

Research supervision as praxis: A need to speak back in dangerous ways?

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Abstract

Viewing research supervision as praxis offers alternative perspectives on this crucial aspect of academic work. In this paper, we consider the contributions in this Special Issue as counterpoints to dominant discourses on research supervision by drawing on the idea of praxis as morally committed and history-making action. This brings insights from Swedish research into dialogue with literature from across the world, particularly the Global South. We thematize these contributions by highlighting issues of complexity; considering how history, future and positionality shape supervision praxis; challenging narrow production-oriented discourses in favour of creativity as a foundation for supervision as praxis; and reflecting on how a shift from precarity to nuance may enable us to view supervision as praxis as enablement towards a better future. Our consideration of research supervision as praxis necessitates a stance that does not conform to the status quo, thus provoking further debate and action to think, and supervise, in non-routine, future-changing ways. As supervisors, we do not need to be resigned to futures where neoliberal regimes of surveillance, measurement and accountability shape our practices as strongly as they do today. We argue that there is a need to speak back to supervision as praxis in dangerous ways.

Key words: doctoral advising; doctoral education; doctoral supervision; praxis; transformation

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Introduction

Where does thinking about supervision as praxis lead? The contributions to this special issue offer rich content that demands a response. The ideas presented by Padyab and Lundgren (this issue), Mahon (this issue) and Rouse (this issue) do not sit inertly in an uncontested field (see Firth & Martens, 2008; Manathunga, 2009). They should agitate and provoke us. We speak back to the papers, considering how

the papers speak to the literature, and how researchers and practitioners of supervision might speak back to what the papers raise. In doing so we highlight resonances, tensions and oppositions, not in search for a right approach to supervision as praxis, but rather in the ongoing struggle to determine and enact supervision that moves us towards what is right. This is not a question of correct or even best practice. Rather, we conceptualise this drawing on Stetsenko's (2020) notion of *dangerous* use of theory, wherein danger refers to deliberate efforts to redirect things towards an alternative that is better than the present (see also Hopwood, 2021). *Praxis* forces us to confront questions of towards what wider good, and to what history-and-future making ends do we supervise? As such it invites dialogue—speaking to ideas, speaking for visions of the future, and speaking back to one another in a collaborative, generative struggle. Our aim in this paper is to agitate these dialogues: to invigorate and to unapologetically fuel frustration and disquiet. Supervision as praxis is not an agenda to passively and neutrally describe what is, but to critique what is, re-imagine what could, and commit to what ought to be.

This Special Issue seeks to go beyond supervision as practice (Lee & Boud, 2009), to frame it as *praxis*. Kemmis (2019) draws on Aristotle, outlining four kinds of action as a means to specify what praxis means. These kinds of action are linked to aims (what the way of acting strives towards) and dispositions (characteristic ways of acting), grouped under theoretical, technical, practical, and emancipatory perspectives. These are summarised in Table 1, which adapts versions presented by Kemmis (2019) and Kemmis and Smith (2008), so that the actions refer specifically to research supervision. This framework extends Aristotle's three kinds of actions (the third of which was praxis), to add critical praxis, 'what we do when we act to identify and to overcome irrationality and unreasonableness, unproductiveness and unsustainability and injustice and exclusion' (Kemmis, 2019, p. 95). Here, praxis and its critical companion are actions that make history, while also forming us ourselves. Both praxis and critical praxis might have dangerous qualities, in Stetsenko's (2020) sense of being part of a struggle towards a better world. Supervision can involve dilemmas where routine, conformist action is not for the wider good, in the interests of the student or supervisor. And, as the papers in this Special Issue illustrate, it can also involve actions that reject the status quo in recognition of its potentially damaging consequences.

Table 1

Four kinds of action in supervision

Perspective	Theoretical	Technical	Practical	Emancipatory
Aim	Attaining knowledge	Producing an external object	Acting for the wider good	Overcoming injustice and unsustainability
Disposition	To seek the truth	To make things correctly	To act wisely, prudently	To free people from harm
Action	Contemplative action-reflecting on what supervision is, what it is for, how it works (or not), theorising	Producing relevant objects (theses, researchers), using pedagogic and research techniques, following relevant institutional rules governing supervision	<i>Praxis</i> -supervising wisely for a greater good (student, research team, broader community), conscious of acting in and forming history and oneself as a supervisor	<i>Critical praxis</i> -interrogating and transforming aspects of supervision that untoward consequences, upholding the status quo in ways that may be unfair, or unjust

Table 1 reflects a neo-Aristotelian tradition in the study of praxis, in which action is morally committed (Kemmis, 2019). This is the view we see clearly in Mahon’s (this issue) account of moral commitment to acting in the best interests of the doctoral researcher, team, and community, intending to serve and protect what is in others’ interests. This resonates with Åkerlind and McAlpine’s (2017) argument for the need to go beyond a focus on supervisor skills and abilities with a concomitant focus on purpose and intentions, and with Van Schalkwyk’s (2012) Southern-based argument that the research education endeavour should be for the wider public good. Kemmis (2019) identifies a second, Hegelian-Marxian tradition in which praxis is history-making action. The first tradition highlights good *intentions*, the second moral and political *consequences*. Arguably we see this, too, in Mahon’s (this issue) explicit reference to being mindful of the consequences of actions for others’ (see also Mahon et al., 2020). Kemmis (2011) argues these need not be incompatible, noting that an observer’s perspective might favour Hegelian-Marxian terms, while that of the participant (in our case, the supervisor) might focus on trying to do the right thing under the prevailing circumstances. We reconnect with these issues of intention and consequence as the first of three threads in our dialogue with the papers from this special issue.

