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Research Degree Supervision and Examination

Reflective Essay

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Reflection: PhD Supervision

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Potential PhD supervisors are called to reflect on their own experience, and how will impact on what they'll do (Fry et al, 2009, p173) In undertaking reflective practice, academic practitioners are “encouraged to continuously evaluate the impact of their own pedagogical approaches and choices on their learners” (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, p3), as “the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice.” (Brookfield, p1)

Prior experience of reflective practice in relation to teaching (Lewis, 2011), has not drawn upon the work of Boud, as specified in this assignment. Boud claims that ‘[r]eflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull over & evaluate it. It is this working with experience that is important in learning’ (1985, p 43). Reflection doesn't necessarily give the answers, but supports the creating of critical questions about work and life (Bolton, 2014, p1).

Reflection within professional practice is described by Schön (1987) as a flat place from which we can't see very far, rather than up where we can get a clear overview, and therefore we have to use trial and error in our practice. We do have compasses in the form of the values that inform our everyday practice with little thought. Reflective practice helps us interrogate those assumptions, and accept the uncertainties that are inherent within postgraduate research practice. (Bolton, 2014, pp-3-5)

Kolb's (1984) circle of reflection (Appendix 1), involves experience, reflective observation, conceptualization of learning, and then returning to experience. Boud et al. (1985) developed this further, integrating recognition of the role of prior experience, and identification of internal processors such as intent and willing as contributing to the learning experience. (Moon 2004, p116) The reflective practitioner returns to the experience and records it, before considering it in detail at an emotional and cognitive level. They then re-evaluate the event in the light of experience, new knowledge & experimentation, seeking to understand the meaning of the experience, before planning for what might change in future (Manthorpe & Baginsky, 2015). Finlay has an issue with Boud's model that “it tends to confine reflection to a retrospective role: reflection-on-action rather reflection-in-action,” as well as restricting discussion to individuals, rather than the wider social arena. On the whole, however, the model is widely supported and it is used well to give “students external validation and positive feedback about their reflections.” (2008, p9)

Session 1

In this session, we focused particularly upon LO1: “Identify and critically evaluate the external influences and drivers, which shape the context of research degrees supervision”

Opening introductions intended to provide brief background to our academic experience as a whole, quickly devolved into a discussion around our own PhD experiences, largely of being supervised, although some had supervision experience to offer. Teaching on the PGCLTHE at Winchester, and on MediaLit at Durham (Lewis, 2013), identified that all students, particularly mature students,

bring pre-existing knowledge that shapes their perceptions and experience. The conversation highlighted a surprisingly wide range of assumptions about the presumed purpose for a PhD. Appendix 2 outlines how we were challenged to think about changes over the past few years, from political to economic, as well as the different purposes and motivations of those involved, requiring an understanding of a wider range of experience than just our own. The PhD is a risky exercise for all involved as there's no set path, and there's no "known ways of getting supervision right" (Peelo, 2011, p2).

Regulatory frameworks change frequently, led by governmental policy. In the Nurse Review (2014), research councils explored how they could support research effectively, to ensure that public money is invested in the 'best' possible way, an idea not unchallenged by Wilsdon (2016). In July 2016 the most recent was published: the Stern review of the REF, affecting doctoral students because of its sense of what defines academic outputs. Previous policies led to the development of UKGrad in 2008, now Vitae, resourcing researcher development, and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), held bi-annually since 2009 to understand the collective (not institutional) experience of students. The QAA (in existence since 1997) updated *The UK Quality Code for Higher Education* in 2015, outlining responsibilities for postgraduate supervisors, largely influenced by business practices in its measures of success.

As the context has changed, institutions and those within it have to adapt, and governments bring constant change. Bolton notes that reflective practice can help us manage whilst working in such conditions of uncertainty (2014, p1). Eley & Jennings (2005) note that there are bigger numbers undertaking PhDs, more inexperienced supervisors, with Wolff (2015) noting that in 2010 in the sciences, only seven out of two-hundred could expect to gain a permanent academic role, so the expected 'career path' is not necessarily academe. Grove (2016) notes that an increasing number of retirees offer particularly challenging power dynamics, although such students have a lot of positive experience in workload management. Some students are making big sacrifices to join a PhD programme, with part-time students needing to juggle their workloads more than full-timers, as well as less access to 'research culture' (Peelo, 2011, p27)

