

'Hospitality at a distance': supervisory practices and student experiences of supervision in online Masters dissertations

Philippa Sheail and Jen Ross

Centre for Research in Digital Education, The Moray House School of Education, The University of Edinburgh, p.sheail@ed.ac.uk, jen.ross@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is informed by a one-year research project which looked at supervisory practices and student experiences in the context of fully online Masters programmes. In these programmes, students are often based in different country locations to their dissertation supervisors, and some may never visit the university campus. The research project examined supervisory practices and processes across four online programmes in the social sciences and medical education, including workshops with supervisors, and explored the Masters dissertation experiences of eighteen graduates who had studied on one of the four selected postgraduate programmes taught fully online from the University of Edinburgh.

In this paper, we focus on the recurrent theme of 'connection and disconnection' which emerged from our analysis of interviews with recent dissertation students. This theme is considered in relation to student accounts of positive experiences of support and continuity in supervisory relationships, juxtaposed with reports of disconnection and isolation during the dissertation process; experiences which were often accepted by graduates as an inevitable part of working on an independent research project.

Building on Ruitenberg's (2011) work on 'an ethic of hospitality' (situated by Ruitenberg as an alternative to the 'ethics of autonomy, virtue and care' (p.28) in education), we explore these experiences within the theoretical framework of 'hospitality at a distance'. We propose that 'hospitality at a distance' is a useful framework in the context of distance education supervision, where home and host, the 'at-home', might be contested, and, we suggest in this paper, where we might need to rethink what it is to, 'leave space for those students and those ideas that may arrive' (Ruitenberg 2011 p.33) from beyond the campus. We also suggest that achieving 'success' in dissertations at a distance may involve accepting the instability of relations between student and supervisor, that are marked not only by power dynamics, expectations, and performances of student and teacher identities (as all supervisory relationships are), but also by the varied and shifting conceptions of home, welcome, and 'belonging' that accompany the distanced encounter.

Keywords

Postgraduate supervision, distance education, digital education, masters dissertations, hospitality.

Background

The practices and processes associated with supervising online distance students during independent study have not been examined in the literature to date in relation to Masters-level education. This paper draws on data from a one-year research project exploring the idea of 'success' in dissertations at a distance, and proposes that there may be something distinctive about the experiences of students who undertake independent research as online distance learners. Here we suggest that a key element of this distinctiveness, as it emerged from interviews with graduates from four online distance masters programmes, is the way that ideas of 'connection' and 'disconnection' are foregrounded. We offer 'hospitality at a distance' as a conceptual hook for understanding how supervisors might think about their practice in relation to online students, taking connection and disconnection into account.

The research project focused on an engagement with dissertation processes and supervisory practices in the context of four online distance postgraduate programmes taught fully online from the University of Edinburgh. Research methods included interviews with graduates, focus groups with dissertation supervisors, and a review of programme- and course-level information for students and supervisors. This paper draws primarily on data from interviews with 18 graduates from programmes in four different subject areas: two in Medicine, one in Law, and one in Education. Interviewees had either completed, or withdrawn from, the dissertation process with one of the selected online distance programmes. Semi-structured interviews took place with participants via Skype or email, with one student being interviewed on campus. Interview audio was recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis of all interview data was undertaken. All participants had completed their studies with the University at the time of interview and transcripts were anonymised prior to analysis. Pseudonyms are used in this paper.

In the following sections, we explore the recurrent theme of 'connection and disconnection' that we identified in our analysis, and propose a way of understanding these, and rethinking supervisory practice in distance education, through the notion of 'hospitality at a distance'.

An 'ethic of hospitality' at a distance

In Ruitenberg's (2011) paper, 'The empty chair: education in an ethic of hospitality', she draws on Derrida's work on hospitality (see for example, Derrida 2000), to explore an ethic in which,

'the position of host, the subject of hospitality, is radically decentred. The ethic of hospitality is all about the guest, about giving place to a guest' (Ruitenberg 2011 p.32).

In Ruitenberg's interpretation, the guest may confront the host with their 'absolute otherness', an otherness which must be responded to by the host as a condition of hospitality. There is no expectation of reciprocity, but rather an acceptance that the 'arrival of the guest may change the space into which he or she is received' (ibid).

Ruitenberg's emphasis on the requirement of the teacher to reconsider the 'sense of being at-home' is, we propose, particularly useful to rethinking aspects of the role of the online distance educator, and to developing and working with the notion of 'hospitality at a distance':

The "at-home" of education is also the figure of the teacher. An ethic of hospitality impels the host to examine her or his own sense of being at-home. Aside from young children's common misconception that the teacher must surely live in the school, teachers can become quite "at home" in the school, the curriculum, and their position. The ethic of hospitality reminds them that the spaces of education are not their spaces, spaces they own or should consider under their control, but rather spaces into which they have been received and whose purpose is to give place to students. (p.34)

In this paper, we propose that there is a particular opportunity, which we should perhaps consider an imperative, to allow the connections of online distance education to destabilise the notion of institution-as-home. Whilst supervision in an institutional context must adhere to regulatory standards and frameworks which will to some extent contain the process and practice of supervision, there is a sense in which the context is also shifted in distance supervision, where the location of the supervisory relationship is somewhere other than the office of the supervisor, and where 'hosting' can be viewed as a shared responsibility, even when the supervisor retains the institutional authority in the supervisory relationship.

Connections and disconnections in the dissertation experience

Stories of connection and disconnection were recurrent in our interviews with graduates. We observed the importance some graduates placed on strong connections with their supervisors, but also some contrasting experiences of limitation, isolation and uncertainty about the possibilities of contact with and guidance from supervisors. In this section we explore this theme of 'connection and disconnection' as it emerged from our interview data.

