Title

An exploration of the use of coaching and mentoring in the supervision of doctoral students

in UK university business schools

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Abstract

Purpose: to consider and evaluate the student and supervisor experience of doctoral supervision (dyadic and triadic) and specifically the value of using coaching and mentoring approaches (process and relationship) in supervisory practice.

Design/methodology/approach: phase one is a mixed methods study exploring the use of coaching and mentoring in doctoral supervision on traditional and taught doctoral programmes in one UK university business school. The focus is on developing a conceptual model for doctoral supervisory practice for the transfer of learning and the improvement of practice. Phase two will be a collaborative action research study in a range of UK university business schools to use, reflect on and refine the conceptual model of supervision.

Findings: the initial findings from phase one will be reported on at the conference presentation.

Research limitations/implications: we have tentative agreements from four UK university business schools for phase two (subject to ethics approval).

Practical implications: students and supervisors participating in the research will benefit from having the opportunity to review and improve their practice; the participating business schools will have the opportunity to review and potentially revise their doctoral student and supervisor training; and a business school's reputation for high quality doctoral supervision could be enhanced.

Social implications: could potentially benefit numerous future students and supervisors across a wide range of UK university business schools.

Originality/value: there does not appear to be any previously published research on the use of coaching and mentoring in doctoral supervision in UK university business schools for the transfer of learning and improvement of practice.

Keywords: doctoral supervision, coaching, mentoring

Introduction

Doctoral supervision has been identified, in the context of Higher Education, as a dynamic form of HRD practice (Dolorient, Sambrook and Stewart, 2012). The existing literature suggests that the growth of professional and practice based doctorates and the diversification of the student population has created a situation where the existing models of supervision, often based on the dominant Oxbridge model, have questionable relevance to the student, the supervisor(s) and to the contemporary higher education context (Lee, 2008, Zeegars and Barron, 2012).

Our experience as doctoral students and supervisors on both traditional and practice based awards in business disciplines and our interest in HRD triggered discussion and reflection on the nature of supervisory practice. Our discussions centred around whether approaches to support and development used within the professional business life of candidates could be transferred into the doctoral context. As HRD practitioners, coaching and mentoring is one approach to one-to-one support and development that is commensurate with our own practice and knowledge and is well documented as an effective HRD intervention within the business environment (Garvey, Stokes and Megginson, 2014). The individual nature of coaching and mentoring and the themes embedded in coaching and mentoring theory such as critical reflection, facilitating learning and development, and enabling change seem to suggest a potential alignment between coaching and mentoring and the dyadic or triadic nature of much of doctoral supervision. Our interest is in exploring the nature of the dyadic and triadic doctoral supervision experience in terms of both process and relationship, and the relevance of transferring approaches developed and utilised in professional business life into the academic domain. We are particularly focused on doctorates based in the business disciplines attracting those from professional business backgrounds who aim to improve their

own and organisational professional and business practice and who may have expectations of one-to-one support forged during their professional working life.

The context of doctoral supervision

Doctoral supervision has been long recognised as the most complex and advanced level of academic teaching (Connell, 1985). Although work has continued in the thirty years since Connell's comments on the problematic nature of doctoral supervision, Zeegars and Barron note in 2012 that this work is still incomplete and a matrix of options for pedagogical practice in research supervision should be developed. There are existing sources of guidance in handbooks for supervisors and students but these have been criticised for out of place paradigms of pedagogical practice and mechanistic discourse (Holligan, 2007) and providing advice that is unrealistic and unhelpful for both student and supervisor(s).

