

Peer to peer support: the disappearing work in the doctoral student experience

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Abstract (100- 150 words)

Introduction

Will some of the benefits of doctoral research become neglected in the rush to measure university outputs? The recent introduction of a Research Quality Framework in Australia has served to further focus attention on appropriate mechanisms for assessing and comparing research quality both within and between institutions of higher education. The new framework appears likely to increase the imperative and pressure on the timely completion of postgraduate research degrees and on processes to monitor student progress.

This paper draws on the experiences of a small group of doctoral students to illuminate some of the hidden costs and benefits that might arise as administrative processes to monitor 'progress' and 'quality' become increasingly institutionalised. Reflecting on our experiences as doctoral students, we consider the apparent contradictions between 'objective' indicators such as completion rates and annual progress reports and our largely positive experiences of post graduate study. We attribute part of this contradiction to the informal, relational work of our study group and the way in which this has assisted us to remain engaged and enthusiastic with learning and with progress along the doctoral journey. We identify the potential for the focus on regulatory frameworks within higher education to lead to the 'disappearing' of certain behaviours that are beneficial to successful postgraduate research.

In this paper we aim to address three main issues. Firstly, we reflect on the importance of our study group as a significant and effective contributor to our post graduate experience. We extend this point by relating our experiences by considering the advantage to the university and to us as life-long learners. Secondly, we identify some specific concepts which contrast behaviours we have found beneficial and the 'official' languages of the organisations in which these behaviours occur. The specific concept of 'disappearing behaviours' appears particularly useful to this part of the discussion and we explain its relevance to the context of our postgraduate research work. Our analysis includes some specific examples of the work that can be undertaken by study groups and the experiences of our study group's members. The third aim of the paper is to discuss strategies for the more systematic inclusion of behaviours, such as the formation of study groups, within the postgraduate experience.

Background and approach

An impetus for this paper was the recent work of McAlpine and Norton (2006) about issues of isolation and invisibility in post graduate studies. This general picture contrasted with our own experiences of a challenging but enriching journey, accompanied by a group of supportive and interested peers. The specific question was therefore: why the contradiction between our experiences and the apparently pessimistic versions of postgraduate outcomes?

When investigating this apparent paradox we became aware that within the current context of higher education policy our experience is just one example of a number of contradictions in post graduate education. Previous studies that particularly resonate with our experiences include discussions about increasingly instrumental approaches to knowledge acquisition (Barnacle 2005), the rationalisation of doctoral education (Kendall 2002) and the ubiquity of risk

management approaches to shaping doctoral experiences (McWilliam, Singh and Taylor 2002). While no one in our group has a specialist background in education policy, we suspect that our experience may contribute an additional insight into understanding some of the implications of “the battle between administrators and academics ... which is inexorably going the way of policy makers” (Kendall 2002, p. 131).

We are particularly interested in the point made by Golde (in McAlpine and Norton, 2006) that student voices are the least heard and that their ‘silence’ becomes even louder at the doctoral level. This paper is one contribution to addressing this concern. In our discussion we articulate our specific concerns about the imbalance between our own behaviours as post graduate students and those that are identified as relevant within our institutional context. Our starting point, therefore, is to contrast institutional definitions of post graduate success with our own experiences. We then turn to the existing literature that provides some insights into the reasons why these concerns exist.

Defining postgraduate success – an institutional standpoint

From an institutional perspective, university websites contain a wealth of information relevant to the requirements and processes of postgraduate research. Using our own university as a case in point, the web page (www.curtin.edu.au), provides considerable information relevant to admission, contacts, faculties and divisions, entry requirements, a wide array of forms, policies and guidelines, courses encouraging the professional development of students and supervisors and other support services. Among these are sessions relevant to ‘learning support’ consisting of seminars on important topics such as finding a research question, developing a scholarly voice, organising a literature review and organising and managing a large document. This appears to be consistent with the type of information most institutions make available (McAlpine and Norton, 2006).

