

We make the road by walking: identity formation and collaborative narratives within the doctoral supervisory relationship.

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Abstract:

The doctoral process is commonly seen as gaining moral worth and honour. It is also often seen as an individual act; some would even say isolated. Within our supervisory relationship, however, we identified and reflected upon the impact of the intersubjective relationship founded on the formation of our individual and shared identities.

Traditional models of supervision have positioned the student as an apprentice or protégé (Petersen, 2014), but as we discovered doctoral education is as much about identity formation, as it is about knowledge production. Rowntree (2015) argues that the practice of supervision is both embodied and situated, and, although structurally asymmetrical, is a reciprocal process. Developing a confident scholar-self arises, therefore, from a supervisory relationship that is founded on close social bonds that are influenced by emotional exchanges between student and supervisor (Rowntree, 2015). Like any long-term relationship, however, the supervisory relationship is multifarious, it is inevitably, and properly, challenging at times because the relationship involves a high degree of emotional involvement on behalf of both the student and supervisor (Bryant and Jaworski, 2015).

In our presentation we consider the complex relationship within the doctoral process through the different perspectives of both the student and supervisor. We recognise that the roles we adopt, and the understanding and knowledge given and received over the course of the research, are shaped by who we are. There were many moments when we reflected on the influence of our relationship on both us as researchers and also on the supervision process. This paper/presentation will give some insight into how our meetings became a space in which the emotional histories of both student and supervisor are 'lived and relived in fragmented moments during a range of doctoral study spaces' (Bryant, in Bryant & Jaworski 2015: 23). We entered into what became creative spaces, which although not therapeutic, became 'interactional moments that left marks on both of our lives' (Denzin, 1989:15).

Our presentation and paper will demonstrate the collaborative narrative approach (Arvay, 2003) that was developed and implemented as a research approach within the doctoral research, as a way to review and reflect on the challenging auto-biographical understandings and experiences which underpinned the research. For both student and supervisor the collaborative narrative approach and supervisory conversation provided a space to both feel 'safe to feel vulnerable' (Rowntree, 2015: 106) and to 'make the familiar unfamiliar' (Delamont & Atkinson, 1995). As a result, both student and supervisor were enabled to emerge from the process with a deeper critical understanding of often challenging life- experiences through an understanding and negotiation of different perspectives of those experiences.

In our discussions together, and in our separate reflections about the supervisory relationship, the relationship itself became an essential part of the research process impacting upon the research in all sorts of significant, as well as minor, ways. On more than one occasion our conversations celebrated and challenged both the I, and the Us within the relationship.

Introduction:

In 2011 Paula (a newly registered PhD student) approached Alison (who in 2010 had completed and been awarded her Ed D) asking if she would consider being her PhD supervisor. We knew each other through our work in the same Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University, although we had taught on different programmes so had not previously worked closely together. Alison accepted at once, with a mixture of pride, excitement and anxiety.

Both of our identities, at this time, were fragile- Paula, as a new PhD student, had wanted to complete a PhD so that she felt she had a legitimate status in the university but was not sure about her ability or acceptance as a PhD student; and Alison, as an inexperienced supervisor, was anxious to 'get it right' for her first PhD student. The weight of responsibility was, and still is, immense for both of us.

Early in our supervisory relationship, we started to recognize and acknowledge our very different identities and perspectives, and started to reflect upon the impact and implications of this. Whilst at first glance, it may seem as if we both shared a similar identity as white, middle-aged, middle-class, female Senior Lecturers working in the same institution, and having both come from a teaching background, yet the impact of our classed childhood experiences have had a lasting impact on how we perceive situations and impact with them. This was something that had not been recognized or acknowledged by either of us until we started to explore it together through the supervisory relationship and our discussions about the direction and focus on Paula's research.

From the start of our supervisory relationship together Alison, in her role of supervisor, started to challenge and question some of the embedded assumptions that Paula brought with her to the research process. It was therefore the coming together of our two different identities, which enabled a much deeper and more critical exploration of the issues that Paula was wanting to explore.

