Professional development for postgraduate supervision

Sue Johnston
University of Canberra

Introduction

The quality of postgraduate supervision continues to be an issue for all parties involved in the process[1]. For universities which are increasingly more aware of their accountability to external groups, attrition rates and completion rates of postgraduate students are becoming statistics of vital concern (Burgess, 1994; NBEET, 1989). With the gradual introduction of fees for postgraduate study, students—now often paying clients—are becoming more vocal about the quality of their experience within postgraduate programs, and horror stories sometimes surface about problems associated with postgraduate research. In the newer universities, the move towards greater involvement in postgraduate programs has meant that more and more of their academic staff are being called upon to assume the roles of supervisors of postgraduate students—something which they have often had limited experience in the past. Particularly in these newer universities, the rush to induct new supervisors into the role has been associated with conscious efforts to establish a research climate in which supervisors and postgraduate students receive adequate support and are provided with a lively intellectual environment for their work.

In order to support both this growing involvement in postgraduate supervision within newer universities and the established involvement in those institutions which have a long tradition of postgraduate research, there has been a range of standard professional development responses. In some institutions, inexperienced supervisors are teamed up with their experienced colleagues as associate- or co-supervisors, in the hope that they will learn about supervision through informal mentoring or modelling processes. In most universities, there are attempts at workshops or seminars related to postgraduate supervision. Sometimes these are 'in-house' affairs while, in other cases, input from outside speakers is invited. Topics for discussion at these programs include such aspects of supervision as the skills of providing feedback to students, supporting postgraduate writing, developing a supportive climate for postgraduate students, research skills, resources available for students and supervisors, departmental or university policies and procedures, ethical issues, and working with international postgraduate students (Moses, 1992; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992a). In some cases, workshops have been preceded by formal data collection to provide attendees with information such as student completion rates and student perceptions of supervision to act as a stimulus for discussion (Powles, 1988). Some workshops have also used a 'train the trainer' approach, with participants expected to take responsibility for disseminating the ideas and for the professional development of colleagues back in their respective departments (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992b). Although many events involve activities for postgraduate supervisors and students separately, some forums are attended by postgraduate students and supervisors together. Postgraduate student associations have also joined the scene, organising orientation and other support activities for students, and sometimes including input from supervisors.

In general, where these activities to improve postgraduate supervision are part of the institutional procedures, they take place as 'one-off' or infrequent events. They are based on the assumption that, once introduced to the knowledge and skills of postgraduate supervision, academics will go away and incorporate new practices into their repertoire, with the aim of enhanced quality duly achieved. After relatively intensive exposure to the concepts, the participants are expected to become better supervisors, and sometimes they are even expected to support the development of enhanced supervisory practices among their colleagues. The assumption underlying many of these approaches is that the process of supervision can be learned by reading, listening and talking about the theories and practices of others. Even with workshops modelled on an action learning approach, the time allocated for bringing supervisors together is short and the site is usually remote from that in which the actual supervision takes place. That is, supervisors from different contexts are brought together for a workshop program which allows little time for implementing new skills or ideas and reflecting on the results of changing one's own practice. To a large extent, all of these professional development approaches assume a traditional mode of transmission of knowledge. Rarely are they part of a more long-term strategy which takes account of the nature of supervision and what this suggests about how its practice might best be improved.

Action research as an alternative approach

Action research is one alternative approach to professional development which has been commonly used in school settings, and which has been acclaimed as bringing about significant changes in teaching practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). In its most technical form, action research is an iterative process of analysing practice, formulating changes to that practice, implementing these changes, monitoring their effects, and reformulating further changes on the basis of evaluation and reflection (Grundy, 1982). Some advocates of action research stress its collaborative nature, arguing that its value lies in the exchange of perspectives on practice and the critical analysis of assumptions underlying practice that occur in a group whose members challenge and extend each other's thinking (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990). A further feature of action research, argued by some to be its most important, is its focus on social justice (McTaggart, 1991). For these proponents of action research, there must be a critical examination of inequitable power relationships underlying existing practices and a move towards achieving more equitable relationships.

