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Digital shifting in doctoral supervision: Different routes to the same destination

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic activated an emergency shift to remote supervision which is now shaping longer term changes to our supervision practice. Through a narrative lens on experience, this paper shares the perspectives of two doctoral supervisors who have different relationships with remote supervision. Our means towards similar ends present interesting contrasts in practice and attitudes to online learning. Our experiences during this transition have been different, which may resonate with challenges facing other supervisors across the Higher Education sector. The informal 'corridor conversations' with our doctoral students are seemingly a thing of the past, so we explore the strategies we have put in place, or, re-evaluate the online opportunities which were already in place, that now form a critical lifeline to build and maintain those relationships. Through our stories, it is hoped useful lessons may be learned, with the aim of improving the supervisory experience for doctoral students.

KEYWORDS

Online supervision; doctoral research; relationships; digital learning; higher education

Introduction

Higher Education (HE) has dramatically transformed during the coronavirus pandemic (Nerantzi, 2020) including teaching for doctoral students. Consequently, sustaining doctoral supervision has required supervisors to adapt quickly to cross the digital divide, which for some has been a larger leap than for others. Adopting a narrative style, in a similar trend to that deployed by Spooner-Lane et al. (2007) in their research on 'co-supervision stories', this paper explores two stances towards online supervision from authors in the same university based in different faculties. The first supervisor ostensibly resisting the digital shift, the second embracing it, presenting a virtual tug-of-war between two camps of practice for doctoral supervision. The stories of our experiences during this transition may echo the challenges facing other supervisors across HE. Indeed, the very notion of tug-of-war evokes an image of two opposing ideologies, a pulling apart, creating a linear spectrum along which a personal position may be identified. Through bringing our stories together intentionally in this way, we discovered there may be more to this discussion than just opposing forces. There are advantages and consequences to each mode of supervision

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practice, which we both acknowledge by giving ground to the opposition before pulling back to our position of strength or comfort. However, *change* is the predominant wind blowing through HE and the prevailing direction is towards online and remote supervision. This means that what might have been a comfort zone in the recent past for some, may not be as comfortable in the future. We therefore present our stories for what they represent about supervision preferences and evolving practice, in hopes they may resonate with colleagues and promote wider discussion for doctoral supervision.

Pedagogical drifting

So, what's all this online business then? Foisted upon me because of a virus (which I have complete respect for, it's a killer), upsetting all my supervision habits that had been working so well for me? And what's this Microsoft Teams I suddenly must 'engage' with? I want to engage with people, not TV screens. How am I supposed to challenge and instil confidence in my mainly part-time PhD learners who are now busier than ever? They're grappling with a difficult project on top of a full-time job and need me to physically be there, just as I always have. Of course, these questions were always present and relevant for my postgraduate supervision, whether I visited my learners in a physical or digital mode. I just preferred the former, and still do. Like a chemical etching, Covid-19 seems to have washed away the bulk of my physicality in supervision relationships, which I engineered for building trust and sharing ideas. This is the strategy I inhabit as a supervisor to get forward momentum in a learner's project. It's probably the only one I have, or am any good at. Damn. The digital shift is upon us, what am I going to do now?

Fight the system. Resist. Don't lose sight of what works for me and my learners, I know it, hold on to the corporeal reality of a shared experience, from which so much progress seems to have been made in the projects I supervise. If I am honest, one of my sneaky ploys is to make doing a research project more exciting than their paid work so the project top-trumps the boredom of day-to-day toil, and 'our' research suddenly takes priority in their lives. Momentum. However, as I crawled into forced isolation during Lockdown One, I realised it was sink, and my learners sink, or swim in the digital sea. With my Microsoft armbands on and some 'digi-buddies' to help me, I took my first swimming lessons. I reflected on why my reaction to remote learning was so strong and importantly, what was I going to do about it.

