'O' for Osmosis, 'P' for Pedagogy: Fixing the Postgraduate Wheel of Fortune

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Abstract

This paper focuses on pedagogy as a crucial element in postgraduate research undertakings, implying active involvement of both student and supervisor in a process of teaching and learning. It takes issue with the reliance on osmosis as the dominant practice of supervision of postgraduate research studies and suggests a model of pedagogy as intentional and systematic intervention, based on literature deriving from research in primary and secondary schooling which acknowledges the problematic natures of relationships between teaching, learning and knowledge production. In doing so, it examines issues of discursive practice and the problematic nature of power differentials in supervisor/supervisee relationships and the possibilities presented by a number of alternative models for such relationships.

Osmosis

The title of Cryer's chapter, Helping students to identify and capitalise on the skills which they develop naturally in the process of their research development programs suggests the role of osmosis in postgraduate work as a matter of course, and we would not argue with that. The interaction with supervisors(s), other postgraduate research students, deliverers of papers, workshops and seminars, perhaps those who work within postgraduate research student organisation bodies—all these in effect constitute more knowledgable Others who teach aspects of postgraduate research undertakings in the sorts of tacit ways identified by Polanyi. It can even be seen in the sort of things that are left unsaid in Connell's advice to supervisors, that sort of assumed knowledge that needs no explication as it is taken for granted that all who engage postgraduate research fields know just what he is talking about.

The literature of postgraduate research students and their supervision is consistent in that taken-for-granted knowledge—the induction of the next lot of researchers to take over from the current crop when the time comes; provisions for carrying on of valued and valuable academic tradition; the stake by students and supervisors alike in the production of new knowledge; the generation of original work within a framework of accepted research theses and an examination process; and so on. Most universities are quite explicit in their descriptions of such undertakings (see for example). Most supervisors are quite clear in what they expect from their students: original work, independence as to study; a maintenance of standards of postgraduate research work; a sense of research methodology; conventions for production of such work, and so on (Cryer, 1997b). Indeed, the whole culture of university faculties supports such induction with some assiduity, but that induction is positioned within a framework of supervision.

Even the terminology of funding body documentation and university policy inscribe the need for research training and ensuing doctoral degrees to be undertaken under supervision.
turn of the century has seen a new concept introduced to the lexicon of postgraduate research endeavour as the funding body through the Minister responsible added the words 'research training' to such undertakings by universities and higher degree by research students. It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a disaggregation of these discourses. What we do take up is the absence of notions of pedagogy within such discourses-in effect silences which serve to normalise supervision-based relationships as outside of knowledge gained about education in other sectors. Postgraduate research study has for so long survived without engaging concepts of pedagogy; very much informed by Oxbridge conventions of male-centric conventions manifested in the don's study. This historicism has the imprimatur born of an elite, Western, male, upper class tradition, formed in conditions which no longer apply in the postmodern world.

Established Models

Holbrook and Johnston point to postgraduate research activities as being a relatively recent phenomenon in this country, the first PhD being in 1946 while Germany has been seeing such things since early in the nineteenth century (p. 4). Lee and Green (1999) see a spur for growth in the area as part of a shift to post-industrial knowledge and information-based economies placing increasing emphasis on educational credentials and multi-skilled workers and informed citizenry (p. 1). Within such constructs, there is ample scope for the individual student making decisions as to educational upgrading, perhaps with a view to advancement in professional situations. There is also the standing that research has within academia, featuring consistently as privileged-ahead of teaching, for example-situated at the top of a hierarchy that places administration and teaching underneath it. Academics would see the respect accorded to being part of such knowledge-producing processes; students would aspire to be part of it; institutions would reward it. It may be possible to cast the situation in a pejorative mould as 'creeping credentialism', but that really has only ever applied to the burgeoning numbers of undergraduate courses assiduously developed by universities in response to challenges to provide places for more school leavers anxious to participate in the changing economic world of global and fast capital. The course work masters degrees and professional doctorates might come under this umbrella as well, but the elite nature of the postgraduate research degree, especially the postgraduate research degree, has consistently maintained its appeal.

That appeal has been constant in the face of a great deal of change in Australia's universities. 1993 sees a 432% increase in the total number of students in higher education in Australia, a number which places universities in a position of having moved from an elite to a mass education system, p. 176). Skilbeck defines the point at which this transition occurs as being when the participation rate is in the range of 15% to 25% of the population of school leaving age (p. 19), and the moves since 1993 have vindicated this perception. The range of student backgrounds implied by this massification of higher education would suggest the sorts of non-white, non-male, non-middle class populations among student postgraduate research cohorts that would give rise to a number of different positionings of students within postgraduate research activities. We also suggest that there is a consequent need for a range of postgraduate research pedagogies to be employed.

