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Reflecting on Masters dissertations

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In Higher Education
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Abstract

In this paper I reflect on my own practice as a supervisor of taught postgraduate students. By outlining my own process of reflection I demonstrate that, despite some minor issues, Brew & Peseta's (2004) ten criteria for good supervisory practice of research postgraduates can be used as tool with which to reflect upon and improve one's practice as a supervisor of taught postgraduate students. In addition, I demonstrate that Chell's (2004) version of the Critical Incident Technique can be used to obtain a student's view of their supervisor's practice. The results of an interview with one of my own supervisees provide support for the future application of Brew & Peseta's criteria to taught postgraduate supervision.

Keywords

Postgraduate Supervision; Reflective Practice; Brew & Peseta; Critical Incident Technique.

Ethical Approval

This report was given ethical clearance within the arrangements provided by the programme to which it relates and consent for publication was given by the individual who was interviewed.

Introduction

In this paper I provide a reflective account of my practice as a supervisor of taught postgraduate students who were writing their final research report for the Master of Business Studies (MBS) in Electronic Commerce at the National University of Ireland, Galway. This study was borne out of my own lack of formal training in postgraduate supervision and a hope that, by trying to understand whether the supervision and feedback that I provided had had a positive or negative influence on the report's development, I might be able to improve my practice as a supervisor.

This study is an unabashedly personal and subjective inquiry into my own practice. However, by outlining my own process of reflection in this paper I hope to demonstrate that, despite some minor issues, Brew & Peseta's (2004) ten criteria for good supervisory practice of research postgraduates can be used as tool with which to reflect upon and improve one's practice as a supervisor of taught postgraduate students. In addition, I also hope to demonstrate that Chell's (2004) version of the Critical Incident Technique can be used to obtain a student's view of their supervisor's practice and that the results from an interview with one of my own

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supervisees provides support for the future application of Brew & Peseta's criteria to taught postgraduate supervision.

With this in mind, this paper is broken into three distinct sections. In the first section, I outline the background to this practitioner enquiry and my reasons for undertaking it. In the second section, I use Brew & Peseta's (2004) ten criteria for supervisory practice to determine the strengths and weaknesses of my current practice as a supervisor and discuss them with reference to the literature on student supervision in Higher Education. I then provide a brief critique of the use of these criteria within the context of taught postgraduate supervision. In the third section, I outline the second-person action research, in the form of an interview with one of my students, undertaken using Chell's (2004) qualitative, social-constructionist version of the Critical Incident Technique, that I have used in order to determine areas of my practice that have worked well for my students and those that require modification and improvement. I then outline how the results of the interview appear to support the use of Brew & Peseta's criteria within the context of taught postgraduate supervision. In the final section, I briefly discuss how I believe that this practitioner enquiry has helped enhance my skills as a postgraduate supervisor.

Background to this practitioner enquiry

In September 2010 I began work as a half-time University Fellow in Business Information Systems at the National University of Ireland, Galway. The position involved teaching a number of modules to undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as postgraduate supervision of research projects for students on the MBS in Electronic Commerce. My role also involved being the junior of two programme directors for the MBS in Electronic Commerce. The MBS is a two year full-time programme. In the first year the students study six modules in semester one and six in semester two. In the second year students are out on industry placements. By the end of the second year they are expected to submit a ten thousand word research report on a topic that has been assigned to them at the start of the second year.

Every student is assigned a supervisor to provide advice on the process of undertaking and writing up their research project. The supervisor is expected to be knowledgeable about the area in which the students are undertaking their research. For the academic year 2010/2011 I was assigned a group of three students to supervise, all of whom were undertaking research in the area of e-learning. Even though their final submission was an individual effort, the students were expected to work together in groups to identify their research topic and share literature. For this reason all supervision meetings were held in groups. This group supervision was to be provided in addition to the two, week-long Research Skills modules that students attend, one at the start of semester one and one at the start of semester two.

