Developing a Disposition for Harnessing the Hidden Curriculum En Route to Becoming Independent Researchers: The Role of Doctoral Supervisors

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Introduction

Lessons acquired via the hidden curriculum within the context of doctoral education tend to be equally elusive and ubiquitous primarily due to their unintended and unstructured nature. Not only do such lessons take various shapes and forms, but they are also likely to occur in various ecological milieu or nested contexts (Bengtsen & McAlpine, 2022; Elliot et al., 2020; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). These hidden curricular lessons may arise in doctoral scholars' numerous interactions with fellow doctoral scholars, supervisors, post-doctoral scholars, course, seminar and workshop leaders and participants and many others—both within and outwith the academic context. In turn, along with direct

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and formal learning (also called 'curriculum proper'), doctoral scholars are able to enrich their experience via unintended complementary learning offered by these non-scholarly activities and through their non-academic counterparts (Martin, 1994).

However, while this type of learning might be in abundance, it does not necessarily guarantee what might be referred to as 'learning consumption' (or utilising learning); instead, genuine learning is often not recognised, let alone realised or used to the scholars' full advantage. Due to its tacit presence, it can at times be tricky to find the hidden curriculum (Elliot, 2023; Elliot et al., 2016). Yet, given that scholars are likely to benefit from the hidden curriculum, this raises the question as to how finding this form of curricular learning can be encouraged. More specifically, how can hidden curriculum learning be harnessed more strategically with a view to supporting all scholars, particularly the doctoral scholar cohort who are en route to becoming independent researchers? These exemplify the questions that prompted my reflection as a supervisor and a staff member who supports doctoral scholars and which I will endeavour to address in this chapter.

Despite its inherent elusiveness, which may explain why the hidden curriculum often remains hidden, it is also recognised that the hidden curriculum co-exists with the formal and informal curriculum (Elliot, 2022; Elliot et al., 2020). This also explains what underpins a possible scenario whereby two doctoral scholars can have a shared experience, e.g., participating in a workshop, but only one recognises and harnesses the workshop's implicit lessons. As a case in point, interaction with a workshop facilitator and participants may convey, even emphasise, the value of effective time management and impress on doctoral scholars how crucial it is. During the workshop, an implicit reference to the connection between a PhD and post-PhD life could stimulate further reflection. In turn, several workshop participants might come to appreciate that managing one's time is critical both for the doctoral journey itself and for post-PhD career planning. This then leads these doctoral scholars to manage their time actively and position themselves while preparing for a post-PhD career.

By envisioning what their post-PhD CV could look like, they strategise a doctoral journey that is aimed at completing doctoral research while embedding a plan to strengthen their subject knowledge and research skills and, in so doing, produce a tangible demonstration of knowledge and competencies (e.g., via publications, teaching experience) —characterising researcher competence. One may argue that enacting such

reflection is informed by their agency and motivation (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016). Equally, such profound reflection on both the doctoral journey and beyond is possibly stimulated by scholars' contemplation of the time management discussion during the workshop. Their participation and interaction with workshop participants served as a catalyst for such reflection. This is aligned to what Kuhn (2019) maintains, i.e., that critical thinking is 'a dialogic practice' where conversations with others enable a person to put forward their own argument (p. 146). This raises the question if there is a mindset, a disposition, a tacit knowledge, a skill, a personal quality, an inclination or a strategy that can help doctoral scholars to appreciate better the value embodied in an experience. Is this perhaps explained by the proverb: 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'? If so, what enables one person, but not another, to see such beauty?

