



Facilitating Researcher Independence Through Supervision as Dialogue

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A doctoral researcher's successful completion of a research project and production of a thesis, monograph or exegesis and publications is usually considered the pinnacle of success for both graduate and supervisor(s). In the most successful relationships, a main aim is fostering both interdependence and the doctoral researcher's confident, enacted, continued independence. For the developing doctoral researcher, successful supervision relationships and processes help establish firm foundations for future research writing and intellectual engagement. Here we consider supervision interactions, including feedback as a developmental dialogue. We share the hidden curriculum practice of developing ideas, arguments and writing together and with others during and beyond the supervision relationship, termed 'Fridaying', (a term historically produced by a participant in one of my

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supervisor development workshops) indicating its creativity and equality in a liminal space. (See also Peseta et al.'s chapter on #thesisthinkers.)

In exploring supervisor and doctoral researcher interactions as forms of dynamic developmental dialogues, we can demystify processes and dispel some of the 'fuzziness' surrounding the conceptualisation, development and practices of supervisor/researcher interdependence which respect difference and nurture confidence, autonomy and independence.

ENABLING, DEMYSTIFYING, NURTURING DIFFERENCE: SUPERVISORY INTERACTIONS AS SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUES

Not all doctoral researcher and supervisor relationships are effortlessly enabling with clear communication and increasing successful researcher independence. There can be blockages to all forms of communication based on misunderstandings about responsibilities, to expectations of replication of previous (positive or negative) experiences of interactions, played out in this new supervisory interaction. Many issues around the relationship, the doctoral learning journey, research and the thesis building come from lack of clarity about the goals and shape of the developing research and thesis (or exegesis and articles). One main supervisor role is working with the doctoral researcher to demystify both the process and the product so they can develop independence and ownership of the research journey and writing, fostering 'competent autonomy' rather than 'benign neglect' (Gurr, 2001, p. 85) where (reading the latter generously) ostensible investment in researcher independence leads to a totally hands-off relationship with long communication gaps, when different interactions might actually support progress.

When the supervisory relationship works well it resembles a dance in which each matches responses to the other's aims, needs and steps in the doctoral learning journey (Wisker, 1999). It is also a dialogue in which power and knowledge shift over time to equality. This dialogue is the main developmental interaction on the intellectual and personal learning journey of a doctorate and one in which each party learns, since each researcher, project and supervisor is different, and the challenges and delight of this valuable newness ultimately leads to contributions to knowledge recognised by the achievement of a doctorate. This interdependent, ongoing, positive two-way intellectual dialogue is enabled through knowledge sharing and building and through mutual respect for different needs, understandings and nuances of expression leading to agreement and action. There are

structures to work within and towards, and in supervisory interactions, these include learning to work together with appropriate boundaries, duty of care and towards achieving the research learning journey milestones: proposals, ethical clearance, supervisory team meetings, yearly audits, confirmation and transfer, submission, mock viva, examination including viva, and finalising post-examination corrections. Together, you co-develop the research processes for constructing the research design, producing the data, finalising the written work and possibly some co-publishing.

When considering the doctoral journey, there are differences to take into account so supervisors need to adjust interactions in relation to discipline, cultural inflections, modes of study, i.e. part-time, full-time, cohort and individual, part taught course part thesis professional doctorates (DBAs, Prof Docs, EdDs etc.) each of which nuance supervisor/doctoral researcher dynamics, interactions, the pace and kind of work. What each relationship version can encourage and enable is supervisor/researcher interdependence as developing equals, and a confident, competent, flexible, independent researcher who can work beyond the doctorate on a variety of projects. Within the mutually agreed and understood structures of supervisory interactions, institutional and doctoral expectations, there is room and encouragement for individuality, creativity and the extra magic which comes with mutual understanding and respect, building positively upon such differences. In doctoral research learning, knowledge creation and supervisory interactions, these differences of ontology, epistemology, modes of understanding, knowledge construction and expression offer rich, fluid, transformational mutual learning opportunities first realised through dynamic, developmental dialogues founded on the respect between intellectual equals: supervisors and doctoral researchers.

ECOLOGY OF INTERACTIONS: SUPERVISOR AND DOCTORAL RESEARCHER DIALOGUES

This piece takes an ecological approach in supporting researcher independence in doctoral education (Elliot et al., 2020) through three forms of dialogue interaction nudged on by supervisors. Each encourages and enables a thriving interdependence than independence within and outside the university to benefit doctoral researchers, supervisors and communities. The aim is demystifying intentions and practices of these interactive processes—where doctoral researchers, supervisors and both formal and hidden curriculum elements interact.