The promise of action research to provide an alternative and more enduring change to supervisory practices within postgraduate supervision led to the development of a submission for funding to the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) in 1993. The submission spelt out the advantages of action research as providing a collaborative approach to the issue of postgraduate supervision, with the opportunity for postgraduate students and supervisors in one faculty to form a group which would explore issues of supervision and work towards improving their practices. The project arose in one of the newer universities in which there was an identified concern among the faculty about the expanding postgraduate enrolments and the relative inexperience of the majority of postgraduate supervisors. The submission set out the four aims of the project as:

- forming a collaborative group of supervisors and students involved in postgraduate research programs in one faculty;

- undertaking a collaborative process in which members of the group investigate aspects of postgraduate student learning, implement strategies to improve learning, monitor the effects of those strategies and discuss their experiences within the group setting;
- producing written material and video segments which would be used to enhance postgraduate student learning throughout the faculty and in other settings; and
- documenting the collaborative process used by the group, together with its strengths and weaknesses, so that other groups could use the process to improve postgraduate student learning.

The arguments for this approach, as opposed to other more traditional means of improving postgraduate supervision, were that it involved both students and supervisors working collaboratively over an extended period of time, and that the process used would allow an exploration of some of the issues of power relationships in postgraduate supervision. In addition, it was envisaged that the outcome of the project would be a deeper understanding among the participants of the nature of postgraduate supervision, which could then be shared with other groups.

The project, which became known as Collaborative Action in Postgraduate Supervision (CAPS), was launched within the faculty in April 1994 with a meeting to which all postgraduate supervisors and students were invited. The acting dean of the faculty had written a letter to all staff encouraging their involvement in the project. The first meeting was attended by five supervisors and eleven students, with a number of others unable to attend the meeting but indicating an interest in joining the project. This first meeting provided an opportunity to explain the action research process and the way in which the project would proceed, with some time to begin to discuss the issues related to postgraduate supervision which interested those who attended the meeting. The aim was for the group to decide on a number of issues which individuals would explore through gathering information about that issue from their own experiences, using the meetings to discuss their findings and search for a deeper understanding of that issue. The use of journals was suggested to provide an avenue for recording ideas and observations, as well as for reflecting on progress and developing understandings. The use of videos of actual supervisory meetings was also foreshadowed as a focus for discussions at group meetings. At this first meeting, dates were negotiated for a series of regular meetings for the group, and it was envisaged that these would play a key role in melding the group and providing a forum for discussion and for sharing of the experiences of postgraduate supervision which the members were exploring.

The process evolves

After only a few of the scheduled meetings were held, it became obvious that the action research process, which relied on regular contact among the group members, was not going to work as the primary way of achieving the project's aims of exploring, sharing and enhancing supervisory practices. Meetings were very poorly attended and a stable group did not develop, as different people attended the meetings on each occasion. Supervisors apparently were unwilling or unable to commit time to the project, and only a few attended on an irregular basis. Those students who attended usually came along with a specific problem which they aired at the meeting, with an expectation that the team co-ordinating the project would resolve the problem for them. Those students who perceived that they had no problems currently associated with their postgraduate experience seemed to feel no need to take part in such a project.

Furthermore, there was little recognition on the part of the students that they could play a role in changing practices and procedures associated with postgraduate supervision. The supervisors who attended the meetings were keen to discuss supervision in general, mainly with a view to changing the practices of others, but they were less willing to open their own practices to any form of scrutiny or discussion. There was an overwhelming view coming from the students and supervisors in the faculty that all available time needed to be directed to the actual task of doing the research and writing the thesis. It was considered to be too much of a diversion or interruption to focus time and effort on exploring the process of supervision, unless serious problems with the process arose. It appeared to be a case of 'If things are going smoothly, don't think about them'. When problems arose, there was a search for a quick-fix solution, preferably carried out by someone else. This quick-fix solution replaced a search for a deeper understanding of why the problem was occurring and how all parties could work together for its resolution. Students and supervisors appeared to feel powerless to change the underlying factors affecting the practice of supervision within the faculty.

