
Negotiating student identity in the doctoral proposal development process: a personal reflective account

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Abstract

This article focuses on the interpersonal and formative dynamics involved in the PhD proposal supervision process. It is a reflective account of my supervisory experiences with two of my doctoral students. The article discusses the *authoritative* basis upon which these two supervisory relationships were founded, negotiated and substantiated. Key to the supervision process has been an awareness of and engagement with the ways the students' personal identities initially informed their respective approaches to doctoral study. Rooted within an understanding of their biographies, the article discusses how the supervisory process navigated shifts in their personal approaches. I show how these shifts enabled them to identify their research foci and to pose an academically acceptable set of research questions. The development of my own reflexivity about my authority as a doctoral supervisor is central to this account.

Introduction

The focus of this article is on the dynamic and formative relationship embedded in the doctoral supervision process. It concentrates specifically on the proposal development process. It extends on an article by Jansen, Herman and Pillay (2004) in which they employ the notion 'research learning' to discuss the developmental and learning experiences of a cohort of doctoral students while working on their doctoral proposals. Jansen *et al.* suggest that "there are no clear steps to be followed in writing of the proposal and that the journey each student traverses is filled with obstacles, reversals, breakdowns and, yet, progress" (2004, p.79). My article is a reflective account of such a journey, of my interaction with two of my students in our co-navigation of the personal, relational and scholarly dynamics involved in the proposal development process. While the doctoral proposal has to be underpinned by an appropriate academic question that suggests an interesting intellectual puzzle worthy of scholarly study, the supervisory process often determines the student's approach to the study and the nature of the academic questions posed. The key conceptual issue of the article revolves around the shifting

identity of these students as they navigate the complex personal identity terrain involved in the process of developing a credible doctoral proposal. The nature of the relationship between my two doctoral students and myself as a supervisor is thus under the analytical spotlight.

The article is based on my personal observations and reflective notes made throughout the proposal supervision process and two 2-hour interviews with each of the students. The first interview solicited crucial biographical information aimed at understanding the students' biographical/personal basis that informed their respective approaches to the PhD process. The data from this first interview illustrate how certain formative processes in the students' biography have influenced their approach to their doctoral study, the ways in which they approached and negotiated the proposal writing process, and the nature of the study they proposed. The second interview focussed on the supervision relationship, the negotiated nature of the supervision process, and the personal relational basis in terms of which a successful proposal could be produced. The interviews provided a means of explication, verification and corroboration of what is essentially a paper based on my own views about a process in which I was a key participant. I provided the two interviewees an opportunity to read two drafts of this paper, especially to check for factual inaccuracies about how the paper personally represented them. The pseudonyms 'James' and 'Faheem' are used to refer to the students in the discussion below.

The article unfolds along two conceptual lines. The supervision process was framed by the interaction between the scholarly identity of the supervisor on the one hand, and the identities of the two students on the other. The second line of argument focuses on the reflexive adaptability of the supervisory process, specifically its ability to negotiate a shift on the part of the students from what I would label a 'normative stance' to doctoral study, to an appropriate analytical stance. Both students' initial approaches to their doctoral studies and their specific foci and research questions, were closely tied to their respective socialization and 'senses of self', which I argue, impeded them in their attempt to propose an analytically rigorous study. The article shows how the supervision process engaged with these firmly held personal approaches, and the different routes travelled along this journey by the two students in successfully completing the proposal.

Conceptual framework

There is a paucity of literature on the affective dimensions of doctoral proposal supervision. Cryer (1997) discusses a range of common dilemmas in the supervision process, including the need to encourage originality, and striking a balance between guiding students' work on the one hand and allowing for freedom of independent expression on the other. Her work also focuses on relational questions that appear episodically during the supervision process. She raises questions about whether and how cultural differences interfere in the supervisory relationship, the extent to which the student should be provided with the space to acquire intellectual ownership of her study, and whether the student should be allowed to stray too far from the supervisor's area of expertise.

Connecting with the specific focus of this article, i.e. the relational and affective dimension of the supervisory process, Wright and Cochrane (2000, p.192) suggest that science students, when compared with students in the humanities, are more likely to complete their theses within the minimum specified time frames. In their study on the factors influencing successful completion of PhD theses, they distinguish between the "external and intrinsic nature of the study in the sciences and the arts and its interaction with the student's individual internal picture of the world". According to them, scientific research requires the study of purportedly objective phenomena, which can be seen as 'outside' the individual. They suggest that this may enable science students to separate their research from their internal psychological world, thus avoiding a situation in which their research impinges on or challenges their identity or self esteem. This is particularly true of the young science student who is still relatively unaffected by intervening and complicating life experiences. Wright and Cochrane (2000, p.192) suggest that "this might make research study in the sciences psychologically relatively easy for individuals who are academically competent and practised but who have negotiated few developmental stages in life – often those who are younger in years".

