Challenges and contributions in supervising professional doctorates for experienced practitioners

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Introduction: The excitement and challenge of professional doctorates

The advent of professional doctorates for experienced practitioners has created an opportunity for those who have already made a contribution to practice to add to the knowledge base of their discipline (Garnett, Costley and Workman, 2009). This has generated exciting research addressing fundamental questions in practice and client services. Drawing upon their experience has opened questions that were unlikely to be asked by junior colleagues undertaking traditional PhD research.

However, this has raised significant challenges for how we approach supervision with such colleagues. They bring expertise in their area but may have little knowledge of research methods. Our understanding of how expertise develops over the period of a career has increased and we can recognise that the purpose of supervision for experienced colleagues includes working within areas in which they are novices, are competent and are expert (Cavanagh, Stern and Lane, 2015). We can draw upon the literature on expert practice and developmental phases to assist our understanding of the challenges they and we face (Ericsson, 2006).

Professional practice has become more complex, expertise is now challenged and the autonomy once enjoyed has been replaced by change in status from

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independent to employee for many (Lane and Corrie, 2006). The lenses we use to understand ways of seeing practice through the perspective of individual, interpersonal and systemic approaches have also emerged as a challenge to traditional codified knowledge. The process for providing service to clients has become similarly complex. Therefore, we need to be able to look at supervision of professional practice in terms of diverse purpose, perspectives and process (Cavanagh, Stern and Lane, 2012).

There has been increasing interest in the idea that we should view practice not in terms of individual competence but as part of socio-material practices in the context in which they occur (Nicolini, 2012). The idea of considering practices opens the possibility of seeking to define the practices which inform supervision. There is a parallel dialogue emerging when we look at mental health and well-being. While diagnostic systems based on individual symptomatology have been dominate these are challenged by broader biopsychosocial perspectives on health. It is now possible to view well-being and mental health from individual, interpersonal and systemic perspectives (Corrie and Lane 2021).

Drawing together the experiences of professional doctorate candidates and the issues they face and the pressures of current practice creates the possibility of new contributions to our understanding of mental health and well-being as well as the supervision of research in these areas.

A model for reviewing the practices involved in supervision

The practices we use arise from three key themes that govern our work as supervisors.

1. What is our purpose?

This covers the purpose of the work for the candidate, the supervisor and other stakeholders. A shared concern must be developed to encompass the varied

assumptions made so that differences of purpose can be addressed to ensure a viable collaborative journey. With experienced practitioners this is not necessarily a simple task. They are not a novice dependent on the goodwill of the supervisor or perhaps working as an assistant within a research team. They come with their own expertise, perhaps more so that the supervisor. As an expert they bring capabilities that enable them to see possibilities that would not be available to a novice. This expertise also can lead them into cognitive bias since they may be over confident in the rightness of their position. However, they may also be at the same time novices in the intricacies of research and make assumptions about what is and what is not a viable research question that as supervisors we will need to challenge. There may be other areas where they have a degree of competence that enables them to quickly complete tasks set. There is an increasing understanding that professionals may go through a series of developmental stages and the support they need to progress varies according to the stage within their journey (Stoltenberg and McNeill, 2010). We have then to think about the purpose of the research and their stage of development. At a minimum we need to consider the areas in which they are a novice, competent or expert. The practices suitable to support them will vary accordingly. Useful questions for supervisors to help them to consider include:

Where do I want to get to?

- What does being a doctorate candidate mean to me?
- What do I consider to be my purpose in working towards a doctorate?
- What makes this worthwhile to me and other stakeholders?
- How have I developed this viewpoint?
- Where do I want to get to – professionally and personally – as a result of this journey?
- What has influenced my professional and personal aspirations to undertake a doctorate?
- How well do my professional and personal aspirations add up to an explicit, cohesive and achievable doctorate?

- Have I shared these aspirations with anyone else - my peers and supervisors?
- What are the possible pros and cons of sharing my aspirations?

2. What perspectives inform the shared purpose?

Depending on the developmental stage (novice, competent practitioner, expert) that the candidate brings, different levels of sophistication will apply to the perspectives that they are drawing upon to inform their journey. It is often the case that expert candidates bring an inter-disciplinary understanding to their enquiry based on long experience of the complexity of professional practice. This can represent a challenge to the single discipline supervisor who may be unfamiliar with the perspectives encountered. In areas of practice such as mental health professionals have often adopted an individual approach to distress. It is seen as being within the person and activity has been directed to individual change. Yet, as professional practice in mental health as well as other areas has faced an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous future (Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015, Cavanagh and Lane, 2012, Corrie and Lane, 2021, Taleb, 2012) it is recognised that we have to draw upon broader perspectives including interpersonal and systems levels of understanding. This opens up a wide range of research perspectives but also necessarily introduces considerable complexity into the definition of purpose and perspectives that may inform the journey (Lane and Corrie, 2006).