The context for such advice is also changing with the introduction of professional and practice based doctorates creating more variety and complexity in the supervisory role and process. The student population has diversified with more students from non white, non male, non western and low socio economic background (Barron and Zeegars, 2006, Guerin, Kerr and Green 2015). In professional and practice based programmes, although less experienced in academic work, candidates often bring with them a wealth of senior management experience. They may feel secure and confident in their business experience but insecure and disempowered when in student role (Dolorient, Sambrook and Stewart 2012). The projected career trajectory of such doctoral candidates is no longer singularly focused on an academic career (Lee, 2008). The changing profile of doctoral candidates raises questions about the applicability of existing approaches to supervision based on the overseeing of inexperienced and young researchers by "a knowing supervisor who passes on knowledge to the unknowing student in a sort of rite of passage" (Bartlett and Mercer 2001). Such traditions have been criticised for being associated with a discipline dominated approach (Zeegars and Barron

2012) with little thought to the pedagogy that underpins what we see as a vital form of HRD practice.

As well as the changing nature of the award and the candidate, Holligan (2007) identifies a changing discourse in higher education. Although there is evidence of guidelines and training for supervisors these often focus on procedural practice rather than chime with the 'performativity and commercialization' landscape in higher education. Holligan (2007) calls for the development of more appropriate guidelines based on a mentoring relationship between supervisor and student.

Conceptualisations of doctoral supervision

A consequence of the debate around the changing context of doctoral work has been the development of a range of conceptual understandings of doctoral supervision (Vilkinas, 2007, Lee, 2008, Halse and Malfroy, 2009). These models either concentrate on segmenting supervision into roles (Lee, 2008) or provide a unifying framework for supervision drawing attention to the interrelationships between each aspect of the supervisor's role (Vilkinas 2007).

Vilkinas' (2007) purpose is to enhance supervisory practice by explaining how academics supervise students and to explore the relationships between the activities undertaken. He explores what supervision involves and identifies for supervisors four foci: people, internal, external and task and five operational roles: developer, deliver, monitor, broker and innovator and a final integrating role. Supervision is seen to be complex and paradoxical, requiring the supervisor to utilise a wide range of skills and deliver on a range of activities that are inherently contradictory and for which they may not necessarily be equipped. Supervisors often avoid dealing with the paradoxical nature of the work by concentrating on one role. Vilkinas (2007) does not label the supervisor as coach or mentor, although the integrator role does require supervisors to reflect and assess their own strengths and limitations and adopt

the most appropriate response to each situation in the supervision process.   The study focuses on PhD students rather than professional or practice based work. The tone is managerial with objectives to be set and monitored and research teams led and built. The supervisor is not identified as a co-learner. Although the framework clearly identifies the breadth of skills needed and the complexities of doctoral supervision; its purpose is not to consider and report how these skills could be developed and deployed or to consider their appropriateness in the changing doctoral landscape.

Lee's work (2008) begins to engage with areas that are germane to coaching and mentoring. It focuses on filling the void in material on supervision about developing a relationship. One of her five areas of influence, emancipation, identifies the supervisory role as a mentoring process encouraging self-discovery and self-experience and supporting the candidate's move from dependence to self-direction. The supervisor's role is performance rather than subject centred.   The mentor provides confirmation allowing the candidate to be empowered.

Drawing on Pearson and Kayrooz (2007), Lee (2008) suggests a supervisor should mentor the candidate, whilst coaching the research project. Lee (2008) foresees problems with the model' suggesting that the mentoring role may go well beyond what some supervisors feel is appropriate to expect or provide, perhaps indicating entrenchment in a discipline focused approach to supervision. Lee's (2008) work clearly recognises that in the traditional PhD programme there is much scope for supervisors to concentrate on developing the student and enabling their progression from dependence to independence. She gathers the supervisor's perspective in this tradition. Similarly Halse and Malfroy (2009) concentrate on life-history interviews with supervisors, citing the need for a learning alliance between candidate and supervisor working towards common goals. Although appearing to embrace the language of coaching and mentoring the responsibility remains with the supervisor in a relationship that is not equal or democratic.

