

The Cultural Practice of Research Higher Degree Supervision over Distance: A Case in Progress

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This paper is research in progress examining the cultural practice of research higher degree supervision in the case where the supervisor and candidate work together with geographic distance separating them. Too often, as scholars such as Danby (2005) have claimed, the research higher degree supervision process has been examined retrospectively, producing reactive research findings largely emphasising the negative aspects of doctoral supervision. Using a case study approach, the researchers have framed the study by examining the developing supervisor/student relationship that has eventuated with its own particular characteristics due to its distance mode context. The data suggest there is a 'flow' between how the physical context impacts upon the means and style of communication, the way the supervisor and candidate address academic content in their communications and the nature of their relationship. Each aspect affects and impacts upon the other. As more and more TESOL/second language research higher degree supervisions are being undertaken wholly or partially over distance, due to the capabilities of information communications technologies that enable supervisors and students to maintain long-distance communication relatively easily, the importance of these research findings for establishing new notions about TESOL research training cannot be underestimated.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is about academic processes and interpersonal relations in research higher degree supervision, and what Danby (2005: 15) has termed the “cultural” practice of research higher degree supervision. The case we explore is our own, with Lesley as supervisor in Sydney and Neil as the doctoral candidate in Singapore. This paper represents our first formal attempt to reflect on the supervision over the first eighteen months of the relationship. As such, what we present here is very much preliminary and exploratory. We consider it a case of an emergent design for the subsequent ‘study within a study’ of our relationship. This is purely for pragmatic reasons: both of us are very clear that in terms of our energy, our priority is above all the successful completion of a doctoral thesis.

In this paper we establish the context of our relationship, review the research higher degree supervision literature, present a working conceptual frame to capture the process variables and the relationships we believe exist between them, describe the data source and the method we have used to collect and analyse the first data to this point, report on, and discuss the findings, and conclude with comments on the direction of the study.

THE CONTEXT OF OUR RELATIONSHIP

Appendix A briefly profiles each of us. We each have full-time, professional academic careers and our supervisor/student relationship is one characterised by aspects in common such as a proficiency in Indonesian language and an interest in language teacher professional development. Appendix B is a chronology of our face-to-face meetings, their location and the leading agenda item for each meeting. We believe we are lucky to have been able to ‘punctuate’ our ongoing distance relationship with several face-to-face visits/meetings.

Soon after our February 2005 meeting, communication between meetings established a regularity or ‘rhythm’ with the help of e-mail. This e-mail correspondence forms the data for our study. It takes five forms:

- reports (in an attached Word document) sent from Neil to Lesley every 3-4 weeks, on topics from his reading and progressive thinking;
- a covering message with the attachment, usually with chatty comment on personal matters and some preview of the content of the report;
- Lesley’s feedback on the report, either in-text with a covering message or itemized in a separate extended message, plus return chat;
- Lesley’s record of each face-to-face meeting; and

- one-off messages and replies on administrative matters or research-related items, such as the discovery of relevant literature.

Our first serious expression of interest in exploring the nature of the supervisor-candidate relationship under the theme 'tyranny of distance' is seen in the following excerpt from a 19 April 2005 message from Lesley to Neil containing feedback on his second report:

I must say that your study style, and the opportunities afforded to you to reflect in writing like this because you are an off-campus student, certainly do lend themselves for you and I to research our time together over your candidature, and perhaps publish a paper in the end.

Our decision to research our developing relationship, to learn from it while immersed in it, was taken early on.