For context, my PhD supervision is primarily for teaching staff in my department. They are all researching socio-cultural aspects of Sport, the Outdoors and Physical Education. I supervise 20 projects in all, as Director of Studies for fourteen and supporting new supervisors to guide their students for the other six, who incidentally, do all their supervision through Microsoft Teams. But that's their choice eh? My preferred mode of operating, (my brand of supervising as I saw it, pre-covid) was drifting around the corridors, popping in to see learners as they worked at their desks. It was always a pleasant distraction to see me! I enjoyed spending time in their company, building a relationship and mutual interest, in them and their project. Sometimes, my supervisees were sharing an office, in one case, three birds with one stone! There was economy in my efforts for pedagogical drifting, but also synergy in the discussions that would spontaneously flow from my unplanned visits. Academics philosophising at work! That's what we do, right? 'Staff as Active Learners' is my mantra (Palmer, 2020; Palmer & Keeling, 2020),

coined to help galvanise these talented souls, who so often are seen merely as the deliverers of lectures on a seemingly endless conveyor belt of modules. I pressed their learning buttons and they enjoy it, or it's certainly an aspect of what they enjoy in this academic theatre. If staff were too busy for my philosophical impositions during the day, we'd arrange my now legendary 'beer and pizza' tutorials after work which alas, have also been thwarted by an invisible virus.

So, what's all this 'remote learning' about anyway? I am already an expert. I take several of my PhD students out for 'remote learning' in often, totally isolating experiences for supervision. For example, I took Ken, or rather he took me, and we dangled ourselves off a cliff in North Wales, us both being climbers and him studying fear in rock climbing (McGregor & Palmer, 2009). I was a data-subject for Ken that day, as well as his supervisor. I took David on a remote canoeing expedition to apply qualitative research methods in the field. At 47, he'd never canoed before, or even camped out for that matter. He learned a lot and so did I (Lee & Palmer, 2018). Then there is Charlie who was embarking on a PhD into the sensorium of coaching experiences. He asked if I could provide him with rich a sensory experience to get started. I took him caving in a load of mud and slime in pitch darkness so he could reflect on the joy it gave him (Hughes & Palmer, 2020). All three philosophised deeply about physical experiences being intrinsic to their learning, it's how they exist as researchers, it's in their flesh and present in our world. Covid-19 has pulled the plug on all this warm-textured learning, or rather, it's put the plug in the wall and I've had to find another way of supervising.

When I started supervising, I also started examining PhDs. Understanding the viva experience was crucial to realising freedoms in project design and learning about examination tactics. Viva's are difficult things to access. Nevertheless, I relished the challenge to learn more about this 'black art', as it would make me a better supervisor. In the recent exodus to a digital world I find myself coaching candidates before their online viva in a similar manner to that of a sports person. 'We've lost control of physical space, so we have to control digital space'. I have been at some good online vivas. Unfortunately, I have seen some pretty poor online viva's too, which have backfired as learning experiences. I believe the examination should be about learning, beyond the quality assurances for standards etc. The screen presence seems to elicit constant dialogue, as if listening to a radio interview where there are no empty spaces for thinking, which are permitted, even encouraged in a face-to-face viva. Tuning in to people's homes, seeing their books, wallpaper choices, pets and ornaments are unhelpful distractions which I have seen examiners dwell on during a viva, rather than the person in front of them. The linear viva is another chronic symptom from this 'digital efficiency'. This can stem from the issuing of a thesis in a PDF file, which examiners can only scroll through, rather than having a physical hard copy to engage with. I have witnessed how this digital file format can narrowly restrict the discussion sequence of a viva to the order of chapters as presented. My feedback to my University as Independent Chair and Internal Examiner has now shaped new protocols for conducting online examinations, and I provide seminars to examiners with 'coaching tips' for online vivas.

The cocktail of lockdown and Microsoft Teams, means access to supervisors is easier than ever, and I had supervision tutorials queued up for me like jobs at a call centre. It was exhausting at the start of the pandemic. However, the thing I overlooked completely is that my supervisees who are staff, now have their lives conducted through Microsoft

Teams as well. I'd have to get in line for their attention now. When I did get through to them on Teams, we just hit the record button so all the supervision records we needed for progress were instantly there, and much fuller and detailed than handwritten jottings. Mmm, maybe there's something in this Teams thing after all? It's a compromise on everything I did and still hold dear in supervision, but it is allowing us to get on, things have not come to a complete halt.

