Behind supervisory doors: Taught Masters dissertation students as qualitative apprentices

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the supervision of Masters students undertaking qualitative research dissertations. Specifically, we present a model for theorising the nature of the supervisory relationship established with students who are relative newcomers to the qualitative research community. By drawing on reflections from our own practice and situating this within a broader context of the Community of Practice approach to learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we argue that the supervision of qualitative Masters dissertations can be seen as an apprenticeship into qualitative research, whereby students begin to take on the identity of a qualitative researcher. Adopting such a model requires that we re-conceptualise how supervisors work with their supervisees, how we prepare students for the requirements of the dissertation, and develop strategies to facilitate their transition from novice to expert. In this paper we explore how we might integrate theoretical and practical concerns in applying the apprentice model to Masters dissertation supervision, considering the advantages and limitations of such a model.

Context

As qualitative research in psychology has increased in prevalence and popularity, so too have the discussions as to how best to teach it. In 2003, the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network (HEAPN) published a report containing guidelines for the supervision of qualitative research at undergraduate level (Gough, Lawton, Madill & Stratton, 2003). This was furthered in 2009 when the HEAPN's 'Teaching Qualitative Research methods at Undergraduate Level' (TQRMUL) working group produced a set of teaching resources designed to support academic staff teaching qualitative methods to undergraduate students. There have, however, been more limited discussions about supervision at Masters level, particularly in the context of taught Masters programmes. While Zinkiewicz's (2004) report reviews postgraduate supervision in psychology, it is focussed towards research or clinical courses rather than taught Masters programmes, and it does not specifically mention qualitative research. Therefore there is a need to explore supervision at Masters level and understand ways in which qualitative research specifically is effectively supervised.

The Masters dissertation

On taught Masters programmes, the dissertation forms a key part of the course. For most students, this independent research project is the last element of their course and carries a weighty contribution (both in terms of their grade, and their sense of achievement) to their final degree classification. Compared to class-based teaching, where staff members teach student groups, the working relationship between dissertation students and their supervisors is closer and more individualised. This one-to-one supervisory relationship is therefore vital for the students' learning experience,

and yet relatively little is known about the processes by which Masters supervision occurs, or what makes a 'good' supervisor (Pilcher, 2011).

Students entering Masters programmes form a diverse group. At The University of Northampton, for instance, students undertaking our psychology Masters courses often come from a variety of professional and disciplinary backgrounds. This poses challenges for the dissertation process, as we are faced with students with varying levels of understanding and experience of both quantitative and qualitative methods. This is dealt with to a degree by ensuring that students have completed specialist research methods modules at level 7 before proceeding to the dissertation, but our experience is that most of the real work of research training is done in the dissertation itself. In common with most Masters level courses, on successful completion of the research methods element, students are encouraged to identify an area they want to study for their dissertation, and select an appropriate supervisor from the staff group based on their research interests and expertise.

Students often choose qualitative approaches for their dissertation based on the assumption (not always accurate) that it is 'easier' than quantitative work (Gough et al. 2003). Despite its growing popularity, qualitative research is still marginalised in many psychology departments in favour of quantitative approaches, and may often be regarded as the poorer counterpart. However, as students quickly realise when they begin to conduct formal qualitative studies, undertaking good quality qualitative research involves a unique set of specialized skills which, in the absence of earlier training in research, must be developed to a fairly high level within the supervisory context.

Our experience of supervising large numbers of Masters dissertation students undertaking qualitative studies suggests that carrying out and completing this work facilitates an identity shift on the part of the student linked to their epistemic position as knower. This relates both to their grasp of the intricacies of qualitative work and their sense of self-efficacy and mastery. Whilst we do not wish to draw direct comparisons with the supervision of quantitative projects, or imply specific differences in workload, style or expertise, we argue that supervising qualitative projects at postgraduate level involves a particular kind of supervisory relationship with students. For many students, their dissertation work involves a transitionary process, with the supervisor playing a key role in mediating and nurturing this development. Students do not merely acquire a set of skills and content knowledges: they become (or at least begin to become!) a qualitative researcher. This maturation process goes beyond the enhancement of strategies for handling qualitative data and involves, in many respects, an identity project (Callaghan, 2005) in which the students start to identify themselves as researchers through the development of a sense of competence and mastery. Situating this within a broader context of the Community of Practice (CoP) approach to learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we argue therefore that students engage in an 'apprenticeship' relationship with their supervisor, which serves to reiterate and refresh the individual student's position within the whole research context. In order to demonstrate this, we draw on the theoretical material of CoP and link it to observations and reflections we have made of our own supervisory practice. We also integrate feedback that students have provided to us both through informal discussions with their supervisors and from direct requests for open-ended comments about the supervision they experienced.

