

How involved should doctoral supervisors be in the literature search and literature review writing?

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Doctoral supervision is a subtle but complex form of teaching in higher education, where supervisor-to-candidate expectations including support around the literature are important, but supervisory practices and candidate starting points can be disparate and expectations are not always discussed. This paper uses autoethnographic reflections and a practitioner inquiry to explore: How involved should supervisors be in the literature search and writing the literature review? This issue arose following the transition from a postgraduate candidate to an academic involved in supervising and teaching postgraduate candidates, co-facilitating supervisor development programmes and researching doctoral supervision. This paper proposes that the involvement of supervisors in the literature search or review could be classed as operating on a conceptual model: the 'sliding scale'. Readers are asked to consider the different tensions in this practice and invited to address them using the 'sliding scale' to encourage conversations with candidates in higher education supervision or teaching.

Keywords: doctoral supervision, doctoral education, expectations, literature review.

Introduction

Brown and Atkins (1988:115) argue that postgraduate supervision is the most complex but also the most subtle form of 'teaching' that lecturers and researchers working in higher education will engage in. Underpinning this supervision or teaching is the need to help postgraduate candidates develop research techniques and methods. There are differences of opinions as to whether supervision is classed as 'teaching' or has a specific 'pedagogy'; but supervisors are described as adopting different 'styles' or 'roles' in their approach (Deuchar, 2008; Taylor, 2017). There are disagreements around which 'styles' and 'roles' are appropriate, and which associated tasks should be undertaken by a supervisor or how these are enacted within each supervision meeting (Brown and Atkins, 1988; Everitt, 2022). The mismatches in roles, responsibilities and

expectations between supervisors and candidates can have an impact on candidate experiences and completion rates (Holbrook et al. 2004; Taylor et al. 2018;). What is not clear is how involved should a supervisor be within the literature search and writing the review, which this paper will explore.

This Point of Departure (PoD) arises from my experiences as a post-doctoral researcher, who has been supporting post-graduate candidates with the literature, initially based on my experiences as a postgraduate candidate. Then I attended Supervisor Development Programmes including the Communities of Practice for Doctoral Supervision (CoP) [Vaughan, Blackburn and Curzon, 2022]. The CoP is based on the work of Wenger (2000) and the idea that all supervisors regardless of experiences have a valid contribution to make by participating in guided conversations and then undertake a practitioner inquiry (see Anderson and Herr 1999). My practitioner inquiry was entitled: *'Understanding institutional processes and revealing them to the student – managing the student journey'*. In 2020 I became a co-facilitator of the CoP programme and to date have supported over 40 supervisors through the programme.

In early 2020, we acquired internal funding to explore my CoP practitioner inquiry further by investigating how the expectations are clarified between supervisors and candidates during doctoral studies (Everitt and Blackburn, 2020). The literature suggests that expectations include those which can be classed as ground rules (i.e., regularity of meetings) and others around the specific support the supervisor(s) will offer (e.g. literature search or writing the review). The research project found differences of opinion between supervisors as to what is or what is not their role, and

some supervisors were upfront with candidates about this, and other supervisors were not. Equally some candidates did not feel they wanted to have their expectations clarified whilst other would have liked to have had them clarified and some did not speak up due to power imbalances (Everitt and Blackburn, 2021).

Interaction with other supervisors and candidates resulted in questions about my inherited practice of supporting candidates with the literature and encouraged autoethnographic reflections. These reflections led to a further practitioner inquiry which was initially shared as a blog post and then used to host a 'Teams Chat' for an online 'Supervisor Development Reading Group' (Everitt, 2021). There was positive feedback from the blog and the chat session, so it was felt this would be a worthwhile POD.

This POD paper examines the main issue which is as *How involved should supervisors be in the literature search or writing the review?* This is explored through autoethnographic reflections and the practitioner inquiry. It advocates that the involvement of supervisors could be classed as operating on a 'sliding scale'. The paper asks readers to consider the tensions which are discussed and the suggestions of how to address them by drawing on the 'sliding scale' to have open conversations with candidates about the involvement with the literature, in higher education supervision or 'teaching' contexts.

