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The Postgraduate Supervision Space: From formal meetings to late-night calls

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Abstract

Undergraduate studies in design disciplines focus the design student's attention on solving problems through designing projects in purpose-built studios or workshops while having regular face-to-face contact with design lecturers. Postgraduate research requires students to shift their focus from a practically orientated physical space to a theoretical-orientated mind space. The design research requires the student to engage with the solitary deep independent thinking supervision space in which contact and reflection occur. This paper will focus on the supervision space, which is described as both space and place in which the supervision interaction between student and supervisor takes place.

The paper aims to understand how students manage their supervision space through understanding the contact, communication and interaction they have with their supervisors. A reflection of current relevant literature is included, which presents the perspectives of the supervisor to understand the changing nature of the supervision space. The perspective of the students is obtained by incorporating open-ended interviews with two groups of participants. They are students that were on campus during their studies and students that were located either in another province or abroad. The participant groups comprise students that were registered in the Interior Design programme at the University of Johannesburg. Although the main aim of the paper will be to reflect on the student experience, the impression of the supervisor will be included to describe and understand the supervision style that informs the supervision context and space.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings that reflects on the changing nature of the postgraduate supervision environment, with a particular shift from the traditional supervisory models to the development of closer mentoring models. The findings will incorporate the impact of digital technology and communication applications (apps) on the supervision space and conclude with recommendations that can assist in design education, postgraduate students and supervisors.

Keywords: Postgraduate supervision space, supervision strategy

Introduction

This paper considers the changes in postgraduate supervision, not only as described in the literature, but also as it has been evident in supervision models employed in our daily practices. This reflection takes into consideration the supervision practices that took place in one department over ten years to gain a deeper understanding of how supervision space has changed from both a supervisor and student perspective.

Our research into the topic identified that the supervision role and position of supervisors are well documented and describe various changes that occurred in relation to supervision space. However, two distinct gaps are evident in current research. The first is the change in student interaction and communication that coincides with a change in communication technology. The second gap is that although supervision models refer to the student-supervisor relationship, the student's perspective and experience is seldom included. This paper, therefore, aims to make a contribution to these two knowledge areas through delving deeper into current practices and reflecting on feedback provided by postgraduate students. The main question of the paper, however, will focus on the student experience through begging the question – how do students experience their supervision space? This question will be investigated through focusing on meetings, interaction, forms of communication and student-supervisor relationship.

Methodology

The research methodology used for this paper comprises a literature review and the consolidation and analysis of data that was gathered from open-ended interviews conducted with postgraduate students. An investigation into literature assisted in providing insight to relevant theories, models and practices that pertain to postgraduate supervision models and changes within postgraduate supervision. Gaps were identified in the literature to identify the significance in research contribution.

Student feedback was obtained by interviewing seven postgraduates, which could be divided into two participant groups. They are students that were on campus during their studies and students that were located either in another province or abroad. The participant groups comprise students that were registered in the Interior Design programme at the University of Johannesburg. The data was collated and analysed by following a qualitative research method. To analyse the textual data, coding, themes and subthemes were used. Supporting quotes were extracted and included in this paper to support the discussion of the research findings.

The paper is presented in the first-person voice of the two researchers. The two authors have investigated the two different perspectives that are represented in the paper, namely one of a supervisor and the other the postgraduate student. The supervisor has over ten years' experience in postgraduate supervision and introduces the paper from a supervisor's perspective that observed drastic changes in supervision and higher education that impacted on the supervision space. The postgraduate student's perspective was obtained by a young academic, who recently completed her postgraduate studies and could obtain objective reflections from seven graduates. To enrich the content of the paper, the two distinct perspectives provide personal observations and explanations of critical decisions that were made during the supervision process.

The supervisor's perspective

A close and personal experience – the voice of the supervisor

My research into postgraduate supervision practices was triggered by observing personal challenges and obstacles postgraduate students experience. In our department, students are mostly part-time students with full-time work responsibilities. They are hardworking individuals but have to manage late-night research hours, family commitments and full-time work responsibilities. My postgraduate students seldom have the opportunity to meet me in person and have to communicate through emails, telephone calls or Skype sessions.

