**Doctoral Research Supervisor Agency: Fostering Engagement
in Guiding U.S. Online Practitioner Doctorates**

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Abstract

This conference paper offers a critical examination of the construct of research supervisor agency to foster doctoral researcher persistence and completion in practitioner doctoral programs, especially for the Doctor of Business Administration and Doctor of Education, within a distributed student support environment. The current literature of higher education engagement specific to supervision of practitioner doctoral research is appraised and models to foster effective practitioner research supervision are presented. New insights are presented for research supervisor engagement within online environments for practitioner doctoral programs. The authors also provide comparisons of the nomenclature of the competencies needed for effective online doctoral research supervision within an online doctoral community.

Keywords: *Research supervisor agency, higher education engagement, practitioner doctorate, doctoral education persistence and completion, doctoral learning community*

Background

Doctoral program leadership must remain cognizant of the unique characteristics found among the doctoral learning community and the unique demographic profile of the graduate student body to best improve doctoral researcher engagement within the community (Gardner, 2010). This includes steps to ensure culminating research expectations for the practitioner doctoral programs are distinguished from traditional doctoral theoretical research degree programs (Throne, 2012). In addition, we know well online U.S. doctoral students require socialization, whether pursuing a practitioner doctorate or a traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), which improves persistence to completion and whether the spatiotemporal distance between the research supervisor and the doctoral peers is regular or episodic such as in blended, hybrid, 100% online, or combinations of modes of interaction (Cornér et al., 2017; Gardner, 2009, 2010; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, & Throne, 2017) as well as quality academic services support for doctoral research writers (Glazek, Adu, & McFeeters, 2018). Further guidance specific to practitioner doctoral programs is needed to ensure the conventions of practice-based research are employed and instructional interventions by supervisors can best facilitate leaders within the discipline prepared to conduct ongoing research and employ research-based decision making to solve the problems of practice as stewards of practice as a gap exists in research specific to the practitioner doctorate research phase (Hawkes & Yerrabati, 2018; Perry, 2015).

Prior research into student agency has been extensive and studies of U.S. doctoral students have noted student agency as a critical trait necessary before and after graduation to seek ideal professional or academic positions, promotion, and tenure in the academy and the profession (Jaeger et al., 2017; O'Meara et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017; Throne & Oddi, 2019). Our previous research into student agency has also addressed the importance of graduate student agency to foster engagement to move to and within the center of the graduate learning community and attain academic and professional roles following graduation as agency has been

found to influence career options for graduate-level researchers (Gardner & Blackstone, 2017; Jaeger et al., 2017; O'Meara et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017; Throne & Oddi, 2019). In addition, we have called for considerations of research supervisor agency to ensure the tenets of quality research supervision are understood as well as developed by those who oversee doctoral research within practice-based doctoral programs.

Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018) noted the growth of practitioner doctoral programs over the past two decades and the plethora of research for Doctor of Education programs, but the gap in research for other disciplinary practitioner doctoral degrees. While the research into research supervisor agency has been less than that of student agency, it remains essential to continue to explore research supervisor agency ensure doctoral student engagement, persistence, and completion (Throne & Oddi, 2019; Throne, Shaw, Fore, Duffy, & Clowes, 2015). We have defined doctoral research supervisor agency as characterized by a strong mentoring ethos, healthy and diverse communication style, empathy, and non-hierarchical relational trust between the research supervisor and new independent investigator (Throne et al., 2017; Throne et al., 2015). We later expanded this definition to characterize

> Research supervisor agency is comprised of the supervisor's efficacy, a strong mentoring ethos, healthy and diverse communication style, empathy, and nonhierarchical relational trust between the research supervisor and graduate student researcher. Agency can also be influenced by the graduate research community and academic environment in which the research is conducted (Throne & Oddi, 2018, 2019, p. 196).

For practitioner doctoral programs, the importance for quality preparation of terminally-degreed practitioners requires clear purpose for the practitioner doctorate (Perry, 2015) as well as the development of researcher identity and positionality (Throne & Bourke, 2019) and research supervisors who possess the agency to mentor practice-based research (Throne & Oddi, 2019). While many past researchers have noted online learning is disruptive to traditional notions of doctoral development as it allows for synchronous and asynchronous connections to a technology-rich doctoral learning community (Robinson, Morgan, & Reed, 2016; Nyysti & Walters, 2018; Throne et al., 2015). When doctoral research supervisors are fully engaged within this technology-rich and diverse online platform and possess agency to foster online doctoral researcher preparation, practice-based research can be fostered, enhanced, and lead to increased dissemination of practice-based research during the practitioner doctoral program and post-doc. In addition, Gray and Crosta (2018) noted that the technology-mediated relationship of the online research supervisor and supervisee can be mediated by multiple modes of communication to reduce misunderstanding or misinterpretations of feedback as well as attention to power dynamics is essential.

