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An Eye On The Prize: Fourth Year Honours Students , Thesis Writing and The Group Supervision Process

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a project arose 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 as it seems that the current focus on supervision of research students across Australasia as a whole is in a current state of flux (Mullins 2002). It would appear that although the supervision of thesis writing students has been a natural and accepted part of an academics working life, little is really known about the actual process, the conditions which underpin optimal supervision or the nature of alternative formats to the typical one on one nature of the process. As stated by Tinkler & Jackson (2000:167), the whole process as it stands is 'shrouded in mystery'.

Thus, in an attempt to explore possible alternatives to all research programs, and mentor possible future doctoral into the research process, a team or a 'community' based approach was set up by the Education faculty. The specific aims were to provide both individual and group mentoring while simultaneously providing an avenue for "openness, and a spirit of inquiry, all of which are desirable traits for educational researchers, whether beginners or otherwise" (Pallas 2002;9).

This paper discusses how the students involved in a 'community of learners' approach have reacted to the initial stages of this new model and the epistemological diversity they encountered.

BACKGROUND

Recent times have seen a focus of 'sustained empirical research' on postgraduate education, where the need for innovative ways of developing the research and writing skills of higher degree students appears to have emerged as a key issue (Parry and Hayden, 1994:8). This issue seems to have re-emerged at a recent open forum on supervision held at the university of Wollongong (September 2002), where discussion centred on the need to explore different forms of doctoral supervision, as it seems that the current focus on the supervision of research students across Australasia as a whole is in a current state of flux (Kiley 1999).

Although the supervision of thesis writing students, has been accepted as a natural part of an academics working life, little appears to be known about the actual process, the conditions underpinning optimal supervision, or the nature of alternative formats to the typical 'one on one' approach. However, with the majority of current research and literature into supervisory practices and experiences emerging from the postgraduate level, it appears that beginning research students at the undergraduate honours level have been seriously overlooked. Consequently, it would appear that the imbalance of representation between postgraduate and undergraduate research students within the research and literature portrays research students not only as a sum of its parts (Cove and Love 1996) but seems to have also created an elevation of status, where postgraduates are positioned at the pinnacle of what seems to be a hierarchical ladder.

While not wanting to downgrade the importance of post-graduate research, for us, the undergraduate period of research training is pivotal for two reasons. Firstly, not only are new knowledge and skills within the research area being developed in students during this stage, but secondly because this undergraduate stage carries with it the potential to not

only act as a catalyst for those choosing the transition to ongoing and advanced levels of postgraduate inquiry.

During further examination of the literature, for this inquiry, it almost appeared that underlying suggestions made to the reader, are that undergraduate honours students undergo some type of mystical transformation, from where they emerge as postgraduate students. Unfortunately, it appears that there has been a failure to acknowledge that the transitional stage to postgraduate student does not just happen, but is instead a developmental process where students undergo a significant changes in terms of work demands, expectations, and also in the adjustment in status from undergraduates to potential postgraduates' (Hawes, 2000:22).

Understandably, these transitions can render the undertaking of an initial research degree as 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 it was felt that the development of a collaborative group approach to the supervision of Honours students may have a significant impact in providing novice research students with high levels of encouragement, support and an enhanced sense of belonging to a community as together they endeavoured to accomplish a 'shared goal' of thesis writing (Adams & Hamm 1996:3).

It would seem that by developing new supervisory practices that adhere to these suggestions, students are more likely to have their needs provided for in a balanced manner. While the literature recognises that beginning research students have a variety of needs that should be met to assist in their development as confident independent researchers, Doecke and Seddon (2002) logically stress the need for the development of new supervisory practices that they maintain must move beyond the traditional one-to-one relationship where the supervisor is ostensibly an expert in all things relevant to the students research (Doecke and Seddon, 2002).

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 this disciplinary knowledge and one-on-one supervisory relationships will remain. However, in spite of this, they strongly maintain that the AMM of supervision is unlikely to 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. In an attempt at exploring possible alternatives that endeavours to meet these needs, and mentor possible future doctoral students into the research process, a team or a 'community' based approach was set up by the Education Faculty at the University of Wollongong. The specific aim of implementing this approach was to provide individual and group mentoring as a means to supervising undergraduate honours students, while simultaneously providing an avenue for 'openness and a spirit of inquiry, all of which are desirable traits for educational researchers, whether beginners or otherwise' (Pallas 2001:9).

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, 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 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

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. It appears that the provision of such a support network may account for the alleviation of isolation that has in the past, been of significant disadvantage to research students (Latona and Browne,

2001). This support also seems to have demonstrated to students that the difficulties they may encounter were not limited to themselves, but were also experienced by others in the group. This also led students to the realisation that these experiences are an accepted part of the thesis writing process.

With emphasis being placed on students attaining ownership of their thesis, the need for them to be independent was highlighted by the participating supervisors in the group. By providing students with high levels of autonomy and flexibility, students were soon demonstrating their willingness and abilities at being independent in their research and thesis writing decisions. This framework of support (Moses, 1985), not only provided students with the opportunity to be responsible and autonomous in their research, but ensured they felt 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 assumed significant responsibility for their research.

It also seems evident within the findings, that while small group supervision is beneficial to students, these benefits can extend beyond the students 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 in 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 and heavy workloads of academics, would normally inhibit them from participating in this network of sharing (Maddern, 1996).

The findings of two academic members who were currently in transition to becoming supervisors appeared to further demonstrate the advantages that this approach provided to supervisors. It would appear that these members not only provided a valuable

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 how best 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 removes the traditional notion of supervision as being confined to the supervisors' office, where the supervisor is ostensibly the expert in all things relevant to the student's research (Doecke and Seddon, 2002).

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.

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 of group development it would appear that while elements of

the forming stage were present during the meeting, it appeared to comprise more of a norming stage, due to the immediate functioning and comfort within the group.

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 a display of hostility and resistance to the groups 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.

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 could be easily adjusted. Interestingly, the inquiry findings have also demonstrated that Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development are not firmly established and set as 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 two of the four participating students have since decided to continue on into higher research degrees.

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