The three conceptualisations of supervision discussed are based on supervisors reporting 'what they do'. There are commonalities between the models about the need to develop effective relationships with doctoral candidates and the multifaceted nature of supervision required to gain a PhD. The candidate voice and expectation of the supervisory experience is not reported. Gaining a PhD is about becoming a member of an academic community and discipline (Leonard, 2001) and it is this academic community that is defining the nature of supervision required. This clear cut purpose for doctoral outcome is not so evident in the professional and practice based awards. Students may wish to join an academic community, however given their seniority and experience the focus of their networks and professional community may lie outside academia and the professional community they seek to influence may not be accessible through the normal academic channels or persuaded by traditional dissemination. Taking the supervisor's perspective of supervision assumes that knowledge of the needs of students resides solely within the academic community. Although experience of doctoral work and research certainly resides here, those coming from business backgrounds where one-to-one supervision between peers is common place may have different views and voices to help shape understanding of the needs of the senior manager but relatively inexperienced researcher.

Whilst these three conceptualisations of supervision provide a language to articulate the complex nature of supervision there is little in-depth discussion of how a supervisory team would operationalise these models. Lee (2008) herself concludes that further work is needed to understand how these paradigms translate into hands-on doctoral supervision and it seems from our own experience how they translate beyond the traditional PhD into professional and practice based awards. Along a similar theme, there have also been criticisms of the lack of pedagogical thinking about supervision. Franke and Arvidsson (2011, p 9) note that 'how supervision should be conducted pedagogically within the administrative framework laid

down has to a large extent been left to supervisors themselves to decide on.' Others have been critical of the paucity of supervisory training, with largely untrained supervisors passing on poor habits to students (Wisker, 2015). Guerin, Kerr and Green (2015) suggest that the supervisor's experience of supervision whilst a student, either positive or negative, tends to be passed on to their own supervisees and this is particularly alarming given the recent changes in the doctoral landscape and the diversity of identifies of doctoral success. They call for doctoral supervisory training to develop a range of innovative strategies to fill this void. Coaching and mentoring has seen to be conceptually aligned with effective doctoral supervision. The next section will explore the theoretical base for coaching and mentoring as a precursor to developing approaches for appropriate pedagogic practice.

Coaching and mentoring – the theoretical base for the study

There has been much debate in the literature about the similarities and differences of coaching and mentoring, often drawing on the historical derivations as a source for inspiration. The history of coaching suggests coaching for performance (sport) and the derivation of mentoring suggests a more experienced person advising and guiding another (Mentor in Greek mythology). Connor and Pokora (2012, p.8) suggest that "it is evident that what is described in one organization as mentoring might be known in another as coaching". In Higher Education, mentoring appears to be used more for students and coaching used more for managers and other staff which is not a helpful or appropriate division for this study. It is where coaching and mentoring overlaps which is of interest in the Higher Education doctoral supervision environment. Having a focus on both coaching and mentoring, ie both performance and advice/guidance seems appropriate, particularly given the plethora of roles in doctoral supervision identified by Vilkinas (2007) and Lee (2008). However, the doctoral supervisor may need to make a judgement on how much to focus on performance (non

directive and directive) and how much to advise and guide the doctoral student (directive) in the supervision process.

Blend of directive and non directive processes

With doctoral supervision taking place in an educational environment, this may encourage both the student and the supervisor to view this process as didactic as opposed to an environment which aims to facilitate the student to learn and develop as an independent researcher. It is how directive and non directive processes work together with the supervisor sharing advice and guidance whilst creating the space for the student to be independent/creative which is of interest to our study.

A blend of directive and non-directive processes applied by the supervisor may be a way of combining both coaching and mentoring skills. Ives (2008) regards directive as instructional, although a distinction could be made between these two terms in the sense that you can direct someone but they can still choose whether or not to apply this direction, whereas an instruction is more for a situation where there is no choice, eg following university regulations. This distinction seems important to a supervision environment in which the student is doing most of their thinking and work outside the supervision sessions and therefore ultimately needs to be choosing their own paths. Non directive derives more from person centred coaching in which there is an "assumption that people have the potential to develop, and to grow, and that when this inner potential is released they are able to move toward becoming more autonomous, socially constructive, and optimally functioning" (Joseph and Bryant-Jefferies, 2007, p.211).

