

Postgraduate Supervision: A Heuristic Approach to Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning

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Abstract: Since postgraduate supervision remains a grey area for many academics following several hydra perspectives and interpretations, the paper examines how postgraduate supervision is an approach to learning, unlearning, and relearning. The study is entrenched within James and Baldwin's framework on good practice in postgraduate supervision to discuss what the concept should entail from the viewpoint of the researcher, while there is also a constant recourse to relevant literature. The paper addresses the fuzzy nature of supervision through an autoethnographic research. It discusses how supervision at the postgraduate level should not merely involve guiding a student to graduation, but an avenue for the supervisor to also learn, unlearn, and relearn academic concepts, methods, and approaches. The study contends that postgraduate supervision should not only be a stage for building new knowledge through postgraduate students' research, but it should also be a stage for knowledge improvement, knowledge advancement, knowledge re-evaluation, knowledge cross-pollination, and knowledge transfer. It is in so doing that the learning, unlearning, and relearning nature of postgraduate supervision can indeed come to fruition.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Knowledge, Learning, Postgraduate, Supervision

1. Introduction

Supervision, especially in the academic milieu, remains a grey area for many. From some supervisors lacking precise knowledge of what is expected from them to students being unaware of the nitty-gritties of supervision, the concept remains fuzzy and perhaps worthy of significant academic research with the aim of strengthening the foundation of postgraduate supervision. As Yousefi, Bazrafkan, and Yamani (2015: 97) put it, problems and challenges in research supervision process are caused by improper and unstructured context and the educational climate in which the tasks and responsibilities of individuals are not clear and well defined. The overarching idea of supervision in a general context relates concepts such as: management, direction, control, administration, and overseeing. One can refer to all these as the industry perspective to supervision. However, it is the contention of this study that supervision in the academia extends way beyond these concepts that perceive students as being subordinates. In the academia, students should also not only be considered as apprentices. Often, there is a misconception that postgraduate supervision deals solely with knowledge transfer where the supervisor gives knowledge to students. This in several ways, undermines the importance of higher education as a domain for exchange of ideas. Postgraduate supervision is more than knowledge transfer, it is also learning, unlearning, and relearning. Understanding this context, this

ethnographic research discusses supervision from my individual experiences while also positing that postgraduate supervision may have been misconceived by many.

Based on my experience, the approach to supervision, as well as the method of delivery at several levels, have all contributed to my argument that the concept is persistently confusing to both supervisors and students. Having been supervised at three different levels (undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees), I encountered completely diverse experiences further affirming that the concept must be fleshed out explicitly for one to have a solid and uniform perspective of this important concept. This paper addresses my auto-ethnographic reflections as a student before proceeding to a discussion of what the focus of postgraduate supervision should be. The study is premised on James and Baldwin (1999) framework focusing on good practice in postgraduate supervision where they list important rudiments relating to the characteristics of an effective supervisor which includes:

- Ensuring the partnership is right for the project.
- Getting to know students and carefully assess their needs.
- Establishing reasonable and agreed upon expectations.
- Working with students to establish a strong conceptual structure and research plan.
- Encouraging students to publish their work early in their academic life and often.
- Initiating regular contact and provide high-quality feedback.
- Getting students involved in the life of the department.
- Inspiring and motivating students.
- Helping if academic and personal crises crop up.
- Taking an active interest in students' future careers.
- Carefully monitoring the final production and presentation of the research,

Using the above premises, this paper draws on my personal experiences of being supervised to discuss postgraduate supervision while there is also a constant recourse to literature texts which have been employed to give credence to the narrated experiences and reflections. Although James and Baldwin's (1999) framework is exhaustive and arguably user-friendly, one cannot however expound that postgraduate supervisors are aware of these critical points nor do they ensure that all the points are upheld in their dealings with postgraduate students. Scholars such as Cloete et al. (2015), Manyike (2017), and Sadiq et al. (2019) note that effective postgraduate supervision is a concern at universities globally. It is therefore unsurprising that in South Africa for instance, where I have had my major supervision experiences, there have been several concerns raised within higher education institutions about the state of postgraduate training in the country using indices such as quality of graduates, supervision capacity, students under-preparedness and research infrastructure among other things (Cloete et al. 2015). For Mutula (2011), some of these postgraduate supervision challenges stem from inexperienced supervisors, supervisors training in different research areas from their specialisations, and the lack of research expertise. A point also conceded by Bob et al. (2021) that supervisory capacity may be lacking primarily because of younger academics who lack the necessary experience.