Through reflecting on the supervision styles as presented by Lee and Green (2009), I observe that my personal supervision style has developed from being a master and mentor to a coach and even a friend. My supervision style has changed over ten years, and I foresee that it might evolve to further dimensions, as I continue the supervision journey with postgraduate students. I have to confess that this growth and developed takes place with students throughout their two or three-year study period. A supervisor grows and develops with students. A supervisor needs to understand the personal circumstance of their students, which lead to having a closer friendship relationship. This results in telephone calls, cell phone message and e-mails that I receive after hours and over weekends. However, my personal approach to supervision was received with great concern at a postgraduate presentation in 2018. Experienced supervisors warned me that this approach infringes on my personal life and those clear boundaries need to be in place between contact sessions during working hours and feedback session after hours. To find a balance and reflect on my own personal supervision style, I have consulted the literature to gain a deeper understanding into how experienced researchers manage their supervision spaces within the demands and challenges of our current higher education environment.

The pressure to develop quality supervision and increase student numbers

Ali, Ullah and Sanauddin (2019:16-17), summarise the notion of quality supervision and identify common qualities that should be present in effective research supervision. These include regular meetings, the devotion of quality time, keen interest in the research project, guiding the student towards successful completion of the research and adopting a supportive and encouraging attitude that appreciate the student's ideas. A sound relationship between student and supervisor is described as an important factor in the successful completion of a postgraduate study (Bitzer 2011). Manyike (2017) observes that to deliver quality supervision is a worldwide challenge and not unique to South Africa. However, quality supervision is a global imperative, since it assists in developing knowledge and contributes to global competitiveness (McCormack 2012; Manyike 2017). The increase in postgraduate students with different levels of capabilities, increase in student numbers and pressure to deliver students within a prescribed time has a notable impact on quality supervision (McCormack 2012).

In South Africa, national and institutional targets have increased the pressure to increase postgraduate research output in higher education. The National Development Plan for of 2011 (SA 2011) requested transformation of the entire system, including an acceleration of human capital development, an increase in research output and postgraduate students. Supervisors are therefore requested to increase their student numbers and focus on the minimum time of completion.

Quality supervision is further depended on regular contact sessions with students, which is compromised with distance students. Manyike (2017) explains, "[P]ostgraduate supervision often involves the geographical distance between student and supervisor". Dual-mode

systems or alternative modes of communication are therefore required to assist in managing the communication challenges and regular interaction between the student and supervisor (Manyike 2017).

The contemporary debate: supervisor-student relationship

To assist the postgraduate supervision challenges across the world, alternative models of supervision and supervision styles have become acceptable. Lee and Green (2009) describe the supervision space as complex and ambivalent, as well as an intensive investment by both the supervisor and the student. Lee and Green (2009) introduce the use of metaphors to identify and explain different roles and associated tensions that are experienced in the supervisor-students relationship. These metaphors include – masters, slaves, disciples, mentors, coaches, friends, authors, apprentices, sisters, fathers and midwives (Lee & Green 2009). The one-on-one discussions negotiate the personal distance or space between the student and the supervisor. In a short period, the traditional role of a mentor can change to being a confidant or a friend. Students share personal experiences and challenges that often reside outside the domain of the supervision project, but gives the supervisors insight into associate difficulties that impacts on the academic performance.

The traditional supervision styles have been replaced by styles and supervision spaces that are described as a more intimate experience. Hermer (2012, p. 827) argues that at a postgraduate level the supervisor-student relationship marks a shift in both physical and mental space from undergraduate studies. This change takes place through the one-on-one discussions that take place and can be experienced as a more intimate experience, while it has to remain 'socially acceptable'. These discussions can take place off-campus, in a private space and if possible, over a cup of coffee (Hermes 2012).