Within this context, it is difficult to identify key policies or documents which succinctly define postgraduate activities that formally ‘count’ as progress towards the requirements of higher degree research. However, from a postgraduate student’s perspective, one of the most visible institutional approaches to defining postgraduate success and progress is that of the annual progress report. Annual progress reports have the advantage of identifying the various components of postgraduate activity that are formally designated as ‘relevant’ to achieving progress.

At our institution Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students are required to address the following areas:

- scholarship receipts,
- achievement of candidacy,
- securing of ethics approval,
- contact and relationship with supervisor,
- access to resources,
- difficulties experienced,
- anticipated thesis completion date and
- progress against agreed timeline.

We are not suggesting that these questions are in any way extraordinary or unhelpful. Indeed, they appear to be similar to reporting requirements of other Australian universities. There is little doubt in our minds that the questions are directly relevant to the task of ensuring that students are receiving adequate university support and are making satisfactory progress. It should be noted

that we view the content of the university's web site in a similar manner. It contains wide-ranging information that is both helpful and essential to meeting the requirements of postgraduate research.

Experiencing postgraduate success - the study group

We are proposing that what missing from annual progress reports, is recognition of the important role that might be played by fellow students in the HDR process. This is particularly important in the development of a supportive culture within a division or school of the university. Reflecting on our postgraduate experiences we have recognised that collaborative peer support has been one of the most valuable enablers to our progress. It has encouraged and supported a mutual interest in extending our areas of learning, knowledge and participation in the academic world. It is this part of our post graduate experience, a part not commonly recognised within formal university discourse, that we focus our discussion on.

The backgrounds, preparation, expectations, motivations and responsibilities of Australia's postgraduate students are increasingly varied (Neumann 2002). It is therefore relevant to consider some characteristics of the people who comprise our study group. Our study group comprises six people, two are current doctoral students, one currently is under examination and three have been awarded their doctorates within the last eighteen months. The two group members who have completed their studies did so on a full time basis. The other four are currently undertaking a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program which consists of both course work, now completed, and a research thesis, in progress. The DBA students are all part-time students in full-time employment. Our group comprises five women and one man, all in the 'mid range' of our life course: 'our' children are in the final stages of secondary education or in tertiary studies.

The group meets informally for a breakfast meeting once a month, as well as through email exchange and phone calls to discuss various aspects of mutual interest pertaining to doctoral research. The initial group was formed in 2001 with the current membership stabilising around three years ago. Interestingly, half the group work as academics and the other half in the government and private sector, all in senior positions. One of the academics is on staff at the university. This was beneficial for networking and understanding university processes both formal and informal.

Group members have different research topics and mostly different supervisors, however cohesion has been found because the studies undertaken all used a qualitative methodological approach which has provided considerable grounding for productive discussion. In this respect members contend that the group provides support and a safe haven to test ideas and thinking. Other functions the study group fulfils are to encourage members to keep going, to reinforce that the studies are worthwhile and that completion is an attainable goal.

Conceptualising the experience

Our study group has questioned whether it matters that we have experienced behaviours that we found to be beneficial but which remain outside the formal processes of the university. Indeed within our own department, the degree of support we received from our supervisors was mixed. There was concern from at least one supervisor that membership of the study group could prove to distract the students from the main game of completing their thesis. An option would be to put our experience down to 'good luck' and count ourselves as fortunate to have had a productive, enjoyable post graduate experience. We believe, however, that a more thoughtful and reflective

analysis of our experience was required. Each of the study group members had, in the course of their research, encountered different languages and explanations for the apparent ‘invisibility’ of specific social behaviours in certain contexts. This meant that our experience, which we saw as integral to the success of our doctoral journey was likely to be hidden from the university. We therefore wanted to understand more clearly the barriers that might prevent universities from recognising the hidden and making visible the invisible.

One group member, for example, drew parallels between the study group’s experiences and the concept of ‘strategic silences’ in economics. Conventional economic theory regards organisations as rational operators in which decisions in any situation can be made by the application of the rules of logic (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). Nevertheless, within economics there is a growing body of literature that demonstrates how the caring aspect of unpaid work is an important but poorly recognised component of the work done in the household sector of the economy. Bakker (1994) has used the term strategic silence to describe the lack of policy significance given to this important component of our social infrastructure.