For June, the most significant connection in the context of the dissertation, was the connection with her supervisor: "If I haven't got a connection with the academic, then I haven't got a connection at all. Just because I'm signed into their [the University's] portal, that doesn't mean anything at all" (June). June was a member of staff at another academic institution, who combined working at her 'home' institution with studying online at Edinburgh, and particularly drew attention to her experience of being associated with more than one university. This meant, for example, that she had access to two different online library collections. Being 'signed in' was not enough to make her feel connected to the University.

June gave an example of the personal level of the relationship with her supervisor, describing how a disclosure from her supervisor evoked a feeling of belonging:

During [supervisor name] supervising me I think she had a problem with [a close relative] but she just told us like a normal person would, and that's fine...you feel a bit of a connection when they do that because you think, that's really nice that they told me, because I feel like I do belong. One of the biggest problems would be, at a distance, not belonging. (June)

June extended this connection with an individual - her supervisor - to belonging in a wider sense, and identified the importance of that feeling for mitigating potential problems of being at a distance. She went on to emphasise that an important part of this relationship and sense of belonging was, 'the communication...maintaining it and being as friendly as possible' (June).

For Martin, there was an association between being welcomed and feeling valued, which he also related to overcoming any anticipated issues of distance:

I can appreciate that to be a supervisor on an online programme... you have to be, you really have to make the effort to make your student feel welcome, to make them feel valued... I thought all of the tutors did a superb job in, like I say, just in making me, as a student, feel valued and I think, importantly, that distance wasn't an issue. (Martin)

The extent to which these feelings of belonging and being valued appear to 'erase' distance, or at least make it unimportant, is in contrast with feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation, which were reported to varying degrees by interviewees. Fern's description of the dissertation as 'lonely work' was typical of these reports: 'Doing the dissertation, it's very lonely work, so you are kind of apart from what is happening with the others' (Fern).

Such reports were often recounted with an acceptance of limited contact with peers and supervisors as part of the independent research process (Fern said, for example, that she 'never expected' to keep in touch with other students during the dissertation), but also with some uncertainty around acceptable frequency and duration of supervisory contact, as well as some clearly perceived boundaries around contact time:

not that the supervisor I was allocated was unhelpful, but I felt I really needed to talk to him way more often, but I know that would have been asking too much. So in the end I did feel quite isolated I think. And had I had other people to talk to about what I was doing it maybe would have helped me rethink the ideas that I had. (Nieve)

I was lucky, because my supervisor was [name] and he was, he doesn't pester you and he doesn't use a lot of words, but...his direction was superb. I didn't make, well you couldn't really make use of him, because you were only allowed two set meetings, which I thought was odd. (Terry)

Our exploration of the theme of connection and disconnection led us to consider ideas of belonging, being welcome, and being valued as part of a positive connection with academic staff. The figure of the supervisor - both present and absent - appears to loom large for students studying at a distance, and so supervisory approaches may need to take into account the perhaps distinctively large role the supervisor plays in student experiences of 'success' in the dissertation. At the same time, how supervisors might go about creating a welcoming environment for distance supervisees is not necessarily obvious.

For example, supervisors in one of the workshops held during the project discussed the somewhat disorientating experience of conducting evening sessions via video-conferencing, where both student and supervisor were in their respective homes, with evidence of domesticity (including occasional children and spouses) very apparent. In this kind of digital environment, the supervisor is both a guest and not a guest of the student; host and not a host to the student.

Ruitenbergh (2011) describes hospitality as:

a demand for openness to the arrival of something and someone we cannot foresee; a demand that is impossible to fulfill, but that confronts all of our decisions and actions. In an ethic of hospitality education must be constructed in such a way as to leave space for those students and those ideas that may arrive (p.33).

She identifies the questions that the teacher-as-host might ask themselves:

Does what I am about to do leave a possibility for my assumptions about knowledge and teaching and learning to be upset by a new arrival? Does it close down a space for future questioning or questioners? (ibid)

In thinking about 'hospitality at a distance', notions of arrival and departure, particularly in relation to the unknown, become particularly relevant (Ross, Gallagher and Macleod 2013, Bayne 2010). Hospitality, as we have considered it in Ruitenbergh's (2011) terms, is also a troubling of the 'at-home', and an 'openness to the arrival of something' unforeseen (p.33). The idea of hospitality at a distance calls attention to the notion of hospitality in education as something which is more than an invitation into a campus building.

In a supervisory situation, it might be argued that the supervisor acts as host for the University, much in the way that she or he would be expected to welcome a student visiting the campus. However, the notion of hospitality is useful because it positions the role of the supervisor as something more than that of the expert overseer of a process, and as offering an invitation or welcome to a shared academic space. This is not necessarily a space of familiarity or comfort and, as Ruitenbergh (2011) explains, hospitality does not require comfort. Grant (2003), writing about Masters supervision, points out that the relations between student and supervisor can be uncomfortable precisely because 'people are strange to each other':

Supervision comes face to face with this strangeness in an intense way and must somehow, and often does, work in spite of this. We, supervisors and students, may even be able to relish it if we can learn to tolerate its instability. (p.188)

To achieve 'success' in dissertations at a distance may involve accepting the instability of relations between student and supervisor that are marked not only by power dynamics, expectations, and performances of student and teacher identities (as all supervisory relationships are), but also by the varied and shifting conceptions of home and welcome that accompany the distanced encounter. Hospitality at a distance, as a conceptual framework, offers an approach to negotiating the kinds of disconnections that students experience, understanding the need for a sense of belonging, and a way of welcoming unforeseen connections.

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