

Postgraduate supervision in a South African transforming academic environment: A reflexivity approach

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The pace of global transformation places a great emphasis on the need for development, with higher education identified as a key agent in the development of a knowledge economy. Higher education systems have been challenged with providing the necessary skilled person-power to complement the changing labour market. Postgraduate supervision is a vital tool in building institutional research capacities, reputation, financial support and developing skill amongst peers, and between supervisors and candidates. Thus, the effectiveness and efficiency of postgraduate supervision processes determine to a large extent the quality of output and the extent of skills transfer. This article is based on a training course focusing on strengthening postgraduate supervision, attended by the researcher. The primary objective of this article is to examine the concept of postgraduate supervision within a transforming academic environment. Specifically, the article examined how aspects of the supervision process enhance skills development and knowledge transfer. Data for the study were collected through a personal narrative inquiry approach and thematically analysed, with meaning construed alongside related literature. The findings show that postgraduate supervision is characterised by various factors which determine the degree of skills transfer and development. The study provides insights into aspects of supervision that if not well managed, may compromise the objective of skill development. It contributes to the on-going discourse in supervision pedagogy and recommends careful consideration of the dynamic changes that may impact the level of educational transformation and skills development in the knowledge economy.

Introduction and research background

Africa is threatened by various political and socio-economic challenges attributed to the developmental agenda of the continent. It is believed that education is a fundamental solution to solving Africa's problems and as such, the higher education sector has intensified the need for postgraduate education, which is considered to be one of the means of achieving Africa's developmental agenda. Okeke (2015) noted that though higher education in Africa offers scope for cultural and community development, it plays a critical role within the global context in which knowledge-based innovations and products fetch high value on the market. Delany (2009) added that in knowledge-based economies, governments see universities as engines for change and expansion of prosperity. South Africa's Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2009) posited that postgraduate students are vital components of the national system for innovation. In this light, universities are recognised agents in driving development by building on human resource capacity.

Irrespective of the vital roles of higher education in Africa's developmental agenda, the sector is constrained from giving its fullest support to the nation's development and has

undergone various reforms to address these challenges. An excerpt from the 1st African Higher Education Summit (AHES) held in Dakar, Senegal in March 2015, stated:

The continent's higher education sector is plagued by huge capacity deficits and challenges that threaten its survival, sustainability and contribution to the continent's historic and humanistic project for democratic and development transformation (Zezeza, 2018, p. 1).

The African higher education sector has been characterised by, amongst other challenges, resource deficits, under-investment in research, and inadequate capacity/research capabilities (Zezeza, 2018; Mathers, 2016; Okeke, 2015; Varghese, 2013). After many years of independence, the continent is plagued by research under-performance (Zezeza, 2018), poor quality of research and less than satisfactory research output (Zezeza, 2018; Mba, 2017), which remains below 1% of total global research output (World Bank, 2014). The quality of the research is presumed to have far less contribution relevant to the country's development needs (Okeke, 2015). In fact, Cooper-Knock & Cheeseman (2015) noted that most research on Africa is produced by non-African scholars outside the continent, than by those from the continent. This has resulted in higher education's continuous struggle to provide the skilled person-power required to keep up with the ongoing development. Harle (2016) noted that African universities have limited supervisors, insufficient resources, and a lack of good research expertise, resulting in many universities struggling to mount strong postgraduate studies programs. Such programs are considered good pathways to locally increasing higher education capacity and skills levels (Van de Laar, Rehm & Achrekar, 2017), and secure the next generation of academics (Harle, 2013). Developing the next generation of academics requires improving the university postgraduate output.

Varghese (2013) noted that higher education struggles to use research and innovation to address the continent's transformation agenda. In addition, Van Rensburg, Mayers & Roets (2016) posited that creating, transferring and managing knowledge has become a central issue in the knowledge economy with its competitive environment, thus creating increased pressure on higher education institutions to enhance postgraduate research output. This is because the work of postgraduate students constitutes a vital component of a university's research effort and contributes significantly to the institution's research profile (Delany, 2009). Postgraduate level qualifications often entail supervision of research-related activities, making supervision a complex social encounter that involves two parties, supervisor and candidate, with both converging and diverging interests (Abiddin, Ismail & Ismail, 2011). The supervisor-candidate relationship is a cornerstone in building a capable human resource to bridge the increasing research gaps in the universities. However, achieving success in such relationships brings into context the supervision relationship, scholarship in the postgraduate environment, supervisory practices and capabilities.

