Doctoral supervision as and for praxis

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Abstract

In this paper, the author revisits empirical material generated in her PhD research in light of (a) her recent experiences and conversations as course coordinator of the supervision course at the centre of the Special Issue, and (b) current supervision practice. Part of her PhD research included examination of her own supervisors' pedagogical praxis while they were supervising her doctorate. This examination occurred, rather uniquely, in dialogue with her supervisors in supervision meetings and interviews, and also through analysis of reflective notes made about her experiences of being supervised during the PhD. At the end of the paper, the author relates the findings of her retrospective analysis to her own being, becoming, and praxis as a supervisor and academic developer involved with the professional learning of supervisors. The discussion builds on current doctoral education and higher education praxis literature by highlighting, among other things, the role of supervision experiences—as both supervisor and supervisee—in supervisor becoming, and how, supervision practice as praxis can be both enacted and nurtured within a supervision team.

Key words: doctoral supervision; PhD supervision; praxis; supervisor becoming

Introduction

As the stakes for doctoral education within a global knowledge economy increase, and concern for, and criticism of, doctoral supervision intensifies (Grant, 2018), it seems that the formation of supervisors (*supervisor becoming*) is attracting more attention. A number of overlapping factors have been highlighted as relevant to this formation. Among these are self-reflection and dialogue (Blose et al., 2021; Huet & Casanova, 2021); being mentored by a more experienced colleague (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009); formal professional learning programs (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009); exposure to relevant literature (Blose et al., 2021); observing others, for example, in research teams (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009); through

participation in academic life and work with others (Halse, 2011); through doing supervision (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Blose et al., 2021; Halse, 2011); and through the experience of being supervised (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Blose et al., 2021). The latter is perhaps the least well understood, but possibly the most potent. With this in mind, this paper explores *supervisor being and becoming in and through the practice of supervision.* In doing so, it highlights some of the ways in which supervision can be understood and enacted as and for praxis.

The paper is based on a retrospective analysis of empirical material generated in a PhD project in which doctoral supervision practice was examined from within a supervision relationship. The material captures conversations between myself and two of my PhD supervisors in supervision meetings and interviews during my doctoral studies (2011–2014). I chose to revisit these conversations because of their formative role in *my becoming* a supervisor, and their often critically reflexive, praxis–focussed nature. I also assumed that they might be instructive and relevant, some eight years on, for my current challenges and wonderings as a doctoral supervisor and my role as an academic developer engaged in supporting the professional learning of supervisors. As I endeavour to show in this paper, that turned out to be the case. Re-examining the material from the position of doctoral supervisor and academic developer highlighted some aspects of supervision that have been helpful for my own understanding of supervision and supervisor *being* and *becoming*. These relate to, for example, pedagogical, technical, critical, relational, and self-forming dimensions of supervision, and the role of negotiation, resistance, and reproduction in how these may play out. While the stories are personal, my hope is that the insights shared can be of value for others trying to make sense of their own becoming as supervisors, and if relevant, their dual supervisor–academic developer positionality.

I begin by briefly contextualising the analysis with a description of my PhD experience and current situation. Next, I describe my theoretical starting point for the retrospective analysis and how I conducted it. This is followed by a discussion of key reflections emerging from the analysis. Finally, I relate these reflections to my current context and consider their implications for understanding supervision as and for praxis, more generally.

My PhD experience

My experience of undertaking a PhD was an enriching one. It was by no means easy. There were struggles and uncertainties, and many times I wondered if I would ever reach the end. But on the whole, mine was one of the happy stories. Not all doctoral candidates can say that. Some abandon their projects before they even

begin, some experience serious hardship along the way, some fall into conflict with their supervisors, and some don't manage to achieve what they set out to achieve. I completed my PhD with a sense of achievement, a sense of knowing far more than I did at the beginning, and a sense of profound gratitude to my supervisors who helped make this possible.

The main aim of my PhD research was to explore possibilities and challenges for the enactment of pedagogical practice as a form of *critical pedagogical praxis*[1] in higher education (Mahon, 2014). I was interested in how critical pedagogical praxis was being enabled and constrained within a particular Australian university, and how a group of seven academics at that university collectively and individually negotiated tensions between prevailing conditions and their praxis–oriented goals. This included the enactment of *doctoral supervision* as a form of pedagogical practice. The project combined elements of institutional ethnography, critical participatory action research, and self-study, and was informed by practice theory, most notably, the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis, Wilkinson et al., 2014; see Mahon, 2017, for an elaboration of the research approach).

