who appeared to be facing a continuous barrage of hurdles. The data relating to this has shown that had it not been for the group, this student would have elected to withdraw from the process (Leder, 1995), at the beginning of the year. Interestingly, this finding is consistent with Burnett (1999), who also found in his study, that the group approach to supervising research students improved retention rates due to the levels of support and assistance provided by faculty members and fellow students. It would seem that appears that the support and encouragement provided by this small group played a significant role in maintaining this student's enthusiasm (Phillips and Pugh, 1987), to continue in a circumstance where she may have otherwise added to the attrition rate of those who do not complete their degree.

The vast ranges of both academic and personal experience brought to the group was also seen as being beneficial to the student's. This could be due to the students being provided with the opportunity to embrace various forms of 'knowledge, expertise and experience' that can be offered by more than one supervisor (Doecke and Seddon, 2002:95). Of particular interest relating to this, was that although the variety of perspectives offered was acknowledged as a strength of the group, two group members also saw it as a possible inhibitor. This was evident in the data where a supervisor was concerned that it could have the opposite effect, and actually cause confusion for the students. This was reiterated by a student who found the diversity of opinions provided in the critiquing of her writing, was an aspect she found confusing. It appears that the provision of such a range of feedback could have an impact of varying degrees. While some students may readily accommodate such a range of viewpoints, the academic diversity of individual

students (Doecke and Seddon, 2002), may leave others feeling overwhelmed and confused, which may eventually lead to a blurring of their own thoughts.

It seems evident within the findings that while small group supervision is beneficial to students, it can extend beyond and benefit to faculty as well (Kellogg, 1999). It would appear that these benefits lie in academics being able to not only observe the supervisory process and styles of others in the group, but being able to use this opportunity to catch up with other areas of research that their colleagues may be currently participating in. With so many of the supervisors in this group referring to this as an advantage, it appears that this approach provides a chance for them to essentially share their methodologies with each other whereas pressures (Maddern, 1996), and heavy workloads of academics, would normally inhibit them from participating in this network of sharing.

The findings of two academic members who were currently in transition to becoming supervisors, appears to further demonstrate the advantages that this approach provided to supervisors. It would appear that these members not only provided a valuable contribution to the group through the sharing of their knowledge and experiences, but also underwent a form of on the spot training in that they were able to observe the types of questions students might ask when undertaking their research and thesis writing, and ways in which these questions were responded to. The data in this case seems to be suggestive of a more open approach to supervision where the knowledge shared lends itself to a move away from the traditional mystification of the research process (Burke, 2002). It appears that the small group supervisory approach no longer sees this practice as being one in which the supervisor is ostensibly the expert in all things relevant to the student's research (Doecke and Seddon, 2002) by confining it to the supervisors office.

The data suggests that students regarded their participation within the group as providing them with a deeper understanding of the research process. This finding is consistent with Adams and Hamm (1996), who acknowledge that reliable research points to collaborative learning not only as a means to enhancing social skills, but improving academic instruction as well. It seems evident that this understanding has been enhanced through the interaction and discussion with others, leading to students gaining a wider knowledge of research design and methods, by becoming familiar with a broader range of studies (Burnett, 1999). This coupled with students being required to think about and justify their research methodology is in accordance with Whatley and Cannalis's (2002:479) statement where they found that 'group taught models have higher pay-offs in terms of student engagement and learning'. Through this interaction, group members had the opportunity to construct their knowledge and confidence within a safe environment, where the establishment of trust seems to have provided students with the freedom to take risks (Whatley and Canalis, 2002), and the confidence to ask for clarification in areas of difficulty.

One aspect of the small group that a majority of participants seem to view as inhibiting this approach, was the structure of the weekly meetings. Some felt that meetings needed to have more of a goal that would assist in promoting discussion, however, a move such as this may lead to meetings assuming more of a tutorial group format. Perhaps the suggestion of structure in meetings could be due to some students feeling the need for some type of structure (Dye, 1994) that may assist in providing them with initial direction. However, due to students working at different stages in their research and thesis writing, too rigid a structure may disadvantage those whose current focus is not within that particular area.

The data indicates that the issue of time allocated to each student during meetings could at times be of concern. Interestingly, this was in no way related to the size of the group (Steiner, 1972; Payne and Cooper, 1974), but instead seemed to relate more to members not adhering to acceptable group procedures by dominating conversation, which inevitably led to a reduction of time provided to other group members.

