**Cirque du Research Supervision: New research approaches for research supervisor professional development.**

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***Abstract***

How can we get research supervisors to reflect on their practice? The constantly changing agendas around Higher Education (HE) and specifically research degrees and candidature have generated a need for research supervisors to constantly re-evaluate their practice. Sometimes these agendas invite thinking outside the hegemony of both research supervision practices and research supervisor education/professional development practices. What other approaches could we take?

Amidst many models for research supervision are a plethora of metaphoric references. People see the research as the journey and the research supervisor as the guide; the research as the challenge and the supervisor as the coach or trainer. These different metaphors provide lenses through which to explore research supervision and by which to develop a range of intervention strategies to enable research students to complete. Our contention is that we can use metaphors in an explicit way to engage supervisors with reflecting on their practice

The rise in popularity of the performative paradigm inspires many different ways of thinking about research supervision. This workshop, inspired by conversations with Arts Design and Media academics, embraces performative research supervision from a Cirque du Soleil framework. Considering elements of research supervision as ‘circus’ acts creates an atmosphere of excitement and interest to advance this particular academic practice.

**Keywords:** Supervision

Metaphors

Performative Inquiry

Professional Development

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**Introduction - Setting the Scene**

Practice-led inquiry (Gray, 1996) addresses real problems arising out of lived experiences. This inquiry approach was appropriate for a collaborative inquiry driven by the practices of two university academics drawn from their individual experiences of facilitating research supervisor professional development. The problem we faced was encouraging research degree supervisors to engage in professional dialogues (Haigh, 2005; Pilkington, 2013) about supervision as an academic practice.

As discourse around doctoral completions has expanded, so too has the identified need for research supervisors to constantly reflect on their practice (eg. Johnston, 1995; Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004) and not just become licensed to supervise through one-off initial training. Universities around the world have initiated a variety of professional development approaches to ensure that, not only do research supervisors reflect on their practice, but they also have a constant agenda to improve. Our concern was how to engage both novice and experienced supervisors in reflective professional dialogues that would require them to think outside the hegemony of the ways they have been supervising that may have remained un-critiqued.

Metaphors and analogies are common in the discourses of research degrees and research degree supervision, both in the growing body of literature on supervision and in the daily academic practice of supervisors and students. Thus drawing on the use of metaphor and inspired by work in an Arts Design and Media faculty, the authors devised a workshop that embraces performative research supervision through a Cabaret and Circus genre associated with Cirque du Soleil. Different ‘circus’ acts provide catalysts for discussion about individual research supervision issues. Our aim was to challenge expectations of professional development programmes and to create an atmosphere of excitement and interest which would enable dialogues advancing this particular aspect of academic practice.

**The practice provenance**

In the context of practice-led inquiry (Gray, 1996), we hold to the view that every practice has provenance, as does each practitioner with regard to their engagement with a practice. Provenance in the context of this paper refers to how a practice is and can be perceived as an historic construction (Kemmis, 2010) that draws on both practitioners’ historic perspectives of their practice, and the general discourse related to a practice, often available in literature. For example, a practice such as surgery is informed by those who practice as surgeons as well as the history of surgery in medieval barbering (Himmelmann, 2007). This dual source of knowledge about practice generates two different interrelated forms of Provenance: general and personal

The notion of professional development for research supervisors has its own provenance that sits within the broader higher education discourses surrounding research and research supervision. The practice of research supervision has presumably been in existence as long as and parallel to research practices themselves, and was brought into academic practice with the shift of universities to become places of research (Noble, 1994). Despite this long provenance, discourse surrounding research supervision appears to have emerged relatively recently and grown quickly (Bastalich, 2017). There is now a growing worldwide discourse about research supervision that, whilst doctorate structures vary around the world, the discourse still conveys the common threads and threshold concepts of advancing research through mentoring emergent researchers (e.g. Lee 2012; Wisker 2012).

There have also been increasingly influential policy drivers in the changing doctoral landscape that have brought institutional and sector requirements for supervisor development. For example, in the UK where we are based, both the *Quality Code for Higher Education* (QAA 2013) and the Research Councils’ *Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training* (RCUK 2016) require that supervisors receive support and training in research degree supervision.