Supervision and Apprenticeship

Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP metaphor is now well established as an understanding of 'situated learning'. This approach suggests that knowledge is not acquired through a passive process, but is built up through participation in a community of practice. This involves interacting with a knowledge community, learning its cultural practices, and in this way, building a competent identity (such as 'butcher', 'midwife' etc.). The notion of apprenticeship is central to the CoP metaphor, referring to the way that the identity of the learner is constituted through their participation in the CoP.

The apprenticeship model has been usefully applied in the literature surrounding doctoral education (e.g. Hasrati, 2005; Lee, 2008; Parker, 2009; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2002), but there is minimal equivalent work around Masters supervision (e.g. Anderson, Day & McLaughlin, 2006). We acknowledge that doctoral education involves a particular level of working, a more extensive thesis and more prolonged engagement with a supervisory relationship (often involving a team rather than individual member of staff). We do, however, feel that many comparisons can be drawn to Masters-level dissertation supervision. For example, both doctoral and Masters research typically involve some form of independent empirical work, engagement with relevant literature, planning and conducting an investigation, demonstrating and honing of research and analytical skills, and production of a written thesis – all under the guidance of an academic member of staff. As such, the supervision of Masters dissertations draws on many similar processes and techniques to those employed at PhD level. Thus, we feel justified in adapting some of the theoretical models used to understand doctoral education, and applying them to the Masters context. In this respect, we feel the concept of apprenticeship within a CoP framework has much to offer.

However, there are also key distinctions between master and doctoral level research, which frequently hinge on the intentions and motivations of the student. Most taught psychology Masters students may be less intent on following an academic or research oriented career after graduation than PhD students and may instead want to develop professional skills, pursue further training as clinical or counselling psychologists, or work in applied settings such as mental health. These students may see involvement in research as just one aspect of their future careers, with relatively few seeing themselves as 'becoming researchers'. We need to consider what this means for the apprenticeship metaphor and explore what these contrasting expectations, competences and identities entail when we constitute effective supervisory practice.

To address these issues, we turn again to the CoP which, "describe social mechanisms by which novices are inducted into expert ways of knowing, thinking and reasoning in their professional or practice circle" (Zimitat, 2007, p.322). In other words, they are both oriented to the production of a set of skills, and to the production of the identity of 'expert' (Callaghan, 2005). They are characterised by engagement in common pursuits within communities which have shared values, practices, goals and experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within the field of qualitative research, there are common behavioural and linguistic practices which, we suggest, comprise a 'community of practice' of qualitative researchers (for example, reflexivity; the orientation towards meaning and experience; the concern with the ideographic rather than the nomothetic; the adoption of a more critical reading of text). Whilst there are undoubtedly sub-communities within this larger CoP as a result of varying epistemological and ontological traditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), we argue there are high-level broad practices which hold the community together. Masters students,

often with little real world experience of qualitative research, enter the dissertation process as relative newcomers to the community of qualitative researchers. As part of the supervision process, students learn about the established practices, languages and ways of thinking and behaving which characterise this community.

Participating in a community involves learning, and the process of participation creates a sense of belonging in that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A key concept within the CoP metaphor is the importance of relationality – that apprentices do not simply acquire knowledges, but that those knowledges are built up in relationship with other members of the community of practice. Thus, the formation of a working relationship with their supervisor, who is already a member of the community of qualitative researchers, facilitates students' membership of the CoP. Through relationships between newcomers (in this case, students) and experienced community members (in this case, academics who specialise in qualitative research), newcomers move towards 'full participation' in the community practices through a process known as 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). 'Apprentices' work alongside experienced community members, engaging in activities and practices that facilitate their growing involvement in the community. In dissertation supervision, students develop a research proposal, prepare materials, familiarise themselves with literature, explore methodologies and analytical techniques and review progress with a supervisor who offers them guidance and feedback. The supervisor 'scaffolds' students' learning by encouraging them to reflect on ideas, defend their decisions and act on feedback provided. This assumes of course that the supervisor is already an experienced qualitative researcher. Whilst this may be the ideal scenario, we recognise that for various reasons students may be allocated supervisors who gravitate more to other research methodologies. That being said, we

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believe that the CoP approach can still be applied through strategic supervisory techniques which encourage reflection and criticality.

