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Enabling Connections in Postgraduate Supervision for an Applied eLearning Professional Development Programme

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Enabling connections in postgraduate supervision for an applied eLearning professional development programme

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This article describes the practice of postgraduate supervision on a blended professional development programme for academics, and discusses how Connectivism has been a useful lens to explore a complex form of instruction. By examining the processes by which supervisors and their students on a two-year part-time masters in Applied eLearning negotiated the blended approach adopted to supervision, it illustrates the conditions that enable connections to occur and flourish. The socio-technical context for supervision was supported using learning technologies (vle, research wikis and ePortfolios), small group supervision (two to three supervisors and students) and traditional individual supervision. Qualitative data were obtained through surveys and focus groups, and analysed using a framework which drew on connectivist principles. Findings suggest that for increased connections between supervisors and their students, a sense of sanctuary, community and regulation within the supervision process is important; the role of technologies in unifying postgraduate supervision in professional development are discussed.

Keywords: blended learning; connectivism; eLearning; higher education; postgraduate; professional development; supervision

Introduction

Increasingly postgraduate supervisors are exploring the movement towards digitalisation to support their practice, given what Firth and Martens (2008) have reported as the increase in the number and diversity of research candidates. The focus of this article is on postgraduate supervision, specifically how to blend the use of relevant learning technologies and unify these with the process of group supervision. In doing so, the aim is to better support students in what has previously been considered too much of a solitary form of study. It is intended that supervisors themselves will also benefit from the potential of collaboration in an aspect of their practice that can be resource-intensive.

Postgraduate supervision involves a lengthy professional relationship between student and supervisor, where the supervisor must help students acquire research skills without stultifying their intellectual and personal development. Research in the field reports that what had previously been regarded by academics as a private space, has moved on to welcome the potential of collaboration and as Hammond

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and Ryland (2009) state, such supervision has shifted to 'being more visible, more open for discussion, reflection and negotiation' (p. 17).

Certainly research in postgraduate supervision has been developing over the past number of years and in several of the higher education journals, recent conversations have been evolving on specific issues such as the development of alternative supervision practices (Dysthe, Samara, & Westrheim, 2006) and how language is used in supervision (Lee & Green, 2009). Indeed, Petersen (2007) has argued that postgraduate supervision while heavily researched from an effective practice perspective remains an under-theorised field.

While much of this research has focused on doctoral supervision, this study aims to explore supervision practices at masters level in a higher education institution in Ireland. As the number of masters' students being supervised rises, the ability of individual staff to carry out their other duties can become more constrained, while the time available for supervision of each student and the quality of their supervision can suffer.

This article covers the development of blended group supervision in a two-year part-time masters entitled *MSc Applied eLearning*. The nature of blended group supervision is explored, the rationale for the study clarified, and how blended group supervision can be used for masters supervision is discussed. The advantages of the environment created for this mode of supervision and the educational principles used in the elements of the supervision process are also presented.

Rationale for study

As highlighted, the demanding supervision process is made more complex by the increasing numbers and diversity of today's graduate students. Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham (2007) argue that with increasing numbers of part-time and international students, supervisory relationships are likely to be conducted at a distance as students study alongside other commitments. Manathunga (2005) reported on the expanding literature on advising such off-campus students. She summarised the key issues facing remote students as social isolation, difficulties in accessing the research culture (intellectual isolation), lack of access to resources and lack of face-to-face (f2f) interaction with advisors.

As isolation can often be a key feature for many postgraduates, whether based in the same institution as the supervisor or not, arguably it can also be an issue for their supervisors. In this study, blended group supervision is offered as one possible solution to the supervisor resource issue facing institutions everywhere. A blended approach was introduced to improve the existing research supervision by having a three-layered approach combining f2f individual supervision, f2f themed supervision groups and virtual student peer supervision sets. It was intended that each of the three methods would supplement each other for all phases of the supervision process.