This was the first time that I had undertaken formal supervision of student research. Unfortunately, my University did not provide a formal training course in research supervision as one does not exist at present. In addition to this I was not provided with any written or verbal advice on how to supervise, nor was I directed towards any appropriate literature by more senior colleagues. My only previous experience

of research supervision was from the perspective of my time as a Ph.D. student at the University of Southampton. Due to the pressures of designing new taught modules, I did not find the time to examine the literature on student supervision before the first semester began. My initial practice was therefore based solely upon how I was supervised as a research student. For these reasons I chose to investigate my practice as a research supervisor with the aim of improving the way that I supervise and enhancing the learning experience of my students.

In the next section I will outline my practice as a research supervisor prior to undertaking this enquiry by giving an overview of how I approached the supervision of my three MBS students. With reference to the literature, I will attempt to identify the strengths and weaknesses of my practice.

First person research - My current practice as a research supervisor

In order to highlight areas of my practice that would be regarded as good and those that require action, I will use the ten criteria for good supervisory practice that have been identified by Brew & Peseta (2004). These were developed in order to assess whether academics undertaking the University of Sydney's Postgraduate Supervision Development Programme achieved the learning outcomes of the programme and are directly related to the learning outcomes for successful supervision identified from the literature by Pearson & Brew (2002). While primarily aimed at the supervision of doctoral candidates, I hope to demonstrate that they are equally applicable to the supervision of taught Masters students. Via a discussion of aspects of the supervision I have provided so far, and with reference to the literature on student supervision in Higher Education, I will demonstrate whether my practice fulfils each criterion. Having done this I will then provide a brief critique of the use of these criteria in the context of taught postgraduate supervision.

Criteria 1: Interest in and enthusiasm for the supervision of postgraduate research students

Displaying interest in and enthusiasm for a student's research project is important for motivating students (Rowley and Slack, 2004). As demonstrated by one of Lee's (2008) respondents, having a supervisor who is not enthusiastic about your research can have a detrimental effect on the research experience:

'My own PhD was a very lonely experience ... at lab meetings it became very evident, he [my supervisor] would show enthusiasm about everyone else's project and not mine'

(Lee, 2008).

As part of the process of assigning supervisors for MBS student research projects, I was allowed to choose a group of students who had proposed a research topic in which I had an interest, this topic being e-learning. I feel that my interest in learning more about this topic and gaining experience in the supervision of postgraduate students has had a positive effect on my practice as a supervisor. For example, before the initial meeting with the students I undertook some initial research into

the area of e-learning in order to be more informed when meeting the students and discussing the direction of their research.

Criteria 2: Appreciation of a range of good practice approaches to supervision and an understanding of what constitutes a productive research learning environment

Because I had not undertaken any research into good supervision practice prior to starting work as a supervisor, my own practice as a supervisor has been informed solely by my experience as a Ph.D. student. Lee's (2008) research and that of Delamont *et al.* (2000 cited in Lee, 2008) has demonstrated that a supervisor's experience as a doctoral student has a strong influence over how they supervise. Overall my own experience as a supervisee was a very positive one. My supervisor's approach to supervision was one of enculturation and emancipation, in that I was encouraged to become a member of the disciplinary community and encouraged to question and develop myself (Lee, 2008).

In practical terms, the supervision I received involved meeting with my supervisor every couple of months for reviews of the progress of my thesis. The practice of regular meetings has fed into my own supervision practice, and meetings are recognised as an integral part of the project management aspect of the supervisor's role (Lee, 2008). Following the lead of my own supervisor, I did not schedule regular meetings but instead contacted my students when I remembered to in order to ascertain their progress and suggest meetings. Because the students were working full-time on placements, meeting up as a group was difficult logistically but I always tried to be as flexible as possible with regard to time and dates, for example by meeting outside of regular office hours.

As a student my supervisor never set, nor did I set myself, any 'pseudo-deadlines' (Geraniou, 2010) for the submission of draft chapters for review by him. As a result I had a tendency to wait until I was close to a formal deadline (e.g. submission of a conference paper, M.Phil. to Ph.D. upgrade review) before writing up my research. Now that I recognise their benefit, as a supervisor I suggested to my students that we set pseudo-deadlines in order to ensure that I could give them feedback on their progress prior to real deadlines. In the earlier stages of their projects, two out of my three students took this idea on board and managed to send me work for review. As time moved on, the pressures of my own employment situation and that of the students meant that pseudo-deadlines went by the wayside.