Within the higher education literature it is recognised that research supervision practice is a practice filled with rich traditions but is one that is also predominantly seen as a private or hidden practice (Manatunga, 2005; Amundsen and McAlpine, 2009). This has been fostered by what Kelly (2017) terms the dyadic inheritance of doctoral pedagogy. Since the mid1980s, there has been an explicit agenda in the literature to examine research supervision practices with a view to helping professionals become much more aware of the professional choices they make in undertaking research supervision. Early examples of this approach are evident in Phillips and Pugh (1987), Salmon (1992) and Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (1997) who sought to make transparent research supervision practices by publishing their own experience. Reflecting on one’s practice in Education, within which much of the research supervision discourse sits, aligns with Stenhouse’s (1981) notion of Practitioner Research.

Our challenge, and one that we are certain others will recognise, is that reluctance for supervisors to attend formal professional development is still common. This may be partly perhaps because academic positions are already busy without additional commitments for professional development and because they perceive this professional development as instrumental, bureaucracy-focussed and even unnecessary. Many research supervisors are happy to draw on their (unquestioned) experiences of being supervised, some of which are based on their own doctoral research experiences from bygone eras and which would be practically unrecognisable to today’s research students.

**Research Supervision and Performative Inquiry**

In the same expanse of time over which research supervision professional development has been evolving, there has also been a rise in popularity and mention of performative research. Haseman (2006) posited a performative (inquiry) paradigm that was positioned along with quantitative and qualitative forms of research. Peterson and Langellier (2006) positioned performative inquiry as an extension or development in narrative inquiry, citing the emergence of telling stories using various performative devices. Our own inquiry positioning aligns with both stances in that we hold to the notion of performative inquiry as a form of practice-led inquiry and we also see that inquiry dissemination involves sharing the stories of our professional colleagues by drawing attention to their experiences through narrative inquiry. From performative inquiry it was short step to thinking of professional development for research degree supervisors through the deployment of metaphors.

**Metaphors and Research Supervision**

Metaphors and analogies abound in the literature as a tool for explaining the processes and challenges in this complex academic practice (McCulloch, 2013; Lee and Green, 2009). People see the research as the journey and the research supervisor as the guide (Benmore, 2016); the research as the challenge and the supervisor as the coach or trainer (Pearson and Kayrooz, 2004)

Lee and Green (2009) noted that idiosyncratic figures such as midwives, cooks, gardeners and mountaineers dominated the supervision literature, with the metaphoric landscape populated by “bridges, chasms, mountains and archways, and traversed by a plenitude of journeys, punctuated by juggling and balancing, marked by rites and rituals, and filled with darkness and light” (2009, 617). Marital metaphors are commonly employed in discussions of supervisory styles and relationships (Bastalich 2017, 1147) and metaphors abound in what Kelly (2017) has described as the cultural imaginary of the PhD, that is in how doctoral research, students and supervisors are imagined and depicted in film, literature and other spaces outside the academy. A frequent example is research as crime detection, and the researchers, supervisors and students, as detectives (Gough 2010, Kelly 2017). In the growing online spaces for supervisor and student peer-support, poetic and often humorous metaphors are used to highlight the emotional and affective dimensions of research degrees, for example The Valley of Shit and The Swamp of Sadness on Inger Mewburn’s *Thesis Whisperer* blog (Mewburn 2012, Trot 2016).

It has to be recognised that as well as identifying metaphors and thus naming commonalities of experience, there is growing critical analysis of metaphors used in discourses around doctoral supervision. For example the journey metaphor in particular has been subject to criticism as individualistic and heroic (Hughes and Tight 2013, McKnight 2017, Thompson 2015). Indeed it is through such critique that the explicit articulation and interrogation of metaphors can help to illuminate this still predominantly private academic practice.

**Practitioner’s provenance**

We align with the practice-led inquiry view that a practitioner’s ‘personal history illuminates the way in which the practice has evolved for a specific practitioner’ (Hill and Lloyd, 2015, 3). Both practitioners have histories as academics supervising doctoral candidates, in supporting supervisor development and have active research interests and publish in the field of doctoral education. Both have a common agenda of stimulating conversations at their university about research supervision. Our provenance for this workshop is significant in that in addition to demonstrating the foundations for our professional development practice, it also fuels the maxim that no experience is wasted. Our chance past encounters with what we describe as ‘circus skills’ have migrated into our common agenda for stimulating conversations about research supervision at the university at which we work.