What is it to Supervise?

To supervise is not to advise. Our reading of the literature suggests that the pre-eminent forms of supervision carry with them powerful overtones of overseeing, that is, of looking over and looking after production and development with regard to academic knowledge and identity (p. 218). Bartlett and Mercer, investigating the dimension of their own supervisor-supervisee relationship, identify models of male-dominated metaphors of power, 'which assumes a knowing supervisor who passes on knowledge to the unknowing student in a sort
of rite of passage', often linked with master-apprentice metaphors (p. 57). Parry and Hayden (1999) see the possibilities of mentor-master roles, as in the master-apprentice forms, as well as those of 'critical friend' and 'gatekeeper of science' (p. 196) for supervisors. Within such frameworks, there exists the construct of a relatively ignorant postgraduate research student in such ways normalised as some form of acolyte. This suggests, in effect, adopting a subject position before the master, relatively powerless to act or decide on one's own account in the face of the overwhelming magnitude of the postgraduate research task which is to be mediated via the supervisor. When such constructs are examined, they are open to possibilities of what Bartlett and Mercer (2001) suggest as 'the tertiary equivalent of the brutalizing [sic] experiences so often documented in the lives of boys in traditional British public schools' (p 57).

Much has been made of the need to produce new knowledge in the globalising economy in which Australia could play a leading role or be marginalised along with the rest of Third World countries like those in Africa and others in the Pacific Rim. Research efforts have come to be constructed as crucial to national economic and labour policies, and to facilitate this happening, we have seen a shift to performance-based allocation formulas for funding of universities in Australia. These include institutions being rewarded, among other things, for 'the quality of their research training environments and for ensuring that students complete their degrees'(Kemp, 199b, p. 29). It is not just the generation of an elite group of researchers that is at issue here. It is matters of completion times and completion rates set against the 'national investment' (Kemp, 199b, p. 1) of the Commonwealth government. It is an important shift within discourses of postgraduate research activity, but it still frames the activity as part of supervisor-student relationships.

That relationship is by no means as straightforward as a reading of Connell (1985) might suggest. Bartlett and Mercer (2001) are not alone in their depictions of traumas and conflicts that have come to be normalised as natural postgraduate research experience. The literature on postgraduate research students and studying is littered with such references to isolation, social deprivation, or even the 'agony' of postgraduate research experience. Indeed, our own experience as office bearers and workers in postgraduate research student associations has provided us with a raft of horror stories that support such assertions in the literature. We have cases of postgraduate research students emerging from each meeting with their supervisors in tears, the experience having been such a humiliating personal, professional and academic experience for them.

Some researchers in the postgraduate research field attempt to list such problems, and offer practical solutions to them. Indeed, most are sympathetic to what they see as the postgraduate research student's plight. They take the form of what Holbrook and Johnston (1999) describe as 'self-help books', ones that describe a postgraduate research world with rules and resources, worlds that run smoothly, 'populated with omnipotent, personable and caring supervisors', and perhaps more importantly, students with 'remediable problems' (p. 4), embodied in pastoral care programs. Such representations only serve to underscore the naturalising processes at work, constraining possibilities of thought for such students as to there being any different sorts of worlds for them to negotiate. Cast as the persons responsible for the smooth running of the supervisor-student relationship, they face a seemingly overwhelming task of taking on roles far beyond their experience, knowledge and expertise. The supervisor role is the privileged one; the postgraduate research student some sort of deficient character who needs to undergo some sort of remediation of the deficiency.

**Discourses of Deficit**

Deficits in this area are instantly recognisable, especially with the new constructs related to completions and completion rates that drive funding exercises. They are the students who
drop out, who don't complete, or who don't complete on time, or who are required to resubmit, and so on. They are measurable in terms of loss of income to students themselves but even more importantly to the universities, with the new performance-based funding arrangements. Others abound, based on more specific student deficiencies. Grant and Graham refer to the stories that they constantly encounter of postgraduate research students and their experience of being supervised — ‘frequently they were dismal’, they tell us (p. 165).