Blended group supervision practices internationally

Increasingly the appropriateness of traditional models of postgraduate research supervision is being questioned, for example in a New Zealand context by McCallin and Nayar (2012). As a result group supervision with students at masters level has been undertaken previously and successfully in a number of disciplines. Qualitative

phenomenological research by Samara (2006) and Dysthe et al. (2006) reveal that supervisor development skills can be enhanced and it also has a positive impact on the student writing process. Kandlbinder (1998) examined a group of supervisors at the University of Sydney who began to use a variety of different methods to develop better supervisory practices. These included training supervisors to use Internet resources, involving them in group workshops and holding peer discussion groups. This change was developed in response to the concerns of students that the quality of supervision was inadequate. Arguably this is also not far removed from the 'learning circle' strategy employed by Manathunga and Goozée (2007) at the University of Queensland to contend with the concept of private pedagogical space in the context of supervisor training.

Blending the use of technology in postgraduate supervision has also been developing in recent years. Wright and Griffiths (2010) explored the experience of using both real-time and asynchronous communication tools to supervise on a distance counselling programme. With the influx of learning technologies available, what has been described as a lonely endeavour by students and supervisors alike need not be so. Cullen, Pearson, Saha, and Spear (1994) argue that supervision should be conceptualised to encompass a broad view of postgraduate education that includes more than the one-to-one interaction of student and supervisor. They believe that there is a need to go beyond individual supervisory interaction and restructure practice to ensure that responsibility for quality is shared and coordinated.

As learning and research involves interacting with other individuals, and increasingly technology, the relatively new instructional framework of connectivism was used in this study to explore the blended group supervision process. Boitshwarelo (2011) argues that it is imperative that research on connectivism is advanced, particularly on its applicability and effectiveness in a variety of educational contexts. Thus, this study describes context-specific research on postgraduate supervision that was aimed at improving supervision practice at local settings. Specifically, it was concerned with how connections are formed in supervision, establishing if available technology is important in enabling connections, and what if anything is transferred during an interaction between two, three or more postgraduate research students and their supervisors.

The article continues now with an overview of the context of the professional development programme and is followed by a discussion on how connectivism contributes to improved understanding of the role of learning technologies for supporting the collaboration of supervisors and their students. A unified strategy combining group supervision tutorials, virtual peer learning sets and individual supervision is then discussed.

Context of the study

Research supervision takes place in the second year of this two-year part-time masters programme. The research was conducted in the academic year 2009–2010, with 16 students (participants) and eight supervisors on a yearlong 'Applied eLearning Project' module. The participants were all academic staff from a variety of different disciplines interested in exploring and developing eLearning within their professional practice. There were three assessed outputs from the module – an eLearning resource, a journal paper and an ePortfolio. In terms of process, students were not

summatively assessed; they received formative feedback from the supervisors on their contribution to the group supervision tutorials. There was also a non-assessed weekly forum in the Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE) for discussion and critique of journal articles and the sharing and highlighting of local, national and international events/conferences in the fields of eLearning and applied educational research.

The majority of the postgraduate students were new to this form of applied research and the academic community therein. The majority of the supervisors on the programme were experienced at masters level supervision, ranging from twenty plus taught masters and five plus by research.

Connectivism: a potential way of unifying the supervision process

Connectivism has been heralded as a theory for the digital age (Siemens, 2004) and seen as a fresh way of conceptualising learning in the last decade. However, Bell (2011) argues that connectivism alone is not sufficient to inform learning and its support by technology in an internetworked world. Therefore, while it is acknowledged that there is debate on whether connectivism can be regarded as a learning theory per se (Kop & Hill, 2008), it was considered as a useful framework for the pedagogy of research supervision where control is shifting from the supervisor to an increasingly more autonomous research student.