Geof Hill’s doctoral inquiry focussed on higher degree by research practices, including research supervision (Hill, 2002). His subsequent post-doctoral appointment at Queensland University of Technology (Australia) strengthened a research specialisation in research supervision. At that university, professional development for research supervision was delivered within the context of a post graduate certificate in Teaching and Learning. During his appointment at Queensland University of Technology, research supervision professional development was shifted to an on-line professional development course which he moderated and this later developed into face-to-face and on-line communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) for research supervisors. In this professional development delivery context, Geof initiated a blog to support research supervisors - *The Research Supervisor’s Friend* (Hill, 2011). The unplanned circus experiences within his provenance were drawn from his earlier years teaching gross-motor developmental skills in a School of Early Childhood which provided secondments to Gymnastics schools in Denmark and Sweden. These experiences exposed him to the scaffolding for many gymnastics feats and in particular static balancing. He also performs his research as cabaret (Hill, 2015).

Sian Vaughan has twenty years’ of experience of teaching in Higher Education, having trained as a historian yet predominantly working within an Art School surrounded by creative practitioners. She is research degrees Coordinator for the PhD program in Art and Design, a cross-disciplinary and increasingly interdisciplinary program that encompasses everything from Fine Art and design practices, to performance and philosophy and even marketing, data-modelling and cross-innovation. She leads a supervisor development program for her faculty of Arts, Design and Media. She has a strong interest in academic professional development and is a mentor and assessor for the University’s Higher Education Academy (HEA) accreditation scheme, championing the use of dialogic assessment. As a bored undergraduate, she also taught herself to juggle during one Christmas vacation.

**The setting provenance**

The university at which we work has its own provenance, one that perhaps makes it particularly suited to our experimental and performative approach to supervisor professional development. Like many former polytechnics in the UK, Birmingham City University emerged from an amalgamation of several colleges with a focus on professional and vocational education. When is became a university in 1992 it began to develop a more explicit research agenda, although doctoral education had existed in some subject areas since the early 1980s. It now has a fast growing post-graduate research (PGR) community that has effectively more than doubled within the last five years, and therefore there are growing numbers of staff engaging in research degree supervision.

In 2015, the University Research Committee reviewed its supervision training provision, identifying the need for professional development opportunities that went beyond the existing workshops to discuss the University’s regulations and procedures for doctoral degrees. The committee agreed on a new professional development model that started with the policy framework supporting and guiding research practices, and then extended and continued with discussions about research supervision based on a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The aim was to bring together groups of academic professionals to talk about a common practice and through this dialogue, advance each individual’s own understanding and practice. The authors were tasked with devising a professional development programme that generated richer conversations around research supervision. We successfully obtained national accreditation from SEDA (the Staff and Educational Development Association) for our Community of Practice around Research Supervision (CoPRS) programme which uses conversations to scaffold and extend individual practitioner inquiries (BCU 2017; SEDA *n.d.*).

In the authors’ experience of facilitating this programme, metaphors are particularly evident when our research supervisors are asked to talk about their practice. From our data drawn from these conversations we encountered a rich seam of metaphors that has encompassed gardening and journeys, as well as running, dancing even water-skiing. Particularly within the faculty of Arts, Design and Media with its mix of creative disciplines we have heard supervisors make explicit reference to circus related activities such as supervision as a juggling act, or a three ringed circus, or a tightrope walk. We even have a supervisor and student who co-delivered a research paper as a magic act in which the supervisor used blades to cut his student into three pieces before reassembling her (Cheeseman and Williams 2014). These conversational comments have great resonance with some of the metaphors in the literature on supervision, particularly Lee and Green’s (2009, 617) reference to “juggling and balancing”.

Our participants have also requested more opportunities to continue such professional dialogues around supervision beyond the SEDA accredited programme. Thus in our university we faced two challenges. Firstly extending the professional dialogues for those who had engaged with the existing opportunities, whilst also finding a mechanism to engage supervisors who were resisting or simply ignoring the professional development programme.