An equally valid concept to examine the experience of the study group is that of ‘communities of practice’. This concept, originally discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991), defines communities of practice as ‘a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing over time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’ (p 98). Because the concept focuses on the social interactive dimensions of situated learning (Roberts, 2006; Handley et al 2006), it has great relevance to study groups. More specifically, Wenger (1998) saw communities of practice as important places of negotiation, meaning, learning and identity. Equally, he asserts that the important focus with communities of practice is neither the individual nor the institution, but rather the informal community of practice pursuing shared enterprises over time. This certainly applies to the study group in question.

In more recent times, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) argue that organisations, in our case, universities, need to become more proactive and systematic about developing communities of practice into their strategy. This strategy would be advocated by this study group, especially given that its success could be measured by traditional indicators such as doctoral completions.

A third relevant concept, suggested by some other group members was that of ‘disappearing’ behaviours, a term developed in managerial literature by Fletcher (1999). Fletcher suggests that it is interesting to reflect on the activities that go unnoticed or disappears when groups of people interact. Observing group dynamics during meetings the types of contributions that are valued reveal some underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted norms about the members. There is evidence to suggest that in such settings it is often the relational activities that disappear (Fletcher 1999). These activities include behaviours such as listening, allowing others to take the lead, acknowledging contributions from other members of the group and anticipating needs that make the achievement of tangible group goals easier.

The group’s discussion of ‘strategic silence’, communities of practices and ‘disappearing behaviours’ suggested to members that their experience was not a ‘one off’. The existence of literature that appears to address similar experiences, albeit in different contexts, indicated that this may be a pattern of experiences that is repeated across different institutional contexts. We therefore decided to examine the concept of ‘disappearing behaviours’ in further detail to gain more insight into our experience.

Reasons for the disappearance of certain behaviours

Stacey *et al.* (2000) describes how the dominant voice in organisation and management theory speaks in the language of design, regularity and control. Expectations within organisations are heightened by language which focuses on tangible or measurable results. It is language which reflects deep assumptions as it embodies the practical consciousness within organisations (Lewin & Regine, 2000). By giving behaviours a label and a context, practices are established which often go unchallenged. Language makes selective elements visible and others invisible. As Lewin and Regine (2000) describe, the dynamic power of language shapes reality and reality shapes language.

In examining the concepts of ‘disappearing behaviours’, the organisational behaviour literature provides guidance. It is well accepted that in organisations there are many competing demands (Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990; Stacey, 1996). Organisations are goal directed entities with a focus on the achievement of tangible measurable results. At the same time however, organisations are comprised of individuals with their own set of goals. At an organisational level, rewards are provided for the attainment of goals in the form of affirmation, resources and privileges. Those in powerful positions, who dispense rewards, are likely to reward tangible measurable results. This can have the unintended effect of making certain things such as relational activities become relatively unimportant in the institutional structure and contribute to their eventual disappearance.

People have mental models which they use as a lens to process and make sense of what they observe (Senge, 1992). These mental models can be simple generalisations or complex theories and often exist below the level of awareness. People’s personal lens filters information, and from this experience, perceptions about the environment are formed. This leads to the creation of complex mental models that are further informed by the individual’s expectations. Everyone either consciously or unconsciously operates through their own behavioural scripts formed from the implicit and explicit assumptions behind the mental models (Stacey, 1996; Weick, 2001). The behaviour that becomes invisible is determined by these models.

It has been stated that power in organisations belongs to those who define the circumstances and agenda for discussion (Sjöstrand *et al.* 2001). Consequently, the mental models of people in organisations in positions of power will have a significant effect on the behaviours that are considered important and accorded recognition and status.