Two of my PhD supervisors (I had three in total) and I were part of the participating group of academics, and so the supervision practices we engaged in (as supervisors in their case, and as a PhD candidate in my case) came under scrutiny in the project. In the vein of critical participatory action research (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014), these two supervisors were, uniquely, simultaneously supervising my research (and development as a researcher) as supervisors, collaboratively reflecting on their (supervision) pedagogical practice as co-participants, and reflexively discussing the unfolding project as co-researchers. Our supervision meetings thus became an important source of empirical material. Thirty (30) meetings were audio-recorded (and professionally transcribed), minuted, and summarised. I also conducted two in-depth individual, semi-structured interviews (Brenner, 2006) with the supervisors concerned (several months apart; audio-recorded and professionally transcribed) and kept a reflective journal in which I recorded observations and my sense making about various aspects of the unfolding supervision and its impact on me and my thinking as a doctoral researcher.

The names of my supervisors are a matter of public record. However, so that the actual names of the supervisors whose practices are implicated in this paper do not provide a distraction, I have chosen to use pseudonyms: Thomas (main

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[1] A kind of pedagogical practice aimed at creating spaces in which untoward practices and conditions can be understood and challenged, and in which new possibilities for action can emerge (Mahon, 2014).

supervisor) and Sarah (one of my co-supervisors).[2] [3] Thomas is a highly experienced doctoral supervisor and accomplished scholar within the field of education who was reaching retirement at the time of the study. He had been at the university for nearly ten years when I started my PhD education. Sarah was then an early-career educational researcher who had recently completed her doctoral degree and relocated to Australia. Sarah brought with her an extensive and broad teaching background. Thomas and Sarah are what I consider to be both (critical) praxis scholars and committed to being praxis-oriented pedagogues, although their work is firmly grounded in different intellectual traditions: critical social science in Thomas's case and post-colonialism in Sarah's. In their supervision of my research, Thomas and Sarah were working with a doctoral researcher (me) who was (a) studying full time and 'on campus', (b) relatively new to research but not to education, (c) new to the place and institution (although I had already made a shift into academia), and (d) surviving on a scholarship and, for one academic session, work as a lecturer at the university. Neither Sarah nor Thomas had met me prior to me undertaking the PhD study. In keeping with PhD studies in Education across Australian universities, there was no course work, and I had a choice of producing a monograph or PhD by publication. I chose to write a monograph.

Generally, we met fortnightly, although meetings were more frequent in the first month and as key deadlines approached. The meetings typically began with me providing updates on my progress and then raising any issues or questions that had emerged since the previous meeting. At times I was seeking advice, clarification, or feedback, and at other times I was thinking aloud, clarifying my own thoughts, and testing ideas. The questions and issues could relate to anything from ethical matters to theoretical concepts, to upcoming conference presentations, to dealing with journal reviewer feedback. Over the course of our discussions, we spoke often about Thomas's and Sarah's roles as supervisors and what supervision and doctoral education entailed.

My current context

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[2] Because of the ethical complexities surrounding the involvement of Thomas and Sarah as study participants in the PhD research (e.g., supervisor interests, participant rights, the dependency relationship associated with supervision), we agreed to ensure that processes were transparent and well-documented, and on advice from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, arrangements were made to have an additional co-supervisor join the supervision team who was not a participant in the study, and whose research was not connected to it.

[3] A draft version of this paper (complete with quotes) was shared with Thomas and Sarah. Their responses implied consent to be quoted in the paper.

At the time of writing this paper, I work as a lecturer/academic developer at a Swedish university. Among other things, I coordinate a pedagogical course for PhD supervisors, and have done so for the three years since I completed the course as a participant. (For a more detailed explanation of the course, see the editorial of this Special Issue). I am also involved in the co-supervision of three doctoral researchers, two based in Sweden (one just starting out, the other well into their fieldwork) and one based in Uganda, and I have examined three Australian PhD theses. These opportunities have allowed me to view supervision practice from multiple perspectives since the completion of my PhD. By virtue of having moved from my home country of Australia to Sweden, working with staff who have experienced doctoral education (as supervisors and candidates) both inside and outside of Sweden, and engaging with doctoral researchers in projects in fields vastly different from my own, I have been exposed to challenges, practices, tensions, and questions in a range of disciplinary, research, and national traditions.

This exposure constantly prompts questions for me about what supervision is, and what is "normal" and "natural" (or not) in supervision. It also compels me to reflect particularly on how I think about and navigate:

- ideals regarding promotion of doctoral researcher 'independence' versus providing an appropriate level of support and guidance;
- contextual complexities and constraints around supervision; and
- demands that I occasionally meet in supervision courses for 'quick fixes' and 'best practice' responses to supervision dilemmas.