Reflections as a postgraduate researcher

When I was a Postgraduate Researcher, the supervisors and academic staff on the programmes I undertook would share literature references on reading lists, in PowerPoint or individually via email, hand or social media. It was a positive practice

and responded to my enjoyment and engagement with the literature.

Despite this, there are some tension points that have arisen from my autoethnographic reflections. For instance, on the MA in Education, there was a recommended book, which many candidates purchased, but many later discussed that on review the relevance was not clear. It felt like it was a 'red herring' and that the relevance of it was missing.

There was another time a colleague shared an article with me indicating it would be useful for an approach to dealing with policy, but again I could not see this. Finally my supervisor handed an article to me and said something like *I am giving this to you, for when you need it*. I am not sure I have found a need for this as yet.

Tensions in supervisor practice

Overall, my supervisory experience was positive and my approach to the literature was what I will call 'inherited'. The literature highlights how newer supervisors will initially draw on their own experience of supervision, which can be positive or negative (Delamont, Parry and Atkinson, 1998). However, Churchill and Sanders (2011) warns that the supervisor to candidate relationship will be laden with expectations by both parties meaning it is important to consider the candidate's expectations.

Tensions in my inherited approach to supporting candidates with the literature arose when a co-facilitator on the CoP programme warned that candidates may not perceive the sharing of literature in a positive manner. Then a candidate who took part in my research project revealed that not all the literature shared from one supervisor was relevant to their topic area. These were both inter-disciplinary projects, and whilst I do

not supervise inter-disciplinary projects, I wanted to explore these tensions. Taylor, Kiley and Humphrey (2018) suggests that candidates may be reluctant to look beyond their own discipline boundaries, but wider reading is important. There is a danger of over-loading inter-disciplinary candidates with too much to read too soon and supervisor teams should agree a literature approach. Grossman and Crowther (2015) do question who will oversee information retrieval, but this does not indicate any direct involvement. This requires some further consideration.

I decided to undertake a practitioner inquiry to explore *How involved should supervisors be in the literature search and review?* The inquiry finds a ‘sliding scale’ of practice including *showing, buffering, instructing, suggesting* and *signposting*. These aspects are discussed in this POD and then brought together into a conceptual model with conclusions for practice.

Showing or instructing candidates how to undertake a review

The literature such as the supervisor handbook by Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2004) suggests that a supervisor will *show* candidates how to find, record, write and reference a literature review such as teaching how to cite and reference (iBid, 61) or how to search for research literature (Janiūnienė and Maceviciute’s 2016). Despite this, *showing* candidates how to do the review is very labour intensive, and so impacts on supervisor workload. Manathunga (2005) warned that many candidates were too proud to admit they did not understand how to undertake a literature review or were treated as incompetent. This could also suggest the fear of the power imbalance in speaking out about expectations with supervisors (Everitt and Blackburn, 2021). Candidates can also be prevented from speaking out due to cultural differences and perceptions of supervisors as authority figures (Eley and Jennings, 2005). This emphasises a potential

need for all supervisors to have conversations with candidates about supporting the literature search or writing the review. It is worth noting that supervisors *showing* candidates how to search and review the literature through appropriate research questions can have an influence on the research topic (Ali, 2019). Furthermore, who selects the topic selection can have fundamental impact on the course of the research and the literature to be searched, as noted earlier for interdisciplinary projects (Taylor, Kiley and Humphrey, 2018). There are survey tools or checklists which include questions such as who is responsible for selecting the topic, which supervisors and candidates can use to discuss this issue (see Brown and Atkins, 1988); but this would not necessarily assist with the support required with the literature search or review.

The other consideration about *showing* candidates how to undertake a literature search or write a review is that many supervisors are now working with an increased number of students and so innovations such as group *instructing* on the purposes of a literature review could be useful (Guerin, 2017). Many universities also have library staff who may assist with finding the available sources and services (Bell, 1999). Taylor, Kiley and Humphrey (2018) outlines how policy changes to the structures around doctoral provision have resulted in the advent of a curriculum, training components, modules and graduate schools creating institutional structures in addition to discipline and programmes contexts. It is important therefore for supervisors to be aware of what is on offer in their institution. This support beyond the supervisor is referred to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ in doctoral education by Elliot et al. (2020) which includes a range of formal and informal provision both within and beyond institutions.

