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## Undertaking the Journey Together: Peer Learning for a Successful and Enjoyable PhD Experience

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# Undertaking the Journey Together: Peer Learning for a Successful and Enjoyable PhD Experience\*

Elke Stracke

## Abstract

This paper deals with the challenge of supervising PhD students. Any supervision is likely to constitute a challenging experience for the supervisor, even more so when they are a new academic staff member with little experience in PhD supervision in the Australasian context. This paper shows how one supervisor addressed the challenge by fostering a more collaborative research culture in her programme (Applied Linguistics) through peer group work, and can serve as a starting point for action for supervisors who are looking for possibilities to integrate their students into learning communities. The paper provides the theoretical rationale for peer learning in doctoral education and emphasizes the desirability for its implementation into supervisory practice from an educational perspective. The description of practice of one particular peer group allows for interesting insights into the genesis, activities, and self-evaluation of this group that emphasized the value of learning with and from each other through exchange, insight into the PhD process, feedback, moral support in a friendly, supportive environment, and research training. The paper concludes by discussing implications, and challenges of this study for practice, policy, and research, as well its limitations.

**KEYWORDS:** Communities of practice, peer learning support, PhD supervision

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\*This paper focuses on the importance of peer learning in doctoral education. It takes its lead from my personal experience as a supervisor when I worked, as a lecturer in Applied Linguistics, with several doctoral (and Masters by research) students in a peer group-learning environment over three years (2003-2006) at a University in New Zealand. An early version of this paper was presented at the 'Spotlight on Teaching at Otago: Sharing Innovation, Best Practice and Research' Colloquium (Dunedin, 2006). I wish to acknowledge the thoughtful suggestions provided by the participants, and to record my appreciation to the anonymous reviewers.

## **Introduction**

Supervising doctoral students is a demanding and stimulating experience to supervisors. For new staff members with little experience in PhD supervision in the Australasian context, it can indeed be a challenging task. In this paper I will describe how I structured activities for peer learning amongst research students. My own perspective, that is the supervisor's perspective, shapes this paper and its autobiographical nature. I will describe the emergence of the strategy, 'what' happened, and the student experience, i.e. what students said they experienced and learned as a result of the peer learning experience.

The idea of support groups for PhD students is not new in higher education—faculties, departments, schools, and so on offer various formal (e.g. reading groups, Higher degree research mini conferences) and/or informal (e.g. Friday afternoon PhD lounge, chat room) contexts for students to meet (with or without their supervisors). This paper develops the idea of the importance of such support groups further by emphasizing the supervisors' possibilities, indeed perhaps responsibility, of structuring activities for their PhD students in the context of particular subject matter and in their local environment. This may not only lead to a successful and more enjoyable experience of the PhD journey, both for the supervisor and the students; it also underlines the importance of emotions in the research experience that is often not given due consideration.

Hence, this paper studies a particular PhD support group with the aim of increasing the understanding of new and experienced supervisors as to the theoretical and practical nature of fostering peer group learning in doctoral education. The results of this particular peer group experience appear to indicate the potential that lies in peer group learning. This might encourage other supervisors looking for ways to better integrate their students into a learning community to develop similar strategies for and with their research students in their local practice.

In this paper, I first provide the theoretical background to peer learning in doctoral education and emphasize the need for its implementation into supervisory practice if supervisors want to take the educational side of PhD supervision seriously. Next, I describe the peer group I worked with. After presenting the group's formation and operation, I will present how the group's informal self-evaluation became the source of data for this study, followed by the analysis of the data and a brief reflection. Finally, I will discuss the implications and challenges that arise from this study for further practice, policy, and research, as well as its limitations.



## **Theoretical background**

The traditionally dyadic relationship of supervision has often led to a neglect of more collective and collaborative forms of supervision (Malfroy, 2005) despite the increased recognition of the “changing nature of doctoral supervision and pedagogic practices” (Malfroy, 2005, p. 166), in particular after the emergence of Professional Doctorate programs. Likewise, the potential of peer learning in higher education is only “starting to be realized” (Boud, 2001, p. 3). Whereas in the general field of learning and teaching in higher education collaborative forms of learning are currently being explored, there is a lack of theorization and conceptualization when it comes to doctoral education (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 503). Not only peer learning, but “[i]ndeed, pedagogy has been the ‘absent presence’ in the ‘supervision’ relationship” (Pearson & Brew, 2002, p. 13). However, there are now calls in doctoral education for a new “focus on pedagogy” where peer learning “might be a productive frame through which to view research education” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 501; Green, 2005). The focus on pedagogy emphasizes, on the one hand, the role of the supervisor as educator, as the more experienced peer in the supervisor-supervisee relationship who offers structured activities for peer learning, and questions, on the other, the value of a learning environment that focuses only or mainly on provision (Boud & Lee, 2005). A focus on pedagogy implies viewing supervision not only as part of the supervisor’s research load, but at least to the same extent as part of her or his teaching load.