Recognising the importance of building capacity and what contributes to successful supervision, this article presents the experience of a supervisor in the postgraduate supervision process. Beyond the introduction, is a discussion on the concept of

supervision within an academic environment followed by a theoretical underpinning on the concept of reflexivity. A methodological approach using a narrative discourse analysis on the postscript data is presented and the article ended with concluding thoughts and recommendations.

Literature review

The domain of academic research supervision

According to Kumar & Huat (2011), the concept of research in an academic context means “an original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding”. The idea of research sometimes incorporates a process of supervision, which though complex and multidimensional in defining, portrays similar meanings. According to Loganbill & Hardy (1983), supervision refers to a formal process based on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee (candidate), where the supervisor’s role is to help the supervisee acquire appropriate professional behaviour and competence in professional activities. Lee (2009) argued that supervision means discipline and oversight of work. A recent definition within the same context posits that supervision is a two-way interactional process that requires the student and the supervisor to connect intentionally with each other and within the spirit of professionalism, respect, collegiality, and open-mindedness (Ismail, Abiddin & Hassan, 2011).

Given these definitions, Brew (2001: 272), opined that a postgraduate supervision could be a personal journey of discovery. It is a relational and empowering process (Tian & Singhasiri, 2016; Waghid, 2015; Liu & Breit, 2013; Schulze, 2012; Bak, 2011; Grant, 2010), because the supervisor is deemed the closest person who can mentor and provide the necessary support and guidance to the student in need (Cryer & Mertens, 2003; Ellis, 2001; McAlpine & Weiss, 2000). Acknowledging this, Tian & Singhasiri noted that supervision occurs under a hierarchical relationship and provides an unidirectional mode of knowledge transfer from the powerful supervisors to powerless supervisees. The mutual outcome of such a relationship not only improves the supervisor’s knowledge capacity, but leads to transformation and the creation of a strong personal identity for the supervisee as a researcher and professional.

Supervision therefore, entails various aspects that determine the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Within the limits of this article, the researcher specifically concentrates on aspects considered most relevant to the narrative, which are kindness and trust, space, communication and power dynamics in the supervision process.

The act of kindness and trust

Kindness is generally regarded as a common everyday word, but in view of Binfet & Passmore (2019), it is a multifaceted, distinct and complex construct imbued with deep meaning and far-reaching ramifications on both an individual and a social level. In the *SAGE encyclopedia of lifespan human development*, Israel and Abramson (2018) defined kindness as a general inclination or tendency to be warm and affectionate, and to show

some elements of concern, charity, and cooperation. Similarly, trust is considered a vital component in building relationships. Accordingly, Mayer, Davis & Schoorman (1995) defined trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the one instilling the trust (the supervisor, in this case), irrespective of the availability of any control measures”.

Research studies within the academic environment have shown the centrality of trust as a key component in the capacity development of postgraduate students, knowledge innovation and creation (Robertson 2017; Green 2005; Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen, 2004). Trust between the supervisor and the supervisee develops as an emergent state being influenced by factors such as interactions, context, situation, motivations, and thoughts involved in the supervision process (Burke, Sim & Lazzara, 2007). In addition, ten Cate (2006) noted that trust includes quality care that reflects a dimension of competence beyond observed ability.

The duo-supervision space

Handal & Lauvas (2008) viewed supervision in higher education as a pedagogically complex challenge and the spaces occupied by supervisors are becoming increasingly prescribed and controlled by frameworks and regulations (McGloin, 2018), shaped by the university and other national requirements (Olmos-López & Sunderland 2017). This is because of internal and external influences driven by the need for quality assurance, compliance with policy guidelines, supervisor development and career progression (Hamilton & Carson, 2015). With such modalities and systematic changes, postgraduate supervision incorporates both relational and learning spaces within the pedagogy, thus increasing the complexity of the process. While relational space may extend to facets of social context sometimes beyond what supervision entails, the learning space addresses the educational developmental aspects. According to Olmos-López & Sunderland (2017), the educational development entails learning that goes both ways, for the supervisor and the supervisee - an aspect the author refers to as a duo-supervision space. The latter challenges the traditional hierarchical private space of supervisors characterised by a centralised model of student learning from an expert (Spiller, Byrnes & Ferguson, 2013, p. 833) and has been under increasing scrutiny within the pedagogy (Hamilton & Carson 2015; Hammond, Ryland, Tennant & Boud 2010; Manathunga 2005).