Supervisors or candidates as a *buffer*

The literature suggests that to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed, because of new

technologies and facilities, the supervisor should act as a *buffer* in the early stages. In this *buffering* role the supervisor would help candidates to sift and sort through material to determine what is important to read and relevant in the first year (Hartley, 2020). *Buffering* could be labour intensive for the supervisor, so Kamler and Thompson's (2014) handbook for supporting doctoral writing, outlines strategies that supervisors can use to have conversations with candidates, so that candidates can apply the *buffering* themselves. This includes knowing what is in the field and the key sources, but also knowing some texts in detail and how the others they have not read, fit together with those they have read. Candidates can approach texts by scan reading them to determine if they are worth reading, rather than reading everything. A shortlist can be created, and then interpretative notes made, which then allow for synthesis across the notes (Kamler and Thomson, 2014; McMillian 2021). The use *buffering* strategies is a way of reducing the candidate's feelings of being overwhelmed and having to read everything that is located. It also means that candidates can then go back to their own notes or visual interpretations.

Suggesting or signposting candidates to literature

In their information sharing study, Janiūnienė and Maceviciute's (2016) highlighted that some supervisors paid special attention to *showing* candidates how to search the literature or write a review. However, the ease of searching due to technology meant that some candidates only needed individual authors or reading material *suggesting* or *signposting* to the general direction of relevant information sources. Although technology improves the ease of searching, candidates could feel overwhelmed by the volume and speed of the incoming information but asking a supervisor for suggestions could increase the amount to read. Zeviots (2021) warns how some undergraduate candidates are not engaging with reading lists due to new technology and the number of

available documents. As a result, there is a need to support candidates to appreciate the relevance of the texts, by being explicit about the rationale for the selection, when *suggesting* any literature. However, Hockey (1997) proposes that a supervisor will only suggest the general direction of the literature and will not provide a reading list. This *signposting* to literature could indicate a laissez-faire approach to supporting candidates with the literature, as Evans and Stevenson (2011) found that candidates' perceptions of 'good' quality supervision included supervisors who would *suggest* reading material individually or via a reading list. This highlights differences in practice, but it is important to consider candidate needs, despite the increase in technology.

Considering candidate starting points

My practitioner inquiry appears to suggest that candidates will require some support with the literature, regardless of the technology. I am concerned that this appears to operate on a deficit model that candidates will require this support – but on reflection this does depend on their starting point. The supervisor handbook by Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2004) suggests that doctoral candidates will not have become familiar with all the journals in an area or read theses as an undergraduate student. Today, nearly 20 years later, doctoral candidates emanate from vastly different starting points: they might be a mature learner, have already published articles or work at a university as a lecturer or a researcher. Remenyi and Money (2012) suggest that candidates with an undergraduate or masters's degree will be in an advantageous position if undertaking a doctorate in the same field but switching to a different field is common. This indicates that candidates may well require some support around the literature, regardless of previous experiences, but opening dialogue about this issue is important.

The ‘sliding scale’ of supporting candidates with the literature

The findings from the autoethnographic reflections and practitioner inquiry about a doctoral supervisor’s involvement in the literature search or review, suggest the support is positioned across a ‘sliding scale’ of practice. This ‘sliding scale’ is shown as a conceptual model in Figure 1 and then there are conclusions of what this means for practice:

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. The ‘sliding scale’ of supporting candidates with the literature search or review

This ‘sliding scale’ suggests uncertainty and/or variability in the role and responsibilities of both supervisors and candidates. Tensions may arise as an outcome of these variations, such as supervisors may be *suggesting* texts, but the relevance of these may not always be clear to candidates. There are also possibilities for candidates to feel overwhelmed due to improvement in searching through technologies and the need for *buffering* to sift and sort what is available. There may be a lack of knowledge around how to find literature or undertake a review, which may not be shared with supervisors, but equally supervisors may have a high workload which may not be shared with candidates. Supervisors can become involved in selecting the literature included in the review but there are possibilities of an unintended influence over the doctorate. Together this suggests that there is a need to create a space within supervision or teaching in higher education, where supervisors and candidates can have difficult

conversations about ability and confidence sensitively. It is important to assess each candidate's starting point and discuss what is needed using this 'sliding scale' conceptual model of support for the literature search or review.

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