

VIEWS FROM CAMPUS

“My Supervisors Never Cease to Believe in Me”: A Reflection of an Intercultural Doctoral Supervision Relationship

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D OCTORAL SUPERVISION has been at the center of doctoral education discussions for long, as it is emphasized in previous studies that the influence of the supervisor(s) or faculty advisor(s) and the traditional dyadic/triadic advisor(s)-advisee relationship are crucial to the learning process and successful completion of PhD students (Acker et al., 1994; Delamont et al., 1997; Golde, 2000; Lee, 2008; Pearson & Brew, 2002). Supervision relationship is described as a complex and subtle form of teaching (in Acker et al., 1994) that has the “tradition of implicit and unexamined processes” (Pearson & Brew, 2002, p. 138). As there has been a remarkable increase in the number of international doctoral students and domestic students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, what has been the focus in scholarly discussions about doctoral supervision of late is intercultural supervision. Supervision pedagogy, as Manathunga (2011) emphasizes, “is not a neutral intellectual zone... Culture, politics and history matter in supervision” (p. 368). Both supervisors and students enter the relationship with personal histories, culture, and social backgrounds.

As an international doctoral student in Education who is interested in migration, transnationalism and

mobility, I entered the supervisory relationship with the self-positioning of myself as a student who used English as a foreign language, coming from the Confucius-inherited education background, Vietnam, and valuing the teacher–student relationship in a more hierarchical way than in Western education systems. Prior to my departure for the doctoral sojourn in New Zealand, I had imagined that being a student not from Anglo-European backgrounds, I would be required to be assimilated to Western research approaches and practices. I had a stereotypical idea that my supervisors would only talk about academic-related issues while students’ personal lives would not matter to them. I was afraid that I would not be “critical” enough, I thought I would try to be “more critical” to prove to my supervisors that I could be a competent PhD student because Asian students are more than often depicted as uncritical (Tran & Vu, 2018). My experiences as a doctoral student demonstrated otherwise.

Empowering Yourself

The dominant discourse has tended to position international doctoral students “in ‘deficit’ terms”

(Magyar & Robinson-Pant, 2011, p. 664) which describe them as uncritical and having poor language skills. This deficit approach is normally translated into a need to integrate and fit international doctoral students into existing university cultures, disregarding students' prior academic capital. My supervisors, however, were always the ones who reminded me that my previous education was important to my academic development, and my cultural identity would offer unique perspective to my research literary and knowledge repertoires. I was their first Vietnamese PhD student, and instead of trying to mold me into a Western way of thinking and writing, my supervisors encouraged me to explore ways to incorporate my Vietnamese language and knowledge in my research. More often than not, the West, or the North, is considered the global hub of knowledge, "the source of all Knowledge and Theory" while the East, or the South, is regarded as "a giant laboratory to test European theories and as a site for gathering data about people, flora and fauna" (Manathunga, 2017, p. 5). However, in our supervision meetings, the West and the East were brought into dialogues. My supervisors constantly encouraged me to think of the Vietnamese concepts and values that could be used in my doctoral project, and to engage in respectful and rigorous critiques of my knowledge about my own cultural heritage. They often reminded me that my PhD project should be read by Vietnamese people as well, not only academics who spoke the English language, and therefore, my Vietnamese language could be the bridge to reach wider audience. And as I am a non-native English speaker, sometimes I came up with words that were not "quite English," but according to my supervisors' opinion, they became a new figurative metaphor when I crafted poems. Their sensitive and encouraging comments made me restore my confidence in using

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English and writing in English. At the same time, I was aware that as English is not my native language, I would need to incessantly improve my lexical repertoire.

Since I was the first Vietnamese doctoral student of both of my supervisors, there was a mixture of pride and fear in me. I felt proud to introduce my home values to them, but at the same time, I was afraid I might not live up to their standards. The following poem is a recorded moment when I was encouraged by my professors to use my mother tongue to empower myself and my Vietnamese research participants in my research project.

Your language

"Have you ever thought about writing poems in your own language?
Embrace it, you know
Let your mother tongue voiced
It's authentic", my supervisors suggested.

"I'm not sure I'm confident of crafting poems in my own language"
Hesitated, me.

Am I too familiar with academic English that I've lost my own language sensibility?,
So I thought.

"Try, you will be fine", they patted me in the back,
As a sign of trust that I was capable.

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Using post-colonial concepts in her study of intercultural supervision, Manathunga (2011, p. 369) raises an interesting point of "moments of ambivalence," or "unhomeliness" which signifies "the cultural alienation, sense of uncertainty and discomfort that people experience as they adjust to new cultural practices" (Manathunga, 2007, p. 98). This ambivalence may occur not only to doctoral candidates who are engaged with alien social, cultural, and academic contexts but also to supervisors who recognize that there is a great deal that they do not or cannot know when they work with students from diverse backgrounds. In my case, the moments of ambivalence occurred from time to time as I explained the way that I preferred to approach my co-national participants, or when I explained the historical context of Vietnam that might lead to certain ways of thinking and patterns of behaviors. However, such moments were not unhomey, nor did they cause me any discomfort.