The PhD is clearly not free from external constraints. In the past, many would have seen a PhD as undertaking a form of apprenticeship, in which the master ensures entry into the guild (some still do). Increasing numbers have led to a more administrative and process-oriented approach being taken as universities seek to minimize risk, and achieve strong completion rates, (Peelo, 2011, p11) to retain funding. McCulloch et al (2016), note the growing professionalism of PhD supervision, through courses such as this one, because the quality of supervision received is believed to affect student experience and outcome so profoundly, and taking time to identify excellence makes completion more likely. The potential for litigation has also grown, which illustrates the importance of proper monitoring procedures, adequate feedback mechanisms, and strict compliance with Codes of Practice (Fry et al, 2009, p179).

Notions of success are implicated by external factors, with pressure from Research Councils and the QAA, the key driver appears to be completion within four years. A commentator on Brabazon's 2013 article wondered why people could not complete most projects within six to twelve months. This raises the question of what constitutes 'doctoralness', much of which seems to be implicit, although professionalization is leading to pressure for more explicitness. The pressure for 'originality' can often be tied to a functionalist purpose, when for many, it is simply for their own personal development. Policy-makers are obsessed with STEM, and appear to base most ideas of 'timely completion' upon science PhDs. The number of students a supervisor should have at any one time (MMU policy indicates three) is often based upon science PhDs, where groups provide economies of scale (Grant, 2006, p99). In what is probably a gross oversimplification, science PhDs seem to focus upon finding the 'right' questions, whereas humanities PhDs are less clear cut, and more difficult to complete within the timeframe. As research councils have withheld funds from those with 'poor completion' rates, disappointingly, space for playfulness and risk in avenues in research has closed down (Peelo, 2011, p19).

Session 2

In this session we focused particularly upon LO2: "Examine the role of the supervisor within the research degree process and identify good practice in research degree supervision"

Recapping upon the previous week offered a good way into discussion the role of supervisor/supervisee, as this is very much impacted by how the environment has changed. Grant indicates that the key role of a PhD supervisor is as a motivator in the face of inevitable setbacks: "To some extent, achieving a PhD is as much as reward for persistence as it is for intellectual talent," maintaining professional conduct in the face of all difficulties, including boredom (2006, p105). We were challenged as to how far that responsibility goes. Fry et al offers statements of responsibility, and suggests that supervisors discuss this at an early stage with new students, and particularly that it is good practice that students keep records of PhD supervisions (2009, p174), as is the guidance within MMU.

The most common reasons why people become supervisors include research interest, and as a rite of passage in academic progression. Grant warns new supervisors that there is a wide range of motivations for PhD students, and not all may be as motivated as those who end up in academia (2006, p97). Maxwell & Symth (2011) have questioned whether the term 'supervision' is overloaded with power. Is it an 'overseeing process', does the supervisor 'know more', particularly towards the end of PhD? Phil Edwards comment on Moodle, from Eley & Jennings (2005), indicates that "the ultimate aim should be to see the power imbalance reduce and level out as the student moves gradually from the position of apprentice to one of colleague."

We spent a lot of time discussing what kind of relationship is appropriate, and there were multiple examples of where this had gone bad in our own experiences, but accompanied by the lessons we were determined to take into

our own practice. Rapoport et al (1989), quoted in Peelo (2001, p21), noted that making difficult judgements becomes easier with great experience, and relationships that are overfriendly can cause in the timely identification of problems, exacerbated if supervising colleagues. Supervisors often have to manage being a critic as well as encourager of confidence and growth. The group agreed that good interpersonal skills were key in successful supervisor relationships, with coaching skills (Lewis, 2010) such as questioning, active listening and responding also valuable. As at other levels, PRES has noted that students attach importance to prompt and high-quality feedback.

Many authors have sought to identify what the supervisory role looks like (Bruce & Stoodley, 2011, came up with nine options, as did Chamberlain (2016), Gatfield (2005) came up with four). Bartlett & Mercer (2001) indicate that the most readily identified roles include confidante, source of intellectual inspiration, resource manager, grant application writer, navigator of institutional tangles, manager of change, personal motivator, writing teacher, editor, career mentor, and networker (quoted in Peelo, 2011, p21). Grant emphasizes that the role of the supervisor is to push the student towards completion, identifying whether there is a clear thesis, whether sufficient use is made of primary evidence, if theory and structure are well developed, whether peripheral information is discarded, appropriate methodologies used, aiding with spelling, grammar, bibliography, deadlines & time management, according to need (2006, p101), which can all sound rather overwhelming, but can be negotiated within contractual boundaries.