Apprenticeship is more than 'learning by doing'. Instead, as noted above, it focuses on the relational context through which learning takes place, involving social participation (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Unwin, 2005). For newcomers, this mutual engagement entails and supports interaction, not only with experienced community members such as supervisors, but also with the wider qualitative research community of fellow dissertation students, PhD students, other staff members and practitioners. Thus, communities of practice are regarded as having a "continuum of expertise" (Zimmitat, 2007, p. 322) where the introduction of new members also impacts on and changes the community. Therefore, it is important to note that we regard the activities and interactions outlined above as part of collegiate discussions between supervisor and supervisee rather than as traditional teacher-student relationships where power dynamics may shape and potentially stifle the learning process. We have found through student feedback that Masters students particularly value the open discussions we have had about their research. The realisation that there is often no 'correct' way, and that established researchers do not always have an immediate answer to an issue or problem is, in itself, a very valuable learning experience for students. In their feedback, some students have mentioned particular instances of realisation and insight which occur during supervision encounters. Whilst not all students report such occurrences of shifts in thinking and understanding, we are often able to see evidence of a gradual process of 'mastery' developing through our supervisory relationships.

Apprenticing

Learning, according to the CoP approach, is characterised by the progression from novice to full participation (Fuller et al. 2005). For Masters dissertation students, this process is reflected in the increasingly independent nature of their research work and their growing confidence with the tools and techniques employed in qualitative research. As a result of the participation process, students become full members of the community and in turn contribute to it. It is during this shift in identity when students 'become' qualitative researchers. However, it has been suggested (Rømer, 2002; Wikely & Muschamp, 2004) that unlike PhD students, students in studying in other capacities (such as for a Masters degree) are unable to become full participants in the sense that Lave and Wegner set out: it is the teachers and supervisors who are the full participants here. Rather, a defining practice of supervision is the focus on the "notion of the critical" (Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004, p.131), both in the sense of having a critical stance on theory and developing a critical skill in the assessment of argument (and, we would add, data). So students are not a finished product – particularly as community membership is an evolving process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They are, nevertheless, equipped with the tools they need to 'practice' as researchers in the field; they can ask themselves probing questions to reflect on their actions, and they can pass on their knowledge and experience to others. Thus the community of practice is reinforced and further developed.

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning often occurs through processes other than direct instruction. When we apply this to a Masters context therefore, there is a need to recognise the distinction between the acquisition of qualitative tools and techniques which takes place in the classroom via the taught research methods modules, and the 'situated' learning that takes place between supervisor and supervisee. From our experience, it is the latter learning which has the more profound

impact on students' practice because they work through issues and challenges in their own research – and hence have opportunity to apply knowledge and skills in a real life situation. However, the most commonly articulated model of how qualitative research is learnt tends to be through the taught classroom-based approaches. That is not to say that the value of the supervisory relationship is ignored, but it is less likely to be discussed in terms of evaluating how and what students have learnt. Thus, we suggest that there is a need for increased prominence to be given to the apprenticeship relationship in a community where supervisors (and others) nurture students' understandings of qualitative research.

In the light of the above considerations, we now need to explore how we might work with dissertation students as apprentices and consider what modifications might enhance standard ways of teaching qualitative research methods – especially in the current climate of budget cuts and increasing workloads.

Managing the apprenticeship model

If qualitative dissertation supervision is to reflect and uphold the apprenticing model, it seems reasonable to assume that apprentices will require more supervisory contact to work on their projects in a CoP setting than is currently allocated. Indeed, supervision of all types of dissertations (whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods) often involves substantial contact time which is rarely acknowledged in workload models. Given the spending constraints in the HE context, it is unlikely that requests for any increase in time would be upheld.