Personally, I had not given any thought to providing the students with a productive research learning environment. Orsmond & Stiles (2001) suggest that in order to create a productive learning environment, students require a diverse learning experience using a correspondingly diverse array of teaching methods. These range from traditional lectures to learning collaboratively through group work (Orsmond and Stiles, 2001). Upon reflection, the MBS programme as a whole does provide aspects of a productive research learning environment. For example, students undertook two, week-long Research Skills modules. Both provided a forum for students to discuss their research in a supportive atmosphere where they could get feedback from their peers and members of academic staff. Also, the students are

expected to work together in groups in order to share literature on their chosen topics, although whether this worked well is debatable (see later).

Criteria 3: Establishment, for and with students, of clear goals and expectations in the light of up-to-date knowledge of the University's requirements

Wisker *et al.* (2008) suggest that supervisors should develop a learning contract with their students in order to 'determine a way of working together, timescales and behaviours that can enable the student to complete the project, and the supervisor to support them in this completion'. This is not a new idea (See for example Stephenson and Laycock, 1993) and recent research has shown such contracts to positively affect students' commitment to their own learning process (Vigaray *et al.*, 2010). This is not something I did as part of the supervision process, however, as part of the handbook for the MBS in Electronic Commerce Research Project, students were provided with an outline of what was expected from them and what support they could expect from their supervisor. The handbook was written by my senior colleague and I am ashamed to admit that I did not read it until, in my role as co-director of the MBS, I started getting queries about it from students.

Criteria 4: Productive and regular meetings held with students, which provide them with sympathetic, responsive and effective academic, professional and personal support and guidance

In relation to Ph.D. students, Heath (2002) has shown that between seventy to eighty-five percent of 355 candidates were satisfied with their supervision experience if meetings were held at least fortnightly. As noted earlier, I held meetings with my students but a schedule was not agreed in advance and the meetings were quite irregular. At the start of term, all of the MBS students were informed that all supervisory meetings were to be held as a group. Prior to the initial meeting with my own group I had not undertaken any research into the pros and cons of group supervision and was not prepared for how meeting students as a group might affect how they and I acted. Chapman & Van Auken (2001) have shown that the role an instructor plays can influence students' attitudes, beliefs, and concerns towards group projects. Their research suggests that students are more likely to be positive towards groups if the instructor discusses group management issues such as the dynamic of the group (Chapman and Van Auken, 2001).

Providing a positive group experience is also important because it has been shown that working in small groups can have a positive effect on student progression and retention (Cartney and Rouse, 2006). This is because such groups provide a social nexus and provide students with a link to the social and academic environment of a university (Cartney and Rouse, 2006). Also, Longmore *et al.* (1996) have demonstrated that learning research skills in groups can promote active learning as long as students have the chance to choose their research topic.

My own perception of the meetings is that they were a success because I managed to answer most of the questions that were put to me by the students. I felt that group meetings were a positive aspect of the supervisory process because they reduced the repetition of research related questions that I had to answer. The

research above suggests that, as part of a learning contract, I should define in advance how often I will meet with students and whether meetings will be in groups or one-to-one sessions. The latter is necessary because a lot of my later supervisory meetings ended up being on a one-to-one basis because students had work commitments and could not attend.

Criteria 5: Careful management of the supervisory process to achieve timely and successful completion of the thesis

In retrospect I do not feel that I was careful enough with the way that I have managed the supervisory process, despite most of the students submitting their deliverables on time. As noted above, I did not schedule regular meetings or ask for regular updates from the students as to their progress. Nor did I ask my students to come up with timetables for completion of their various deliverables. I feel that improving my own time management skills would be one way of helping me become a better manager of the supervisory process.

