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Finding a stable core in supervision from a distance: A Kurdish-Australian case study

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Finding a stable core in supervision from a distance: A Kurdish-Australian case study

This paper's second author is a doctoral student, based in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, whose study focuses on peer education in refugee camps in that region. The other three co-authors are her supervisors, whom, to date, she has not physically met. Yet, we have created and sustained a productive 'learning community' from a distance. In this paper, we provide a critical reflection on the way this supervision learning community has worked and continues to work. We analyse the elements that make this a productive partnership and team, whilst also addressing some of the challenges. We use each other's reflections to discuss the elements that contribute to effective supervision from a distance. This case study demonstrates that creating and sustaining a human-centred learning community of peers forms the crucial foundation of and for effective distance doctoral supervision that nurtures independence and agency.

Keywords: doctoral supervision; distance learning; learning community; peer learning; Kurdistan region of Iraq

Introduction

The profound sense of insecurity that COVID-19 has caused has long been the norm for one of the co-authors of this paper. She is the doctoral student in our case study, based in Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Her study, which she commenced in 2016, focuses on peer education in refugee camps in Iraq. She submitted her thesis in December 2021. While in many doctoral programs, supervisors and students have had to adapt to a suddenly changed landscape, in the case discussed in this paper, a sense of instability has been the norm from the beginning. This applies particularly to Sazan's PhD study itself and its location, which is characterised by frequently shifting circumstances due to continuous political instability. The pandemic is only one added element, albeit a significant one.

The other three co-authors are her supervisors, and while currently all based in Australia, they have moved around the world during her candidacy, due to a combination of career choices and professional development opportunities. Sazan has never physically met her supervisors. Yet, we have created and sustained a

productive learning community from a distance. Aided by a range of technological tools, a persistent flexibility and agility in the supervisor-student relationship has been established. We have been closely connected at all times, including during the multiple challenges of data collection in the refugee camps and despite the distance and ever-evolving political-social-cultural environments, involving both internal (ISIS, COVID-19) and external (Turkish and Iranian attacks) threats.

In a recent study, Roumell and Bollinger (2017) identified a lack of institutional support to adequately provide a healthy context for distance doctoral research supervision. This builds on a perception that doctoral candidates are often accustomed to particular types of learning strategies and collaboration from their previous learning environments and may find it difficult to adjust to the new context of distance doctoral studies (Brown-Ferrigo & Muth, 2012; Roumell & Bollinger, 2017). However, this applies to most doctoral candidates, whether they study on campus or in distance mode. Furthermore, it assumes that supervision arrangements are restricted to one institutional context, which does not apply in our case either, because all three supervisors work at different institutions, characterised by different institutional contexts. Central to the success of the supervision in our case is a combination of relationship building, effective delegation of tasks, and continuous adaptability from all sides. In this paper, we analyse the supervisory relationship that developed, with reference to the three themes identified by Gray and Crosta (2019): enculturation, healthy relationships, and emancipation.

We further couch our analysis in Winchester-Seeto et al.'s (2014) eight intensifiers affecting candidates and supervisors in cross-cultural contexts in doctoral education: language, cultural difference in dealing with hierarchy, separation from the familiar, separation from support, [other] cultural differences, stereotypes, time, returning home (pp. 616-617). Winchester-Seeto et al. (2014) conceptualised these intensifiers to provide a framework for analysis of a more common situation where a PhD candidate physically moves to a different country to conduct their doctoral studies. In this study, by contrast, they provide an analytic tool to explore to what extent those intensifiers apply when the candidate does not physically move, yet still works across a range of boundaries, such as linguistic and cultural ones. Thus,

we extend the application of these intensifiers to a distance mode.

We provide a critical reflection on the way this supervision as a learning community has worked so far and continues to work. We analyse the elements that have made it a productive partnership and team and that have contributed to effective supervision from a distance, despite a range of considerable challenges.

Overview of the supervision context

The geographical, political and social context of Sazan's doctoral research is in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which has a long history of socio-political conflict (Leezenberg, 2005), and has been affected by ongoing conflict and upheaval throughout Sazan's candidacy.

Indeed, during Sazan's research, the impact of conflict, both past and present, was evident. The location and Sazan's distance from supervisors flagged ethical and safety concerns for the university and a safety/risk audit had to be conducted in addition to the usual ethical procedures. Later, the Turkish offensive on northern Syria in 2019 (Regan & Britton, 2019) and the Iranian missile attacks on US military bases in Iraq in early 2020 (Romo, 2020) impacted on her research. One landed within a couple of kilometres of Sazan's home, which seemed to cause more angst for the three supervisors than for Sazan. Safety protocols that accompany living in Erbil are part of daily life for its residents.