Before we move on, however, and in the aforementioned spirit of fuelling frustration and disquiet (speaking back dangerously) we must address the idea of good intentions ‘under the prevailing circumstances’ (Kemmis, 2019, p. 96). If we are to keep hold of the emancipatory potential of supervision, does it make sense to frame it as a response ‘under’ given circumstances? Is the point not to break away from what is given, or at least not to be automatically confined to it? The idea of acting under current circumstances (not of our own making) comes from Marx—as cited by Stetsenko (2020), and as follows by Kemmis:

[People] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. (Marx, 1852, as cited in Kemmis, 2019, p. 28)

The point is that history-making under present circumstances does not preclude making history! We indeed make history—and can break away from what is given. If we want to understand and promote supervision as praxis, then we need to confront the circumstances under which we act, without being contained by them. This is implied in the various provocations on the future(s) of the doctorate offered in the volume edited by Barnacle and Cuthbert (2021), as well as by McKenna (2021)—with both these sources enabling us to cross the North/South (or for that matter, East/West) divide. Taking a Marxist perspective, praxis is regarded as a world-historical activity, premised on the need to practically attack and change things (Stetsenko, 2020). Stetsenko (2020) suggests this can be taken up in a unified ethico-onto-epistemology where distinctions between conceptual analysis and political struggle, theory and practice, facts and values are blurred. This is key to the idea of theory being taken up dangerously—because it is not separate from active efforts to remake the world on better terms. McKenna (2021) argues that this challenge can only be taken when supervisors are committed to creating pedagogical spaces of hope that are rooted in mutual recognition and learning, risk-taking, kindness and critical citizenship. Such mutuality does not only refer to the relationship between supervisor(s) and student(s), but also between supervisors themselves. Even though our argument here might suggest some sort of unified response, the reality is more likely that supervision history making will take place within the context of a contested future (Barnacle & Cuthbert, 2021), and that we should not limit ourselves to our current reality/realities (see Barnett, 2021; Bengtson, 2021).

How might we re-view the actions of Table 1 with this view in mind? First, the separation between praxis and critical praxis weakens, as society is constantly in the making and change is not *any* change, but change premised on struggles and commitments to a sought-after future. Secondly, theoretical and technical actions are bound up in the wider political project—whether in upholding the status quo through compliance that amounts to passive acquiescence, or in ethical deliberation as we contemplate what indeed ought to be. Struggle and commitment do not imply necessarily accomplishing everything that is desired, but this does not negate the history-making that is inevitably bound up with supervision. Supervision as praxis constitutes supervisors as agentive actors of history in the making, albeit not always without experiences of constraint, inertia or resistance to change (Stetsenko, 2020; see also Motshoane & McKenna, 2021 for a perspective from Southern Africa). This gives us a second thread to draw through our response to the papers in this Special Issue: what is the relationship between things ‘not as we please’ and currents that break away and transcend the prevailing or given approach to supervision?

Before we speak back to the papers more directly, we want to add to the agitation that praxis invokes by connecting with the work of Freire. Freire’s (2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is cited by Rouse (this issue) and Mahon (this issue). This helpfully highlights that supervision as praxis is—at least partially—*pedagogic* work, a well-established notion (see also Danby & Lee, 2012; McKenna, 2021; Waghid, 2011). Furthermore, we find it apt to revisit Freire’s argument as to the need to live utopia and search for the *viable unheard of* (see Liberali, 2019)—a dangerous aspiration in Stetsenko’s (2020) terms, given it is grounded in struggle that refuses to be confined by the status quo. This is about creating the opportunity to live and act beyond the limiting situations of immediate reality, as Barnett (2021) and Bengsten (2021) imagine. This recognises that the circumstances under which we act are not of our choosing, but again reminds us these are not fully *limiting* either. The papers in this special issue convey various struggles and frustrations. Freire reminds us that just as the struggle should not be limited by present reality, nor should it be limited by what we *think* is viable, either. The good intention, the commitment to remake history needs to be towards what ought to be, however unviable, unheard of, unthinkable that may seem. Presently neoliberal regimes of surveillance, output measurement and accountability might figure strongly as limiting features of immediate reality (see McKenna, 2021; Tennant, 2009) —but we should not be resigned to those as prevailing features of the future, however trapped within those regimes we may feel today. So, our third thread is that of the viable unheard of—looking for glimpses of visions that transcend the limitations of

the status quo. This takes up what Mahon (this issue) frames as supervision as a site of *possibility* and resistance.

Rather than take each paper in turn, we speak back through different themes, some of which are foregrounded more in some papers than others (a reflection of the different ways they resonate with our lines of thinking).

These themes are as follows:

- a) Complexity in supervision as praxis
- b) History, future and positionality in supervision praxis
- c) Production and creativity
- d) Precarity and nuance

In working through these themes, we draw out connections and contrasts between the papers, and extend these out to the wider literature, emphasising where we can recent scholarship, particularly from the global South. This is an important counterpoint to a collection of papers stemming from a particular context in the global North (Sweden).