The next challenge was distance and isolation. What was I going to do for my community of learners who once thrived in each other's company at various research symposia (e.g. Palmer, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021) but all now in lockdown? I needed to bring this group together in a virtual environment for learning. A few colleagues in the department started setting up Research Groups for staff to discuss the School's research vision and agenda, aligning interests and identifying targets and 'outputs'. All reasonable planning but my visceral repulsion to all this from a supervision point of view, led me to set up Clive's Learning Shack, which is a Teams area (that's the common bit) but just to talk about learning as it may affect them. No agendas. That is, to share ideas, thoughts and feelings for staff who are active learners. The motives for this were to inform or increase learner confidence to maintain momentum during this difficult period of isolation. When setting the Teams area up, I wanted to be clear about what people might get from coming to the Shack and have deliberately pitched things in a playful way. The informality of a Shack meant no boundaries, no 'measuring up' or hierarchical expectations, just come on in and share your thoughts. To reaffirm the informality, I avoided corporate logos, opting instead for a picture of my garden shed to represent the Learning Shack (see Figure 1).

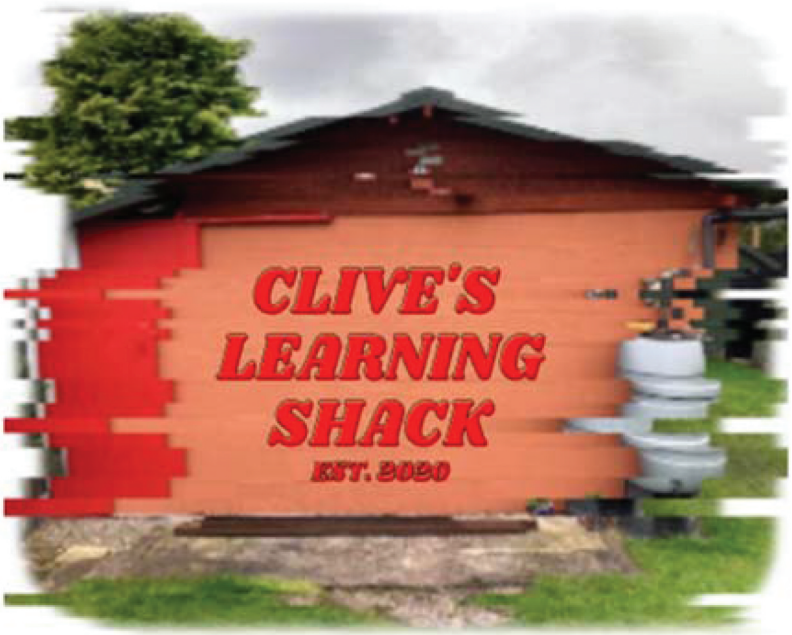

Figure 1. Signalling informality: Clive's learning shack teams area icon.

To entice folks to the party, which occurs every 6–8 weeks, I set up three channels at the Learning Shack. The first is *Groovy Readings* comprising a growing selection of papers that are useful and otherwise hard to find, the kind of things which instil confidence, such as Saldaña's (2014) *Blue Collar Rant*. Then there is the mighty *Drinks Table*, which people are always curious about. To sample the delights from such a table, a visitor has to share a tipple of personal choice. Be brave in the vulnerability to share as it will help others, so the 'Shackers' leave copies of their research thesis to look at and take inspiration from. The community has grown to include supervisors and candidates beyond my supervision, postgraduate taught students, staff who just enjoy chats about learning, managers and education developers from across this university and others too. The third channel is my *What's Occurring* channel, so people can tell others about, well, what's occurring. In this space we communicate about conferences, writing ideas, publications, chew over knotty dilemmas, like, 'what does physical learning actually mean during Covid-19?' My next symposium was an online Research Gallery, made available for 8 weeks, for researchers to look over each other's ideas via infographics, akin to visiting an art gallery and perusing what's on display (using Google Jamboard). This form of 'slow learning' (Berg & Seeber, 2016) allowed time to gather thoughts prior to a meeting of minds at the Shack. It was not an online conference which, by Lockdown 3.0, I had grown tired of. But here's the rub, much as I dislike the online experience, there are some unique benefits. The amazing thing from the Shack experience is the range of voices that come together for a chat, or just listen in, that would not otherwise get to meet. That's not because there are too many of them, they'd probably all fit in a large room, there being about 60 Shackers at last count, but these people's lives and duties are way too distant to ever find themselves in that physical room together. I have been hoisted by my own petard up the online flagpole. Maybe there's something in this online learning after all. Thank you for listening to my digi-supervision story . . . please excuse me as the smell of bacon sandwiches from my kitchen is luring me away from the keyboard.