The conventional perception of peer group is often one of a group in which postgraduate students meet without their supervisor. Fisher (2006) describes the peer support group as “a small group of three to five candidates who meet regularly to discuss the content and process of their research projects” (p. 42). A look at two randomly chosen handbooks for supervisors (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2004; Taylor & Beasley, 2005) and the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (Golde, Walker, et al., 2006) confirms this perception since none of these books lists peer learning or peer group as a chapter or subchapter in its table of contents nor in its subject index. However, using the term for a group of peers that includes both the supervisees *and* the supervisor(s) underlines the importance of a desired partner-like relationship between the supervisee and the supervisor and questions the conventional perception of peer group as a group of students only. This understanding of peer group emphasises the peer-to-peer notion, as also underlined in the concept of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where people “come together in groupings to carry out activities” in “*mutual engagement*”, a “*joint enterprise*”, and develop a “*shared repertoire* of common resources of language, styles, and routines” (Barton & Tusting, 2005, p. 2). The traditional master-apprentice relationship that propagates a power relationship in which one is the master and the other the learner would not correspond to such a community of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Cumming (2008)

convincingly describes the overwhelmingly positive features of communities of practice in the area of doctoral education by also pointing out their potential for disharmony, for example, due to the asymmetrical nature of the supervisee-supervisor relationship.

Peer learning is accurately described by Boud (2001) as a “two-way, reciprocal learning activity” (p. 3) and “refers to networks of learning relationships, among students and significant others” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 503). In this paper, the learning relationship under investigation is the peer group for which I structured peer learning activities as a supervisor when working with several PhD (and Masters by Research) students at a university in New Zealand. The following description of practice aims at reducing the gap in documentation of peer learning and its application in doctoral education as observed by Boud and Lee (2005, p. 503). Such descriptions of supervision practice and the student experience are needed for further investigation of the potential of peer learning and peer groups in doctoral education as an integral part of supervisory practice, if supervision wants to move beyond the traditional one-to-one relationship that still constitutes the majority of supervisory relationships. This paper thus adds to the literature that conceptualises postgraduate pedagogy “as more than the relationship between a single supervisor and a student” (Malfroy, 2005, p. 177; Green, 2005) and, in a wider sense, to the “under-researched and basically undocumented” (Green, 2005, p. 156) field of doctoral research.

## **Study**

In this section I present details about the study conducted. In a first step, I will, in a purely descriptive approach, describe how the particular peer group under investigation came into existence. Second, I will describe the kind of activities that the group developed. In a third step, I will describe the informal self-evaluation that the group conducted at the end of the first semester of its operation. It is this informal self-evaluation that constitutes the data source for the subsequent analysis and reflection.

## **Origins**

After roughly one year as a lecturer at the new university, I found myself supervising five PhD students (three primary supervisions; two co-supervisions).<sup>1</sup> I observed that, even though students shared the same office, there was not much communication between them. I decided to do something about this observed lack of communication that manifested itself at various levels. For instance, students were not aware of their fellow students’ research topics. They also did not share, for example, any knowledge as regards useful

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers varied between a minimum of three up to nine students.

workshops being offered by the university, good databases, or possible funding opportunities for conference attendance and presentation. Based on these observations, I suggested to my supervisees that we should meet regularly to enhance communication between all of us. Everybody was interested in having these additional peer group meetings. The group work was not a substitute for the supervisory meetings with the individual students; rather, they complemented them. Hence, I organised fortnightly meetings. However, I only set up the framework (time, room, timetable, chairperson); the students suggested the actual topics in a brainstorming session at the beginning of the semester.

My role can best be described as that of a moderator or facilitator who ensured the member-negotiated meetings were conducted in an organised fashion. What I also found noteworthy over these three years was that the group meetings took place regardless of whether I (or any other group member) was able to attend a particular meeting. Once the timetable had been finalised, the group was able to meet autonomously, taking charge of their meetings.

From this first semester onwards, the group held weekly or fortnightly meetings, which were attended very regularly by the doctoral students that I was supervising and less regularly by the Masters students. The students developed such a strong sense of group identity that their chosen name for their group was an applied linguists 'club'. At the same time, the group welcomed guest members to the 'club', for example postgraduate students who did not study under my supervision, or visiting fellows, if they expressed an interest in joining the group.

