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'Collaborative Critique' in a Supervisor Development Program

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Supervision of research degrees is currently undergoing significant re-evaluation as the research environment itself responds to new and ongoing external policy and funding pressures, internationalisation, increasing cross-disciplinarity, and the proliferation of sub-specialisations, amongst other factors. The Exploring Supervision Program is designed to aid new supervisors of research students to find effective ways of negotiating supervision in the context of this changing academy. To this end, a workshop facilitation approach is employed that we call 'collaborative critique', a technique designed to extend understandings of complex situations through discussion and debate stimulated by narrative, case studies and role plays. Here we outline the rationale of collaborative critique and then demonstrate how it is used in a workshop on working in the multicultural academy.

Keywords: supervisor development program; academic development; multicultural academy; cross-cultural workshops

Introduction: supervisor professional development

As the research climate in universities has responded to changing internal and external policies and pressures in the last decade, the need to provide relevant academic development for research supervisors of PhD students has become critical. Systematic supervisor training has become part of the agenda (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Brew & Peseta, 2004, 2009; Wisker, 2005, 2012; Reid & Marshall, 2009; Lee, 2011); frameworks and requirements for PhD supervision articulated (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2007; Lee, 2008; Evans, 2009); the challenges posed to supervisors by the implementation of the Bologna Process (Baptista, 2011) and government policies

elsewhere (McCallin & Nayar, 2011) analysed; the need to build research capacity in countries such as South Africa championed (Bitzer, 2007; de Lange, 2011); and alternative conceptualisations and models for supervision have been put forward (among recent examples, see Samara, 2006; Crossouard, 2008; Firth & Martens, 2008; de Beer & Mason, 2009; Creighton, Creighton & Parks, 2010; Fenge, 2011; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011). As academic developers responsible for providing appropriate education for research supervisors, how can we best fulfil our brief to deliver programs suited to this research climate?

Recent literature on structured supervisor development programs marks a shift from emphasising the administrative and policy compliance aspects of research supervision to concentrating on the pedagogical elements of supervisors' responsibilities. In line with Clegg's (1997) model, Manathunga (2005, p. 22) points to the need for supervisor training that transfers its focus from the implementation of institutional policies to a pedagogy that can 'value, explore, and build upon academics' prior knowledge and understandings'. She focuses on reflective practice and the interpersonal and emotional aspects of research supervision, as do Emilsson and Johnsson (2007). A similar tendency to prioritise reflection and feedback appears in the program developed by Brew and Peseta (2004; 2009). Halse (2011) recommends that formalised supervisor development programs include explicit discussion of 'becoming supervisor', that is, of the continuous learning and knowledge generation that occurs for supervisors themselves while supervising research students. Narrative, creative writing, drama and roleplays are also harnessed in innovative professional development programs that draw on the situated nature of individuals' experiences (Manathunga, Peseta & McCormack, 2010; Winka & Grysell, 2011).

Professional development programs for staff training are delivered in both localised and centralised modes, with associated advantages and disadvantages (Boud 1999). There are certainly benefits in staff development activities being delivered within disciplines or faculties: there may be specific issues peculiar to that research culture or research group; collegially developed initiatives are more likely to be generally supported, as opposed to those introduced by a single individual borrowing from external sources. But as Boud also concedes, training undertaken within faculties risks being more homogeneous and less innovative than programs that bring together a cross-section of the university's academic community. Indeed, the recently released NAIRTL (2012, s2.1) publication on supervisor development explicitly recommends that 'It is important to avoid isolating disciplines' in such activities. The program discussed here is centralised and thus influenced by working across the whole university, with the distinct advantage that supervisors can learn from diverse areas and share insights across faculties. The teaching approach described below draws on this diversity as a strength in supervisor development.

'Collaborative critique'

We have developed a teaching approach that we are calling 'collaborative critique' – an approach that is collaborative in that participants work together to create meaning, and their combined efforts are directed at critically assessing and evaluating aspects of their shared environment. Like the more recent supervisor development approaches outlined above, collaborative critique highlights the sharing of personal experience and collegial reflection, but privileges the learning gained from structured environments where reciprocal critical discussion is embraced.