As a result of our conversations and the very different perspective that Alison brought to the conversations, Paula reached a position whereby she realised the significant and un-deniable impact of her own identity on the research that she was planning to undertake. This became a turning point in Paula's research- where she started to open up to the possibilities that an

auto/biographical approach to her research may be more authentic and may be more effective in exposing and examining the issues that were so important to her.

Throughout the supervisory process, we have reflected upon the impact of the way in which we interact with and work with each other upon the doctoral process.

The doctoral supervisory relationship:

There are still relatively few texts that explore supervisory relationships, it being acknowledged that ‘practices of supervision and scholarship remain under-scrutinized both in university settings and in academic writing’ (Bryant and Jaworski, 2015, p.3).

The ‘traditional’ doctoral student is typically seen as white, male, young, and middle-class (Petersen, 2014), and in more traditional models of supervision the student has been seen as an apprentice or protégé. But as Green (2005) stated ‘Doctoral education is as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production’ (Green, 2005, p.153 in Petersen, 2007) and ‘good supervision’ takes into account our humanness, our emotions and values’ (Bryant and Jaworski, 2015, p.11).

Feminist academics in the 1990s sought to highlight the emotional realm in research and doctoral supervision, for example, Aker and Feuerverger (1996, cited in Rowntree, 2015) but it has since waned (Ibid). However, Rowntree (2015) sees that the practice of supervision is both embodied and situated and although structurally asymmetrical it is a reciprocating process. Rowntree (2015) drawing on the work of Ingleton, argued that developing a confident scholar-self arises from a supervisory relationship that is founded on close social bonds; that are influenced by emotional exchanges between student and supervisor.

For Paula, both supervisors have been keen to support her in going beyond the process of engaging in research and writing a doctorate per se; instead focusing on how the self is being (re)constituted and negotiated in the process (Petersen, 2014). The supervisory relationship has been a reiterative practice in recognising, repeating, and recontextualising subjectivity and intersubjectivity, enabling the experience to go beyond a merely cognitive experience; to one that has seen the process of ongoing negotiation of self and identity as equally important.

Indeed, the doctoral supervision relationship is ‘where the emotional histories of both candidate and supervisor are lived and relived in fragmented moments during a range of doctoral study spaces’ (Bryant, 2015, p. 23). Paula’s fieldnotes and research diary throughout the doctoral journey have therefore detailed and recorded how:

“Meetings with my supervisors have, over the years, involved surprise, passion, disappointment and euphoria; all of which have provided emotional and intellectual sustenance during the long marathon of the PhD. Through their love and recognition, I have learnt, or am at least beginning to learn, to have trust in myself; and to see myself as worthy of this doctorate and my position in the academy. I am convinced that the recognition I have acquired from the solid social bonds of the supervisory relationship/s and the confidence it has provided, has enabled me to flourish in my own learning.”

The relationships that have been established are seen to be borne out of intersubjective love, rights and solidarity (Honneth, 1995). The fact that we value each other’s qualities despite the differences between us in terms of class and gender has made Paula feel valued and accepted for who she is. Paula notes, therefore, how the supervisory relationship has:

“given me courage.”

Like any long-term relationship, however, the supervisory relationship is complex. It is inevitably, and properly, challenging at times, involving a high degree of emotional involvement on behalf of both the student and supervisor (Bryant and Jaworski, 2015). This was experienced in our supervisory relationship and we valued reflecting on those times of heightened emotion and the cause and impact of it:

Alison: You just became really angry

Paula: I wasn’t angry actually. I was.... It wasn’t anger...although know it came across like that....I think that is a class difference....it wasn’t angerI don’t know what it was.....it was complete and utter frustration, impotence. I felt out of

control. I was not angry...not for a moment did I feel angry at anybodyeven myself. I just didn't know what to do with myself. I honestly didn't know what to do with myself. (Collaborative narrative: February, 2017)

There were also times when we both felt lost and isolated, Paula noting that:

"During the writing process there have been incredibly emotional moments suffered in isolation."

I have just realised I have not seen Alys in ages. I really miss her provocations.... how can I contact her when she is so busy in her new role (RD: September , 2016).