CONCEPTUAL FRAME

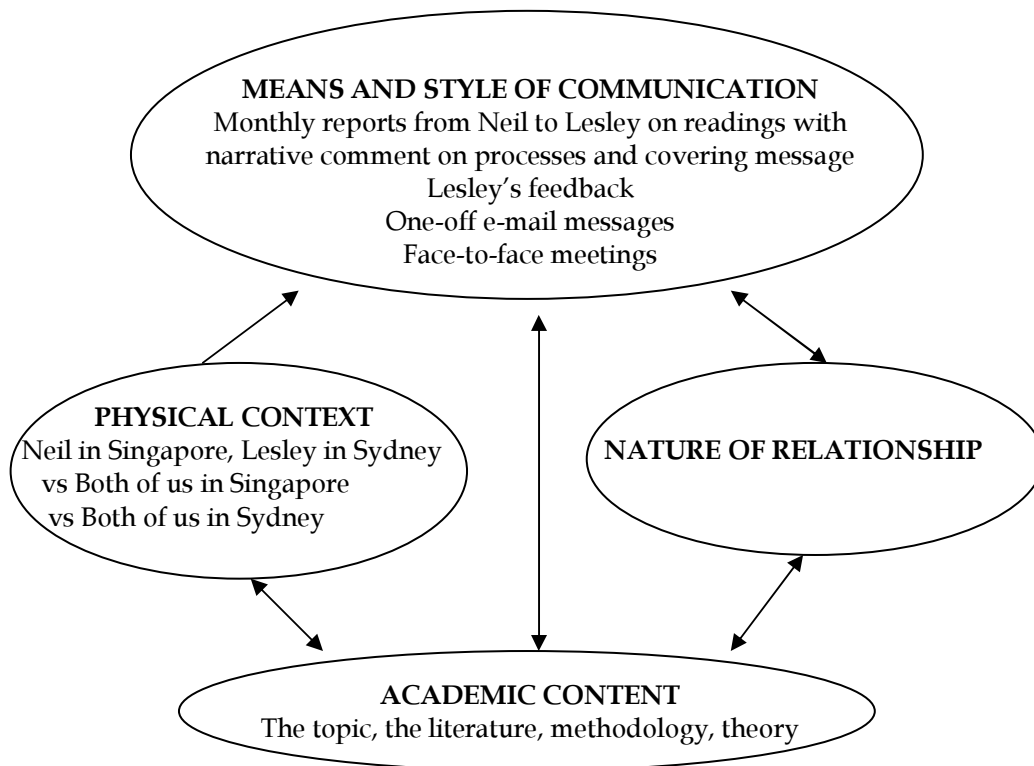
When first considering how to represent the interplay between distance (infrequent face-to-face contact but regular electronic communication), academic processes in research higher degree candidature and supervision, and the nature of the supervisor-candidate relationship, the construct of *field*, *tenor* and *mode* from Systemic-Functional Linguistics was a useful starting point for an analysis frame. Drawing on Martin (1984):

- *field* is 'what people are doing and what they are doing it to'. In our case, the 'what' was shaping and refining ideas in the early stages of a PhD candidature, with language teacher beliefs and in-service language teacher education as the broad topic of investigation;
- *tenor* is 'the way you relate to other people when doing what you do', shaped by the variables of status, affect and frequency of contact;
- *mode* is 'the channel selected to communicate'. In our case the channels were face-to-face communication versus written communication, and within written communication, reports as attachments versus covering messages, for example.

The purpose of our research, however, is not the linguistic analysis of the written texts we produce. We needed a more dynamic 'human' frame, one that centred around tenor and made provision for changes in our physical context, with variations to the context norm of Neil in Singapore and Lesley in Sydney. Figure 1 presents our working model, which we fully expect to reshape upon deeper engagement with the data and as circumstances possibly change over time.

FIGURE 1

The 'flow' linking all aspects of our developing relationship



The following notes, seen from Neil's perspective, illustrate how we have conceptualized the 'flow' from one dimension to another:

Physical context → *Means and style of communication* → *Nature of relationship*

Most of the time Neil is in Singapore and Lesley is in Sydney. This context forces Neil to write to Lesley in monthly reports. Neil's second report (March 2005) began with a narrative about his study processes and personal circumstances. This, we can see, established a 'genre'. Neil reveals things about himself that he probably would not reveal if the relationship involved regular face-to-face meetings. Lesley comments in reply to Neil's emails. The relationship, we believe, is therefore strengthened.

Physical context → Means and style of communication → Academic content

There have been several visits by Lesley to Singapore. Before each visit, we set an agenda, each sets questions for the other, sending material ahead of time where possible. The face-to-face meetings have dealt with 'meaty' issues; for example, the June 2005 meeting centred on discussion of the first draft of data collection methods and the December 2005 meeting was mainly discussion of the conceptual framework.