Key principles of connectivism that inform the process of blended research supervision on this programme are: that learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions; learning is a process of connecting specialised nodes or information sources; nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning; the ability to see connections between fields, ideas and concepts is a core skill; currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of the group supervision process and activities; and that decision-making is itself a learning process (Siemens, 2004). The starting point for applying connectivist principles to the research supervision process occurs when knowledge is actuated through the process of a learner connecting to and feeding information into a learning community. This happened in three stages – at individual supervision level, group supervision and in virtual support sets. Siemens (2004) has suggested that a community is the clustering of similar areas of interest that allows for interaction, sharing, dialoguing and thinking together. Indeed Cormier (2008) acknowledges that connectivism enables a community of people (working with learning technologies) to legitimise what they are doing.

Individual supervision on the programme followed institutional regulations and was aimed at providing specific advice on the applied eLearning project and supplying the necessary quality assurance. Individual supervision practices took place solely in a f2f setting and included specific dialogues between the one student and their supervisor (this covered institutional routines, the use of resources, ways of thinking and the nature of discourse in supervisor meetings). Online logbooks were used in this individual setting to record a basic framework of meetings between the student and supervisor. These were established in Blackboard as private discussion board topics, and both the supervisor and the student completed entries. The use of logbooks in supervision has a long history with Yeatman (1995) recommending the log to manage the process of negotiation positively without administratively overloading the process. Although the use of online logbooks is far from a new

practice in research supervision, in the context of this programme they proved to be invaluable for reflecting the dialogue between the student and supervisor, and allowing flexibility of access through their asynchronous nature. Similarly, de Beer and Mason (2009) utilised the online infrastructure to keep all records and logbooks pertaining to the students online, with the online documentation becoming dynamic evidence of the research process.

Supervision groups consisted of two or three supervisors and their MSc students based upon similar project themes/methodologies (scheduled to meet f2f two to three times per semester). There were three groups in all and these f2f tutorial meetings were very much focused on the project scope, research process, and issues in academic writing common to all students. Their purpose was to provide personal and disciplinary support for the students and enable them to better appreciate their project progress, along with helping them address specific common problems spanning the data collection and analysis phases of a research project. They also could provide inspiration when needed, allow for the exchange of ideas and perspectives on academic knowledge, expose the students to different intellectual challenges, as well as let them see how different supervisors reason, argue and give formative feedback on the project. During each f2f group tutorial all students presented their work for feedback, having emailed two to three key issues in advance on which they wished to receive commentary. This ensured that the group meetings were organised and efficient, and the students were prepared.

The aim of the group tutorials was to provide diversity in feedback and peer review on student work along with what Dysthe et al. (2006) call *enculturation* into the applied research discipline. Multiple readers of the work presented provided critical opposition and thus helped develop the students' ability to handle different perspectives in their work. It provided opportunities for dynamic, interactive, free-flowing discussion and feedback from their own supervisors and at least one other from a similar topic to their own. Research students were able to bounce ideas off supervisors, read their verbal and non-verbal reactions and develop extended interactions between each other. Research wikis were established by a number of the students themselves as an organic form of engagement with each other and as a collaborative layer to encourage the participation of other researchers. These were preferred by some of the more technically engaged students over email contact as a way to form communities of interest in their specialist eLearning projects, and seen as a fertile workspace for their project ideas. In terms of meeting the challenge of sustained wiki engagement i.e. managing to encourage subsequent student update of the research wiki, it is planned to use the insights of the active few who began the process and who commented favourably on the time-saving aspects of the technology to further engage others. These insights focus on the usefulness of research notes taken using the wiki which were immediately available for other group members to view and develop. They felt they were enabled to spend more time collaborating, and less time managing their collaboration tools.

