

REFLECTING ON SUPERVISION EXPERIENCES: HONOURS STUDENTS' RESEARCH PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AT THE NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on my supervision experience of students conducting their one-year research projects at Honours level in the Department of Development Studies at Nelson Mandela University from 2016 to 2018. My conclusion is that students who are enrolled in the block-release¹ learning program do not have adequate face-to-face access to various university support systems, such as group work sessions with fellow research students on campus or close to it, regular meetings with supervisors, and research-related workshops. This contributes to students' feeling of loneliness and exclusion from the university community. As supervisors, we are guilty sometimes, of not encouraging our students to enter the research community by publishing research papers, as they progress towards finishing their research projects. This article proposes strategies to overcome the identified challenges and to exploit emerging opportunities, in order to improve the research supervision practice. The intention of this study is to contribute to the field of teaching and learning in the South African higher education sector, by proposing strategies to improve the practice of research supervision.

Keywords: reflection on research supervision, research supervision, research supervision and training, postgraduate research students

INTRODUCTION

The number of postgraduate students who undertake research projects is growing worldwide and in the South African higher education institutions. Consequently, universities have the challenge of increasing academic personnel who have the capacity to supervise research projects, mostly at Masters and Doctorate level (Khene 2014; Ndlangamandla 2017; Bastalich 2017; Turner 2015; Vereijken et al. 2018; Åkerlind and McAlpine 2017). This challenge has become an opportunity for many universities to expand (Vereijken et al. 2018) their research supervision sector as one of the key components of teaching and learning (McCulloch and Loeser 2016). Various scholars argue that research supervision plays a significant role in the success of postgraduate students (Sonn 2016; Van Biljon and De Kock 2011; Van Biljon and

De Villiers 2013). Choy, Delahaye and Saggars (2014) agree, stating that using higher degree research studies as a means to develop researchers, has become a key priority for a number of universities.

In spite of the growing number of postgraduate research students, there are many universities in South Africa that have a backlog in “research training and supervision” (Grossman and Crowther 2015, 104; Bak 2011; Singh 2015). Hence, Maistry (2017) argues that obtaining competency and capacity in supervising research projects remains an obstacle in the country because of the diverse challenges discussed below.

Novice supervisors often find themselves caught between the process of learning the trade of conducting research as apprentices and also learning ways of teaching the trade of research to their students (McCulloch and Loeser 2016; Maistry 2017; Schulze 2011). This creates a “parallel learning” (Maistry 2017, 119) process. The dilemma here is that, since an apprentice is still learning the trade, she/he is not yet capable of providing a service that fulfils the desired benchmark. This creates the possibility of producing mediocre research graduates. Additionally, the campaign of universities to expand their research supervision has manifested in an attempt to achieve rapid supervision competency among young academics. This results in limited development of young academics at a deep conceptual level (Maistry 2017). Waghid (2015) states with concern that the tendency of trying to produce doctoral qualifications in a rush is a major risk that South African higher education institutions face. It can be concluded that the process of teaching and learning research supervision is often difficult and overwhelming (Burns and Badiali 2016; Urquhart et al. 2016; Vereijken et al. 2018; Wiggins et al. 2015; Wilkinson 2011).

The field of research supervision tends to have insufficient protocols to guide novice supervisors and their students (Tangen, Borders and Fickling 2019; Chikte and Chabilall 2016). Many supervisors rely on their own “experiences of being supervised” (Guerin, Kerr and Green 2014, 107) to guide them through the supervision process. This often results in novice supervisors unconsciously inheriting the mistakes and unfair practices they were subjected to by their own research supervisors and imposing them on their students. This can create discomfort in the relationship between a supervisor and a student and impact negatively on research supervision (Vereijken et al. 2018). For example, a supervisor could fail to provide support strategies such as clarifying performance standards, dividing responsibilities between the supervisor and student, and providing critical feedback to the student (De Kleijn et al. 2015). Therefore, we need protocols that guide research supervision in university faculties to avoid the difficulties that often develop in student-supervisor relationships.

