Getting up close and textual: An interpretive study of feedback practice and social relations in doctoral supervision

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.
Dedication

This thesis is for my son Sam (mon bien aimé p’tit/grand prince), my neglected partner Ross, my dear dad and Kerry, brothers David and Roger, my nieces Jess, Rache, Carlia, and sisterly-in-law Fleur, as well as my extended family, my dear friend Jo Hart, and especially for my mum.
Abstract

The privatised interactions between doctoral student and supervisor as they jointly work on the text are the subject of my thesis. To investigate this important yet neglected aspect of supervision, I use data obtained from interviews with seven doctoral supervisory pairs in the social sciences, arts, and humanities in an Australian university. My methodology comprises a series of close-ups to explore feedback relations within supervision and the ways in which meanings are played out for both supervisors and students. The interpretive approach draws upon Foucaultian theory, critical discourse analysis, and (post)critical theory traditions. Accordingly, the power asymmetries between supervisor and student are seen as productive - in the sense of creatively fertile - and not merely synonymous with prohibition or disempowerment. Within five interpretive chapters, I engage with the productive and problematic aspects of supervisory relations, making visible how supervisory feedback assists in the formation of students' scholarly identities. My analysis examines how the pressures to ensure the production of timely and disciplined thesis texts are impacting on feedback relations. It also examines various ambiguities and tensions such as those embedded in the supervisor's position as ‘pastor’ and ‘critic’, between asymmetrical and relational power, between the promotion of authorship/autonomy on the one hand, and the preservation of the canon on the other. My discussion highlights the ways supervisors, notwithstanding their authority, attempt to mediate the power disparity through mechanisms such as standing back, withholding and filtering feedback, or using the invitational strategies of ‘under offering’ which downplay the disciplinary nature of their work. I also reflect on what makes acceptance or resistance more or less likely and what promotes/hinders the transition to and reliance on students’ own expertise. Overall, the interpretations I offer suggest that the exercise of power is never straightforward, is opaque and ambiguous and susceptible to misunderstanding and unpredictability. My research thus reveals a picture of social relations that is less orderly and transparent than assumed in the institutional literature and associated guidelines. In particular, the research
qualifies the current institutional faith that PhD research/writing is a transparent process, within which supervisors can be trained in the ‘skills’ for providing effective feedback so students can work at an efficient pace and produce predictable results.
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