

Chapter 25

Communities of Practice for Distance Research Students in Australia: Why Do We Need Them and How Might We Create Them?

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ABSTRACT

The literature on best practice Higher Degree Research (HDR) supervision indicates that incorporation of candidates into communities of practice is an essential part of the process. This chapter reviews the literature and draws on the author's experiences as a part-time HDR student and as someone whose employment has involved providing support for HDR students, highlighting the problems and possibilities involved in incorporating distance students into communities of practice, and proposing a way forward for the Australian context which would provide an action research possibility.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, the postgraduate population in most Australian (and overseas) universities has become far more diverse in age, experience, educational background, location, career plans and reasons for enrolment, as well as

becoming significantly more numerous (Engebretson et al., 2008; Harman, 2002; McWilliam, Singh, & Taylor, 2002; Willems, 2005). The demand for flexible options, including part-time and distance candidature has increased accordingly and has created a need for changes in research supervision practices, to which some are responding. This

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chapter examines the literature on best practice supervision for higher degree research (HDR) and makes suggestions about future directions for postgraduate supervision in the Australian distance education context, drawing on the author's personal and professional experiences in the higher education sector.

BEST PRACTICE SUPERVISION AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Smyth and Maxwell (2008, pp. 170-173) identify three equally important foci for successful supervision of HDR students:

- Learning and therefore teaching;
- The student's development towards professional autonomy;
- The timely production of a research project or outcome.

Two further definitions echo these criteria. First, Reidy and Green conceptualize supervision as a process of "collaborative knowledge management" (2005, p. 49) involving the movement of the relationship from coach and novice, through mentor and mentee to friendly professional colleagues and the provision of access to a research culture. Second, Engebretson et al., (2008) indicate that, as well as producing a tangible, assessable outcome—the thesis or dissertation—best practice supervision inculcates into students the research methodology of their chosen field so that they can conduct research independently and introduces them to the communities of practice which will enable them to function successfully as a researcher or academic. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2006), so it seems that involving HDR students in appropriate communities of practices is one strategy for achieving the first and second if not the third of Smyth and Maxwell's (2008) foci.

JOINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: TRADITIONAL METHODS

Schools and departments typically induct on-campus students into their disciplinary community of practice by including them in: seminar programs, both as audience and as presenters; social events; email lists; and newsletter distribution lists (James & Baldwin, 1999). They become involved in wider professional networks through attending and presenting at national and international conferences and by publishing their work in professional journals.

Involvement in school/departmental activities also ushers students into the HDR student community of practice and they can often join wider HDR networks through their university's postgraduate students' association. Formally structured peer discussion and seminar groups can be important in building intellectual capacity amongst HDR students (O'Hanlon, 2004), but on-campus students also have the opportunity to obtain informal peer support, which provides other benefits.

Students most want help with direct research-related pedagogy such as designing and conducting research and the construction and writing of a thesis (Engebretson et al., 2008) so it is of concern that Manathunga's work (2005) found that many research students were concerned that asking their supervisors for help with literature reviews, writing and conducting research result in their being perceived to be incompetent.. Shared offices and tea rooms make it possible to ask students who are further advanced in their candidature those questions which may appear too stupid to ask busy supervisors. Students also discover that other students are experiencing similar frustrations and difficulties and may be encouraged to approach supervisors for necessary help.

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