The 'flow' idea, we maintain, has helped us see our developing relationship more clearly. However, the nature of research higher degree supervision is not always the clear, straightforward process that 'how-to-guidebooks' might have us believe, and this we show below in our close examination of the literature.

RESEARCH HIGHER DEGREE SUPERVISION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LITERATURE

Research Higher Degree Supervision as a Problematic Area

After being 'under-researched' for a long time, the research higher degree supervision process has had a place in the research literature since the 1980s¹. The first titles of books, book chapters, journal articles and conference papers indicate that the area was fraught with issues: key words in titles and texts themselves indicate 'problems' need 'fixing', 'changes needed', and 'help given' in answer to the 'unfathomable', 'complex' aspects of research higher degree supervision. In the traditional master-novice supervisory relationship, communication has tended to be one-directional, knowledge being transmitted from the 'master' to the 'disciple'. The research higher degree 'journey' was portrayed by popular folk-wisdom, as well as by the published literature, as a model of "conflict, isolation, trauma and fraught discipleship" (as noted in Barlett & Mercer, 2000: 197; Lee & Williams, 1999), 'uncertainty' and 'menace' (Styles & Radloff, 2000), 'alienation' (Moses, 1984), 'miscommunication' (McLean, 1995) or even 'repression' (Aspland, 1999). In a traditional conceptualization of the 'powerful' supervisor, the supervisor passed on knowledge to the student novice in a sort of 'rite of passage'. This model reflected a "fundamentally unequal power relation ... [involving] complex and dynamic negotiations around power" (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000: 197).

¹ There are more than eighty thousand hits on Google Scholar when typing 'research higher degree supervision' into the search engine.

Scholars have turned now to frame solutions to the 'problem' (Labaree, 2003) of research higher degree supervision in terms of 'effectiveness' or 'efficiency' (Pearson & Brew, 2002) of higher education in general. Sinclair (2004: 27) traces the perceptions of research higher degree supervision pedagogy that has surrounded the traditional 'hands off' supervision pedagogy, where the supervisor leaves candidates largely to their own devices. Not surprisingly, the Sinclair report says that such a pedagogy was "associated with slow and non-completion". Worrying metaphors such as "rackety bridge" exist to describe the process of training a student to become a fully-fledged researcher (Grant, 1999: 1). Barron and Zeegers (2002: 1) describe what needs "fixing". No wonder research higher degree students have "problems of adjusting" (Hockey, 1994: 177), and require "balance" (Leder, 1995: 5) if perceptions such as these have 'coloured' our thinking about research higher degree supervision until now. In such an atmosphere it is difficult to conceive that anyone might ever see any aspect of the research higher degree supervision process as positive.

Recent Positive Images about Research Higher Degree Supervision

Researching their own supervisor/student supervision practice, Bartlett and Mercer's (2000) notion was to better understand what was happening to them personally and professionally. They needed to understand how they were undertaking the research higher degree supervision. They chose to research their practice by analyzing their stories: a process approach.

In the same positive vein, Shannon (1995) describes research higher degree supervision as being within a 'supervisor as mentor' paradigm, rather than the 'supervisor as master' paradigm. Certainly this is more akin to Heron's (1990) facilitative approach which envisages the mentoring process as a "process of socialization into the significant issues of the discipline", being "a dynamic bilateral interaction between colleagues" where "the mentor has to stimulate, goad, and encourage at different stages of the enterprise" (p.13). The supervisor can assist a student's career development through professional networks of colleagues, introducing him or her into the community of scholars.

We note with added expectation and encouragement from such recent studies as Bartlett and Mercer's (2000) project, Grant's (2003) work, and Harbon's (1997) reflection on research higher degree mentoring, the notion of the research higher degree supervision process being "pleasurable" (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000: 200): that it can be a relationship characterised by a "productive and supportive friendship" (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000: 196).

Suitable Research Higher Degree Supervision Strategies

From our reading we know there are a number of tools available for supervisors to strive for best practice in research higher degree supervision, the application of which will allow for open communication early on (Gurr, 2001; Heron, 1990; Parsloe, 1992). Each of the practices underlines the importance of promoting dialogue between the supervisor and student involved. Somehow in our case we needed to apply all that those practices advised us, plus cope with the 'tyranny' of distance.