This pedagogical approach grows out of the insights of Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice, collaborative learning, adult learning, peer learning,

situated learning, and particularly the social constructivist approaches that educationalists have developed from Vygotsky's (1978) work. These approaches to facilitating learning are very well established, and we reflect on how they can usefully inform current practices in face-to-face supervisor development workshops in the contemporary research-intensive university.

In establishing a pedagogical framework for our workshops, a premium is placed on the 'reciprocal peer learning' framework, as advanced by Boud (1999). Boud's model draws on the broader notion of peer learning in higher education (for example, Boud et al. (2001)), applying this specifically to staff academic development. Boud's thesis is that much staff development is best undertaken by groups of academics working collaboratively, in the absence of any designated 'teacher'; such groups instead take 'collective responsibility for identifying their own learning needs and planning how these might be addressed' (1999, p. 6). Boud suggests that this approach empowers group critiquing of the particular learning activity being undertaken (1999, p. 6). Academic development activities conducted in this way thus align with the peer learning, peer review and collegial evaluation and decision-making processes that operate within the research environment. However, as Boud's own examples show, teacherless peer learning situations depend critically either on some existing expertise on the topic being present within the peer group, or on sufficient time for the group to acquire such expertise. This cannot be assumed in the series of workshops that are the focus here. We believe therefore that there is a role for a 'teacher' who can feed in data, questions and scenarios for the group to consider; who can seed and nurture the group's taking of collective responsibility; and who can simultaneously function as a critical(perhaps disruptive) agent, putting forward provocative issues for the group to confront. The strong emphasis on the negotiation of a collaborative, critical response to

the topics and materials distinguishes this approach from the peer learning commonly found in undergraduate settings. However, it can prove unsettling to some participants who anticipate a program aimed at generating compliance with institutional supervisory regulations. Further, importance is placed on workshop participants producing, as a primary outcome, take-home documents representing their responses to the issues under discussion, and which include principles and methods for ongoing critical enquiry into those issues.

While Boud provides us with an instructive general model for workshop pedagogy, Jonassen et al. (1995) offer a systematic structure for implementing such a pedagogy. Jonassen et al.'s (1995) widely cited, seminal article on collaborative constructivist learning environments has usually been adopted in relation to online learning and the use of digital technologies in education (the original article's focus), but the central concepts are equally applicable to face-to-face delivery. Thus, we would certainly agree that 'learning is necessarily a social, dialogical process in which communities of practitioners socially negotiate the meaning of phenomena' (Jonassen et al., 1995, p. 9), and consequently seek to develop effective learning environments that take into account context, construction, collaboration and conversation. The workshops are intended to be 'learner-centred collaborative environments that support reflective and experiential processes. Students and instructors can then build meaning, understanding, and relevant practice together' (Jonassen et al., 1995, p. 8).

The primary aim in the workshops is not to teach specific, predetermined content; rather, it is to provide a learning space in which supervisors work together to critique their own assumptions and actions, and to establish mindsets and methods for ongoing critical inquiry into their supervisory values and behaviours. This collegial engagement is a central part of the core learning in the workshops.

In the supervisor development workshops participants jointly develop a range of possible responses to given situations, rigorously examining their reactions to hypothesized circumstances. Rather than seeking fixed 'correct answers', the process works to develop an understanding of the complexity of the issues. Group members are encouraged to find their own meanings in their disciplinary contexts – sometimes with considerable variation within the group – constructing strategies between them to negotiate this terrain, drawing from personal experience to understand events, identifying what requires their attention, what they are willing to tolerate and where they personally draw the line. The aim is to construct a workable understanding for each individual that is broadly harmonious with (rather than identical to) the generally agreed parameters, and to construct a shared understanding of the responsibilities of research supervision. While we readily acknowledge that there are different research cultures in Schools and Disciplines across the university, we also seek some coherence between those areas in the basic principles of best practice in supervision; after all, such coherence can become critical in inter-disciplinary PhD projects that straddle significantly diverse local research cultures.