Conversely, those who operate from a relational practice perspective and who attach importance to caring relational behaviours see the world through a different lens. Fletcher (1999) discusses how these relational behaviours are not seen as competencies but as ‘helpful’ or ‘nice’ and considers how people become disheartened because their efforts aren’t respected or rewarded. It is a reasonable assumption that the reasons for this disappearing behaviour are complex and multidimensional. We have summarised these in Figure 1.

Place Figure 1 here

If our assumptions about disappearing behaviours are correct, then a more focused examination of the activities and behaviours of our study group will progress a discussion which is of benefit to the post graduate experience of doctoral students. Fletcher (1995:449) describes four types of relational activities or behaviours. These will be described with reference to the study group’s experience. The first, *shouldering*, refers to taking on activities other than those required by the

job and using informal channels to create relational bridges. The formation of our study group was clearly a shouldering behaviour as the activity was not identified as important or even formally encouraged by our institution. Ongoing examples of shouldering within the group were also apparent. For example, one of the group members assumes responsibility for informally facilitating practical issues around room bookings and access, and encouraging people to share ideas during sessions, topics for discussion, keeping conversations focused and sending reminders about meetings. Other members of the group shoulder responsibility for facilitating attendance and a presentation by the group at conferences.

The second type of behaviour described by Fletcher (1995) is *mutual empowering* which occurs when the information is modified to the needs of the learner, potential rifts and explosive situations are dealt with before they develop and barriers are eliminated by anticipating another's needs. There were many examples of mutually empowering behaviour within the study group with all members keen to demonstrate genuine care for others and proactively avoiding conflict. For example members take time to explain software applications or to pass on relevant information, literature and exchange information gained from workshop or conference attendance. At other times there are commitments required for specific tasks such as editing of a completed thesis draft for final submission. In these circumstances it has proven beneficial to receive advice and assistance from a peer who has experienced similar challenges. Group members are therefore empowered to share experiences with their supervisors and discuss their differing expectations and experiences.

Group members were also empowered by the simple knowledge that others are pursuing a similar endeavour that has a substantial 'solo' component. As one member of the group commented:

I benefited from others when I first started and try to pass on my experiences to help others. Many of these seem trivial and hardly noteworthy of mentioning to other students but many save time and therefore contribute to timely completion of research.

Another stated:

Being part of this group I feel valued. It provides a place to test my ideas to see if they have academic rigour and to explore sources where articles and resources may be accessed.

A third type of behaviour results in realising one's own goals and may include capacities such as an ability to understand emotional situations and then have others respond appropriately to requests for help, Fletcher (1995) terms this as *achieving*. Similarly, there are many examples of achieving behaviour. For example, our study group makes possible the frank discussion of specific methods, authors or articles which, due to the specialised work being undertaken, it is often not possible to discuss with friends or family. Much of the discussion may not warrant specific appointments with supervisors who already have heavy workloads and supervision commitments. Group peers can also provide an active and critical discussion of issues of interest to their members in an environment where it is okay to make mistakes and where conflict or disagreement has few long term sanctions or implications.

This aspect of group support can, within the context of an 'achieving' behaviour, provide tangible outcomes. For example, discussion among peers can provide increasing confidence to present ideas in larger forums that might be perceived as more intimidating, such as conferences and workshops where more experienced and esteemed researchers are present. Each of our group's members has successfully 'made the leap' from our informal discussions to more formal presentations of their own and our joint work. In addition our group has worked together in

writing of papers and presenting as colleagues at formal postgraduate research forums. The completion of this paper is another example of ‘achieving’.

The fourth type of relational behaviour described by Fletcher (1995) is *creating team* in which an environment of trust, cooperation and collective achievement occurs. This involves affirmation, encouraging gestures and responding empathetically to others’ feelings to create the supportive background conditions. Creating team is a behaviour that has been truly evident in our study group. Interestingly, the ‘team’ established unwritten rules about group behaviour including sharing of responsibilities, notification of non attendances and agreements around confidentiality. The concept of ‘Chatham House rules’ was quickly established where team members could express their frustrations and concerns about their doctoral studies knowing that disclosure to others outside the group would not occur.

