

VISIONS OF EFFECTIVE DOCTORAL SUPERVISION: DISCIPLINES AND TRADITIONS IN A TIME OF CHANGE

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Biographical Note

Jacqueline Potter is Associate Dean for Teaching, Learning and Academic Development at Edge Hill University. She trained as an ecologist, increasingly developing pedagogic research and interests in learning in the disciplines, institutional change and development. She has initiated and contributed to a range of research and practice projects exploring and extending practice within disciplines. Recent publications explore academic learning communities and learning collaborations. Jacqueline was an inaugural member of the Management Board of NAIRTL during her time working for the Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning (CAPSL) at Trinity College Dublin.

Mary Creaner commenced her career in education, subsequently qualifying as a psychotherapist and clinical supervisor. She has been involved in developing and delivering a variety of adult education programmes and professional development training. She is lecturer and research co-ordinator with the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and Course Director for the Diploma in Clinical Supervision, Trinity College Dublin (TCD). She is accredited by the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and a member of the American Psychological Association. Mary has a particular interest in practitioner research; in clinical supervision; research supervision; and counsellor education.

David Delany holds a PhD in computational neuroscience from the TCD School of Psychology and Trinity College Institute for Neuroscience (TCIN). His primary research interest is in the area of brain function enhancement and rehabilitation. After completing a post-doctorate in mathematical neuroscience in the School of Mathematics in TCD, Dr Delany moved to the TCD Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning (CAPSL) part-time, where he runs an innovative cognitive science-based advanced thinking skills course he developed for researchers within TCD and other universities.

Joan Lalor is currently a lecturer in Midwifery at TCD and is involved with teaching and supervision from undergraduate to postgraduate level. Joan also continues to practice as a midwife and maintains her clinical links with the linked service providers to ensure that her research is clinically relevant with a strong service user focus. Her interest in doctoral supervision aligns with the recent drive to increase research capacity within health care staff with an emphasis on the generation of evidence for practice, whereby more clinicians undertake research at doctoral level.

KEYWORDS

Graduate education; postgraduate supervision; qualitative research; grounded theory; metaphor.

ABSTRACT

The numbers of postgraduate doctoral students has steadily risen in Ireland and internationally in recent years. The Irish government has made a clear commitment to expand and develop research education, and the work of postgraduate students constitutes a vital part of the contribution of the university to research. Nationally, and within and across institutions, expectations are changing and a new infrastructure is being developed to meet the changes and improve the postgraduate research experience.

The role of the supervisor is also under scrutiny. International work has shown that the quality of supervisory practice has a demonstrable effect on postgraduate outcomes (Cullen *et al*, 1994) and recent research shows how supervisor behaviour and conceptions of the role may vary across disciplines (Zhao *et al*, 2007; Lee, 2008). In this paper we report the aims, approaches and preliminary results from the qualitative research study Visions of Supervision (VOS). The VOS study uses grounded theory methodology to explore how senior academic staff from differing disciplinary backgrounds conceptualise effective doctoral supervision at a time of change and development in fourth level education in Ireland.

The study was conceived of and initiated in response to a review of the international research literature on supervision undertaken by one of the authors. From this we identified a lack of published literature exploring supervision practices through in-depth qualitative approaches and in detailed relation to contextual factors such as discipline. These lacunae, and our interest in understanding how supervisors were responding to the range and speed of developments influencing graduate education in Ireland, were the initial questions we sought to illuminate with our study and which we begin to address in this preliminary paper based on our conference presentation.

INTRODUCTION

The work was developed out of a shared interest among the authors in doctoral supervision practices, their management and variation in disciplinary contexts and in Ireland. Following a preliminary literature review by one author (Delany, 2008) we identified the need for a detailed qualitative study to explore our understanding of research supervision in Ireland at a time of specific government expectation on higher education to expand and diversify fourth level study opportunities (DETE, 2009). We developed a consensual approach to the VOS project that would exploit the range of research capabilities and interests we had and that would also allow us to grow and develop as researchers through the collaboration.

On completion of our first phase of data analysis we wished to bring forward the research to the attention of colleagues through a NAIRTL conference presentation under the theme of graduate education. This short paper, based on that presentation, covers three areas. First, we situate the VOS research project within the current national graduate education context. We feel that this is particularly important owing to the unique character and context of Irish higher education. Second, we briefly present ourselves as researchers, our working philosophy and methodological approach. Third, and finally, we briefly introduce our participants and the first stage outcome of our consensual research approach.

NATIONAL GRADUATE EDUCATION CONTEXT

Globally, the numbers of students studying and graduating with research degrees has increased rapidly in the past decade. Concomitant with this growth in numbers has been increasing focus and review of the quality and fitness for purpose(s) of graduate education structures and approaches, including the role of supervisor. One very evident outcome of this growth and interest in graduate education has been the number and range of academic research and publication on supervision and graduate study, predominantly from Australia, the UK and the USA.