The moments instead brought my supervisors and me together in order for us to come to a mutual agreement of how we could work between and across cultures as a team. My supervisors listened to my explanation, googled where I came from, and constantly demonstrated their appreciation of our differences in cultures, languages, and social values. They consistently emphasized that my Vietnamese identity deserves to be embraced evidently as a part of my project and as a post-colonial effort to decolonize Western academic superiority. I accepted their challenge and attempted to create found poetry made from my research participants' own words in Vietnamese. In so doing, I was reminded that in seeking the legitimization of being an academic in a Western world, my cultural root was visible and a crucial part of the process. In that sense, elements of transculturation should be present in supervisory relationship "as moments of creativity" when students critically and carefully blend the parts of Western knowledge they find useful with their own ways of thinking. Concurrently, supervisors "expand their ways of understanding the world, rethink their disciplinary knowledge and remain humble in the process of themselves continuing to become learners" (Manathunga, 2011, p. 369–370).

Our pedagogical space of intercultural supervision, in fact, had its own history. My main supervisor is a transnational scholar herself who used to study and work in the US before moving to Australia for several years and returning to New Zealand where she was born and raised. My co-supervisor is a New Zealander who studies Pākehā identity and uses arts-based methodologies in her research including poetry, fiction, drama, and painting. They both have supervised many international students from diverse ethnicities and national backgrounds. This can explain their "mutual respect, dialogic approaches to supervision and the recognition of the intellectual resources diverse students bring with them"

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(Manathunga, 2017, p. 3). Since they value spaces and places they have been to, they considered my cultural knowledge as relevant and insightful, and they spent time understanding the geographies that shaped my intellectual development. In contrast to the assimilationist supervision pedagogies, what I experienced is an intercultural supervisory approach that does not regard knowledge as "universal and un-located" (Manathunga, 2017, p. 5) but as a kaleidoscope. Furthermore, supervision is a space that nurtures diversity and deep respect for multiple sources of knowledge and ways of knowledge creation. Since I was always treated as an intellectual equal to my supervisors, I gained more confidence in my intercultural and bilingual knowledge.

My experience of our intercultural pedagogical space may have some implications for international doctoral students and their supervisors. It can be argued that working with supervisors is one is the first stage of international doctoral students' being exposed to international critique, leading to a possible disorientation and reorientation into a new identity (Carter & Gunn, 2017) and the re-examination of their existing identities. Therefore, supervisors' patience and empathy is critical in allowing these processes to happen. That students see their supervisors' attempts to understand and listen to their histories and existing social, cultural and academic capital is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for a fruitful teamwork process. The learning, un-learning, and re-learning processes occurring within the intercultural space can be empowering both students and supervisors, resulting in changes in their emotions and even embodiment.

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Balancing Your Roles

I was thankful to have supervisors who constantly encouraged me to prioritize my children and family, to find joy in their cuddles and snuggles, and not to worry too much about not experiencing a PhD student

life in all its shapes and forms. They suggested a new perspective to look at the situation of being a mother while being a doctoral student as two complementary roles that actually helped me to find the balance. As I had to have finished work in the office by the time the children left their kindergarten and could only resume my study the next morning

after they were back with their teachers, my brain took necessary time to rest and my energy was not sapped by a stressful workload. I would not have the feeling that either my academic pursuit or my maternal duties doubled the stress, nor would I feel guilty for not doing well in both roles. My argument here is that although the supervisory role in the candidature of any PhD student is of high importance (Golde, 2000; Lee, 2008; Pearson & Brew, 2002), it is even more crucial in the case of graduate student mothers who may experience “a kind of stigmatised social identity” (Zhang, 2020, p. 314), which refers to the violation of “a set of appearances and actions as well as beliefs and attitudes that can be reasonably expected of each member” in academia (Eversole et al., 2013, p. 161). In this sense, although supervisors may not act as judges who give the verdict of “not guilty” to graduate student mothers, their support and sympathy can serve as an effective antidote to the uneasiness and guilt student mothers often suffer when they think they are failing in both roles (Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012).

Supervision is never solitary work, but a close-knit collaboration between the advisors and their advisees because the doctorate is “a relational and pedagogical project of student/supervisor development and identity formation” (Thomson & Walker, 2010, p. 4). This process, as Magyar and Robinson-Pant (2011) notice, becomes even “more complex when differing cultural practices and multiple identities are involved” (p. 665). Besides the professional assistance, attention has been called to the facilitative role of supervisors in their doctoral students’ emotional and personal concerns as well (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004). This aspect of

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child is one way for supervisors to encourage their students to reconfigure these identities along with their doctoral student/academic identity development, rather than developing one at the cost of the others. The nuances of personal identity of an international doctoral student can lead to deviance in their doctoral learning. In that sense, supervisors should allow students to have time and space to negotiate their multiple identities.

Reflective Notes

The supervisory practices I had highlighted “a pedagogical site of rich possibility as well as, at times, a place of puzzling and confronting complexity” (Grant & Manathunga, 2011, p. 351). What I learn from my supervisors and our relationship is that any relationship will work as long as there is honesty, tolerance, understanding, openness, patience, and trust. Transculturation moments in our supervisory relationship were promoted by “dialogue (or dialogic interaction, communication, exchange) between cultures, between knowledges, and between supervisors, students and others such as peers – dialogues that take place in different forms at different stages with different levels of engagement” (Xu & Grant, 2017, p. 2). I was also taught by my professors that the supervisors’ traditional position of authority as “the academic and cultural ‘insider’, the ‘knower’” (Magyar & Robinson-Pant, 2011, p. 673) who is familiar with implicit rules will

be challenged. Instead, students can take the role of the knowers who have higher awareness of and sensitivity to differing cultural practices, which contributes to the feeling of being an academic in a student like myself. What makes me, as a student, feel empowered is that

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my supervisors have never ceased to believe in my potentials and competences. When I told them I hoped I could survive my PhD program, they assured me I would be able to thrive in academia.

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