Doctoral study in the humanities, I would argue, can be considerably more subjective and requiring of exposure to judgments from within students' internal worlds, such as their values and belief systems, and even their ability to display or control emotion. The humanities PhD exposes students to an element of personal risk and emotional investment, rooted as it is in understanding human and social processes. This makes their work more "intrinsically challenging to their individual psychological equilibrium, thus

bestowing the potential to affect their ability to function effectively” (Wright and Cochrane, 2000, p.193). Notwithstanding, the somewhat sharp distinction Wright and Cochrane make between science and humanities students, they highlight the view that the doctoral supervision process involves a complex negotiation of the psychological and affective dimension of the students’ personality make up.

This article provides a discussion of some of the affective processes in the context of my supervisory interaction with two such students preparing their doctoral proposal. Having to reconcile the personal, the political and the analytical, and having to engage with constructions of self, as I show below, is a crucial part of proposal writing. I have thus sought to understand the dynamic interaction between, on the one hand, my own construction and display of my role as supervisor, and the acquisition by the two students of an appropriate academic identity which made a successful doctoral proposal possible on the other. The article is an attempt to provide conceptual elaboration of Dison’s position that “the relationship between a student and supervisor or mentor is likely to be one of the most formative contexts in which the student’s development of research capacity takes place” (2002, p.14).

Complicit in the supervisory process: my authority as a supervisor

After having taught at a high school for six years, I joined the university as a junior lecturer in 1994. Most of my scholarly publications in the first years of my academic career were based on the politics of education. I published in the area of school access, youth political identity and teacher activism. My doctoral thesis, completed at the end of 1999, was a political economy analysis of education policy development during the 1990s. It was based on an analysis of policy documents and interviews that sought to understand the politics embedded in policy making.

Over the last five years I have begun to use more nuanced post-structural conceptual lenses with a view to understanding the multilayered complexity of education policy reform and practice. I subsequently published articles on higher education policy discourse, teacher biography, teaching cultures, and discourse and agency in Muslim community schools. I have applied a number

of methods in the qualitative research tradition such as observations, interviews, and discourse analysis.

My work had shifted to an analysis of agency processes, of the *people* involved in these processes, working with a mix of discourses and in different contexts. Something fundamental happened: my conceptual turn had forced me to become modest, to adopt an interpretive theoretical stance that emphasized *verstehen* (description and understanding). I have had to temper my own emancipatory interests in order to validate the authentic experiences of people. I have had to move from a politicised analytical logic to an analysis of confoundment and social reconfiguration, from an ‘acting-upon-society’ logic to an analysis of the intersubjective world of ordinary people in turbulent social circumstances as they reflexively establish and substantiate their social practices.

I have supervised a number of Master’s theses and have co-supervised one doctoral thesis. I am the main supervisor of the two students James and Faheem discussed below. A professor in the Faculty of Education serves as the co-supervisor. Cryer (1997) suggests that a successful supervisory relationship has to be based on the appropriate exercise of respect and authority, the breakdown of which may complicate the process and affect completion. The authority of the supervisor is generally rooted in her academic expertise in the student’s area of study, her research and publications record, her knowledge of the relevant literature, and her knowledge and expertise in the appropriate methodological approaches. Authority is thus based on the supervisor’s expert knowledge from which she derives epistemic credibility.

My view of myself as a supervisor is not unrelated to my age and relative inexperience as a PhD supervisor. I am younger than both James and Faheem. Compared with older and more experienced supervisors, I do not have the aura of experience to mediate my authority relations with the students in the way that makes it easier to be forthright and direct in the offering of advice and guidance. The relational dynamics between the students and me are different. As Cryer (1997, p.6) suggests, as a new supervisor I tend to put in “more time, effort and guidance than my more experienced counterparts”, in the belief that it will prove my professionalism to myself, my students, and my academic colleagues. Cryer warns that this attitude can delay or even prevent the student’s transition to independence.

A crucial determinant of the supervisory relationship has thus been the way in which I have been negotiating authority relations throughout the supervisory

process. The process has been established, as it should, on the basis of authority governed by the scholarly expertise of the supervisor. The nature of this relationship, however, is seldom stable, always somewhat tenuous, negotiated and renegotiated, and as in my case when the supervisor is younger than the students, has required sensitive management of interpersonal dynamics. I have had to be acutely aware of the view that participation in the learning relationship involves complex relations of power. I was particularly conscious of Dison's view that "the supervisor's role is to provide access to the student through negotiation and practice of meaning, but the supervisor may also with or without conscious intention, hinder the access of the student to becoming a fully competent member of the community"(2004, p.14). I discuss below the contingent and personal dynamics of this ultimately successfully negotiated relationship.