Surfing the wave

As I sit in my home office during lockdown 3.0, managing constant interruptions from adorable and well-meaning family members, both human and canine, I reflect on whether my doctoral supervision methods have changed over the past year. I'm currently supervising five part-time postgraduate research students who are either staff in HE or the National Health Service (NHS). As a supporter of blended learning, I figure I'm a dab hand at picking up learning technologies (see Figure 2) and I truly believe that virtual spaces offer advantages over physical spaces in some aspects of facilitating learning. However, I am a not a digital-only or digital-first advocate. As a species we fundamentally require human connection and sometimes digital connection is just not enough for us to satisfy our needs. In the midst of a global pandemic, we are in a world that necessitates physical distancing but thankfully with technology, that no longer means we must socially distance too. So how do I manage my spaces to connect with my students and manage my own space as a supervisor? Well the answer for me depends on where the student and other supervisors are in terms of their own digital confidence and capability. I agree with Hase (2014) that the ability to flex in our approaches to supervision is an absolute must to

Figure 2. Signalling interconnectivity: image by Gerd Altmann Pixabay https://pixabay.com/illustrations/wlan-web-friends-community-sms-2088659/.

keep us moving forward. Meeting the student where they are at that moment allows for gradual nudging to enhance confidence and capability. And isn't that the destination of a doctorate, to create not just the thesis, but the independent researcher?

> "The product that the PhD researcher creates is not the thesis – vital though that is to their subject area through the creation of original knowledge – no, the product of their study is the development of themselves" Sir Gareth Roberts (Roberts, 2002; Universities UK, 2009)

What this means in practice is that I supervise each student slightly differently. However, to be able to flex, perhaps digital capability is required to make the informed choices on when and how to flex. For example, like so many, all my supervision sessions are now online using Microsoft Teams and I envisage this change will stick, at least for some students if we ever return to some form of normality. For one student in particular, we were doing this already before the pandemic hit, as they could only visit campus occasionally. For that student we have a dedicated Teams site to share and feedback on live documents, ask questions as they arise, and host recorded meetings. We even have a shared Microsoft OneNote to track and feedback on data analysis. This approach has been productive for both student and supervisors as it provides the ability to be accessible in the same way as with an open-door policy on campus, facilitating learning at the point of need. I've found that making sure everyone has a grasp on the small functions like 'tagging' the person to ensure it pops up on notifications helps to ease this process and keep the communication channels open. It also helps to schedule the meetings directly in the Teams site rather than in Outlook because then, any recordings are automatically saved in that space for access later. I've learnt from experience that I quickly lose people if I start enthusing about all the functionality of a platform. However, this drip, drip, drip of little morsels to help develop digital capability works well. At the other end of the spectrum, some of my other students (and co-supervisors) prefer to do everything via email apart from the supervision sessions. This is ok too but if I'm honest, I'm more likely to respond quicker to a Teams message than I am to an email, so this potentially means I'm less accessible to some students compared to others. As a result, I've found myself

nudging to get us to a space where there is equal support. I could of course take more notice of my email but personally I can't wait for the 'day the email died' . . . is there a song about that?

Doctoral supervision is more than just the development of the student. There's also paperwork to be done and monitoring to keep on top of. To manage my own working environment, I rely heavily on a note taking productivity tool, in my case Microsoft OneNote. I have a research supervision notebook and sections for each student with pages on supervision, progression, feedback on drafts, key dates and anything I need to keep an eye on. The global search functionality means this system makes much more sense to me than traditional linear folders and means I can find any document or note I've made in an instant. If you haven't used Evernote, OneNote or one of the other similar tools, I urge you to have a go! I use different notebooks for each aspect of my work and home life too. For example, it's great for taking meeting minutes with the auto-titling feature drawn from the Outlook Calendar, clipping recipes from the web or taking photos of a bottle of wine you came across in a restaurant . . . remember restaurants? I do hope we get back there again one day. Oh, and you can use it for individual or shared white-boarding and brainstorming too, you know Clive ;-)

Developing doctoral researchers also involves community building. Where Clive has built an internal community space for his students in 'Clive's Learning Shack', I've taken a slightly different approach. I find Twitter a hugely beneficial platform for my own informal learning and use it to keep up with what's going on in the world of HE through joining the tribes where I feel belonging and inspiration. As a result, I've encouraged my students to investigate platforms and communities that can support them. From suggesting key people to follow such as @thesiswhisperer or @PhDForum to finding hashtags of relevance to their subject or to the doctoral process (#phdchat and #acwri are just two of my favourites), I've signposted and encouraged exploration. It's fantastic when a student comes back to you with a golden nugget of another support network or resource they've found helpful. For example, many of the 'shut up and write' style events (Mewburn, 2013) have moved online and one of my students found one through her social network and reported gaining momentum and confidence from joining. As a result, her nugget has gone into my gold bank of resources to share with my other students.