**A Circus Workshop format**

Inspired by working in a Faculty which embraces a mix of performative, practice-led and traditional modes of research, our stepping out of the expected was by drawing on the metaphors used in discussing research supervision to posit a *Cirque du Soleil* style lens to considering research supervision through a participatory Cirque du Research Supervision cabaret-style workshop format.

It is worthwhile here commenting on why it is the *Cirque du Soleil* conception of circus in particular that we have adopted as the provenance for this format. *Cirque du Soleil* is a Canadian based theatrical production company, originally founded in 1984 by two street performers (Babinsky, 2004). *Cirque du Soleil* produce character-driven contemporary circus shows based on human performers (there are no animal acts). Each show has a narrative and the performers are also stage-hands. It is thus a collaborative spectacle, taking its audiences on a journey: “stretching the imagination [of its audience] further than it has gone or indeed may want to go toward an unknown, unexpected, dangerous and exciting limit” (Barker, 1992, 235). It thus can act as a metaphor itself for the research degree process – by the association of high level skills leading to performance, a collaborative journey (in which student and supervisor both perform and support), with a narrative or purpose (the research question) that challenges limits (making a contribution to knowledge).

In our workshop format, we embrace performative research supervision from this different perspective of the circus genre, which we introduce and thus position as explicitly associated with *Cirque du Soleil*. In explaining its provenance and link with *Cirque du Soleil* as part of the introduction, we are already leading our participants into a metaphorical way of thinking about supervision. Our Cirque du Research Supervision is purposefully a participatory workshop. Different ‘circus’ acts provide catalysts for discussion about individual research supervision issues. Each act is introduced and demonstrates a circus skill which participants are then invited to try out themselves. Our aim is to break down barriers between supervisors from different disciplinary backgrounds and with different levels of supervisory experience by encouraging everyone to participate. Whilst some may be nervous of performing in this way, the reality is that in a room full of activity there is in fact no audience; so participants’ self-conscious awareness and anxiety of performing soon lessens. In the activities there is of course active learning (Knowles, 2011 [1973]) of circus skills, but more importantly for our intentions is that in getting research degree supervisors to do the unexpected, we can challenge their expectations of professional development sessions. The participatory activities are intended to be fun but challenging. We also ask supervisors to discuss how the activity might be a metaphor for supervision whilst trying out the physical skill. Each circus act then ends with a group discussion of the metaphor, sharing personal experiences to illuminate and, importantly to critique the particular metaphor for supervision. We aim to thus create an atmosphere of excitement and interest in discussing and advancing this particular aspect of academic practice.

**The Juggler**

The first of our circus acts is the juggler. As Sian taught herself to juggle whilst an undergraduate she demonstrates juggling and explains the waterfall method of juggling three balls. Supervisors are then invited to take some beanbags and try it out themselves whilst pondering why a supervisor is a juggler.

Facilitated discussion then explores what does the metaphor of juggling have to do with research supervision? This can be taken in any number of directions, which in itself illustrates the complexity of research supervision as an academic practice. Juggling can be impressive, and when it works it looks effortless. This gives us the opportunity to raise a common fear that has been voiced by supervisors in our community of practice (CoPRS) programme, the perceived danger that if in reflecting on supervision as an academic practice you think too deeply about it, you overthink it and that can be counterproductive. We feel it is important to acknowledge some supervisors’ reluctance to reflect on their practice, and talking about juggling can provide a space in which to do this.

In fact Sian’s juggling skills are limited, and she tends to demonstrate dropping as much as juggling. This in itself can be an important tool in relation to professional development; it demonstrates her willingness to reveal her limitations and models the importance of acknowledging our weaknesses as well as our strengths as supervisors and academics. It can also prompt a discussion about how research students’ may perceive us as supervisors, do they expect us to be perfect and have all the answers? Might there be pedagogic benefits in sharing our own experiences of struggles in the academy, even our failures with our students? This can also be discursive space in which to discuss students and their different cultural backgrounds which may affect how prepared students are to accept their supervisors as flawed, as peers rather than as idols. It can also be an opening to discuss what might go wrong in research degree supervision, what might dropping the ball represent.