Communication in postgraduate supervision

Communication in postgraduate supervision entails both formal and informal ways of disseminating information between the supervisor and the supervisee. According to Saleem & Perveen (2017, p. 140), informal communication entails learning in an informal setting, and formal communication consists of prescribed, formal methods of sharing information. Communication in postgraduate supervision consists of written documents, clear timelines, regular meetings (inside and outside of the office, e.g. coffee shop, via social media, etc.). Studies have shown that both formal and informal ways of communication play critical roles in building relationships, developing identities and

improving the postgraduate success rate (Morton, Storch & Thompson 2014, p. 34; Adkins, 2009).

Leveraging the power dynamics

Power dynamics in postgraduate supervision has been long researched and debated. Foucault noted that all social relations and associated parties are endowed with systems of power, which can be equal or unequal, and constant or subject to transformation (cited in Grant 2001, p. 14). The student-supervisor relationship is embodied in power dynamics, and its complex nature is influenced by various socio-economic factors such as culture, gender, ethnicity, expertise, age and race (Green & Dekkers, 2010; Ellis, 2001). In addition, Ibrahim (2018) highlighted on how various forms of power, namely, referent, coercive, expert, legitimate, and reward power, play out in supervision to determine the outcome of its process. Within the South African purview, other challenging factors peculiar to postgraduate supervision, are inadequate academic literacy and writing skills, inequitable power relations, and inadequate preparation in research methodology (Wadee, Keane, Dietz & Hay, 2010). Supervision across diverse cultures could be a rich pedagogical site but also a place of puzzling and confronting complexities (Grant & Manathunga, 2011).

Given that universities acknowledge the hierarchical structure inherent in the postgraduate supervision process, power relations are applicable to both the supervisor and the student. In this setting, the supervisors are endowed with both institutional and expertise, a power deemed necessary for effective supervision (Boughey & McKenna, 2018). The supervision process setting allows the supervisor to exercise both legitimate and expert power, while the students exercise their power by allowing the supervisors to read their drafts. Murphy & Wright (2005) noted that supervisors' use of power reflects positively in facilitating discussions, sharing of ideas, providing constructive feedback, empowering the student and offering a safe and collaborative partnership. Gill & Burnard (2008) posited that use of powers in postgraduate supervision may reflect a positive or negative outcome, therefore, the management of these factors is important for a successful supervision process.

Theorising reflexivity in the domain of supervision

The theory related to supervision is multifaceted and complex (Friedman, 2003; Weick, 1995); applied to various perspectives in life and remains integral to academic disciplines (Beck & Stolterman, 2016). According to Cornelissen (2000), academic research is primarily initiated for academic understanding, which is mostly concerned with building theories. The meaning of theories has been defined from different perspectives. Some scholars view theory as a set of principles or statements designed to structure observations, understanding, and explanation of the activities and phenomena in the world (Carpiano & Daley, 2006; Wacker, 1998; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). For Abend (2008), theories are formulated to explain, predict, and understand phenomena and, in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical assumptions. Given the complex nature of theories, developments in the world of

knowledge-sharing show that scientific theories to some degree can be dogmatic and mythological, and make presuppositions with the view that the foundation of theories is not always as scientific as it seems (Popoveniuc, 2014).

Narrowing to the concept of reflexivity, Popoveniuc (2014), asserted it is a conceptualised construct in the field of social sciences. Reflexivity is complex in nature, and has been theorised, defined and widely applied across various disciplines. The phenomenon is increasingly gaining ground in academic research. A general definition of reflexivity refers to an individual's considered response to an immediate context and the ability of service users to process information and create knowledge to guide life choices (Ferguson, 2004, 2003; Elliott, 2001). The four notions highlighted by Zienkowski (2017, p. 3) are: reflexivity as a general feature of interaction and subjectivity; as a methodological praxis in the social sciences; as a property of discursive and non-discursive systems, and as a key feature of late modernity. Within the scope of this article, the researcher focused on reflexivity as a methodological praxis, which is concerned with the relationship between researchers and their research objects (Zienkowski 2017) or researchers as agents in the research process (Hibbert, Coupland & MacIntosh, 2010).