The 'schooled' socialised identities of James and Faheem

James' and Faheem's biographies display remarkable similarity with regard to what I would label the 'schooled' identities they acquired within the socialisational context of their family and communal life, and their early school going experiences. Based on data from the first interview, this section illustrates how certain formative processes in the students' biographies influenced their approach to their doctoral study and the nature of the study they proposed. Their different 'senses of self', constructed during their childhood and beyond, had an impact on the type of intellectual questions they initially posed. The supervision interaction around the proposal has been framed fundamentally by an awareness of the ways in which their different personalities shaped their approach to the PhD.

They both hail from big working class families. James was the youngest child, and Faheem the second youngest. They both felt fortunate to be afforded the opportunity to complete their schooling and become first generation university graduates. Their mothers were very influential in encouraging them to do well at school. The school was presented as a way of 'getting on' in life, and for getting out of their current class status. They were often reminded about the privilege of attending school while most of the other siblings had to work, often to finance their completion of schooling.

They both loved school, their teachers, books, reading, writing and studying, and the socialisational atmosphere of being at school and doing school work. They were diligent and regular school goers. Their image of self was cultivated early on by encouraging and positive messages about their intellectual prowess. James was interpellated as the ‘clever baby brother’ while Faheem was referred to endearingly as: ‘hy’s ‘n slimmetjie’ (he’s a clever one). Having always been top of their class, they had both acquired a strong personal image as academic achievers reinforced by academic success throughout their school and university careers. The choice to do doctoral studies was partially motivated by their sense of self as academic achievers. From the interviews it seemed clear that their self identities are strongly tied to academic achievement and the acknowledgment acquired from it. Doing the PhD could be regarded as an outcome of an image of academic achievement and its role in acknowledging and affirming their sense of self.

Both were affected very deeply by the student and youth uprisings in 1976. They became politically conscious and active largely in the context of these uprisings. Their political identities were cultivated at high school and mushroomed into activism when they went to university. Throughout, and despite the politics of opposition of which they were a part, they remained close to their schooled identities, staying the course as academic achievers. Both sailed through university: James at the University of Cape Town where he could never quite fit into the white dominated climate of the mid seventies, and Faheem at the University of the Western Cape where his academic achievements secured him a prized place in the Sociology Honours programme. James passed his Higher Diploma in Education programme with distinction. Both had highly successful careers as young teachers in schools on the Cape Flats where they lived out their professional lives as progressive, activist teachers. James left for the USA where he completed a Master’s degree in Education in 1987, and Faheem completed a Master’s degree in classroom Action Research in 1990, scoring a distinction for his mini thesis. Their schooled identities, based on academic achievement - while enriched and informed by politics and activism - thus remained a key part of their personal make up.

Divergences in their schooled identities fundamentally impacted on their respective personal and intellectual approaches to the doctoral process. They differed with respect to the way in which they approached politics. James was a pragmatist who worked in the political background while Faheem became a youth leader who loved ideas. For James, an idea is only worthwhile to the extent that it has practical value. He makes a distinction between on the one

hand those young political activists, his friends with whom he grew up, who loved ideas and could convey them eloquently in the mass meetings, who took leadership and public roles, and those on the other hand who chose to play a political and organisational role in the background. James took on the role of secretary, organiser, or vice chairperson, the organiser of the social programme, the type of role he was good at as a child when he organised sport events for kids in the local neighbourhood, instead of playing soccer or cricket. James' pragmatism is tied to what he does best, i.e. organising and making things happen, such as Conscientisation programmes or pamphleteering for the bus or meat boycott. Although not quite impatient with the 'mere display of ideas,' his main motivation sourced in the practical usefulness of ideas, as I explain below, had an influence on his initial doctoral focus and the type of academic questions he posed. James' preoccupation with doing a PhD in order to understand the impact of a development programme on poor communities could be seen as influenced by and is analogous to his concern for the pragmatic.

Faheem's childhood socialisation took place in a communal context characterised by religious and cultural influences. He grew up in the image of his father who was a community Imam, but died when he was seven years old. He speaks about being influenced by the presence of his father's religious and secular books, his father's business and cosmopolitan networks and interests, and the general texture of his father's social and community welfare work. Faheem was always reminded of his father's leadership role, often pressurised to follow in his father's footsteps, and as he suggests, he had serendipitously developed a strong sense of self as a leader of people. He became a progressive, if traditional, Cape Town Imam. As a leader of a religious student organisation, Faheem read widely, admitting to the fact that he loved ideas, which together with his strong leadership personality, influenced him to carry his ideas and perspectives of the world with confidence and pride. His emancipatory commitments, his 'love of justice,' cultivated during his schooling while observing the injustices meted out by cruel teachers to his struggling fellow students, translated into a strong normative stance. Analogous to the critical theory perspectives that underpinned the activism of the popular educational movements during the 1980s, Faheem was committed to changing the world. This normative stance would impact directly on his approach to his PhD study, motivated as it was to linking his study closely to contributing to changing the world.