Open communication is one aspect of effective supervision, but the communication must be focused on some product of the study. We agree one hundred per cent with Kamler and Thomson (2006: 11) when they state that "[r]esearch cannot be separated from writing", and that "writing-oriented supervision practices" (p.159) can be a productive paradigm. Shannon (1995: 13) believes that communication in a supervisor-student relationship is never more important than in "the issue of writing", and believes that communication must proceed between supervisor and student about the "habits [and] the conventions of the discipline". We can see, therefore, that the need for the supervisor to constantly see evidence of the student's writing is of paramount importance. This needs to be communicated at the outset of the supervision (Cargill, 1998) and updated periodically with constant reminders during the candidature. The excellence of the final written artefact is the ultimate objective – or according to the essence of Kamler and Thomson's words (2006: 1) "putting doctoral writing centre stage".

The literature acknowledges that communication with students must include information on "their rights, the resources available to them, planning of their programs... peer support [mechanisms]" (Shannon, 1995: 14). If certain logistical and administrative structures are set in place for the supervisory relationship, such as frequent communication, preparation of documents informing supervisors and students of expected procedures, and accompanying agreements between supervisors and their students about open, trusting communication, then communication must necessarily flow.

Within the often lonely and isolated context of higher degree research, it is essential that the supervisory relationship is an open one, with honest, trusting, communicative dialogue forming the basis from the beginning.

Metaphors of Research Higher Degree Supervision Practice

There is a range of diverse social positionings of the "real" people (gendered, classed, aged, ethnic, religious, sexually-oriented) that lie behind the labels "supervisors" and

“students” (Grant, 2003). For example the literature points out that female supervisors have been tracked as having introduced new styles of supervision that challenge the male “authority/genius/charismatic master” (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000: 198) models. Bartlett and Mercer’s (2000) new style of supervision was one they first noted in their own relationship as they tracked and interrogated the traditional “mother-daughter model” of supervision. Barlett and Mercer (2000) posit a series of metaphors they have developed as ways of representing and reconceptualising the research higher degree supervisor-student relationship, such as “creating in the kitchen” (p.201), “digging in the garden” (p.202), and “bushwalking” (p.203).

Researching the Current Cultural Practice of Research Higher Degree Supervision

Added to these issues is our acknowledgement that supervisors themselves, being a product of their own narrative, may adopt – or deliberately avoid – supervisory techniques used during their own doctoral period. Lesley’s own experiences of being supervised during both her masters and doctoral programs have led her to adopt a style characterized by ‘a gentle yet structured pressure’ (Harbon, 1997). During her doctoral candidature, the context afforded by her supervisor was ‘gentle’ and empathic, yet structured enough to ‘pressure’ her to keep to deadlines, and to keep producing written text. She has appreciated knowing that this style of supervision, suitable for her during her own research higher degree candidature, may be one that suits her students too.

For Lesley, the ‘gentle yet structured pressure’ that can be offered as a supervision style to research higher degree students can be likened to Heron’s (1990) framework. His six categories of counseling intervention distinguish between “authoritative” and “facilitative” styles or approaches (Heron, 1990: 4), with the authoritative described as a “prescriptive, informative and confronting” approach, while the facilitative can be viewed as a “cathartic, catalytic and supportive” approach (Heron, 1990: 21).

In our case, we have gradually come to see that the authoritative and facilitative approaches may suit different phases during the student’s research degree program (e.g. development of proposal, data collection, analysis, writing up) and/or different supervision contexts themselves (e.g., supervision of autonomous students, supervision over distance). This becomes particularly true when the student is not a full-time student on campus.

Our choice to study the processes of our supervisory relationship is modeled on the studies of Bartlett and Mercer (2000) and Danby (2005). They had commented on the perceived value of examining and analyzing current processes rather than the ‘reactive, post-event’ studies which run the risk of being seen as supervisors and candidates

commenting negatively on their experiences. We, like Danby, take the everyday event, and examine the 'cultural' practice of research higher degree supervision. We hope that our examination of our participation and relationship at all stages using a 'research lens' will allow us to keep on top of things and come through the candidature having not only a successful pleasurable experience, but also one that has been valuable and contributed to the research literature.