This paper recognizes a generational problem here in that today's supervisors were previously students many years ago. As such, their supervision techniques may in fact be a result of the influence received from their own supervisors. Thus, this study argues and recommends that it is significant to learn, unlearn and relearn in the academia. Through such an endeavour, postgraduate supervisors are not entirely rigid in their ways of supervision. Instead, they are flexible and adaptable to changes depending on circumstances and situational contexts surrounding the present-day postgraduate supervision. Recognising that a one-dimensional approach to knowledge, and its nuances is extremely dangerous and counter-productive, it is important to perceive knowledge and its accompanying nuances as entities that can be recycled, repurposed and recontextualised in everyday usage.

2. Methodological Approach

The paper employed an auto-ethnography approach to the study of how postgraduate supervision is not an attempt to control, but an attempt to learn, unlearn and relearn. To Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography is a qualitative approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand certain experiences by drawing from tenets of autobiography and ethnography. They argue that using this approach, an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences. In a similar vein, McIlveen (2008:3) states that the core feature of autoethnography entails the researcher performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon and it is not just writing about oneself, it is about being critical about personal experiences in the development of the research being undertaken, or about experiences of the topic being investigated. Of the many types of autoethnography research discussed by Ellis et al. (2010), the personal narrative style is employed in this study. According to them, as well as Tillmann (2009), personal narratives are stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives. In the case of this research, the paper is written drawing from the academic and research experiences of the author.

Although not without its own challenges, scholars such as Méndez (2013) have lauded the approach for its potential to contribute to others' lives by making them reflect on and empathise with the narratives presented as through the social account of an experience, some may become aware of realities that have not been thought of before. It is within this context that I draw on my own experiences to establish the need for postgraduate supervision to not only be a stage for knowledge transfer, but importantly, to also learn, unlearn and relearn. What makes ethnographic research even more interesting, according to Méndez (2013), is the impact of the stories and personal experience which makes writing and research more relatable to many kinds of readers outside of the academic settings. For Méndez (2013), autoethnography, as a method, humanizes research by focusing on life as "lived through" in its complexities.

3. An auto-ethnographic reflection of postgraduate supervision

My very first encounter with academic supervision, although peripheral, was during my undergraduate days as a final year university student working on undergraduate research which Longcroft (2020) refers to as an extended piece of work meant to integrate and develop the student knowledge and experience in a discipline area. Longcroft (2020: 135) argues that research at this stage "involves independently exploring a specific question in depth where students are required to demonstrate research and project skills, critique their own and others' work and underpin their work with a range of relevant sources". During my undergraduate days, my understanding of the role of the supervisor was highly limited with my expectations being that my supervisor was only a marker, and the supervisor holds the key to my graduation.

My undergraduate research made little or no difference to my growth or development research-wise, and this was partly impacted by the fact that I basically did exactly what the supervisor advised me to do. The other challenge relates to the popular perception that research at the undergraduate stage, as well as supervision, are mainly rudimentary. In fact, it is concerning that the expectation at the undergraduate level is highly unclear although in discussions with some academics, it is perceived that the intention at this stage is to introduce students to the scientific ways of becoming a researcher. However, thinking even further, I believe undergraduate research is only an avenue to develop basic research skills especially as a way of assisting students who intend to further their education. Hence, they can build on the foundational skills when they become master's and doctoral students. What is missing, but also important at this stage is the need to foreground that research is a process of knowledge making and that the undergraduate research is an important stage to learn useful techniques about research.

I must also admit that I was completely oblivious of the roles of a supervisor at this stage. Boikhutso et al. (2013) echoed similar sentiments in their observation that often, during undergraduate research process, the students' and supervisors' expectations are most of the times at variance mainly because they are not clearly spelt out, which consequently has implications on the quality of research

outputs. Thus, for me at that stage, the intention was to do exactly as required by the supervisor to get an excellent grade. Considering the position of Boikhutso et al. (2013: 41), the problem of poor supervision of undergraduate research is also aggravated by lack of students' motivation with contributory factors including lack of prerequisite research skills on the part of the students. They agree that research supervision at undergraduate level is extremely plagued with several complexities and challenges which are mainly evidenced in students' outputs and growth.

