

Title

**Doctoral Supervisor: Coach, Mentor or Master? Developing an
alternative paradigm for doctoral supervision**

Authors

Dr Janice Cook, Senior Lecturer, Hertfordshire Business School,
University of Hertfordshire, De Havilland Campus, Hatfield, AL10 9UF,
j.cook9@herts.ac.uk

Dr Lynn Nichol, Principal Lecturer in HR, Worcester Business School,
University of Worcester, City Campus, Worcester, WR1 3AS,
l.nichol@worc.ac.uk

Abstract

This working paper is the second in a series of working papers presenting the ongoing findings from a longitudinal research project grounded in exploring the experience of doctoral supervision and developing practice. In the first paper and phase one of this research study, Cook, Nichol and Loon (2014) explored the existing context for doctoral supervision and, drawing from literature on the problematic nature of doctoral supervision and coaching and mentoring, considered the value of drawing on coaching and mentoring models in formulating alternative paradigms for doctoral supervision. This paper reports the findings of phase one, a mixed methods study of experiences of doctoral supervision with supervisors and students in one UK university business school, from which the Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision conceptual model emerged. The paper also introduces phase two, a collaborative action research study with doctoral supervisors and students who are applying, reflecting on and developing further this doctoral supervision model. We are aiming to answer the question of whether the use of coaching and mentoring in doctoral supervision enables the transfer and sustainability of learning from the doctoral supervision session to outside the experience and improves the quality. Is the doctoral supervisor coach, mentor or master?

Key words

Doctoral supervision, coaching, mentoring, collaborative action research.

Doctoral Supervisor: Coach, Mentor or Master? Developing an alternative paradigm for doctoral supervision

Longitudinal research study exploring doctoral supervision

Questions have been raised for some time in UK university business schools about applicability to a new and more diverse current doctoral student body of approaches to doctoral 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). Our research aim is to develop a new model for doctoral supervision which is more appropriate for a wider range of doctoral students including more mature and business experienced individuals. By developing an alternative paradigm for doctoral supervision, we are attempting to answer whether the doctoral supervisor is coach, mentor or master?

This working paper is the second in a series of working papers presenting the on-going findings from a longitudinal research study grounded in exploring the experience of doctoral supervision and developing practice, specifically the role and responsibilities of both the doctoral supervisor and doctoral student in UK university business schools. In the first paper, Cook, Nichol and Loon (2014) explored the existing context for doctoral supervision and, drawing from literature on the problematic nature of doctoral supervision as well as literature on coaching and mentoring, considered the value of drawing on coaching and mentoring models in formulating alternative paradigms for doctoral supervision. This second paper provides a reminder of the theoretical base for our research study, a brief summary of the Phase One findings and an outline of the research design for Phase Two.

Theoretical base for our research study

Whilst it is difficult to source a breadth of literature relevant to the aim of this research study, Cook, Nichol and Loon (2014) did highlight the work of Lee (2008) which begins to engage with the concepts of coaching and mentoring. In particular, she focuses on developing a relationship and one of her five areas of influence is emancipation which identifies the supervisory role as a mentoring process encouraging self-discovery and self-experience and supporting the doctoral student's move from dependence to self-direction. This definitely aligns itself to current

coaching and mentoring research and theory. Drawing on Pearson and Kayrooz (2007), Lee suggests a supervisor should mentor the candidate, whilst coaching the research study. However, 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. However, the willingness of doctoral supervisors to implement such an approach may be varied even though the changing market place of doctoral students seems to be indicating that change is needed.

Cook, Nichol and Loon (2014) stated that "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."

They identified that "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" or, in this study, the doctoral supervision session. As Cook's (2011) model was originally developed for a business coaching context, this seemed to provide a suitable theoretical base to assist with answering our research question in a UK university business school environment.