The aim here is to embrace the benefits of diversity in the group, not to reach a rigid consensus with which all must comply. Participants embark on an autoethnography of their workplace: they are full members of the research group; their observations and analyses demonstrate this personal membership; and the analysis is directed towards improved understanding and theorising of social phenomena (i.e., research supervision) (Anderson 2006). However, as Hayano (1979, p. 102) cautions us, 'cultural "realities" and interpretations of events among individuals in the same group are often highly variable, changing, or contradictory', thus we accept that responses and understandings will vary. New, unanticipated reactions to materials and situations are

central to this approach; flexibility in facilitating engagement with and exploration of those responses is crucial to its success.

Central to the ethos of collaborative critique workshops is a mutual respect between participants and facilitators. It is necessary for participants to respect that the facilitators have a considerable breadth and depth of experience in the area being interrogated in the workshops, as well as to trust the facilitators' ability to aid their critique of the material. Facilitators must reciprocate this trust by providing a learning experience that is a worthwhile use of participants' time, and a safe environment in which sensitive issues can be explored. Thus, expectations must be managed: interaction with colleagues is the focus of the session, rather than facilitators simply transmitting knowledge.

'Collaborative critique' can be employed in workshops on most topics relating to research supervision. Here one workshop, 'Research Communication in the Multicultural Academy', is used as an exemplar of this teaching approach. This workshop highlights our intention for participants to perform the kind of autoethnography of their workplace mentioned above, reflecting on their own behaviour and principles, and constructing themselves as both autoethnographers and participant observers.

Transcultural supervision and the multicultural academy

The complexities of cross-cultural research degree supervision, while not new to Australian universities, are becoming increasingly critical in the face of rapid internationalisation. However, in the supervisor training workshops under discussion here, we have noticed that the academics (from all disciplines across the university) who attend the sessions seem to have a sense of cultural homogeneity, despite the workshops and their own disciplinary groups being populated by culturally, ethnically

and linguistically diverse individuals.

We have previously reported on the tendency of our transnational staff to minimise the impact of cultural difference when asked to recount their experiences of moving into the Australian university environment, and have suggested elsewhere that this is a consequence of their notion of a global disciplinary community, that is, the assumption that shared disciplinary values and beliefs somehow confer an unproblematically cosmopolitan set of sociocultural beliefs and behaviours (Guerin & Green, 2009). While these successes and ability to work harmoniously together are admirable, we also suspect that there might be more bubbling under this smooth surface of cosmopolitan integration. Often a major challenge faced by academic developers in research supervision development programs is to flesh out the various expectations about behaviour, attitudes and relationships that all too often lurk uninterrogated behind that assumption of cultural homogeneity. Only then it is possible to consider how those expectations might be better articulated so as to provide for more effective supervisory practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

Academics on the whole appear reluctant to address issues relating to cultural differences within the academy. Anecdotally we hear that many of today's academics regard cross-cultural workshops as somewhat anachronistic: the academics themselves come from very diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, many have worked in more than one country, and all are working with colleagues and students from many nations. The impression is that their only concern is the writing and language difficulties of students using English as an additional language (EAL). Is there also an unspoken version of 'political correctness' here that is reluctant to acknowledge difference as if it is necessarily lesser, thus buying into the deficit model of international equating to non-Western? One job of academic developers is to dispel such concerns in

order to create space for a more open, productive discussion about the challenges and the richness of such multicultural workplaces, allowing academics to articulate and critique something of the granular, messy environment they operate within.

Collaborative critique is thus used for participants to jointly develop a range of possible responses to miscommunications caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings, rigorously examining their own reactions to hypothesized circumstances. This approach allows for detailed exploration of the tensions between disciplinary homogeneity and cultural diversity, and between learnt cultural behaviours and individual personalities in the research supervision relationship. Rather than offering a potted anthropology advising on responses to specific cultural groups, participants are invited to draw on their own lived experience of the multicultural academy, with facilitators suggesting principles, methods and examples by which this reflection might be fashioned into a systematic ethnography of supervision. Supervisors thus develop more nuanced strategies for negotiating effective relationships with students. This discovery process is pertinent not only to international, interethnic difference, but also, of course, to other diversities in the research community, such as gender, generation, and minority and indigenous cultures.

Case study

This article explores the 'Research communication in the multicultural academy' (RCMA) workshop as a case study demonstrating how collaborative critique can be implemented, framing the discussion with Jonassen et al.'s (1995) four categories: context, construction, collaboration, and conversation. These categories allow for instructive insights into the roles of both the workshop itself and the role of the facilitators in constructing understandings of how we operate together in a multicultural academic workplace.