For my master's degree however, there were observable changes. I soon began to understand what supervision may be perceived to be. The first observation for me was the fact that I could have a supervisory team with one person being a main supervisor, and the other being a co-supervisor. My instant understanding was that research and supervision at this stage would become rather serious as two different experts would be able to compensate each other in the supervision process resulting therefore in a better supervision model. An imminent challenge was that instead of identifying a potential supervisor for myself based on their experience and expertise, as would have been the ideal practice, I was unable to do so, and my supervisor then had no primary expertise in my field. This was however compensated with the fact that I had a co-supervisor of my choice who had a better idea of my academic background. However, I experienced a little challenge as my then co-supervisor, being a visiting professor, had to return to his parent university after six months.

Technically, the combination of my supervisors was appropriate especially since my master's research focused on two different cultures and each of the supervisors could relate with each of the cultures. However, in terms of disciplinary expertise, the pair was perhaps not a great combination. This is in fact an important factor in James and Baldwin's (1999) framework where they advise that involved personnel must ensure the partnership is right for the project. I worked more with the co-supervisor in terms of the research than I did with the supervisor. Observations from my master's degree days in terms of supervision may be categorised into two. First, being supervised successfully is both the responsibilities of the student and the supervisor. Second, where one of the party's defaults, it affects the research process and ultimately the research output. Since Yousefi et al. (2015) stipulate that enough communication, either verbal or by email, is an influential factor in the effectiveness of supervision, it is important to ensure effective communication between the supervisor(s) and the students.

Van Rensburg et al. (2016) also concur that one of the key elements in the supervisor-student relationship is communication, and more specifically, feedback on submitted work related to the research project. James and Baldwin's (1999) point actively comes to play here where they recommend that supervisors work with students to establish a strong conceptual structure and research plan. Through these regular feedback sessions, important issues such as the synergy of chapters and concepts, as well as engagement with current literature, and the degree of clarity required in the methodology could be easily identified and resolved. Van Rensburg et al. (2016) notion of academic and writing support are important in academic writing.

Their underlying argument that a supervisor will be able to move through the learning processes related to knowledge and skills with the student is one that all postgraduate supervisors must inculcate. Also, they concede that a supervisor should be able to facilitate and develop students' abilities to write academically. Since Van Rensburg et al. (2016) already established that the supervisor is only able to identify a student's strengths and weaknesses through feedback and assessment, it is expected that the students' weaknesses should be identified at an early stage if there is a good relationship between the student and the supervisor(s). I was able to identify my writing weaknesses on time as I did not only receive support from my supervisors, but I also received a great deal of support from a senior academic colleague who took a great interest in me. With his sound and constructive comments/feedback, I was able to engage critically with my writings which has contributed significantly to my academic development.

It was during my doctoral days that I had a team of supervisors who in many ways aligned with the framework of James and Baldwin (1999). I had two supervisors whose primary interests lie in field of expertise. With these dependable and experienced supervisors, I was able to produce a defensible doctoral research thesis. First, the partnership was right as both supervisors have interests in my primary field of research. Second, one of the first things I did with my doctoral supervisors was to discuss my strengths and limitations so as to concur and be aware of my needs. At an early stage, we developed the supervisor-student agreement which established the expectations from both ends. More importantly, we

worked collaboratively on the research plan, proposal, and overall development up to the point of submission.

For Abiddin et al. (2011), such a supervisor-student agreement indicates the primary focus of the beginning phase of the supervisor-student relationship as they develop a degree of trust and become familiar. It was in this agreement that the ethical conducts of both the supervisor and the student was discussed as well as timelines. Throughout the period of my doctoral research, there were contacts with my supervisors from time-to-time with constructive feedback and comments to improve on the quality of my writing. As Abiddin et al. (2011) put it, at each stage of the research project, students need different forms of guidance, and it is important that the supervisor is present to offer the time-to-time guidance and support. At this stage, I began to see supervision from a different point of view. From my doctoral experience, I was able to reflect differently, while also unlearning earlier perceptions from the master's days in a bid to relearn new standpoints and viewpoints regarding supervision. Importantly, I was beginning to see supervision as being more than teaching a student how to write, but as a process of working collaboratively to create and produce new knowledge.