The data appears to suggest that the number of supervisors in the group should be reduced for two reasons. One being that some students felt intimidated by so many supervisors. Another possible reason for this could be the effect that particular supervisors have not only on the group meetings, but on the interaction and behaviour of other supervisors as well. This could be due to some students still not feeling that hierarchical status between supervisors and students had been removed, therefore giving them a sense of 'us and them'. Interestingly the most effective group meetings were conducted using only two supervisors which reduced group numbers to six. This is consistent with (Woods, 1994; Abelson, 1992; Johnson and Johnson, 1987), who all maintain the most favourable group size comprises only four to six participants. Some students eventually became concerned in relation to the lessening of supervisor attendance as time progressed. While this appears to be in direct contrast to students feeling there were initially too many supervisors, it would appear that while they did feel that supervisor numbers needed to be reduced, they also felt that as long as these supervisors were active members they should also be committed ones as well.

### **The place**

The data exploring the number of rooms occupied by the group and the impact the physical environment may have had on group meetings, did not appear to have any impact on the performance or progress made by the group. Interestingly this finding seems to be in contrast to Wineman and Serrato's, (1998: 283), notion that levels of performance and success of a group meeting can be determined by the 'size, furnishings, and environmental conditions of the meeting space'. Although the group had moved a number of times, and group members had commented on the physical environment during informal conversation, meetings remained consistent in that they continued to be conducted on a weekly basis during session times as originally organised (apart from during session breaks).

It did become apparent however, that as each meeting venue changed so too did its size. With every move, the meeting rooms became smaller, and appeared to contain an organisational set up more chaotic than the one before. Some student members however, appeared to have adopted responsibility for satisfying the needs of the group (Bradford, 1978), by ensuring rooms were not only tidy, but that tables had been organised and washed down prior to meetings. This seemed demonstrative that this group had very strong foundations, where members appeared to adopt a sense of ownership and nurturing of the group meetings.

The findings suggest that seating arrangements within these meetings also played a key role in the interaction levels of the group. While not impeding on the success of the meetings per se, they were found to impede on the interaction, and participation among group members Wineman and Serrato, (1998). While members were distanced from each other it appeared that a linear form of conversation was taking place. However, removing unwanted desks and reducing the seating area into a circular formation, forced group members to not only sit in closer proximity, but promoted eye contact and free conversation (Sommer and Ross 1958). The introduction of food and drink into these meetings, provided what appeared to be an element of informality, as well as further demonstrating a maintaining and perpetuating of the group

(Tuckman, 1965). Group members interacting and conversing over afternoon tea did appear to promote a more relaxed feel to the meetings, which in turn gave meetings a communal feel.

### **The process**

Although the findings appear to suggest that the initial meeting served to clarify procedures to be used and 'provide a general organization for the group' (Feather, 1999:26), it appears to also have been one in which all members felt confident and felt a high level of comfort with each other. Interestingly, it also became apparent at this point that a natural selection process had taken place, where the group seemed to automatically adopt one particular member as group facilitator. With student feedback after this meeting being so positive, it appears that even after one meeting members had come to believe in the potential of the group. In comparing this first meeting with Tuckman's (1965) model it would appear that while elements of the forming stage were present the meeting, it appeared to comprise more of a norming stage, due to the immediate functioning and comfort within the group.

It is worth noting however, that the second meeting, although effective, saw group members quieter than in the first. During this meeting they appeared to be going through a 'polite, get acquainted, ice-breaking stage' (Cain, 2003:1). These characteristics are normally reserved for the forming stage of Tuckman's (1965) group development model. However, the reasons underlying this quieter behaviour could relate to the group now being moved to what was deemed to be a more permanent environment in which they could now adapt. Alternatively, it could be that group members had also become more focussed, as group discussion was for the first time centred on the research and thesis writing area.

It appears that relationships developed between most group members prior to the group selection, and their ease with each other, acted as a catalyst in creating an extremely settled and productive beginning. However, the data also suggests that previously developed relationships can also have the capacity in a group situation to cause an element of dissonance. This became evident in week three (Cain 2003) of meetings, when one student member felt that her relationship with another had become distanced. These feelings may have been caused through a change of roles that people within the group were now playing, perhaps creating a feeling that the friendship was now being replaced by the group. It appears that the development of these feelings, coupled with being asked to meet a deadline for submitting Chapter One, led to her display of hostility and resistance to the group's task, and the demands that it placed on her (Tuckman, 1965). This behaviour seems to be consistent not only with Tuckman's (1965) storming stage of group development, where conflict and competition are introduced into what was previously a pleasant work environment Cain (2003), but also with what (Kennedy, 1998:17) maintains, is the exertion of possible punishment of the group for what this member perceived as an injustice.