THE DATA

Since realising that our supervisory relationship may be the subject of a research project at some stage in the future, we decided after only a few emails had been exchanged that we would keep copies of our correspondence as a corpus of data to be examined at a later date. This was in the style of what Danby (2005) described of the supervisory relationship she examined. Danby chose to examine the researcher/student relationship in a corpus of emails between her two colleagues. Unlike Danby, however, we had no choice. The mainstay of our communication is essentially carried out through electronic communication. Our written correspondence is the essential nature of how we have conducted our communications – it has allowed us to cope with distance and difference in time zones, and represents an emerging new model of supervision.

As we are focusing at this stage on the 'crucial' first year of candidature, we note in Sinclair's report (2004, p. vii) that,

[d]uring this period 'hands on' supervisors negotiate a mix of formal and informal interactions between themselves, their candidates, other candidates and relevant sources of expert advice. This encourages self-confidence in the candidate and simultaneously monitors progress.

These understandings have helped us 'frame' our examination of our own relationship.

Our choice for a data source to examine evidence of the processes inherent in our relationship (our writings) was to work with Neil's emails to Lesley. Lesley was the 'recipient' of Neil's emails, and agreed to discuss how she 'read' them. Neil agreed to make his private writing public. This 'reading' of Neil's emails has essentially been the 'reading' of our developing relationship and has allowed us to examine the 'flow' and interplay of aspects by which we have framed our study for deeper understanding. Our choice to work with the body of Neil's email messages, rather than the even fuller descriptions and narratives and stories within his email attachments to Lesley, has been a conscious choice. Particularly at this stage we wished to avoid working with the much

larger corpus of data contained in the email attachments. Doing so at this stage might have taken away our prime focus – Neil’s thesis – if we were not careful.

METHODS

A case study approach has been chosen in order to examine data that will answer the research question about the nature of the processes involved in research higher degree supervision at a distance.

The procedure used to examine our first data set involved selecting all emails from the student to the supervisor (from the first email, in January 2005, until August 2006), representing a period of 20 months. Three points were chosen for specific examination: the first two months (January and February 2005) the mid-point two months (September and October 2005) and the final two months to this point in the candidature (July and August 2006).

A tally count revealed that there were five emails from the student to the supervisor in the beginning period, twelve emails in the mid-point period, and nineteen emails in the final period. Each email message was coded as being personal/indirect research-related/direct research-related, and a note was taken as to whether the email was part of a chain/thread of emails.

We read and re-read the emails of those months. The emails were examined for ‘means and style of communication’, ‘academic content’, and key terms/words that would give an indication as to the ‘nature of the relationship.’

DISCUSSION

Months 1 and 2: Jan and Feb 2005 – Emails 1 to 5

The ‘officially enrolled’ supervisory relationship between us began in January 2005. (Neil and Lesley had met just once face-to-face about Neil’s possible enrolment in a discussion three years previously. A few emails had been sent in the interim before Neil finally enrolled.).

Lesley received her first official email from Neil in late January 2005.

Dear Lesley

Happy New Year to you. What does it have in store? Are you as busy as ever at work? What subjects are you teaching?

I don't know how things work within the Faculty of Education and Social Work, but I assume you know that I finally sent off a PhD proposal at Christmas time and received my letter of acceptance about a week ago, with you as my principal supervisor as requested. [Colleague's name] is my associate supervisor.

Did you get to see my proposal? It was for a longitudinal study of cognitive and behavioural change in a group of experienced Indonesian [teachers] of English as a result of an INSET programme at [place of employment]. I'll send you a copy by mail. Once the term gets underway, perhaps we could discuss the arrangements for our communication and where you think I should start with my reading.

I'm excited by the whole thing, and scared at the same time. Natural I guess. I'm looking forward to working with you.

Regards

Neil

The candidate's formal use of language for this first email – *Dear Lesley...Regards Neil* – underlines the formality in the start to the relationship. The topics within the text of this first email are in 'neutral territory': New Year, supervisor's workload and tasks, a mention of the proposal document – suggesting Neil is opening the relationship carefully at the start. Not commanding her to do so, but gently suggesting it with a 'perhaps', Neil is guiding Lesley to proceed with the supervision.

In saying, *"I'm excited by the whole thing, and scared at the same time. Natural I guess"* we believe that Neil was firmly stating that he is in the candidate seat, and Lesley should now feel sure that Neil is looking to her for guidance.