However, it is our contention that this way of working will produce better researchers – and better research – and hence add value to the whole context. Moreover, if we explicitly adopt a CoP approach to our apprenticing, there are ways

in which we can maximize supervisory time by strengthening the communities in which the individual apprentices interact (as discussed in more detail below) – indeed, this is a requirement for CoPs as laid out by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Furthermore, the apprenticeship model may entail a reappraisal of the taught research methods modules that should equip a student with the skills necessary to fulfil dissertation expectations independently and effectively. From our student feedback, we know that at the outset of the dissertation process, students have expressed concern that their projects would be too much for them to handle, or that they would be unable to do qualitative analysis.

Moreover, the assumption that students complete research methods modules fully equipped to conduct qualitative research is notably optimistic. However, if students are expected to learn 'on the job' as apprentices, then taught modules can be restructured with more modest – and achievable – goals.

In effect, the taught modules would now aim to prepare students to become apprentices. There is less emphasis on students learning how to conduct various types of qualitative analysis, and more prominence given to an overview of the theoretical context of qualitative methods, and the range of possibilities afforded by the various approaches. The module now focuses on imparting critical and/or interpretative perspectives, rather than merely passing on an analytic skill set.

Such restructuring would support students more in setting out their broad research aims, and enhance their abilities to formulate an appropriate research question. Their critical awareness will enable them to make tentative epistemological and methodological choices with greater understanding and confidence. Finally, with

these initial ideas in mind, they will be able to approach an appropriate supervisor – to whom they will be apprenticed for the dissertation period.

A further implication in the management of the apprenticeship model relates to how a student's choice of supervisor may be based less on his/her capacity as an expert in a particular substantive field, but more on the supervisor's willingness and expertise to oversee projects with particular methodologies. Therefore, for the CoP approach to work as outlined, students would ideally need to be supervised by academics who are experienced with qualitative methods. In reality this may not always be possible, but in situations where the supervisor may not be an established qualitative researcher, the CoP framework could still apply - albeit more indirectly. For example, a quantitative academic supervising qualitative research is already part of a scholarly community, with considerable experience in areas such as critical reading of literature, academic writing and handling data. In terms of the analytical techniques specific to qualitative work, the supervisor and student could find themselves learning together, and drawing on expertise from others – reflected in the CoP model as the two-way learning process which occurs when newcomers enter a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In practice, as supervisors we need to engage students in several clear processes to constitute their identities as apprentice qualitative researchers. This enables us work with them as apprentices in a CoP context, rather than for them to be considered as 'merely' supervisees. Some practical suggestions follow which reflect time and workload constraints.

Building the community

If we see apprenticeship as occurring in a community of practice, we need to facilitate the creation of a community of peers as outlined earlier. Two approaches in particular are discussed here – group supervision and the creation of peer learning groups.

Group supervision.

By moving some individual supervisory time into small group supervision the nature of contact is modified and potentially enhanced. Group supervision would not replace individual supervision altogether, but could help especially when students face specific common tasks (e.g. the submission of ethics applications, or carrying out interviews or focus groups for data collection). In this way, supervisors do not need to repeat the same instructions to all apprentices, and the students are encouraged to work together as a peer group.

Additionally, in these more strongly guided sessions, students can learn what it is to be in an academic CoP, what is expected of them as apprentices and as peers to the other group members.

Peer learning groups.

The second suggested format for the community of practice does not involve the presence of the supervisor. Students would be required to meet in a peer learning group, to discuss and plan their work and to support each other during some of the more challenging phases of the research project. This mode of working is also a transferable skill, which helps to prepare them for the type of interaction encountered or expected in their professional lives, or indeed in a future position as an academic researcher.

To ensure the functioning of such groups, supervisors may set particular reading or research tasks, in order to maintain a critical weight of engagement and purpose; without these, groups may be in danger of losing momentum or interest. Moreover, staff may ask for (informal) reports on group tasks, or for explicit mentioning of group work in students' reflexive writing. Once this minimal effort is planned and put into place, the responsibility then falls to the students to ensure the success and impetus of their peer group. While supervisors can always help set mini-deadlines for data collection, literature reviewing and so on, with the support of a peer learning group students will be more likely to be able to maintain a steady pace of work. At the same time, they would benefit from the sense of community and shared experience.