The lack of success with the action research approach envisaged for the project led the project team to rethink the direction the project was taking. The project officer employed to support the project began to work individually with those supervisors and students in the faculty who were still interested in some involvement in the project but who were not necessarily able to attend meetings. The project officer then encouraged and assisted these individuals to record their experiences and growing understandings of postgraduate supervision through the writing of narratives. The process of writing these narratives collaboratively with the project officer meant that the project participants each explored issues of interest to them and reached a deeper understanding of those issues. Rather than using the support, probing and challenging of group interaction, the process relied on the project officer to take that role with each person on a more individual basis. Excerpts from the narratives were shared at group meetings, which continued for those interested in attending. Written materials, including these excerpts, were also circulated to all involved in the project. The excerpts provided examples of real experiences described through the words of real supervisors and students. For this reason, they created interest, provoked discussion and stimulated participants to consider their own experience in relation to the narratives.

The next stage of the project involved seeking volunteers from the faculty to participate in videotaping sessions. Some of these were of real supervisory sessions and others were of role plays based on real supervisory sessions. The participants themselves developed the ideas for the videotapes which were organised by the project officer. Again, the video segments provided material for discussion at group meetings and were also used at a workshop conducted for the faculty at the end of the year. Although a different format and medium from the narratives, the video material did provide some frank and personalised perspectives about supervision, and when it was shown to groups of either supervisors or students, it provoked lively discussion.

Discussion

The move by the project team from an action research approach to an alternative process for the project may appear to have been somewhat premature. Indeed, perhaps more efforts should have been made to explain the intended process and to build the necessary support and trust, as well as commitment to the project, necessary for the action research process to continue. There was some indication that the lack of success with the action research approach may have been the result of inadequate preparation of the group participating in the project, some of whom commented later that they had felt that things moved too quickly in the early stages without the development of sufficient trust among the group members. However, as with all funded projects, deadlines imposed by external agencies brought a sense of urgency and some pressure to keep the project moving towards the achievement of its pre-specified goals.

The major difficulties with the action research approach to the project appeared to arise from the time constraints that both supervisors and students were experiencing and the associated low priority of time they were able to give to attending meetings, which were originally seen as an important part of the project. Time to focus specifically on the process of supervision was considered to be just too much of a luxury by supervisors and students alike, whose efforts were directed towards completing a research project and writing a thesis.

This could be compared with the resistance one would expect from a highly motivated mathematics class whose lecturer appeared to be spending a proportion of the class time on discussion of student learning approaches, instead on covering the mathematics students perceived they needed for their exams. Although this would be considered a commendable diversion by some, it is unlikely that the majority of students and lecturing staff would see it as a worthwhile use of their time.

What then is needed for a process such as action research to succeed in such a context? It is likely that the time required for promoting the process and gathering commitment to it is quite lengthy, and that specific strategies need to be undertaken to achieve this as a preliminary stage to such a project. Action research should arise from a ground-swell of support that it is a useful process to explore an issue which participants have agreed upon as a priority for exploration and concomitant change of practice. That is, there must be an agreement that an issue exists and that action research is a good way of addressing it. There must also be some recognition that action research is not a quick-fix solution but, rather, a process which helps people work together to explore and find their own solutions through collaborative understanding. This means that a prerequisite for action research is a willingness to commit time not only to the solutions but, most importantly, to the process of exploration and investigation.

Is the formal time commitment required of an action research approach too much to expect from postgraduate students or, more particularly, from academics who are experiencing a range of demands for their time of which postgraduate supervision comprises a small component? For staff in the newer universities, pressures to develop a research profile and to become involved in postgraduate supervision have come at the same time as a number of other demands and cost-cutting measures, which have led to a dramatic intensification of academics' work. The experience of this project suggests that a requirement to attend regular meetings which focused on a process of sharing and exploring postgraduate supervision was too much to ask of these supervisors and students.

Notwithstanding these difficulties in the use of action research for developing the quality of postgraduate supervision, there is still a need to pursue some strategies for professional development of both supervisors and students. Action research is not the only means of providing some meaningful development of supervisors and students. The project, although deviating from its original stated processes, did proceed towards outcomes as specified in the submission. The move away from an action research approach could be interpreted as a willingness on the part of the project team to be flexible in its approach, to reflect on its processes, and to modify those processes according to the context of the project and the expressed needs of the participants. Comments from those involved suggested that the process was very worthwhile, and that the move to developing and then sharing more individual narratives of experience was an effective alternative to action research.