Complexity in supervision as praxis

Supervision has long been recognised as complex. Grant (2003), for example, offers a view of supervision as a complex and unstable process. Rouse (this issue) invites us to confront complexity in supervision most directly. A strand of researching highlights complexities of supervision relating to internationalisation, cultural issues, power relationships and still-present legacies of colonialism (Grant, 2010a, 2010b; Manathunga, 2011, 2012a, 2014; McAlpine et al., 2022). We can add complexities of diverse settings and arrangements (Pearson et al., 2016), team supervision (Manathunga, 2012b), and gender dynamics (Johnson et al., 2000) to an already ‘chaotic’ pedagogy (Grant, 2003). At this point we note that the supervision formation most often invoked in this paper is that of a student and supervisor, reflecting the practices to which the papers in the Special Issue generally refer. Of course, many students have multiple supervisors, perhaps from different disciplines, institutions, and even countries. We do not address this complexity directly, but rather point to complexities that arise regardless of the specific formation, but which indeed might be amplified when supervision expands beyond a dyadic nature.

Through a feminist technoscientific approach, Rouse tackles complexity as something to *honour*. This non-reductive approach leads to an ‘un-taxonomy’

(Rouse's term) of 11 supervisory styles (collaborative, collegial, demystifying, professional, literary, editorial, inspiration, co-learning, flexible, reflective, and radical). These honour complexity because they express specific, entangled practices co-constituted in networks of people—not characteristics of a person or homogenising labels. This is not to say these styles present us with individualistic notions, but rather they emphasise relationality without the human beings, with all their history, ancestry, and positioning (see below) themselves being thrown out of the window. In our reading, there is something deeply humanising about this way of thinking about supervision as complex, which relates to African philosopher of education Yusef Waghid's (2011) notion of supervision as a call to Cavellian scepticism (both with each other as colleagues, and with our students as aspiring scholars of the present and future). Supervising students sceptically requires that we acknowledge humanity within the Other (in this case our students) and our own responsibility to the Other in our role as supervisors, being willing to care about their ideas with an openness to critique these ideas in the spirit of academic scepticism. Indeed, Waghid's Southern African view of humanising supervision also links to Ann Lee's (2008) framework, especially when supervision is seen beyond being functional by incorporating elements of enculturation, critical thinking, and especially emancipation and relationship development. We would suggest that thinking about supervision dangerously—so we can advance struggles to overturn aspects of the status quo that are not as they ought to be—necessarily embraces this humanising and emancipating quality, a counter to tendencies where students are reduced to producers of products to be counted, and where attempts to secure equitable practices have become forces of standardisation and control.

One agitating claim might be that trends in the regulation of supervision, supervisors, students, theses, and knowledge have dehumanised supervision. Lee (2008) writes about the inherent tension in supervision between the supervisor's professional role as academic and the personal self, which Rouse's nuanced entanglement of supervisory practices also highlights. Firth and Martens (2008) argue that successful supervision requires a supervisor's recovery of a fully integrated self, reversing the dehumanising that results from fragmentation of human beings' essential unity (see also Manathunga, 2009). Could Rouse's un-taxonomy speak back to these trends, and be used to speak up and speak out in a humanising, decolonial spirit, akin to Waghid's (2006) argument in favour of reclaiming freedom and friendship through supervision? We have in mind the work of Frantz Fanon (1952/2008), who urges us not just to broaden or redeem, but to completely remake how we imagine 'the human' (see Alessandrini, 2014; Stetsenko, 2023). Honouring complexity in supervision leads us not to focus on categories of people (or people as categories), but rather to the emerging dynamics

of their inter-relatedness, human bonds (particularly within educational encounters), which Davids and Waghid (2020) portray as frail and insecure. We disrupt traditional binaries of who is acting upon whom, and instead open up a space to investigate and enact practices where the important question is how people act *with and for* one another. Rouse's 'radical' style clearly signals room for critical praxis, working outside of institutional or disciplinary norms. What other styles create space for transgression and resistance? Which styles more comfortably acquiesce to how things are? Which might be complicit in upholding norms that have untoward consequences (i.e. those which perpetuate inequality, injustice, unfairness)? Which, in contrast, are more dangerous, posing a threat to the status quo?

Complexity also manifests in the papers of this Special Issue in relation to ideas of the good supervisor. Collectively, the papers address supervision as an aspect of *professional* practice. Complexity abounds when we explore praxis this way. First, the notion of professionalism implies complexity, something beyond cookie-cutter technical competence and performance, something requiring judgement, discretion, and nuance—dare we say, wisdom (building on Barnacle, 2005). Here we find ways to honour the complexity of supervision as both research and teaching (echoing again Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017). The notion of professionalism in general also connotes responsibility and an obligation to avoid what might be unprofessional. As a professional practice, supervision must advance students' interests as well as those of institutions and professions (education, engineering, healthcare), which often have codes that specifically articulate expectations and seek to eliminate practices that might perpetuate harms (Halse & Malfroy, 2010). Professionalism also extends to our collegial entanglements within and across supervisory relationships and structures.