A Theoretical Lens

In exploring this topic, I employ the concept of metacognition—a psychological construct I argue to be core not just to general effective learning but to achieving a major objective, such as managing one's entire doctoral experience efficiently (Elliot, 2022, 2023). According to the *Dictionary of Psychology*, in understanding metacognition, or the 'knowledge and beliefs about one's own cognitive processes', 'meta-memory' enables regulation of such cognitive functions in planning, checking or monitoring one's strategies (Coleman, 2015, p. 456). Building upon theory-of-mind development, this conceptualisation of metacognition goes back to John Flavell, who originally coined the term to denote active control of one's cognitive processes with a view to facilitating successful learning (Flavell, 2004). This definition suggests that metacognition entails having not just the ability but the intention to adopt and apply metacognitive skills. Likewise, it is worth noting that learners' capacity to regulate and employ metacognitive strategies is informed by their acquired knowledge through interaction with others, which influences their decisions, e.g., what to select and prioritise for future learning (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020). McGahan and Stone (2022) further explain that metacognition refers to 'how learners can intentionally regulate their own cognitive skills to manipulate learning' (p. 177); in so doing, the emphasis is not only on learners' capacity to regulate their thinking but on it being done purposively to achieve an end. Very often, it is to advance learning. The anticipated added impact of applying metacognition makes understanding of this construct highly

desirable. In the doctoral context that has knowledge production at its core, metacognition is arguably an indispensable tool for creating knowledge and advancing learning (Holmes et al., 2020).

At the same time, Kirschner and Hendrick (2020) stress the importance of understanding metacognition not just as a purely internal, cognitive process—learners' behavioural and social experiences need to be considered, too, as they are likely to have an impact on the process. As an example, the support that other stakeholders (e.g., supervisors and researcher developers) can offer in raising awareness of the necessity and implications of metacognition is essential. Such support forms a critical part of doctoral scholars' social experience—subsequently influencing both their thinking and behaviour. Put simply, understanding metacognition necessitates attention to the potential interaction between internal and external factors, i.e., one's cognition and other people's influence. In elucidating metacognition further, the argument I favour is that whereas acquisition of metacognitive skills and strategies, even competence, is good, having a disposition to employ metacognition is far superior (Kuhn, 2021). This, therefore, suggests that managing one's intentional usage of metacognition, rather than mere acquisition of metacognitive competence, can make a difference to scholars' doctoral experience. By 'making use of acquired control' or metacognitive strategies, new concepts, ideas and procedures can be harnessed (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020, p. 247). This then suggests that metacognitive disposition 'puts scholars in a proactive mode as they consider and evaluate, plan, access and harness available resources to help address challenges encountered and find a resolution'. This idea is conveyed in the cyclical relationship involving 'appraise', 'solve problem' and 'revise'—emanating from scholars' metacognitive disposition' (Elliot, 2023, p. 159). Nevertheless, despite metacognition's emphasis on the internal processes to foster individual competence and autonomy, we need not underplay the idea that metacognition heavily relies on a person's exposure to other people's ideas and interaction with them. It then contributes to appreciation of what is valued and prioritised in certain contexts as well as ways of doing things, e.g., the standards to aim for, the goals they need to set for themselves, how to implement a chosen strategy and how to adjust their approach, if necessary.

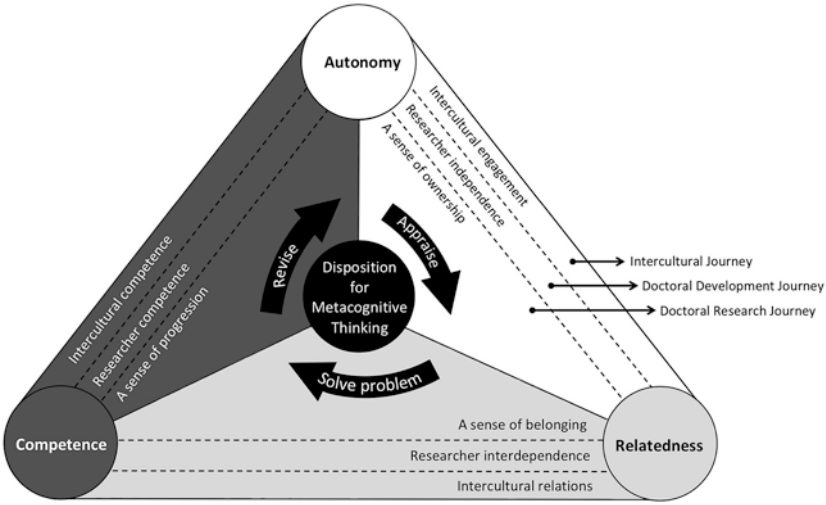

Fig. 1 A metacognitive approach to learning, motivation and intercultural relations: A new model for international doctoral scholars