The *virtual peer supervision sets* included only the MSc students (no supervisors) in the same small groups that they had experienced in the f2f tutorials. These were virtual to allow the students to maintain the dynamic and pace of their learning between f2f group tutorials. It was integral to the impact of these sets that investment was made in establishing mutual trust amongst the students as part of the f2f programme induction as such peer exchange is rooted in existing relationships and a certain degree of reciprocated faith. We established early on that peer

exchange necessitates a minimum shared knowledge of the context so as to make sense of what peers have to say about their work and that it requires a will to learn on the part of all the students. That will to learn implies that students need to be able to admit that they do not know all the answers, which in turn requires there to be mutual confidence and a relatively non-threatening atmosphere within the virtual peer set. Arguably, research students require both social and academic integration in order to successfully complete their research studies in a timely fashion. Creating opportunities for social and academic interaction with supervisors, with other students and with the institute's broader research environment is of vital importance. By providing personal support, the virtual peer sets were based on openness and personal commitment to one another which helped students develop the ability to combine criticism with support and also serve as a first filter for research ideas and shared resources. The emotional side of carrying out a research project and writing is usually privatised and often under-communicated so the students were encouraged to exchange experiences, frustrations and discuss research-related issues. Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) reported that group supervision sessions were distinguished by an open-hearted manner and communicative frame of mind by all involved, which they interpreted as trust. The crux to engaging learners in the virtual environment is the creation of a space where they feel comfortable, trusted and valued.

Jones, Gaffney, and Jones (2011) discuss that the use of technology for supervision is now commonplace and report findings on the use of email for tutor's formative assessment in the early stages of postgraduate supervision. However, as highlighted earlier, technology can present its own challenges to the research supervision process. It is important from the outset to establish for all supervisors and students, what access they had to the tools and media being proposed. Early on in the blended design for the programme, it was useful to map out what the technological environment would be like. As part of the study, it was important to investigate how well the supervisor and student can exploit the virtual communications available to them. Sussex (2011) argued that the web can mask student characteristics and skew communications. He reported that a combination of media, involving maximum immediacy and personal interaction combined with recording for later review, has been shown in practice to yield the richest and most flexible supervision.

Method and design

The research question on how connections are formed between research students and their supervisors in blended postgraduate supervision was addressed through a qualitative research methodology. This was chosen to investigate blended research supervision by maintaining flexibility in the process of data gathering (Patton, 1990). It also enabled the gaining of in-depth knowledge about people's 'lived experiences'. Qualitative design allowed the exploration of the content of the connections and how they were formed. A qualitative questionnaire was distributed to all eight supervisors and a separate 1–16 MSc students. It was important to establish through the questionnaire a clear focus on how the students and supervisors began making connections during the supervision process, and open questions were designed with this in mind.

Prior written consent in which confidentiality was assured was obtained. Members from the three supervision groups took part in three focus group interviews. The interview questions were built on findings from the questionnaire and concentrated on the following issues: how connections are formed, nurtured and maintained between the key participants in postgraduate supervision in order to facilitate continual learning; the role of learning technologies to support the process of connecting specialised nodes or information sources within supervision; and the contribution of group supervision to enabling connections between fields, ideas and concepts.

The focus group interviews allowed the invitation of information from the respondents about situations from their own perspective and in their own words (Kvale, 1996). A qualitative framework for analysis was implemented which was informed by connectivist principles from the literature and which although uses a thematic approach, allowed themes to develop both from the research questions and from the narratives of the research participants.

Findings

Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to increase credibility and validity of findings was conducted at a formal meeting with the supervisors and students to discuss and revise emergent themes, ask for clarification and seek disconfirming evidence. This iterative process resulted in dimensions of connectivism to emerge, ranging from the connections that effective supervisors make with their students in conventional individual supervision situations to the ways that effective supervisors intuitively seek to meld their students into supervision communities in blended environments. Connectivism also focuses attention on the complex and changing roles of supervisors and their relationships with their students in both traditional supervision meetings and more loosely-connected VLEs.

Connectivism within supervision

This section firstly explores the connections between the people involved in the supervision process. In the context of research supervision in order to innovate, we need sources of new ideas, which come through connections with other people. Secondly, the impact of technologies on offer for supervisors and their students can deepen the process of participation in a supervision community.