Supervision traditionally takes place in a private space involving an intense relationship

between the supervisor as master and the student as apprentice (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2017; Pyhältö, Vekkaila and Keskinen 2015; Hodza 2007; Wood and Louw 2018). This relationship has always been teacher-focused, with the supervisor seen as an expert who transmits knowledge to an inexperienced student (Khene 2014; Bastalich 2017; Hodza 2007). In certain instances, such a relationship can create a feeling of inferiority in a student, which contributes to the student's discomfort in the relationship with the supervisor. Feedback from the supervisor can be interpreted as continuous personal attack by the student, which can lead to the student to see the research project as an obstacle to progress, rather than a challenge to be met. Thus, an unpleasant research supervision process can affect students' wellbeing, leading to burnout and the inability to complete the degree (Corner, Löfström and Pyhältö 2017).

For the research supervision to be conducted successfully, supervisors must recognise the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with their students (Guerin et al. 2014; Pyhältö et al. 2015; Orellana et al. 2016; Turner 2015). Several strategies can be adopted to achieve this. Supervisors can, for example, begin the research supervision process by acknowledging the prior knowledge that students bring to the process in order to build their self confidence in the learning process. Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2017) write that supervisors can also act as mentors to students and facilitators of learning, rather than only presenting themselves as experts. Supervisors need to establish a harmonious relationship with students for the research supervision process to be successful.

South African universities' subsidies from the Department of Higher Education and Training result in many students enrolling for postgraduate degrees. Students are encouraged to complete the research part of their studies within the stipulated timeframe (Sonn 2016). However, this approach is accompanied by its own challenges, for instance, it results in supervisors having large workloads, demands from funding bodies and employers on supervisors, and some students have low English language proficiency (Bitzer, Trafford and Leshem 2013; Erwee et al. 2011; Lee 2007). In light of such circumstances, at times, the outcomes become the supervisors' decreased sense of care for their students as they strive to adhere to their institutional deadlines. Hodza (2007) points out that care is significant in ensuring that the student-supervisor relationship is successful. De Lange, Pillay and Chikoko (2011) emphasise the significance of integrating doctoral supervision with providing support to students in order to achieve doctoral learning. Despite the significance of universities' targets with regard to producing research outputs and gaining government subsidies, supervisors' caring attitude is very important in the supervision process. For instance, Gumbo (2019) states that in the absence of supervisors' care about students' personal circumstances, many challenges are more likely to erupt, such as unpleasant working relationships between students

and supervisors, failure to complete research projects, and students feeling demotivated. These human aspects must, therefore, never be neglected while making diverse endeavours to achieving success in research supervision.

This discussion has revealed that universities are experiencing many challenges as they strive towards developing research capacity through research supervision. As indicated through the literature, such challenges, for instance, originate from supervisor-student relationships, universities as institutions of learning, and demands that are experienced by supervisors as they strive to develop novice researchers' capacity. However, according to Gumbo (2019), less is known about developing an effective research supervision model, which emphasises the human aspects in supervision in the 21st century. The research questions in this study are as follows: How can students' feeling of loneliness and being excluded from their academic community be eliminated? How can students at Honours level be encouraged to participate in publishing research papers? This article intends to contribute to the field of teaching and learning in the South African higher education sector. The themes discussed here include the context in which supervision takes place and the practices involved in research supervision.

THE CONTEXT IN WHICH I SUPERVISE

As stated above, my journey of supervising postgraduate students started in February 2016 with Honours students in the Department of Development Studies at Nelson Mandela University. I was working as an off-campus part-time staff member, the research supervisor in the Department, supervising students who were enrolled in the block-release learning program. The students allocated to me lived and worked in the region of the East London, King Williams Town and Mthatha, close to my home in the former Transkei area in the Eastern Cape Province.