Online Research Supervisor Agency

In our prior work, we have characterized online research supervisor agency by the specific traits that offer effective doctoral research supervision and allow a research supervisor to guide a doctoral candidate from the periphery of the online doctoral community to the center through the development of doctoral researcher positionality (Throne & Bourke, 2019) and via a doctoral research supervisor who possesses agency in research supervision (Throne & Oddi, 2019). The inherent rewards for the research supervisor can serve to motivate the introspection of research supervisor agency and the inherent characteristics necessary to best facilitate this doctoral

researcher evolution beyond the culminating doctoral research project. In addition, we have noted these requisite traits and characteristics for research supervisor agency and the specific ability to facilitate doctoral researcher positionality are assurances for new doctoral investigators to conduct quality research at a graduate-level capacity and to navigate the online doctoral scholarly community to further enhance research knowledge, skills, and with complexity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gardner, 2010; Throne & Duffy, 2016; Throne et al., 2018; Throne et al., 2017; Throne et al., 2015).

We have purported the relational aspects between researcher supervisor and doctoral researcher should be democratic and maintained from a non-hierarchical relationship, doctoral-level research skill development may exceed documental expectations and the candidate may seek research opportunities, academic publishing, ongoing research agenda, or conference presentation post-doctorate (Black, 2017; Throne & Bourke, 2019). This requires a research supervisor willing to move beyond traditional hierarchical relationships and to provide individualized social support and the high mentoring ethos to holistically develop a qualified researcher (Throne & Oddi, 2019; Throne et al., 2015). In addition, online doctoral scholar engagement decreases feelings of isolation as these scholars are brought into and engaged within a supportive and technology-rich doctoral learning community (Nyysti & Walters, 2018).

For the practitioner doctorate, Robinson et al. (2016) offered a disciplinary disruptive approach to practitioner doctoral education and noted innovation must be considered through new perspectives and traditional assumptions for doctoral research must be disrupted to for new models of doctoral researcher development for practice-based research. We agree that traditional assumptions of the research doctorate, including models for dissertation research and the defense, must be disrupted for the practitioner doctorate to seek ongoing innovation and improved preparation of scholar practitioners ready to embark upon practice-based research post-doctorate to improve the problems of practice (Throne, 2012). In turn, new perspectives for research supervisor agency must also be considered to ensure the tenets and principles of practice-based research are embraced by practitioner doctorate research supervisors (Perry, 2015).

Research Supervisor Agency and Practitioner Doctoral Research

Past researchers have noted the impact practitioner doctoral graduates can have on practice to improve societal and industry problems once they attain the terminal degree (Hoyne, Alessandrini, & Fellman, 2016; Kochhar-Bryant, 2016; Pervan et al., 2016; Robinson, 2015). The importance of engagement, socialization, critical awareness, action, and goal achievement have been noted as essential to enhance doctoral scholar agency including civic and change agency. When higher educational institutions have an institutional goal to prepare practitioner doctoral candidates to conduct practice-based research to improve practice, the development of agency and doctoral student identity must also be considered within this development.

For example, Robinson (2015) noted doctoral student agency in the business practitioner doctorate can be defined as knowledge into practice. Particularly, Doctor of Business graduates must employ agency to move beyond the individual to the organizational setting that requires a critical awareness and responsiveness to the business setting to characterize one's business agency (Robinson, 2015). Likewise, for the education doctorate, Hoyne et al. (2016) noted agency for innovation is especially needed for educational leaders who are prepared as innovation-capable leaders and doctorally qualified to improve practice. Thus, the authors

encouraged higher education institutions to ensure the practitioner education doctorate prepares graduates with agency amid a suite of skills to ensure a workforce able for long-term sustainable productivity (Hoyne et al., 2016). Similarly, we recommend this doctoral student agency to be modeled by the dissertation research supervisor throughout the practice-based research study to foster student agency, researcher positionality, and responsibility for applicability of the research to the professional practice. In addition, a research supervisor with agency can foster awareness of the role and responsibility the doctoral scholar will have post-doctorate as they return to practice with the terminal degree in the discipline to solve the problems of practice.

Further, Pervan et al. (2016) illustrated how practitioner doctoral candidates can exercise agency through social and cultural capital. The authors defined agency as the ability for doctoral candidates to self-identify the capacity to perceive and act to achieve personal goals and this action must involve socialization (Pervan et al., 2016). As practitioner doctoral students perceive these goals, the doctoral journey itself offers a socialization process for these doctoral scholars to navigate relations among doctoral faculty, administrators, and research supervisors and noted that past theoretical frameworks for doctoral scholar identity development has excluded understanding of the involvement of agency (Pervan et al., 2016). In addition, Kochhar-Bryant (2016) called for the development of doctoral scholar identity and commitment if we are to prepare practitioner doctoral graduates as change agents to solve the problems within practice. This civic agency is comprised of "the capacities of communities and societies to work collaboratively across differences like partisan ideology, faith traditions, income, geography and ethnicity to address common challenges, solve problems and create common outcomes" (p. 31). The author concluded the duality of the scholar practitioner from academy to community is needed for transformational leaders to return to practice as change agents who will have significant impact on societal and practice problems (Kochhar-Bryant, 2016).