Both James' and Faheem's initial understandings of the doctoral study, a study of impact and a study contributing to change respectively, were not directly

congruent with the interpretive scholarly stance that I had recently adopted in my own scholarship. This lack of congruence informed the nature of the relationship of authority of the supervisory process. My understanding was that, as supervisor, I had to establish congruence for the supervisory process to be successful. What follows is an account of the way in which my supervision, with the co-supervisor's assistance, navigated and interrogated their initial approaches to the study and the proposal production process that followed.

Coming to the doctoral study

The different ways in which the two students came to the doctoral process, accompanied by their specific concerns and intellectual interests and attitudes, played an important role in the way the respective supervisory relationships were set up and negotiated. While their specific personal approaches were informed by their distinct 'schooled' identities, i.e. one pragmatic and the other ideas-orientated, my relationship with them depended on how I understood, adapted to, and worked with their personal expectations of the supervision process. Key to the supervision process was whether, and the basis on which, they were able to acquire and incorporate the necessary compartment shift to enable them to ask appropriate research questions, on the basis of which they would develop the doctoral proposal. My role as an engaging supervisor, having become aware of and sensitive to the personal dynamics involved in such a shift, arguably played a key role in the students' successfully producing the proposals.¹

Both James and Faheem had toyed with the idea of PhD study for a long time. After completing his M.Ed in the USA, James had immediately been offered a place on that university's PhD programme. He declined this offer. While he felt disappointed by the quality of this world class university's programme in Educational Studies, at the age of 27, in 1987, James wanted to head home to participate in the educational initiatives of the popular liberation movement. On his return he embarked on a range of educational development work, from contract university and college teaching to non-government organisational work. With the advent of democracy in 1994 he entered government, first embarking on a stint at provincial level followed by work in the Adult Education section of the national Department of Education (DoE). He learnt some important lessons about the complexity and frustration of bureaucratic

¹ In the interviews both students strongly underscored this role that I played.

functioning, and acquired valuable insights into the limits and possibilities of state reform. But, James' desire to concretely contribute to change at the level of human capacity building led to his resignation from the DoE. He set up his own educational services agency, contracting, among others, with government and development agencies. His company was appointed to design, manage, and co-ordinate a massive two-year public works adult learning programme for the Department of the Environment and Tourism.

Close to the end of the project James' company completed an evaluation that sought to measure the impact of this programme on the participants. He collected valuable 'hard' data on aspects of the learning achievements, but was left questioning his role in this programme and whether it had any 'real' impact on the adult learners. He was concerned with what happened to them after the programme, and whether and how they had been enabled to improve themselves and their communities. These concerns, I would argue, led him to making a decisive shift in the direction of doctoral study. James spoke in the interview about how he thought doctoral study could provide him a way of asking questions and providing explanations about the impact of his work. I would suggest that his personal biographical trajectory, having until then shown a strong commitment to pragmatic change, had now shifted somewhat to his wanting to understand how change really worked. While his involvement in adult development and learning gave him an opportunity to give expression to his desire to actively contribute to change, his perplexity with the outcomes of the programme led him to adopt a reflexive attitude towards the nature and impact of development initiatives. At this point James' new-found reflexivity began to link to his strong, if by now somewhat residual 'schooled' sense of self. The doctoral study, I would argue, represented his next biographical step. PhD study would arguably provide him a platform for combining features of his academic achieving self image with a newfound concern for going beyond, and perhaps questioning the pragmatism of programme implementation as he moved towards a desire for greater understanding of the complexity of development and change.

Faheem began toying with the idea of starting a PhD almost immediately upon completion of his MEd. His determination to get going on his next phase of study filtered through an intermittent 10-year process of attempting to gain access to what he termed "the appropriate academic expertise." During the early 1990s he acquired an interest in museum studies largely as a result of an artefact collection and display project he was running at the mosque where he was officiating as Imam. He tells a compelling story of approaching different academics in four higher education institutions in the Western Cape. The first

three attempts were based on exploring whether he could find someone to supervise a potential PhD topic on the study of museums. Inaccessibility and lack of interest and feedback from the academics he approached at two institutions and technical problems with registration at another left him despondent and dejected.

Faheem's search for a credible academic environment found an outlet in the Sociology Department of one of the universities. By 2001 he had done a number of MA courses at this university in the areas of Development Studies, Culture and Community. His decision to leave teaching for the business world had caused his interest in the academic study of education to be placed on the proverbial 'back burner', overtaken by broader concerns for economic and community development. These courses brought him back firmly into the realm of study and academic work, exposing him to some of the latest thinking on social development and change.