These students were mainly black African Xhosa speakers. Mostly, they were employed in professions such as teaching, social work, and administration in government departments. Often they were not familiar with research and, as their supervisor, I had to teach them research from a beginners' level until they become knowledgeable about research practices. Winberg, Ntloko and Ncubukezi (2015) write that there are many cases in South Africa, and internationally, where postgraduate students do not have the necessary capacity to conduct research projects, for example, being unable to search information and reading materials that relate to their studies. Often my students had completed the course work modules of their postgraduate diplomas, and were left with the unfinished research project. I learnt, through conversations with the students, that some saw the research as a huge and fearful project. This is usually perpetuated by the underlying challenge of inadequate academic literacy (Ndlangamandla 2017). Manathunga and Goozee (2007) suggest that universities traditionally

assume that research students are already able to conduct research independently, by virtue of being postgraduate students. This assumption is shown to be incorrect by the many examples of postgraduate students who have not yet learned the culture of the research communities and the discourses of their discipline in order to proceed with their research projects. They also need emotional support and assistance as they develop their careers (Manathunga and Goozee 2007; Maistry 2017; Bastalich 2017). Morrow adds that the history and conditions of an institution can either constrain or create an enabling environment of epistemological access to academic literacy (Morrow 2009; Khene 2014; Orellana et al. 2016). Therefore, it is universities' responsibility to provide an enabling environment that facilitates the development of academic literacy of students, for instance, by providing access to writing centre services for both undergraduate and postgraduate students (Grossman 2016). Writing centres are valuable because they provide guidance to students on how to conduct research projects and develop their academic literacy.

Inadequate academic literacy is a significant challenge that dominates in higher education in South Africa, especially among students from disadvantaged academic backgrounds such as those from rural areas. The challenges that students face manifest mostly at first year level, since they are still unfamiliar with the discourse used by the academic community. They resurface at the postgraduate level when students have to conduct independent research, which requires a high level of academic literacy. Tapp (2015) says that the deficient academic literacy of students can be a barrier that prevents them from gaining access into the academy, which places them permanently on the periphery of the academic community. This may result in the feeling of exclusion of students, as they are not able to understand and participate adequately in the academic discourse of the institution and their disciplines (Khene 2014). Sebolai (2014) laments that, in South Africa, this challenge persists, despite the fact that more than 20 years have passed since the transformation from apartheid into democracy. The vulnerable students are often those from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as schools in rural and semi-urban areas where the level of English learnt is often poor. Consequently, these students struggle to master English for academic purposes in their reading, writing and thinking (McCabe 2011; Hallett 2013). As a result, their feelings of exclusion and loneliness are enhanced (Ndlangamandla 2017).

I have focussed above on the background of the students I supervised. From my observation of their writing, these students did not have a strong academic writing background. Poor academic literacy is further revealed when students have to work independently on research projects, which they often experience as a significant challenge. Therefore, there is a need to devise strategies to assist students to cope better with their research projects, as

proposed below.

PRACTICES IN SUPERVISION

As described, the students I supervised were enrolled in Honours and were, in essence, engaged in the block-release learning program. They were required to attend lectures at the University for two block sessions a year: for a week in February/March and another in July/August. This learning system allowed them the space to maintain their full-time employment while studying. However, the nature of this system provided them little opportunity to learn by engaging in face-to-face social interactions, such as in group sessions with fellow research students on or near campus, research-related workshops that are often offered for free to university students, the writing centre's academic literacy workshops, and regular meetings with their supervisors. Consequently, some students even develop an anxiety feeling about research, because of the perception that it is an enormous and complicated project. Various researchers agree that the process of teaching researchers in the early stages of their careers is complex (Lee2007; Maistry 2017). Therefore, the process of teaching novice researchers seems to be often escorted by challenges.