The researcher in this paper adopts Schwandt's (2001, p. 224) definition of reflexivity as (a) the process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions and preferences; (b) an acknowledgement that the enquirer is part of the setting, context and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand; and (c) a means for critically inspecting the entire research process. Considering this definition, the study adopts Soro's (2013) theory of reflexivity. The researcher's reason for adopting a reflexivity theory stems from the fact that (a) there are multiple ways of inquiry into a phenomenon; (b) the participants are socially situated and constructed (Engward & Davis, 2015); and (c) the researcher questions how knowledge and understandings are situated within the epistemological framework. According to Soro (2013), the concept of reflexivity serves two functions - the cognitive and the manipulative functions. While the cognitive function entails the understanding of the world we live in, the manipulative function addresses the impact we create in the world (Soro, 2013). These two functions connect an individual's thinking (subjective reality) and the actual state of affairs (objective reality) (Soro, 2013; Lawson, 2013). In essence, reflexivity produces knowledge by expressing an individual's thinking in relation to the observable facts surrounding the individual. Given that reflexivity has multiple dimension, the researcher focused on self-reflexivity. This encompasses self-reflection, self-reference, and self-reflectiveness, which are prerequisites for individual self-consciousness (Popoveniuc, 2014). In the domain of self-reflexivity, the researcher connects thinking and reality in the interpretation of the researched. By so doing, the researcher uses experiences, biases, orientations, etc., in postgraduate supervision, to process thinking into expression and thought that in turn produce knowledge.

A methodological approach to reflexive research

This reflexive article is motivated by the researcher's participation in a postgraduate supervision training course. One of the key foci of the course was for the participants to prepare a written document in relation to any of the key themes and categories covered in

the course. With that being said, the researcher focused on the category of supervision and supervisor experience, bringing into context a personal reflection. For the purposes of this study, the researcher adopted an action research paradigm because it requires active participation of the researcher in the process under study (Fellows & Liu, 2003); focuses on a social problem with the aim of promoting change (Parkin, 2009), and produces useful knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2007). The study adopts a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (2013), the five commonly used qualitative approaches to research include, case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology. The researcher selected a narrative inquiry quality approach, defined by Creswell (2013) as a study of experiences expressed in the way individuals live. Various types of narrative inquiry exist which include field notes, life story interviews, photo voice projects, letters, orally told stories, autoethnography and other human experience narrative methods (Ford, 2020; Creswell, 2013).

Going by Creswell's definition and types of narrative inquiry, the researcher focused on autoethnography which involves describing and analysing personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). Autoethnography or personal narrative inquiry allows the researcher to remember, interpret, construct and reconstruct events in the outside world (Sclater, 2003), and explores how the physical, social, and cultural environment impacts and shapes an individual's experiences (Haydon, Browne & van der Riet, 2018; Clandinin, 2013). Given the three dimensions of narrative inquiry, temporality, sociality, and spatiality, the researcher focused on the sociality which supports the researcher's use of personal, social and cultural interaction, as well as participants' understandings and perceptions of their environment to build their social framework (Clandinin, 2013). Qualitative data were collected through the researcher's reflexive experiences involving personal beliefs and values in postgraduate supervision. The data collected were coded and thematically analysed alongside several key features in the related literature.

The narrative

Narratives are an acceptable social research tool which is central to individual identity, self and experience. In this article, I narrate my journey with a masters student, Ms Agnes Siyaya (a pseudonym), in a transforming university in South Africa. Demographically, both Agnes and I are working class females and of African descent. At the time of writing this article, Agnes was within the age range of 30-33 years while I am in early 40s (40-43). The journey began when Agnes registered for a masters degree program and was allocated to me as her supervisor. Agnes was doing a course-work masters and was struggling with two of her modules at the time. She approached me for assistance regarding an assignment for a module she was registered for then. Though I advised her to contact the lecturer-in-charge, I could tell she did not want to do so and preferred I assist her instead. So, given my knowledge and experience in the discipline, I was able to provide Agnes with the necessary help needed in addressing the assignment.

Much later, she wrote me a letter of appreciation and indicated that she had obtained a distinction in that assignment. During the course of the semester examinations, Agnes

approached me again, to assist her with understanding how to address questions in the examination for two of her modules. We had a session where I was able to assist with applying theory to practice/case studies in relation to the upcoming examination. As previously done, Agnes sent me an SMS (text message) with a follow-up email, showing appreciation for all the help and time I had dedicated to assisting her. She indicated that she made a distinction in one of the modules and got an average pass mark for the other module she had anticipated failing. It was my pleasure that I was able to create that space and opportunity to put a smile on Agnes' face.