The retrospective analysis

Inspired by the conversations giving rise to this Special Issue, and because of an interest in the questions and issues noted above, I was curious about what treasures might still be buried (forgotten, unthematised) in my PhD empirical material. This curiosity prompted me to first revisit the detailed meeting minutes and summaries, and then, where relevant, sections of supervision meeting transcripts. I did not have the luxury of the time I had during my PhD research to analyse all the supervision-related material, and I assumed that beginning with the minutes and summaries would direct me quickly to relevant dialogue segments in the meeting transcripts[4].

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[4] I acknowledge that I may have missed relevant dialogue by not doing a thorough retrospective analysis of the transcripts themselves, since the summaries and minutes, although detailed, were initially constructed with a different research purpose in mind. If time permitted, this would have

Whilst re-reading the minutes and summaries, I made analytical notes in the margins (e.g., noting anything that might be particularly salient *for my own being and becoming a supervisor, and my role as a supervision course facilitator*, such as, direct references to what supervision is, or what was implied about supervision in the ways in which supervision was constructed and co-produced). Where *salient* dialogue was noted, I went directly to the relevant meeting transcript. The analytical notes and corresponding text excerpts were then collated into one document, which I subsequently coded to identify, categorise, and re-categorise themes, and to which I added further analytical notes relating the themes to my current contexts.

The retrospective analysis constitutes a form of 'self-study'; a study of practice, but at 'the intersection of self and other' (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). More than this though, it as an exploration of practices pertaining to an historical 'self and other' (the *other* being primarily my PhD supervisors) located in a distant time and place viewed through the experiences of a present-day 'self and other' (where the *other* largely denotes the PhD candidates and course participants with whom I engage dialogically in the present). I make no claims with respect to distancing myself from the material, the relationships (which still exist although they have evolved), and the experiences. That would be impossible, and would frankly miss the point.

Supervision as a site and a practice

Five overlapping and broad themes emerged from the analytical process:

1. Supervision as pedagogical practice
2. Supervision as a site of negotiation
3. Supervision as a site of supervisor becoming
4. Supervision as a site of possibility and resistance
5. Supervision as praxis and for praxis

In the following sections, I discuss each one at a time. Based on what was evident empirically, but also influenced by *practice theory* (Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, 2001), I treat supervision as both a *practice* and a *site* of practice.

By saying supervision is a *practice*, I mean that it constitutes human activity; it is something that happens in real space and time as a nexus of people's *sayings* and *doings* (Schatzki, 2002) and *relatings* (Kemmis, Wilkinson et al., 2014) for a

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been the ideal approach. Re-analysing the journal entries and supervisor interview transcripts may also have proved fruitful, but was not possible within the given timeframe.

particular purpose (e.g., the purpose of contributing new scientific knowledge, or fostering development of the research capacities of a new researcher). I also treat supervision as a practice that is co-produced—it is not something that *supervisors* alone perform/enact. The practice of supervision unfolds in social interaction, primarily between *supervisors* and *supervisees*, but also with others (e.g., colleagues, informal mentors; cf. Deem & Brehony, 2000; Lee, 2008; Trowler, 2021). In this paper, I focus mainly on interaction between myself, Thomas, and Sarah.

By saying supervision is a *site* of practice (Schatzki, 2002), I mean that it is a space (social realm) within which particular practices happen, take shape (i.e., are mediated, enabled, and constrained—or prefigured [Schatzki, 2002]— by an array of social, material, and political conditions [Kemmis, Wilkinson et al., 2014]), and are intrinsically a part (Schatzki, 2002). Relevant practices within the site of supervision could include, for instance, researching practices, teaching practices, studying practices, academic practices, reviewing practices, writing practices, supervising practices, mentoring practices. In our case, all of these practices were relevant at one time or another, mostly simultaneously.

Supervision as pedagogical practice

The conversations between my supervisors and me pointed to construction of supervision as a form of pedagogical[5] practice aimed explicitly at the formation of the researcher and the support of knowledge and thesis production. This entailed my supervisors providing advice and guidance as needed on a range of technical matters, such as proposal and thesis requirements, ethics approval processes, key milestones, data management, funding, conference travel, leave, and examination arrangements. However, it also entailed a more holistic creation (especially by my supervisors but in some senses by all of us collectively) of conditions conducive to my learning and identity work (Bendix Petersen, 2007; Green, 2005, 2009) as a developing researcher and the production of a strong thesis, one that would make a significant contribution to literature and society.

