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Taking time to appreciate the scenery: an exploration of PhD supervision as pedagogy

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Abstract

A PhD generates new knowledge and builds new links with existing research literature – by definition a ‘mind-bending’ exercise, even without the additional challenges brought on by Covid-19 restrictions. As an undertaking, it is both self-directed and requiring of sustained independence (a part-time PhD may require sustained investment for up to eight years) and demanding of trust and effective communication between candidate and supervisor. This project used visual and creative methodologies to explore an emerging PhD supervisory relationship as it developed during the lockdown restraints of the pandemic. It sought to understand this relationship through the development of a visual and creative methodology designed to help both parties understand the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research project. Visual artefacts and literary extracts were discussed as metaphors for the supervisor/supervisee relationship and the PhD ‘journey’, providing an exploration that proved valid and valuable to both supervisor and candidate.

Introduction

This study investigates the concept of flexibility as explored through the roles and relationships of PhD supervisor and supervisee. It grew out of necessity during the Covid pandemic lockdown of 2021, where supervision was required to move online, changing the dynamic of supervision sessions. The PhD supervisor (Clare) sought to challenge what she felt to be an underlying concept of research held by her first-year PhD candidate (Edward). Edward’s research project involves exploration of trainee teachers’ perceptions of English teaching, with this framed specifically within Edward’s own understanding of pedagogy in that context as an English teacher. Edward’s personal pedagogy rejects a didactic approach instead preferring to support emergent learning, and he further rejects the end-point, examination driven curriculum in which he feels he has to teach and of which he is himself a product.

Curiously, though, as he embarked on his doctorate Edward repeatedly framed his research in an inflexible, output-driven paradigm. Although the *content* of what he was

researching rejected this approach, his understanding and personal context meant that the *methods* he proposed to gather, interpret and articulate data remained firmly embedded within it, as did his conceptual framework. This proved a challenge for Clare as his supervisor who felt that the restrictive nature of lockdown teaching, coupled with the remoteness of the supervision session, was hindering Edward's ability to step back and critically evaluate his positionality. Brew suggests that 'an important task facing postgraduate supervisors is to develop an understanding of the different ways in which research can be conceptualised, in order to be in a position to help the research student articulate their understanding' (Brew, 2001 p. 283), and Clare was concerned to find a new way to do just that, within the confines in which they were working.

This account reports our response in addressing these various challenges in a project, co-incepted, co-created, co-developed, co-analysed and co-written by the two researcher/participants.

Literature

The purpose of PhD supervision is to 'steer, guide and support students through the process of conducting a doctorate' (Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts, 2008 p. 72). To achieve this, a good supervisor should 'be accessible, provide timely feedback of good quality and in a constructive way... and ensure that their evaluations of the progress of the trajectory are communicated regularly to the PhD candidate' (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015 p. 218).

Some elements of the supervisory role remain similar to that of 'teacher', although its position regarding the student is unique in the education world in that supervisors are not expected to 'know more' than the candidate they supervise; that candidate is moving towards the creation of new knowledge, and as such is the expert in their own area. However, the supervisor is nevertheless expected to guide the candidate and the feedback, judgments, and affirmation they give will inevitably impact the self-esteem and confidence of that candidate (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015). Just as in other educational fields, supervisors may also increasingly find themselves required to fulfil an ever-lengthening list of responsibilities, functions and tasks (Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts, 2008). There is an increasingly anxious focus within institutions on the need to support candidates to achieve timely completion of PhDs, with high-quality supervision seen as a success factor for achieving this (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015). Just as in other educational settings, as the arbiter of when (and if) the candidate is advanced through the doctoral process, the supervisor holds considerable power, and this

imbalance may be a 'complicating factor' (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015, p. 219).

At the core of this teacher/pupil, guide/guided, facilitator/independent relationship is the two parties' understanding of what research actually 'is'. For the relationship to be successful the parties must share 'fundamental apprehensions of what research should be about' (Johansson, Wisker, Claesson et al., 2014) and a shared understanding of the 'conceptual approach' (Lee, 2008) of what they are doing. Fundamental contradictions at this level may be challenging for the parties to resolve; when a process of inquiry is discussed these underlying concepts about the nature of research are likely to underpin everything that is said and done (Brew, 2001). These concepts 'influence the types of projects researchers feel comfortable in pursuing, the choice of methodology, the questions, ideas and issues pursued, and the ways in which the work is carried out (Brew, 2001, p. 282). This is true even without the imposition of external factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Where the subject matter under scrutiny is teaching and teacher identity, the pedagogy used to guide the candidate needs to be sufficiently flexible to enable both parties to transcend the immediate while still acknowledging it.