Cook's (2011) Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Figure 1) combines both directive and non-directive approaches through a collaborative approach between the coach and the client; a model which emphasises the need for the coach and the client (or, in this study, the supervisor and the student) to work collaboratively with both individual and shared

responsibilities. The purpose of the model is to enable the transfer and sustainability of learning outside the coaching session, a seemingly important element for developing independent doctoral researchers through the doctoral supervision process. Cook's (2011) model suggests that it is this collaborative action which enables the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching session to outside the session.
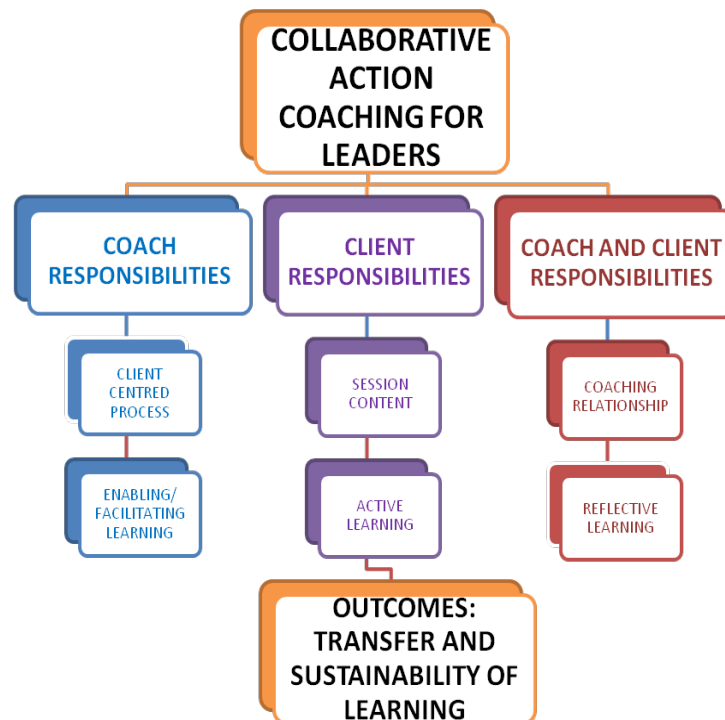

Figure 1: Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (Cook, 2011)

Collaborative action and the transfer of learning

In their research, Olivero, Bane and Kopelman (1997, p.466) regarded all aspects of the coaching process to be important including "collaborative problem solving". Law, Ireland and Hussain (2007, p.142) in reviewing a range of techniques and tools, came to the conclusion that "common ground exists among different coaching approaches; they are a collaborative intervention between coaches/mentors and coaches/mentees" which is similar to the *common factors* espoused by both Tallman and Bohart (1999) and De Haan (2008) in which the coaching client is the common factor and therefore the focus. Natale and Diamante (2005, p.372) in their research have determined that "executive coaching is viewed as a

collaborative alliance focusing on change and transformation". These aspects of problem-solving, interventions, focus on the client, change and transformation all seem relevant for a doctoral supervisory environment. One which continuously has to solve problems, an intervention to enable the completion of the doctorate, a focus on the student and the desire for change and transformation as a researcher at doctoral level.

Cook's (2011) model therefore begins to address the co-learning issue identified in the doctoral supervision literature above and also focuses on the transfer of learning. There have been several definitions of transfer of learning used over the years. Ruona, Leimbach, Holton and Bates (2002, p.220) prefer the expression "transfer system" in which "transfer involves the application, generalisability and maintenance of new knowledge and skills." Cox (2013, p.138) sums it up very well when she states that "one of the unwritten goals of coaching is to ensure enduring learning and development for the client that can be sustained long beyond the end of the coaching intervention".