Endeavouring to understand me as a learner and to nurture a critical disposition appeared to be part of this mission. The latter was reflected in the kinds of questions Sarah and Thomas asked, such as those that prompted consideration of ethical–moral–political consequences of various aspects of the project. It was also evident in their problematising of my use of particular words and phrases, not per se but rather in the contexts in which they were being used. For example, Sarah

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[5] There were many references in our conversations to 'supervision as pedagogy' and Green's work on this (e.g. 2005), suggesting that the pedagogical dimension of supervision was often at the foreground of our thinking.

challenged my use of 'problem', 'oppression', 'development', 'capacities' and 'shared understanding' because of what possibilities they potentially shut down in certain conversations, while Thomas challenged my use of the word 'improvement' in a text in which I was critiquing technical preoccupations. Sarah also sometimes used a technique that I referred to in the study as 'mirroring' (Mahon, 2014). This entailed quoting my words back to me as a way of prompting critical reflection on the implications of what I was (and we were all) saying (see Lovitts, 2008, pp. 317–318 for a similar technique: 'repeat back what they're saying in a way that will enable them to transform it').

Creating conditions for my learning also included ensuring that I had opportunities to engage in conversation with other scholars. For example, decisions about my location (i.e., my desk space) on campus were made in light of the opportunities for conversation that the location would create. I was also encouraged to meet with visiting scholars, attend conferences, and be part of a local research group. I was introduced to many people within a broader network who would later become important interlocutors and research collaborators. In this sense, Sarah and Thomas were instrumental in facilitating my initiation into a particular practice community (cf. Halse, 2011).

It is worth noting that it was not only me who was constructed as a 'learner', nor my supervisors as 'teachers'/'supervisors', in our conversations. We were often constructed through our words and actions as 'co-learners', and Sarah acknowledged that 'the supervisee teaches the supervisor sometimes' (supervision meeting, 2011, May 25) through the material produced or presented by the doctoral researcher that the supervisor encounters. In one of our meetings, Thomas's first words, directed to me, were 'Supervise away!' (2012, June 4), as if to say, please begin supervising, Kathleen. The comment was intended to be humorous, I think, but it seemed to deliberately disrupt notions of what supervising means, and who does what in the supervision relationship.

Supervision as a site of negotiation
The analysis also highlighted that, in/through supervision, our practices (e.g., teaching, researching, supervising, studying), and aspects of our practices, were constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated. This might be said of any pedagogical practice site, but perhaps the emergent nature of doctoral education[6] (Green, 2012) and expectations around doctoral researcher autonomy, as well as the nature of the study, made this particularly relevant. We not only negotiated elements

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[6] Green (2012, p. 16), citing Osberg and Biesta (2008), referred to doctoral education as a 'space of emergence': 'one does not know, cannot know, what will happen, only that something will happen'.

of the PhD study itself (e.g., the focus and nature of the study), but also how we would work together, pragmatically and relationally.

In terms of pragmatics, we negotiated many *routines* such as the frequency, location, and recording of meetings; dates for submission of draft proposal sections or thesis chapters and return of feedback; and how and when we would communicate. We agreed early in the candidature, for example, that I would set the meeting agenda. Two days in advance of each meeting I emailed Thomas and Sarah a list of items for discussion based on what support I thought I needed at the time. The emails always finished with an invitation for Thomas and Sarah to add anything to the agenda if they thought it was necessary, which they never did, at least in an overt way.

In terms of our relationship, our negotiation began with agreeing to approach supervision as a team by ensuring that all three of us were present for every meeting and copied into email correspondence, and that we all had a say in how the PhD would progress. However, as time went on, more complex relational aspects of supervision such as *power* and *ownership* were discussed and negotiated. We were all aware of Thomas's and Sarah's implicit role as gatekeepers (Bendix Petersen, 2007). Thomas and Sarah were not formal assessors in the sense that they would be if teaching in undergraduate or postgraduate programs. However, they were constantly reviewing and giving feedback on my work and thinking, and would ultimately determine when the thesis was ready for examination. This was acknowledged by Thomas in a discussion about thesis examiners:

> I particularly know that when your thesis goes to those people in this field to be read and evaluated that there's a sense that [Sarah] and I are also being evaluated because we've *allow*ed this thesis to take off, and go on its journey to wherever it's going. (supervision meeting, 2012, March 14)[7]

Despite this gatekeeper role (*allow*ing the thesis to take off, etc.), and the power differential created by my lack of experience and knowledge (at least initially) regarding research and my chosen topic, I had, as a doctoral researcher, a great deal of 'room for manoeuvre'. Talking more recently to other supervisors about their PhD experiences in a range of contexts has made clear to me that I should not have taken this for granted. (In other fields, for example, candidates may be expected to complete defined research studies that form part of the *supervisor's* research program). There appeared to be conscious attempts on the part of Thomas and Sarah

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[7] This quote also gives a sense of how power dynamics within the supervisor practices are influenced by what is at stake for supervisors regarding the quality of the thesis: their work is also being judged when the thesis is examined.

to redress a power imbalance and monitor how power was being played out, thereby making negotiation more possible than it might have been otherwise.