When I think about it, nudging, exploring, experimenting and connecting are cornerstones to the way I facilitate learning. I'm a trained coach and use open questions and the 'loving boot' (Blakey & Day, 2012) to both challenge and support my students. Coaching is a multi-sensory practice and using self as instrument (Bluckert, 2006) is a key tool in my supervisors kit. What is 'not being said' often becomes apparent in physical interactions and trusting my instinct to guide questioning in a supervision session helps to unlock the capability and self-awareness of my students. I must admit this is the most difficult part of online supervision for me. Whilst I'm as fully present as I can be in supervision sessions online, there are inevitable distractions in the home for both supervisor and student which disrupts the 'self as instrument' process. With only two senses at work online, and sight often limited to a headshot, this means I have spent more energy on understanding the immediate needs of the student and the questions that will unlock that elusive potential are more difficult to reach. As the supervisory relationship and rapport develops, this does take less effort, but it can be very tricky to 'read' students in those early days. On the flip side, I possibly get to know

more about a student's home life when supervising online. I've inevitably met their partner/child/pet and understanding their home situation is a valuable way to engage lifewide learning (Jackson, 2011) and holistic academic development (Gillaspy, 2020).

Through my coaching style of doctoral supervision, I adopt an appreciative inquiry model which can improve performance and leave people feeling valued for their contributions (Cooperrider et al., 2004). Focusing on my students strengths rather than their weaknesses acknowledges the wider personal and social needs of the typical part time researcher (Edwards, 2010). Plus, I feel it's time to put the all too common deficit model found across HE behind us in favour of more compassionate and inclusive approaches. In virtual compared with physical conversations, we lack some of the non-verbal feedback cues which means our language becomes even more vital. When positive language is reinforced with a good amount of head nodding, the student can go away from the session knowing what has gone particularly well.

It is possible to bring the human and the social into the virtual space through coaching techniques with a focus on connection and relationship building, especially at the start of a doctoral journey. However, I am still left with the feeling that perhaps facilitating doctoral supervision online is not as much fun as face to face. So, I intend to stay in my blended learning camp once the pandemic is over, to keep the best of both worlds.

Conclusion

In sharing two doctoral supervision narratives, we look to further the debate on the future of doctoral supervision within and beyond the pandemic (Kumar et al., 2020; Lambrechts & Smith, 2020; Le, 2021). At first glance, our stories may appear as a tug of war, each attempting to win over the other 'camp'. However, as we delved further into the meanings behind our experiences, we found synergies in the way we supervise. This resulted in us pushing towards each other, rather than pulling apart, learning from the other's experiences, and enhancing our own practices as a result.

Our supervision practices are congruent and contextually bound, each finding the most natural course to tweak our supervision practices according to the resources and experience we could draw upon. For example, our narratives both sing of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) but we each followed a different route to maximise effectiveness. Clive has an 'oven ready' community given the high numbers of staff he is supervising and therefore an internal community space was the obvious choice. This also allowed him to explore and develop new digital practices in a safe, closed environment. Emma, on the other hand, has an extensive external network through Twitter, so she chooses to leverage the opportunities this brings for her students, encouraging connection with other doctoral communities outside the institution and building a sense of belonging to the wider academy (Finn et al., 2020; Rainford, 2016). In the future, we are looking to combine these approaches to bring the best of both strategies to our students.

Both narratives ultimately celebrate that good researchers thrive on positive relationship building, being core to successful doctoral supervision (Wisker, 2012; Zhao et al., 2007). We both found relationship building to be challenging in the online environment with the inherent lack of liminal and informal spaces. Ultimately, we both developed strategies to maintain a supervision rapport online, each to their satisfaction . . . more or less. We hope that elements of our narratives have resonated with your own remote

supervisory stories and invite you to reflect on what you may keep in your toolkit as we go forward into the brave new world of doctoral education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

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