Over the years, large numbers of refugee camps have been established in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to accommodate internally displaced people and refugees from Syria. In 2020, Erbil was locked down as a result of COVID-19. Sazan, along with her husband and young children, experienced extended periods of lockdown, like other parts of the world did. Yet, we were able to continue our student-supervisor meetings.

When Sazan enrolled in doctoral study, she selected a university that had a lengthy history of effective 'distance' education. While all three supervisors had experience of working remotely with doctoral students, a variety of factors could interfere with effective communication, including internet reliability, time

differences and political factors.

The supervisors were not in one location during Sazan's enrolment either.

At times they were living in different Australian states (Queensland and New South Wales) and different countries (Australia, China and the USA), not including working away from campus or attendance at international conferences.

Communication was conducted largely via email and meetings were held on a regular basis using Zoom. Even though the electricity in Erbil regularly shut off, Sazan was generally able to rejoin the meetings quickly. With video and sound, it was easy to talk, establish relationships and share aspects of the team members' locations and lives. Establishing relationships of trust and developing expectations are key elements of enculturation, the first of Gray and Crosta's (2019) three themes. Within that theme, "accessibility, empathy, friendliness, support, and open-mind, mastery of field and methodology" (p. 176) are crucial elements. These were definitely supervisory characteristics that were taken into account, if not explicitly, in anticipation of a context where all communication would potentially be online.

Empathy and an open mind were further important in light of the place of culture in the supervision relationship (Gray & Crosta, 2019, p. 176), which was very much a cross-cultural relationship. While this can create considerable challenges, both the supervisors and Sazan were experienced working in cross-cultural environments, which contributed to the establishment of healthy relationships (the second of Gray and Crosta's themes).

During the data collection stage of Sazan's study in refugee camps, easy and instantaneous communication was necessary to ensure ongoing communication with her supervisors. Robyn and Sazan kept in contact via WhatsApp on their mobile phones. Over time, WhatsApp became a useful platform for communication about aspects of Sazan's study, sharing photographs and updating each other about current events. This informal communication created a sense of immediacy and humanity from afar. Nevertheless, there were times when the supervisors were worried that Sazan had not been in contact for a while or had not replied to emails. Since Henk followed her on Twitter, he could sometimes fill in what had been happening, which provided useful back-up.

By then, healthy relationships had been well and truly established, and Sazan was well on her way towards ‘emancipation’, which is Gray and Crosta’s third theme (2019, p. 180). However, while emancipation implies hierarchical power relationships, we would argue that in this case, a more horizontal relationship had been established of a community of peers, a team of equals with differing areas of expertise (both academically and culturally). This ‘community of peers’ capitalised on the themed opportunities Kaur et al. (2021) identify: role and identity construction, co-construction of research knowledge, and enactive and vicarious learning (p. 10). The potential challenges (i.e. lack of structure, and power and credibility issues – Kaur et al., 2021, p. 10) were mitigated to a large extent, *because* the relationships were increasingly horizontal. The increasing movement towards a community of peers, rather than hierarchical supervision relationships, also facilitated the critically reflective writing in this paper as challenges were discussed regularly as they happened and as peers. Of course, the official supervisory roles still play a part, especially when the candidacy is still in progress, which could raise potential ethical issues related to differential power dynamics. We do not argue that these were entirely erased, as would be impossible, but rather that the relationships developed were closer to peer and mentor-mentee relationships amongst colleagues than hierarchical supervisor-supervisee relationships. This in turn facilitated the level of critical reflection required to give this study meaning.

Individual reflection 1: PhD Candidate

I decided to pursue a PhD in Education while maintaining my professional career (in the United Nations) and at the time, was pregnant with my first child. I soon realised the most significant challenge was finding both supervisors and institutions willing to supervise from a distance.

I found Henk in the *Journal of Peer Learning*, who then got in touch with Megan, and together they led me to Robyn. I had a six-month-old baby, when my PhD journey officially began. Three key components made my PhD supervision a success: regular Zoom meetings, supervision informality (related to the ‘community of peers’ mentioned before), and WhatsApp instant communication. I knew my circumstances were challenging: a PhD with work, motherhood, a volatile

political context, and a global pandemic added to the mix. The blogs I read by other PhD candidates, for motivation, illustrated that a significant challenge for many PhD students was their relationship with supervisors. However, the relationship with my supervisors, including their guidance, was the best part of my PhD candidacy. The challenges identified by some PhD students relate directly to some of the intensifiers outlined by Winchester-Seeto et al. (2014, pp. 616-617), for example cultural differences in dealing with hierarchy, separation from the familiar, and separation from support. However, the initial establishment of healthy relationships, and the gradual development of a community of peers, mitigated some of the intensifiers, while others (e.g. what happens when the candidate returns home) do not apply, because I did not leave home.