That Sarah and Thomas were willing to be my 'co-inquirers' and have their practices examined as part of the inquiry is a clear example. They were also cautious about having too great an influence on my thinking and decisions. This was implicit in their asking me what I planned to do rather than just offering suggestions, and also in the way in which they both expressed their opinions. Unless it was for something very technical that had a definitive right or wrong answer, they tended to offer opinions tentatively rather than as forgone conclusions, which made it possible for me to critique and resist their ideas. They also regularly reflected on whose journey, thesis, study, or story the supervision was about, and the importance of me being free to think for myself. Examples of comments by Thomas are as follows:

> one of our tasks is that you do the study you want to do and not the study that we want done.

and

> It's got to be, in the end, your thesis. (supervision meeting, 2011, May 25)

> […] our job is directive in terms of your going through all the phases necessary to complete the work in a timely manner. We think of it as your journey and not ours and we're meant to be, I think, being responsive, except in the most abstract sense where we are, as it were, instructive or instructional and that's about getting the whole job done. But the content we rely on you for, and then we draw on our scholarly experience in order to — I mean it's not our realisation that's achieved through this, although there are dangerous ways in which it's true or possible, namely conflicts of interests over, for example my interest in research within practice traditions: Have you been sidelined into doing that? But I think in a genuine sense, or at least I think, sincerely it's true that our aspiration is your realisation of your thesis, not your realisation of our thesis, or my thesis or [Sarah's] thesis. (supervision meeting, 2012, March 14)

Sarah evoked similar sentiments by relating one of her own PhD experiences. She said she experienced her PhD 'not as a mini-me experience'. It seemed important for her that she be encouraged to 'stand on my own and think' (supervision meeting, 2012, July 10*)*. In relation to my supervision, Sarah expressed the importance of me

struggling with my own ideas, suggesting that supervision conversations that have a 'designing' effect take the doctoral researcher out of the 'critical learner space' (supervision meeting, 2012, June 25).

This was also important from my perspective as a doctoral researcher. I regarded the sense of ownership of the process that sentiments like this engendered as pedagogically and ethically significant. I felt able to steer and take responsibility for my own learning. I could ensure that the learning experiences aligned with my learning goals and interests, and that possibilities for learning thereby opened up. It also meant that, as the person most affected by decisions about my learning, I had the space to exercise self-determination and self-expression (Young, 1990). Some of this is reflected in one of our reflexive discussions about supervision:

> The kinds of questions that… both of you ask do much more for me than if you were saying, 'I think you need to go this way now', or 'I think you need'. Just asking the questions— and I'm the sort of person who wants to be able to answer the questions for myself. Otherwise I probably wouldn't be getting as much out of the whole process. It'd be just jumping through hoops… (Kathleen, supervision meeting, 2012, March 14)

As Bradbury-Jones et al. (2007) pointed out, this is not always the case for doctoral researchers.

Supervision as a site of supervisor becoming
Both Sarah and Thomas shared or implied that they were influenced in their supervision practice by how they were, themselves, supervised (cf. Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Blose et al., 2021). Sarah, for example, talked about being influenced in her practice as co-supervisor by what her co-supervisor did during her own PhD, and being conscious of complementing and not usurping, the main supervisor. In my case she recognised that I needed the opportunity to talk things through, and she saw her main role being to ask challenging questions to help me do this. Sarah also told stories about her experiences of doing her PhD and supervision, and shared advice that she received from her supervisors, such as the following tip from her main supervisor:

> Have an idea of the story you want to tell and how the argument will be constructed. Then write the introduction first so that the story of the thesis is clearly in mind before embarking on the rest, but it is important not to be married to that… (supervision meeting, 2011, February 24)

Thomas also invoked his doctoral supervisor's practice, for example: 'I could look at the list of things I'd promised to do and hand one of them to you, the way [my supervisor] did with me' (supervision meeting, 2012, March 27).