## **Activities**

The idea of brainstorming topics for our sessions during the first meeting of the semester was implemented in all following semesters, which ensured that topics were always based on student needs. Below is a typical timetable (Table 1) identifying the topics discussed by the group over one semester.

**Table 1: Sample timetable for one semester**

Abbreviations used:

SV = Supervisor

PhDC = PhD Candidate

VF = Visiting Fellow

MC = Masters Candidate

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topics for discussion</i>	<i>Chairperson</i>
2 August	Discussion of topics/timetable for Semester 2, 2005	SV
9 August	PhDC1 presents conference paper (test-run)	PhDC2
16 August	SV presents paper (at another local institution)	—
23 August	MC1 presents conference paper (test-run)	PhDC3
30 August	PhDC4 presents conference paper (test-run)	PhDC5
6 September	PhDC3 talks about his PhD journey up to completion (including <i>viva</i> )	PhDC1
13 September	PhDC3 and SV present joint project (conference paper)	MC2
20 September	Discussion: How to organise the life of a researcher	SV
27 September	PhDC5 presents initial findings of research	PhDC4
4 October	PhDC2 presents initial findings of research	VF
11 October	MC2 presents initial findings of research	PhDC5
1 November	VF presents his research	PhDC2
8 November	PhDC4 presents initial findings of research	MC2
15 November	MC2 presents paper	PhDC4
6 December	PhDC2 presents literature review	SV

This example timetable shows the three major categories in which the sessions can be categorised: sharing research, sharing the research process, and sharing knowledge about practical matters:

- *Sharing research*: Each group member (this included, of course, the supervisor) presented his or her research. Naturally, the research projects were at very different stages in the research process: some of the group members had been working on them for two years, others only for four

months. Often, we used the sessions for a test-run of an upcoming conference paper presentation.

- *Sharing the research process*: We discussed a variety of topics, like what it is like to be a researcher or why it is important for (emerging) researchers to participate in conferences. The fact that some students were further ahead in their studies than others led to a deeper understanding of the different phases of the candidature. For example, in one semester, one student talked about his experience of the *viva* (oral examination) he had just been through as part of the examination process. His talk and the follow-up discussion were highly informative for his peers who were at an earlier stage of their respective PhD journey.
- *Sharing knowledge about practical matters*: The exchange of information regarding funding possibilities, useful websites, databases and so forth was an ongoing, integral part of the group meetings. Members exchanged information freely during the meetings and also outside this context. The group also met off campus from time to time, mostly for a meal, where such information could be communicated in a relaxed atmosphere.

## Data collection and analysis

### Informal self-evaluation

After the first semester of meeting as a peer group, we undertook an informal self-evaluation of our work by discussing the following three questions that I suggested:

1. What was good and effective about the peer group meetings?
2. What should be changed?
3. Should future meetings be convened?

During and after the discussion, I made notes of what I considered important key words in the discussion. It is these notes that form the source of the following brief analysis and self-reflection.

### Important key words

In answering the first question, *exchange* (*italics* indicate the frequent use and in-depth discussion of this term during the discussion) turned out to be one of the key words in this evaluation. The exchange of all kinds of information was considered to be very useful. Likewise, the possibility of gaining *insight into the PhD process* was highly appreciated. *Feedback* constituted another important key word. Group members appreciated receiving feedback on their own research, their paper presentation, their draft chapters and other material in a constructive way. Finally, members felt that they gained *moral support* in



what they considered a *friendly, supportive environment*. Those participants already considering an academic life after successful completion of their PhD viewed the meetings (and discussions) as an integral part of their own *research training*. They also slowly started seeing themselves as researchers and supervisors, that is, as full members of the academic community.

Questions 2 and 3 yielded only positive responses. Students definitely wished to continue meeting as a peer group, in addition to their individual supervision meeting. Students expressed the wish to meet at flexible times, which led to an increase of meetings. As can be seen from the above timetable (table 1), there were often weekly meetings, in particular during the teaching period.

Based on my membership in this peer group over three years (2004-2006), I would argue that working as such a group fostered collegial exchange, feedback, insight into the PhD process, moral support, as well as a supportive environment for all group members. Students considered the collaborative work part of their training as members of a research community. Working together as a peer group contributed to making the PhD journey a successful and enjoyable one for both students and supervisor.