Cook's (2011) model outlines the importance of both the coach and the client taking responsibility for the transfer of learning outside the coaching session. The model requires that each person has an equal responsibility to enable successful transfer of learning. This might imply the importance of an equal relationship which could be seen as a challenge in a doctoral supervision environment where the supervisor is perceived to have greater skills, knowledge and experience than the student. Therefore, the psychology of learning from a coaching and mentoring perspective may also have something to contribute to the doctoral supervision environment.

Importance of relationship

The review of the doctoral supervision literature has indicated that relationship could be important in improving doctoral supervision practice. Bluckert (2005), drawing on his experience as an executive coach, believes that the coaching relationship is a critical factor in

executive coaching and in his concept paper he outlines that the literature on executive coaching up to this point has been mainly focused on models and techniques. He has utilised a secondary research approach through a review of the applicable literature and integrated his experience to argue his point that the coaching relationship is the critical success factor. Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) in their research also highlight the importance of the coaching relationship, along with other factors. Gyllensten and Palmer (2007, p.171) suggest that "the confidentiality of the coaching sessions played a vital role in helping to build and maintain the trust between the coach and the coachee". There are also some interesting specific developments in the coaching for leaders' literature both in terms of process and relationship: the concept of partnership, the individual being coached taking responsibility and seeing coaching as part of the consultancy process.

Cook's (2011) Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model indicates that the coaching relationship is key in respect of encouraging the transfer of learning and is the responsibility of both the coach and the client.   Through honest dialogue in a safe and confidential environment, the client is encouraged to transfer their learning to outside the coaching session. Connor and Pokora (2012) talk about the initial establishment of a working relationship between coach and client which is referred to in the Cook (2011) model as the contracting or start point stage with the coach in charge of the process and the client in charge of the content. However, Cook's (2011) model outlines an equal weighting of all elements of the model which indicates that relationship is only one factor of importance when it comes to transfer of learning. Reflective learning is another important element for both coach and client or supervisor and student in this study.

Reflective learning for supervisors and students

Reflective learning could be seen as an important element for both student and supervisor training. The doctoral supervision literature has indicated that this needs to be reviewed in light of the changing nature of doctoral supervision in UK university business schools. Schön (1991, p.68) argues that "when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case.... He does not separate thinking from doing." Whilst reflection in action is a theme of "active learning" in Cook's (2011) model, it also forms part of the "reflective diary" theme under the "reflective learning" category. When conducting the doctoral research into the effect of coaching on the transfer and sustainability of learning, client participants completed reflective research diaries as part of the data collection process. It was the process of writing these diaries which enabled the transfer and sustainability of learning and therefore why it became part of the model. This has a direct parallel with the student researcher being encouraged to keep a research diary and reflectively learn as a researcher not only about the research process but also about their individual capability and perspective. Therefore, a research mechanism already exists to help embed reflective learning for the student. However, Cook's (2011) model also encourages the coach (supervisor) to reflectively learn as well. Their reflective learning will be focused on the doctoral supervision relationship and processes with a view to improving their practice both during and after supervision sessions.

This reflective learning process could help raise self awareness for both students and supervisors including the identification of any learning and development needs to feed into any learning, training and development opportunities.

Cook (2013) states that "coaching could be criticised as being an expensive conversation. When organisations are deciding on whether or not to contract the services of an external

coach to work on a one-to-one basis with leaders, they are expecting much more than simply an expensive conversation." No organisation wants to waste investment of time and money in a learning process without seeing some appropriate results, for example a transfer of learning. The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (Cook, 2011) model provides both process and relationship guidance for this transfer of learning from the coaching session to outside the session and its sustainability over time. In this previously stated new era of more varied and complex supervision environments, it may be time for new skills to be developed to ensure that practice is aligning itself to these new challenges. The use of coaching and mentoring skills to enable the transfer of learning and improve practice could be one important consideration for both doctoral student and supervisor skills and mindset development. Below is a working example of how the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model was applied to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching in Hertfordshire Business School.