Within the session we discussed potential metaphors (see Appendix 3). It was a useful exercise to see the different ways people think about supervision, perceptions and expectations. This would be worth using in a discussion with new students, whether that be in a formal supervision meeting, or down the pub afterwards! Armitage (2008) noted that without exception, all respondents said that the initial meeting was an important aspect of the dissertation process. Both supervisors and supervisees could set boundaries in order form an 'adult' one-to-one working relationship with their students, and that those that missed this crucial step were likely to run into trouble.

Manathunga, in investigating key signs to look out for that might lead to lack of completion, emphasised the need for a good relationship, with regular supervision meetings, emphasising a pedagogical approach in which no question is too stupid, optional scaffolding with regular achievable tasks for the first six-months, helping with personal and professional development, including building confidence, and providing an 'in' to research culture and research networks (2005, p224). Brabazon (2013) identified ways of managing negative experiences of supervision, although the large number of comments indicates her advice was not met with universal approval. Wisker (2014) gave helpful insights into what to do if the relationship with a PhD supervisor not working well, including lack of supervision or interest, unrealistic demands and harsh feedback, or not being introduced to the research community. The importance of institutional processes in managing such difficulties was highlighted as key, as was the need to change supervisors if necessary.

Seibold fears that we focus too much upon potential problems, and we forget the joys that come with supervision. (2007, p39). Hockey highlighted that a good student evidences 'intelligence, independence, initiative, enthusiasm, creativity, perseverance, and willingness to consider supervisory advice', whilst a 'bad' student is not one that runs into problems, but one who doesn't respond to supervisor's interventions (1996, quoted in Peelo, 2011, p29). Gurr's 2001 tool for monitoring that we considered in session highlights what a delicate balance we tread as we move the student towards original work that provides a contribution to knowledge.

Session 3

In this session we focused particularly upon L03 and L04: "Recognize the importance of skills development for research students and demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the Researcher Development Framework; Critically evaluate the role of the examiner and discuss the examination process in relation to research degrees within the University.

We questioned what skills we might expect a student to have on completion of a PhD, drawing upon Vitae's Researcher Development Framework, which few of us had come across before, to identify key skills. We considered whether it encouraged taking intellectual risks, and how the non-academic destination of many doctoral students adds an emphasis to transferable skills. External factors mean that many universities now conduct structured research training sessions. My university set these up in the second year of my PhD (1998), covering qualitative and quantitative methods, conference presentations, and other areas of 'best practice'.

Manathunga highlighted four key ways to identify students who may need skills development support, with early intervention key, involving constant change of topic, avoiding communications, isolating themselves, and avoiding submitting work (2005, p223). Grant also highlighted problems caused by students who are not responsive to advice, and the need to distinguish between obligatory and optional advice; problems with students who lack independence and want to be told the 'right' way to do it.; and also emphasized those with a 'pathological fear of writing', as early writing is part of the formational process (2006, pp102-104).

This session also focused upon the examination process, which I am particularly interested in as I have two PhD external examinations in process (see Appendix 5). We undertook a practice viva upon a 2007 article by Holbrook. Good preparation was underlined as key, whilst an awareness of the different range of personalities – from shy to belligerent – identified that a one-size-fits-all model doesn't fit at the viva stage any more than elsewhere. Some students need more encouragement, and others more challenge.

There is general agreement that the purpose of the viva is dependent upon the quality of the thesis. With a strong thesis, the purpose is to confirm authorship, explore issues not fully explored in the dissertation (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000, p180; Fry et al, 2009, p182), and 'polishing' the work, potentially for publication

(Powell & McCauley, 2002, p107). A problematic piece of work offers a space for redemption, although Tinkler & Jackson are clear that one should resist pressure from the examining institution to pass a poor quality thesis (2000, p198). There may be extenuating circumstances, but these are not a good reason for passing a PhD, although can be taken into account when defining extra work required (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000, p180). Grant notes that it is important to demystify the viva as there is too much mythology around length, tone and content, and that mock vivas can be helpful (2006, p108).