With the data suggesting that most meetings over a number of weeks were effective, it also suggests that on rare occasions they were not as successful. This could be suggestive that outside factors may have had an influence on some group members, such as moods, other meetings, or conflicting responsibilities that in turn affected these meetings. A key change in the group however, seemed to have taken place with the introduction of food, drink, and the commencement of the thesis writing process. It appears that at this time group members not only became more relaxed and interactive, but more motivated as well. Perhaps this was due to them now being able to see a purpose in the meetings and how this purpose would best serve them to achieve their goals. It appears that with the purpose of the group, and the relationships within having now been clearly established, the group had developed enough stability to allow it to move into what appears to be the performing stage of development (Tuckman, 1965).

During this stage the group displayed characteristics of what (Bradford, 1978:128) described as being truly productive, with much active listening, helpful feedback, openness, trust, warmth, and with group members now realising that everyone had something to offer. From here the group seemed to settle into this stage where it functioned smoothly for a significant period of time. However, although the group had maintained an established flow, the data highlights, that this did not necessarily mean that the group meetings would continue to be harmonious.

It appears that outside of the group setting, the relationship between two group members had begun to deteriorate. While both members voiced differing recollections about a particular issue during a meeting, it appeared that the group had regressed back to the storming stage of development (Tuckman, 1965). Of particular interest in this situation was the strength and support that the group displayed in suggesting a possible way to alleviate the dispute, which is consistent with Tuckman's (1965:390) notion of the group having now become a 'social entity'.

Further changes within the group over time saw three members decide to no longer attend meetings. While one had given an indication of her decision, two members simply failed to turn up, and had made no effort to relate their intentions to the remaining group members. In one of these cases this could have been due to heavy workloads and responsibilities, in the other case it could be that this member saw no further need for the group or the support that it had offered. The group seemed to have now shown its first signs of dissolution (Kennedy, 1998). The lack of notification as to their decisions however, appears to demonstrate that these members had no firm commitment to the remaining group members.

Findings show that there were two extremely productive meetings in which remaining students were expected to produce outlines for the structuring of their next two chapters. Not only does this appear to be yet another shifting of the stages where the group once again performed favourably (Tuckman, 1965) but also coincides with Dye's (1994) contention, that beginning research students do need to be provided with a particular level of structure. The reason why these remaining students embraced this concept is perhaps due to it not only placing an expectation on them, but that it also allowed them the autonomy (Dye, 1994), to independently think about and organise their own framework, which they were able to bring to the group for further support and assistance if needed.

With the limited time placed upon the Honours year and therefore placed on this inquiry it was inevitable that there would come a time where remaining members would go their separate ways. However it was not anticipated that the interaction within the group would decrease during the last meeting of data collection. Once again the group saw a significant amount of time and discussion directed entirely on one member. This not only was indicative of non-adherence to group norms, but could also demonstrate that life in the group as we had come to know it, would soon be ending. Alternatively, it could also be as simple as Johnson and Johnson (1987: 365) explain, in that perhaps group members had psychologically separated from the group, and were now in the process of moving on to new experiences.

## **SUMMARY**

The findings of this inquiry have highlighted that the enablers of a small group approach to supervising undergraduate honours students far outweigh the inhibitors, and have shown that both students and academics alike can benefit from

such a model. While containing elements that were perceived as inhibitors, these appear to be minor in that they would require only slight modifications. Interestingly, the inquiry findings have also demonstrated that Tuckman's (1965), stages of group development are not firmly established and set. It has been demonstrated throughout the inquiry that these stages can emerge as recursive phases throughout the group process, and seem to be dependent on the situational context at any one time.

With all elements of the balanced approach model, such as support, encouragement, autonomy, and flexibility evident in the findings of this inquiry, it would appear that the beginning research students participating in this group have been provided with an optimal supervisory experience. By incorporating elements of teaching, training and mentoring into their supervision these students have also had the opportunity to develop a far deeper knowledge and understanding of the research process. It would seem that the indisputable success of this small group model becomes even more evident in that three of the four participating students graduated with first class honours, two of these students have since been awarded PhD scholarships and two currently hold full time and casual teaching positions in NSW schools.

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