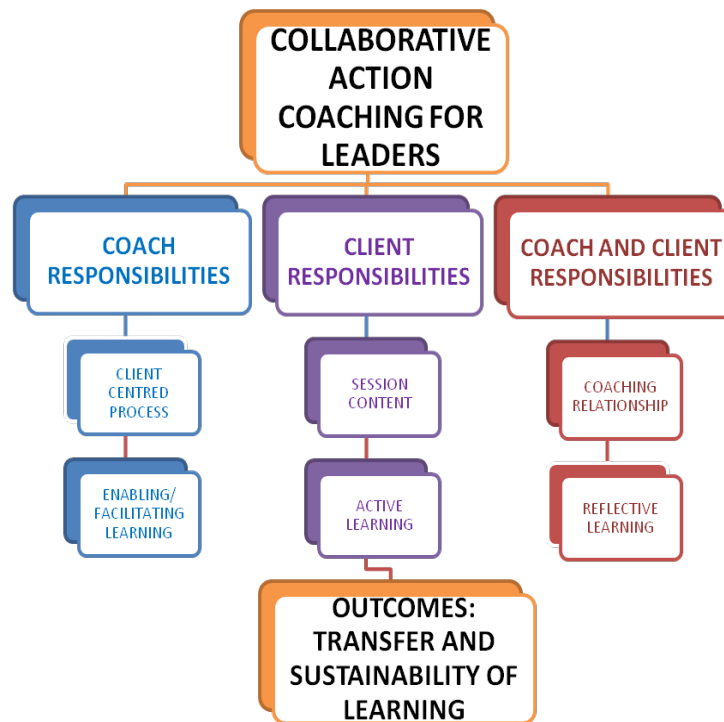
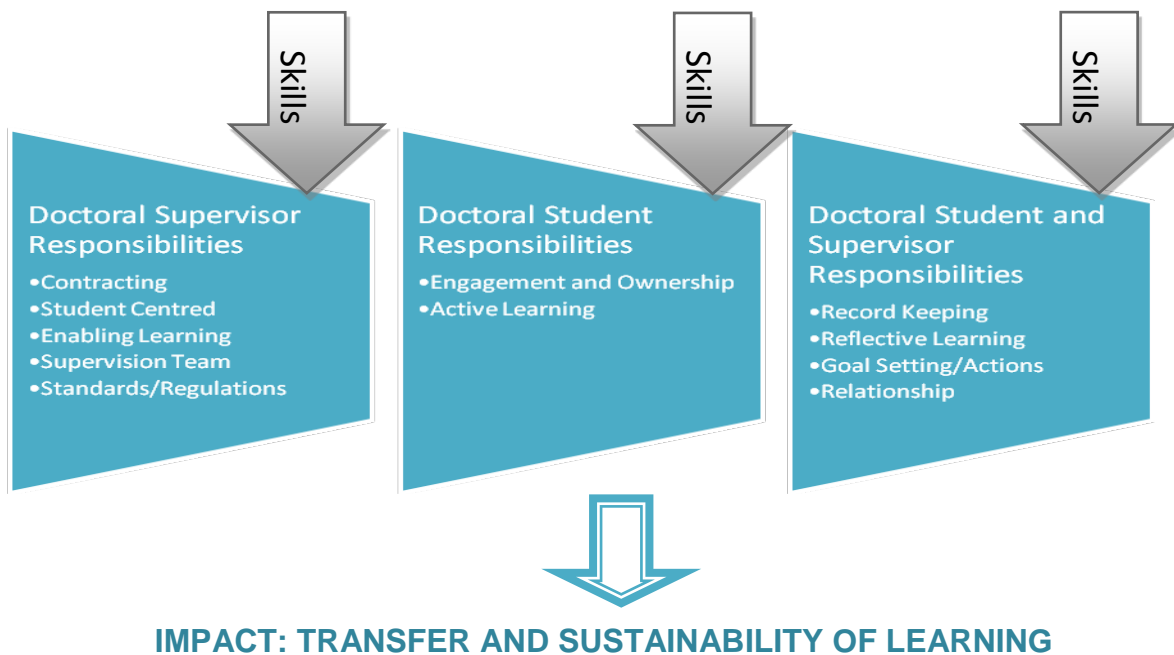


Figure 1: Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (Cook, 2011)

Brief summary of findings from Phase One

We are in the process of developing a journal article on the findings from Phase One and therefore can only present a brief summary in this working paper. We will expand on this in our conference presentation as a further taster for our article and for discussion in the session.

Phase one was a mixed methods study of experiences of doctoral supervision with supervisors and students in one UK university business school, from which the conceptual Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision Model emerged (see Figure 2 below) following a thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Phase one explored and confirmed the value for doctoral supervision of using Cook's (2011) Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model.



**Figure 2: Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision conceptual model
(authors' own)**

As Figure 2 above illustrates, this newly developed conceptual model contains a range of individual and shared responsibilities for both the doctoral supervisor and student. This creates an overall collaborative process and relationship to enable transfer and sustainability of learning enacted in the supervision session to outside the experience. There are eleven themes of responsibility which have emerged from phase one as well as identified skills to enable implementation of the conceptual model by both doctoral supervisors and students.