In between that first email and the fifth email, Lesley scheduled a face-to-face visit to Neil in Singapore (on route to undertake teaching tasks offshore). They corresponded in the remainder of the first two months in short exchanges. The emails started to take on an urgency, "Dear" and "Regards" were dropped as they attempted not to keep each other waiting, and finalising arrangements for the first meeting.

It was evident in those emails that we started to develop a personal relationship alongside our professional one – Lesley would be staying with an uncle at his home (she knew Singapore more closely than a transit tourist); Neil could offer his home for the meeting place (Lesley would find out about how and where Neil lived, his work and family, etc.).

Our emailing continued throughout 2005. From early March, Neil attached longer responses to his reading in attached documents.

'Mid-point', Months 9 and 10: Sept and Oct 2005 - Emails 6 to 17

By this stage entering into the ninth month, the data show that Neil's email messages were sometimes extremely brief, and the "meat" was inside the attached document.

However, examination of the structure and language used in Neil's emails gives clues to the developing relationship. It was clear even through opening greetings that the relationship had become more casual, seen through the more familiar chatty tone "Hi Lesley" and lots more abbreviations obvious: "It's" "here's" and "I'm", for example.

At the end of the ninth month, Neil had had some more time to write.

Hi Lesley. Greetings from Singapore...

I've been busy since we were last in touch, both at work and with my study.

I said in my last report that there were some readings I wanted to put into my out tray and that I wanted to start drawing things together with an outline of a possible lit review. I've stuck to my word and snuck in a bit more reading as well - the most recent articles I could find on collaborative/cooperative research from Teaching and Teacher Education and other high profile journals. I know that I'll need a healthy quota of post-2000 references in my proposal. I came across some good stuff.

The most useful article I've read (one of the ones I'd had sitting around ready to go in the out tray) was by 'my Gary' (Fenstermacher) entitled 'The knower and the known: The nature of knowledge in resesearch on education'.

It's a beauty and I think I'm likely to draw heavily on it to present a case for the need to justify practical teacher knowledge according to some form of normative framework. More and more I see that my study will be one which problematizes this whole construct in cross-cultural settings.

Anyway, enough raving on. I just wanted to touch base and tell you that [Name] and I are going to Adelaide on Friday night. We're going for [Name] ([Name] youngest) 10th birthday. Back next Wednesday so I hope to get a formal report to you on the developments above by 3 October.

Hope all's well with you.

Neil

At almost the end of the first year of the candidature, the relationship had settled down to being quite familiar and arguably more casual. Colloquial phrases (e.g. *"It's a beauty"*, *"enough raving on"*, *"good stuff"*) are characteristic of Neil's written texts now and we consider this a sign of having become closer personally and professionally. What was flowing between the language choice in the emails to the developing relationship was a signal to become more casual and relaxed with each other.

We consider that the text shows that the relationship by this stage, even though still not having changed in 'physical proximity', had relaxed to an extent. Humour is present in Neil's writing: his reference to "my Gary", something that he and Lesley had laughed about at a face-to-face meeting earlier on, alluding to how he has taken to highlighting key authors/notions in his readings as a sign of high respect for their work.

As well, we consider that another means by which our relationship has visibly become closer and more relaxed is with our English/Indonesian code-mixing/code-switching. This point is where another personal commonality they shared (they had discovered they both had a proficiency in Indonesian language) binds them through email again - Lesley having commented about Neil working in Indonesia, and Lesley's decision not to go to Indonesia, and how Bali had been bombed again that week, with Neil writing *"Yes, kasihan Bali yang indah"* [yes, poor beautiful Bali]: code-mixing allowed him to advise Lesley in a language she understands, how he expresses deep regret for what has happened in 'beautiful' Bali.

A further hint in the email above that their relationship had become closer is in Neil's adding family travel details. Neil's note advises Lesley about his family priorities *"to Adelaide on Friday night"* but that his study would be on his agenda after family activities, so that Lesley should not worry about his seeming lack of attention to his thesis.

The remainder of the twelve emails until mid October were sorting out the process by which the annual progress report official paperwork would be completed. This flurry of emails recorded how the procedure occurred and geographic distance did not slow the process down.