It was so good to see Alys today. We both acknowledged our part in the breakdown of communication and got back to things how they were. Within 10 minutes we were both raving about how I was going to take my doctorate forward. She's woven her magic again (RD: February 2017).

Alison, in turn, also experienced feelings of low self-confidence and isolation, as Paula seemed to become increasingly engaged in a research study and methodological approach outside of Alison's immediate expertise. As a new and inexperienced supervisor, Alison spent time questioning the value of the support that she was able to offer. This coincided with a period where Alison moved into different roles outside of the University context, reducing time available to continue the regular informal meetings with Paula, and impacting on Alison's sense of her own identity as she moved away from academic roles and into senior leadership roles back in schools. The significance of this was not fully understood by either Alison or Paula until some time later, as we reflected together in subsequent supervisory meetings and as Paula has identified in her thesis:

It was the relationship with my first supervisor that has truly made a difference to my ability to be reflexive, and to remain excited about my research. I missed her when getting together became difficult. She has provided a space in which it is 'safe to feel vulnerable' (Rowntree, 2015, p. 106).

Indeed, it was this awareness that led to our consideration of the collaborative narrative approach as a way of increasing the potential of our work together and the impact that it could have on supporting the development of understanding of Paula's research.

The Collaborative Narrative Approach:

As Paula was the author, the narrator and the protagonist of her research (Lejeune, 1989) our relationship therefore took another turn at the final stages of Paula's data analysis, when she called upon Alison, in her role as supervisor, to help her interrogate her data. Adapting Arvay's (1998) collaborative narrative approach we talked about our own interpretation of the data and any issues arising in which both parties contributed to the interrogation of the narrative.

Arvay (2003) intended the collaborative narrative approach be collaborative; to attend to power relations within research; and to deal with issues around voice and representation. She acknowledged that this method is time-consuming and very personal. She also pointed out that collaborative research relationships are often fraught with power issues that can be difficult (Ibid.).

For us, we adapted this approach to set up in-depth conversations where we reviewed and interrogated together parts of Paula's analysis and writing. Ahead of the meeting, Paula would share a particular piece of writing that she was working on, to give time to Alison to read and interact with it on an individual basis. We then came together and talked together about what we had experienced and identified by reading through the shared piece of writing. The conversations were all recorded, but were unstructured and informal, allowing us to interrogate and discuss the writing in a variety of ways. This approach enabled new insights to be explored, as typically Alison challenged and exposed embedded assumptions that Paula had brought to her writing, bringing those to the surface so that they could be investigated again in relation to wider literature.

The Collaborative Narrative Approach therefore enabled Paula to take up a dual consciousness, with the help of Alison, to tell the story as narrator whilst at the same time reflecting on the story told as researcher, constantly moving between these two positions as the story unfolded. This links with Arvey's (1998) model where the researcher and co-investigator both hold multiple 'I' positions in the exchange as various possible 'selves' interact. In this way Paula was able to interpret her own 'script' from the perspective of the 'self' of the narrator, and the 'self' of the researcher. It was the opportunity to negotiate multiple and shifting meanings through voicing our understandings equitably that moved her thinking forward. To reveal aspects of oneself, the hidden; the silenced; and the private, there has to be trust- this approach therefore evolved out of the particular supervisory relationship that we had developed over time.

What kind of learning emerges from the experiences of connectedness?

The experience of connectedness that we discovered through our supervisory relationship enabled the process to become more than a merely cognitive experience, for both of us. It became a process of ongoing negotiation of self and identity which enabled both of us to challenge and question our assumptions and beliefs about the 'self' but also as the 'other' enabling the self to be (re)constituted and negotiated in the process (Petersen, 2014).

From the start, as a result of the connectedness that we felt and the emotional bonds that were developed through the supervisory relationship, Alison was able to gently challenge Paula to begin to form an academic identity through engagement in conference presentations and has resulted in an intellectually productive as well as emotional experience. This may not have happened had it not been for the strong and supportive relationship that had been fostered. Yet, as an emergent scholar who was unsure of her positioning within the institution and the PhD process, this was particularly important to Paula in terms of developing a positive relationship to self-esteem. It enabled Paula to become part of a community of scholars with particular traits and abilities that contribute positively to the shared projects of that community (Honneth, 1995).