This connects with the stresses and stressors described by Padyab and Lundgren (this issue). A *good* supervisor, acting with good intentions in ways that have positive consequences for their student(s), colleagues and the community, is at the same time enacting their own historical formation. This might be one of nurture and growth but might also be one of a trajectory of augmenting stress, towards burnout, where the mission drifts ever-outwards (Pyhältö et al., 2017). What is experienced as mission drift for some is a core element of praxis for others. Complexity is precisely what we confront when we read in Rouse (this issue) of the 'goods' of (gendered) editing practices described by supervisor Sandra, practices that honour the autonomy of the student; then we also read in Padyab and Lundgren (this issue) of Delta who found expectations of editorial work were producing stress, detracting and distracting from the work of supervision.

For supervisor Laura (in Rouse, this issue), a professional style of supervision is a means to avoid misogynist traps and protect home from work. However, professionalism is not a panacea, and can undermine aspects of supervision as praxis. Moves to promote professionalism with the intention of wider good can get caught up in processes that reflect other prevailing circumstances (not of our choosing) that can have unintended consequences. Daniel (2007) has shown that aspects of professionalisation in doctoral education can reproduce stratified social relations, with significant negative effects on minority students. Discourses of professionalism as an unquestionable good (who argues we should be less professional or unprofessional?) provide a cover for neoliberal regimes of control and compliance (see Berg, 2015; Grant, 2001). These can suffocate the very autonomy, discretion and expertise that are so fundamental to a practice being complex enough to be professional in the first place. As such, they need to be dangerously countered.

As we seek to become ‘more professional’ are we at risk of being distracted from other struggles? How can we take up ideas of professionalism without unknowingly also taking up the baggage of neoliberalism? This is something that Frick (2022) tackles from a Southern perspective through a lens of global citizenship education that highlights epistemic (in)justices, patriarchy and colonisation, countering Northern narratives of doctoral production for the knowledge economy. When professionalism becomes a matter of documenting a fixed number of meetings, have we evacuated all meaning? Yes, we need mechanisms to ensure students are not left floundering in supervisory neglect, but we cannot take false comfort in such reductive measures. They measure nothing close to praxis, after all. Surely the solidarity and critique described by Ablett et al. (2019) in PhD students’ resistance to neoliberal practices are also what is needed among supervisors?

Complexity also provides a useful way to think about tools used in supervision and supervisor development. Rouse (this issue) critiques a quadrant representation of supervision developed by Gatfield and Alpert (2002) and presented in the course at Borås. Rouse notes the apparent completeness of the grid, but a lack of clarity how to move from the four-part taxonomy to the realities of doctoral advising as experienced in practice. This is an important point, given that such tools are far from isolated (for more such examples, see Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011; Crossouard, 2008; Deuchar, 2008; Halse & Malfroy, 2010; Lee, 2008, 2010; Parker-Jenkins, 2018).

Such tools are necessarily simplifications. Indeed, in their simplification we wonder whether they can be effective provocations towards complexification, if only by forcing us to confront the inadequacy of simplified representations.

However, there is another point here, too, connecting with our third thread, and the emancipatory and transgressive aspects of praxis. Models like Gatfield and Alpert's (2002) grid help us, in limited ways, to reflect on our practices—but perhaps they orient us too much, too comfortably towards a status quo, and perhaps, as Rouse (this issue) points out, to a model of practice that appears (perhaps unintentionally) all-encompassing and universal, but is in fact highly limited in its representation, and highly particular in its origins (in Gatfield and Alpert's (2002) case, management science in Australia). Where is the invitation to transgress, to use such tools dangerously (i.e., in the struggle to usurp unwanted and unwarranted features of the status quo)? Do we not also need models that lead us towards the viable unheard of? Mapping supervision practices that are not-yet—not just not-yet done, but not-yet seen as possible? While existing tools might invite us to reconsider our own practices, is the frame too much within a field of what is, rather than a radical, agitating conjecture of what ought to be?

History, future and positionality in supervision praxis

The three papers highlight different aspects of history, future and positionality in supervision as praxis. Adapting Kemmis's (2019) argument, we can take a stance that, regardless of whether we take a neo-Aristotelian view of praxis (right action) or the Hegelian-Marxian view (history-making action), practices are praxis when we act with respect for the supervisees' good and the wider good of research teams, communities (see Mahon, this issue), and when we lay down histories of practice that we expect will shape their future and future ways of supervising. To the sense of history and future that are clearly manifested here, we can add that we never act as supervisors who have no history, no location among others: we always act from and take up a position in relation to others (supervisees, colleagues, institutions), and one's (past and future) self.

These themes agitate our understanding of supervision as praxis in the sense of bringing a clear sense of movement. Kemmis (2019) further argues that we cannot understand praxis as a snapshot in time; what we must grasp is the 'meaning, motion and momentousness (or not)' of actions (p. 12). How might we speak back to the papers, and how might they speak back to the wider literature, on these lines?