Research Supervisor Engagement in Online Higher Education Environments

The authors have previously stressed the importance of a vibrant online doctoral community to foster doctoral researcher positionality and development of new investigators (Nyysti & Walters, 2018; Throne & Bourke, 2019; Throne & Oddi, 2019). Strategies for fostering online graduate student engagement and fostering of an online personal learning time, online student engagement, technology-rich resource support, researcher positionality, practice-based research, and innovative, disruptive solutions have been offered within our past work (Walters & Henry, 2019; Throne, 2007, 2012). In addition, we have articulated a situated dissertation advising framework that incorporates research supervisor relational traits of honesty, trust, and effective communication (Black, 2017; Clowes, Shaw, & Throne, 2016; Throne, 2012, 2018; Throne & Duffy, 2016; Throne et al., 2018; Throne et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw, Fore, Duffy, & Clowes, 2015).

In this dissertation advising framework grounded within technology and founded upon Lave (1991, 1996) and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, we identified key characteristics among a formal approach to online practitioner research supervision to improve student persistence, scholar-practitioner preparation, and dissertation completion in practitioner doctoral programs. These key characteristics included   companion constructs within a situated online doctoral learning community were iteratively developed through tangential technology, technology-rich resources, engagement, and online faculty development for practice-based research supervision (Throne, Oddi, Ferreira, & Maddox, 2019).

In a recent literature review by Gray and Crosta (2018), the authors noted the delicate balance that must be used by the doctoral research supervisor to ensure a hands-off approach is balanced with instructional supervision when needed. The authors outlined nine criteria that may characterize quality doctoral research supervision and nine further aspects that characterize a quality supervisor/supervisee relationship (Gray & Crosta, 2018). These characteristics mirror our earlier framework for situated dissertation advising (Throne et al., 2015; Throne et al, 2017) and we concur continued research that establishes a consistent framework for doctoral research supervision. Also essential is for the institution to assure a doctoral learning community exists for which the doctoral candidate can remain interactive throughout the dissertation journey (Gardner, 2010; Gardner & Blackstone, 2017).

Thus, the authors suggested in recent conference proceedings (Throne & Walters, 2019) the comparisons between competencies outlined within the past research be used to determine a more consistent and defined list of personal competencies to describe doctoral research supervisor agency (see Table 1). This standardization of competencies for doctoral research supervisor agency may lead to improved doctoral research persistence and completion specific to practitioner doctorates and for the doctoral research phase of practitioner doctoral programs.

Table 1

Nomenclature Comparisons for Research Supervisor Agency

Throne, Shaw et al. (2015)	Black (2017)	Gray & Crosta (2018)	Throne & Oddi (2019)
High Mentoring Ethos	Authenticity/ Genuineness	Active Engagement	Non-hierarchical
Accessible/ Equitable	Knowledgeable	Healthy Relationships	Researcher Positionality
Relational	Climate of Trust	Expectations/ Ground Rules	Social Support
Socialization	Climate of Connectedness	Emancipation	Doctoral Learning Community-Engagement
Technology-mediated	Personal & Professional Ethic	Enculturation	
Collaborative engagement	Dissemination of Research	Impact of Power/ Relational Power	Dissemination of Research
Iterative/ Celebratory			Relational Trust/ Honesty/Integrity

Calls for Future Research

While Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018) noted the depth of current research into Doctor of Education degree programs, the authors called for ongoing research into the overall impact of Doctor of Education degree graduates and the impact on practice across U.S., United Kingdom, Australia, as well as to expand the scope of research into practitioner doctoral programs across the global community especially focused on the research supervisor and the practitioner doctoral research experience. Likewise, Gittings, Bergman, Shuck, and Rose (2018) called for comparison studies of professional doctorates with traditional PhD programs and to compare doctoral program outcomes by Carnegie classification. We support these recommendations and concur that considerations specific to practice-based or practitioner research be considered in addition to researcher positionality expected within research doctorates.

Throne and Bourke (2019) called for further studies of online, hybrid, and distance graduate researcher guidance on research identity and positionality as well as remote research supervision within an online scholarly community, and Throne and Oddi (2019) called for ongoing research to better understand online research supervisor agency "as it remains essential for remote research supervisors and others who oversee graduate research from a distance to evaluate their own agency coordinated with positionalities, proclivities, and self-awareness to ensure clarity in one's own identity, leanings, implicit biases, and other influences that may inform the research supervisor's perspective". We continue to recommend these further studies and to ensure that the conventions of practitioner research are considered additionally to those of research doctorates.

Gray and Crosta (2018) noted past researchers who have called for a theoretical framework for doctoral research supervision, which was not consistent within the literature reviewed. However, the authors noted at minimum best practices for research supervision need to be delineated as doctoral research supervision is nonlinear and levels of support can vary greatly throughout a dissertation study whether online or in traditional form (Gray & Crosta, 2018). Similar to the above recommendations, the authors noted that continued research into doctoral research supervision should consider the nuances of practice-based doctorates versus research doctorates as these frameworks may allow for specific guidance for practitioner research that may differ from the PhD. We concur that continued collaborative research among interested groups may lead to a consistent framework and identification of personal competencies for research supervisor agency as specific to quality practitioner doctoral research, which may improve practitioner doctoral persistence to completion (Throne & Walters, 2019).

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