Metacognition in Action

While Fig. 1 was originally employed to help elucidate how international scholars could navigate their doctoral experience, the metacognitive element—at the centre of the diagram—is arguably invaluable to all doctoral groups. More specifically, applying the iterative cycles of appraisal, problem-solving and revision can pave the way for doctoral scholars strengthening a sense of researcher independence. What this means in practice is that they consciously make an effort to reflect on their respective objectives in any of the three domains—doctoral research (its progression and completion), doctoral development (linked to post-PhD career preparation) and intercultural development (in the case of the international group). With these objectives in mind, scholars are then encouraged to adopt a cognitive habit, e.g., asking metacognitive questions in any situation they face:

- *Appraisal.* What personal strengths can I identify in myself given the current circumstances? Likewise, what are the areas in which I am

lacking? Am I reliably appraising my strengths and goals based on my interaction with others? Where is development essential?

- *Problem-solving*. What are the ways in which I can build on my acquired personal strengths to respond more effectively to specific circumstances or challenges? How can I work with people around me to address the problem? What are the different possibilities available to me when seeking a resolution to a problem?
- *Revision*. Where did my attempt to resolve an issue lead to? Based on other people's successful cases, do I consider the strategy I adopted to be effective? If so, what can I learn from such a strategy? Can these lessons work in other contexts? On the other hand, if I regard my problem-solving efforts to be weak or insufficient, what other options do I need to consider? Are there alternative problem-solving strategies that I can implement? Who else could be involved in resolving the issues?

A Metacognitive Disposition as a Means of Harnessing the Hidden Curriculum

To put these exemplar metacognitive questions into context, let us consider a hypothetical case, i.e., a doctoral scholar's decision to apply for an internship with a view to acquiring knowledge, insights and skills that are not typically offered via institutionally offered courses and workshops. Megumi, a Year 2 doctoral scholar, has always wondered if applying as an intern for a journal editor would be either an advantage or a distraction that might keep her from concentrating on her doctoral work. Her response to the metacognitive cycle of questions guided her decision. In this case, the questions she asked and reflections she made, based on her discussion with her supervisor, included:

1. *Appraisal*. Knowing the importance of publication in doctoral and post-doctoral work, how much do I know about this process? Who are my potential sources of learning? By becoming an intern, am I likely to enhance my understanding of how publishing in a peer-reviewed journal works?
2. *Problem-solving*. Although my love of reading and writing led me to undertake a PhD, my knowledge of publishing and peer-review is almost non-existent. I reckon that pursuing an internship

opportunity, which entails constant interaction with a highly experienced author and exposure to the journal publishing process, will help me become familiar with this task that is often beyond the expectations for those pursuing a PhD monograph. The process also offers insights into what are considered acceptable standards in academic journals. Perhaps, my enhanced understanding can then increase my chance of getting published.

3. *Revision*. Upon reflection on my earlier experience as an intern to a journal editor, this led me to appreciate the rigour of the peer review process, e.g.,

    - various steps involved from initial assessment of the suitability of the manuscript (at times, leading to desk rejection, with reasons for the decision);
    - selection of anonymous reviewers based on subject and/or methods expertise;
    - several possible outcomes following the review—accept, minor revision, major revision, reject;
    - initial recommendation from editors (and co-editors) offering perspectives on their decision over the manuscript, at times, leading to seeking a new reviewer's perspective (in the case of a huge disparity among reviewers' decisions);
    - when authors are invited to address the comments from the reviewers, there remains the possibility that the manuscript will not be accepted if the reviewers and editors felt that the recommended changes were not adequately addressed.

