

## HDR Supervision 2: Reflection on Support of a Mature Aged Student with Diverse Needs

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### Abstract

*The Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoLT) should focus on evidence of student-centred learning, adjustment of teaching practice and responses to peer review feedback [1]. The aim of this paper is to reflect and report upon the experience of supervising a distance higher degree research student and colleague with diverse learning needs enrolled in a capstone unit of the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in 2013. The focus in this article is to share these case study findings and to seek and accommodate feedback from the global community. Effective communication processes and accommodation of diversity are important to consider carefully for supervisory practice based on integration of Scholarship of Learning and Teaching Models (SoLT) at the Australian Catholic University (ACU).*

### 1. Introduction

In this article a supervisor is defined as “a person with a vision who can see the wood for the trees...” who locates resources, fosters growth and progresses initiatives [1]. Supervision is explained as a process of establishing common goals through building positive relationships, transparent communication and acting upon reflective feedback [2], [3].

The aim of this paper is to reflect and report upon the experience of supervising an HDR (Higher Degree Research) student enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, UNHE503, Research-based Learning and Teaching capstone unit of study at the Australian Catholic University during 2013 [4].

The focus in this article will be on building and establishing;

- Strong relationships;
- Effective communication processes;
- Accommodation of diversity and an emerging, evolving plan for supervisory practice based on integration of Scholarship of Learning and Teaching Models (SoLT).

These issues emerge from an HDR supervisor’s experience, integrated into reflexive consultation and response to feedback. By being open to continuous

improvement, it is envisaged that one might illustrate how these important components of supervision can be adjusted to ensure inclusive practices enable success for both the supervisor and the student [5] [2].

### 2. Background

The Higher Degree Research Student (HDR) student was male, mature-aged and approximately 60 years old. In 2013 he worked in a technical area and managed a diverse range of health and cognitive issues, which meant that the supervisor had to ensure she built a solid supervisory relationship and followed the Australian Catholic University HDR Student Supervision Guidelines and other relevant policies [6].

As the HDR supervisor had worked with this student previously in a professional employment capacity, a positive, productive working relationship had been established prior to this experience. Before the candidature commenced, the HDR supervisor was aware that she needed to consider and monitor the health needs of her HDR student as well as determine the level of academic support required [7] [21]. Kirby stated that flexibility is important for the process to be successful, and this may mean that deadlines may need to be renegotiated [7], [21].

Both the HDR supervisor and student had agreed to work together as supervisor and student as part of the requirements to successfully complete their respective Graduate Certificate capstone units. The student was enrolled in UNHE503 and the HDR supervisor was enrolled in UNHE504 [4].

The supervisor and the student were nervous about the supervision project initially due to a number of reasons. Issues related to reassessment and reappraisal of past accomplishments and challenges adjusting goals, and concerns arising from the supervisor’s own supervision experience, needed to be resolved to progress their respective projects [12], [16]. Both supervisor and student identified needs to pass their respective capstone units, UNHE504 (HDR Supervision) and UNHE503 (Research based learning) and complete requirements for the Graduate Certificate in Higher

Education degree funded by the Australian Catholic University [4].

In addition, they wanted to learn something useful to progress their academic and professional careers respectively. Both supervisor and mature-aged student were going to be assessed by an academic colleague, who was lecturer-in-charge of these units of study, in their immediate work area. The unknown consequences 'if the learning experience did not go well' concerned the mature-aged student. He was worried about consequences for both parties if the HDR supervisor-student relationship suffered due to his forgetting things, not understanding what he misunderstand and if he were unable to use what he learned. Shulman used the terms '*amnesia, fantasia and inertia*' to describe these experiences when learning grinds to a halt [15]. Both the student and the supervisor were committed to complete a quality project demonstrating highly developed scholarship, successful collaboration and excellence in supervision and working through barriers together.

Despite his concerns the mature aged student with diverse needs agreed that the author of this paper would prepare and submit a journal article for publication on this supervision experience. He indicated in writing that he read and fully supported submission of the first article presented by the author (and HDR supervisor) at the LICE 2015 Conference [21]. He also supported submission of a subsequent extended article for publication in the International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education for the purposes of contributing to global knowledge. Both the supervisor and student were required to complete Ethics applications before the commencement of the HDR Supervision experience.