Using the metaphor of the supervisor as juggler brings to light the different roles of the supervisor. What is it that we are juggling at any one time? This might be the different elements of the supervisory role – the pastoral, the intellectual and critical, and the professional mentor. We might be juggling different research students with very different projects, at different stages and with different needs. We are almost certainly juggling research supervision with other demands on us as academics, whether that is teaching, administration or our own research activities. In the metric-driven and competitive environment that is the modern university, it can often feel as if you are chasing about and juggling different commitments to make time for research degree supervision, which is not always recognised and prioritised as an academic practice. Taking the metaphor in this direction can lead to interesting discussions around the choices available to supervisors. How do you select the things that you will juggle? Sian admits that she can juggle three things, but has never succeeded with four. This can be extrapolated to a discussion of knowing your own limits, whether these are in terms of expertise or simply time management. Inevitably some students are easier to supervise than others, how do supervisor make those judgements about which students to take on? In learning to juggle Sian advises participants to start with beanbags, as they do not roll away from you when you drop them, and practice when standing in front of a wall as that provides a natural boundary to contain your juggling. In our supervisory practice, what tricks and techniques can we share and teach each other to make research degree supervision easier?

**The Acrobat**

In our next act, Geof as ‘acrobat’ models static balancing. The static balance, like certain core research skills, sits at the heart of many gymnastics ‘acts’. In an earlier moment in his academic career, Geof taught gross-motor development skills in early years’ education and this involved rudimentary gymnastics exercises such as static balance. With a ‘planted’ volunteer from the audience he demonstrated some of the static balancing poses before encouraging members of the audience to experiment themselves. Thus moving from an individual activity (juggling) to a collaborative act, our supervisors are encouraged to pair up and test the ways in which two bodies could be ‘balanced’ whilst discussing what does the metaphor of the acrobat and balancing in particular have to do with research supervision?

Such an exercise makes practical or tactile the notion of a ‘delicate balance’ noted by Bastalich (2017, 1147) citing Delamont, Parry, and Atkinson (1998). As their description emphasises, the differences between control and non-intervention can be explored at a tactile or experiential level as our participants discover that when one of the pair is supported, the other can take more risks in terms of stretching themselves within the balancing act. The tactile feeling of supporting another translates effectively to the ways in which a supervisor can support a research student as they experiment with and explore various alternative methodologies. In a facilitated group, the physical act of balancing prompts discussion of issues of power dynamics and control. It serves as a clear demonstration that mutual effort (supporting one another) leads to mutual benefit (not falling over). It surfaces issues of trust and team dynamics. The metaphor can be expanded to discuss contrasting student centred and supervisor centred approaches to supervision. Whilst our acrobatic act involves pairing participants, in discussion we can explore whom each side of the balance might be and explore issues of team or co-supervision. Is the balance between supervisor and student, co-supervisor and co-supervisor? What are the implications of attempting triadic or even quadratic balances? What else might need to be balanced in research degree supervision? Could it also be roles, methods, disciplines? As with our juggler, the metaphor of the acrobat is a fertile territory that can open up multiple perspectives on doctoral supervision as an academic practice.

**Other Circus Acts**

The two modelled ‘circus acts’ lay the ground work for a third for which we had a video example. We show a Youtube clip of supervisor David Cheeseman and fine art practice-led research student Grace Williams performing their joint conference paper “Vanishing in Plain Slight” (2014) in which the supervisor uses a magician’s cabinet to slice his student into three pieces whilst she narrates her research paper. Whilst we do not give our participants the opportunity to physically slice one another into pieces, we do facilitate a group discussion around what the performance might reveal about doctoral supervision. How might thinking of a supervisor as a magician be beneficial or otherwise for understanding the academic practice of research supervision?

The particular illusion of slicing an assistant in pieces can be read as a metaphor for intellectual critique – dissecting a student’s argument and helping them put it back together again. To trouble the metaphor, it shows the supervisor as having the power in the relationship and the potential to leave the student in pieces, intellectually and emotionally. The broader metaphor of supervisor as magician can suggest hidden skills, and sleight of hand. Both in that the research student might not realise what you are doing at the time as only in later in their research do they understand the significance of and rationale for your advice, but also in that there is the possibility that the student may be manipulated and tricked by their supervisor. This can open up discussion of ownership of the doctoral research project. More broadly again, magic and the magician can be explored as a metaphor for the academy itself. If being an academic is akin to belonging to the magic circle, a supervisor can help the student join the academy/circle and literally learn the tricks of the trade.