Faheem's strong religious identity had always predisposed him towards a doctoral topic on the Muslim community. A fortuitous event brought him back to a study on education. Bored with business, he went back to school for an 18 month teaching stint to gain first hand experience of transformation processes on the ground. He wanted to find out for himself how teachers and schools were responding to expectations for pedagogical change. He seemed there to have seamlessly resumed his activist teacher role, getting involved particularly in the school's extra mural and enrichment programmes. He became animated by the ways in which teachers were discussing and responding to, or mostly finding ways to ignore, the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Faheem described his school experience as one of "great expectations and great disappointments". He felt that the exercise of managerial power at the school and the curriculum, learning and teaching processes were more akin to "recycling of old discourses", instead of the empowering progressive pedagogy he had expected. He kept a copious diary on the interaction between new policy expectations and the old-styled didactic ways in which learning and teaching were approached at the school. The idea of the PhD becoming an educational study was thus concretised in the context of his observing how teachers functioned in the school. His approach to his study prior to starting the supervision process was informed by a firmly held understanding of the requirement for teachers to adapt to policy expectations for pedagogical change. In the supervisory relationship, I have had to establish a basis to engage with Faheem's firmly held views about the world of teachers, arguing for an appropriate distance from both his assumptions and his closeness to what he observed in practice. I believed that only such a distancing would

enable him to ask appropriate research questions about the complex nature of teacher discourses and practices.

Setting up the supervisory relationship as 'mutual engagement'

The way in which the supervisory relationship was set up played a decisive role in determining the nature and outcome of the mutual engagement that characterised our collaborative deliberations. The proposal process was characterized by building of trust and respect. As supervisor I developed respect for their personal commitment to the PhD process and their scholarly potential, while they, as they concurred in the interviews, had acquired respect for my academic authority and ability to serve as their supervisor. Once accomplished, the process proceeded relatively smoothly, but not without difficult moments, which, based on the nurtured trust and respect, were resolved productively. My own engagement in the supervisory relationship, however, unfolded around the specific personal and intellectual bases upon which each of the two students approached the proposal process. While my interaction with them shared many similarities in process and outcome, each brought his personal or 'normative' expectations to the process which impacted on the nature of the relationship.

During the first few months I encouraged both students to read as much of my work as possible. I was very concerned to establish the relationship on the basis of my academic authority, which I thought could be realised only if they understood the nature, scope and scholarly veracity of my work. I asked them to read my earlier work based on policy analysis, especially my doctoral thesis, as well as my current work on culture and identity. I was particularly keen for them to understand the intellectual shift I made from policy document analysis and the application of what I now regard as a simplistic analytical framework, to a qualitative, interpretive research approach. I wanted them to understand that the type of study I would be willing to supervise had to connect with my academic interests and current scholarly and methodological approaches. Perhaps more fundamentally, getting them to read my own work was a way of displaying my academic capability, which, if they decided to proceed with me as a supervisor, would give them some general expectations of the potential intellectual quality of our interactions. I wanted them to be comfortable with the intellectual quality of the development and learning practices that would make up the supervisory process. Both students revealed

in the interviews that they had read some of my work. They said that they had found it stimulating, and had developed by reading it, an appreciation of the intellectual quality it portended for the relationship.

An incisive dynamic in the earlier months was the quality of the conversations we had in the supervisory meetings. I met the students often, generally twice per month. For each meeting they were required to read widely and produce a written piece. The meetings were thus always based on something they had written and e-mailed to me beforehand. This gave me an opportunity to read their written work carefully, make notes for conversation, provide leads for further reading, and engage with them about the nature and focus of their potential study. I tried my best never to be prescriptive, and to respect their views and the type of study they thought they wanted to do. My leverage or influence was gained by getting them to focus on what a researchable doctoral study might be, the nature of the research questions, and the intellectual puzzle or curiosity that the proposal had to suggest. I pushed and prodded them to question their intellectual assumptions, and to develop some critical distance from their understanding of their proposed study or research unit of analysis. Shifts in their thinking were never imposed. They were always the outcome of the serendipity embedded in ongoing conversations in which the views held by the students and their ability to recognise and adjust their thinking were affirmed and valued. While I always engaged, at times robustly, with their conceptual approaches, our relations were always based on affirming their capacity and autonomy in deciding on the type of study they wanted to propose.

In the interviews they spoke about the role played by the wide and in depth reading I expected them to do in getting them to see their possible research from novel or more rigorous conceptual angles. According to both students, lending them my own books played an important role in generating trust in the process. I was also able to provide a conduit for access to bursaries to both students who, as businessmen, needed financial support to enable them to take the leap into near full time study. I involved both students in aspects of the work of the Faculty of Education. I invited them to participate in staff seminars and later on asked them to do part-time contract lecturing. James felt very affirmed when I asked him to participate in a 'theorising' day I organised for academic staff, while Faheem appreciated my confidence in him for asking him to co-lecture one of my 4th year classes with me on campus and to lecture the same course alone at one of our Faculty's remote campuses. According to them, these academic induction opportunities provided them crucial identity markers as academics or scholars in the making. It shifted their self image to

now firmly begin to incorporate elements of the scholarly identity that is crucial in PhD completion. Acquiring a scholarly identity through visible scholarly markers, I would argue, is a key requirement for PhD study.