Coaching and mentoring for effective learning and teaching

One of the drivers for this collaborative research in the Hertfordshire and Worcester Business Schools is a model presented at the 2013 UFHRD annual conference; a tutorial model which was developed at Hertfordshire Business School (Cook and Earle, 2013) which was based on Cook's (2011) Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model and takes into account a learning and teaching environment and a student/tutor relationship. It has three components: 1) the collaborative action needed to enable the transfer and sustainability of learning from tutorial sessions to the workplace (now and/or in the future); 2) the blend of directive and non-directive approaches by the tutors; 3) the emphasis on reflective learning for both the students and the tutors.

Although this model was developed for an undergraduate employability module, it provided us with a starting point for our discussions about exploring the use of coaching and mentoring

in doctoral supervision. When the model was evaluated by undergraduate students and tutors, there was a noticeable link between the use of coaching and mentoring and increased confidence in students as well as how useful it had been to have someone more knowledgeable and experienced to help them learn and develop independently. These and other results from the evaluation process gave us the impetus for our exploratory research.

Two stages of evaluative research

An epistemological and ontological position of social constructivism will be adopted in this experiential based research study, constructing meanings as people engage with the world they are interpreting (Creswell, 2009). The purpose of the research is to consider and evaluate the student and supervisor experience of doctoral supervision (dyadic and triadic) and specifically the value of using coaching and mentoring approaches (process and relationship) in supervisory practice.   We are particularly interested in doctorates based in the business disciplines and those which are engaged in improving professional practice. Similarly the use of coaching and mentoring shares this space, focusing on the personal and professional development of business professionals. We seek to answer the question: can the use of coaching and mentoring in doctoral supervision in UK business schools enable transfer of learning and higher quality supervision?

Following a review of the literature, the project will be undertaken in two phases.

Phase one

A simultaneous mixed methods research study (Bryman, 2006) exploring the existing experiences of students and supervisors on traditional and taught doctoral programmes in one UK university business school. We aim to develop from the literature review and this initial research process a conceptual supervision model using coaching and mentoring.

The research objectives for phase one are:

1. To explore from the student's perspective the use of coaching and mentoring (process and relationship) in the supervisory experience to enable transfer of learning

2. To explore from the supervisor's perspective the use of coaching and mentoring (process and relationship) in the supervisory experience to enable transfer of learning

3. To develop a conceptual model for supervisory practice with a focus on transfer of learning and higher quality supervision

The data will be collected using both a mixed methods questionnaire and individual semi-structured interviews with students and supervisors separately. Questions will be formulated using Cook's (2011) Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (as informed by Cook and Earle's 2013 model), exploring the student and supervisor experience in this theoretical context. The participants will be sourced on a voluntary basis from both taught and professional doctorate programmes in a UK university business school provided they identify their doctorate as including an aspect of improving practice in business. Should there be more volunteers for the interviews than can be accommodated, we will ensure a mix of taught and doctoral programmes, varying length of experience of both students and supervisors, and a mix of subject areas. If possible, we will also ensure a mix of gender and ethnicity. The initial findings and learning from phase one will be presented at the UFHRD 2015 conference.

Phase two

A collaborative action research study with doctoral supervisors and students in a range of UK university business schools to use, reflect on and refine the conceptual model of supervision emerging from Phase one with a focus on transfer of learning and higher quality supervision. We are hoping for a minimum of two action research cycles to enable the model to be evaluated and changed from one action research cycle to the next. The design of phase two

will be finalised after phase one is completed and it is anticipated that it will follow McNiff and Whitehead's (2006) "living theory" in which we will aim "to generate theories about learning and practice" (2006, p.1).

Implications for doctoral supervision practice

It is anticipated that students and supervisors participating in the research will benefit from having the opportunity to reflect on and review their practice. The business schools will have the opportunity to review and potentially revise its doctoral student and supervisor training in line with the supervision model developed. With a focus on transfer of learning, a business school's reputation for high quality doctoral supervision could be enhanced. Therefore, this research will not only benefit current doctoral students and supervisors but could also potentially benefit numerous future students and supervisors across a wide range of university business schools.

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