

Networked Learning for Post-graduate Supervisors

Peter Kandlbinder
 Institute for Teaching and Learning
 Carslaw Bld, F07
 University of Sydney,
 NSW 2006 Australia
 tel: +61 2 9351 4872
 fax: +61 2 9351 4331
 email: pkandlbi@ctl.usyd.edu.au

Abstract

The Postgraduate Supervisors Development Program has been delivered on-line since 1998. The success of this program in demonstrating the potential for on-line academic staff development has led the Institute for Teaching and Learning to undertake further on-line initiatives targeting, in the first instance, flexible learning and assessment. This paper discusses the development of this networked learning program in which academic staff are free to arrange their own progression and retrieve resources at any time that suits them and their supervisory responsibilities. It highlights the program's participatory modes of learning that creates an environment in which supervisors can reflect on their own supervision as a basis for understanding their supervisory practice.

Keywords

On-line professional development, postgraduate supervision

Introduction

Many academic development units (ADU) are ambivalent towards the use of on-line technologies for staff development. On the one hand ADUs are at pains to ensure they are driven by pedagogy rather than technology. On the other hand there is the recognition that networked learning has a legitimate role in overcoming the constraints experienced by some academic staff. The Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) has used the Internet and on-line learning as a means of delivering academic staff development since 1996. Early examples made use of e-mail and discussion forums with only limited success. The increased acceptance of World-wide Web brought with it an expanded range of offerings for academic staff starting with simple web-based workshops and culminating in a complete development program for postgraduate supervisors delivered by flexible learning.

Many universities now have in place a program of workshops for the development of postgraduate supervision. Most struggle with the implicit nature of supervision which make it difficult to know which approaches work and how to transfer these successful practices to other supervisors' situations. The ITL took a similar approach until 1998 when it partially delivered the Postgraduate Supervisors Development Program on-line. This program's main aim is to raise awareness of the roles and responsibilities of postgraduate supervisors as outlined in the University's "Code of Conduct" (Graduate Studies Committee, 1999). It introduces a range of techniques used by experienced supervisors and demonstrates how these techniques can be integrated into supervisor's own practice.

The disparate nature of postgraduate supervision makes it an ideal case for adopting flexible learning principles in staff development. This paper describes the evolution of a learning environment developed to support supervisors drawing on their own experiences of being

supervised, to reflect on their journey to becoming a competent supervisor. The program allows supervisors to choose to complete the program as flexibly as their schedules permitted. Some supervisors complete just the web-based modules, some only attend the workshop program, while others elect for a combination of both.

Postgraduate Supervisors Development Program

The Postgraduate Supervisors' Development Program was always conceived of as more than a collection of links to information. It consists of three inter-related learning environments that involve either web-based materials, workshops or independent study. Access to the web-based resources is through one of three entry points. A "browsing" section is available to anyone interested in postgraduate supervision. It provides an information-rich environment that links supervisors to material about their immediate institutional context, as well as the wider scholarly community writing about supervision pedagogy. In this way it provides both the information required by supervisors and the models necessary for reflecting on supervisory practice. Examples of resources available are the University's Postgraduate Studies Handbook, links to the latest journal and book publications, web sites on postgraduate supervision, links to appropriate higher education reports, links to relevant committees with contact information, and case studies by successful supervisors.

For supervisors who would like to work through the resource material in a more formalised course of study, there are six self-study modules also available on-line. The modules are password protected and require registration into the program to receive access to the materials. Registration involves a brief questionnaire in which supervisors indicate their interests in postgraduate supervision and nominate a date when they would like to be removed from the program's register.

Each of the six modules represents a different stage in the cycle of supervision. One of the most popular modules is "Preparing for Supervision" which discusses negotiating the aims and responsibilities of supervisors as the starting point for supervision. Equally popular is "The End of Year Review" which outlines the institutional requirements for reporting on a candidature and mechanisms for receiving feedback on supervision practices. Supporting these modules is an on-line discussion forum that acts as a central point where participants engage with the web-based materials. It is in this forum that they are able to discuss the activities and trigger questions contained in the self-study materials. The forum also represents the third access point for supervisors just interested in discussing issues related to postgraduate supervision, such as the recent government recommendations for the reform of university research (Kemp, 1999)

The program retains two workshops for supervisors who prefer face-to-face interaction or for those who can not access the on-line modules. The workshops provide an opportunity for supervisors to come together and engage in a dialogue about supervision practice. They also allow supervisors to gauge their own approach to supervising relative to the expectations of the wider university community. To encourage this comparison the workshops in 1999 included presentations from postgraduate students, postgraduate coordinators and examples from successful supervisors recognised in annual teaching awards. Evaluations of the workshops suggested that supervisors' valued the opportunity for cross-disciplinary dialogue. While it might be argued that this facility is available at the web site through a discussion forum, we have come to acknowledge that the environment created by face-to-face interaction provides an intrinsic part of the staff development process. Feedback forms indicated that all supervisors valued the opportunity to engage in discussion with colleagues though supervisors also suggested that more time was needed in the development of a strategic approach to address the individual problems faced by them in their supervision.