The celebration of success was also a behaviour quickly established by our group. The practice of organising celebratory dinners, with partners who often feel isolated and bewildered from the doctoral studies of their partners, has become routine to acknowledge submission of thesis, completions, successful submissions and receiving of awards.

The relevance of Fletcher’s (1995) analysis to our research question lies in its application to organisations, where it is commonly accepted that power rests not with individuals but in systems of shared meaning (Putnam, 1983; Whiteley, 1995; Choo 2001). The organisation or group is more than a collection of individuals; it becomes strong as a result of the emergent behaviour in which relational behaviours act as social glue (Fletcher, 1999). Therefore, it would follow that the more social glue in the form of relational behaviours, the stronger the group. The behaviours described by Fletcher (1995), however, could result with the individual making compromises for the sake of the group. Jackson (1999) and Jantsch (1980) describe how tensions exist between the macro dynamics of the group and the micro needs of the individual.

Whiteley (1995) discusses the core value model which illustrates that there are many values and behaviours which are invisible to the group. The core knowledge of the group is only a small part of the total knowledge of all the individuals. As can be seen in the Core Knowledge Model, Figure 2, the more individuals contribute to the core knowledge the greater will be the shared part of the relationship. This shared knowledge has provided deeper and more meaningful connections with the university than may be achieved at an individual level.

Place Figure 2 here

Before making recommendations about the relevance of study groups in a university context, it should be pointed out that literatures and theories on social learning, such as communities of practice, peer learning and situated learning offer much support for many of the points made in this paper.

Similarities exist between the role of the study group and the role of peer coaching. The purpose of both activities is to share ideas and to promote learning. Ladyshevsky (2003) maintains that learning from peers is a natural form of social learning in that it provides a safe learning environment. He maintains that the informal communication that takes place between peers is less threatening than advice from many other official sources. This was certainly the case for members of our study group. Furthermore, peers are more likely to use language and conceptual frameworks appropriate for all the group members.

Ladyshevsky (2003) describes learning that results from processes as forming the hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum occurs outside of the formal setting and is a very important adjunct to learning. Much of the success of this hidden curriculum can be attributed to the caring shown through the relational behaviours which occur in the group setting as already described. The key themes emphasised by Ladyshevsky are examined in detail by Boud and Lee (2005). They argue that peer learning, initiated by students, can provide pedagogical techniques for supervisory staff and provide a counter balance to educational approaches that are increasingly individualised.

We now refer to the third stated aim of this paper, which is to discuss strategies for the more systematic inclusion of behaviours, such as the formation of study groups, within the postgraduate experience. Through this paper, the significant benefits of an informal study group have been demonstrated. It is anticipated that our study group will continue to exist beyond the completion of all members. In our current situation, we are re-focusing our efforts, not only on supporting all members through to completion, but also to pursuing further writings and publications.

The study group has been effective from each member's perspective because of the relational behaviours practiced within the group. It kept us connected with the doctoral process when barriers, real and perceived were encountered. This has related and continued benefits for the university. We see these benefits as fourfold: continued engagement with post graduate studies ultimately leading to completion; graduates who are enthusiastic about their post graduate experience; autonomous problem solving by students within the group; and the production of collaborative conference presentations and publications that contribute to the university's research output.

Conclusion

This paper outlines our experiences and demonstrates Fletcher's (1999) central argument that relational behaviours that serve to provide connections between colleagues are either not recognised, rewarded or may even be devalued. However, these relational behaviours form a very valuable part of the process of achieving group goals. Terms used to describe the phenomenon are the 'disappearing dynamic' (Fletcher, 1999), communities of practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or 'strategic silence' (Bakker, 1994). It is argued that while relational behaviours underpin tangible results, they become invisible when organisational leaders use the mental models and language of measurement and control. As argued by Sjöstrand *et al.* (2001) when this occurs, 'taken-for-granted' remain the status quo and new realities emerged.