When I asked in the interview whether they could recall any difficult moment in the supervision process they offered one example each. Faheem felt that at one point I had not seen or “perhaps forgot what the focus of proposal was”. I had made some challenging comments about his work and had introduced two examples of successfully completed theses as a way of exposing him to different type of studies. Faheem interpreted this to mean that I wanted him to shift focus, something he was loathe to do, and that I perhaps did not quite understand what he wanted to propose. The issue was resolved when we spoke about my intention in giving him the theses as examples of emulatable studies. James experienced a difficult moment when I, according to him, brutally confronted him about not having delivered work for a long period. Turning the confrontation inward, James reacted by blaming himself for this situation, vowed to work harder, and then proceeded prolifically to produce a smart piece of written work shortly thereafter. These two incidents notwithstanding, the rest of the proposal development relationship was relatively productive and conflict-free.

As suggested earlier, James’ and Faheem’s individual approaches to the PhD were personally divergent, which issued into some relational differentiation on my part. Faheem was interested in establishing a relationship based on a high level of scholarly integrity. As an ‘ideas person’ he wanted to be challenged academically. While not unaware of or even averse to engaging with the personal dimensions of the relationship, his primary expectation was for a supervisory process that could provide a stimulating intellectual experience. James, on the other hand, was more concerned with establishing a relationship based on personal synergy. The relationship would have to take account of his personal and emotional demeanour, and particularly the impact this dimension would have on his approach to his doctoral work. Thus, while my relationship with Faheem had been mediated by the academic quality and expertise I could muster in the supervisory process, with James the primary emphasis had been on establishing synergy with his personal emotional approach to the doctoral study. Neither relationship, however, was unaffected by the other dimension. In each case, the one element seemed more primary than the other. I asked myself early on though whether Faheem could or would learn from me, given the way in which he held his ideas, and his high expectations for academic stimulation. My apprehension was laid to rest in the context of our academic conversations during the process. James’ statement in the interview that “I

realised that I can learn from you”, points to the comfortable personal and intellectual synergy we struck during the process.

Proposal supervision as ‘shared repertoire’ development’

The doctoral proposal can be viewed as an artefact of the proposal development process that comes to be adjudicated by the academy in order to determine whether the student has formally proposed a coherent and plausible doctoral study. As artefact, the proposal has to display whether the student has been able to identify a research focus rooted within a gap in the extant literature on the subject, a set of sharp analytical questions framed by the conceptual literature, and a research methodology that is congruent with the study’s main questions. Coherence among these elements is essential. A proposal has to indicate whether the study is rigorously framed and whether it addresses an interesting intellectual issue or puzzle worthy of research scrutiny. The supervisory process is primarily aimed at guiding the student from her initial focus and approach to the potential study to an elegant statement of the main elements required by the proposal.

The proposal supervision process can be likened to a situated practice in which shared repertoire development takes place. That is, wherein the student comes to learn or acquire the rudimentary skills and conceptual clarity and capacity necessary for writing a coherent proposal. The supervisor facilitates such repertoire development by engaging with the student’s intellectual approach to the proposal. While supervising my two students I had come to understand how the relational dynamics embedded in the process interact with and shape the proposal’s intellectual form. Facilitating a shift from the initial views they held about their study to an appropriate academic focus was closely tied to engaging with their normative self constructions. I have had to understand how their personal identities impacted on the way they initially framed their approach to the doctoral study. Facilitating a shift in their self construction was required in order for them to develop an academically acceptable proposal. I would argue that the embedded practices in the situated context of the supervisory process facilitated this compartment shift.

James’ and Faheem’s initial approach to the doctoral study was closely tied to their personal identities. Faheem initially favoured a classroom Action Research type of study. Similar to his MEd study, he wanted to design,

implement and research a classroom innovation programme that he thought would facilitate learning improvement. He was interested in understanding, through the study, whether and how such a programme might be taken up by his learners. He was motivated by the desire to empower learners through the application of a critical and innovative pedagogy. Faheem's study was based on what I thought was his firmly held ideas about change. It sounded as if he knew exactly what he wanted to do, and that he was about to do it without much reflection on his own assumptions about the nature of change in the area of teaching and learning. I steered our early conversations in the direction of questioning the way in which a strong emancipatory thrust might prevent him from developing a complex understanding of change. I began to engage him on the confounding nature of social change in a transforming country and the fact that there had not yet emerged any solid cognitive maps or co-ordinates to help us understand change. I impressed on him the need to be reflexive about his assumptions. I suggested that his strong normative views could be regarded as judgmental and I silently questioned whether Faheem would be able to do a doctoral study without the required distancing from his own understanding of the world. My view of Faheem early on in the supervisory process was that he required a fundamental shift in his approach to doctoral study. I thought he had to suspend, or at least develop a critical distance, from his own normative views. But, I also became very aware that the relational basis for engaging him in such a shift would have to be intellectually substantial. He was not about to change his perspective on his doctoral studies on the basis of superficial conversations with a young supervisor.