Phillips provides us with her 15-year research that pairs comments in interviews by supervisors and students that show how much at odds they are with their perceptions of each postgraduate research project. She stresses the need for open communication early on in each case, but also indicates the unwillingness of students to do so, and presents not only students as suffering stress and anxiety as a result but also being the instruments of frustration in their supervisors.

Stevens and Asmar (1999) reproduce the story of one Corinne:

> After reading a very lengthy and clumsy first draft of my honours thesis, my supervisor told me that it was like reading one of those books that, once you put it down, you just can't pick it up again (p. 23).

This is cruel. Even our primary schools have signs that announce them as being No Put-Down areas. How is Corinne’s treatment allowed in a university? It is not funny. Yet Stevens and Asmar (1999) follow up with advice to students to be more explicit in their expectations of supervisors, and vice versa, so that mutual respect can be established. It all sounds so easy, a depiction of that sort of world identified by Holbrook and Johnston (1999) referred to earlier. We are reminded of Gergen’s clever play on Barrett-Browning’s famous lines: ‘How may I fault thee? Let me count the ways...’ (p. 148).

Yet we acknowledge that this is not the case with all students. We have had many tell us how ‘lucky’ they have been with their supervisors. Surely it must be more than a matter of ‘luck’. Surely the Corinne of the above anecdote deserves better than that sort of Wheel of Fortune situation where the wheel can be working for her or against her. Osmosis clearly is not working. We need pedagogy.

**‘P’ for Pedagogy**

We are not just looking at teaching here. We use the term pedagogy to capture not only the teaching of content, but also how it is taught, how a student learns, and the context(s) of that learning. This implies a multiplicity of pedagogies and epistemologies, not just the conversational and comfortable tones of Connell (Green & Lee, 1985, p. 130), so suggestive of the Oxbridge conventions. Lusted takes up the issue of pedagogy as ‘draw[ing] attention to the process through which knowledge is produced (p. 2, italics in original). In spite of his representation of it as ‘an ugly word in print and on the tongue’ (p. 3), Lusted (1986) represents the concept as part of active engagement on the part of the teacher and the learner, producing knowledge together:

> The concept of pedagogy...refuses any tendency to instrumentalise the relations, or disconnect their interactivity or to give value to one agency over another...it denies notions of the teacher as functionary...the learner as 'empty vessel' or passive respondent, knowledge as immutable material to impart. Instead, it foregrounds exchange between and over the categories, it recognises the productivity of the relations, and it renders the parties within them as active, changing and changeable agencies (p. 3).
Here, Gee's notion of Discourses comes to mind. He makes the distinction between capital 'D' Discourse and small 'd' discourse. Small 'd' discourse has been used as a label for stretches of written or oral language, as used in discussions based on literacies. Discourse with a capital 'D' Gee (1990) uses to describe texts. These texts are not only oral and written types but also refer to the contexts in which they have been generated. Given such a concept of Discourse, a more complete picture emerges where the language itself is viewed as part of the total context in which it has been conceived, generated, articulated and received. The whole context then is the discourse in which utterance itself is only a part and the actions from which it is generated and which it generates is seen as discursive practice. Gee (1997) gives the story of the little girl, Leona, who has not managed the Discourses of school, and continues to operate in the Discourses of her home, telling the story of her grandmother's birthday and subsequently accused of lying by her teachers. She is not mainstream white, male and middle class; she comes from a different tradition of communication and child-rearing practices.

Pedagogy takes issue with notions concerning the construction of knowledge as something that can be transmitted in linear passages from knower to non-knower. It takes issue with notions of Discourse that exclude forms of knowing that sit outside mainstream constructs. Pedagogy in a supervisor-supervisee relationship, moreover, takes issue with the positioning of the mediating influence of all research production on the part of the supervisor. Pedagogy acknowledges the postgraduate research student as an active learner. Pedagogy acknowledges that supervision and being supervised is not about 'luck' or being 'lucky'.