Connections between people

Arguably an effective supervisor has access to a range of facilitation methods and can adapt to the needs of individual supervisees. While supervisory approaches certainly vary and depend on the people involved and the terms of the relationship, fore-fronting the need to be flexible with other people in the relationship is important. A student quote illustrates the importance of the flexibility of the supervisor:

> The supervisors in my group shared their work in a facilitative manner, were open to negotiation on the topic we were discussing yet they established very clear boundaries for us to work each time we met.

The group supervision tutorials involved the active engagement of people with resources in communication with others, rather than the transfer of knowledge from

supervisor to student. Within connectivism learning is enhanced by certain activities and a notion of 'sharing' where students might participate and share their work with others. In the group tutorials, this is seen as vital to active learning on the programme.

The fostering of a sense of connectedness among students themselves and between students and supervisors appeared to lead to what was called 'a supervision community' by the students. Learning about conducting an applied eLearning project through its various life stages was a process for one student of connecting information sources in the field:

> We received guidance in relation to matching theory to practice and outcomes of the research. Aligned with this was the need for up-to-date and relevant resources on my topic of which I obtained a plentiful supply from the others in the group.

The most important advantage highlighted of the group supervision tutorials was receiving feedback from multiple perspectives, as a student indicated:

> The tutorials were important so that I could see what my peers were doing in their projects (and this helped with my worries and thoughts on progress).

Peer learning has featured explicitly in postgraduate supervision for some time. It was found that peers can and do learn from each other as well as supervisors learning with and from students, through such processes as learning by being challenged, becoming aware of new literature and resources, and through exposure to new data. The feedback in the group tutorials from their fellow research students was seen by some as a highlight:

> … I went in feeling I was considerably behind but feedback indicated the opposite to be true. The opportunity to discuss work with peers as well as other supervisors was welcome in that it lent *gravitas* to what was being discussed.

> It also allowed for an extensive critique of the work being undertaken … I had a forum in which one's research could be discussed from a broader set of perspectives, and this was a useful addition to my own individual supervision by reinforcing my own sense of what was important in my eLearning project as well as helping me adjust to the notion that research does not have to be done alone – I can learn and grow as a researcher within the group setting.

Diverse opinions were typically expressed though discourses and clarified, contested and refined through critical dialogue in the supervision tutorials. Often sense making was performed through continuous discourses that co-constructed and negotiated meaning on a project idea. While the students reported the benefits accrued from positive peer feedback on their projects, within a connectivist framework, learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions. This diversity was most easily recognised by the modelling of critical thinking on the topic by the supervisors in the group tutorials. Through exposure to the supervisors' expertise and experience, the students claimed to have learnt to think more critically. This manifested itself in their changed understanding of the knowledge base on their topic in eLearning, and in developing the ability to better contextualise and evaluate information from all the variety of sources that they were drawing upon for their projects. Several

students reported the combined supervisor attributes that they believed facilitated the recognition of diverse opinions:

> … it was important that my supervisor provided me with self-assurance, direction and prioritization when I needed it; by providing critical feedback in a supportive way, they helped me realize that some answers are not yet known.

> Communication, time management, problem-solving, feedback, knowledge of topic and research methods are important but when I saw that experts in a particular field like eLearning can disagree on what is true, I was able to value my own beliefs more.