Useful questions include:

What do I have to do to get to where I want to be?

- What ideas currently influence my journey?
- What do I need to do to seek wider perspectives of value to my journey?
- What development issues might these raise for me to address?
- What needs to happen next?

- How can I use a self-development plan to best effect for my journey?
- Compared to where I want to get to, both professionally and personally, how well am I doing now?
- What tools, resources and people are available to help me assess my capabilities and achievements?
- What could I audit myself against?
- What external standards/examples are there that might be of use to me?

3. What process will be necessary to complete my journey?

Essentially supervision consists of three (as a minimum) process elements. We work with candidates to develop their capabilities as researchers and in practice doctorates and also as professionals. This is sometimes called the formative or developmental role of the supervisor. It is typically about developing skills or building upon existing skills. The second key role is that of building the quality of their performance as researchers/professionals. This is sometimes called the normative function of supervision ensuring that candidates understand what an effective performance looks like and can learn to reliably meet that standard. The third and most difficult of the roles is where we need to challenge the beliefs and assumptions they hold. We help them to explore the paradigms they are using, challenge them and transform their ways of seeing the world. They are seeking to innovate to produce original and significant work. This will potentially involve moving to new uncomfortable positions. This can disrupt their thinking and be a cause of considerable stress. It is sometimes called the restorative role as supervisors will often have to assist the candidates through a very difficult period in their journey. Useful questions include:

What is the next step and how will I know when I get there?

- How often should I audit my capabilities and achievements?
- What is the best way to document my assessment and audit my process?
- How often do I need to reassess my professional and personal standards?

- How can I develop my willingness to explore challenging ideas or areas of practice?
- Within my practice can I develop systems to encourage others to become actively involved in my professional development and be willing to challenge my approach?

This gives us three dialogues for supervision - that of purpose, perspective and process and within these the respective developmental positions (novice, competent, expert), focal perspectives (individual, interpersonal, systemic) and key processes (developing capabilities, enhancing quality performance, exploring paradigms, innovation, transformation).

Combining these dialogues and positions creates 27 potential supervisory practices. The 27 practices are not fixed but rather emerge as relevant to the particular social and material assemblage involved. Thus, supervisor and candidate build the practices that make sense for them in the context of the project. The practices listed below arose from an analysis of the work of three experienced supervisors looking at some cases and commonly emerging practices. The case study that follows illustrates this process of emergence.

Table 1. Coaching Supervision Cube - Combining Dialogues
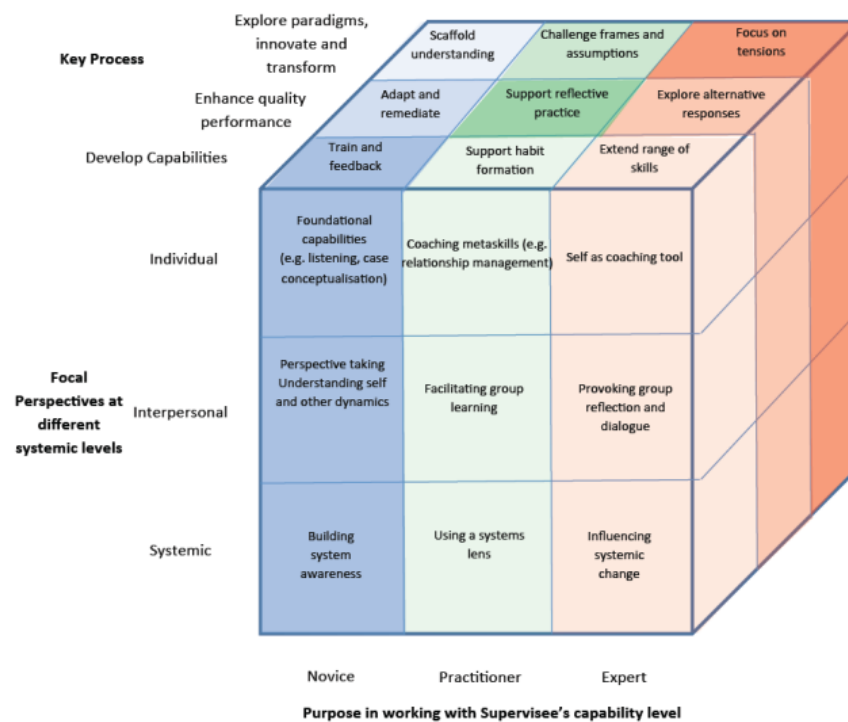
Copyright 2015 Cavanagh, Stern and Lane, Coaching Supervision Cube – combining dialogues