I conducted 85 percent of research work while based in Iraq's Kurdistan Region with occasional London visits. To date, I have not met my supervisors in person, but over the years, with my cup of coffee in hand, I have discussed my life, and my research, in face-to-face virtual communication. They have met my children (through regular interruptions of my Zoom meetings) and even seen my move from work on the dining room table to a purpose-built home office. These are the contexts of my life and research that you would not share when meeting in person in a college office.

At times, I yearned to talk about my research to someone outside my supervisory team. I often thought about how it would feel to be on campus and speak about my thesis to colleagues over a coffee. My thoughts and progress were only in my head. In the first year, this often caused confusion, feelings of loss, and drowning in an ocean of ideas. This relates directly to the intensifier “separation from support” (Winchester-Seeto, 2014, p. 616), which has been a key challenge, and indeed a flaw in the supervision. While there is some online support for doctoral candidates available, this is often geared towards ‘regular’ full-time PhD candidates (Connell & Manathunga, 2012), and my journey has been an outlier in many respects. Upon reflection, it would have been good if additional (peer) support structures would have been in place from the beginning, despite a very responsive and flexible supervision team.

My supervisory meetings on Zoom allowed me to be inspired, motivated, share thoughts, and achieve milestones in my research. Our meeting times were usually scheduled on Friday mornings, which was the beginning of the weekend for me, and I could facilitate babysitting for my children. These meetings often began with informality. I provided insight into events in my part of the world, which was almost always more heated than where they were, but they always listened with interest.

The informality of some of our conversations, the human side of their interaction with me, and their eagerness to understand my context and circumstances was a significant contributing factor in cultivating this positive relationship. This in turn contributed to the ‘levelling of the playing field’ and the development of a more horizontal community of peers. During COVID-19, I went through a stage of intense challenges. I remember sending a photo to Robyn when my neighbour's body was taken by an ambulance after losing his life to the virus. When my family and I tested positive for Covid, I recall texting Robyn so that she knew what was happening, if I did not reply to emails.

My supervisors’ openness to listen and dedicate their time to me and my thesis cultivated a more in-depth understanding. Yet, I was aware of their other commitments, and the intensifier “time” (Winchester-Seeto, 2014, p. 617) was definitely a consistent presence, but flexibility and commitment often mitigated this challenge. We sometimes arranged a last-minute meeting; it could be a one-to-one session with Robyn or Henk alone, who addressed my research queries. These meetings were usually shorter and more specific, but enough to answer my research dilemmas and keep me productive to reach particular milestones.

Individual reflection 2: Primary Supervisor

My reflections focus on building relationships amongst the four members of the doctoral team. Henk, Megan and I had not previously supervised together, so we did not have an established or agreed *modus operandi*. Our way of working developed as we went along. Using Zoom, our meetings with Sazan followed a reasonably consistent, although unplanned, format. Our meetings began with each of us sharing what had been happening, in our personal or professional lives or

both. Importantly, most of the time was devoted to discussing Sazan's research project and her associated learning. The considerable time devoted to sharing informal updates of everyday life have been a crucial part of community development, and has thus contributed to overcoming the "separation from support" intensifier (Winchester-Seeto, 2014, p. 616).

The sharing time was instrumental in developing a working relationship at a distance as, initially at least, it enabled us to get to know each other. The video capability of Zoom provided windows into our different locations. There was much crossover between the personal and the professional, but this strengthened our working relationships and contributed to the development of a community of peers.

Sazan's location, the refugee camp context, and its challenges were beyond our experience. Understanding that context therefore became increasingly important, especially when Sazan applied for ethical clearance. The refugee camp locations probably rang alarm bells for some members of the ethics committee, which are partly related to the intensifier "cultural differences" (Winchester-Seeto, 2014, p. 617). Although the application went smoothly through the ethics processes, the accompanying safety audit and risk management plan presented much greater challenges – more, I think, from the university's perspective than ours. As supervisors in a 'community of peers', we were able to significantly mitigate this potential intensifier, as we had a much clearer idea of the actual risks involved through extensive conversations about the context. Sazan had worked in refugee camps with personal experience of the United Nations' safety protocols, and that context was familiar to her. Apart from managing the safety issues of being an outsider within the camps, driving long distances in places where it is not always culturally appropriate or welcoming for women, and collecting data away from supervisors, Sazan also had to explain how she would manage high summer temperatures of over 50 degrees, potential air-conditioning failures when the camps' electricity generators were overworked, and the winter rains when mud impedes movement around the camps.