It was established at the beginning of the supervisory relationship that mentoring as well as academic supervision was important in achieving academic as well as personal goals [2]. The HDR supervisor and the student had reflected upon their own learning and how they see others being part of this process as they emerge and are resolved early [8]. In addition the supervisor developed a Learning and Supervision Plan in consultation with the student. Literature selected to support the experience and findings in this paper focuses on the need for a flexible approach to research supervision to enable success.

### 3. Literature Review

Contemporary literature that focuses on how to improve supervisory practice from the 1970s to the late 1990s and beyond, has moved away from the traditional 'supervisor and apprentice' model identified by Gurr [9] towards student-centred learning [10], [9], [2]. This does not mean that this supervisory method is redundant, or no longer

relevant, but rather that it may be incorporated and adjusted into an integrated approach to support the HDR student according to researchers' reflections on their PHD supervision experience [11], [2].

The supervision role incorporates managing, guiding as well as dynamic mentoring to facilitate learning that Kram's Model of Supervision, 1983 [12], recognized would occur while progressing through adult life stages and that Mansson, 2012 [13], identified as being crucial to retention and success rates. It is the journey into mentoring relationships that a HDR student has to negotiate, while acquiring skills, knowledge and the ability to apply what they learn through self-reflection that improves pedagogy and their learning [8]. Transparent relationships and trust are aspects of a successful partnership in learning (or future employment) and involve being aware of the cues in the operating environment and the ability to adjust support to meet those needs [1].

### 4. Effective Communication

Communication should be ongoing through the process of supervising higher degree research and should include trust, warmth and collaboration [14]. The perception of the supervisor by the student was shown in later studies to have been correlated with overall satisfaction [14]. It has been observed in the current supervision experience, that the frequency and involvement of the supervisor does recede, as the HDR student becomes more confident working independently on their research project.

Clear communication protocol guidelines detailing contact and expected response times with diverse students must be established early in the candidature, as these students may need to renegotiate goals, deadlines and output regularly with their supervisor, who should be able to demonstrate that they are open to using flexible learning and teaching styles [1].

In addition, the mode and method of communication can impact on how well the student demonstrated work focus, creative problem solving and engagement with their supervisor and express confidence in completing their tasks and demonstrate scholarship [1], [12]. Therefore it is important to provide opportunities for diverse students to select, where they are able, and adopt their preferred method of communication [20], [21].

Location of the student and the supervisor need not be a barrier to a successful supervision experience [20], [21]. As the HDR supervisor and the student were on different campuses at ACU they negotiated to communicate each fortnight (initiated by the student) via email or by Adobe Connect virtual conference room technology. By using the conferencing technology the partnership was able to share documents, show 'track changes' feedback on

written work. When the HDR supervisor expected to be working on the student's home campus in Strathfield, Sydney, she gave prior notice so that the student could meet with her face to face [20], [21].

This regular communication strategy meant that the student could be actively supported by the HDR supervisor by scaffolding challenging concepts and ideas usually at his request removing the risk of the student feeling overwhelmed or that he could not meet the outcomes [1], [20], [21]. Evaluation of this learning and teaching experience [21] and feedback from colleagues at the LICE 2015 Conference showed that while they commended us for using a SoLT model of practice to establish strong, clear communication protocol, mode of communication and accommodate the different locations, their international and domestic experiences were not always positive. Some people reported that they had communication challenges with supervisors due to antiquated 'Supervisor and apprentice' approaches to HDR student supervision [9].

## 5. SoLT (Scholarship of Learning and Teaching)

A SoLT model of professional practice consisted of the HDR supervisor building strong relationships, communication and achievement of outcomes through reflection and adjustment of her own professional practice, knowledge and research [3]. The HDR supervisor used reflective listening, reviewing and sought feedback after each session with the student [3], [21]. On occasions, oral communication was difficult for the student and comprehension of his needs by the HDR supervisor were challenging during the candidature

Sensitive and tactful suggestions by both parties for improvement were considered carefully and applied positively allowing both parties time to process challenges and strategies to resolve any issues in the learning and teaching relationship [15], [21]. This was possible due to the trust that had been built up before, during and after the process of supervision ended and was communicated through ongoing feedback to the supervisor and through evaluation.