Understanding practices

There is an increasing recognition that the social world consists of practices. That is, the human activities and the process of establishing meaning occur within social and material assembles which are made and remade in space and time using tools, discourse, our bodies and organisational activities. Thus, to understand supervision we have to define the processes, sources of meaning making and purposes in terms

of a performed activity (Nicolini, 2012). We move away from the popular notion of understanding our work as defined by supervisory competences towards understanding the performances undertaken which are embodied in both the material and social realm (Lane, 2020). As we move from an individualistic to a situated sociocultural view of learning we have to take account (Fenwick and Nerland, 2014) of environments within which learning takes place and therefore it is always situated in activities in given settings and communities in time and space. The cube above, by combining the meaning making activity of purpose, perspective and process, enables the assembly of such tools, concepts, people and organisational factors that can generate the performed activity of supervision. Each block within the cube represents a performed activity, that is, a practice, as it emerges in a particular space and time. We have to recognise in the encounter what is happening inside, what is happening outside and what is happening over time.

Below is an example of a candidate undergoing supervision for a practice based doctorate as part of a cohort. Each member of the cohort has shared as well as individual concerns they wish to explore. The example draws upon material published by Middlesex University looking at journeys in higher education, and in particular practice based doctorates (see Garnett, Costley and Workman, 2009).

A case example

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) wished to develop a framework of education in General Practice for Vets. There was no existing research framework for establishing this so RCVS and the Society of Practicing Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) approached the Professional Development Foundation (PDF) to explore this area. Through the Institute for Work Based Learning at Middlesex University a research-led programme was established to bring a group of eight experienced Vets together to agree an overall purpose for the work which was then split into individual topics each contributing to the outcome for a Master's degree. Core themes from that work were further explored in five practice doctorates. This paper explores the

issues that arose in supervision interpreted in terms of the supervision cube (see Table 1 above).

Starting with Purpose

The candidate is highly experienced and expert in the field of veterinary general practice which is the subject of the research. As a researcher having completed a master's project there is a level of research competence. However, in terms of a complex doctorate level of research they are a novice. The research purpose is to contribute one element to an overall group strategic piece of research involving both the participants, other members of veterinary teams in several practices, their peers in the doctorate cohorts and the professional body. The aim is to create a model for general practice that can become a nationally available award in this area. The overall purpose was to explore practice based on a series of studies of patterns of activity and identification of necessary skills, knowledge and capabilities for engaging in work as an advanced practitioner. The purpose of the supervision was to enable the candidate to develop necessary capabilities, to understand the complexities of researching the field and to provide guidance on appropriate standards.

Exploring perspectives

This is a very involved piece of research looking at individual practices - beliefs and activities. However, these take place in a team context involving several interpersonal interactions (vet with other staff, vet with human client, vet with animal, animal and client with reception staff and nurses) in a specific physical space involving several material activities as well as social interactions. The performed act investigated in the research thus involves the perspectives of individual actors and what they bring into the space, the activity between them as it plays out in the interactions and the acts that follow the event resulting in changed behaviour from the animal and human client. However, the research is intended to understand the performance as an activity having implications for the systems within which general veterinary practice happens. The intent is to impact the future patterns of activity

that will be proposed to the professional body as a result of the work and which will, therefore, have to take into account systemic influences on practice. Candidate and supervisor need to explore the perspectives that could inform the research activity to ensure that the issues are fully understood and that it is possible to contribute to the evidence base for the discipline.

Considering process of supervision

The conversation between them about purpose and perspectives provides some clarity for the candidate and supervisor on the areas they need to address in terms of process they may use in the supervisory activity to ensure an appropriate performance. The candidate started the dialogue by looking at the relational aspects of working with the individual participants. So, in the cube they considered what foundational capabilities would be required. They decided that the candidate had the necessary understanding and also was fully aware of the metaskills necessary for relational management. Less certain was the question of managing those individual relationships as part of a complex research project (the expert level) and therefore they decided that some work would be needed to extend skills in this area. So, the process needed for developing capabilities was one of extending an existing skills base into a new area of activity.

The second initial area that the candidate wished to explore was the possibility of some group based reflections between the veterinary teams to explore areas of practice. They had experience of working within teams in their own practice setting and felt competent to run group learning experiences at an interpersonal level. However, given that the research was going to involve challenging thinking about practice they felt uncertain that they had the skills to provoke and challenge in a group situation in a way that would be safe for participants. So, in term of enhancing the quality of their performance they agreed that some further work on supporting reflective practice as a process would be necessary.