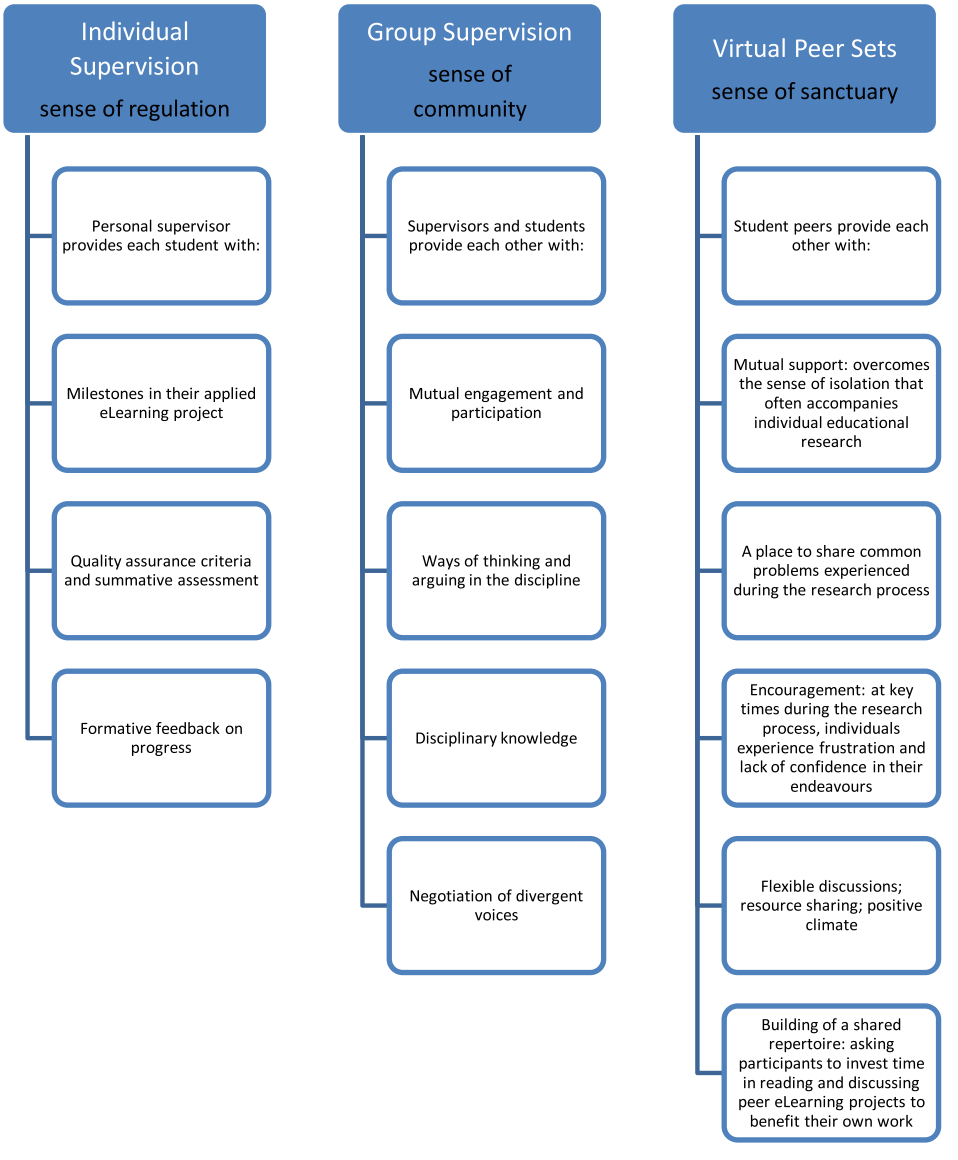

Figure 1. Connecting the supports for each supervision strategy.

Supervisors supporting confidence-building and problem-solving were identified as important in this current study, and this mirrors Manathunga's (2005) survey which reported the characteristics of prize winning supervisors from Queensland University. In order for the students to develop a capacity for informed judgements on their eLearning projects, and produce cognitively complex discourse, tolerance of 'conflict' was key to a better learning environment in the group tutorials. The students were encouraged to have the confidence to raise issues which created dissonance and supervisors refrained from expressing their own bias, letting the students debate and resolve problems.

However, the connections being forged between the people involved in the group supervision process were not all positive. For two supervisors, in particular, expressing frustration at the occasional lack of impetus shown by their students is an indicator of an issue which needs to be addressed in the future:

> I feel that the supervisors set a very important positive climate in the group tutorials and were generous in their willingness to share information with the students; notwithstanding that I had a strong sense of the students themselves holding back, waiting to be prompted.