Having used video of the magic trick to open up a group discussion, the next stage in our workshop format is to jointly produce a list of other circus acts that could similarly be interrogated as metaphors to provide alternative lenses on research degree supervision. For example, at the conference, the following arose:

* Tightrope walker
* Clown
* Lion tamer
* Trapeze
* Ring master
* Wall of death
* Strongperson
* Fortune teller
* Knife-thrower
* Human cannon ball
* Fire-eater
* Freak show

This discussion of these other acts as metaphors can be expanded as time permits. At the conference demonstration workshop, the clown and strong person metaphors were unpicked to a degree. The clown can be used to open discussion of the emotional aspects of supervision in both responding to a student’s emotions and the need at times to wear a mask whether to maintain relationship boundaries or to facilitate the student’s ownership of their project. Talking of clowns can also surface imposter syndrome, not wishing to be the subject of ridicule, and also of the need to perform (to put on a costume). Discussion of the strongperson as a metaphor brought to light the gender presumptions and prejudices still embedded in the academy, as the first suggestion was strong*man*. Exploring our gendered expectation of circus acts can become a lens through which to discuss how gender and equality and normative values more widely might affect research degree supervision and student experience.

Our workshop format closes with a brief review of why we adopted the circus metaphor for professional development, and a suggestion that other metaphors might similarly be expanded and interrogated as catalysts for professional dialogues about the academic practice of research supervision.

**Conclusions**

Any professional development innovation needs review, and having presented this workshop our conclusion was that it had achieved several of the aims that we had identified in initially proposing the workshop for this conference. Most importantly, the observations of engagement with the topic of research supervision reinforced for us the potential for such an approach to stimulate conversations around research supervision.

Whilst supervisors draw on both their own student experience of supervision, and their growing repertoire of supervising others’ doctoral projects as time passes, as Halse and Malfroy (2010) have shown, there is an increasing need to articulate and clearly define the work of supervising research degree students. Our Cirque du Research Supervision provides an alternative model of how to stimulate the articulation and discussion of research supervision as an academic practice.

The atmosphere created by our supervisors’ willingness both to try out the physical activities, and to then use these as a jumping off point for exploring and discussing research supervision through the lens of that circus act as a metaphor created an atmosphere of engagement, lively conversations and excitement. The seemingly playful approach appeared to free up conversations and encourage participation and reflection. The conversations we observed were rich and the unpicking of the metaphors was nuanced and sophisticated rather than superficial. It is our impression that participating supervisors had both a memorable experience and were challenged to rethink their supervisory practice.

The broader metaphor of the circus itself, and not just the individual acts, may be useful here. The circus is an alternative space, generally understood as an exciting and stimulating space of spectacle that wows and challenges its audience whilst ultimately remaining a safe and contained space. In encouraging supervisors to be both audience and circus performers, our workshop format highlights the performative nature of the academic practice and the need to adopt different supervisory styles (Lee, 2012). Just as circus skills need to be learnt and practiced, so too does supervision need to be learnt, it is an academic practice that we need to practise. A circus show is the combination of different acts and different skills, similarly supervision needs a variety of skills, a toolkit as it were of approaches, techniques and strategies. It is also important as a supervisor to recognise when you need another performer, a specialist input from another professional. The explicit referencing of *cirque du soleil* as a model with its emphasis on an overall narrative acts as a framework in which to position supervision as simultaneously a series of discrete acts and an overall narrative tailored to the individual research student.

The new challenges for us going forward are to mount the full-scale event as a university wide event in full performative mode. There is also the wider academic challenge within the discourse to discover ways to refresh thinking about this element of academic practice that is often taken for granted. We have demonstrated that the circus metaphor can be productive when embraced in the spirit of performative inquiry. What other metaphors might be similarly explored and deployed to facilitate the professional development of research degree supervisors and supervision as an academic practice?

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