### **Reflection on peer learning by supervisor**

I conclude this section with three reflections closely related to my argument that the peer group experience is a promising route to take and should indeed be an *integral part of the PhD experience*:

1. The interaction between the supervisor and supervisees, understood as a peer-to-peer relationship, plays an important role in the development of the supervisee and emphasises an equal power relationship. The collegial dimension is vital for a successful research student experience (Evans, 1999). A peer group can clearly support this desirable outcome.
2. The peer group supports both the supervisees and the supervisor in developing a deeper understanding of the PhD process, understood as a journey undertaken *together*.
3. The group experience helps to negate any sense of isolation. The importance for the doctoral candidate to join the research community, thereby countering isolation, seems crucial (Conrad, 2006). Belonging to a peer group can sustain the *motivation* to ensure a *successful and enjoyable* PhD experience. Undertaking research in an atmosphere of collaboration is also often simply more *fun* than studying on one's own.

## **Discussion**

In the following section, I discuss some of the implications, challenges and limitations that arise from this particular study for further practice, policy, and

research. It should be recalled that this paper is a description of supervisory practice and aims at informing and encouraging other supervisors to better integrate their students into a community of practice.

This study based on personal experience illustrates that peer learning can indeed be a “productive frame through which to view research education” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 501). The members of this particular peer group all emphasized that they learnt from and with each other in this peer group. The role of the supervisor would be to create this frame through a conducive framework and atmosphere. This does not have to be an onerous task, but it does mean extra work and effort for the supervisor. Universities might need to take this into consideration when it comes to workload matters. At the same time, supervisors might need support while developing new roles and “their repertoire of skills as educators and leaders” (Pearson & Brew, 2002, p. 143).

An important issue that needs indeed more investigation is how to foster a peer-like relationship in such a peer group given the fact that the supervisor-supervisee relationship is not symmetrical. I understand myself as the more experienced academic in this relationship, but still consider the students, professionals themselves, as my colleagues and peers. All of them possess a rich background: as academics at their home university, where they might be lecturers; as assistant lecturers or teaching fellows at the university; or as practising ESL (English as a second language) teachers. However, this understanding is not necessarily shared by PhD candidates, as clearly expressed by Rose in her story when she exclaims, “I can never think of [my supervisor] as a peer, ever” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 508). Such mismatches in understanding the supervisor-supervisee relationship might lead to tensions in the peer group and between its members. Issues of power as well as cultural and generational issues need further investigation, and supervisors would benefit from discussion and advice how to overcome or at least reduce the distance between their students and themselves, if they wish to adhere to the peer notion. Possibly, such research might also reveal some down sides of establishing peer groups and more equal relationships that might be perceived as too ‘close’ or too personal to allow, for instance, for critical feedback.

Another area for investigation would be an in-depth study of the student experience in such peer groups. This study, essentially a personal experience, has only scratched the surface; the informal evaluation can best be described as a first exploratory tool to develop an understanding of how students experienced their peer group learning. Again, depending on each student’s understanding of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, this might have had an influence on her or his evaluation of the process, especially since the supervisor was present and participated in the evaluation. The supervisee may feel intimidated by having the supervisor attend, thinking that what they present may impact on the outcome of their PhD. Hence, the nature and small

size of the sample, the informal data collection procedure, and the limited data are obvious limitations of this study that allows only for a preliminary view of the issue. More and more robust research into postgraduate peer learning is needed to gain a better understanding of possible benefits of peer learning in postgraduate education.

## **Conclusion**

This paper showed my personal experience as a new supervisor who addressed the challenge by fostering a more collaborative research culture among her PhD students through peer group work. In this study, I emphasized the implementation of peer learning into supervisory practice in doctoral education as desirable from an educational perspective and discussed the value of learning with and from each other through exchange, insight into the PhD process, feedback, moral support in a friendly, supportive environment, and research training.

The paper can serve as a starting point for action for supervisors who are looking for possibilities to integrate their students into learning communities. Furthermore, the study can help them move from the traditional one-on-one apprenticeship style of supervision towards a peer based supervision style. I would like to encourage other supervisors looking for ways to better integrate their students into a learning community where the potential of peer learning can be fully developed. This will, without any doubt, add to the tasks of the individual supervisor. However, from my perspective, it is a worthwhile and rewarding enterprise. Supervision can become a more pleasurable activity, students can enjoy their PhD journey a little bit more, and timely completion can become more of a reality. What is even more rewarding for me is to see when PhD students who were member of the above described peer group develop similar activities in their local context once they have become supervisors of postgraduate students themselves.

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