Doctoral researchers engage in many ways in interactive research-oriented dialogues with supervisors, their community of peers, with colleagues in cohorts, at conferences, through emails and through supporting others' writing, or co-writing. Interactive dialoguing with supervisors can enable student autonomy and independence:

1. Structured supervisor/doctoral researcher dialogues held together by a supervisory rhythm from a social start and close, with complex, cognitive, clarifying, contestatory debate, building doctoral-level academic engagement and articulation skills.
2. Structured versions of feedback dialogue.
3. Creative, intellectual, free-flowing 'Fridaying' where intellectual equals co-create in a liminal free space in planned or serendipitous dialogue between doctoral researchers, supervisors, supervisor contacts, colleagues and peers.

STRUCTURED SUPERVISOR AND DOCTORAL RESEARCHER DIALOGUES IN SUPERVISION

Some supervisory dialogues are face-to-face while (during Covid and beyond) some are entirely online, synchronous or asynchronous (the latter through email discussion). It could be more difficult to judge responses in online interaction, especially if there is no history of face-to-face interactions (Kumar & Wisker eds., 2022; Wisker et al., 2021). It is, however, always important to think carefully about issues affecting interactions and dialogues, including the culturally inflected learning backgrounds of supervisor and doctoral researcher; developmental dialogue norms such as provocations to query, contest, consider and discuss; politeness and courteous disinclinations to be critical. These sensitivities might be more scripted and difficult online (or less so).

Historically, we (Wisker et al., 2003) conducted research involving supervisor and doctoral researcher interactions based on a counselling model, John Heron's six category intervention analysis (Heron, 1975), as we believed supervision, intended to be enabling, resembling counselling. No team supervisions were included (rare then though now the norm). Their dynamic could produce quite different interactions and research would be interesting.

Following ethical approval (Anglia Ruskin University, 2001), we asked supervisors and students to consider taping a supervision interaction which we analysed and shared with participants before publication. No one redacted their transcripts.

Working with the Dialogues

The range of supervisory dialogue types developed during our research prompt questions about kinds of interactions, why, to what effects and how could they help move doctoral researchers on and empower them.

In supervisor workshops I ask: Could you use these kinds of interactions? Why? When? Why not? Are there any others you might prefer to use? The intention is to consciously surface how we engage and why, to what outcomes and to prompt development of an effective repertoire.

Textbox 1 Supervisory dialogues

1. didactic
2. prescriptive
3. informative
4. confronting (or challenging)
5. tension relieving/social
6. encouraging critical, problematising and problem-solving attitude
7. eliciting
8. supporting
9. summarising
10. clarifying
11. collegial exchange (*Wisker et al., 2003, after Heron, 1975*)

Through thematic analysis of supervisory dialogues, we found ten questioning themes/interactions or 'intervention' categories, developing from Heron's 'six category intervention analysis' (1975). Supervisors might have preferences and also need to determine the language appropriate for each category of interaction, where and when to use them to enable the doctoral researcher with whom they work.

More collegial and social interactions start and end supervisions or release tension in fraught or focused discussions. Some dialogues are informational or instructional. Others engage contrasting and critical thinking, ways of working with conflicting information, nudging more complex theorising, relating theory to emerging data.

In other interactions, supervisors ‘nudge’ doctoral researchers to move further, more deeply into their work. There are also student response themes which emerged (2003), less refined as yet. It is useful to consider these regarding what might shut doctoral researchers down, and what might enable and empower their interactions, confidence, articulation, critical and other thinking.

Textbox 2 Student (doctoral researcher) response themes (still under development)

1. seeking direction and information;
2. seeking feedback;
3. information giving;
4. information seeking;
5. working out through talk/developing ideas and plans through dialogue;
6. student defining ideas;
7. student developing ideas;
8. student judgement re: needs;
9. student pleasing supervisor;
10. student relating previous work to own work, theory to practice, experience to research culture;
11. student taking control;
12. tentative-provisional thinking;
13. uncertainty (of reaching PhD) unclear end result;
14. clear idea of the project as PhD. (Wisker et al., 2003)

Interestingly, responses evidence development of both independence and confidence shown in examples of moving from more tentative questioning, forming of ideas to clarity about the PhD project.

In supervisory development workshops, these dialogues help us consider how different doctoral researcher responses might reflect different needs

and development along the doctoral learning journey; how to work with difference, encourage and enable more empowered, independent, appropriately confident responses which develop over time, but for some never develop and for others are evident early on—perhaps with professionals successful in another context. The dialogues can help us consider and work with different researcher needs, at different stages from proposals through research and writing to submission and beyond. They suggest the shape and flow of supervisions for all involved. Seeing these two sets of responses we are better placed to plan and choose forms of interaction and wording, encouraging enabling response and work with facilitative dialogue.

The most useful dialogues take place where both participants match cognitive processes and move forwards, so doctoral researchers increasingly take the lead.

