

Praxis perspectives on doctoral supervision from across disciplines

The Editorial by Rebecca Rouse, Andreas Kalckert, and Kathleen Mahon

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Introduction

This special issue brings together a unique collection of papers on doctoral supervision, including work from researchers both outside the pedagogy discipline as well as those centred within it. The contributions include research on factors that contribute to supervisor stress, professional learning programs for supervisors, advising ancestry, gender and power in supervision, and the formation of supervisors more generally. What unites the papers is a connection to a particular doctoral supervision course offered by the University of Borås, Sweden, and a shared interest in supervisor being and becoming. The contributing authors include four course participants, each of whom is an interdisciplinary researcher from outside pedagogy, a course leader, two scholars who have been guest facilitators/presenters in the course, and two additional invited contributors. The latter four authors are recognised internationally for their contributions to supervision scholarship.

The aim of the special issue is to explore the topic of being and becoming a doctoral supervisor from the perspectives of researchers who, prompted by the course, have been explicitly endeavouring to understand what this means in relation to their own contexts and supervision practices and/or who have been involved with supporting, in one way or another, other academics in their professional learning and formation as supervisors. We hope to inform ongoing debate about what being and becoming a doctoral supervisor entails, how it is nurtured and constrained, and what this means for supervisor development and education. The issues and questions raised by the various contributions are particularly relevant for both new and experienced doctoral supervisors, academic developers, graduate school/research education teachers, leaders, policy makers, and doctoral education scholars.

The supervision course

The course in question, and courses of a similar nature, are a mandatory, credit-bearing prerequisite to supervising or advising doctoral researchers in Sweden. This requirement for continuing pedagogical education at the university level is common practice within the Swedish system, although it may be unfamiliar to those in other national contexts. The central goal of the supervision course is to foster a deep understanding of supervision in relation to doctoral education conditions, practices, and requirements, as well as the phases of the research process (University of Borås website, 2023). The course is intended primarily for staff at the University of Borås¹, but is open to participants from other Swedish universities. Course participants represent a variety of disciplines, and have varying degrees of supervision experience. Many have undertaken their own doctoral studies and/or had experience of supervising outside Sweden, so part of the course is dedicated to expectations and practices around supervision in the Swedish higher education context. In 2021, the year some of the authors collected here completed the course, there were participants from universities in Borås, Skövde, and Luleå².

In 2021, the course comprised six whole-day workshops spread out over several months interspersed with pre-workshop reading activities, reflections, and research assignments. The workshops, which are normally held in person, were conducted online due to the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting university-wide shift to online learning. Topics included, for example, supervision in social-cultural-historical context, supervision as a social practice, the thesis as a knowledge contribution, power and gender in supervision, quality in supervision, helping doctoral students write, ethical considerations, and local regulations. Activities included a range of reflective and discussion-based activities, guest presentations, a panel discussion with experienced supervisors (professors), and opportunities to present and give each other feedback on ideas via discussion of assignment texts. The participants were required to complete two course assignments: (1) a ‘mini-study’ (a small interview and/or observation study on a chosen aspect of supervision), and (2) a comprehensive personal supervision strategy drawing on the mini-study findings, the participants’ own experiences, relevant supervision literature, and national and local documents to justify their strategy. Two of the papers in this special issue are reworked and expanded versions of the mini-studies completed in the course.

¹ The course was historically offered in partnership with University West and the University of Skövde, Sweden.

² All course participants in the 2021 cohort were invited to contribute to this Special Issue, but not all were in a position to do so.

The course discussions effectively became a case of collegial dialogue as a mode of inquiry in which participant narratives, participant experiences, and participant questions were an important resource for the workshop discussions, thus centring participants as knowledge contributors, which enriched interactions in the course and made this special issue project possible. Understandings were extended through dialogue between participants, and with course facilitators, guest presenters, panellists, interviewees, and authors of scholarly literature encountered in the course.

Extending the dialogue—enter, the special issue

This special issue has been informed by and represents an extension of this dialogue. For those involved in the course, producing the issue has been an attempt to find a meaningful way to continue the dialogue together and collaboratively explore in more depth what we were still curious about and troubled by after the course had ended. This has occurred mainly through conversations with each other about our manuscripts. We have been prompted to reflect further on our own practice. Our ideas of what it means to be and become supervisors in our current conditions have been challenged and/or expanded, prompting new ways of thinking about and doing supervision. In this way, additional layers of dialogue have since added value to the course experiences.