Not only do these examples highlight how my supervisors' stories of being supervised became part of my story of being supervised, but also how, in the process of being supervised, they were *being prepared to supervise others.* In other words, their supervision *as doctoral researchers* was a *site for their becoming as supervisors*, indirectly prefiguring their future supervision practice. Thomas and Sarah articulated this themselves and seemed aware that they were playing a role not only in supervising my doctorate, and thus supporting my formation as a researcher, but also in influencing my formation as a supervisor.

Sarah, especially, also articulated an awareness of her own becoming as a supervisor *in the practice of supervising*. She made reference to her sayings, doings, and relatings as a co-supervisor being shaped through the experience of doing supervision. This chimes with arguments by Amundsen and McAlpine (2009), Blose et al. (2021) and Halse (2011) about learning experientially through supervising. Indeed, one of the reasons Sarah gave for agreeing to be a co-inquirer in the study and to have our supervision conversations in focus was that she saw it as a good opportunity to *work on* her supervising practice. And because we were actively reflecting on supervision as it was transpiring, there were times when Sarah (like Thomas) was receiving immediate feedback either from me or her fellow supervisor (Thomas), which may have informed that *work*. An example is the following comment by Thomas to Sarah:

> you are very good at stepping back and making a little move every now and then in the discussion to show us where we've got ourselves hooked in to some perspective. You're very good at reframing so that we escape a kind of way of looking at a problem that we've got ourselves locked into… (supervision meeting, 2012, March 14)

This statement by Thomas also reflects the kinds of signals I received throughout my candidature about what constitutes good supervision, but I was also exposed to signals about what constitutes a good or not so good PhD, a good or not so good doctoral researcher, and a good or not so good doctoral thesis. To give one example, a not so good thesis, according to Thomas, could look like this:

> Some theses just read like sticking this in front of you. 'Now I'm sticking this in front of you. Now I'm sticking this in front of you. Now I kick the ball. There's a goal. Here's the picture of me having kicked

the goal.' And it's like, there's not really a progress. (supervision meeting, 2012, August 8)

Certain values, norms, and assumptions regarding supervision, theses, and so forth were more implicitly reinforced by Sarah and Thomas through such actions as recommending organisational strategies, recommending I read particular doctoral theses or supervision literature, sharing their own work with me, and the normalisation or not of what I was experiencing, such as how long was considered 'normal' for brainstorming at the start of the PhD research before making decisions about the study focus and design.

Supervision as a site of possibility and resistance
The aspects of supervision alluded to in relation to the previous theme point to supervision as a site of reproduction of particular practices and aspects of practice. However, there were just as many ways, if not more, in which supervision was constructed as a *site of resistance* to norms, traditions and particular ways of thinking about and doing (in) supervision, rendering supervision a *site of possibility* as well. We explored, for example, the possibility of me writing a methodology chapter that didn't 'fit the mould' (Thomas referred to this as a 'not-the-methodology' chapter), or breaking with empirical traditions and writing a purely theoretical thesis. Thomas wasn't thrilled with the idea I had at one stage of employing fable writing, but he never ruled it out. That he didn't rule it out, combined with Sarah's and Thomas's general encouragement to push at conventional boundaries and their openness to changing their positions, made it possible for me to eventually incorporate poetry (not fables thank goodness) into my thesis to say and evoke what I was not able to say/evoke with academic prose. Taking an unconventional approach to the ethics approval process is another example (see Mahon, 2017).

Resistance also took the form of resisting being trapped by broader traditions, norms, and conditions (e.g., preoccupations with accountability, performance, and competition), theoretical perspectives (including practice theory), dependencies, and particular ways of thinking (e.g., technical, deficit, saviouristic, elitist thinking; assumptions about difference) and being human. We often named and discussed the things we did not want to be trapped by (this is not to say that we didn't still fall into some traps), and explicitly talked about resistance and entrapment. For example, Sarah, expressed concern with being trapped by the language available to us:

> […]we're caught up in a language of our time. And it's very difficult to get out of the bind of language that's available to us. I mean I

confront that every day. How do I use the language that helps me escape the thing that I'm trying to escape? (supervision meeting, 2011, March 29)

Thomas, drawing on Gadamer, reflected on how our thinking can be narrowed by particular taken-for-granted categories: 'we must be saying things we don't know we're saying because we're following paths that we're not aware of in our own thought' (supervision meeting, 2012, June 13). I expressed a fear of being trapped by particular categories in my theoretical framework, especially since I was part of an academic community where practice theories permeated our everyday conversations. In a supervision meeting I talked about this in terms of 'getting fixed on that way of seeing the world' (supervision meeting, 2011, June 22) and how I might work analytically to move beyond that.