Manyike (2017) shows with feedback obtained from supervisors in South Africa that they do not only assist students to succeed academically but take responsibility for their overall wellbeing. Their role is described as a 'long-term commitment' (Manyike 2017). The responsibilities of the supervisors have extended in the contemporary supervision debate from being a master and mentor to a friend, confidant and counsellor (Manyike 2017; Lee & Green 2009; Blythe, 2018; Bitzer & Albertyn 2011). Blythe (2018, p. 410) reflects that by positioning himself as a friend in the supervision space, he was able to be more attentive to the needs and expectations of the students. Therefore, the total student experience and 'their situation as a person' are taken into consideration (Blythe, 2018, p. 410).

In the contemporary supervision space, the students require more encouragement from the supervisors and positive communication along with constructive feedback (Ismail et al. 2013). Salmon (1992) explains that due to the dynamic nature of the research process supervisors need to be more flexible in addressing the needs of students. A static approach to the supervision process results in "late submissions, or drop out from the economically and intellectually highly invested degree programs" (Saleem & Mehmood, 2018, p. 25).

The postgraduate student's perspective

Research participant group

Open-ended interviews were conducted with seven research participants who were supervised in the Interior Design programme. The interviews were conducted by the second author, who is a recent graduate of the master's programme. She could manage a confidential discussion and encourage an objective reflection. The participants were asked to reflect on the supervision space in which supervision interaction between themselves and their supervisor occurred. Research participants comprised of two groups. They are students that

were on campus during their studies or in close proximity and students that were located either in another province or abroad.

From the feedback, four primary themes emerged, namely:

- The supervision space: virtual vs physical;
- Information and communication technology that aid the research supervision space;
- The connected supervisory experience: adaptability and flexibility; and
- The supervision space: connectivity and availability.

The supervision space: Virtual versus physical

Due to the increase in part-time and distance students, the student and the supervisor are often geographically separated. This makes the act of face-to-face engagement between the student and supervisor a negotiated task. Information and communication technologies (ICT), therefore, were used to facilitate virtual contact sessions. Students in close proximity described the interactions as follows:

Contact sessions were “in the supervisor’s office and over the phone via WhatsApp calls” (Participant 6).

Because I work there [on campus], it was possible to have contact in terms of physical space. Sometimes we would set up meetings, and we would consult in her office. Other times it was either over email or via WhatsApp (Participant 5).

The majority of participants explained that although they were able to effectively communicate and engage with their supervisor in the virtual space, face-to-face interaction was still the preferred method of interaction. Even though the technology was successfully used to support the virtual space of supervision, face-to-face contact in a physical place was preferred as “this was a comfortable, familiar space” (Participant 6) that mirrors the undergraduate learning experience.

I gained more value from the in-person contact because we would read things together and discuss things together, and it was also more fun (Participant 3).

I like meeting physically more than phone call chatting because I feel like I lose concentration quickly with phone calls (Participant 3).

I enjoy interacting with a person, face to face, as you can see body language and facial expressions. This face-to-face interaction also builds a professional relationship with your supervisor. During my previous studies, as a design student, I would always meet in the lecturer or supervisor’s office and discuss designs. So, this was a comfortable, familiar space due to this experience (Participant 6).

During the physical contact sessions, research participants felt that they could actively engage with their supervisor. The distance student expressed that compared to emails that are exchanged between them and their supervisor, and the physical contact session provided immediate feedback. Therefore, both distance and onsite students expressed that, onsite students had an advantage by having ease of physical access to their supervisor and that physical meetings worked better. The following observations explain these observations:

I was lucky to be an onsite student because I could have [face-to-face] meetings with her (Participant 1).

Because I was on site, I often just go to her office (Participant 1).

It remains a challenge if you are a distance student. Because I felt that I sometimes just want to go and knock on her door to ask something quickly. I cannot substantiate this, but I felt that if I was an onsite student that you had access to the supervisor and that you could get feedback quicker (Participant 4).

I found that the physical meetings worked very well for me. I like the connection about being with someone and being right there [...] that for me, was my first choice (Participant 7).

ICTs that aid the research supervision space

A full-time onsite design student's undergraduate learning experience primarily consists of guaranteed practical face-to-face scheduled studio sessions where they can engage with their lecturer. In contrast, at a postgraduate level, students have to shift their focus from a practically orientated physical space to an abstract and theoretically orientated mind space. This often leads to an isolated, solitary and unconnected form of study that is one of the main contributing factors that result in unsuccessful completion of postgraduate studies.