They started to discuss influencing the system and considering how they could adopt a systems lens on the work. Some reading around this was agreed. The question of how to influence system change at the expert level was left for a future stage in the supervision. They also discussed exploration of paradigms. It was clear from the outset that there could be some challenge to existing frames and assumptions for the participants. This was an area that the candidate was uncomfortable with at this stage, so some work was agreed on how to scaffold understanding with a view to them developing challenge processes. It was recognised that this might indeed create tensions at the systems level since there were existing vested interests which might oppose this work. Learning how to lean into and build on tension and create a generative dialogue that could accommodate differing views was seen as a possible further area for supervision in the future.

At each stage of the research different issues emerged at the individual, interpersonal and systemic levels and the expertise of the candidate to meet the purpose of the research gradually developed. The process used varied depending on the level of expertise they held in the issues raised. Some involved direct teaching of skills, some building reflective practice and some learning how to use tension to create change. The key is that the practices will vary in time and space. Hence the practices outlined above will emerge from dialogue around the purpose of the work, the development stage of the practitioner, and the process that enables them to engage fully in different ways as the work progressed.

Conclusion

Practitioners deal with an increasingly complex world and practice based research has to reflect that, it cannot work on rigorous application of defined protocols. Much of our working context is concerned with non-linear and complex situations (Cavanagh and Lane, 2012). We cannot always apply simple linear supervision models that do not recognise the emergent nature of the activity. This potentially creates a problem for a view of the science-practice divide as one built on a narrow

scientism rather than the phenomenology that underlines the material world we
seek to understand (Salkovskis, 2002):

> "Modern science, then, challenges the notion of an ordered and objective reality
> which we can uncover with increasingly sophisticated techniques. Its Purpose is to
> understand the non-linear relationships that characterise complex systems,
> including human ones. Its Perspective is that aiming for prediction and control is a
> misleading basis upon which to build a science. The task is a holistic endeavour in
> which we seek to facilitate connections that might enhance self-organisation. The
> critical determiner is relationship because the universe evolves in the Process of our
> interacting with it."

(Lane and Corrie, 2006, pp. 86)

If the task is a more holistic endeavour our role as supervisors is to facilitate these
connections. We seek to provide a narrative framework for the supervision process
in that is individualised and self-reflective (Lane and Corrie, 2006). However, if we
are going to view supervision in terms of practices, those practices should also be
both reflexively and relationally narrated (Lane, Kahn and Chapman, 2016). We must
pay close attention to the contextual factors that impact on the construction of our
practice and be willing to entertain a range of ways of knowing. Our supervision
practice is socially constructed in conversations with our supervisees not
predetermined by us or by the dictates of a specific approach. We are seeking to
enable our supervisees to become more articulate (Stengers, 1997). Nicolini (2012)
has drawn out key implications of Stengers' approach which are relevant to the
complexity of professional practice and therefore our approach to supervising
research on practice. He argues that being articulate is to be able to appreciate
differences that matter. This creates the possibility of making new and even
enlightening connections between things of the world. Good research on practice is
generative not eliminativist, thereby, increasing our capacity to make connections.
Hence as supervisors adopting good science we do not close down the possible
connections in order to operate a limited model that pre-defines what is and is not
worthy of exploration (Lane, 2017).

Nicolini (2012) argues that all science is performative and constructivist. Thus, if we think about the supervision of research it requires engaging with the world of practice in a way that gives it a chance to bite us. If we are to understand any practice (supervision in this case) we get close to the activity at hand and build, or slice, the world in terms of the practices. Our theory/method must become articulate and offer our candidates resources for building supervision narratives that plot the world of practice in all its complexity – not using ready-made plots to stitch it together.

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David A Lane – is Director and co-founder of the Professional Development Foundation. As well as contributing to research and professional development Professor Lane has worked in a wide range of organisations including major consultancies, multinationals, and public sector (including health, social care, education and emergency services) and government bodies. He also pioneered the international development of work based masters and doctorate degrees for experienced practitioners. He has published widely on coaching, therapy, organisational development and supervision.

He was Chair of the British Psychological Society Register of Psychologists Specialising in Psychotherapy and convened the European Federation of Psychologists Associations group on Psychotherapy. He has served on committees of APECS, BPS, CIPD, EMCC and WABC, as well as being a founder member of the Global Coaching Community. He is a Fellow of BPS and his contributions to counselling psychology led to the senior award of the BPS for "Outstanding Scientific Contribution". In 2009 the British Psychological Society honoured him for his Distinguished Contribution to Professional Psychology. In 2016 he was made an Honorary Associate of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons for contributions to developing the field of general practice and the professional development of its members and also was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences for contributions to education and of APECS for coaching. He also holds a lifetime achievement award from the University of Surrey for contributions to Applied Psychology.