Flexible delivery of staff development

From presentations in the workshops it is clear that supervisors learn from their experiences of their own supervision and reflecting on these experiences. The paths to successful supervision varied from trial and error to working through professional development activities similar to the Postgraduate Supervisors Development Program. Understanding how supervisors came to be effective has resulted in a gradual change in emphasis for our own program. It is no longer largely about developing techniques and methods for effective supervision. It also raises awareness of the variation in supervisory practice, particularly where supervisors are involved in a process of reflecting on the aims of supervision and applying these principles into practice.

Participants in the program reported that their thinking about supervision had changed as a result of their involvement in the program. They were implementing processes aimed at supporting students such as formalising documentation, negotiating regular meeting times and clarifying the roles and responsibilities with their students. Supervisors negotiated individual learning goals through the registration process where trigger questions assist them to conceptualise their goals, strategies to meet those goals and then to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning about supervision pedagogy. Supervisors' reasons for joining the program ranged from attracting more research students, exploring their roles and responsibilities, managing projects, through to considering their own philosophies underlying their practice. Many participants indicated that they were unclear about 'how' they knew their supervision had improved, which will be addressed in a future module that can be assessed and accredited if the supervisor chooses.

To ensure that the Postgraduate Supervisors Development Program made appropriate use of information technology, participants in the program were asked to comment on their experiences in the program through an email survey. Particularly pertinent were their impressions of utilising on-line technologies for professional development. Supervisors who had attended both the workshops and used the on-line materials could also comment on the congruence between those parts of the program. The program participants responded that the use of technology for professional development allowed them to 'think about the principles of postgraduate supervision outside the workshop format'. It has also permitted a more flexible involvement and a careful selection of resources relevant to their practice. Access to on-line materials meant that resources were conveniently located at a single destination - convenient considering the many demands on academics' time.

The ITL's experience with networked learning demonstrates that flexible delivery of supervision training can provide opportunities for supervisors to think about issues in a sustained manner, at a time convenient to them. This was confirmed in a survey of Postgraduate Coordinators who are responsible for the nature of supervision in their departments. When asked to comment on innovative departmental practice they reported that supervisors had been engaging in more explicit pedagogical practices with their research students. This included collaborating on resource statements, increasing contact hours, negotiating expectations about roles and responsibilities, reinforcing comments made by the program's participants.

Conclusions and future challenges

There have been considerable changes to the program since its move from the traditional face-to-face workshop format to on-line delivery. The combination of the workshops and web-based resources seems to have struck the appropriate balance for the staff development of postgraduate supervisors. The number of supervisors registered to complete the program has almost doubled and the program continues to be successful in attracting its target group of academics new to supervision. For a large part it is the web-based resources that have allowed supervisors to complete the program in their own time, supported by links to other participants.

The move to networked learning has had little impact on who registers for the program. Supervisors in the Faculties of Health Science and Science have consistently represented the largest group of participants throughout the program's history. The program is less successful in attracting the more senior academics who do most of the supervision of postgraduates. While this is a group who do not traditionally participate in staff development activities, the Postgraduate Supervision Development Program provides the best opportunity to collaborate with this influential group of academics.

The primary challenge for the future continues to be how to overcome the time pressures so often mentioned as a limiting factor in staffs' access to the program. Many of the comments regarding both the workshop program and the web-based resources seem to reflect personal preferences for individual learning styles. Supervisors have pointed to the importance of more structure to the on-line discussion forum and strengthening web-based resources by including content of the workshop program. Others have reported that the openness of a program delivered through networked technologies has allowed "thinking about the principles of postgraduate supervision outside the workshop format." Rewarding supervisor's participation in the program will be the strategy that moves the program into its next stage of development.

References

- Graduate Studies Committee, (1999). *Postgraduate Studies Handbook*. Sydney: University of Sydney.
- Kemp, D. (1999). *New Knowledge, New Opportunities: A Discussion Paper on Higher Education Research and Research Training*. Canberra: AGPS.