The implementation of ICTs can effectively bridge the face-to-face communication gap to provide a connected supervision experience. ICTs that were used in the supervision space include Skype, WhatsApp, phone calls and emails.

The way we communicate was what we had at our fingertips, so we used it (Participant 4).

By incorporating this type of ICTs, the students were able to have direct contact with their supervisor. The supervision space was supported with ICTs in the following manner:

Used email for submitting chapters and research sections (Participant 1).

Through WhatsApp, we were able to get real-time feedback on queries (Participant 1).

Whatever information I might find, or she might find she would WhatsApp me an article that was interesting or I would WhatsApp her with something regarding my research (Participant 1).

Most of the usable knowledge was from a Skype session or a physical session (Participant 7).

The combination of different communication technologies had the following results:

WhatsApp would be more like the questions that I have. She would usually call me depending on the type of questions I have asked her. [Email is used for] when I want to send her my work. And if she wants to send me attachments like readings or comments she made on the work (Participant 3).

The telephone or Skype calls helped a lot because I can immediately get an answer to a question. It was a quicker feedback session (Participant 4).

All the participants made reference to the use of WhatsApp. It is used as a form of quick, cost-effective and immediate communication. This is explained as follows:

WhatsApp we use a lot. In fact, [my supervisor] will find really nice articles and WhatsApp me links. And sometimes I'll take images of books I'm reading and send those to her as media. And general texting. We do use WhatsApp a lot (Participant 5).

WhatsApp was used for quick messages. WhatsApp phone calls was an “easy way to connect” (Participant 6).

With the use of available technology, it would be required of both the supervisor and the student to be proficient in the use of ICTs.

I believe both parties need to have good computer literacy if the mentoring process happens long distance. I would have hated to go through the process and have a supervisor that wasn't PC literate. It would drive me insane (Participant 6).

The connected supervisory experience: Adaptability and flexibility

Limited time interaction between supervisor and student is two-fold. First, postgraduate students have varied commitments outside the realm of research. Due to factors like work and family commitments and geographical location, students cannot always engage with traditional formal supervision interaction that takes place in a physical 08h00 to 17h00 face-to-face space. Second, apart from supervision responsibilities supervisors also have limited time due to various institutional responsibilities, increase in workload and the focused time that is required to conduct supervision discussions. Adaptability and flexibility in managing the supervision space are therefore required. One participant explains this as follows:

[My supervisor] always made me aware of when she won't be available and the dates she will be available when she will be in the office, so I could work around that (Participant 1).

To facilitate both contact and distance, students' schedules can become a difficult task. The supervisor thus has to be flexible to provide an enriching supervision space. Research participants explained how their supervisors accommodated them from formal meetings to late-night calls. Collectively the participants explained that their supervisor was willing to accommodate their schedule.

Usually, it would have been in the mornings in coffee shops (Participant 3).

I was constrained to after hours because I was working full-time. Six o'clock in the evenings. There were some later calls maybe eight o'clock (Participant 4).

Mostly late afternoons to late evenings. When I had to submit some stuff previously it will sometimes go from 9, 10 sometimes at 12 o'clock we will send an email at night. Late night. Sometimes 4 o'clock in the morning as well (Participant 5).

Usually, my supervisor came to me because I work ... then we would sit in a coffee shop around here. Lunchtime (Participant 3).

Not only did the supervisors accommodate the students' schedules in relation to theirs, but they also had to wear different hats, not only that of a supervisor. Supervisors also adapted to the identities of their students. The multiple identities that postgraduate students are responsible for, often in one day, included being a student, a wife, a partner, a family member, a parent, a friend and a full-time employee. Two participants explained this as follows:

We would also discuss everyday life, not necessarily just varsity [...] that worked well (Participant 2).