Van Rensburg et al.'s (2016) definition of supervision as an interconnected learning and developmental process that takes place within a relationship between the supervisor and student is relevant in this context. My ideology of supervision changed significantly to that which I exchange knowledge with my supervisors and perhaps, this could have been so given the rigour expected in a doctoral degree. In Mouton's view (2011), experienced supervisors possess the ability to provide guidance and structure to their students. With my doctoral research, I was able to receive necessary guidance and mentorship from my supervisors. Not only did I have a healthy professional relationship with my doctoral supervisors, but I also maintained a personal healthy relationship with both of them throughout the period of my doctoral research as well as after (Mouton 2011). A point also echoed by Lin and Cranton (2005) that it is important to maintain good interpersonal relationships between graduate students and their supervisors as it is often a determinant of student success.

The period of my doctoral research taught me to value constructive and quick feedback which Abiddin et al. (2011) perceive as one of the strongest characteristics of good supervision. Majorly, the feedback I received are on two levels: (i) where my supervisors disagree with my argument or (ii) where my supervisors think I have not said enough, and I could say even more through different ways. To put it more concretely, Hawkins and Shohet (1989) identify three tasks of a supervisor which extensively capture my experience during my doctoral days. The first relates to the administration/normative task which is concerned with the management aspects to deliver operations, processes, and quality. Both my supervisors were available throughout in assisting with my administrative requirements and related processes within the university. The second is the education/formative task which involves the process of skill development and the ability to reflect on experiences. In this regard, both my supervisors were expert in the field and as such, were able to contribute significantly to my educational development. Through their critical and constructive feedback, coupled with professional and expert advice, I was able to development my academic writing and research skills extensively. Finally, the support/restorative task involves the supportive and helping function which is what Carroll (1996) conceives as counselling supervision and involves such concepts as consulting, evaluating, and monitoring professional or ethical issues and being emotionally aware as they work with clients.

4. Seeing Postgraduate Students as Academic Colleagues

It is the argument of this paper that postgraduate supervision will benefit significantly from an approach that considers both the supervisors and students as academic colleagues who engage critically and collaborate to produce new knowledge. I argue that postgraduate supervisors must ensure that they provide a strong foundation for their postgraduate students in order to prepare them solidly for the future. Anne Lee's (2008) propositions on approaches to supervision state clearly that the roles, expertise, and expectations should be alongside issues of relationship with students, critical thinking, enculturation among other things. A critical probing into these issues should provide supervisors with an array of perspectives. Wood and Louw (2018) intimate that supervisors should also learn much from past experiences. Such experiences make it important to value collaboration, critical reflection within caring dialogical spaces, and develop trusting relationships.

Shamida, Sidhu and Nawi (2021) have established that postgraduate education is one of the main sources contributing to the advancement of knowledge, technology, and innovation. Oparinde and Govender (2019) discussed the role of postgraduate research in the development of African continent. Focusing on Africa specifically, they argue that through postgraduate research, institutions can effectively impart significant intellectual development which will allow the continent to actively answer questions relating to African problems. In the study, they posit that research mentoring is underutilised at postgraduate level and that there is a need to improve on research mentoring strategies. However, what was not vividly discussed in the study was the role of postgraduate supervisors in this regard given that they are in the business of mentoring future postgraduate supervisors. Van Rensburg et al. (2016) concur that high quality supervision of students plays a pivotal role in the scholarship of discovery and the development of evidence-based practice. Thus, they intimate that the role of the supervisor in providing a supportive, constructive, and engaged supervision process is important in the development of next generation practitioners who have the correct educational and skills mix to fulfil the future needs of the profession.

It is important to build young academics' research competencies at the early stage as this would enable them to be effectively embedded in the academic culture (Mydin et al. 2021). Evidently, research supervision plays a key role in training, empowering, and facilitating postgraduate students to become independent researchers (Fenge 2012). To a large extent in fact, the educational responsibilities alluded to by Van Rensburg et al. (2016) in the development of future academic practitioners seem to be the only common approach adopted by postgraduate supervisors thus putting limited attention on the skills transferred in the process of the supervision. Having established that current supervisors have significant influence on the practice(s) of their students in the future, it is important that existing supervisors not only focus on educational needs for their students, but also focus on skills that current students can recoil to in the future. Such skills can be rooted in the notion of intellectual flexibility which allows for an individual to be able to learn, unlearn, and relearn. This study in no way berates supervision styles, instead, it argues that supervision should be approached with an adaptable and convertible mindset as Armstrong et al. (2004) posited that analytic supervisors are perceived to be significantly more nurturing and less dominant than their more intuitive counterparts.

