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Exploring the experience of supervising pre-registration nursing students thorough their literature review dissertation

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Abstract This report explores and reports on the experience of supervising pre-registration nursing students thorough their literature review dissertation. The introduction includes the rationale and key questions for the investigation. It highlights the key transition points that students have to manage and the need for supervisors to be aware of these so as to support and develop them effectively.

The investigation explains how the work was undertaken and expands on the methods used. The findings are broken down into; what constitutes an excellent literature review, effective ways of working with students and the problems that can arise offer an insight into the views of supervisors supporting pre-registration students. They suggest a need for attention to supervision practices and the development of detailed guidance, through participatory workshops, to support the supervisor through the supervisory process

Introduction

As teaching staff take on a leadership role supervising students, thought needs to be given to the developing relationship, how this progresses over time, and the impact it has on the process. Zuber-Skerrit and Ryan (1994) suggest that research postgraduate training is unique among academic responsibilities as it provides a direct link between teaching and learning activities and research, highlighting how supervision cannot be underestimated in bringing together individual goals of higher education. Although some work has been undertaken in exploring these issues at postgraduate level little is known about research undergraduate training, particularly in the nursing profession, and the experiences and expectations of supervisors.

In relation to those supervising doctoral students there is evidence to suggest that the supervisory process relies heavily on the expertise, time and support of supervisors who must foster the skills and attitudes of research in their students and ensure that a thesis of an acceptable standard is produced (Heath 2002). This is similar to the expectation at undergraduate level. Supervisor's understanding of research supervision and also their experience of supervision as a student are two key influences (Lee 2008).

It is at the undergraduate level where the changes take place in the student's learning context with a need for assuming a more intensive level of engagement with the area that they have chosen to study (Clauston & Whitcombe 2005). Here many students find themselves having to manage a series of profound transition points (See Table I): (Day & Bobeva 2006). These include changes in how students communicate, the type of knowledge they accumulate and how they present this,

how they self manage within a supervisory relationship and a move to the role of collaborator rather than pupil. The supervisory process will be key to ensuring that students are supported at this time of conversion.

From	To
Interaction within the institution---External communication	
General knowledge--Knowledge in-depth	
Knowledge consumer---Knowledge provider	
Single truth --Multiple/provisional truth	
Structured time allocation--Self management of time	
Delivery to a student group---One-to-one with supervisor	
Directed---Autonomous learning	
Pupil---Academic collaborator	

Table I: The Impact of the Dissertation Upon Undergraduate Student (Day & Bobeva 2006)

Health care practitioners require skills and knowledge to critically appraise and generate evidence in order to evaluate, develop practice, and provide appropriate care. Their roles also demand the development of skills that enable them to discuss, disseminate and implement research findings in collaboration with colleagues, service users and the wider community. On the BSc (hons) Nursing programme at a large University in London, a 6000 word literature review on a chosen topic is undertaken and students are allocated a supervisor. The supervisor, for the duration of the module, offers academic support and advice on the process and content of the literature review. Six hours of supervision are allocated to each student, to be utilised as needed. Examples of supervision include developing research questions, discussion of draft work, support to utilise critical appraisal tools and making sense of research methods used in individual studies. This module aims to provide the students with a knowledge and understanding of research and its methodologies. It aims to develop students to be critical consumers of research aware of strategies for sharing and implementing findings and developing practice with colleagues, service users and local communities. This module aims to enable students to be able to carry out literature reviews of their own and to be able to set that research within a wider context. Importantly the module aims to develop students' skills in educating others.

The present work aims:

- To explore supervisors' approach to supervision and their concept of research supervision
- To uncover views on the characteristics of a successful literature review
- To explore reasons for problems that may arise and how these are managed
- To identify what students have gone on to do after the literature review

The Investigation

Questions to be asked of supervisors were based on a small aspect of research carried out by Anne Lee (Forthcoming book) who explored the influences on a supervisor's approach to their work with doctoral students.

A general email was sent to all potential pre-registration BSc (Hons) Nursing supervisors explaining the reason for the study (n=125). Questions asked included:

1. What has been your experience of supervising pre-registration nursing students undertaking a literature review dissertation? How many?
2. What have your students gone on to do?
3. How would you define an excellent literature review?
4. What effective ways are there of working with your students? Where do you begin? Where do you go then? How often do you see them? What do you do? What do they do?
5. What problems have arisen and how have you coped with them?

It was explained in the email that responses could be given by email or a telephone conversation could be held instead. Two academics opted for a telephone interview. By analysing the responses it was hoped that an understanding of the attributes of pre-registration BSc Nursing supervision at one institution could be offered. Others reading the work may recognize what is reported at the place that they work. The findings will hopefully benefit a wide range of stakeholders including:

- Supervisors and pre-registration nursing students
- Supervisors and students across the University in other Schools who can compare and contrast experiences
- The Academic Development and Services Department and the Learning Development Centre who develop research supervision support resources
- Others outside the institution where the study took place supervising under graduate students

Findings

There were 20 out of possible 125 responses (16% response rate). Fifteen of the 20 supervisors had experience of supervising pre registration dissertation students. One lecturer was concentrating on her PhD, and two supervised only post registration students. One was a newly recruited lecturer and one said that they had a focus on management development outside the remit of nursing. Themes uncovered from the findings include: 'What constitutes as excellent literature review; Effective ways of working with students and Problems that arise'.