Choosing an examiner is an important step, and one in which both student and supervisor should be involved, remembering that personality is as important as professional expertise, and the process can be highly politicised. Kiley & Mullins (2004) indicate that inexperienced supervisors are dangerous as they only have their own experience to judge against, but this downplays the other expertise that one brings to the PhD process. Ideally one wants an examiner who takes the thesis at face value, and doesn't pick out every flaw (Grant, 2006, p106). Ideally, the viva becomes a conversation between relative equals, a rite of passage, rather than an inquisition (*Ibid.*, p107). Good advice from Facebook included to make it about the thesis and not the student, and to open with simple questions about origins of the research.¹

Tinkler notes that external PhD examination is poorly remunerated, typically taking three-to-five days, but is seen as a service to the academic community (2004, p97). We should not say yes to every invitation, questioning whether we are the right person for *this* PhD, whether we have the time, and are prepared to work to that particular institution's regulations (*Ibid.*, p99). The preparation of the pre-viva report is key, as it gives a clear position of your position before the viva starts (*Ibid.*, p122), and helps shape the discussion at the viva in a way that is fair on the student. Mullins & Kiley (2002) indicate that *both* quality and quantity count, it should be a substantial piece of work. Those that provide a poor or sloppy literature review set up a signal for less sympathetic reading of the rest of the thesis. Doctoralness indicates that they are at the forefront of knowledge and business practice, so have they set their work clearly within there?

There are strong feelings about whether a student should be told the outcome at the beginning of the viva, as it can allow the student to enjoy the experience, but it also damages the viva as a part of the postgraduate process. I certainly didn't care too much about discussing Foucauldian discourse analysis once I knew I had passed, but I also relaxed! After gentle opening questions, questions should focus on clarification, check understanding, prompt justification and defence, link to broader context, prompt evaluation of own work – especially for future development. Listen actively, respond positively, and ask questions that can be answered (Tinkler & Johnson, 2004, pp192-3).

With increasing transparency required in the face of auditing and potential litigation, the role of an independent chair, as well as internal and external

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/drboxl/posts/10156469607020161>

examiners, has become more normal. Should the viva be going well they should really only need to focus on timekeeping and taking minutes, otherwise they need to step in if the atmosphere is problematic. Problems can arise in a viva if the student exhibits 'difficult' behaviour, sees a referral as a complete fail, or if the examiner is being unhelpfully challenging (Grant, 2006, p109). The PhD supervisor may or may not be present, although should have done some preparatory work, but the chair may be required to step in and ask for a break, and move the process forward to complete the viva in a timely manner. Any revisions should be clearly presented to the student, with re-examination focused upon viva recommendations only, rarely requiring a second viva.

Action Planning for CPD

As someone who is interested in lifelong learning, I undertook this course out of interest, rather than towards a qualification. I continue to seek out training, request supervision opportunities, and develop my online presence within a community of practice (Lewis & Rush, 2013), following hashtags such as #PhDSupervision to access up to date information. As I get to understand the complex systems and processes at MMU, I pursue opportunities to offer funded PhDs, whilst continuing conversations with those who have in the past indicated that they would be interested in me as a PhD supervisor, now I am in a stable role.

A strong research culture is indicated as one in which it becomes easier to secure research students (Grant, 2006, p.95), and I am part of a group within Marketing, Operations and Digital Business who are seeking to grow the research culture. C3 on the Vitae Researcher Development Framework is a particular area that I need to work upon, in securing income and funding. Kamler (2008) indicates that those who haven't published alongside their PhD are more daunted afterwards (my PhD book proposal has only just been submitted). There is a question, however, how this is possible within the tight time-frames to complete, but required within a precarious job-market.

I would not have read a lot of this material without the pressure of this assignment. Although not my most polished essay, it has connected me with a wide range of literature, got me thinking about the purpose of a PhD, the fundamental humanness of the supervisory relationship, and how one manages processes and expectations. It seems "... the most comfortable and generally the most successful way to work is to be true to your own values and preferences." (Grant, 2006, p100), so as an overly conscientious 'teacher' and 'coach', I need to take care in managing student expectations of support, to ensure that publications are returned for REF, but taking on students in my (currently being redefined area) will make this process an enjoyable and manageable one.