We can start with Mahon's (this issue) intimate account, which bursts with motion. Consider Mahon's own motion, towards coordination of a supervision course for supervisors and supervising doctoral students herself. Consider also the motion highlighted as Mahon explores the themes of supervision as a site of emergence wherein the practices of supervision were constantly renegotiated. Add

to this the motion implied in supervision as a site of supervisor becoming. And finally, in the theme of possibility and resistance, where we can see motion as transgression, beyond what was initially deemed possible or necessary. Such motion can be the kernel of dangerous thinking and acting because, however modestly, they can break away from the status quo. The discussions around Mahon's methodology chapter entertained quite different versions (fables, poetry) before settling on something more conventional. While the endpoint was not in that particular piece of writing a radical departure, there was motion through alternatives that meant the convention was not adopted as a given, prevailing status quo, but rather *chosen*.

Much in Mahon's (this issue) account resonates with Rouse's (this issue) writing on ancestry. Taking up feminist perspectives, this shifts away from the focus on supervisors as individuals, to instead focus on supervisors and supervisees in relationship, a 'powerful lens for articulating the interconnectedness of multiple actors in the entangled web of relations that surround the advisor-advisee dyad' (Rouse, this issue). Rouse uses the notion of ancestry to bring her own in many ways privileged positionality into contrast with those of students whose histories have not demystified academic culture (see for example Holley & Gardner, 2012; Offerman, 2011; Wofford et al., 2021). For Rouse, this becomes an aspect of her praxis—acting with intentions to demystify norms while avoiding a position as an enforcer of them. Rouse and Mahon both connect with history as something that continues into our present, by virtue of supervisors often referring to the way they were supervised when they shape their own practices (not only in imitation, but also in breaking away). This is an established theme in the literature (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Blose et al., 2021; Halse, 2011). Here, praxis as good intention meets praxis as action with historical consequence, as Mahon (this issue) asks, how many doctoral researchers actually 'suffer or benefit because of what their supervisors themselves endured as candidates?' (p. 133). This is an implicit invitation to think and act dangerously: to struggle not to reproduce what was endured in the past. We highlighted above the importance of possibilities that transgress diffuse but pernicious regimes that distort professionalism into mundane compliance. Now we can see the importance of transgressing much more personal norms—breaking away from the mould of one's own history.

Our position 'now' as supervisors is always intensely historical. This is an important point that connects with the widely researched area of student-supervisor relationships (see Frick & Mouton, 2021, who show the dominance of Northern-based discourses in this field). Our histories of being supervised live on into our present praxis. We enter each supervisory relationship at a moment in the trajectories of our becoming as supervisors, never exactly at the same position

twice. These are also often moments in wider unfolding histories of internationalisation of research education, and even wider histories of colonialism, wherein supervision brings different historically and culturally shaped positions into contact with one another (Grant, 2010a, 2010b; Manathunga, 2011, 2014). Our position as supervisors enacting praxis is not a static relationship with another. Rather it is a constant and evolving presence that co-determines the direction in which supervision as praxis moves (moves students, moves us as supervisors, moves wider society). That motion is *from* somewhere, and *towards* somewhere else, and this direction can be full of dangerous intent, towards alternatives to the present state of affairs. We cannot gain any sense of direction without knowing both of these points. This does not mean the departure point is left behind in some fixed state. Our positions move with us, while also trailing behind and getting stuck. The question of positionality asks ‘from where’ do we speak, act, interact. Praxis adds to this the question of ‘towards what?’. This is where history and future collide, as we act from our positions towards (but perhaps never finally reaching) what ought to be.

In Mahon’s (this issue) account of the deliberations and changing relations between her and her supervisors (Sarah and Thomas) we pick up a sense of what Stetsenko (2017) describes in relation to our unavoidable togetherness, where individuals are positioned and position themselves and each other as a condition of their communal acting. This is palpable in Rouse’s (this issue) analysis, inspired by Lindén’s (2016) argument that reflection on supervision is crucial lest it become a footnote to the trinity of teaching, research and service. Rouse seeks to complicate supervisor/supervisee binaries based on a banking model of education where a knowledgeable one acts upon a less knowledgeable other, favouring a more nuanced, entangled notion of positions. Positionality in supervision cannot be reduced to such a simplistic binary. Manathunga and Goozée (2007) challenge assumptions of positions based on the autonomous student and effective supervisor, and Grant (2003) also critiques a ‘given’ positioning of supervisor as knowledgeable, finished, and overseer, and the student positioning as not knowing, insecure, inexperienced, needy and consumed. These positions are not in a vacuum around the thesis, but derive meaning from broader life experiences and social positions: there are real people (gendered, classed, aged, religious, sexually oriented, able, etc.) who *take up* positions of and as student and supervisor (and, of course, between supervisors themselves) (Grant, 2003). Positions are not purely given:

These individuals take up their position as student or supervisor differently from how others do; they also have differing beliefs about

how the other position *ought to be* taken up. (Grant, 2003, pp. 182–183, emphasis in original)

Stetsenko adds:

This is the process of taking into account actions of others in each occasion of one's own acting (in its unity of being, knowing, and doing) – or, stated from the other side of the same process, of making one's own acting to be occasions for acting by everybody else, now and in the future. Such positionality is impossible without a complex process of figuring out diverse and often diverging interests and conditions, while also considering possible consequences and outcomes of ones' actions for oneself and for the others. (2017, p. 296)

We find this incredibly powerful in imagining how the questions raised in this special issue might speak back to the literature on issues of history, future and positioning in supervision as praxis. There are echoes of the stresses described by Padyab and Lundgren (this issue), where the sometimes consequences of diverse and diverging interests are so clearly outlined.