Criteria 6: Development of a partnership with students that takes account of the need to assist them to develop a range of generic attributes and introduce them to the research community

The relatively short time frame within which these students were writing their research reports and the fact that they were on placement or working full or part-time meant that the development of a partnership to improve their generic skills was difficult. Crebert *et al.*'s (2004) research suggests that University students want to gain generic attributes such as 'oral and written communication skills, critical analysis and evaluation, problem solving and team-work skills' from their University experience. While the development of some of these skills (e.g. written skills, critical analysis and evaluation) are implicit components of undertaking a research project, I feel it would have been helpful to point out in our initial meeting why undertaking a research project would benefit the development of my students' generic skills. Outside of the supervision, a number of these skills are developed. For example, one component of the Research Skills module is the requirement that students work as teams and present a short outline of their research proposal as well as give constructive oral feedback to their peers.

The lack of time that the students are physically present at the University in the second year also affects the chances of being able to introduce them to the research community. While I have introduced them to it in the broadest sense by suggesting relevant articles and books, providing more direct contact via invited speakers and encouraging them to attend conferences, it is more difficult because of these external pressures.

Criteria 7: Open communications established with students with timely feedback, which is both supportive and challenging, given on progress

From the very first supervision meeting I was clear to the students that they were welcome to contact me via email or phone if they had any questions or problems with any aspect of their research projects. I did my best to make sure that I provided an answer to any query within a reasonable length of time. As discussed in the

interview below, one of my students experienced difficulty completing his deliverables due to illness. Throughout this period I made sure that I maintained contact with him in order to provide encouragement and ensure he did not fall behind.

At the start of the supervision period I provided a lot of feedback on written work, including making suggestions about spelling and grammar. Including advice on the latter is a time consuming process and, having discussed it with my wife, who is an academic with a large amount of experience of postgraduate supervision, I altered my role so that I provided advice on the overall structure of the research rather than grammatical and spelling issues. Wisker (2005) suggests that feedback should encourage the improvement of critical thinking, with advice that is specific rather than 'phatic', while Wisker *et al.* (2008) suggest providing models of good writing in the form of examples of successful work in a similar format to the work expected from the student. The latter is something that I had already done in the context of teaching a component of the Research Skills module attended by all MBS students.

As the semesters progressed and my teaching workload increased I tended to put the marking of my students' deliverables on the back-burner. This meant that they did not get immediate feedback. I realise that this may have affected the progress of the research report and for any future students I intend to have work marked and feedback returned within a week of receipt.

Criteria 8: Utilisation of a repertoire of supervisory strategies to take account of the differing and diverse needs of individual students, including assisting students from equity groups and those off-campus to achieve success in their study

As part of my supervisory practice I did not examine how I might modify my supervisory strategies to suit my students. A valuable first step would have been to get my students to audit their research skills and discuss their findings with me (See for example Wisker 2005:55). This would have allowed them to focus on areas of perceived weakness and allowed me to adjust my supervision accordingly. It might also have been beneficial to determine their preferred styles by using a questionnaire such as that designed by Honey & Mumford (1982) which assesses students' learning styles and has its basis in Kolb's theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1985). Cartney (2000) has demonstrated how using the questionnaire and applying it with the broader academic and social context in mind can enhance students' learning.

Criteria 9: Evidence of systematic evaluation of competency in supervisory skills and of critical reflection and engagement with salient and emergent issues in their own field of research, to improve supervisory practice

This practitioner enquiry represents my first attempt to systematically evaluate my supervisory skills and critically reflect on my practice as a supervisor. I am actively involved in researching teaching and learning issues in my own field (Duke, 2011; Duke and Hughes Under Review). This has provided me with an awareness of issues surrounding student motivation which I hope will feed into my future supervisory practice.

Criteria 10: Use, by the supervisor, of the literature on the scholarship of supervision pedagogy, and of relevant policy issues in research education to enhance the postgraduate research experience of their students

This practitioner enquiry represents my first attempt to use the literature on the scholarship of supervision pedagogy to influence and improve my own practice.

How well do Brew & Peseta's criteria apply to taught postgraduate supervision?