Ireland traditionally adopts and adapts a multiplicity of approaches, influenced by models in the USA and the UK as well as through association with continental Europe and the European Higher Education Area. This confluence of influences operates within the very specific

current context of the national drive to develop a strong research base and an excellent higher education system as infrastructure to contribute to the Government's plans for economic recovery and a knowledge-based economy (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment [DETE], 2009); specifically, the DETE report talks about a "system-wide step change in PhD, education" (p. 18). There is some current research in Ireland investigating graduate education outcomes (Buckley *et al*, 2009); however we know of no other research, past or current, that explores the views of supervisors and supervision practices in Ireland. The VOS project aims to contribute the unique voice of Irish graduate educators to the global graduate education literature.

THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND THE RESEARCHERS

Determining consensus on the research framework was a critical step in the VOS project. The four author/researchers represent different disciplinary and research backgrounds which influenced our approaches and our expectations of involvement in the project. Openness, reflection-in-practice and reflexivity are therefore core components of the framework and of our research process.

We have taken a grounded theory approach with a view to systematically generating theory from recursive investigation of the data collected. We operate as a collective of researchers mindful of consensual qualitative research approaches (for example, Hill *et al*, 2005) and working broadly within the Strauss and Corbin (1990) model as interpreted by Wareing (2001) and with support and guidance from the author, Mike Wareing, on its application in relation to this data set.

From Delany's (2008) literature review, we have summarised:

- that disciplinary differences exist in supervision practices;
- that the quality of supervisory practice influences postgraduate outcomes;
- and that most studies on supervision have not expressly focused on the approaches and practices of experienced, effective or successful supervisors.

This led us to our initial research frame: What is effective research supervision in Ireland? It influenced our sampling approach where we have: (i) explicitly focused our data collection among senior academics as a possible surrogate for experience, effectiveness and/or success; and (ii) purposefully sampled for discipline variation among our participants. The focus on effective (rather than on good, best or excellent practice) is deliberate and follows Elton's (2006) usage and contention that effective teaching leads to effective learning.

Having secured ethical approval for the research, we commenced data collection through semi-structured interviews with the senior academic staff who were our research participants in early 2009. Interviews were recorded and transcribed before each researcher independently open-coded the interview transcripts. Throughout this first phase we used consensual qualitative research approaches to collectively determine the questions we put to our research participants, to achieve consensus about the meaning emerging from the data after the first open-coding and, in the process of working through the data, we met and discussed our emergent meaning-making from the data.

THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES

We interviewed nineteen senior academics from a research-intensive university in Ireland. At the time of interview, our participants were collectively supervising one hundred doctoral students and had supervised 178 PhD students to completion. Each interviewee had more than six years experience supervising at graduate level; some had more than thirty years experience. In addition to their experience as a supervisor, most participants held or had held postgraduate leadership and

development responsibilities locally (in academic departments or schools), for the institution or within the context of inter-institutional collaborative graduate education programmes (GREPS). The participants' disciplinary backgrounds were varied and covered the full spectrum of variation inherent in the typology descriptors of hard, soft, pure and applied disciplines developed by Becher (1989).

Our initial frame was to establish a workable model from our first coding to further develop research questions that could be explored within the data. To do this, we examined the potential of developing an explanatory metaphor to summarise our preliminary understandings and consensus of the meaning we had made after our initial and independent coding of the data (e.g. Carpenter, 2008). Lee and Green (2009) have recently discussed the archetypal metaphors of authorship, discipleship and apprenticeship. These are focused on the pedagogy of supervision; however our interviewees talked more widely about national and institutional contexts, about changes to their practice through time, and about changes and responses to the expectations of graduate education by students, academics and external agencies. We put forward for consideration to the NAIRTL conference our shared metaphor of 'captaincy' – the command, leadership or guidance of others - particularly the command of a vessel or the leader of a team or crew. The metaphor seems a better fit – a way to sort and synthesise our data - and more akin to the metaphorical nature itself of 'super-vision' as discussed by Lee and Green (2009). We believe that the captaincy metaphor captures the breadth and nature of our data that extends beyond participants' reflections on their own supervision experience and practice to their views and perspectives in relation to changes and contextual variations that influence traditions and conceptions of practice, particularly those that emanate from the discipline and how they respond to the current climate of change and rapid expansion of graduate education goals. The concept of captaincy explicitly incorporates elements of leadership and responsibility but also conceptions of journeying with others. At this stage we are testing and interrogating the metaphor: exploring whether it is robust enough to identify future themes of inquiry, testing it to ensure it is 'followed through' for implications and associations. Presenting this initial outcome and discussing its fit and function with the NAIRTL conference audience was an important component of the ongoing research.

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