Once again, we find the threads of intention and consequence, and of work that unfolds in prevailing circumstances, without necessarily being constrained by them, and potentially, dangerously transcending them. This brings to mind the notion of freedom captured in the final sections of Vygotsky's last work, where he described human actions, arising in the cultural-historical development of behaviour, as 'free' in the sense that they are not dependent on an immediate need nor on an immediately perceivable situation, but are rather directed toward the future (Vygotsky, 1987; see also Stetsenko, 2020). That we might act towards a future we cannot currently perceive is echoed in Freire's (2005) idea of the viable unheard of. As the papers variously demonstrate, supervision as praxis is not free from history, free from stress, free to remake history under conditions of supervisors' choosing. But it *is* free in this sense of being always, in however seemingly small ways, free to be directed towards a future we cannot yet see. This might involve resistance that exploits the fissures of existing systems, symbolic as well as concrete acts. We should not think about transgression in terms of whether the act overturns the status quo, but rather that all changes in which norms with untoward consequences are re-made for the better require transgressions. What counts as a valued transgression for some might not be so for others.

Production and creativity

We discussed links between professionalism and framing of doctoral education on productive terms, especially production of certain kinds of valued knowledge. This theme addresses aspects of production that are sometimes less overtly raised in the three papers, but nonetheless present in them. Padyab and Lundgren (this issue) switch the gaze from familiar issues of research student stress to the stress of those supervising them. Those stresses are framed in terms of supervisors being confronted with a new, but high-stakes, type of teaching, into which are folded challenges in cultural and linguistic attunement. This connects us back to history and positioning, and helps us acknowledge that supervisor stress might be a real result of tackling the (inter-)cultural complexities of supervision (Grant, 2010a, 2010b; Manathunga, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014). When we look at the stresses outlined by Padyab and Lundgren, a sense of *production* is present. Stresses due to time pressures – the production line moves at a pace set by institutionally mandated completion rates. Stresses were also described in relation to supervisors feeling responsible for a productive thesis process, and arguably to ensure relationships themselves are productive (signalled by ideas about effective communication, matched expectations).

Does recognising such stresses point us to demands of production and productivity about which we might be (dangerously) critical, without arguing we should be less productive or unproductive. What is being produced is, implicitly, a product. This could be a thesis, a capable researcher, or new knowledge. These are the products as outputs that are tightly woven into the forces *producing* stress around timely completions. It is such senses of production that lead us to (quite justifiably) look for early warning signs in order to intervene and avoid delays to completion (Manathunga, 2005): keeping the production mill running smoothly.

An agitating question to ask is: What are we not supposed to produce? Stresses might arise in supervisors seeking to avoid producing strong (negative) emotional responses in students through rigorous feedback (Padyab & Lundgren, this issue; Carter & Kumar, 2017). The avoidance of private relationships as key to professionalism seems to seep out into a sense of supervision as an emotion-free or emotionally flat zone, an idea that has been contested (particularly in the Global South), for example by Mkhabela and Frick (2016), Robertson (2017), and Grant (2003). In Rouse's (this issue) 'un-taxonomy', the 'professional' style avoids overstepping boundaries that produce exploitative emotional labour—in clear contrast to the inspirational style that is based on fascination, excitement and an infectious 'spark'. Do we accept that supervision should not be productive of strong emotion, or at least emotions that might be regarded as untoward (like anxiety, demotivation,

etc.)? If we try to avoid producing certain kinds of emotions, they might erupt anyway, as Grant (2003) describes, and as Rouse's notion of infection suggests. Do discourses of production and productivity contribute to the dehumanising of supervision? Do they undermine aspects of supervision as praxis? Do they need to be dangerously countered?

Our answer is: in some ways, yes. Before we explore creativity as an alternative that might be better suited to supervision as praxis, we need to acknowledge how production might be taken up in a more praxis-resonant way. While dominant ways of framing production in research education focus on theses, researchers, knowledge, this doesn't have to be the case. We can think about supervision as producing a wider good (in the neo-Aristotelean sense). And as producing history (in the Hegelian-Marxian sense). The consequences that flow from our actions are in some senses the products of our labour. These might take us well beyond an examined document, a graduated student, an extension to knowledge. We might (re)produce inequities, boundaries, barriers (see Frick, 2022). Or we might produce transgressions, opportunities, or even new senses of what is possible. Our argument then, is not to reject production as a helpful way to think about supervision as praxis, but rather to problematise, qualify and agitate that idea.

What dangerous alternatives might we have to production when thinking about supervision as praxis? One option is to think about creativity—something noted as a theme in a strand of research on process, but relatively under-researched compared to more common themes such as disciplinarity, retention/throughput, and knowledge (Frick & Mouton, 2021). Let's think first about knowledge. Xu et al. (2010) helpfully summarise differences between knowledge production and knowledge creation. The former, which they trace to Machlup (1962) treats knowledge as a business product, an asset, where knowledge is embedded in the product, and its production is an achievement of codification and communication of information. Knowledge creation, on the other hand, they link to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1996), regarding knowledge as a dynamic human process based on justification and pursuit of 'truth', a spiralling process where tacit knowledge becomes explicit. One might argue that knowledge production is too reductive to really uphold a notion of praxis, confined perhaps to theoretical and technical action, insufficiently imbued with the good. Creation opens up space for something more unfolding, never-finished, and expansive—particularly if 'truth' might be taken up not in narrow positivistic terms, but as a movement towards a wider good.