What constitutes an excellent literature review?

Staff described an excellent literature review. A range of views were offered and responses were detailed. The term 'appropriate' was used to identify areas that needed to be incorporated including: appropriateness of subject, literature reviewed, and the critiquing tool utilized. Up to date and pertinent literature was highlighted as

important. It was also clear that the aims of the review and the discussion needed to clearly relate to the original research question/aims/objectives.

> '*The key to 'excellence' lies in the ability to pose pertinent and relevant research questions, which have been well considered, and presented to the reader in a series of developmental steps during the introduction … Thus intelligent and informed questions and objectives can then be derived from this'.*

Some supervisors focused on the critical appraisal skills of the student.

> *For a dissertation to be excellent, I would expect the student to be able to demonstrate high level critical and analytical skills in critiquing the literature both at the level of the individual study and across the literature.*

Alongside this key areas for future investigation had to be explored along with recommendations for further developments. The importance of this being carried out systematically was identified as was the ability of the student to write an academic piece of work with relevance to the practice setting. Transparency through the whole process was seen as paramount with an appropriate referencing system used. Pearson and Brew (2002b) identify attributes of individuals including the ability to think and solve problems inventively and able to communicate effectively both orally and in writing linking with findings that supervisors wanted students to work 'logically and intelligently'.

Finally the quest for a brave, interesting and unique academic story was identified and the ability of students to apply what they had found in practice:

> *I always like to read a dissertation from the 'brave' student who is willing to provide a personal and subjective reflection on the issues, and to ponder over what they have discovered i.e. what do the findings and experiences actually mean to them as an individual in clinical practice?*

Effective ways of working with students

Generally detailed answers were given for the question concerned with effective ways of working with students incorporating a number of factors that supervisors found important. Some said they started with the handbook as a guide to how to progress and then split the review into two parts; the actual development of the research questions and the search strategy then the analysis and writing up of findings, discussion and implications for practice. Learning contracts and 'being available' were seen as important for many.

> *Agree a learning contract – explore expectations, agree learning objectives and agree ground rules about supervision … Make self available for regular supervision in times of crisis – easily contactable and reliable for appointments*

The style of the supervisor was alluded to with some feeling strongly that proof reading was not part of the supervisor role and others stating this as implicit to good supervision. Students have identified constructive feedback given on draft work as being very valuable (Todd, Bannister, & Clegg 2004). Some supervisors observed

how the student progressed and made decisions based on that progress as to how the student should be supported. This included ensuring the student knew how to go about and had the knowledge, right attitude and skills to undertake the work. If this was lacking support was to be offered to gain these proficiencies.

Developing the effectiveness of students included encouraging students to immerse themselves in the literature and utilise the library services. There was also encouragement to organise the development of the review through a timetable to ensure that work was undertaken in time. One supervisor highlighted the importance of students feeling secure in the work they were undertaking

> *Encourage the student throughout and ensure they have a sense of security, continuity, belonging, purpose, achievement and significance*

The supervisory role is an essential role where suitable leadership qualities should be demonstrated. Lazy or unmotivated supervisors have a demoralizing effect on students (Rudd 1975). As Dinham and Scott (1999) observe the student-supervisor relationship is often very enriching and productive, but alternatively can be extremely difficult and personally overwhelming.

The process of supervision as a leadership activity, is one of the most complex and subtle forms of teaching undertaken (Acker & Hill 1994). Little has been written about the experience of supervision at pre-registration level but it is likely to share characteristics with other forms of supervision including doctoral supervision. The supervisory process at doctoral level relies heavily on the expertise, time and support of supervisors who must foster the skills and attitudes of research in their students and ensure that a thesis of an acceptable standard is produced (Heath 2002). For the pre-registration supervisor similar characteristics and goals can be noted, the outcome being a piece of academic work which may warrant publication.

Generally supervisors did not know what their students went on to do following completion of their literature review and had not published the literature review with their students.

> *I think most went straight into clinical practice, I have no idea what has since become of them, unfortunately!*

One supervisor identified the importance of keeping in touch to encourage students back to the University for further study and in some cases a research career.