These reflective questions led Megumi to evaluate and appreciate the overall value of engaging in journal internship and how it could enrich her doctoral research progress and her doctoral development as a scholar. Moreover, Megumi's internship further led to her valuing, enacting and pursuing unconventional, but invaluable, academic activities—particularly those that are not confined within the institutional context.

Following her internship, when Megumi returned to her initial 'appraisal' questions—

- Has my understanding of publishing in a peer-reviewed journal increased as a result of taking the internship opportunity?

- Has my experience helped not only in familiarising myself with a new academic experience but has it offered distinct insights that can increase my chances of getting published?

—Megumi's answers to these metacognitive questions are likely to inform her decisions concerning future opportunities. It could be another initiative that again differs from the courses and workshops offered by universities to doctoral scholars. This came from realising that participation in these initiatives offers an insight into activities pursued by, and typically becoming part of, the scholarly life of academic scholars, supervisors and other experts in the field. Upon further reflection, what Megumi did not expect is that her time as an intern in an academic journal also led to enhancing skills deemed invaluable by future employers including teamworking, working to a deadline, clarity of written expression, being systematic and organised.

Needless to say, her internship also expanded her network from whom she received informal advice when looking for the right journals or how to deal with unclear feedback from the reviewers or editors. Arguably, an expanded network opens more doors of opportunity—something discussed more comprehensively in Aarnikoivu's chapter. Not only did Megumi acquire concrete understanding from the journal internship itself but it also extended and strengthened her accumulated knowledge and repertoire of skills in journal publishing.

Taken together, Megumi's interaction with other scholars serves as resources that stimulated her metacognitive thinking and approach to learning advancement. Megumi's case then illustrates how having a disposition for metacognitive thinking can lead to genuine pedagogical lessons that can enrich one's doctoral learning experience. The benefits obtained from the journal internship were facilitated by a close and interdependent working relationship with the journal team. Significant learning started with scholars' openness to exploring new possibilities leading to cross-fertilisation of ideas.

En Route to Becoming Independent Researchers

In sum, within the doctoral context, harnessing these hidden lessons has been argued to complement or reinforce existing 'curriculum proper' or formal structures (Elliot et al., 2020; Martin, 1994). The challenge, however, is recognising, actively searching for and intentionally harnessing the

hidden curriculum. General awareness of the contribution that hidden curricular lessons bring to doctoral scholars' development as competent and independent researchers is useful, but it is merely a starting point. Instead, it warrants a deeper appreciation of how supervisors (and other hidden curriculum agents) can encourage doctoral scholars to take advantage of genuine hidden curriculum opportunities. (In this connection, Albertyn elaborates on the idea of doctoral intelligence and their manifestations in her chapter.) Through supervisors' regular interaction with doctoral scholars, the question worth asking is—how can supervisors help instil the idea of intentionally harnessing the hidden curriculum as one of the significant pathways for becoming an independent and competent researcher?

Supervisors may proactively engage in more focused discussions specific to developing an active disposition for metacognitive thinking. Perhaps, regularly employing the metacognitive cycle of questions—appraisal, problem-solving and revision—as a guide for discussion is a way forward. These supervisor-initiated conversations can serve as ideal platforms for reflecting not only on the explicit benefits when attending workshops or taking part in internships or other opportunities (e.g., enhanced knowledge, research skills), but also in clarifying the impact of the implicit messages conveyed in these activities. Intentional metacognitive thinking can enable doctoral scholars to be more strategic in pursuing and harnessing hidden curricular lessons and, in turn, contributing to these scholars becoming more competent and independent researchers. In this respect, untapped resources, e.g., the supervisor's role (and that of other hidden curriculum agents) in cultivating a metacognitive disposition and realising this endeavour should not be underestimated.

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