Indirect dialogue with the journal editors and the anonymous reviewers has also been generative in this sense. As mentioned, some of the contributing authors (i.e., the former course participants) are disciplinary ‘outsiders’ to the pedagogy field. For this group of authors, engagement with pedagogy is often less theoretical and instead grounded in our own practice. It is therefore with special gratitude that we acknowledge the journal editors and blind peer reviewers who acted as generous hosts welcoming us into the pedagogical research. Interestingly, and relative to the publication process in our own disciplines, the voice of the reviewers took on an increased importance as mentors and guides through the literature of the field, encouraging us to more fully situate our work within the ongoing conversations therein.

The result of the dialogue we have been describing is a special issue that, in itself, has been arranged as a conversation. The contributions speak to each other in very deliberate ways. In the article by Nick Hopwood and Liezel Frick, this is literally the case, as the article has been written as a response to the contributions by the former course participants (Rebecca Rouse; Ali Padyab & Martin Lundgren; Andreas Kalckert), and the course leader (Kathleen Mahon). In a move to open the pedagogy field to honour ways of knowing outside disciplinary convention, the

articles by ‘pedagogy newcomers’ sit alongside work from researchers established within the field. The ‘pedagogy newcomers’ draw on perspectives not only from pedagogy but also their ‘home disciplines’, which include cognitive neuroscience, bioscience, informatics, information systems and information security, media arts, aesthetics, and narration. In addition to this disciplinary diversity, authors in the issue represent geographic and cultural diversity. This is an important aspect to point out as conventions, rules, and methods of doctoral supervision are culturally informed. Authors in the issue have experience of supervising/advising or being supervised/advised in contexts including Australia, UK, USA, Malaysia, Germany, and Sweden. Thus, the issue represents a dialogue not just between different individual perspectives, inquiry-informed insights, disciplinary perspectives, and articles, but also between different academic cultural traditions. In sharing our contributions in this special issue, we now, of course, invite the readers into the dialogue.

A praxis perspective

From this foundation of diversity, the authors have come together to examine the topic of being and becoming a doctoral supervisor. A particular point of departure in our exploration of the topic is the notion that supervision is not only shaped and limited by the history and culture of the interactions, settings, and relationships in which it takes place, but also as contributing to that history and culture through the individual and collective actions of those who engage in it. This links to the notion of *praxis*, which can be understood as ‘history making action’ (see Kemmis & Smith, 2008; and Freire, 1994, after Marx). In line with this, the course in focus, and our subsequent scholarship, have involved, (a) examining the historical-cultural contexts in which we find ourselves as supervisors (including what we inherit from former generations of supervisors and supervisees and academic communities in the form of practice traditions, norms, and regulations), and/or (b) critically exploring our own formation as supervisors in relation to these contexts, and (c) considering the meaning and implications of (a) and/or (b) for our own future practice and for possibilities in supervision more generally. A process of more deeply understanding our historical circumstances and contexts, and the consequences of our own acting in history, has been important for seeing possibilities for acting otherwise.

Terminology

While the diversity among authors supplies a richness of perspective, it also results in a proliferation of terms. Instead of seeking to standardise language across the contributions, we will lift the nuances of the terms here as a way of valuing the diversity represented. Some papers describe the process of working with a doctoral ‘student’ while others describe doctoral ‘researchers’. Some papers use the term ‘supervision’ while others use ‘advising’. On one level, these terms can be understood as interchangeable synonyms that simply reflect the randomness of differing linguistic traditions and translations. On a deeper level, the terms do imply different shades of meaning, and even point to slightly different ontologies regarding the structure of doctoral studies, and therefore also the praxis of doctoral supervision.

When working with a doctoral *student*, the connection to teaching is made explicit. This is a common term in the US context, where doctoral study often also commonly includes required coursework (as is also common in Sweden, but on a more limited scale) and examinations prior to the shift into self-directed doctoral research. In contrast, in the Australian context, there is often little or no coursework in a doctoral program. In contrast with the *student* moniker, the term doctoral *researcher* shifts focus away from teaching and learning contexts toward the research activity, which makes more sense in, for example, the Swedish and Australian contexts, although there the expression ‘doctoral candidate’ is also commonly used.