Problems that arise

As with any piece of complex work where the expectation is to produce a piece of publishable academic work that may be published, there were problems in the supervision process that arose. Many students had problems structuring the review and communicating in the written word and some were advised to seek academic support elsewhere in the University. Occasionally plagiarism was a problem although it wasn't always clear if this was intentional or not. Some students had unrealistic expectations of their competency and were ultimately not capable of undertaking the work independently. Other students lacked motivation to be self directed and found

the transition from pupil to academic collaborator difficult (Day & Bobeva 2006). Some left the majority of the work till too late and didn't make regular contact with their supervisors. Others suffered personal problems that impacted on their ability to complete the work. The ability to work independently is an important outcome of undergraduate study, particularly the dissertation (Gibbs 1992) and there is a need to ensure that students become independent learners. Students have moments highlighted by Silén (2003) as 'chaos' and 'cosmos'. These terms indicate movement on the students' part between the emotionally unsettling experience of intellectual confusion and moments of insight and order. This takes place as they shift the boundaries of their personal knowledge and they need to be supported through these transitions.

One supervisor discussed how a student became obsessed with her topic as it was of personal interest to her. This meant she spent too long on background reading wasting valuable time. Alongside this she had several personal problems which impacted on her ability to get the work done.

> *My student became obsessed with the topic which was to the detriment of the process of conducting a search. She spent many hours on background reading. This may be because she had a personal connection to the subject. She also had numerous personal crises during the process which caused difficulty in meeting timelines.*

Others were anxious about their progress and this sometimes became more pronounced and difficult to manage. Finally some students didn't do the work as agreed at supervision sessions leading to an inability to complete tasks and frustration on behalf of the supervisor.

Enhancing and informing practice

In this investigation supervisors discussed what they thought constituted an excellent literature review, effective ways of working with students and the problems that can arise whilst supervising pre-registration students. Clearly the role of supervisor is challenging and students arrive at the task with varied learning styles and different abilities and expectations. Doctoral supervision, with many similarities to supervision at the undergraduate level is described as a complex, teetering process and has been compared to 'walking on a rackety bridge' (Grant 1999) and this reflects some of what has been drawn out in this report. Supervisors have similar and dissimilar notions of the literature review, how it should be carried out and what might constitute a problem during the process.

Rich interesting and informative data were collected from supervisors. There is an urgent need to share these findings with a larger group of potential supervisors which could take place through a series of workshops. Many supervisors did not respond to the request to complete the questionnaire so their views remain unknown. It would be helpful to bring them together to enable them to express their views. Through workshops the main themes uncovered could be fed back to supervisors and plans made for how best to develop supervisors in the future taking into account the diverse strengths and weaknesses that students present with. Supervisors use various strategies and teaching styles when supporting students.

'Hands off' and 'hands on' supervision has been described. With the 'hands off' approach, supervisors intervene minimally in the process of supervision and fewer and slower completions often result. With the 'hands on' approach supervisors and others will often intervene often resulting in more and faster completions (Sinclair 2004).

Gurr (2001) elaborated Grant's (1999) 'rackety bridge' metaphor and devised a model for aligning supervisory style with the development of research students possessing 'competent autonomy'. This model is defined by two key dimensions: a 'direct'/'indirect' and an 'active'/'passive' dimension aligned categories of behaviour:

- o direct active, characterised by initiating, criticising, telling and directing the student
- o indirect active, characterised by asking for opinions and suggestions, expanding students ideas, or asking for explanations of supervisee's statements
- o indirect passive, characterised by listening and waiting for the student to process ideas and problem solve; and,
- o passive, characterised by not responding to student's input

A key point is that the effective supervisor moves flexibly between the various modes discussed here. This information could be offered in the workshop to help supervisors reflect on their personal style and how effective it is in helping students develop and complete their literature review.

As found in this study supervisors reported a range of methods to support students. In a previous study by Todd et al (2004) students identified the role of the supervisor as someone who could offer academic guidance on how to manage their work, motivate and encourage and communicate academic expertise in the area of the dissertation. They disagreed that it was the responsibility of the supervisor to help write the dissertation itself although this view could be challenged if the student struggled to write articulately. Finding out what students expect locally could be a useful expertise and it is recommended that such a piece of work is carried out with initial discussions on how this could take place held at the supervisor workshops.

Other recommendations include publishing dissertation guidelines that make explicit the criteria against which students are marked and agreement that academic staff would apply these criteria so that students receive consistent guidance. Some staff might find joint supervisory arrangements with more experienced staff useful and this could be explored. New staff or those about to undertake supervision could attend the student's first lecture to hear what is they are taught.

Further training that helps supervisors expand their skills as educators and leaders, be adaptable, able to negotiate learning and career outcomes with students and to improve through self-awareness by reflecting on the supervision process (Pearson & Brew 2002a) is required and it is recommended that this training is developed locally but in combination with the wider University.

Finally, there is an opportunity through the supervision relationship to encourage students back to undertake a Masters and for those who are capable and interested a PhD. This is not presently happening and supervisors generally loose contact with students. Maintaining contact may help students who are interested in returning to undertake further study as they will have a contact with whom to discuss career aspirations. If they decide to return to study at City, the institution will benefit financially.

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