When providing support for this mature-aged student with diverse learning needs it was important for the HDR supervisor to show and apply a willingness to review, plan and implement:

- learning and teaching methods, such as mentoring, for supervisor and student before and after supervision experiences so they are flexible and are able to be adapted easily to improve student success in units of study or courses and improve teaching practice [8];
- Integration of pedagogy with technology to improve teacher and student experience as well

as achievement of expected learning outcomes [3], [21];

- Communication of expectations and expected outcomes of the experience are scaffolded or modified in consultation with the student to meet academic standards and not 'dumbed down' [3], [21].

Both parties were open to the SoLT method used to complete the project, namely reconsidering how they integrated technological communication to enhance learning, teaching and scholarship

## 6. Developing a Supervision Style

Initially the supervisor had some reservations about the level of experience she needed to undertake her first HDR student supervision. It was evident that although both supervisor and student were unsure how to formally commence the supervisory process, there were support materials in the form of journal articles, books and ACU Policies and Procedures to guide them [16], [17]. By linking employability skills acquired by the student, it was considered that problem solving approaches would be able to be transferred to the learning environment. This would be evidenced in a student project to foster success in his HDR studies [18].

Trust had been built up between supervisor and student through professional practice, and the application of Mansson's *Redefinition Phase* of mentoring, when engaged in work-based projects. This process enabled open, direct communication about stakeholder goals that were easy to negotiate [13]. Initially the supervisor provided direction on how to develop a literature review, the student's project, and suggested some selected, short, scaffolded readings to encourage familiarity with the structure of the task as it was challenging for him to read large sections of support materials that were new to him.

The Supervisor-Student Collaborative Model of Supervision between the HDR supervisor and the mature-aged student was developed over the course of the candidature drawing on research by Gatfield, Halse & Malfroy, Lee, and Vilkinas, [5], [2], [15]. A summary of the Model is provided below and a diagram of the process of two way feedback, negotiation and collaboration is included on the next page:

- Directed/contract based
- Developing autonomy
- Collaboration Phase
- Revision, Completion & Examination Phase

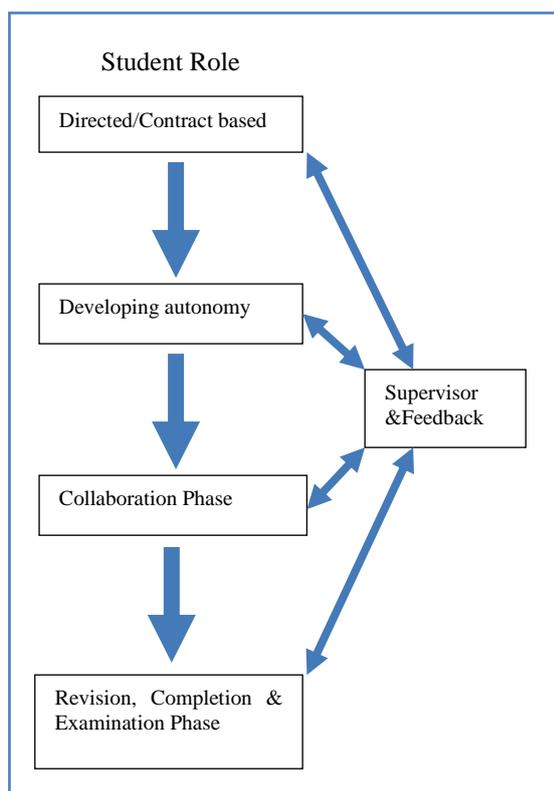


Figure 1: Fisher's Supervisor-Student Collaborative Model of HDR Supervision, 2016.

