

A wholistic approach to doctoral research supervision: What should it include?

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***Abstract:** This round table presentation will facilitate discussion on the question: 'a wholistic approach to doctoral research supervision: what should it include?' It will be suggested that a wholistic approach by supervisors to doctoral candidates facilitates an acknowledgement of the candidate within a network of social and familial relations and with multiple and varied demands on them. This is particularly important given the changing face of candidates who are increasingly part-time, mature professionals with families. It also allows the relationship between the candidate and supervisor to be acknowledged as always involving multiple strands and 'hidden dangers' (McWilliam, Singh & Taylor, 2002) Such an approach assumes that all events are in some way interrelated, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and that we cannot build our reality out of the parts or elements of a reductionist analysis in a building block fashion. Therefore, when considering a wholistic supervisory practice there cannot be simple rules to follow nor can we reduce the success or failure of that supervision to the supervisor. However, beginning with an acknowledgement of complexity and interconnection, it is possible to devise multiple methods and sites of support for the process. A wholistic supervisory practice framework would need to include the difficult issue of explicit negotiation of both the implicit and explicit power relationships between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate (Grant 2001) and between the academic supervisor and the institution. The current, and continuing, emphasis on rational accountability by institutions of the supervisor – candidate has led to an emphasis on training within doctoral studies, which can be viewed as problematic (Kendall 2002). It is suggested, following, on from Yeatman (1995), that rational accountability should ultimately rest with the candidate and not with the supervisor. Flexible and creative feedback systems between candidate and supervisor and between supervisor and institution would then need to be developed. Some suggestions as to how that may be possible will be offered for general review and discussion.*

Keywords: Supervision; rational accountability.

Introduction

A fundamental difficulty with the supervision of doctoral students in the current university environment in Australia is lack of time and money. This paper will hopefully stimulate some discussion about creative ways that this can be addressed and offer some critiques of the current 'solutions' being followed by Australian universities. Before setting out on that discussion I will raise the question of what should a doctoral education give to the candidate?

Gaining a doctorate

My experience of gaining a doctorate in humanities in the 1990's from Murdoch University was possibly quite similar to many other candidates. I returned to study after some years in the workforce at the age of thirty-one, commenced part-time study whilst working full time to pay off a mortgage, and then two years into my part-time studies started a family. It took the next nine years to finish the PhD. The key factor in completing was, as the research has shown with part-time doctoral studies, to 'hang in there'. My capacity to keep producing miniscule amounts through busy and trying periods of juggling fulltime work and children was possible because of a supportive understanding supervisor and institution which gave me periods away from the doctorate and then welcomed me back. This approach involved an acknowledgement of the candidate (myself) within a network of social and familial relations and with multiple and varied demands on them. This wholistic approach to the experience of doctoral research is important both because the candidates are increasingly part-time, mature professionals with families but also because pedagogically it acknowledges that education is more than training. Doctoral research is a wonderful opportunity to spend three or more years concentrating on a single topic out of which the candidate emerges a specialist on their subject. But do they also emerge with a higher education?

Walter Murdoch suggests that:

... we all know that the world we live in – this comfortable world , with all its miraculous devices and contrivances –is built on specialization, on the toils of the specialist. We do homage to the specialist every day of our lives. ... By all means let us do honour to [those who know many things about something]- especially since they are, in a sense, martyrs. They are fettered that we may go free; they are starved that we may live delicately; they are chained to the oar that we may see the world. They are sacrificed to our needs. That we may be supplied with refrigerators and wireless sets and Panama Canals and antitoxins, they are robbed of the blessings of education. (Murdoch 1938,122)

The blessings of education

An education in Murdoch's model allows a person to take an intelligent interest in all aspects of life, all aspects of society. "The house of the mind possess a great number of windows, through which we look out on the great and moving spectacle of life," Murdoch writes. This is the liberal arts education that universities grew out of from the middle ages in Europe and England. Remember that the word 'university' originally was applied to a community of any kind and was used for all guilds (which in latin is *univeritates*). Only slowly did that fall away and the word applied only to communities in which the main business was teaching and learning. These universities were not institutions but collections of people come together freely to pursue scholarship. The student guilds were known as *univeristas* and the teachers or masters guilds were faculties or colleges. It was only when these two groups came formerly together that a sense of a modern university developed around 1200.

The licence to teach, and the control of this licence was a hard fought battle between the universities and the church, originally only the Pope could give the permission to teach. However, the universities fought for the right to licence scholars to teach and to judge them as proficient through the court of their peers. As we know the universities won that battle and put in place a system which is still current. Gaining a doctorate is a licence to teach. And the

licence is to teach the seven liberal arts of: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. These communities of teaching and learning were about many things for many people. Some wanted to gain the licence to teach which was a lucrative and useful career, others wanted to gain a professional accreditation in the areas of theology law medicine and to practise those professions, others wanted to understand the nature of the world and their relationship to it and to God in a fuller and more complete manner, others wanted to create change and improve their life and the lives of others.

Higher education as an agent of change and liberation in society has always been part of what universities have been about. But there has also been another strand that has run through education that of control and power and keeping education in the hands of those with the power in society to reinforce and to maintain that power. The tension between these different approaches to education have always been part of the western tradition.