This kind dialogue was one way of resisting fixations and narrowing tendencies, or at least staying aware of them. Other strategies included bringing relevant critical literature into our conversations, and deliberately being playful with ideas and theory. My supervisors also encouraged me to seek out scholars whose perspectives on my research topic were very different from (even in tension with) theirs and mine, nurturing a capacity to resist and critique their thoughts and work while allowing new possibilities for thought to emerge.

Supervision as praxis and for praxis
Many of the aspects of the supervision practice/site discussed thus far connect directly to the notion of supervision as praxis in the sense of being morally committed to acting in the best interests of the doctoral researcher, the team, and the broader community (see Kemmis & Smith, 2008); being sensitive, responsive, reflexive, and mindful of the consequences of actions for others (Mahon et al., 2020); and being formed and informed in community whereby the people whose good the action is intended to serve and protect are determining what is appropriate/in their interests (Freire, 2008; Mahon, 2014; Sarah, supervision meeting).

Acting in the best interests of the doctoral researcher was evident in Thomas's and Sarah's general ethic of care. There were times when I was experiencing some difficulty or other, even self-doubt. This is not surprising given that the doctorate is a 'highly emotional endeavour' (Hopwood et al., 2011, p. 223). During such times, Thomas and Sarah were attentive to my needs, vulnerabilities and wellbeing, including when I needed prodding (for instance, if I were 'dwelling' for too long in the analysis), reminders about taking better care of my health, encouragement to talk through concerns (e.g., whether or not to take on teaching work while doing the PhD research, difficulties articulating ideas to others, ethical

issues), or affirmation. The following exchange exemplifies the kind of encouragement and affirmation that I received as necessary. It occurred at the end of a discussion about my draft literature review for the research proposal and difficulties I had experienced with various understandings of 'praxis':

> Kathleen: I guess my problem is that I still haven't read enough and so I'm kind of grasping at whatever I've read and can remember of what I've read.
> Thomas: That's why we're having this conversation. You're doing a great job. Hang in there. (supervision meeting, 2011, October 11)

Thomas and Sarah also showed sensitivity towards my needing space to work through issues on my own, especially during focussed analysis and the writing of thesis chapters where I was grappling with methodological and theoretical issues. During these times they appropriately left me to my own devices. This was in keeping with expectations about doctoral researchers demonstrating that they can work autonomously (Bendix Petersen, 2007; Bradley-Jones et al., 2007). It was also important pedagogically because of the aforementioned sense of ownership and the responsibility for my own learning it encouraged.

Sensitivity to what I needed at particular times and in particular circumstances extended also to technical elements of the PhD, and being able to appropriately balance the technical, practical, and critical dimensions of the thesis work and doctorate. Thomas mentioned that craft considerations (the crafting of the thesis), the everyday technical work of getting the thesis done, and where I was in the journey, were constantly in his mind, and he saw this as an important part of supervision.

Alongside this, there was an overt sensitivity to the possible broader consequences of our work together, through the impact of the thesis, when it was released to the academic community, and through my future practice as a researcher. Thomas and Sarah were, as I wrote in my thesis:

> endeavouring to help me become a researcher who could research critically, and in ethically and culturally sensitive ways; who embodied praxis or developed a capacity for praxis; and who produced a thesis that could make a difference to society through the body of literature to which it would contribute. (Mahon, 2014, p. 149)

In this sense, they were both enacting *supervision as* and *for praxis*. Based on my retrospective analysis, I could replace the words 'researcher' and 'research' with the words 'supervisor' and 'supervise' and the statement I wrote would be equally

valid, although the ways in which this was happening was more subtle and in the background.

Knowing what was appropriate for Thomas and Sarah to do to pedagogically support my progress and make possible a particular kind of thesis, however, was not necessarily self-evident or easy for them to discern, and taking this or that course of action was not without risks. What might have been an empowering experience for me at one time may well have been disempowering for me at another time, or for a different doctoral researcher at a similar stage of their PhD process. They might have 'got it wrong'. This uncertainty and risk around supervision, as with any form of pedagogical practice, made our dialogue, and their attunement to me and the situation through that dialogue, both crucial and challenging (despite them making it look easy much of the time).