Some early dialogues focus on functional and conceptual work, setting up ways of working together, developing research proposals and ethical approvals (if appropriate) and creating a conceptual framework informing research. While functional interactions can be rather one way, i.e. instructive and informational, they can also be conducted through discussion, questioning and prompting, leading doctoral scholars to understand early seemingly only bureaucratic processes as times for thinking through theory, big ideas and ways to undertake their research. Working relationships established encourage doctoral researchers to explore their own ideas in their own terms, refine and shape these into doable, complex enough projects with structure and scaffolding. Some see the doctorate as a lifelong project (Mullins & Kiley, 2002) but in the event it must be manageable, finished within a reasonable timeframe. Boundaries, limitations and pragmatic choices are important.

Pragmatic functional dialogues help doctoral researchers trim, hone and make realisable their projects and the writing about them, while more exploratory, conceptual, questioning, problematising dialogues encourage theorising and free-flowing creative thinking. (*This is linked to Frick's chapter discussing how supervisors can unlock and stimulate doctoral scholars' independence and creativity by employing pedagogical strategies.) Following doctoral scholars, I and colleagues explored dialogues towards completion, noting 'Dialogues aim to encourage developing the thesis and preparing for the viva. Students are asked to indicate crucial change moments of their research ... Facing up to and identifying the effects of critical incidents moves learners on in their ownership of this learning' (Wisker et al., 2003).

Over time, we engage supervision modes to guide, prescribe, inform, confront, elicit, clarify, support, summarise and move the work on. There will be moments of ‘learning leaps’, blockages, disagreements and clarification where doctoral scholars recognise they must maintain momentum, fulfil requirements, that decisions, and progress are dependent upon their ability to problem-solve, make choices, take risks, be original. Through learning conversations/supervisory dialogues, doctoral scholars recognise for themselves where to pull ideas and information together into a synthesis, engaging theoretical perspectives and critical reading in a dynamic dialogue with their own work.

FEEDBACK AS DEVELOPMENTAL DIALOGUE (WISKER, ONLINE)

Much feedback focuses on correcting errors, offering information, while feedback or feedforward (Race, online) aimed at encouraging further learning also supports further, new learning, empowering doctoral researchers to identify, manage their own issues and make their own decisions. Rowena Murray’s feedback characteristics helpfully identify the feedback range offered in doctoral level writing. Concerned about explicit guidelines in supervisor feedback from the student’s point of view, Murray (2002) asks:

Are the comments global or detailed or both? For supervisors, there is a decision to make about what type of feedback to give. Do they want to make you focus on the ‘big picture’ of your whole argument, or a section of it? Or do they want you to tidy up the style? Is clarification of terms paramount? ... supervisors may recognize that one is more important, at this stage, than the others. (Murray, 2002, p. 78)

Supervisors comment on elements of achievement or need in the doctoral scholars’ work, but it would overload if we did that every time. Developing their own engagement with feedback, processing, owning and acting on it helps establish independence through internal interaction and enables them to internalise corrective and developmental learning which much feedback intends, fully owning their own decisions.

Kumar and Stracke developed a framework of useful feedback categories (2007, p. 465) based on speech functions helping supervisors define what to say, where and when, for specific outcomes.

They consider feedback responses and their intent as: Directive, Expressive and Referential.

Directive—corrects errors and informs, ‘48% not 54%’; ‘Give full reference for Vygotsky’.

Expressive—comments on the quality of the work, offering praise or criticism, directly or sometimes indirectly: ‘this is developing well’, ‘clearly expressed’ or ‘needs further clarity—what do you mean by xxx???’

Referential provides information: ‘you need a fuller reference here’ also offering explanations, models and fuller guidance, e.g. ‘Look at this example of using XX’s theory on the relationship between place and identity. ... How might you use xxx’s theory to engage with your ideas and arguments about x??’. The latter example involves doctoral researchers thinking through a model, not just copying it, working out how it might inform their own work, active in responding to learning suggestions. If we want doctoral researchers to take ownership and become independent, they should correct errors but also be nudged into thinking, learning from examples and models, appreciating and deciding on their arguments in a contested situation. This makes the interaction a dialogue encouraging independent thought, rather than an instruction shutting it down.

As supervisors, we consider how and when to use categories of feedback in our own work, constructing balanced feedback appealing to a variety of doctoral scholars. It is not a dialogue, of course, unless the doctoral scholar takes the suggestions and prompts into their own thinking and practice.