Students who participated in the project made comments which suggested that their participation had been a learning experience and that, through the discussions, they now had new understanding of and a feeling of control over the process in which they were engaged. Supervision had become a topic of lively conversation:

I learnt that when one becomes a postgraduate student there are many more choices—the quality of the work, the time put into it, the direction taken, even the ability to change a supervisor if necessary. For me, the more active the introduction to that change from undergraduate to postgraduate, the more active initiation into the new style, the more talking taking place, the more cooperative learning you do in discussing your fears and your problems [the better].

There is a feeling of having more control about what happens in supervision. Previously I knew what research was, but I didn't have the confidence to put that and the supervision information together.

I have an increased enthusiasm for helping other students in supervision. Now I approach people about supervision and talk about it.

Some students particularly commented that the narratives had demonstrated that what they were saying was being valued. The narrative approach also allowed a wider involvement by students who felt unable to commit time to attending meetings:

I saw students really feeling that what they said was worthwhile, when they were listened to as they expressed their views and then their seeing a written record of what they had said, knowing it would be included in a report. The writing made people see that what they were saying was valued.

I felt disappointed when I thought I wouldn't have enough time to be more involved and so wasn't as involved as I would have liked. Through the change in the project to include a greater level of individual contribution, I felt as though I could share, through my narrative, with other people.

Supervisors involved in the project also commented that it had encouraged more openness, and that it had started up a conversation about supervision which had not been present before the project. They observed how the conversation had facilitated a sharing, which meant a deeper understanding of the process of supervision:

There is a greater openness around about some of the difficulties in supervision and, therefore, it makes it easier to deal with them. It reduces the isolation.

It opened my understanding of how vastly different students are in their demands throughout supervision. My awareness has been increased in terms of the difficulties that supervisors encounter in relating to a variety of expectations from students.

I could see outcomes for both supervisors and students. Things were made clear for both parties that perhaps they had known, but were clarified by other people. You could see people's 'lights' turning on. I could see people thinking, 'Oh yes, that's what it's like for me'.

Conclusions

The experience of this project suggests a number of features of professional development activities which have the potential to bring about changed supervisory practices and relationships. The first of these relates to the need for some form of a collaborative approach involving both supervisors and postgraduate students. Postgraduate supervision can be a very isolating experience for both supervisors and students. It is an experience which often takes place in the privacy of an academic's office, and involves only the supervisor and student meeting together. For many supervisors, approaches to supervision are based on their own experience of being supervised as postgraduate students, because they have had few, if any, opportunities to observe other approaches. In this respect, it is a far more private and less observed form of teaching than other classroom-based forms of teaching in which academics are engaged. For this reason alone, it is imperative for supervisors to come together in some way on a regular basis, sharing their experiences, problems and successes of their supervisory roles.

The involvement of students is also necessary for supervisors to begin to understand what the experience is like from the students' perspectives, and to gain some appreciation of the diversity and complexity of student needs and preferences. Furthermore, there is a need for students to be involved in the process of professional development in a meaningful and equitable way. This requires more than token involvement, which often takes place through inviting students as observers to discussions or expecting one or two students to represent the views of all students through a short input to a formal program. There is a need to employ processes in which more equitable power relationships between supervisors and students can be developed. Many writers have referred to postgraduate research as the means of inducting new academics into the profession, and few supervisors would argue that the end result of doctoral studies is the development of a more collegial relationship between postgraduate

student and supervisor. Postgraduate supervision deserves to be explored using approaches which encourage the development of these collegial relationships and the acceptance of responsibility from both supervisors and students that students too have an important role to play in the supervisory relationship established. While there is general recognition that postgraduate students have a major responsibility for the research project on which they are working, there is less recognition that they should be allowed to develop a similar share of the responsibility for the supervisory relationship.

Another feature which should characterise professional development related to postgraduate supervision is the need to focus on the actual experiences of the participants. Like all forms of practical endeavour, there is a very tenuous link between knowing something about the theory of supervision and being able to translate that into effective practice. As in other forms of practical endeavour, changes in practice are most likely to occur when there has been a carefully supported and structured series of activities which allow practitioners to reflect on their own practice, to consider particular issues of importance to their practice, and to share their experiences with a supportive group of colleagues who can challenge assumptions which underlie that practice and together develop alternative ways of approaching that practice. In other words, there is a need to theorise the practice and use that understanding to develop alternatives. Collaboration among a group is important here to develop the level of trust which is needed for troublesome issues to be explored and for challenges to be made to what are sometimes entrenched ways of thinking about those issues. Noddings and Witherell (1991) have highlighted the depth of understanding which can come from sharing narratives:

> *We learn by both hearing and telling stories. Telling our own stories can be cathartic and liberating. But it is more than that. We discover as we tell and come closer to wisdom* (Noddings and Witherell, 1991, p. 279).