When we finally got to the dissertation stage, as supervisor and candidate, we adopted both formal and informal means of communication. Prior to Agnes commencing on her dissertation proposal writing, we had several consultations. In one of the consultations, there were issues with her intended use of a particular research approach, which I did not see as an appropriate approach for the study. She made mention of an informal meeting with a professor who confirmed that the approach was ideal for her study. I offered explanations on the pros and cons of the intended research approach but left the final decision for her to take. As the proposal writing commenced, Agnes realised that the intended research approach was not ideal for her study and she changed to another approach which I had earlier suggested to her. After one of our meetings, Agnes pleaded with me to have a co-supervisor (an individual whom she indicated she has access to). Puzzled, I questioned the concept of access and believed that I had never denied Agnes access even at odd hours to reach me. She burst into tears in my office. I consoled her and reluctantly granted her wish. As the writing journey proceeded, I usually provided Agnes with constructive feedback using tracking, followed by a face-to-face meeting for further explanation of what needed to be done. I noticed that Agnes struggled with writing skills. I recalled having a session with her where she explained to me her intention but the written aspect in her manuscript implied otherwise. During that consultation meeting, I guided her and she drafted the concept as per her intention. Later on, I conducted a workshop with seven of my postgraduate students, including Agnes, where I taught them the language of a dissertation.

Moving forward, after granting Agnes her wish, I remained her supervisor and she was assigned a co-supervisor of her choice. At some point, Agnes wrote to the program managers to drop me as a supervisor and continue with the co-supervisor on the condition that I provide constructive feedback on her submissions. I remembered in one of Agnes's communications to the program managers during the period that she wrote: [Even] "*my final chapters 1 to 3, still came back with corrections*". The program managers reviewed my constructive feedback and the feedback from the co-supervisor and refused to grant Agnes her wish of moving on with only the co-supervisor, because of concerns of quality and expertise. From then, Agnes resorted to only formal means of communication between us and I could tell that things were no longer as usual. For example, there was an email from Agnes beginning a sentence with, "*This email has reference to...*". I once had a meeting with Agnes in my office where I explained to her the implications of extreme use of formal communication, which may for instance, create a liminal space and widen the relationship gap between the supervisor and the supervisee. This may be considered unhealthy. Subsequently, I stopped receiving phone calls and text messages from Agnes.

The distance was quite obvious, and all my efforts to resuscitate the use of formal and informal means of communication, as a supervisor, to provide a good if not excellent relationship between Agnes and myself, proved unsuccessful.

From then on, Agnes resorted to the use of the co-supervisor only and I was not allowed to review the last three chapters of her dissertation. Finally, at the point of the submission of the dissertation for an examination, I read through the entire document and provided a report on my concerns, especially on the last three chapters of the dissertation. I had a meeting with Agnes in my office, discussed the concerns in her dissertation especially the last three chapters, and the need to address those concerns before the examination. I also noticed that the concerns were captured in the proofreader's report. I told Agnes that I was willing to work with her to ensure the concerns were addressed before the examination but unfortunately, she was adamant that she was not prepared to do so. The dissertation was finally sent for an examination. The outcome of the examination required Agnes to register for another semester, re-write the entire last three chapters of her dissertation and re-submit for re-examination.

Discussions on postscript and scholarly significance

Given the narrative and the emerged data, discussions are presented alongside four aspects of supervision as depicted in Figure 1.

