Chapter 4

Doctoral Research Supervision: Interpretive, Developmental, Transformative, and Culturally Adaptive

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ABSTRACT

Supervisors generally recognize the complex capacities needed to complete the doctoral degree. However, pressures from management practices in universities for rapid completions have time-compressed the leisurely research experience of a bygone intellectual age. The need for focused supervision strategies that bridge candidate and supervisor expectations seems clear. At the same time articulating supervision “pedagogies” poses a philosophical and theoretical conundrum. Whilst supervision expertise can be intuitive, and often based on personal experience, the research candidate will have different lived experiences. Their respective world views can be dialectically opposed to that of their supervisor with the decision making landscapes caught in subjectivities, stubbornness and non-recognition of “other.” Paradigmatic shifts can be an integral part of the development process. In the context of increasing internationalization of the doctoral experience “downunder” these arguments are cause for reflection on how supervisors and candidates can deepen their philosophical, and meaning-making constructs of “knowing,” and seek transformative intellectual positions.

INTRODUCTION

A counterpoint to labeling the theoretical position or paradigm upon which the research study evolves is consideration of the shifting sand within the supervisor/ supervisee dialectic. The proposition is that both supervisor and candidate are caught in a unique web of meaning making that is philosophically biased by ontological and epistemological forces—often beyond their immediate field of vision. Starting with a brief historical overview related to the “downunder” context, consideration is given in this chapter to the value of holistic approaches based on the work of Kegan (1994), Perry (1999) and Gebser (1985). Each offers a methodology for interpreting a candidate’s behaviors, which in turn help guide the interpretive process of supervision. In brief, a synthesis of their perspectives offers a strategy for supervisors.
facilitating the meaning-making process of the thesis journey as well as ways for supporting students from diverse cultural backgrounds to better understand their own process. International students from non-English speaking backgrounds who are studying in Australian universities are the focal cohort for this analysis. The focus of discussion is on their lived experience, and how subjectivity in the beginning stages of the research process is challenged, and at times compelled to make, what can appear to feel like quite radical changes in world views. At work is a transformative paradigm of self which may or may not lead to an alignment in the research study undertaken. Nevertheless, the personal insights gathered are likely to influence the final shaping of the research to be undertaken.

BACKGROUND

In their book series *Doctorates Downunder* (2006, 2007, 2009) editors Carey Denholm and Terry Evans mapped the landscape of the doctoral experience in Australia and New Zealand. Their list of contributing editors represented the who’s who list of graduate supervisors in the region. The series was and arguably remains a benchmark for bringing together a comprehensive documentation of the issues facing students, supervisors, faculties and higher education providers contracted in the process. As the title suggests there may be a difference in the experience for doctoral students within this geopolitical region when compared with North America or Europe. Both Australia and New Zealand are nations with diminishing but continuing connections with European traditions. The Bologna process (Walters, 2009), for instance, is referenced in higher education circles as a guide for global standards related to equity, mobility and opportunities for international cooperation. Just as countries within the European Union are engaging in cooperation to achieve more uniformity in standards that will facilitate international credit transfer, many Ministers of Education around the world are now signatories to that process and committed to aspire to the same goals of attainment including national qualifications frameworks. This appears to assume that the Bologna process goals which originated in 1999 within the European Union framework may have a universality of application. In the context of enhanced mobility options, both in real and online terms, a “knowledge” standard to which institutions of higher education and ministries of education in diverse cultural settings can apply has much appeal.

Within this recognized highly competitive global market for higher education the “doctorates downunder” approach presumed a difference in the programs for Australia and New Zealand. Whilst a valid assumption, however, the “downunder” view articulated is in need of an update—or a new volume that better reflects the diversity of candidates who have benefited from the Bologna process and other international agreements. Connell’s more recent construct of *Southern Theory* (2007) appears to capture the problem. Although knowledge may now be produced in a different historical and geopolitical context, Connell insists that contemporary intellectual practices remain subject to systems of reproduction that do not allow for diversity to emerge. The times are different, and according to Manathunga (2014), global marketing has resulted in epistemological landscapes of cultural diversity for supervisors and candidates. The levels of complexity differ from past landscapes of scholarly exchange.

The direction pursued in this paper relates primarily, although not exclusively, to the changing needs of supervision required to respond to contemporary patterns of student mobility. One element of the change relates to the discovery world of social media and digital resources. The other relates to the flows of students from diverse cultural settings into the “downunder” region and the expectations that they bring to the task of doctoral studies. Many of the key issues are highlighted in the Australian Education
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