Fresh from his work on the development and learning programme, armed with data from a baseline survey he had designed and completed about the impact of the programme, James' initial approach was informed by wanting to understand the impact of his two-year programme. He was keen to find use for his data in the doctoral study. He wanted to understand whether and how the input dimensions of the programme impacted on the adult learners, whether it enabled them to acquire skills that would help them find work and whether as he put it "bring food to the table". James thus initially suggested a type of impact evaluation study with quantitative and qualitative dimensions. With a senior colleague as my fellow supervisor also playing an active role, our initial approach was to encourage him to pursue this study. As supervisors we were excited about the data he had already acquired, and we thought that it could serve as a solid basis for the study. I was personally sceptical about the way in which James spoke about the impact of the programme. I had a nagging feeling that the nature of impact might be much more complex than James was suggesting, that a two-year intervention programme that combined elements of

work and learning aimed at individuals who eked out a living on the coast, might not have the desired impact. I thought that life in these marginal communities might ‘take up’ these trained individuals in much more complex ways than an index such as whether they had been able to find work might suggest. I began to engage with James on conceptualising the complex nature of impact in marginal communities. My intention was not to suggest another study. On the contrary, I thought I was helping James to develop conceptual and explanatory depth to the baseline evaluative data he already had of the programme.

While we thought his study of impact was plausible, we engaged James on the nature of the questions he wanted to pose and the appropriate methods for the study. I, in particular, questioned whether an understanding of impact that is limited to measuring learning input and achievement output might provide much of an understanding about the complex ways the programme impacted on the lives of the adult learners. James found my continuous prompting about “what type of story you want to tell” unsettling and challenging. He began to take on the view that his study “was much too simplistically framed”, and “that I had to respond to your question much more profoundly”.

My intellectual interaction with the two students was informed by the intention of getting them to understand what I regarded as the social complexity that characterised contemporary South Africa. I believed that both students initially viewed their study along the lines of a single dimension, in terms of which they regarded successful progress and change as the outcome of activist-driven programmatic intervention. This approach, I believed, eschews an understanding of the intricacies involved in change in especially the type of marginal and impoverished contexts in which they proposed to do their research.

On reflection, I have to admit that my approach to my own research may have influenced my interaction with them. I had recently adopted interpretive lenses to inform three qualitative studies I had undertaken into educational discourse and identity. In one of these studies I reflected on how my critical theory lenses became inadequate in trying to understand what I was observing during the research. I had realised that I was carrying my own normative assumptions of the research unit much too strongly, and that I had to suspend my judgment, although not entirely, and adopt a *verstehen* approach that allowed me to study the intentionality of the human activity I was observing. The interpretive approach enabled me to understand the complex bases upon which human

choices were being made, and their creativity in adapting to a transforming discursive and material environment (see Fataar, 2005).

I wanted James and Faheem to understand that the doctoral study that I was prepared to supervise had to help lay some 'logical interpretive order' onto the unfolding social world. I believed James' and Faheem's study of impact and educational change respectively underestimated the nature and depth of social reconfiguration. Realising early on that their initial understandings were tied to their normative identities, I began to lay a platform to engage - with sensitivity - with the knowledge dimensions of their proposals.

They both read widely throughout the proposal development process. They understood that a key feature of repertoire development required extensive reading of contextual and theoretical literature. The supervisory meetings were largely used to discuss their readings and written pieces in relation to their proposed study. The ways in which their reading was marshalled in the supervisory interaction took on slightly different nuances for each of the students. James was interested in understanding how he could develop a scholarly focus for his study of the adult learning programme. He thus read more narrowly around the need to develop an adequate conceptual approach. He became animated by the work of Touraine, introduced to him while doing a post graduate reading course at another university. Touraine's views began to resonate with some of the comments I made about the sociological complexity of a changing environment (see Touraine, 2000). James became persuaded that a study on impact required nuance and sophistication.

Faheem's attitude to reading was coupled with his search for an area of study. His voracious reading and conversation about it with me eventually led to him shifting away from a study on pedagogy and change. Noticing his appetite for reading, I gave him a considerable number of books and articles to read on issues of culture, pedagogy, identity and policy. I had intended for him to become familiar with the latest literature on change in South Africa, especially the application of new analytical approaches and methodological techniques. Faheem took to the key ideas of these readings with keenness and sophistication. He came to understand that studies on identity and culture focus on providing understanding about the basis upon which communities and individuals reflexively adapt to a changing environment. As a person deeply immersed in a particular cultural understanding, he found work on identity and culture fascinating. In his own words: "It opened up a new world of understanding." I prodded him to start making links between schooling, culture and identity, especially to consider the mediated ways in which

teachers adapted to change in difficult circumstances. Faheem gradually became fascinated by the idea of a study on teacher identity in the light of becoming persuaded that studying classroom pedagogy from an Action Research perspective with a strong view about the nature of change might not be appropriate.