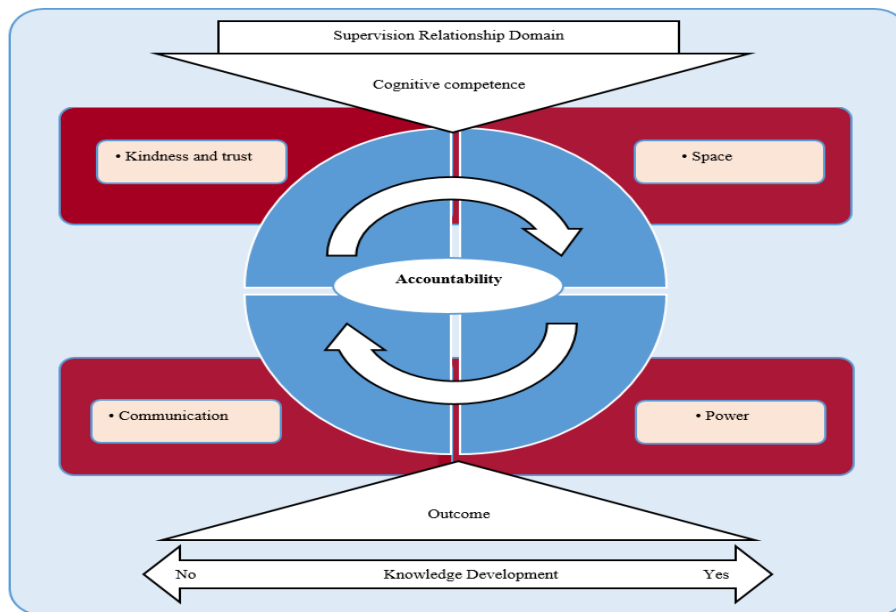


Figure 1: A graphical exposition of the reflective domains (adapted and modified from Bazrafkan, Shokrpour, Yousefi & Yamani, 2019). (use "zoom in" function on PDF reader for improved legibility)

Given Figure 1, cognitive competence applies to the supervisor not only being conversant but exhibiting the ability to transfer the knowledge, and the supervisee ability to grasp the concept. In so doing, both the supervisor and the supervisee are held accountable under the circumstance. The themes of engagement, which purports such an arrangement centres around the concepts of kindness and trust, space, communication, and power.

The act of kindness and trust

Mkhabela & Frick (2016) argued that kindness and trust represent the mutual core aspects that define student-supervisor relationships, while Mantai & Dowling (2015) posited that kindness and trust within the pedagogy reflect as an acknowledgment. Data from the narrative support the enactment of kindness in providing Agnes with the necessary help to address the assignment and in conducting a session with her to help her prepare for examinations. The stance of Cole-King & Gilbert (2011), who defined kindness as being sensitive to the distress of others with a commitment to try and do something about it, is also reflected in the narrative: “*She burst into tears in my office. I consoled her and reluctantly granted her wish*”. The narrative shows evidence not only of my accommodation of aspects beyond the supervision contract, but also in the formal and informal ways, Agnes showed her appreciation initially.

In my earlier relationship with Agnes, I identified her challenges with academic writing and gained an understanding that she came from a non-academic background, which added to her writing woes. I assisted Agnes by reviewing her assignment and had a session with her and explained the concerns in her document. The idea was that she would grasp and practise the writing skills prior to writing her dissertation. This is in line with Lee & Murray (2015), who noted the need for students’ initial understanding of principles of academic writing, thereby acquiring the necessary skills required. The process helped us because Agnes accepted the constructive feedback and scored a merit, as noted in the narrative. I believed that trust played a crucial role in achieving this because of the care and effective communication we developed over time. Furthermore, our relationship incorporated the views of Devos, et al. (2015), who discussed components of structure that support trust as: regular supervision, constructive feedback, providing answers to specific questions, expertise, instrumental help, in-depth discussions, and dedicated time. For Guerin, Kerr & Green (2015), trust requires space and time for effective communication to develop.

The duo-supervision space

My personal quest for professional development played a large part in my supervision relationship with Agnes. In addition, the need to uphold the university’s mandate controlled and strengthened the process. I argue that my experience with Agnes reflects a mutual and decentralised supervision relationship in which the concept of private space was decolonised and construed because of dynamic changes in postgraduate education. This is supported by McGloin’s (2018) assertion that the supervisory space is shifting because research is evolving and postgraduate education is responding to this changing context. As such, supervision goes beyond the mere academic framework and involves

more complex social and human relations (Dimitrova, 2016). This shift in modern thinking has seen the deconstruction of traditional supervision into a knowledge-sharing model of the supervision relationship, referred to as “contemporary supervision” by Hair (2014, p. 108), or “colleague in training” by Chamberlain (2016, p. 1).