Use of Brew & Peseta's (2004) criteria to reflect on my own supervisory practice has highlighted the fact that in general the criteria can be applied to the supervision of taught postgraduates. However, it also highlights some aspects of the criteria that are incompatible in a taught research context. For example, building a productive research learning environment (Criteria 2.) for taught postgraduates is difficult given the relatively short space of time over which the research takes place. In addition, it is especially difficult to foster a research learning environment when students are geographically dispersed, for example on work placement. One way to mitigate this might be to set up a virtual research community for postgraduates (See for example Richardson and Cooper, 2003). Holding regular meetings at least fortnightly (Criteria 4.) can also be problematic if students are on placement or living in different cities from the supervisor. The logistics of organizing such meetings become even more complicated when students are working on team-based research projects. Such problems could be mitigated by using free online tools such as Skype group calls or Google+ Hangouts (Tang *et al.*, 2012). Again, if students are dispersed or are on work placement, developing partnerships to improve generic skills and introduce students to the research community (Criteria 6.) can be difficult. As noted for Criteria 2., this problem could be mitigated by setting up a virtual research community.

Having reviewed my practice in light of Brew & Peseta's (2004) criteria for good supervisory practice, I will now further investigate my practice as a supervisor by undertaking second-person research in the form of a largely unstructured interview with one of my supervisees. By soliciting the views of one of my students I hope to determine whether my own perception of my practice is aligned with that of my student and whether my student's experience provides any support for the application of Brew & Peseta's criteria to taught postgraduate supervision.

Second-person research – A student's view of my practice

Reason (2001) suggests that a first-person enquiry can be enhanced by engaging with others in face-to-face reflective conversations. In order to enhance my understanding of my own practice I invited my three supervisees to participate in a short interview in order to get their perspective on the way I have supervised them. All three were initially contacted via email and of the three only one was available for interview. The other two expressed interest in participation but had work commitments that meant it was difficult for them to spare the time.

In the initial email I acknowledged the fact that there was a potential ethical conflict, given that I would be conducting the interview and it was my practice that I was

enquiring about. This is a problem highlighted by Norton (2007), who suggests that the practitioner-researcher carrying out pedagogical work should always 'think' ethically by thinking through what effect the research might have on the participants. In this case, I was the students' supervisor, was marking their final research projects and was also one of the directors of their MBS programme. There is therefore an unequal power balance that could influence how the students reacted during interview. In order to provide some reassurance, the email stated that the interview would have no effect on the student's final mark, that it would be conducted in a place not associated with our supervision meetings and that they could withdraw consent at any time.

Given the subjective nature of my first-person research my hope for the interview was that I could garner as unbiased an account of the student's perception of my supervisory practice as possible. My aim was not to lead the discussion in a particular direction while at the same time trying to determine whether the student's perception of my practice corroborated my own. For this reason I decided to undertake a critical incident interview using Chell's qualitative, social-constructionist version of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Chell, 2004). The intention of this version of the CIT interview is 'through the process of a largely unstructured interview to capture the thought processes, the frame of reference and the feelings about an incident or set of incidents, which have meaning for the respondent' (Chell, 2004:47). Unlike a purely unstructured interview, the CIT has a focus 'which enables the researcher to probe aptly, and the interviewee to 'hook' their accounts' (Chell, 2004:47). One disadvantage is that the accounts are retrospective, but Chell (2004) suggests that because the incidents are 'critical' the subject is more likely to recall them. In order to analyse the data I will relate what the student discusses to Brew & Peseta's (2004) criteria for good supervisory practice. After this I will outline areas of the interview that appear to support the use of these criteria within the context of taught postgraduate supervision.

At the start of the interview the student was provided with a short printed outline of the research which also detailed how the CIT interview would progress. I then explained the possible benefits of the research and highlighted the issues of confidentiality and ethics. The student was also asked to sign a consent form and again informed that they could withdraw consent at any time. To start the interview the student was asked to provide an overview of how he thought his year had progressed in relation to the research report and the supervision he had received. To aid recall of any events during the past year he was provided with a visual aid in the form of a double-arrow-headed line on a single sheet of paper (Chell, 2004). He was encouraged to mark the 'here and now' and add any events of significance back to the start of the first semester of his second year. It was stated that I would not ask any leading questions but would instead asking probing questions such as 'What happened next?' in order to clarify situations or seek further information. Having outlined his year, I asked him to select and recount three of these events that he felt were 'critical' to the progress of his research report. These are discussed in turn overleaf.