Mahon (this issue) provides another way to think about what supervisors do, explicitly describing the collective *creation* of conditions conducive to learning and identity work as a developing researcher. This links to the work of Frick and Brodin

(2014, 2020), where effort (perhaps dangerous struggle) that is pursued under certain conditions (listed by Mahon as relating to thesis requirements, ethics approval processes, milestones, funding etc.), but is not confined by them—there is still scope to create alternative conditions that work better. And this is itself bound up with Mahon’s development as a researcher, nurturing her critical disposition as someone who can make a contribution to literature and society. Here we can understand supervision very differently: instead of productivity and responsibility to institutional demands, we have a sense of creativity and responsibility to the wider good. Supervision as creating conditions for learning and identity work seems closer to praxis, capturing both the intentional and history-making aspects. Mahon suggests this leads us to understand supervision as critical pedagogical praxis, aimed at *creating* spaces in which untoward practices and conditions can be understood and challenged, and in which new possibilities for actions can emerge (see also Mahon, 2014). Here we pick up transgressive, dangerous potential—perhaps even where previously impossible actions enable us to realise the viable unheard of?

We can also detect strong currents of creation rather than production in some of the styles in Rouse’s (this issue) un-taxonomy. These further help elucidate supervision as praxis. Here a subtle shift in wording enriches the discussion: from creation to creative and creativity—as counters to productive and productivity. Demystifying is not policing students into an existing culture but inviting them into ways of knowing in which their creative ways of doing things differently are legitimised and nurtured. Transgression and danger again! And positively valenced difference that explicitly resists notions of compliance and conformity—without, as Rouse is careful to point out, rejecting all processes, rules, norms and disciplinary culture. In the editorial style, the supervisor is not correcting according to stable language and grammar rules, but rather fostering a student’s creative thinking through engagement with writing, strengthening the student’s own voice and approach (see also Lamberti & Wentzel, 2014, who offers these perspectives from a South African context where English as the dominant language of science needs to be balanced with students’ multi-lingual abilities and understandings). This frames the struggle as acting in the student’s interests, not just as an item on a production line, but as someone with something to say, and a way of saying it. This is not technical action, this is (critical) praxis. Such an understanding of critical praxis links to the notion of the university becoming a place of play (Waghid & Davids, 2019), with play signifying attempting, venturing, trying and experimenting with intent and determination to bring about change and stimulate creation. This is an interesting notion emanating from the Global South, where

change in higher education settings has often been accomplished through protest rather than play.

Precarity and nuance

Our final theme relates to precarity and nuance, stretching further from the core focus of each paper, and reading more into and across them. One does not have to look far or hard to detect a sense of supervision practices as precarious. Risk is a key way in which precarity comes up. Students might stall and need clutch-starting (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004); we need to look out for early warning signs (Manathunga, 2005); be wary of trauma (Lee & Williams, 1999; McChesney, 2022); we are working in risky, or perhaps more risk-averse, times (Frick et al., 2014; McWilliam, 2009). Doctoral work and supervising it are no place to be fragile—students must be hardy (Kearns et al., 2008), and supervisors can experience significant stress—under which they must not buckle (Padyab & Lundgren, this issue). Supervisor Van (Rouse, this issue) describes how some students feel uncomfortable in a mentoring relationship because they ‘fear failure and taking risks’ (p. 79). Grant (2003) writes of the eruptions of desire and the intimacy of supervision, which can provide (risky) grounds for derailments, and allegations of malpractice. Both this special issue and the wider literature point to numerous, real, risks, and could leave us thinking that supervision is a matter of tiptoeing on precariously thin ice. Given this, thinking and acting dangerously is perhaps harder, but even more needed.

What if it were otherwise? What if supervision of praxis begs a different way of thinking and acting? Must we be resigned to these risks and their implied sequelae of risk-avoidance, tighter management and control, a frenetic, constant alertness to what might be about to go wrong or collapse? The answer from this special issue, and indeed from other writers in the field, is firmly: No!

The papers in this special issue amplify others in the field revealing supervision to be complex in diverse ways. This complexity does not equate to fragility. Complexity does not demand tip-toe responses fearful that anything might break at any moment. What is demanded, is nuance. This is precisely what praxis is about—going beyond the rules and procedures of technical action (see Table 1) into moments of discretion and dilemma, when the answer to ‘What should I do now/next?’ is not clear and cannot be given with certainty as to what the (history-making) consequences might be. Nuance is what is needed when we have intentions that orient to a wider good but the means to enact them are not straightforward. It is also needed when those *good* intentions might compete with one another—the