Communication in postgraduate supervision

The initial use of formal and informal means of communication provided Agnes and me a level ground where we could pour out our thoughts without prejudice and at the end achieve our common objectives. It reinforced mutual understanding and trust, a similar view shared by Mkhabela & Frick (2016), in their supervision relationship. I argue in this article that while my constructive feedback might have been detailed, it assisted Agnes in achieving good grades in her modules, and provided a learning opportunity and development of her academic identity. These outcomes I considered most important because there is a saying that good supervision is similar to good parenting, in which one has to be tough and clear, as well as kind and generous (THE, 2014). This is akin to the concept of the commonly understood tough love. Furthermore, I support the assertion that formal and informal communication with supportive interactions can help in building a good rapport or relationship that supports student success (Breunig & Penner, 2016; Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Gill & Burnard, 2008). Thus, resorting to only formal means of communication created not only an imaginary gap but an unhealthy relationship associated with discomfort between us. It changed the supervisor-supervisee relationship. This is a situation which, if not well-managed, may lead to emotional distress (Bazrafkan et al., 2016) for both the supervisor and the student, which may well debilitate the student’s ability to succeed (Boika 2016). Therefore, a careful balance between the application of formal and informal means of communication would go a long way towards achieving a successful outcome.

Leveraging the power dynamics

My initial relationship with Agnes reflected this status, as evidenced in the modules in which she attained good grades, in the development of her research tools, the successful approval of her research proposal without corrections, the issuance of an ethical clearance certificate for her study, and the advancement she made in the earlier chapters of her dissertation. However, Agnes’ use of power resulted in her registering for an additional semester, the re-write of three chapters, re-submission and re-examination of her dissertation. This highlights the importance of balancing power to ensure the full benefits are achieved.

Drawing from Figure 1, the extent to which kindness and trust, space, communication, and power, are balanced in a supervision arrangement reflects on the outcome of the process. Such outcome therefore determines the extent to which knowledge is shared, transferred or developed.

Concluding thoughts and recommendations

According to Veldsman (2019), relentless innovation, which requires continuous learning, has placed a critical stance on the role of higher education in providing the right human capabilities to unlock value, create wealth and drive the knowledge society. The South African National Development Plan (NDP vision 2030), posited the need to raise the qualifications of staff to PhD to address the capacity for research and supervision and improve the quality of student outcomes (DHET, 2013). It is also assumed that increasing the number of PhD graduates will significantly improve throughput and research productivity (Cloete et al., 2015). With the on-going transformation in the academic environment, much emphasis has been placed on postgraduate supervision as a form of knowledge transfer and skills development. This article, therefore, specifically examined the postgraduate supervision process and its effect on the development of future academic researchers in a South African transforming academic environment. Evidence from the study has shown that to achieve this depends on a range of multiple factors associated with the supervision process, which may include kindness and trust, supervision space, communication, and power relations. It is believed that supervision is an interconnected learning and development process; thus, the extent to which these factors are effectively managed would reflect the success and quality of the knowledge being transferred or capability being built.

This study therefore recommends the need for educational awareness into the journey of postgraduate research supervision process for all the stakeholders involved. The awareness would provide case scenarios of the positive and negative challenges associated with the journey. Having said this, and drawing from the narrative, I bring into context here the relational aspects of trust and power. I concur with the idea that trust can be construed as a deliberate exercise of power (Raffnsøe, 2013), in which uneven power dynamics, isolation or paralysis could occur (Gardner & Barnes, 2014; Lovitts, 2001). I argue that as supervisors and supervisees could exercise power in supervision processes, sometimes the idea of balancing the power is a far-reaching accomplishment. In view of the foregoing, the findings from the narrative pose the following questions for future academic discussion and research:

- i. What are the determinants of a supervisor's ability to exercise power in the supervisory process?
- ii. What role could power play in the knowledge transfer and development of a postgraduate candidate as a future researcher?
- iii. To what extent does trust contribute to the knowledge transfer and development of a postgraduate candidate?

Further research to address these concerns would be most helpful in achieving the goal of using postgraduate supervision as a means of capacity development and contributing to the knowledge society.

Limitations to the validity of the study

Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nyström (2008) noted that human sciences research builds on inter-subjectivity. Reflexive writers are “ethically and politically self-aware, in making themselves part of their own inquiry” (Pelias, 2011, p. 662). A reflexive writer socially construes his/her experiences and finds expressions in statements, actions, and behaviour. In doing so, the researcher is conscious of the experiences, biases, prejudices, values, and orientations likely to shape the interpretation and approach to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell 2015; Weiner-Levey & Popper-Giveon, 2013). The researcher’s openness to the narrative was maintained throughout the data collection process to avoid influencing the thoughts and expressions narrated.

Disclosure statement

This article reflects the author’s personal encounter/experience and therefore no conflict of interest is declared.

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