> Critical to the intellectual growth of the project is the student's own ideas but at times in the group setting, these were slow to surface; some of them seemed reluctant to initiate debate, preferring to stand back and let us lead on topics.

Figure 1 depicts the characteristics of each supervision strategy on the MSc programme.

Supervisors generally felt that the combinations of the three supervision approaches were useful for providing a sense of regulation, community and sanctuary, respectively, as one explained:

> It is good for both students and supervisors to share different strategies and experiences in a small, select research community and recognise and debate common issues/concerns.

Some students also tended to value the blended strategy:

> The real gold is in the conversations taking place in three different venues. Spanning the individual and group supervison, my supervisor is an interlocator and is very good at brain storming and spotting subterranian themes not yet mined.

In each of the three approaches, it is important to find a balance between free dialogue and systematic and prepared feedback. In the Blackboard discussion boards, there was an inclination for most students to share their learning and work with each other. Honesty was core to this (there were instances of students posting 'I don't understand' to each other, without a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment). Peers encouraged each other to reformulate ideas in their applied research. All this pointed towards the virtual space being seen as a *sanctuary* for their work. However, in the f2f group supervision tutorials, there was a sense of anxiety of sharing unfinished work. To counter this and to build a sense of *community* at the beginning, supervisors found it useful to introduce some models for feedback such as peer response strategies. Finally, supervisor feedback in individual supervision

sessions focused on the *regulations*, which was the structure of the project, a focus on revision within the confines of journal paper construction, and a discussion of when the overall work had reached postgraduate level.

In today's busy academic environment with supervisors having many demands on their time, it is believed that less can be spent on individual supervision as the students can utilise group feedback, and develop independence and increased ability to self-assess through the virtual supervision sets.

Technology supporting connections in supervision

Considering how technology-enabled connections within the programme and across supervision practices can best happen is important. In the connectivist environment provided by the virtual peer-learning sets, choices needed to be made amongst the students themselves as they had to manage time, set their own learning goals, find resources, try out new tools and make them work.

Arguably while still in early stages of development, technology is permitting new ways of seeing information and impacting interactions in this study. The online logbook entries serve as a basis for clarifying diverse perceptions, and to clearly set out what is achieved and agreed upon at each session. One supervisor reported on their use:

> The Blackboard journal is very good for keeping records as I have found that traditional project logbooks which I have used in the past are often mislaid or forgotten during the course of the project. I can provide timely formative feedback to my student in a flexible manner.

To an extent technology can enable helpful connections between people and provide access to their knowledge and ideas. One student was very specific on the types of tools that can support this:

> I liked the online discussion forums, the wikis as a collaborative tool, and shared workspaces such as Google docs. But I would like to see more use made of Skype, online meeting software such as elluminate, and Ning collaborative software.

A key problem encountered by some students centred on the perceived time required to be involved in all three forms of supervision, and interestingly for an eLearning context the virtual learning space came out least valued of the three:

> My foremost problem is time. I'm coping quite badly with this. A second problem is that I haven't done this before, I have no experiential road map, so the online journey just takes longer.

From the student perspective, although initially the combination of the three different forms of supervision did appear time consuming, there was a general consensus amongst them that they could see it saving time in the 'long run' through the stronger connections it was offering to all involved.

While most took advantage of the convenience afforded by the online modality provision of the different tools, there was critical discussion about the compromise to quality of supervision if there was not enough f2f contact with students:

> I mostly used email, my virtual logbook and ePortfolio where I kept updates that my supervisor could check easily. We held regular f2f meetings … Despite the flexibility provided by the technology, regular f2f contact with my supervisor has been invaluable. F2f is a richer experience so we mostly use that, and I wouldn't like to see that balance tipped in favour of online supervision.