Concerning my Honours students, the anxiety feeling and challenges regarding research projects were elicited by the fact that most of them were working on research projects for the first time. Simultaneously, operating away from the support systems of the campus exacerbated the situation, by provoking their feelings of loneliness and exclusion from the mainstream academic community. Reeve and Partridge (2017) argue that research isolation is often experienced by researchers who are not integrated with their research communities. Research isolation is attributed to several factors, such as being physically isolated from the campus, and being unfamiliar with the field of research. The number of my students who withdrew from their research projects during the course of the year was a manifestation of this reality. McKenna (2016) argues that withdrawal cases are a universal challenge, attributed to the fact that students are expected to embark on the research journey without being structurally linked to other scholars or other scholars' projects (Orellana et al. 2016). Albertyn, Van Coller-Peter and Morrison (2018) concur by stating that students have a tendency of struggling to complete the research part of their postgraduate studies. Consequently, this lonely journey, of conducting research projects, results in a high level of student dropouts and mediocre research outputs. The proposed strategy in Table 1 is appropriate to this concern.

Furthermore, students' feelings of loneliness and exclusion might be promoted by universities themselves. This is because achieving inclusive higher education is still a challenge in South Africa, despite the fact that apartheid officially ended many years ago. This is reflected

in the disjuncture between higher education policies that are aimed at promoting inclusivity, and students' experiences of the ineffective implementation of such policies (Bozalek and Boughey 2012; Bryant and Jaworski 2017). This concern is manifested in the many students in South African education institutions who feel excluded from academic discourses at their universities and in their specific fields, because of their poor academic literacy. This problem is perpetuated by the inadequacy or absence of university support systems aimed at promoting academic literacy of students, such as writing centres or academic support programs. Diverse authors concur by saying that students sometimes have inaccessibility to academic literacy, even though it is a vital tool used by the society in conversations to shape what society should be (Wheelahan 2010; Ndlangamandla 2017). Other scholars also agree by saying that academic literacy, especially gained through postgraduate qualifications, is valuable in the workplace as a competitive advantage for employees (Bitzer and Albertyn 2011; Ndlangamandla 2017). Having inadequate access to academic literacy deprives students of a tool that is vital in making a positive contribution to society. Hence the exclusion of students from academic literacy is equivalent to social injustice.

Moreover, in terms of social interaction with my students, I hosted meetings with them as a group, usually once at the beginning of each year. The focus of the meetings was on getting to know them and to understand their projects, and to assist them with writing exercises on key aspects of their projects. The intention was to assist them to gain the necessary skills that would enable them to write independently. Additionally, there was email and telephone communication between the students and me as their supervisor through the course of the year.

Upon reflecting on my approach in supervision of these students, I realised that I had been focused on coaching them without much mentoring. Coaching is oriented towards assisting a learner to perform certain tasks for a project within a specific time-frame. Throughout the process, the coach sets the target goals, observes the performance, and then provides feedback. That is why the process of coaching is usually executed in a workplace. In contrast, mentoring focuses on developing the capacity of the individual, to assist her/him in discovering her/his own wisdom to pursue career and other goals. During this process, the mentor is not in a position of authority over the learner. Instead, the learner operates as an independent individual (Webster and Webster 2014; Linden, Ohlin and Brodin 2013; O'Neil 2018; Keane 2016). While supervising, I emphasised the completion of different tasks or sections of the students' projects in line with the Department's deadlines and believed that, when the projects were completed, my and the students' missions were accomplished. This approach is similar to Lee's functional style of supervision. It focuses on student skills development as a priority, including "directing and project management" (Lee 2007, 680). Examples of supervision activities in this context

include giving practical advice to a student on how to conduct interviews, orientating a student to his/her new colleagues, developing ground rules that both parties should adhere to, and ensuring that “project and time management” are integrated in the supervision process (Boehe 2014, 399).

In light of the above, it is necessary to propose a research supervision model that encourages supervisors’ caring attitude towards their students (Gumbo 2019). The model has two objectives, namely, to eliminate students’ feeling of loneliness and being excluded from their academic community (see Table 1) and, secondly, to encourage students at Honours level to consider a research career by publishing research papers.