Ultimately, Zoom discussions with significant university people enabled the study to go ahead. They directly questioned Sazan about their concerns and how she

would deal with them. The technology with video and the ability to meet in real time (but in different time zones) facilitated the process and helped university staff understand that what they see in the media is not necessarily the full picture of life in distant locations. Thus, the immediacy of Zoom helped to mitigate the intensifier of “stereotypes” (Winchester-Seeto, 2014, p. 617) and facilitate the understanding of university administrative staff.

The importance of other technologies became evident during data collection. One of my roles was to support Sazan during data collection in the refugee camps and WhatsApp was helpful. Even though Sazan was capable of solving problems, at least I knew where she was and how data collection was progressing. Our long string of WhatsApp messages is a reminder of the tensions Sazan felt, her concerns about data collection being delayed by one refugee camp, her anxiety when flooding occurred at her house (following her promise to collect data between the end of the hot summer and the beginning of the rainy season), and indications of the impact of conflict (e.g., the Turkish raids on Syria) on data collection. For Sazan, this time was nerve-wracking and stressful, but technology enabled us to support her from a distance.

Individual reflection 3: Associate Supervisor

I share a common dimension with Sazan and the supervision team, which relates to living and working within and across ‘distances and spaces’, and includes the ability to manage and overcome whatever physical, social and emotional dimensions the distances and spaces present.

As I had not supervised PhD students in a distance mode, I relied on my previous on-campus PhD supervision experience as my template. Sazan still received similar guidance about the research process, in developing capabilities as an emerging researcher, navigating the administration processes and procedures, maintaining regular meetings and having robust, intellectual dialogues. The virtual ‘space’ helped to facilitate the diverse ‘distances’ – life events and career trajectories – of four individuals who reside in different time-zones, and contributed significantly to the development of a community of peers. In many ways, this harks back to an earlier model, where time was less of an intensifier (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014).

The university's insistence on making PhD candidates finish in three and half years intensifies the pressure, and for many gets in the way of helping candidates to develop independent agency (Carter & Kumar, 2017). In response to that challenge, Connell and Manathunga (2012) have provocatively argued that their main role as supervisors is "to reinforce the idea that a supervisor's role is to protect the student from the institution, as far as one can, and encourage originality and radical thinking" (p. 8). In our case, the community development from the beginning encouraged originality and independent agency on an increasingly horizontal (peer) level.

Individual reflection 4: Associate Supervisor

From the very beginning when Sazan approached me by email about doing a PhD, we communicated by distance. It soon became apparent that there were a number of barriers, including requirements around physical presence on campus. This led us to the university where Sazan eventually enrolled, which had a longstanding reputation as a distance education provider. I already had a close working relationship with Megan, and I had worked with Robyn before, which inspired confidence about the potential of the supervision team. Prior relationships help smoothen the process of the enculturation stage (Gray & Crosta, 2019).

In Sazan's case, establishing a good working relationship was particularly important, as this team was effectively Sazan's 'learning community'. Doing a PhD can be lonely, especially when a student never has an opportunity to join other PhD students on campus to discuss their work and talk about the challenges they face, which are considerable in Sazan's context. This relates to the "separation from support" intensifier (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014, p. 616), and this is what I consider the main flaw in our supervisory relationship, as we could have done more to link Sazan into other support networks.

The academic challenges included explaining the project and context to an Australian ethics committee, developing conceptual ideas, accessing resources, and testing and shaping ideas. Different backgrounds of supervisors meant that it took a while to reach consensus on conceptual and methodological approaches, while

Sazan's work context meant that the idea of reading academic journals needed some initial reinforcing.

We have played different roles and used different tools at various stages to bridge the distance both literally (through technology) and metaphorically (by being present and aware). While Sazan has a direct line to her primary supervisor (Robyn) through WhatsApp, I follow both her Twitter account and her blog (called My Nest in Kurdistan, <https://mandalawi.me/>). As a supervision team, we make sure at all times that one of us, via WhatsApp, direct Twitter message, or email, checks in, especially when we hear on the news or through social media that a crisis is taking place (e.g., the Turkish attacks on Kurdistan, or high numbers of COVID-19 cases).

