

Building a relationship between international doctoral students and their thesis supervisors through an online community of practice: Findings from a Systematic Literature Review.

Dr. Lucilla Crosta, Prof. Morag Gray

Honorary Senior Lecturer University of Liverpool, lucilla.crosta@my.ohecampus.com

Honorary Senior Lecturer University of Liverpool, morag.gray@my.ohecampus.com

Abstract

This paper presents an extract from a systematic international literature review research work funded by Laureate Online Education and aimed at detecting best practice in online doctoral students' supervision. It was carried between March and July 2013 out by the authors of the paper, who have been working as online tutor and thesis supervisors at the University of Liverpool in the Online Professional Doctorate of Education (EdD).

Prof. Morag Gray is also the Thesis Supervisor Manager in the EdD and she has been working recently for the implementation of the Thesis stage of this same programme. The authors initially illustrated the meaning of supervision as mentoring since while doctoral advising is related to accomplishing doctoral requirements, mentoring refers to both career and psychosocial support to students (Lunsford, 2012). The paper focuses on the idea that student-supervisor relationship is pivotal in student's success and progress in research and on the idea that the use of a community of practice among supervisors and students may help in sustaining doctoral distance students on their journey and to overcome their sense of loneliness while working online.

Some information on the way how the systematic literature review has been carried out is given in the paper namely: the research main aims and objectives, the literature search strategy, the search term used in the work and so on.

This work makes an attempt to create connections with the online environment and on how it might be possible to sustain and to enhance the supervisor-student relationship via the internet when doctoral students and supervisors coming from different parts of the world, and who have never met in person. Particularly Andrew (2012) proposed the use of an online community of practice and of regular e-meetings for supporting online students' work and relationship, also among doctoral students themselves, whilst Rosset & Marino (2005) shared experience on e-coaching providing some interesting insights on the possible use of technology for distance communication purposes and related effects on the individual's relationship.

Hence this paper provides some linkages between the Networked Learning practice and the use of the community of practice metaphor for connecting doctoral students and supervisors

Keywords

doctoral supervision, online community of practice, systematic literature review, online relationship

Research Context

This project is based on an international systematic literature review was funded by Laureate Online Education and was carried between March and July 2013 out by Prof. Morag Gray and Dr Lucilla Crosta who have both been working as online tutor and thesis supervisors at the University of Liverpool in the Online Professional Doctorate of Education (EdD).

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Method of the Systematic Review

The purpose of a systematic review is to identify, evaluate and summarise findings of all relevant data aligned to the research questions. The main benefit of a systematic review is to provide available evidence more accessible to Faculty staff and decision makers. We aimed to conduct a high quality systematic review which adopted a transparent, rigorous and comprehensive methodology. It is good practice to have a minimum of two researchers involved so that there are in-built measures to minimise individual bias and error implemented at all stages of the review (CRD 2009; Higgins and Green 2011; Gough et al., 2012).

Aims and Objectives

The specific aims of this systematic literature review were threefold:

- To improve the online dissertation / thesis support and supervision provided to international students undertaking professional doctorates;
- To identify the state of the art practice in online supervising /mentoring of international doctoral students during their dissertation / thesis stage;
- To identify best practice in online supervision / mentoring international doctoral students during their dissertation / thesis stage.

Objectives:

- To undertake a rigorous systematic literature review that focuses on students' needs undertaking an online doctoral programme, during their thesis phase of the programme;
- To summarise the existing evidence on how online doctoral students' needs have been clearly fulfilled in institutions world-wide during their thesis phase;
- To identify good practice in online supervision / mentoring of doctoral students during their thesis phase;
- To identify any gaps in current research or guidance and make suggestions for further research;
- To make recommendations based on the review to inform our practice in the support and supervision of online doctoral students during their thesis phase

Design

The project is currently in the first stage and while the literature search strategy has been completed, further investigation on the way how online doctoral supervision takes place "in context" in the EdD programme at Liverpool University is planned in the near future.

Systematic Review Questions:

- ▶ Do the needs and expectations of students' differ when undertaking a traditional doctorate or a professional doctorate? If so, how do they differ?
- ▶ Do the needs and expectations of students' differ when undertaking their doctoral studies online? If so, how do they differ?
- ▶ Does good practice exist when meeting the needs of online doctoral students? If yes, what is the nature of this?
- ▶ Are there any needs of online dissertation doctoral students as yet unresolved? If yes, what are these?