The project reported here explores the pedagogy of considering research methodology. It took as a starting point the postulates of the Critical Communicative Methodology (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010), specifically those of 'No interpretative hierarchy' and 'Same epistemological level'. This respected that Edward and Clare's ontological presumptions could have equal validity, and that both could give equal (if different) emergent meanings. It also means that each would have the same ability to 'know the phenomena investigated from our respective roles' (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010 p. 22). It further sought to utilise the approach of 'gentle Socratic inquiry' (Jackson 2001). This suggests that the 'gentle' implies a cooperative approach that 'accepts that there is no right answer' (Lee, 2008 p. 273).

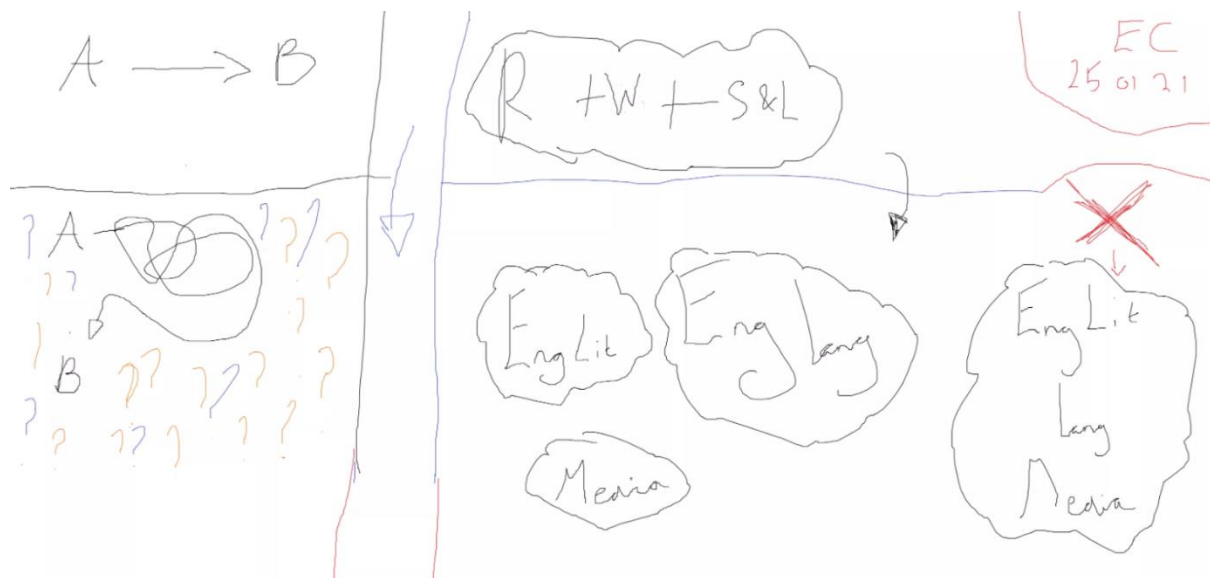
Method

Having agreed that there was an issue in our different conceptualisations of research ('problematizing'), we worked together to find connections that would help us through this issue, working within and even embracing the restrictions that we found ourselves under. We determined to create 'spaces of dialogue [where] both of us [would] have the same opportunities to contribute our respective knowledge' (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010, p. 22). The vehicle for these 'spaces' was agreed to be a visual-methodology approach. This is a method 'where visual mediums (images or objects) can be generated by the researcher or participant (which they have found or created)'

(Bartoli, 2019 p. 1009). This was chosen, pragmatically, as one that worked effectively remotely, and was a medium relatively new to each of us and therefore one of equality where knowledge might be created dialogically. This dialogic knowledge was understood to be neither viewed from a positivist perspective (where there is a ‘truth’ to be discovered), nor from an entirely interpretative perspective (where each person’s truth could exist apart from the other’s). Instead, the purpose of the study was to build a shared understanding of ‘truth’ through dialogue, as it is through ‘intersubjectivity that we share interpretations, points of view, and arguments, and thus we reach agreement on the interpretation of reality’ (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010 p. 22). To this end, neither of us was positioned as either ‘researcher’ or as ‘researched’ as we each assumed both and equal roles.