The first objective includes providing students access to periodic learning spaces that are conducted through social interaction among fellow research students and the supervisor. The proposed activities here include, firstly, hosting six group contact sessions per annum with the supervisor and students. Two of them would be whole group contact sessions, which are integrated into the existing two teaching block sessions of the Department in February/March and July/August. The four sub-group contact sessions would be divided between Semesters One and Two, with two sub-group contact sessions in each semester. The timeframe would be flexible and determined by the availability of the students and the supervisor. The second set of activities includes hosting meetings with each individual student at least once per semester.

Table 1: Group contact sessions

Annual time-frame	Group details	Group details
Semester One	1 x whole group contact session (integrated in the block session: February/March)	2 x sub-group contact sessions (flexible time-frame)
Semester Two	1 x whole group contact session (integrated in the block session: July/August)	2 x sub-group contact sessions (flexible time-frame)

Overall, the intention through these contact sessions and meetings is to facilitate learning in the form of social interaction between the supervisor and students, and among students themselves. This is contrary to relying mainly on the online learning system. Gumbo (2019) argues that information and technology communication is valuable to supervisors as it alleviates the major demands of postgraduate supervision they are often confronted with. However, the human aspects in the supervision of students need to be prioritised (Picard, Wilkinson and Wirthensohn 2011). The intended outcome of this objective comprises students feeling included in their academic community. An indicator of this outcome would include fewer cases of students withdrawing from their research projects during the course of the year.

Moreover, looking back on my supervision of Honours students in the three-year period,

I realised that I had not made attempts to encourage them to consider a research career through publishing research papers from their projects. This would have been an example of designing challenges for students so that they can achieve enhanced independence in the process of conducting research (Boehe 2014). I discovered that I had been allowing them to end their research projects once they were completed, instead of encouraging them to explore publishing research papers. Encouraging students into a research career would require making efforts towards getting to know them better in terms of matters like their career goals or plans after finishing their studies.

The second objective therefore involves inviting students to consider research as an alternative or additional career. Associated activities include referring students to reading materials that relate to their research interests, guiding them while writing research papers, linking students to appropriate researchers who work in fields similar to theirs, and encouraging them to submit research papers to journals. Boehe (2014) concurs, highlighting the significance of exposing students to various sources of knowledge such as conferences and formal research training. One-on-one meetings with students would be among the necessary activities for coaching them in writing research papers. The desired outcome would include students' gain of skills and knowledge on issues of publishing. The evidence for this outcome would be the draft research papers that are submitted by students to the supervisor/s, and submission of research papers to journals.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to reflect on my experience of supervising students doing research projects at Honours level in the Department of Development Studies at Nelson Mandela University. The outcomes of this reflection reveal that students who conduct research projects in what is essentially a block-release learning program have insufficient access to the University's face-to-face support systems. For instance, they are unable to learn from their fellow research students through regular group work sessions, the writing centre on campus, or the research related workshops that are often hosted by the University free of charge to students. Consequently, students develop feelings of loneliness and exclusion from the academic community, which sometimes results in their withdrawal from their research projects. Therefore, pertaining to block-release learning programs, it would benefit the supervision process if universities could devise research supervision models that include facilitating learning through enhanced periodic social interactions amongst fellow research students, and between students and their supervisors.

As supervisors we tend to miss the opportunity to encourage our students to consider

research as a career, as they progress towards finishing their research projects. If supervisors could execute this, they would make a greater contribution to the research community, not only through the production of theses, but also through published research papers. Overall, the significance of this study is that it contributes in the field of teaching and learning, by focusing on the process of supervising students as they conduct research. It highlights challenges and opportunities that arise from the supervision process, and suggests strategies for improving research supervision practice in South African higher education: an effective research supervision model, which enhances the human aspects in the supervision process and which is appropriate in the 21st century, is proposed.

NOTE

1. Block-release learning program: it encompasses students who are not enrolled full-time and then visit the University campus to attend lectures at specific times of the year, like in February and July.

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