The search strategy

The search strategy used a combination of thesauri terms from each database plus suitable key words to ensure maximum retrieval related to the research questions. Within the resources available, the period of the search was from 2000 to 2013. The search sought English language papers with an international perspective. A multi-professional approach was also be adopted.

Search terms:

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Doctoral ▶ Doctoral supervision / mentoring / advising/ guiding ▶ Doctoral supervisor / mentor / adviser ▶ Education – thesis / dissertation ▶ Online supervision / mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Online thesis / dissertation ▶ Online thesis mentor / supervisor ▶ Professional doctorate education ▶ Student needs ▶ Student perspectives ▶ Student satisfaction / evaluation
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Table 1: List of Search Terms used in literature searching

Literature was retrieved from 13 different countries: USA; Australia; UK; Sweden; Finland; New Zealand; Japan; Iran; Malaysia; Norway; Iran; Ireland; and Turkey (arranged in order of frequency of publications).

Definitions of doctoral students' supervision

Lunsford (2012) discusses doctoral advising or mentoring on students and with these terms she implies the process of supervision. While doctoral advising is related to accomplishing doctoral requirements, mentoring refers to both career and psychosocial support to students. Hence the former seems to lack of an aspect that might be needed while supervising doctoral students. Indeed Lunsford (2012) in her research showed how mentoring was significant related to students' positive outcomes in terms of number of students' publications, presentations and progress made. Moreover, building a personal relationship with a supervisor reported more student satisfaction with their advisor. Hence the study concluded that the students felt more of the need of being mentored than supervised. (Lunsford, 2012).

Lach, Hertz, Pomeroy, Resnick, and Buckwalter (2013) while describing distance mentoring among nurses, defines mentorship as “ a relationship between two people in which the one with greater experience and/or expertise teaches and counsels the other to develop professionally” (p.39). This implies also a long-term relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Bozeman and Feeney (2007) provide a wide excursion of the development of the meaning of the word “mentoring” although they add to Lach et al.' s (2013) definition the idea of the psychological support that the mentor should provide to the mentee in addition to the professional one.

We commenced our work with this idea of doctoral supervision intended as “mentorship”, in mind and linking them in a second time with the online environment. In this paper we would like to reflect on how is it possible to “online mentor” doctoral students while supporting them also professionally and psychologically and while building relationship with them.

Community of Practice

An et al., (2008) explains that a community of practice (CoP) is formed by a relatively small group of individuals who voluntary choose to share and learn together towards common goals. It is important to emphasise the word voluntary in respect to creating a CoP as it will not function if participants are coerced into activity. The concept of a community of practice is based on social interaction where participants create an environment (virtual or face-to-face) whereby feelings of isolation are reduced as a strong sense of community develops (Wenger 2000; Beutel et al., 2010). It is through this shared sense of community that sharing and deep approaches to learning take place (Wenger, 2000; An et al., 2008; Beutel et al., 2010). Not surprisingly the benefits of establishing a CoP are highlighted in the literature. Full-time doctoral students on campus can readily form peer support groups but part-time students have less opportunity therefore establishing an online community of practice is particularly important. Martinsuo & Turkulainen (2011) from a large survey of doctoral engineering students (n=584) across 5 different universities, report that this form of peer support has a positive effect on students' progress.

It is interesting to note that in the literature there is a growing realisation that myths about the isolation of being an online doctoral student are being squashed as a result of the technological advances in the last decade (Sussex 2006). The authors have significant experience in using Skype in conducting doctoral tutorials which we believe

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reduces the 'distance' element to supervision and enables the early development of a meaningful relationship, however as yet there is little literature available. .

Moreover, we have also developed online research clusters where students who are researching in common subject areas are grouped together along with their supervisors. In this way, the students have their own online community of practice; an online community specific to a subject area and their individual online supervision. It is too early to say whether this format of supervision of online doctoral students is successful but our intention is to evaluate this on an on-going basis. The Community in this case, may help students feeling more "connected" with each others, sharing experiences, best practice, supporting each others and thus in turn learn from each other's experiences. The community will develop over time so it will be interesting to analyse its forming process.

Through a mentoring relationship, as described in the paper, with doctoral students we have informally noticed that this facilitates a feeling of belonging (Levett-Jones & Lathlean 2008) to the thesis stage and their cohort peers. We intend to conduct research in this area in the near future.

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