However, we also acknowledge the impossibility of eliminating all power imbalances. For instance, in writing this paper, we have made the linguistic choice to place ‘supervisor’ before ‘supervisee’ implying, in a society where we read from left to right, that the ‘supervisor’ is more important than the ‘supervisee’, despite this not being our intention.

The initial input into the project was for each of us to “Provide an image that reflects the experience of the PhD”. This task was kept deliberately vague in order to give maximum flexibility of response. These images (figure 1 and 2)



(Figure 1. Edward’s first image)



(Figure 2. Clare's first image. Musée de Cluny.)

were not shared in advance so as to harvest initial impressions through 'live' online discussion. We decided that these impressions would be recorded as the image receiver's response initially, and then – when both images had been considered – each of us would describe our own rationale for our chosen image. In each instance, the commentary was recorded in note form by the other.

These impressions were then coded by each (separately) for themes. This resulted in similar codes, most notably the theme that Edward described as 'The journey' and Clare as 'Gaining insight'. This suggested the beginnings of Lee's 'shape of an answer' and they decided to undertake a second round of prompts that might further elucidate this emerging theme, in this instance by production of an 'artefact.' Edward's artefact was an extract from Stephen King's *The Body* (1982) where the characters are running away from a train:

I screamed, 'TRAIN!' and began to run.

Vern looked back over his shoulder. He saw my attempt at running and knew straight away that I wasn't joking. He began to run himself. Far in front I could see Chris stepping off the bridge and on to solid ground. He was safe. I was glad for him, but I was also jealous as hell. I watched him drop to his knees and touch a track. My left foot almost

slipped, but I recovered and ran on. Now I was just behind Vern. We were more than halfway across, and for the first time I heard the train. It was coming from behind us, from the Castle Rock side of the river.

'Ooooooh, Jesus!' Vern screamed.

'Run, you pussy!' I shouted, and hit him on his back with my hand.

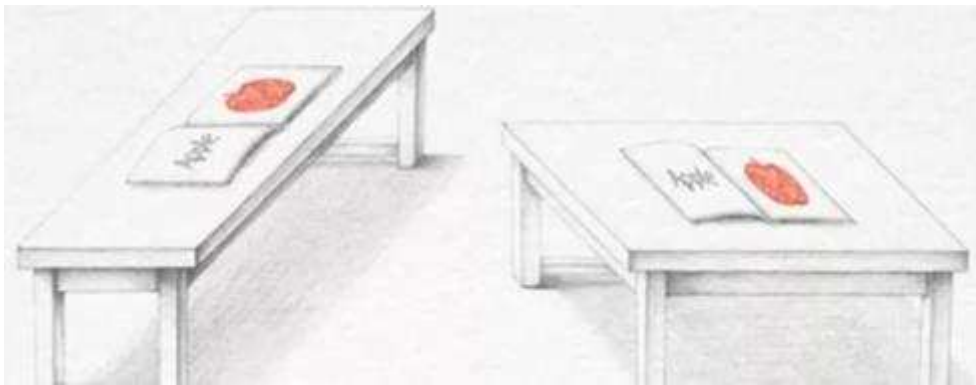
'I can't! I'll fall!'

'Run faster!'

'Gordie! I can't!'

'YOU CAN! RUN FASTER, PUKE-FACE!' I shouted at the top of my voice . . . and was I enjoying this? (p.331).

Clare's artefact was of Shepard's tables, an optical illusion (figure 3).



(Figure 3. Shepard's tables)

Responses to these artefacts were again recorded by each of us, and the results, including any 'uncovered concepts' that had emerged, were discussed.

Findings

The Insightful Journey

This was the overarching theme to emerge from our discussions and was clear in each coding. It summarised how both of us agreed that the PhD is not about the eventual end point, but the experience gained in getting there. This theme is explored in three sub-themes: *The Impact of Educational Experience*, *Developing Trust* and *The Value in Time, Effort and Experience*.