While the tools used in supervision on the MSc programme were helpful for connecting people in a literal sense, and they do hold promise for enabling connections across formal structures, there was strong consensus by both students and supervisors that they will not overtake the need for f2f connections in supervision.

Discussion

The problems experienced within the group supervision process in this study were similar to those reported by Marshall and Reason (1993), where the supervisors were often left to take the lead and generate new ideas and the students tended to play a more passive, receptive, dutiful role. If this arises it is important to comment on this apparent pattern and explore its foundations, if it is to be successfully overcome.

For successful participation in group supervision from a supervisor perspective, they need to embrace the potential of collaboration with fellow supervisors. Watts (2010) reported that the best composition of supervisors included intellect, methodology and pastoral elements. This is similar to the findings of Firth and Martens (2008) who argue that supervisors are best equipped for their roles by a process of personal self-transformation which allows them to achieve an appropriate balance between emotional and rational elements in their supervisory practice. As Brew and Peseta (2004) have observed, supervisory styles are often based on the supervisor's own experiences of being supervised. This can work in either direction, with them using it as a model for their own supervision or as something to react against. Further work is need on the programme in helping everyone involved more fully understand that a range of supervision strategies can be important and that forms of co-supervision can be helpful if the roles are clearly allocated.

Continuing to grow access to the academic research community is an important issue for postgraduate students. Wright (2003) identified isolation from the community and the support networks it creates as a major problem for flexible learning for postgraduate students. As in this study, by creating their own support networks with staff and peers, students can reduce the possibility of isolation.

The literature has been mainly in agreement that supervision needs to be delivered in a more flexible manner for part-time students such as those on this applied eLearning programme. de Beer and Mason (2009) argue that the findings from their study imply that traditional supervision practice needs to be revisited and modified to include digital procedures. More recently, Ravenscroft (2011) suggests that we should design and support learning for the digitally literate learner in the networked landscape. While the availability of technology can address resource issues, at other times it can be a major source of frustration (Hedberg & Corrent-Agostinho, 2000). Indeed, supervisors and students may have limited training or knowledge of specific software programmes needed for their studies. While it is important to be aware of the disadvantages of fully online supervision, which Altekruse and Brew (2000) list as lack of human contact, limited opportunity to view non-verbal communication,

and limited bonding between supervisor and student, this professional development programme will continue to utilise a blend of f2f and online delivery.

Conclusion

This study is directed towards facilitating further discussion about the role of blended postgraduate supervision within the context of professional development for academic staff, and offering the practitioner a foundation on which to develop a connected supervision experience. The primary goal in working with postgraduate supervisors and their students is to support an intellectual process of close examination of the connections between supervisory strategies and actions, and the technology being used to sustain them. Key to this is making explicit the rationale and intentionality underlying those connections. A qualitative research design was used to investigate the perceptions of 16 graduate students and eight masters' supervisors of blended group supervision. The small sample size in this study limits generalisability, however, many of the findings concur with the existing literature on group supervision and the use of technologies to support the process. In a world increasingly shaped by socially-driven online interactions, postgraduate supervisors have a vital role to play in building and maintaining supervision communities in which students are both supportive of and feel supported by both their supervisor and their peers. There is scope for future research, specifically exploring the impact of blended supervision on students' timely completion of their studies. Presently, the emphasis on strengthening the connection between the different forms of supervision remains a commitment of the programme team.

Notes on contributor

Roisin Donnelly is the programme chair of the MSc Applied eLearning and MA in Higher Education in the Dublin Institute of Technology. Her teaching and examining responsibilities are also on the Postgraduate Diploma in Third Level Learning and Teaching. In her current role, she delivers consultancies and workshops on a variety of topics in learning and teaching development. She has a wide range of publications to date reflecting her specialist teaching and research interests, including supporting undergraduate and postgraduate supervision, eLearning pedagogy and design, supporting virtual communities, blended learning models/strategies, active learning, curriculum design and ePortfolios/teaching portfolios.

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