Multiple strands and 'hidden dangers'

To educate is to lead forth and that takes time. Leading doctoral candidates forth is a very complex task because the relationship between the candidate and supervisor always involves multiple strands and 'hidden dangers' (McWilliams & James 2002) It involves the multiple strands of scholarship both specialized knowledge, liberal arts and generic skills. It involves the multiple strands of the scholars with all their intellectual, emotional, psychological, sexual and physical aspects and it involves the interconnecting webs of community, families and institutions. The supervisor has to guide as a critical friend another person who is under taking an extremely difficult task. A task that by its nature will always be complex and there are no easy or simple rules to guide the guide. A key aspect however in all this is to be explicit about the multiple strands and the power relationships involved in those strands. There is always a differential of power between candidate and supervisor and between supervisor and institution. It is crucial to successful supervision that this power differential is both explicitly acknowledged and implicitly managed with integrity and care by the supervisor and the institution. As part of that ethics of care it is important that institutions explicitly acknowledge that the doctoral experience of today's candidates cannot be equated to the traditional model. Gaining a doctorate in Australia in the twenty first century is no longer necessarily a licence to teach nor is a doorway to a lucrative career. In the push to improve completion rates and the lack of resources of time and money for doctoral candidates and their supervisors it may often also give no opportunity to develop in the liberal arts. The current, and continuing, emphasis on rational accountability by institutions of the supervisor – candidate has led to an emphasis on training within doctoral studies. The difficulty is that the emphasis on training and gaining generic skills of analysis, problem solving communication and so forth can be at the loss of emphasis on the slow development of scholarship and the creative aspects of research.

The need for a wholistic doctoral education

As stated previously there has always been a tension between a pedagogy of liberation and that of control within the western tradition. The current climate of economic rationalism with its emphasis on outcomes and training models is pushing the doctoral experience towards the conservative ethos. It is crucial that the liberal arts model of the PhD is not lost and by having more alternate forms of higher research degrees available that may be possible. To return to Walter Murdoch's point on education we need specialists. "I honour such [people] as these - [people] who concentrate on their own particular jobs through thick and thin. Great and glorious results have come from such concentration of mind." (Murdoch 1938,122) And we

also need generalists who can perceive the interconnections between disciplines and who can take a more wholistic perspective on knowledge. We need that more than ever now. A wholistic approach makes us realise that everything is interconnected and that the challenge we face today in seeking wisdom is the challenge of creating a new world view. The dominant Western worldview, which has its roots in the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm, assumes atomism, dualism, and materialism. It assumes that the nature of reality is 'substance pluralism', and that Nature is made up of discrete, dead atoms that collide randomly in empty space. Epistemologically, the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm assumes that it is possible to abstract knowledge from context and knowledge is independent of values. Methodologically, it assumes the whole is reducible to its parts and the parts can be manipulated mathematically. A dualism is assumed between primary (as in quantifiable) phenomena, such as mass and weight, and secondary subjective qualities, such as colour and smell. According to the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm only that which is measurable and quantifiable has an objective reality. The smells and sounds, the colours and tastes and touches of Nature are reduced to measurements. Nature is rendered dead 'through and through'; it has lost the power of enchantment. We need to reenchant Nature and our societies if we are to save the planet and all its beings from environmental catastrophe. We need to reenchant our institutions of doctorates and universities to take the bigger and broader picture of education.

Rational accountability

The competition for scarce resources within the higher education sector has also led to increased emphasis on academics to justify and to be open to scrutiny and auditing. Part of this means that supervisors must account for their time and the relationship with the doctoral candidates is skewed to wards a contractual management style. Attempting to maintain the traditional model of the PhD in the current situation of diminishing resources may not be the most rational approach to accountability. It may be that options such as focusing on specific skill development within the doctorate whilst gaining specialised knowledge and undertaking a research project may be better done within a part course work, part thesis model. Such a model could also include industry placements so that on completion graduands are job competitive. The selection of candidates could be through a rigorous method of written application which deals specifically with the issue of motivation by the potential candidate and future career plans, educational qualifications and a panel interview by both faculty and research office staff. Thus models of accountability of postgraduate students currently used by many supervisors such as student logs, set tasks to be completed, meetings recorded with specific actions and timelines et down could be rationalised within course work. The traditional model of the PhD which allows for a wholistic education could then be offered within institutions but on a limited basis and with a realistic budget attached.

Flexible and creative feedback systems

The current attempt to squeeze that traditional higher research degree model into the constraints imposed by massification of higher education have led to unfair expectations of supervisor and candidates. The flexibility of alternate models of higher research degrees could alleviate this problem. Offer of a place in a traditional PhD programme could then be tied back to a licence to teach at universities in full time permanent positions. The current situation, in which many universities are forced to fund teaching through the casualization and exploitation of doctoral candidates and recently completed doctoral students.

Conclusion

In the world of massification of higher education the traditional doctoral model is under threat. This model demanded massive resources of time and money that are no longer available. If universities wish to maintain this model then they have to resource it. That may mean that only very limited places are made available. It may also mean that the majority of higher research degrees on offer become a form of professional doctorates but universities must also beware of being reduced to institutions that **only** train doctoral candidates in generic skills and for specific jobs. Either way universities and supervisors need to 'come clean' with potential doctoral candidates

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