Brew identified four dimensions of concepts in research (2001): domino conceptions, trading conceptions, layer conceptions and journey conceptions. Her description of the trading conception which foregrounds products, end-points and publication is

closest to Clare's understanding of Edward's starting point in his research. The journey conception, which foregrounds a 'personal journey of discovery' is closest to Clare's own perception, and to a perspective that she wanted Edward to consider. In this conception, the subject under investigation is deemed to be less important than the questions that the investigation provokes (Brew, 2001).

The Impact of Educational Experience

In feeding back on his first artefact (Figure 1), Edward explained how his previous education has impacted his current PhD experience. The A à B symbolised at the top left of Edward's artefact, suggested that he believed the PhD would be like his previous education; GCSEs and A-Levels culminated in exams and, although not exam focussed, Edward's approach to his undergraduate degree was framed very much with the end-point in mind. However, the representation in the bottom left-hand side of Edward's image, he explained, represented how his initial assumptions of the PhD being a straightforward journey were erroneous. In grappling with his personal understanding of epistemology and ontology and with the confusing and ever-changing demands of the times in which he was working, Edward described how things became more complicated the more he read, researched and lived. His visualisation of 'messiness' in his image is that the straight line from A to B not only becomes tangled, but the positioning of B is altered. Not only is his path towards the end-point of his doctorate becoming more muddled and indistinct, but his destination may not be where he had believed it to be.

Lee (2008) describes her belief that there are two fundamental influences on the doctoral supervisor: their concept of research, and their own experience as a candidate (Lee, 2008 p.267). Edward's belief is that he is a product of a 21st Century education system that is end-focussed and 'transactional'. Clare's school-based educational experience was rather different, spanning as it did the 1970s. Perhaps this influence is reflected in her initial image of a 16th Century Flemish tapestry (*'Manorial Life – Hunting'*, Musée de Cluny – see figure 2). This features a hunter with a falcon on his fist, a servant carrying an axe and a hunting dog. Clare's intention was to convey the difference between the hawk (the PhD candidate), who is essentially in partnership with the hunter (the supervisor) and the servant and dog, who merely obey (pupils at school). The relationship between the hunter and the hawk is one of mutual trust and is built on respect. The hunter does not teach the hawk to fly and nor can the hunter fly himself, but he does support and guide the hawk to have the best chance of success.

Edward's perception was that the central figure looks out of the image to a space that cannot be seen by the servant, the dog or – in fact – the person viewing the

tapestry. Edward conjectured that this might imply the relationship between the supervisor and candidate, where the servant/supervisor sees the hunter/candidate as they exist at that time and in that place, and must therefore only see the research through the candidate's eyes.

Developing Trust

Trust became a more central issue in the overarching theme of '*The Insightful Journey*.' In the extract from Stephen King's *The Body* provided by Edward, Gordie must trust Chris and Vernon that it is safe to cross the bridge. They cajole him into doing so, and the incident very nearly ends in disaster. Edward identified the bridge-crossing episode as 'the one that everyone remembers' from the book and expressed enthusiasm for the excitement and even the element of danger that the metaphor implies for his readiness to embrace new concepts of research as a result of trusting his supervisors to stretch him academically. In contrast, Clare's second artefact (*Shepard Tables*, see figure 3) was, in fact, an illusion and involved an element of trickery. Clare initially asked Edward how he would seat pupils around the tables in a classroom to ensure all pupils benefitted. He argued that there would be some element of disadvantage, no matter which table was chosen. Clare then revealed that each table was, in fact, the same size and that the picture was an optical illusion. This could be seen as a betrayal of trust, and a deliberate undermining of the supervisor/candidate relationship. Yet, as Clare explained, this represented the 'messiness' of reality and how supervisors share their versions of reality uncritically without, perhaps, knowing what 'reality' is for themselves. The reveal that the picture was an illusion was a comment on how the supervisor can 'lead' the supervisee but that ultimately the doctoral candidate will inevitably have to make their own decisions relating to their own project.

The emphasis on the relationship between supervisor and candidate, and the extent to which both rely on trust, came across strongly throughout this project. In its very inception it sought to create research that was democratic and egalitarian, and which relied on the mutual cooperation and engagement of each party. Underneath the project was, though, a tension in that Clare was challenging Edward to examine and perhaps to alter his perceptions of research. She was asking for his trust that this exploration would be fruitful, and that the endeavour was worthwhile. This tension was managed amicably throughout the project (perhaps itself an indication of a strong relationship), but the tension created remains important. Johansson, Wisker, Claesson et al. in their study, *PhD. Supervision as an Emotional Process* (2014) suggest that 'During a four- or sometimes five-year process it is probably impossible

to avoid conflicts and emotional turbulence' (p. 612), although they also suggest that these conflicts may sometimes lead to valuable outcomes.