Ashtarian and Weisi (2016) note affective language, e.g. ‘please’ and ‘could you’, politely preventing the reading of feedback as critical or destructive, while Parr and Timperley (2010) advise that suggesting improvements to approach a desired response needs careful management as it could look like pointing out lack, shutting the researcher down. This is a complex linguistic maze to negotiate, particularly if some of the expressions, the politenesses and the shortcuts of ‘??’, ‘say more’, ‘clarify’ do not immediately speak to any previous comments received. For many doctoral researchers, the language of the research and thesis might be their second, third, fourth, etc., and both sensitivity and accuracy are needed in translation of tone, content, advice to empower and enable them to interpret, own and act on feedback. Building on limited work on supervision feedback on doctoral work with second-language speakers (L2), in her own work on supervisor feedback with Chinese doctoral researchers in New Zealand, LinLin Xu (Xu & Grant, 2017; Yu & Lee, L. (2016) used Bakhtin’s dialogic theories to

explore the dialogue, present, or not, in such feedback interactions, noting that supervisor comments ranged from informative and corrective to engaging in a more empowering discussion. Some (Yu & Lee, 2016) suggest doctoral scholars might benefit from scaffolding, ‘progressive development’ in feedback comments, suggesting that students appreciate scaffolding and comments, offering ways they could improve ‘rather than a simple judgement without explanation’ (Xu & Grant, 2017, p. 21).

Bearing language issues and potential misinterpretations in mind, I argue that clear comments and a dialogue which helps structure future work, as well as encouraging critical thinking, ownership of the work and independence, are useful for all doctoral researchers.

FRIDAYING DIALOGUES

Not all supervision and research-related dialogues are formal whether in supervisions or written feedback. Much development of thought, understanding and creative thinking emerges as unscripted through dialogues which are part of the hidden curriculum. ‘Fridaying’ (a term established by a South African colleague in one of my supervisor development workshops, and his writing collaborator, on which I build here) uses planned or unplanned gaps and relaxing moments to engage in an intellectual creative space and co-build complex, shared thinking and dialogue, leading to mutual understanding of research decisions and achievements and often to co-writing. It takes place freely in the interstices of more structured interactions, such as conferences, either planned or serendipitously, and makes the most of often hard-won free space and time. Anyone interested can be involved usually including colleagues, co-researchers (or future co-researchers/co-authors) and supervisors with doctoral researchers (not always their ‘own’ students). My colleague Gillian Robinson and I recognised the term as defining our sudden clever thoughts on the outskirts of planned conference moments (which had to be talked through, taped, worked with), as out-takes when running supervision workshops abroad on a large cohort-based doctoral programme, and as discussions with others in quiet reflective moments. Fridaying, as I interpret it, is a creative dialogue suddenly ignited by a shared sparky thought or an ongoing set of actions and reflections between equals. It involves one complex thought springing from the other, recorded, with permission, and then used in research. We spot its beginnings as we talk with each other and with doctoral scholars around residential courses, on walks, over coffee or supper.

The ‘Friday’ element is the liminal free space in which igniting of ideas and developing discussion begin and then are ‘nudged’ to open up thinking. It can lead to learning leaps, breakthroughs in understanding or ‘conceptual threshold crossings’ (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). Work on dark and light sides of supervision (Wisker et al., 2017) came from this process. Setting up moments when it is likely to start (co-attending conferences, having a coffee and chatting) and fostering the energies with doctoral researchers is something supervisors can do to encourage independence. (See also Makara et al.’s chapter discussing participation in a Journal Club to elucidate the Fridaying concept.)

CONCLUSION: WHAT DO SUPERVISORS DO TO SUPPORT INDEPENDENCE?

Supervisors work with very different research learners, adjusting support to different needs, not substituting the supervisor’s practices for those the researcher should develop themselves, rather offering examples, nudging opportunities for new research practices, different forms of expression. Supervisors demystify and enable further entrance into the worlds of research and publication, which are otherwise likely to remain esoteric and obscure for researchers from all contexts whether related to discipline, mode of study, gender, international, culture, class or learning behaviour. Supervisors open doors to and illuminate elements of the hidden curriculum of research-related behaviours and participants, enabling researchers to find their own guided way through the complexities of the research planning, decisions, activities, overcoming hurdles in writing, examination submission and publication. They introduce researchers to communities of other researchers working internationally, to other projects and to publishing politics and practices. I here emphasise the opening of doors, demystification, modelling, sharing and networking enabled by interactive dialogues, dynamic interactions and practical actions. Crucially, interdependence and independence-oriented supervisor guidance helps researchers develop the independence and insights to continue to work through and beyond achieving the doctorate.

Using research and experience on and with supervisors and doctoral researchers, this chapter explores ways in which supervisory dialogues, constructive feedback/feedforward, modelling, networking, community-building and sharing of good practice induct researchers into self-aware, reflective, successful independence during the doctoral research process,

enabling continued interdependence and independence, leading to future community building, researcher development, leadership and, probably, if appropriate, effective dialogue-based supervisory practices.

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