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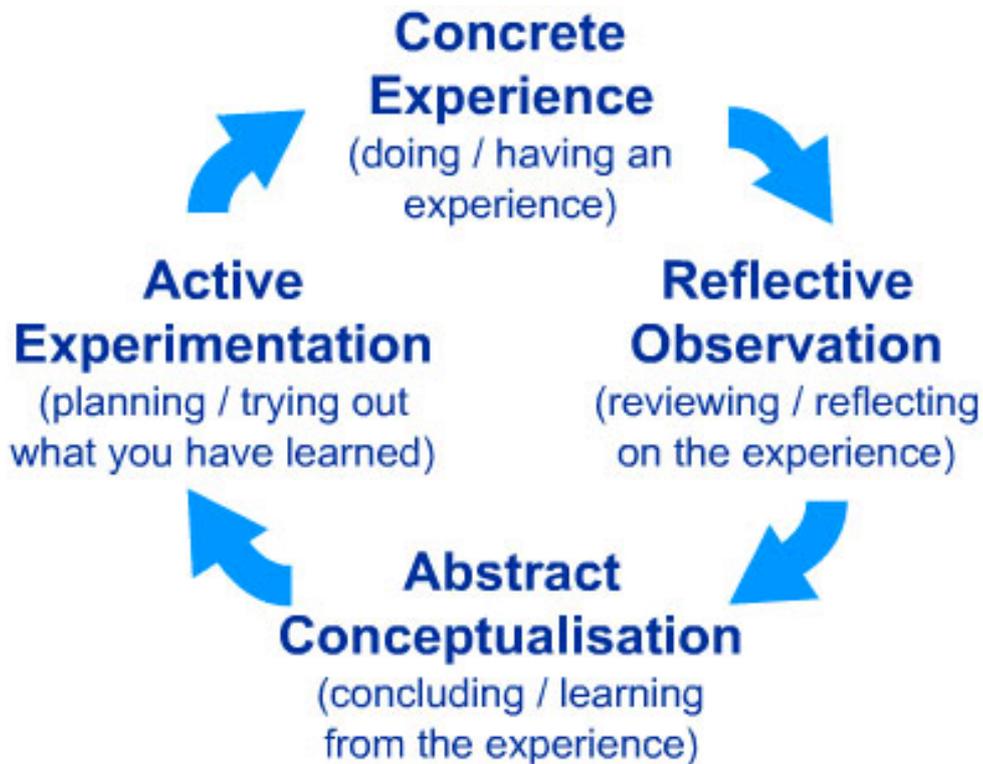
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Appendices

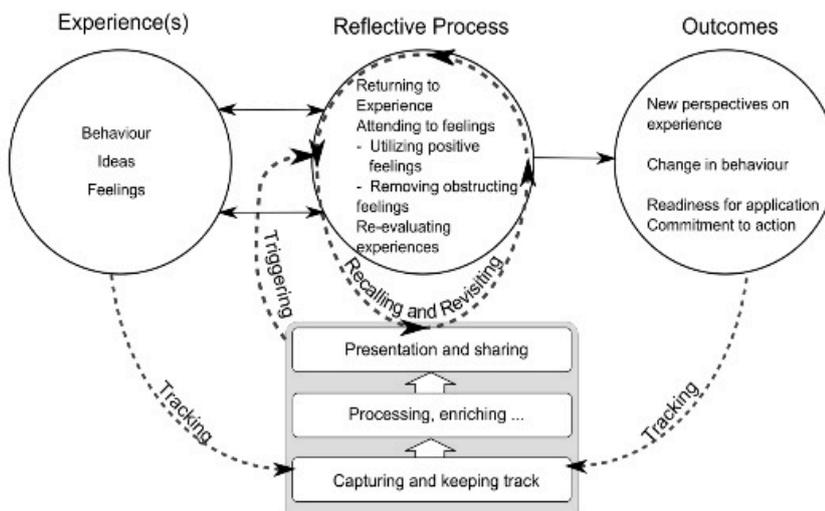
Appendix 1: Models of Reflective Learning



Source: <http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

Theoretical Basis:
Reflective Learning (Boud et al.)

MIRROR



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Source: <http://www.slideshare.net/MirrorIP/mirror-reflectivelearningatworkpresentationsept2012>