The Value in Time, Effort and Experience

Edward brought his own created image to the project in the first round, which was the only occasion that either party did so. This itself shows a commitment and a personal approach. Clare's image – the tapestry – was 'borrowed', but nonetheless was designed to indicate something of value, that takes time and attention to make and that requires commitment for its execution. Interestingly, Edward's interpretation of the image was of 'something two-dimensional' (referring to the lack of realistic perspective in the image). He speculated as to whether this might represent 'the limits of the form', wondering if it might 'represent ... the ultimate point of 2D words on the page?'.

Edward's speculation regarding the two-dimensional nature of the tapestry is interesting. It shows a continued perspective that the doctorate 'is' the thesis and further indicates his continued focus on an end product. He does not speculate on the intricacy, the detail, the time invested, nor the skill of the creators of the tapestry, seeing it only as an object that depicts a scene. Tapestry as a medium was partly chosen by Clare because of its association as archaic, perhaps heraldic. It is a form that implies something that is 'not of modern times', just as the PhD, with its long history and its traditions of oral defense of a thesis is itself something that may be seen as archaic and formal.

This discussion of time and effort led us to speculate about the success of future PhD students. The educational experience of pupils who experienced the pandemic restrictions may impact them in ways not yet known. These further restrictions are occurring within an education system in England that already focusses on exam results and accountability. The emergence of multi-academy trusts as a result of the Academies Act (2010) has led to some schools adopting highly restrictive approaches to their curricula and pedagogy (Keddie, 2016; Collyer, 2020). When education in England focusses on short term goals, Clare wondered how pupils educated in this manner will manage when presented with PhD study, which could take up to eight years.

Of interest is Edward's perception, as expressed during this project, of experiential learning. His discussion of the Stephen King artefact suggests that he is starting to 'value the exploration of intellectual challenges by doing, not just by reading about them second hand', an educational experience greatly threatened during Covid's on-line learning. It is through 'doing' that experiences 'becomes firsthand' and the 'part

to remember” (feedback on artefact session). His positioning of reading as learning that is ‘second hand’ here reflects Brew’s manifestation of the trading conception of research, where there is ‘a focus on reading ... reading to understand the ideas of other people. (Brew, 2001 p. 278). In this case, Edward’s description shows a clear movement towards a more journey-orientated conception.

Conclusion

The doctoral supervisor/supervisee relationship is an important one for both parties. For each, the research represents a considerable investment of time and a commitment to engage. Between them (although, clearly, the primary responsibility lies with the candidate) they share a project, resulting in an output that is both a written thesis and – importantly – a defence of what has gone into it and been left out of it at viva.

To do this, supervisor and candidate need to explore ‘fundamental apprehensions of what research should be about, that are subtle and emotionally charged’ (Johansson, Wisker, Claesson et al., 2014, p. 613). Brew’s 2001 paper exploring research conceptions provides a ‘useful tool in performance review discussions’ (Brew, 2001: p. 282). The visual-methodology, discursive and dialogic approach taken in this study has similarly provided an exploration of research that has proved valuable to both of us, particularly in the context within which we were working. We enjoyed the opportunity to discuss, to explore and to develop our ideas even within these times of restriction. As we emerge into less ‘mind-bending’ times we hope that Edward’s continuing journey will be one that will take in some interesting scenery for us both.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Clare’s co-supervisor for Edward’s PhD, Dr Sheine Peart, for providing external moderation for this project.

Bio



Ed is an English teacher and PhD student based in East Anglia. His PhD explores the lived experiences and identities of trainee English teachers and how they perceive their roles and responsibilities. He is interested in English education and how school management and leadership cultures either support or hinder the progression of the subject.



Dr Clare Lawrence is a Senior Lecturer in Teacher Development at Bishop Grosseteste University, where she is English subject lead. She thoroughly enjoys the opportunity within this role to supervise doctoral candidates, and the co-operative venture with Ed explored in this article is an example of why this is such fun!

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