'End-point', Months 19 and 20: July and August 2006 - Emails 18 to 36

It was in fact Lesley who opened up communication at the point of the 19th month under examination in this analysis (July and August 2006). The topics of the emails at the beginning of that month were about personal details (Neil's family matters), Lesley's absences from the office (attending conferences), planning for a joint delivery of a paper, and for Neil's thesis proposal meeting. Characteristic of those emails are short sharp sentences with no formalities.

By late July we had resumed 'the thesis end' of our communications. Neil wrote:

Hi Lesley. I'm at home today, finally putting into the relevant READ pile readings which have been sitting on my desk for months and which have begun to annoy me, drawing out key articles from the different piles, trying to establish links, jotting down ideas, working up to an in-note-form version of my proposal for you and [Associate Supervisor] to have a look at. I felt an urge to share something with you.

Earlier this morning I read the following:

Labaree, D. (2003). The peculiar problem of preparing educational researchers. Educational Researcher, 32 (4), 13-22.

It's from the 'Teachers as researchers' stream of literature, which I'll be writing about, for what it has to say about voice, collaborative inquiry (with researchers), established and emergent communities of practice, epistemology etc. Labaree talks about educational research programmes in the US and potential cultural clashes between the worldview of the teacher and the researcher, how an experienced teacher doing a PhD may resist having to transform their cultural orientation from normative to analytical, from personal to intellectual, from particular to universal, from experiential to theoretical. I think it's relevant to my study ie. my take on what I'm bringing to the interaction with my participants as both a teacher educator and a novice researcher, what the participants are bringing to the interaction ie Is this normative, personal, particular, experimental orientation of teachers universal? What other dimensions are there, given there are cross-cultural issues at an even bigger level?

I thought the article was also relevant to our own shared research area of the relationship between supervisor and PhD candidate. It's another model based on conflict.

One thing that really grabbed me was Labaree's questions to ask yourself when critically evaluating academic texts : What's the point? What's new?

Who says? Who cares?

I've put these 4 questions in big bold print and stuck them on the side of my computer (next to the pictures of Etienne, Gary, Virginia and Donald).

I'll ask them of myself as I'm writing my proposal and my thesis.

Have a good weekend.

Neil

When Neil tells her “*I felt an urge to share something with you*”, Lesley is being advised that her role in his study is important. Yet due to distance separating them physically, an email had to suffice, replacing what in a face-to-face supervision might have resulted in Neil dropping in to Lesley’s office unannounced for a quick chat.

After Neil shares his reading with her, he describes how he will use the material he has just read, and comments:

One thing that really grabbed me was Labaree's questions to ask yourself when critically evaluating academic texts : What's the point? What's new?

Who says? Who cares? I've put these 4 questions in big bold print and stuck them on the side of my computer (next to the pictures of Etienne, Gary, Virginia and Donald).

We agree the written text shows Neil appealing to their shared knowledge: Neil has referred before to his practice of placing large signs with names/questions/photos up at his workspace – this kind-of ‘insider’ (emic) view that only Lesley and he share about his work habits. We realise that we perhaps now share more information with each other – even down to fine details of study habits – than is shared between a student and candidate in a face-to-face supervision.

Bartlett and Mercer (2000: 201-203) had used “cooking in the kitchen”, “digging in the garden”, and “bushwalking” as replacement metaphors for the “mother/daughter relationship” to describe their supervisory relationship that they tried not to perpetuate. An analysis of Neil’s emails to Lesley over the twenty months indicate to us we may have developed a ‘good friends’ relationship metaphor, something similar to, yet not exactly like, the ‘critical friends’ metaphor that has existed for research higher degree supervision in the past.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we believe that there had been a change in the nature of the personal and professional relationship between us in this period that has traced the initial twenty-month period in a supervision relationship where Neil has prepared his proposal document.

The physical context had not essentially changed – Neil was still in Singapore and Lesley still in Sydney. Yet the email communications and as many face-to-face meetings as possible that we had orchestrated had clearly become our way of developing a workable, productive relationship and brought us together as ‘close friends’.