It is not just about the studies, it is also about the fact besides being a master's student, you also have a life. As a mentor, [my supervisor] is quite understanding that you have to work around a whole lot of things to get this done. Not only does she mentor you on how to complete your study, but she also takes into account

the life you have around you, and she helps you to work with that. I think that gives you a good balance in terms of mentoring (Participant 5).

A supervision space: Connectivity and availability

Traditional mentoring processes have often been criticised in relation to the unsuccessful completion of postgraduate studies. The end goal for the postgraduate student is to complete their research study successfully. To arrive at a successful end-goal, it requires a journey to be walked alongside the supervisor during the mentoring process. Participants were thus asked to reflect on how they experienced their supervision journey.

I actually think that [my supervisor] being my supervisor opened a lot of communication links where we are able to chat with each other. I have heard that with most supervisors you have to make an appointment to see them. Whereas [my supervisor] is quite flexible. She allows you to WhatsApp her. She does not mind a late-night message. She has allowed us to interact more freely and more flexibly which works much better (Participant 5).

The participatory nature of supervision involves the concept of connectedness. Participants specifically commented on the successful outcome of their postgraduate studies in relation to their supervisor's supervision style. The success of the supervision style was to be able to remain connected with their supervisor throughout their supervision journey.

The only document in academic writing was in my BTech year, which was a very small document. I had to learn quite a lot in terms of academic writing and the feedback and support in that regard was quite helpful. The results of my document were really good. It goes to show that the support and guidance I had was of quality (Participant 4).

The outcome of my study really showed the quality of the supervision that I have received. She is also someone that is motivational even if you feel you are floundering and you not going to make it; she is so positive [...] you can't help to work harder. The proof is definitely in the results (Participant 2).

The participants explain that their interaction with their supervisors was informal, however, professional. Participants said they looked forward to contact-session as it provided insight and clarity. The participants explain that due to how the supervisor facilitated the research study allowed them to engage comfortably with their supervisors.

I have a good relationship with my supervisor, so the type of language is nonchalant. The feedback is obviously formal, but the setting I suppose is more casual (Participant 3).

I wouldn't say informal, but it was a comfortable conversation. It did not feel like she was preaching at me. [The contact sessions] were systematic, but I felt I could still converse with her. I did not feel like I was getting a lecture (Participant 4).

Evident from the participants' responses, is that the communicative relationship between themselves and their supervisor had a considerable impact on their research journey. The majority of the participants have explained that they were nervous and unsure of the research process due to the unfamiliarity of postgraduate research. All participants have expressed that their supervisor, however, put them at ease. This was achieved through how the supervisor communicated with the student, whether it was in the physical or virtual space.

Conclusion

Traditional supervision styles and spaces have changed noticeably to accommodate various pressures and challenges in the postgraduate environment. The paper identifies that the successful completion of postgraduate studies can significantly contribute to how the student-supervision relationship and space are managed. The contemporary debate in relation to supervision space shows that it is a more intimate experience, where the supervisor is required to be more flexible and considerate of the entire student experience. The study shows that the position of master and mentor has evolved to a position where the supervisor establishes a closer relationship with the student and that the position of friend and confidant is often included in a more intimate supervision space.

Feedback from the seven participants interviewed shows that the contemporary supervision space requires a different approach to the traditional models. Postgraduate students face various challenges, which require a more flexible, adaptable supervision styles and space. Alternative forms of communication, such as the inclusion of cell phones and WhatsApp application, could assist in providing quick, easy communication between the supervisor and student. Distance students benefit from Skype sessions or WhatsApp calls but prefer face-to-face contact sessions. Part-time students appreciate after-hours consultation sessions and contact with their supervisor.

However, the paper indicates the difficulties that supervisors face within the current postgraduate environment. Managing an increase in student numbers and meeting the demands of throughput rates and success rates, requires supervisors to find alternative approaches within the supervision space that can assist in improving student success. These alternative approaches could require not only a more flexible and adaptable supervision style but also an extension of boundaries from formal meeting spaces to informal discussion that takes place after hours and extends into weekends. The students interviewed in this paper were appreciative of alternative, flexible supervision methods and describe various situations that show the positive effect it had on their postgraduate experience.

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