These terms also reflect different economic conditions of those pursuing doctoral research across contexts. In the US, students may submit a general application to a doctoral program, be admitted, and pay their own tuition to attend. In this sense, they are clearly *students*, which in the US means paying to receive education. In Sweden, education at all levels is fully funded by the state. At the doctoral level, doctoral positions are positions of employment, meaning the work is conceptualised as regular labour and paid in a compensatory fashion. Swedish doctoral students/researchers therefore both engage in course work, and are clearly workers, carrying out the labour of research in higher education, and thus can be deliberately positioned as students or researchers depending on the context in which the roles are discussed.

These understandings correspond to the terms *advisor* versus *supervisor*. The use of the term *advisor* is more common than *supervisor* in the US context, for example, where it is placed in relation to the doctoral *student*. While an advisor may offer advice or guidance to a student, a supervisor may oversee or evaluate a worker (particularly relevant, as indicated, in the case of Sweden).

Overview of contributions

The special issue presents a blend of contributions, some from the participants in the course, some from the course facilitator/presenters, and an additional article that connects with this collection by reflecting on a related doctoral supervision professional learning course. The three articles written by former course participants and one of the course leaders (referred to hereafter as the *course participant articles*) were prompted by, or stemmed from, the University of Borås supervision course conversations or activities (such as the course assessment tasks). Despite a shared entry point, the research projects reported in these three articles are quite different from each other in focus and perspective, and as such offer interesting but complementary takes on the special issue topic. They also differ in terms of how and the extent to which they explicitly engage with the notion of praxis. The three course participant articles are bookended by three guest author contributions, each of which, as we highlight here, speaks to the course participant articles, and thus contributes to the special issue, in a unique and substantial way.

The first contribution in the special issue is a *Notes From the Field* paper by Petra Angervall: “*Making*” *an academic supervisor*. The paper is a narrativised version of a lecture on ‘Power relations and norms in doctoral supervision’ presented by Angervall in the University of Borås supervision course. In the lecture, Angervall drew on her own research to create a picture of conditions around academia and supervision in Sweden, and this sparked lively discussion and much reflection. The paper is included in this collection not only to provide a glimpse of some of the supervision landscape terrain we dialogically explored in the course, but also to underline the foundational nature of power and norms surrounding supervision. In the paper, Angervall draws our attention to how and why gender and power matter to supervisor being and becoming in a refreshingly open and humble way.

Second in the special issue is the guest author article by Trine Fosslund, *Becoming a professional supervisor: Doctoral supervisors’ development in a mandatory, large-scale development programme*. This article offers a point of comparison with the University of Borås (Sweden) course by sharing findings of a longitudinal study based on a doctoral supervision course in Norway. Drawing on course participant perspectives of the course and their development as supervisors, Fosslund identifies a number of factors that matter in supervisor becoming and that relate to the notion of praxis, such as the development of reflexivity and supervisor awareness of their roles and responsibilities and of broader ‘moral-social-political aspects of doctoral supervision’ (Fosslund, 2023, this issue).

Third in the special issue is the first of the three course participant articles, *Understanding complexity in doctoral lifeworlds and impacts of advising ancestries* by Rebecca Rouse. Rouse shares results from an interview study with both former advisors and former PhD students in a way that is at once highly personal, reflexive, empirically-grounded, and theoretically provocative. The interviews are used to explore issues of inheritance across advising generations, reveal the complexity of advisor influence (sometimes profound, sometimes not), and trouble notions of simple taxonomies of advising styles or approaches. Stemming from a perspective rooted in feminist technoscience that celebrates (as opposed to suppressing) complexity and entanglement, Rouse pushes back against the desire for neatly-described best practices by offering a wide-ranging un-taxonomy of advising styles grounded in series of ethea that celebrate the complex, humanistic, and shifting nature of advising practices.