## 7. Challenges vs Opportunities that Emerged during Supervision

There were a number of challenges and opportunities that emerged during the supervision experience showing how important it was to reflect, renegotiate tasks and maintain open communication. Both the supervisor and the student worked full-time on different, state based campuses of Australian Catholic University. Therefore, their supervisory relationship was conducted via distance using a diverse range of technologies, such as Email, Teleconference, and Web conferencing as well as face to face on two occasions which, according to some research identified by Erichsen, 2012, is more conducive to the needs of mature aged students [20].

While this could have been a disadvantage [19] that impeded effective communication, according to Lee, it was successful because both parties, as stakeholders, committed to establishing transparent, open and concise communication. Their goals were 'interwoven' as the HDR student was required to produce a literature review, a challenge for the student until the supervisor provided some resources that may not have been known to him [7], [15]. The supervisor needed to document and report upon the supervision experience in the form of a journal article.

The supervisor relationship commenced with a brainstorming exercise to determine goals and

expectations conducted by listening to what the other person had to say and indicating understanding by reflective listening as well as renegotiating deadlines if he was feeling ill [7]. This worried the student and caused some anxiety so he demonstrated what Shulman, [15] termed *Fantasia* or the oral indication students vehemently understand what is required, when they don't. The supervisor recognised this behaviour quickly as she had experienced this in other supervision experiences [1]. It was an indication he wanted to achieve, but was frustrated by the process, so the supervisor used a chunking or scaffolding technique to support him that resulted in building blocks of achievement [5], [3]. An example was the suggestion to take a step back and focus on something of interest.

At the end of each discussion session the supervisor summarised the key items discussed, outcomes and due dates committed as well as providing resources orally and by follow up email so the student could return to it as he had some memory difficulties [7]. The student provided feedback in oral form as well as email so that the supervisor could continuously improve her support and professional practice as suggested by application of a SoLT Model identified by Trigwell & Shale, 2004 [3]. This was useful when the student had difficulty narrowing down his research question and scope.

## 8. Conclusion

The Student had diverse health and cognitive needs that required considerable personal support from the HDR supervisor in his project. Effective supervision practice was enabled through building strong relationships, employing a sound, simple SoLT approach together with mentoring and opportunities for 'scaffolded' academic work. Both the supervisor and the student experienced challenges in communication, negotiating mutual understandings and pressure of other priorities. Despite these issues, strong communication, mutual respect and responsiveness to feedback helped both parties overcome their barriers through hard work and a willingness to learn from hurdles along the journey.

Challenges that emerged while supervising the student were expected. He required significant direction, assignment and feedback on written work, as this was his first attempt at writing a research journal article. In addition if he was experiencing major health issues at a particular time, referral to references or frameworks and structural suggestions to enable him to manage cognitive requirements, were essential so he could gain confidence and pass milestones.

It is important for the supervisor to continue developing a statement of her supervision that could be easily adapted to support a diverse range of

Higher Degree Research Students through the application of SoLT approaches and strategies that emerge from further research in this Subject area. It was a useful learning journey for both the student and the HDR supervisor while studying a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education teaching unit. Feedback from the Global community about strategies for continuous improvement in HDR supervision commended our experience as it highlighted a common issue regarding inconsistent, poor supervision.

In addition, we were encouraged to continue to help build clear expectations, experiences and outcomes for both the student and the HDR supervisor, particularly in relation to supporting mature aged students with diverse learning needs.

The opportunity to engage in this supervision experience allowed both parties to negotiate how this approach can be adapted while considering workload pressures and other competing priorities [16]. By undertaking this supervision experience, engaging in teaching and reflective practice, the author used a Scholarship of Learning and teaching approach showing what she and the student had learned from professional practice and research activities [3]. However it resulted in an important aspect of managing the learning and teaching experience for both parties revealing insight into their own learning and how they transferred these experiences [1].

The author and mature-aged student recognised that while this was only a case study it was a valuable contribution to global knowledge in this area of research. More recent research would need to be conducted using data analysis of a large group of student-supervisor relationships selected across the university sector to further test the proposed model of SoLT applied to the supervisor-student relationship in the context of mature-aged students with diverse needs.

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