Overall, the 'learning community of peers' we have cultivated between us, and which is based on mutual respect and trust, has helped to scale some of the barriers that come with the 'tyranny of distance', as well as considerably mitigate some of Winchester-Seeto et al.'s (2014) intensifiers.

Discussion and conclusions

These individual reflections and our dialogic discourse provide important insights into what constitute some of the elements of successful doctoral supervision by distance. In our case, the insights we have gained are an important recognition of supervision as pedagogy (Kobayashi et al., 2017) and what some of the elements of such pedagogy may involve, particularly in a distance mode. The key here is that we worked towards a community of peers from the early stages, which quickly helped us move past the enculturation stage towards the healthy relationship and emancipation stages (Gray & Crosta, 2019).

As Bastalich (2017) has pointed out, doctoral supervision has long been treated as a 'private space', which has led to "its under-theorisation as a specifically pedagogic' practice" (p. 1149). As part of this wider debate, long-standing supervision practices are increasingly being questioned, including most recently the idea of individual supervision by exploring the idea of supervising doctoral students collectively (Agné & Mörkenstam, 2018). Part of the reflections in this paper can

thus be seen as reflections on pedagogic practice, with a particular focus on distance supervision. We have used a combination of Gray and Crosta's (2019) three themes related to online doctoral supervision, and Winchester-Seeto et al.'s (2014) intensifiers affecting candidates and supervisors in cross-cultural doctoral education contexts, as a framework to reflect on a single case study. This has two main limitations: firstly, it is one instance of a successful supervisory relationship, which may not be transferable to other contexts, and secondly, it is an instance of reflection-in-action in that the candidate has only just submitted her final thesis. In terms of the former, the use of Winchester-Seeto's (2014) intensifiers has allowed for an analysis of contexts (such as supervision by distance) where those intensifiers may be relevant but in different ways than an on-campus cross-cultural candidacy. The lessons learned in this process are potentially transferable to other supervision by distance contexts. With regards to the latter limitation, power relations undoubtedly had an impact on the reflections in this study. Yet, the development of community of peers in this case again served to mitigate their impact to an important extent, as a high degree of trust underlies this community, which set the scene for reflections that are as honest as they can be, without fear for potential negative consequences.

Richards and Fletcher (2020) framed doctoral supervision as a form of critical friendship, which includes three key elements that are relevant in the context of our case study: 1) finding a balance when supporting students; 2) maintaining social relationships with students; and 3) giving up control and allowing students to struggle. Firstly, finding a balance begins well before the actual supervision starts, and goes all the way back to initial contact between the candidate and supervisor, as it involves carefully considering and identifying the right fit. This becomes even more important when the supervision occurs from a distance, because it involves all supervisors being flexible, humble and agile enough to firstly learn about the candidate's specific context, and secondly respond to that context in an appropriate and flexible manner. This happens simultaneously with the cognitive aspects of situated doctoral supervision, including scaffolding, coaching, problem-solving and guidance (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991). In this case, the supervision team and the candidate began to function like a learning community from early on in the supervisors-candidate relationship, which means

that individuals in this community were increasingly more like peers, thus flattening the power relationship to an important extent. The learning community we have established challenges “the conception of supervisors as distant masters with sole responsibility for ‘quality’ outcomes” (Bastalich, 2017, p. 1146), and shifts the responsibility to the learning community overall, which includes the candidate. This does not mean that there were no differences in perspective or challenges in the supervisory process. In the early stages, for example, we had meetings where it felt like the three supervisors were at times bombarding Sazan with their own knowledge and perspectives. It took time to find a balance in the level, amount and timing of the advice offered on the one hand and creating enough space for Sazan to find her own way on the other. Again, the development of a learning community of peers allowed for this to gradually happen in a balanced and supported manner.

This leads to the second, and closely related, point of maintaining social relationships, which is a crucial element of such a learning community. Our reflections of conversations about everyday life on the one hand, and crises on the other, as well as the practice of ‘checking in’, are vital elements of maintaining social relationships, which in turn deepen and extend the functioning of a learning community. In our case, we injected a sense of humanity in an otherwise virtual learning community.

The final element of giving up control (as supervisors) and allowing the candidate to struggle is important. Again, this is a fine balance which requires flexibility, humility and agility, as well as empathy and mutual respect, especially on the part of supervisors, as we are not experts all the time. Overall then, developing and sustaining a human-centred learning community of peers has the potential to provide a blueprint for effective distance doctoral supervision, even if every supervisory context requires a unique approach to some extent.

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