Current supervisor-student relationships, where the supervisor adopts the role of facilitator rather than master, are increasingly characterised by greater flexibility and growing student autonomy than the rigid traditional model. As Grant states (2003: 175), “supervision is not only concerned with the production of a good thesis but also with the transformation of the student into an independent researcher”. The student achieves this transformation by constantly constructing new knowledge for new meaning and new meaning from new knowledge. These new constructed meanings are conveyed and contested through such communication practices as dialogue and discussion with supervisors (and other significant others) as well as through the reflective reading processes, as the student learns not just the skills but is taught HOW to become a researcher (Grant, 2003: 180).

The processes we have cultivated have facilitated a growing understanding of each other (each other’s ways, each other’s needs, each other’s strategies) that have allowed a ‘relaxation’ to occur – not in the effort expended by either of us on the tasks, but on the way we have communicated about our tasks. The means and style of communication has become much less formal and resorts to devices such as humour and code-switching to periodically establish our ‘insider’ knowledge about each other, confirming we have come a long way to this point. The means and style of communication can be business-like, or as mentor-student, or even as caring friend.

What this means for the remainder of the candidature is that we will:

- continue with the ultimate task, to have Neil produce a solid research study, as after all, “writing-oriented’ supervision practices (Kamler & Thomson, 2006: 159) make sense to us both;
- continue to write to each other via e-mail, which represents the process of further data collection;

- continue to rely on email as our chief source of communication, but also to explore such technologies as, for example, *Skype* (voice over internet);
- watch closely to see whether our supervisor/candidate relationship changes as the project comes to maturity;
- disseminate our study's findings in the hope that our model for TESOL research higher degree supervision over distance is meaningful for other supervisors and students who are in projects similar to ours. We will encourage others to explore the examination of the cultural practice of research higher degree supervision as a most worthwhile aspect of the supervisory process.

Admittedly there is a danger that we now have realised these aspects of our relationship, we might be inclined to 'write for the data'. In our discussions we have acknowledged this will be an inherent problem, but one that we are positive will be overcome by the fact that our main task still drives our relationship: the priority to see a successful doctoral candidature and examination come to fruition.

THE AUTHORS

Lesley Harbon is Senior Lecturer in Languages Education and TESOL in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. Lesley also coordinates the short term international experience programs in the Faculty, having taken small groups of pre-service teachers to Indonesia and South Korea since 2004. Her research interests include short term international experiences for language teachers, bilingual education, intercultural language education, Confucian Heritage Culture learners, and the research higher degree study process.

Neil England is Lecturer in the Language Education and Research Department, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore, where he coordinates the Certificate in TESOL and teaches on a range of English proficiency courses for government officials, mainly from ASEAN countries and China. He is in his second year of a part-time doctorate through the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, in which he will be working with Indonesian language teacher educators, to co-construct an interpretation of local warranted practice.

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Appendix A: Brief personal profile of Neil as candidate and Lesley as supervisor

Neil	
Personal details	An Australian citizen, resident in Singapore since 2000; a lecturer at a regional language centre.
Research Higher Degree candidature	Doctor of Philosophy in Education, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney; part-time, commenced in March 2005.
Area of study	In-service language teacher education in cross-cultural settings; (Indonesian) language teacher educator beliefs and practices; how to develop a sense of local warranted practice, understood and accepted by a broader international community of practice.
Lesley	
Personal details	Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney
Professional roles	University lecturer in Languages Education and TESOL; preparation of pre-service language teachers; research higher degree supervisor; Faculty Director for Short Term International Experiences.
Research areas	Language teachers' short term international experiences; language teacher professional development; bilingual education; intercultural language education; ICT and languages education; the Confucian Heritage Culture learner.

Appendix B: Face-to-face meetings between Lesley and Neil

Date	Location	Main purpose
August 2002	Sydney	To discuss possible supervision.
February 2005	Singapore	First meeting as candidate and supervisor; to exchange academic and professional histories, establish ground rules for communication and discuss issues arising from research proposal for acceptance.
June 2005	Singapore	To freely discuss 'issues arising' and consider the academic, practical and presentational aspects of a first draft data collection and analysis table.
December 2005	Singapore	To discuss the 'fit' of a draft conceptual framework with the research questions.
May 2006	Singapore	To discuss 'issues arising' and presentation topics for the Sydney colloquium.