Illness at the start of the second semester

The student identified being ill at the start of the second semester and missing the second week-long installment of research skills (Research Skills 2) as being critical to the progress of his research report. As part of the summative assessment for Research Skills 2, students were expected to submit two documents, one by the 14th February outlining their research methodology and the second by the 21st March outlining the research instrument they would be using. The student failed to submit either deliverable. He suggests that missing the week put him at a disadvantage to other students and mentions being lost in relation to the research methodology:

'I'm sure they were explained in class like what exactly they [the deliverables] were but erm like the information was up there like [on Blackboard] and if I needed help from you I should have come to you like it wasn't your job to come to me you know.'

This quote reflects the fact that the student acknowledges responsibility for his actions, something he does again and again throughout the conversation. After asking him if there was anything else I could have done as his supervisor that could have helped him complete the deliverables, he highlighted the fact that I had contacted him about them on a number of occasions:

'You contacted me about them, you contacted me more than once about them [laughs] like it's not your fault anyway.'

Probing further, I asked if he found the regular email contact helpful or if it put unnecessary pressure on him:

'It was pressure that I needed put on me like, it was pressure put on me but I needed it put on me to get to work on the project because otherwise you know I wouldn't be starting it until the last week or something anyway. I'd never get finished you know Do you know, if I was more into my project now than I am then of course we probably would have met more times but there's nothing that really reflects on your supervision like that I can say, do you know?'

The above statement suggests that maintaining regular contact via meetings or emails is important for the progress of this student's research as they provide the impetus to study, perhaps because they help to maintain an active link with the University (Cartney and Rouse, 2006). It also suggests that I should have had more regular meetings and set pseudo-deadlines to ensure this student was more engaged and interested in his project and did not fall behind.

Asked if defining the roles of the supervisor and supervisee at the initial supervision meeting would have been helpful, the student agreed and noted that I had in fact verbally outlined my role as a supervisor and my willingness to help:

'Yeah, like you defined your role in the beginning you did and you said I'll be here to help.'

My willingness to answer questions was highlighted by the student on a number of other occasions.

A one-to-one meeting in the middle of the second semester

The student identified one of our later one-to-one meetings as critical for helping him with his research methodology:

'The research methodology was my biggest problem, I did not know how to proceed like I was just stuck with it like, you gave me all the right answers for that, you know yourself I wasn't sure how to go about it but erm you set me on the right track like.'

The advice I gave at the meeting appears to have helped him understand how to approach his research methodology. He identified that lending him a book was important for the progress of his research project:

'My project is pretty much all secondary sources but you gave me the case study book and all that so that was a big help because I wasn't really sure like I knew there was a bit of information on the Research Skills, on the slides we got but the book was more comprehensive so erm yeah so that I suppose it would have been one of the most critical that we had.'

This provides an example of me introducing the student to the research community (in the broadest sense). It suggests that more active support of students, in the form of the supply of books and relevant articles would be of use to them. In relation to meetings, I asked him if there were any aspects of the feedback that I had provided that were helpful or unhelpful:

'Maybe just a tiny bit more emphasis on areas that might have been written better or maybe certain things that should have come before other things that I did do in the literature review.'

The literature review was submitted as part of the summative assessment for the first week-long research skills module (Research Skills 1.). This comment reflects my lack of experience with providing appropriate feedback, something I feel I have since remedied by focusing less on grammar and spelling and more on overall structure.

The clash between work placement and writing the research report

The student identified the clash between being on a work placement and having to undertake research for his report as critical to the success of the report:

'I was working up until January and I was working almost to the date that the literature review was due so it's hard to focus on it you know because even like during Christmas it's not like I got Christmas holidays from work, I worked all

through Christmas as well so it was hard to find, I know it was our own job to find that time but I know it's hard to get jobs as it is with companies and it's up to them when we work.'