The RCMA workshop is usually the second in a series of three three-hour workshops that together constitute the Exploring Supervision Program. Participants attend these workshops, plus a Supervisor Induction, submit two written assignments (one critiquing or developing a supervisory 'tool' or technique, the other reflecting on experiences of supervision) and present a research project on a currently topical aspect of research supervision in order to qualify as principal supervisors.

RCMA has five main aims:

(1) to consider/articulate, in collaboration with other academic staff members, what our multicultural research culture actually looks like (what are its value systems and codes of behaviour?);

(2) to elaborate on the strategies researchers require to negotiate it effectively, particularly as supervisors of research students;

(3) to distinguish between learnt cultural behaviours and individual personalities (avoiding stereotypical assumptions);

(4) to explore the tensions between cultural diversity and perceived disciplinary homogeneity in transcultural supervision; and

(5) to explore received notions of multiculturalism (eg. national, ethnic, religious, linguistic background), examining whether our methods for multicultural enquiry aid understanding of working with people across other social categories (eg. gender, age, and so on).

The following discussion takes each of Jonassen et al.'s (1995) categories and considers how they manifest in this particular example of collaborative critique.

1. Context

Workshops

For Jonassen et al. (1995, p. 13), an effective constructivist teaching environment requires a 'real-world' context for the tasks, that is, 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger 1990). Thus, our workshops focus on case studies and role plays drawn directly from transcultural supervision scenarios gained from our own experience of talking to supervisors in all faculties of the university. Since they come from the working environment of the workshop participants themselves, they are immediately understood as relevant to those participants. For example, Indigenous Australian students, as a result of cultural death taboos, cannot say the names of deceased research subjects; conversely, ethics permission typically requires specific details such as names. Therefore, situations can arise when students may be perceived as uncooperative if they fail to provide information when questioned. Hence, supervisors might face conflicting cultural imperatives that must be resolved if the project is to proceed. Working through such case studies is a rehearsal for supervisors responding to similar situations with students themselves. The workshops provide opportunities to develop a metalanguage for exploring such dilemmas in a systematic, principled manner.

Facilitators

The role of facilitators in providing the context is to prepare rich materials that are capable of multiple interpretations, that are current, relevant and realistic, and that speak to real-life issues confronting supervisors in the contemporary academy. If participants are to engage effectively in the joint construction of meaning, these case studies and role plays must resonate with their own real-life experiences – to be believable – and to be applicable to the issues they are likely to meet when supervising research students.

Consequently, the scenarios must be regularly updated to explore topical issues in the current research climate. At various times, different waves of international students may be entering PhD programs. New recruitment strategies at a university level may mean that research groups previously dominated by Chinese students now need to adapt to Middle Eastern students with considerably different pre-existing skill sets and life experiences; as the staff profiles change, so too do the cultural mixes of research groups.

2. Construction

Workshops

The second category focuses on the construction of meaning based on personal experience and interpretations of the context presented for exploration. During the session, participants explore a range of possible explanations for the situations under review, working through the possibilities and articulating their reasoning. For example, are students failing to meet agreed deadlines because they are disorganised or lazy, or is there some other culturally specific reason for their behaviour? Are they waiting for some other prompt, such as a piece of information they regard as necessary, before it is possible to present the correct answer to their supervisor? Is homesickness preventing them from working effectively? Do they have family responsibilities, here or at home, that are disrupting their work schedules? The usefulness of potential explanations and responses are examined as members of the group construct their own understandings of the material. In terms of the Exploring Supervision Program, the focus in this process is particularly on the practical applicability of the ideas put forward – how can they enhance supervisory pedagogies?

Facilitators

Facilitators participate as active members of the discussions in building responses to the case studies, role plays and scenarios. Their task is to circulate amongst the groups, listening and learning just as much as other participants. The creativity and empathetic imagination of the participants frequently lead to new, previously uncovered insights into their multicultural workplaces. The task of facilitators is certainly not to lecture on the 'correct' interpretation of the material. However, while their main role is to draw out the opinions of workshop participants, there is no ban on adding their own views to the mix, especially as those ideas are informed by previous iterations of the workshop with different staff members working in yet further parts of the university. Thus, the facilitators are in an ideal position to contribute insights from the broader university community into each smaller group of participants, so that the cumulative construction process represents the ideals and experiences of an increasingly representative population of the University.