Learning reflexivity

Reflexivity may seem a difficult concept for students to grasp, and their initial attempts to engage with it are sometimes at a rather superficial, descriptive level. However, a well-structured research process enables students to undertake reflexive analysis at different stages. We have found that asking probing questions during supervisory meetings can facilitate students' reflexive thinking and raise their awareness of how their own beliefs, experiences and expectations shape the research process. Examples include: asking about their choice of research topic and what they think they might find and why; reflecting on their relationship with participants and the dynamic created during data collection; and asking about the data collection process and how they felt about their own strengths and weaknesses in this respect.

The small group setting could also be an important arena for students to develop their reflexive muscles, as well as an important opportunity for supervisors to

put in place a formative structure. This might require students to maintain a research journal or other reflexive instrument, in which they consider how their ideas develop through discussion in both the supervised and unsupervised contexts. By encouraging students to start writing reflexively at the commencement of their projects, we aim to build the habit of reflexive writing that is so vital to the development of mature, critical analysis of qualitative data, where "the interpretative and theory-generating processes *happen*" (Gordon-Finlayson, 2010, p.164-165, original emphasis).

Analytic apprenticeship

It is in the passing on of the skills of analysis that qualitative research is most traditionally rooted in the apprenticeship model. Teaching analysis to an apprentice may involve a slightly more hands-on approach to supervision than is perhaps the norm, spending time sitting at their elbow as they actually tackle their own data. The role in this setting is more that of the collaborator than the pedagogue, and herein lies its strength.

We have found that undertaking some collaborative analysis with students can help in stimulating their thinking and understanding, moving beyond merely descriptive analysis to more interpretative work. Such collaboration can take the form of reviewing and discussing the rationale for students' initial analytical patterns (e.g. coding structures, thematic maps, discursive practices, grounded theory models). Through shared analysis, supervisors can also facilitate discussion about, for example, the validity of qualitative work, the use of researcher triangulation and reflexivity. The role here is of the mentor, or a 'critical friend', who can demonstrate a critical stance, and who is able to facilitate the development of critical skill.

We hope that by implementing some or all of these ideas, we will be able to ensure that our students develop the core skills and capabilities of a qualitative researcher over the course of their Masters dissertation. We expect them to mature into: *analytic researchers*, able to move beyond mere description of data and take a critical stance; *reflexive researchers*, able to account for their personal stake in the research and for their subjective involvement in the analytic process; and *professional researchers*, with experience of both independent and group research processes, able to become full participants in their next CoP, be that further academic work or a professional setting.

Conclusion

In this paper we have considered an apprenticeship model for supervisory relationships in the context of Masters level students undertaking qualitative dissertations. We have explored how this model might shift our understanding of preparation for dissertation research and of supervisory practice, based on sound principles as well as practical concerns. We have also contrasted the conventional teaching processes (through provision of specialist modules, classroom learning and engaging with the literature), with a more participatory and action oriented understanding of qualitative research supervision. We have argued that an apprenticeship model provides a useful framework within which to build supervisory relationships.

The interests of students from varying backgrounds with different levels of expertise and experience are paramount in such considerations. While we recognise that an apprenticeship model places new responsibilities on students and supervisors, the outcome is most likely to be higher quality research from more confident

researchers. Given the prevailing financial and academic constraints facing Higher Education, the model should provide an efficient framework, acknowledged by students and supervisors alike.

Our suggestion, based on the notion of the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991), extends the conventional supervisor-supervisee interactions, and aims for inclusion of others in the qualitative research process (e.g. peer group members engaged in similar research). The mutuality and exchange learning that can be nurtured in a CoP are central to the apprenticeship model. Moreover, the reflexivity that such experiences engender would provide learning opportunities for all participants. Of course, such a model might equally be applied to the supervision of quantitative or mixed methods dissertations if consideration is given to the particular behaviours and practices of the community in which students are becoming part of through the research process.

Academic staff face numerous constraints at various levels, so the practical approaches to management of the apprenticeship model suggested in this paper would mean that factors such as allocated time, assessment principles, support processes and the format of supervisory meetings would better serve to develop critical and analytical skills, confidence and practical expertise among students. This academic and personal growth would reflect the new status of the student as a member of the CoP, and reiterate the shift in identity that the student has undergone during the apprenticeship process. For supervisors, the model would enable them to maximize interaction with the students and initiate contacts with other community members. Overall, we argue that the apprenticeship model would lead to stronger researchers and a stronger qualitative research ethos.

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