Fixing the Wheel

By this we mean to stop it spinning and producing either lucky or unlucky results. We mean that good will and random, isolated good practice will be privileged rather than operating as they do now on the margins of mainstream postgraduate research practice (see for example papers presented at this conference; . Good as such programs are, they do not tackle the problem. Palmer refers to an academic culture where the sort of teaching that is undertaken in Faculties is privatised to the extent that no colleague really knows what another does in terms of pedagogy, unlike for example trial lawyers and surgeons who constantly perform in public. This is embedded in discourses of academic freedom, of course. And he argues that we pay a high price for this as we rely on student surveys 'cynically accepted' and 'selectively invoked' to establish student satisfaction or otherwise, and no real engagement with issues related to our pedagogies. Our collegiality means that we have no real accountability systems in place. Who among the Directors of Graduate Schools can force pedagogical practice of any type upon a supervisor? What inducement is there, beyond a personal or perhaps professional concern, to undergo any pedagogical training for supervisors? If the requirements are some sort of postgraduate research qualification in order to be registered in an institution as a supervisor, what models have we to guide our activities but the very intense private one we had with our own supervisors? And what if that was one like Corinne's? With existing problems in all likelihood being exacerbated by increasing numbers of postgraduate research students with no corresponding increase in academic staff (Grant & Graham, 1994, p. 165), the chance or 'luck' factor is likely to be heightened.

The Community of Practice is a model that is often invoked in relation to such issues. Such communities may operate as part of discursive practices within faculties, within institutions, within higher education in general. Lave and Wenger's Legitimate Peripheral Participation provides a useful one to inform such moves (Zeegers & Barron, 2000). Within communities of practice, roles of various members at various stages of their activities and progress may be systematically supported, with good theory to underpin the communities' endeavours. The position of the supervisor as mentor, within a framework suggested by Lusted's (1986)
discussion of the role of pedagogy may be explored. Details within such a framework may be worked out: the sorts of pedagogic conversations described by Palmer (1997); confronting power relations issues such as those discussed by Bartlett and Mercer (2001) and Green and Lee; engaging reflective practice as suggested by Schön, and so on. The possibilities are certainly there, but we argue that the uptake being left in the hands of supervisors is still too much based on happenstance. The Wheel of Fortune may land on one of these or not, depending on how lucky or unlucky the postgraduate research student is.

Government funding emphasising completion rates and timely completions may be a force for action, but this still does not touch supervisors personally, nor does it get beyond statistics in terms of a postgraduate research student's course of study. Survey results may or may not be taken seriously by faculty members. There is a good deal of research being done on such issues, and welcomed by postgraduate research students and supervisors alike. While collegiality dominates the system, though, it is possible that we see none of the shifts in positions and positioning required to take luck out of the equation as far as students are concerned. That same collegiality may serve to open up engagement with such problems, provide a forum for reflective practice, and generate real avenues for change. Some of the more concrete aspects of this revolve around developing skills in the literature review, one of the most neglected aspects of postgraduate research supervision. Another is the perception (shown by Phillips, 1994, as being different in supervisors and students) of the whole postgraduate research process as the production of a thesis AND a process of examination. The question of originality is to be addressed, and that of independent student work (so independent that no supervisor is required at all, really?). Supervisors can work with postgraduate research students to construct knowledge around generic research skills, and the problems associated with ethics in research rather than leaving it all as a taken-for-granted bit of knowledge in postgraduate research students. The purpose and forms of feedback is another issue: how these should be given (like in Corinne's case?) and how often. It is possible to address such questions within a pedagogical framework and not rely on individual, independent and quite private supervisor beliefs and theories, properly tested or otherwise.

Finally

We turn, finally, to a model used to inform Early Years Literacy Programs in Australia and overseas. Here the figures, the statistics, the national interests, the hopes of parents and guardians for their children, the needs of potential employers, and so on, were taken rather more seriously than the research on postgraduate research education in the stages between enrolments and completions has been. As children were still leaving school at beginning levels of reading after twelve years or more at school, mandated programs have been introduced. Along with these has been the reinforcement (or perhaps more correctly, enforcement) by what some teachers in primary schools call 'The Literacy Police' as to approaches, strategies, techniques-specific pedagogies, in fact-to be employed in classrooms. Teachers do not like it, on the whole. Academics do not like it either. But governments have been brought to such a pass that this sort of intervention was deemed necessary if children were not to bear the brunt of teacher beliefs and theories, properly tested or otherwise, as they impact upon student progress between the stages of enrolment and completion of their schooling. If the research had been heeded, if the strategies proved to have been successful had been employed, if children had been constructed as active participants in the construction of knowledge and the shaping of their own learning, perhaps such action would never have been implemented. Grant and Graham (1994) argue the point: 'things do not have to continue as sometimes, from a commonsense point of view, it seems they must: with insight, and some tools, either student or supervisor can interrupt the present relations of power in supervision' (p. 168, emphasis in original). It is possible to effect
What we are arguing is that unless supervisors themselves take up pedagogies in their supervision of postgraduate research students, pedagogies may have to be imposed upon them.
References


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