Having taken time to establish a comfortable interactive relationship with each of the students, I began to engage much more firmly with them around identifying the parameters of their actual study. With James I began to discuss themes around the Sociology of Education, impressing on him the need to take analytical account of the relationship between educational change and social formation, that an adult education initiative had to be seen in broader context. I helped him to identify, by using of a spatial metaphor, how his analysis could be framed sociologically. James began to see his study as potentially being framed by macro policy discourse which impacted on the meso level of programme implementation. He took on board the idea that the ‘heart of the study’ would be at the micro level of individual identities.

It was, however, discussions about the application of Touraine’s framework that were incisive in getting James to decide what the focus of his study would be. Touraine (2000) uses the concept ‘demodernization’ to refer to the intractable material and symbolic conditions under which people in the late industrial age survive. Touraine theorises about the reflexive basis upon which humans retain their humanity. What appealed to James were Touraine’s views on how humans ‘become subjects’. The notion of ‘becoming’ pointed to the ways he could uncover how these adult learners retained their reflexivity in apparently intractable circumstances. He took to the idea of studying the lives of learners by applying the notion of ‘becoming a subject’, as a way of understanding how a two-year learning programme may have contributed to them becoming empowered individuals. James thus shifted fundamentally from a policy focus on the impact of the programme, whether the programme has been successful in providing the learners employable skills, to a focus on their more complex shifting identities within their marginal life worlds.

James’ shift to a study of identity was decisive. He dropped the quantitative methodological approach in favour of a qualitative ethnographic study of five adult participants. In answer to my prodding about the nature of the study, or the story that he wanted to tell, James proposed a study about the complex, negotiated and shifting worlds of five participants who had completed the adult learning programme. He became interested in understanding the formative worlds of these people before they entered the programme, how

they understood and took up the policy intentionality of the actual programme, and how their constructions of self impacted on the quality of their lives after the programme. He was no longer interested in the generalisability that a quantitative study might have provided, instead preferring to refer to his ethnographic study as having 'relatability' value, i.e. that other education intervention programmes could find some resonance in the story he was about to tell.

Faheem's proposal is located in the broad area of HIV/AIDS Education which is part of a university wide inter-faculty programme on studying the dynamics of building a better society. While he intended to do a study on HIV/AIDS and Education when selected for the programme, it was only during the course of the supervisory process that he decided on a topic. Given his newfound fascination with teacher identity, Faheem proceeded to write a proposal around the sexual identities of Muslim teachers. This topic combined his cultural interests in Muslim society with his role as a teacher. He was, however, very careful not to suggest that Muslims held different normative positions about sexuality. He took care in developing a study that struck a conceptual balance between the common sexual discourses of all teachers and their peculiar expression by one religious group. He held tenaciously to this conceptual approach and I played the role of helping him to set up the study conceptually and methodologically. Faheem proposed a sophisticated study that combines a specific conceptual framework that is capable of analysing heterogeneity and difference in teacher identity on the one hand, and a methodological approach that compares the sexual identities of teachers broadly with that of Muslim teachers specifically.

Both James and Faheem shifted their studies to an analysis of identity formation in a transforming context. They had thus moved decisively away from their initial approaches to doctoral work, which were facilitated by repertoire development dynamics inside the supervision process. My role as supervisor was incisive in facilitating a process that combined their intellectual development with relational and personal dynamics that made such a shift possible. Both students have come to understand that doctoral study requires the assumption of an academic identity that enabled them to pose scholarly questions, and to write a proposal that, as artefact, signals the readiness of the students to become full participants in the doctoral writing community of practice.

Conclusion

The situated practice of supervising doctoral proposals has to take into account the ways in which the relational dynamics between supervisor and students interact with the intellectual approach to their study. As I have shown above, successful supervision must be responsive specifically to how the student's personal dynamics have shaped her approach to PhD study. At stake for me personally was to be aware of the personal and intellectual basis on which I had to negotiate my authority as the supervisor. I have had to pay attention to establishing my role as supervisor, primarily on the basis of my intellectual expertise, which could not be assumed or taken for granted. What informed my authoritative interaction with my two students was my willingness to understand the specific ways in which they came to the proposal process, displaying awareness of their personal and intellectual requirements, and facilitating their immersion into the necessary academic and intellectual repertoires required for proposal writing. A constructive conversational climate was established on the basis of respect and trust. Our conversations were mutually affirming, comfortable and carefully directed to discussing the intellectual parameters of their study. I was able to be forthright when I thought it necessary to push them into definitive intellectual directions, possibly influencing them to tie their studies closer to my own interests. Overall, supervision of their doctoral proposal was successful in large part because of their ability to incorporate elements of a scholarly identity, which enabled them to ask appropriate academic questions. My role in the supervision process was to facilitate such a shift. In the process, I was able to develop my own personal and professional reflexivity about the complex ways of mediating my own authority as a PhD supervisor.

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