Borrowing from Wright et al. (2007), the postgraduate supervisor should be a quality assurer, supportive guide, research trainer, mentor, and knowledge enthusiast. Undoubtedly, to be all of these requires a considerable level of flexibility on the part of the supervisor. This is also an important factor identified by Muller (2009) that in the modern day, there is a need to desist from perceiving postgraduate supervision as means of knowledge transfer, but as a means of knowledge creation. This is a welcome position for the current study although with a minor revision. While Muller (2009) advocates for knowledge creation, I advocate for knowledge co-creation. With this approach, the student creates the knowledge with the supervisor. As such, students are not perceived as being independent researchers but as interdependent ones. It is in such interdependence, that the supervisor is able to probe and interrogate the knowledge of the student and juxtaposed with the knowledge of the supervisor thus encouraging the processes of learning, unlearning and relearning.

What is recommended in this study is the notion of intellectual/cognitive flexibility in postgraduate supervision. It is important that postgraduate supervisors begin to view supervision not as a rigid process, but as a process that is flexible and highly adaptable. Subscribing to Dajani and Uddin's (2015) perception that cognitive flexibility is a critical skill that enables individuals to respond in the face of changing environments accurately and efficiently, the academia will benefit enormously from an intellectually flexible environment especially between postgraduate students and their supervisors in the pursuit to co-create knowledge. It is worth mentioning also that the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn does not only assist the postgraduate supervisor in the supervision process, but it also contributes to the supervisor's career and self-development.

This paper aligns with Wood and Louw's (2018) overview of postgraduate development especially by foregrounding that the aim is not only to supervise students to produce a research thesis, but the aim is also to impact the lives of the student and help them in their career development. As such, to inject vital skills in postgraduate students, it is important to build a solid relationship between the supervisor and the students which is Wood and Louw's (2018) first level in postgraduate development. According to them, important to the relationship factor are collaboration, coaching, commitment, and communication. The second level is concerned with reflection and the factors include: critical thinking,

co-creation of knowledge, and lifelong learning. The second level especially relates to specific disciplines, and supervisors as well as students need to locate these factors within their academic background. The final level is recognition which deals with such factors as: affirming own and others dignity; and building confidence and capabilities.

5. Conclusion

Postgraduate supervision is not controlling or managing, postgraduate supervision is (re)training and (re)educating. In such (re)training and (re)education, the next generation of researchers are birthed, while the current generation of researchers also sharpen their skills and recontextualise their knowledge within current happenings and events. The postgraduate stage should require supervisors and students to innovatively cross-pollinate ideas to achieve promising research outputs. This paper captures the overt and covert of my experience as a student which has now been slightly shaped by my current position and strategies as a supervisor. While I had some unpleasant experiences, I later had some pleasant ones. My perceptions of supervision progressed from being just peripheral to being impactful. As such, I was able to unlearn the earlier thoughts and assumptions and relearn fresh opinions regarding the tenets of effective supervision. Now as a supervisor, I am guided by both practical experience as well as theoretical evidence such as those proposed by James and Baldwin (1999) in my dealings with my postgraduate students.

In relating Wood and Louw's (2018) propositions to supervision, supervisors are encouraged to work hand in hand with students to produce new knowledge and contribute to the academic space. Also, they must be able to mentor and coach the students and assist them in the development of their skills as expected. They must be committed and dedicated in their roles as supervisors in order to deliver the roles effectively. And finally, to cement an efficient relationship with one's students, effective communication is key and hence, one must make oneself available for one's postgraduate students to discuss issues pertaining to their research and postgraduate life. The postgraduate phase should mainly involve interconnection and synthezation of ideas among the students and the supervisors. It is in these sorts of engagements that there is bound to be an even stronger avenue to address many intellectual, practical, and social problems permeating the world. Thus, this study strongly contends that the intellectual collaboration of both the students and supervisors will suffice in the attempt to birth new, dependable, and flexible researchers who would in turn be excellent postgraduate supervisors in the future given their abilities to learn, unlearn, and relearn.

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