In the joint Conference Presentation that Alison encouraged and supported Paula to engage in early in the PhD process ('It's All About Me.....? Complex understandings of the positioning of the researcher within the research process' Constructing Narratives of Continuity and change

Conference, Canterbury, 2012), the feedback from people attending the presentation was interesting. As Paula later reflected in her fieldnotes:

It was interesting (and perhaps a little disappointing) that after our presentation some members of the 'audience' were more interested in our relationship than the paper itself (FN: May 2012).

Already, people outside of our direct work together could see the strength of the supervisory relationship in supporting the development of our joint learning, and the growth of our knowledge about the research area and, importantly, of ourselves.

Importantly and centrally, the benefits of the relationship were not just one-way, and Alison openly acknowledged to Paula the reciprocity of the learning experience to her as supervisor as well. As a result of our work together, we have both emerged with a much stronger and deeper understanding of our own self and identities, and there have been many opportunities where we have reflected this back to each other to support our learning:

Alison: You would have been thinking about things very differently back then...and that was part of the conversation I had with my parents. I would never have asked those if it hadn't been for the conversations that we have been having. (Collaborative narrative: February 2017).

Identity formation- changing identities:

Through the supervisory relationship we have both, individually and collectively, engaged in identity formation: our identities have changed and we have found support in reflecting about this with each other.

For Paula, the auto/biographical research approach has enabled her to create space in her life to reflect on who she is in relation to self and others and 're-collect' (Etherington, 2004) an aspect of herself that had not previously been known. Paula has confronted, acknowledged and, to some extent reconciled, the intricacy of her identity and has increased her understanding of her 'self', using it as a vehicle for growth. As Paula identifies at the end of her thesis:

“In order to succeed in the world, I have become someone different. It was not intentional and it has happened gradually, and not without injury and loss.”

For Alison, working with Paula to develop the auto/biographical approach has disrupted the complacency that Alison had previously experienced in relation to her identity and ‘self’, As Paula has ‘confronted’ herself and her childhood experiences, so Alison has confronted herself and her lack of critical understanding of classed experiences and the impact of those on the individual. It has taken Alison on a similar journey of discovery into the history of her own family, as Paula has undertaken with her family history, asking questions of her parents and family members that she would not previously have thought to consider.

For Paula, her confidence and sense of identity as a PhD student has been developed as she has moved from a newly registered PhD student to a student nearing completion of her thesis. For Alison, although Alison’s professional identity has changed as a result of changing roles moving her away from the University setting, the doctoral journey with Paula has moved Alison from an inexperienced supervisor towards becoming an experienced supervisor once she has supported Paula to successfully complete her Viva.

For both of us, we have confronted our academic identities, allowing ourselves to start to identify ourselves as ‘an academic’. This has been achieved, for both of us, by “making the road by walking”: learning and supporting each other to learn within an emotionally intelligent supervisory relationship.

Concluding Comments:

We did not set out to, but we have challenged the traditional notion of a doctoral supervisory relationship – the master and the protégé (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015). From a ‘woman’s way of knowing’ (Belenky *et al.*, 1997), we quickly assumed a relationships built on ‘love, rights and solidarity’ (Honneth, 1995) that took into account our ‘humanness, our emotions and values’ (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015: 11).

As Paula acknowledges:

"It may be risky to acknowledge the emotional dimension of the doctoral education but it is emotion that has been the driving force behind the risks that I have taken; and the vulnerability and the suffering that is felt in the scholarly pursuit of knowledge that has had the biggest impact on my cognition."

The importance of recognizing and valuing the impact of connectedness and relationships in the learning process, particularly in something as emotionally deep as the doctoral supervisory relationship is therefore essential.

This is not the end of the process of discovery and learning for Paula and Alison; through our shared experiences together we have identified a need to explore in more detail the impact of a range of different research relationships- we continue to 'make the road by walking', and the journey is strengthened through the connection with an-other.

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