Part of the 'hidden learning' that occurs outside of the normal curriculum in any organisation results from the relational, supportive behaviours that occur within study groups. Study groups are a form of peer to peer learning in that they provide a safe haven for these relational behaviours or the 'caring' aspects to be practiced. The trust that builds up determines how much shouldering, mutual empowering, achieving and creating teams can occur. The benefits of relational behaviours are not directly measurable and may not have immediate effects in the short term. We argue however, that they can produce long term benefits and ultimately contribute to the measurable outcomes sought by universities, such as completion rates. It is therefore in the interests of higher degree institutions to ensure that relational behaviours are encouraged and supported, rather than assumed and neglected.

In practical terms, there may be a number of ways in which higher education institutions can prevent the valuable outcomes of relational behaviours from disappearing. In the university context this might not be particularly difficult or expensive. The establishment of study groups

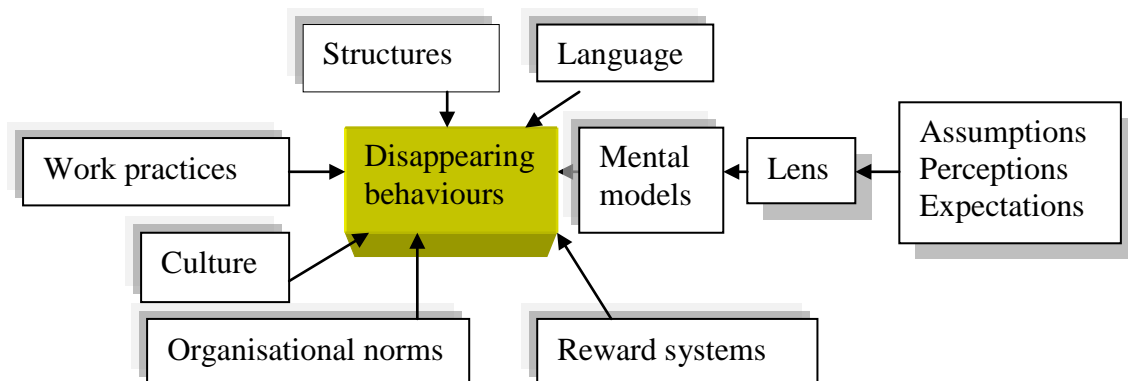
might require little more than putting students in contact with others who have a similar subject for research or a similar research methodology and showing students the correct processes for booking a meeting room or other appropriate space. At the early stages of formation, there may be benefits in having an academic staff member (not necessarily a thesis supervisor) provide a degree of mentoring and direction. While this was not the case in our particular study group, we can see that this might be a useful strategy in some cases. Recognition of active study group participation within institutional processes such as progress reporting and academic workload may also provide encouragement of such behaviours.

From a student's perspective, the inputs are somewhat greater. A successful study group requires commitment from members to contribute time, effort, patience and meaningful support to other group members. However, we would argue that this is a use of resources that has benefits which extend beyond thesis completion. In our case, it seems that as the completion process draws near, the study group will evolve with new roles that include publishing their Doctoral work.

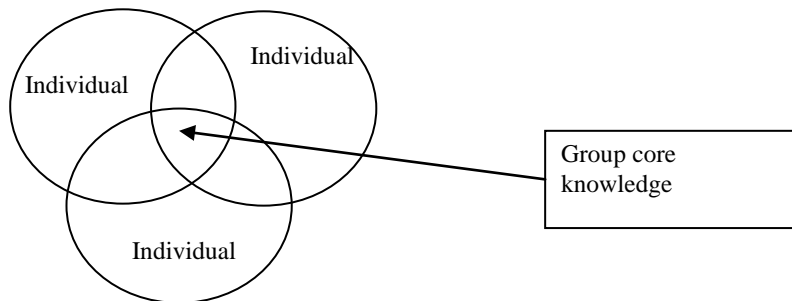
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Antecedents of the Disappearing Dynamic: Figure 1



Core Knowledge Model, Adapted from The Core Values Model (Whitely 1995): Figure 2.