Reflections on current practice and becoming

Looking back at my PhD supervision experience (via the empirical material) with supervisor and academic developer eyes (instead of doctoral researcher eyes) has reinforced how positive and powerful that experience actually was, not just for the kind of researcher I am being and becoming, but also in terms of the *kind of supervisor* I am being and becoming. I was aware that my supervisors' practices had left a lasting impression, but I probably underestimated the extent to which I was becoming a supervisor already during my PhD. This has highlighted the importance of asking whether and how doctoral researchers might suffer or benefit because of what their supervisors themselves endured as candidates? I believe I benefitted, but many surely do not. Regular reflection on what I am reproducing in my own supervision practice and in the courses I facilitate is important, and perhaps engaging in dialogue with colleagues in supervision teams and in supervision courses is one way of helping to monitor this, since reflection on its own or on one's own may not be enough. The analysis also raised particular questions that could be helpful in any such dialogue: Why am I/why are we doing this or that in my/our practice? What am I/are we implying about what is normal and good? How am I/are we positioning myself/ourselves? What is this doing for the doctoral researchers' sense of ownership and agency? Whose journey, study, story, thesis do I/we have in the foreground—what about the doctoral researchers? What possibilities for negotiation or emergence is this or that opening up, or not?

In line with this, in the supervision courses I am involved with, we typically build in time and space to reflect on our own experiences of supervision as doctoral researchers, but we reach a point quite early in the courses of saying something like, ok now we need to put the experiences of being supervised aside and focus on our

practices as supervisors. Not only do I now think that is impossible, I also wonder if it is a missed opportunity. Have I been too quick to dismiss prior experiences? Might something like tracing and understanding our 'advising ancestry' (Rouse, this Special Issue) yield some important insights that allow new possibilities for supervision to emerge and the reproduction of potentially harmful practices to be disrupted?

I am often asked in courses and workshops to provide examples of 'best practice' (in the sense of supervision strategies that are widely accepted as the most effective or 'proper'). I usually respond by almost dismissing the concept, questioning what can realistically be judged as effective or proper when supervision and doctoral contexts and actors can differ so markedly. However, reflecting on the empirical material—and writing this paper—has given me a more nuanced way of thinking about this. The emergent nature of doctoral pedagogy, plus questions around whose learning, journey, thesis is at the centre suggests not only the need for adaptability but also mutual steering of the process. I might now ask what possibilities for this the notion of 'best practice' closes down and opens up, and encourage further contemplation of what that expression can mean and entail. Perhaps 'best practice' is a useful phrase in relation to supervision if we turn it around to think about *doing and being the best we can in practice* and staying ever mindful of whether those with whom we are interacting (in the here and now) or will (in the future) experience our supervision practices as empowering or not[8].

As I have indicated, my experience of supervision was empowering, both in my becoming a researcher and becoming a supervisor, but Thomas and Sarah had to work very hard to ensure that was the case, and they no doubt worried at times whether they were getting it right, because they cared. Importantly, they did not do it on their own or in a vacuum, or with merely a bag of tried and tested strategies at their disposal (although they clearly had a few that, thankfully, turned out to be beneficial). They were constantly learning how to best do and be in the supervision practice as it was unfolding amidst a complex array of uncertain and changing circumstances in dialogue with me and with each other. This kind of generative struggle seems to be crucial for supervisor becoming and is arguably part of supervision practice.

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[8] I am indebted to 'Sarah' and her comments on a draft of this paper for helping me clarify my thinking around this.

Conclusion

This paper has provided *a* window into supervision as and for praxis based on dialogue with two of my PhD supervisors over several supervision meetings. The discussion has highlighted that supervision is (or can be) a site of pedagogy, negotiation, resistance and possibility, reproduction and becoming, including supervisor becoming. Because of the latter, more is likely at stake in doctoral supervision than has been acknowledged.

In making particular choices about what examples to include or not in the discussion, I have risked reproducing and reinforcing particular assumptions and values and norms and not others. Rather than being indicative of how supervision ought to be enacted and constructed, the analysis and reflection represents what I see as worth reflecting upon and theorising further. I acknowledge that my experience was unique (other doctoral researchers would have experienced similar practices differently, perhaps in some cases even negatively; the focus of my PhD research on supervision/in supervision may have also affected my supervisor's consciousness of what they were doing, and hence induced an unusually high degree of meta-dialogue about supervision). This is a story of three people's experiences and practices resulting in a 'happy story' viewed through one person's (possibly-still-rose-coloured-despite-taking-an-analytical-stance) lens. So, there are limitations to what can be concluded on the basis of the analysis in this paper. I nevertheless hope that this 'window' is a catalyst in dialogue and reflections about what new practices in supervision and professional learning of supervisors might be possible, and that it encourages the interrogation and sharing of all kinds of supervisor becoming stories in the future.

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Author biography

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