3. Collaboration

Workshops

The participants work in partnership to find some kind of agreed understanding on the issues raised. Participants draw on each others' contributions to the discussion to inform their own views, jointly building knowledge and insight. Together they collaborate on a social construction of the realities of their workplace, articulating the norms of their own corner of the university, and attempting to theorise more generally from those insights. However, more than one 'answer' is acceptable, even encouraged. The aim is to reach broadly consensual understandings of the ways in which cultural difference plays out in their workplaces, but there is certainly no strict compulsion to settle for a

single, unified view. For example, while some academics from Humanities might accept the concepts of group or team supervision, many balk at the idea of joint authorship of publications arising from the PhD research, regardless of how much time and effort expended on scaffolding development of the writing skills of an EAL student over repeated drafts of the paper.

Facilitators

Facilitators contribute to discussions, but must do so as members of the group. That is, they take part in the collaborative project as equals alongside workshop participants, rather than patrolling the conversations and correcting 'mistaken' assumptions as authority figures ruling on acceptable constructions of 'truth'. At times they will intervene to push the discussion into uncomfortable terrain: to what extent do we as supervisors accommodate cultural differences in relations between students from the same national backgrounds, and where do we draw the line and start to name that as bullying or sexist? What constitutes modest, polite, face-saving behaviour, and where can that reasonably be interpreted as lack of critical thinking and failure to participate in seminar debates? In these ways, facilitators cooperate with the other participants as active contributors to the sense-making endeavour.

4. Conversation

Workshops

The workshops are currently conducted face-to-face with all participants physically present in the room, rather than online, so that the conversational element of the learning environment takes place in person, in real time. The workshops in their current form allow for both small group discussion and whole group feedback. Thus, a variety

of viewpoints can be aired; we are concerned that this multiplicity is maintained and that the opinions are not presented as a some kind of debate between competing views that seeks resolution in one final viewpoint. The external content is by no means the focus here; rather, the opinions and beliefs of participants are the whole point – given their current knowledge and understandings, how can they together find feasible, viable ways of working within the multicultural academy? It is through conversation that they discover the opinions of their peers, and therefore together work on the task of negotiating their shared terrain.

Facilitators

Facilitators create opportunities for small group and whole group conversations by outlining scenarios, assigning controversial conversation topics and posing open-ended questions. Their focus is on allowing for multiple voices and opinions to be heard by the whole group, so that multifaceted versions of the stories and understandings are uncovered. Facilitators split the participants into groups of three to five – enough members to canvass a range of stances and experiences, but not big enough to allow for passive 'passengers' in the conversation. During the session, the facilitators offer alternative points of view to provoke and unsettle, playing devil's advocate and indicating to the participants that there are more complex interpretations of the material than their initial reactions might include.

Conclusion

What does collaborative critique add to Jonassen's (1995) original four categories of context, construction, collaboration and conversation? We acknowledge that collaborative critique can leave some program participants with a certain amount of confusion. Nevertheless, the risk is worthwhile, because such confusion can often be a

necessary step towards entertaining less hidebound approaches to the issues under investigation, and we seek to have them leave our sessions with means of addressing that confusion on an ongoing basis. Supervision is a complex and dynamic field, and there are no easy, set or permanent answers to the kinds of questions posed in this area.

The workshop process encourages participants to review their own assumptions through supportive corroboration of their peers' narratives. Participants are asked to recognise that their own immediate responses to some situations do often have culturally specific underpinnings, and that they can benefit from learning to take a range of alternative perspectives on what is going on, these often involving more generous interpretations of those situations. Collaborative critique requires participants to yoke this range of views together, and to form from these their own methods and guidelines for advancing their supervisory practice.

Thus, confusion, complexity, critique and corroboration, while unsettling and challenging, can be harnessed to work in conjunction with the context, construction, collaboration and conversation that are central to academic development programs like the Exploring Supervision Program.

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