Stress in PhD student supervision is the second of the course participant articles in the special issue. Authors Ali Padyab and Martin Lundgren shift focus away from the stress of the PhD student, a phenomenon that has been well documented in research in the field, to instead consider the causes of stress and follow-on impacts from stress experienced by PhD supervisors. Padyab and Lundgren develop an interview study with Swedish doctoral supervisors to approach the topic, resulting in the identification of a series of stressors impacting supervisors. Interestingly, half of these stress factors can even result in shared impacts between both supervisors and doctoral researchers. This outcome of the study emphasises the interconnected nature of supervisor and student stress, also leading the authors to suggest further development of communities of practice around doctoral supervision as a potential stress mitigation technique.

The final course participant article is by Kathleen Mahon, who was the course leader for the 2021 course, but also a former participant having completed the course five years prior. Her article, *Doctoral supervision as and for praxis*, revisits empirical material from her doctoral research project related to doctoral supervision. This material was generated through dialogue with two of her own doctoral supervisors, but it is re-analysed from the perspective of someone who has since acquired experience as a supervisor and is engaged in supporting the professional learning of other supervisors. Drawing on this analysis, Mahon reflexively explores how her own formation as a supervisor was happening whilst being supervised during her doctorate, and relates this to her current day experiences and questions as supervisor and academic developer. Mahon's multi-positionality in the text (as supervisor, student, course participant, course leader, researcher, academic developer) affords a unique discussion of the importance of one's own supervision in supervisor becoming, but also has a resonant symmetry with the project of the special issue as a whole.

The guest author article, *Research supervision as praxis: A need to speak back in dangerous ways?* by Nick Hopwood and Liezel Frick, completes the special issue collection with a culminating look across the three course participant articles to draw out key themes, connections, and points of disjunction. Hopwood (a guest facilitator in the 2021 course and an invited contributor to this special issue) and Frick (an invited co-author) write from the standpoint of valuing that which unsettles us, both in practice and disciplinarily, to encourage ever-continued development in supervision praxis, even when ‘dangerous’. As Hopwood and Frick elaborate, this lean toward the edge of the learning cliff is not something to fear, but instead a move intended to inspire hope by ‘putting ideas to work *dangerously*, that is, as part of deliberate efforts to redirect things towards an alternative that is better than the present’ (Hopwood & Frick, 2023, this issue). In their analysis of the articles, four overarching themes related to supervision praxis are drawn out: complexity; history, future, and positionality; production and creativity; and precarity and nuance. Highlighting the intensity of focus on supervision as praxis in the special issue, Hopwood and Frick suggest the contributions here may provide a provocative and constructive counterpoint to the contemporary discussion of student experience and wellbeing, emphasising the interconnection between and across doctoral researchers and supervisors.

The articles collectively provide a unique praxis-oriented pathway into dialogue about being and becoming a doctoral supervisor, offering insights gesturing towards the alternative to which Hopwood and Frick refer. Inspired by the processes behind and contributions in this issue, we continue to work towards that alternative. We hope that readers of the collection will be inspired to do the same.

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Guest Editor biographies

Rebecca Rouse, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Media Arts, Aesthetics and Narration in the School of Informatics' Division of Game Development at the University of Skövde, Sweden. Rouse's research focuses on investigating new forms of storytelling with new technologies such as immersive and responsive systems via queer, critical, feminist perspectives and methods. Rouse designs and develops projects across theatrical performance, interactive installation, movable books, and games. This design work dovetails with Rouse's research in critical pedagogies and design methods, and queer feminist media theory and history of technology. For more information visit www.rebeccarouse.com.

Andreas Kalckert studied Neuroscience at the University of Cologne (Germany) and Cognitive science at the University of Vienna (Austria) and Eötvös Lorand University (Hungary). After his Ph.D. at the Karolinska Institute (Stockholm, Sweden), he worked as a lecturer in Psychology at the University of Reading Malaysia. He is now a Senior Lecturer in Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Skövde, teaching subjects such as neuroscience, methods and statistics, and scientific experimentation. In his research, he investigates the cognitive and neural processes of the perception of the body.

Kathleen Mahon is an Associate Professor (Docent) in Educational Work at the University of Borås, Sweden, and a Senior Lecturer, Higher Education, at the Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation (ITaLI), University of Queensland, Australia. Her research interests include educational and research praxis, higher education pedagogy, the professional learning of teachers, and practice theory. Her teaching is mainly in the area of higher education pedagogy. Kathleen is a Senior Editor of the *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*, and a member of the Pedagogy, Education and Praxis international research network.

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