Even once his placement was complete, he had to undertake paid work in order to survive. The pressures of being a full-time student and having to earn a living are evident in the next quote:

'I wasn't able to quit my job before, you know, student debt and all that like I had to keep working. I guess like I come to college at weekends cos I'm working all week so I generally wasn't able to but erm up until now I haven't really done anything to really help it out but I know it's due on the 24th June like and I can't keep working up until then and I just won't get it done so I said if I quit my job then I'd be able to focus on it completely you know.'

This emphasises the need for supervisors to be aware of the external pressures that are placed on students and try and provide coping strategies (Hunt *et al.* 2004). The establishment of a project timeline in the initial supervisory meeting might be one way to help students manage these pressures and help them break the work down into manageable chunks.

Working in groups

Although not explicitly identified as a critical event, the student expressed some reservations about the benefits of the group aspect of the project:

'Initially we had to meet as a group because we were supposed to be working together you know but erm well I guess some of the subsequent meetings like I met only because the other guys wanted to meet like, I couldn't think of anything that I needed to ask but because we were supposed to be working in a group like I felt like I should be there.'

He personally did not think that working in a group was good due to lack of ability to meet, a drawback also noted by Chapman & Van Auken (2001). This suggests that I should have emphasised the benefits of the group project in our initial meetings and also that I should have discussed issues such as group dynamics on a more regular basis (Chapman and Van Auken, 2001).

Support for applying Brew & Peseta's criteria to taught postgraduate supervision

This particular student interview appears to provide some support for the future application of Brew & Peseta's criteria to taught postgraduate supervision. For example, the student noted that regular contact, open communications and feedback were helpful to his progress (Criteria 7.). The student also highlighted the importance of having productive meetings (Criteria 4.) by noting that his progress was enhanced by having been given helpful advice and being loaned a book. The interview also highlights that the supervisor needs to manage the process carefully (Criteria 5.) to ensure the student does not fall behind (e.g. after periods of illness) and that the supervisor provides coping strategies (Criteria 4.) to ensure that

students can stay focused on completing their research project, especially if they are under pressure to undertake paid work in order to live and eat.

Bias in the student's account

Given that the student was asked to identify only three events that he felt were critical to the progress of his research report it is likely that the interview did not reveal all of the elements of my practice that had a positive or negative effect on the final outcome. The fact that I was the interviewer and was enquiring about my own practice could also have caused some bias in that he may have felt under pressure to focus on the positive supervisory aspects of his critical events. However, the student did provide comment on negative aspects of my supervision (e.g. by pointing out that I could have provided better feedback) which suggests he was somewhat at ease during the interview.

Discussion

Writing up this research and evaluating my own supervisory skills has brought me a step closer to fulfilling the last two of Brew & Peseta's criteria for good supervisory practice (Brew and Peseta, 2004). By examining my practice in light of Brew & Peseta's work I have discovered areas of my practice that appear sound. These include my enthusiasm for supervision and my willingness to engage with students. It has also highlighted a number of areas where change is necessary. I need to be more aware of student's initial skills as a researcher and their particular learning styles so that meetings and my advice can be adjusted accordingly. In terms of group work, I need to explain the advantages of working in groups and ensure that the group dynamic is working. I believe that creating a learning contract with a student which sets out my and the student's responsibilities, and contains pseudo-deadlines, would set clear goals and expectations for us both and would allow me to manage the supervisory process in a timely fashion.

The process of undertaking this practitioner enquiry has been a very important learning experience for me. It has highlighted the need for the provision of formal training for research supervisors in my own institution but also that I need to be more proactive in searching out advice about supervision from colleagues and from my university's Centre for Excellence in Learning & Teaching.

Conclusions

By undertaking this practitioner enquiry my ultimate aim has been to enhance and develop my practice so that I can provide the students that I supervise with good support and guidance with regard to the research process and so that students can gain the maximum educational benefit from writing their research reports. By outlining the process here I hope to have demonstrated that, despite some minor issues, Brew & Peseta's (2004) ten criteria for good supervisory practice of research postgraduates provides a good base from which to start reflecting upon one's practice as a supervisor of taught postgraduate students.

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