The features which have been described here do not lend themselves to one-off workshops, or even to short-term residential events. Instead, they require a recognition that changes to supervisory practices will not take place quickly. The collaborative group which is needed to support such changes will take time to form. There is a need for the group to meet on a regular basis over a sufficiently long period of time for issues which relate directly to practice to be shared and monitored. Furthermore, special processes are needed to encourage the sharing and articulation of specific issues related to practice. Bringing a group of students and supervisors together will not automatically guarantee that the discussion will focus on personal concerns and the details of individual practice. If students and supervisors are not initially willing to devote time to forming such a group and becoming involved in such processes, other ways of focusing on practice and sharing understandings need to be used.

The change in direction of this project away from action research and towards a collaborative process which relied on the project officer encouraging and supporting the writing and sharing of individual narratives can be seen as a means of achieving the criteria outlined above. The evolution which occurred in the project should not be seen as a failed attempt at action research but, rather, as a recognition that action research is not the only professional development approach which meets the criteria. Nor should it be seen as a criticism of the supervisors or students who belonged to this faculty. The original conception of the project based on action research, like many projects for which funding submissions have to be written long in advance of their execution, did not take sufficient account of the initial priorities and commitment of those who were envisaged as participants in the project. The pressures felt by the students and supervisors in this faculty were not atypical of those in most institutions, and the project evolved into a process which took more account of this situation. The writing and sharing of narratives appeared to those involved as a less formalised and less intrusive process which eased them more gradually into the exploration of their own experience of supervision and into the exploration of the experiences of others. The role of the project officer who acted as a conduit among the participants in the project replaced to some extent the initial emphasis on formal meetings of a stable group of participants. Although relying more on the project officer, the process itself became more flexible for the other participants involved.

The act of recording conversation in narrative form gave a written record of each individual's thinking and concerns of the moment, forcing them to revisit their ideas on a number of occasions and search for a deeper meaning. The writing of the narratives over a period of time meant that changes in practice could be recorded and explored, while a number of participants also took specific action to change the experience in which they were engaged. In this way, the outcomes were very similar to those which one would expect from an action research process. Perhaps the name of the process is unimportant as long as the principles of collaboration among students and supervisors, a focus on specific practices, and sustained effort over a worthwhile period of time characterise the approach.

References

Burgess, R. (ed) (1994) *Postgraduate Education and Training in the Social Sciences: Process and Products*, London: Jessica Kingsley.

Carr, W. & Kemmis S. (1986) *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, London: Falmer Press.

Grundy, S. (1982) 'Three Modes of Action Research' *Curriculum Perspectives*, 2 (3), 23-34.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1988) *The Action Research Planner*, Geelong: Deakin University Press.

McCutcheon, G. & Jung, B. (1990) 'Alternative Perspectives on Action Research', *Theory Into Practice*, 29, 144-151.

McTaggart, R. (1991) 'Action Research is a Broad Movement', *Curriculum Perspectives*, 11(4), 44-47.

Moses, I. (ed) (1992) *Research Supervision and Training*. Proceedings from an ARC and AVCC sponsored conference.

NBEET (1989) *Review of Australian Graduate Studies*, Initial Report by the Higher Education Council. Canberra: AGPS.

Noddings, N. & Witherell, C. (1991) 'Themes Remembered and Foreseen', in C. Witherell and N. Noddings (eds), *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*, New York: Teachers College Press.

Powles, M. (1988) *Know Your PhD Students and How to Help Them*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed) (1992a) *Starting Research - Supervision and Training*, Brisbane: The Tertiary Education Institute.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1992b) *Manual for Conducting Workshops on Postgraduate Supervision*, Brisbane: The Tertiary Education Institute.

Footnote

1. This paper relates to a project funded in 1994 as a National Teaching Development Grant by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT). A complete report of the project as well as resources produced are available from the author or from CAUT. The contribution made by the project officer, Juliana Broda, is gratefully acknowledged.