intention to support a student's creative risk-taking, and the intention to meet completion targets when failing to do so might have material untoward consequences that affect many people, for example. Rouse's (this issue) un-taxonomy has this in mind, an approach that is 'expressive of particularity and nuance' (p. 57). The nuance of praxis is precisely about navigating and negotiating the particular, not adhering to the universal. In Mahon's (this issue) account, supervisor Thomas is quoted explaining how he and Sarah are also being evaluated when the thesis goes for examination. What Mahon describes is not a practice based on precarity, but a praxis based on nuance, expressed (again by Thomas) in terms of being responsive, except where also being instructive or instructional. Mahon describes the pacing of her work (so often framed in terms of precarious risks of delayed completion) as collaborative work of nuance, for example of how long to dwell in analysis, how much to give space for Mahon to work through issues on her own—nuancing autonomy with support. Collectively, the papers speak to issues of professionalism in supervision. We have discussed above how professionalism can be taken up in reductive ways, where control and compliance are justified against a backdrop of precarity (the dangers of being unprofessional, uncontrolled, non-compliant). But professionalism can be understood, in ways more in tune with praxis, as demanding nuance—precisely because rules, responsibilities and procedures cannot sew up how to do supervision well, there is always something left open to nuance in the moment. It is in that residual openness, where fissures for dangerous acting and thinking might be explored and exploited.

Where does thinking about precarity and nuance take us in terms of the three threads we have used to explore supervision as praxis? A shift from precarity to nuance can strengthen how we think about the intentions of supervision (acting for the wider good), and its history-making consequences. If as supervisors we commit in our actions to the good, to futures that might not yet be, we might do so more robustly if we treat these as matters of nuance not of risk. Nuance does not translate into arrogance—rather it foregrounds humility instead of fragility. The wisdom and prudence that Kemmis (2019, see Table 1) describes as central to praxis do not require a precarity-free zone. Indeed, they are so important precisely because supervisors act amid uncertainty. Such nuance does not mean dilution of critical, scientific or whatever other commitments supervisors make when envisioning and taking steps towards the future. The unheard of can become viable through matters of subtlety just as much as revolution, we can dangerously transgress the status quo in many nuanced ways. Critical praxis, then, is not about the precarity of the future that ought to be in face of the rigidity of the present, 'given' circumstances, but about the nuance that enables us to take strong, impactful, committed actions.

Conclusions

Supervision as praxis allows us to speak dangerously across divides, invites dialogue, and invokes responses from different positionalities. The danger is not to supervision or supervisors, but to the status quo (Stetsenko, 2020), as the idea of supervision as (critical) praxis becomes both a provocation and an invitation, to disrupt, unsettle, and struggle towards alternatives. This has been our aim, expanding the dialogue between the papers themselves, and between the papers and the wider literature. This special issue, even though geographically bound in some ways, allowed us the intellectual space to consider new questions arising from thinking of/about supervision as praxis, and how this idea may manifest across and within contexts.

What contribution does this special edition make to the literature on doctoral supervision? Invoking the notion of praxis is by no means new, but it is brought into distinctive, deliberate focus here. Given the recent emphasis on student experience and wellbeing, this collection of papers offers an interesting and helpful counterpoint in the ongoing conversation around doctoral education, whilst praxis as the theoretical anchor helps to consider the precarity, complexity, and nuance of research education (and researcher development). As such, as supervisors we are part of both history and making history, of both identification and identity, of both producing and creating, of both teaching and research. We are encouraged and excited by the way praxis leads us to think of the meaning, motion and momentousness of supervisory actions (Kemmis, 2019). Such an expression of supervision as praxis moves us beyond a narrow resignation to neoliberal productivity discourses and ideals, to consider supervision within the broader Aristotelean ideal for the good of humankind, and as part of a genealogical history-making action (in the Hegel-Marx tradition). We thus do not only supervise (or study supervision) looking back and building on history, but also with a view to the future as we create a continuously unfolding ancestry for our students, a praxial tapestry that will forever be incomplete.

Author biographies

Nick Hopwood is co-convenor (with Kirsty Young) of the Life-wide Learning & Education Research Group. He has more than a decade's experience researching how people learn in a range of settings, and he takes inspiration from the idea that with the right resources and support, the future that ought to be can be the future that actually comes to be. As Professor of Professional Learning, Nick often works in transdisciplinary projects collaborating with practitioners and researchers in health settings. His expertise pertains to agency, professional learning, positive change in families and schools. He has studied workplace learning, teacher learning that improves student outcomes, partnership between health practitioners and families, inter-professional health practice, and health professional education. Nick is interested in how people change from a given status quo towards something better, especially in schools and in family settings with parents of young children who are affected by adverse circumstances. He draws on cultural-historical theory and practice theory, following questions of knowledge, expertise, learning in everyday life and workplace settings.

Liesel Frick is a professor in the Department of Curriculum Studies and the director of the Centre for Higher and Adult Education at the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University (South Africa). Her research interests are within the broader field of doctoral education, with a particular focus on aspects of doctoral creativity and originality, learning during the doctorate, and doctoral supervision. Her Master's and Doctoral students work more broadly within the fields of higher and adult education, where most tend to focus on workplace learning. Liesel is a member of the International Doctoral Education Research Network (IDERN), as well as the Special Interest Group of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) on Researcher Education and Careers. In 2015 she received the Best African Accomplished Educational Researcher Award for 2013-2014 by the African Development Institute (ADI) and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). She currently holds a South African National Research Foundation C1 rating.

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