Doctoral supervisor responsibilities and skills

Overall, the five themes of responsibility for doctoral supervisors are indicating a process and relationship more aligned to coaching and mentoring than historical doctoral pedagogy; although the work of Lee (2008) mentioned above has some similarities. For example, the model includes both directive and non directive processes of enabling learning with the supervisor providing advice and guidance from their experience as well as asking key questions to enable the students to develop as independent researchers. The possible challenges for implementing these themes include: clarity by the supervisor at the initial contracting stage of the relationship; tailoring supervision to the individual needs and context of each student;

enabling the student to learn and develop as a researcher by creating the right balance of challenge and support; creating a balanced supervision team according to the needs and context of the individual student; and, finally, ensuring that the student complies with university standards/regulations.

The data also indicated that enabling of learning in such a unique context requires an extensive range of skills, not just limited to delivering content from the supervisor's area of expertise. They include listening, use of silence, empathy, open questioning, and reflective observation. All coaching and mentoring skills.

Doctoral student responsibilities and skills

The data found that the supervisor creates the environment for the 'meeting of the minds' where the student can evaluate options and make informed decisions. In order to do this well, the student needs to be engaged, owning their work and actively learning from doctoral supervision. These were key in terms of enabling transfer and sustainability of learning from the supervision discussions. In terms of skills development, the students need help in maximising the opportunities that supervision provides including the interface between themselves and the supervisory team.

Doctoral student and supervisor responsibilities and skills

Also emerging from the data in phase one were some shared responsibilities for both the supervisor and the student. This collaboration in four areas is also enabling the transfer and sustainability of learning for the doctoral student. Collaboration to achieve the shared goal of doctoral completion was seen as a joint responsibility as was record keeping which is often traditionally seen as mainly the student's responsibility. Similarly, reflective learning was seen as part of the student's development as a researcher, the data indicates the important of both parties reflectively learning to enable the supervision process and relationship to develop positively and effectively. With regard to relationship, it was found to be important for supervisors and students to be connected 'personally, intellectually and politically' in a long-lasting and formative relationship.

Two areas emerged where both supervisor and student require the same skills; feedback skill with both parties seeking and providing appropriate feedback; and reflective learning skills.

Phase one was conducted in only one UK university business school and, as planned, delivered a suitably robust conceptual model to be used as a starting point (Bassey, 1998) for phase two of our research study. Phase two will be a collaborative action research study with doctoral supervisors and students applying, reflecting on and developing further this doctoral supervision model.

Phase two research design

In phase two we are seeking to answer the question: can the use of coaching and mentoring in doctoral supervision in UK business schools enable transfer and sustainability of learning for doctoral students and higher quality supervision? It will be a longitudinal collaborative action research study over a period of approximately 18 months within a social constructivist paradigm (Cresswell, 2009) and is a form of 'practical' action research that aims to change and/or improve practice within a group (Carr and Kemmis, 2004). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) state that it is not action research unless it is collaborative; McNiff and Whitehead (2006) prefer participatory action research. Cook (2011, p41) suggests that "collaborative implies more of a commitment (both emotionally and practically) than participatory as well as a sharing of responsibility" which is important in this study.

Our study will follow Bassey's (1998, p93-108) eight stages of enquiry as slightly modified by Robson (2002, p218), originally developed in the teaching world which is relevant for this study both in terms of the Higher Education environment as well as the use of coaching and mentoring. The starting point (the first stage) for the collaborative action research process will be the Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision conceptual model (Figure 2 above). This model will be applied and developed by supervisors during two action research cycles. Supervisors and students will be able to develop their practice as well as contribute to the development of a model.

The main data collection methods will be research diaries completed by supervisors as well as feedback/reflection forms completed by students. With regard to the research diaries, Cox (2005, p260) in her mentoring research suggests that “the regular use of a reflective practice tool or model makes learning from experience a more reliable and faster method of gaining access to necessary knowledge and wisdom about our work processes and about ourselves”. The feedback/reflection form for students will be designed around the Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision conceptual model including specifically transfer and sustainability of learning. Supervisors will have a discussion with the students about the content of their feedback and include any reflections on these discussions in their research diary. As in phase one, a thematic analysis approach will be adopted, drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure a robust and thorough approach to the data analysis process.

A total of eight to ten supervisors will be recruited on a voluntary basis from a range of UK university business schools from various professional fields to enhance the generalisability of the findings (McNiff, 2013). A robust ethics approach will be adopted as outlined by Cook (2010) in her model of “creating a strong ethical environment for collaborative action research in coaching” which includes ‘surface, non-surface and situational’ elements. Ethics approval by Worcester Business School is in place and participant recruitment has commenced. Figure 3 below is a map of the research process illustrating the stages of the two action research cycles; because of the potentially dispersed geographical location of the participating supervisors, it may not be possible to hold a group session for all of them but every attempt will be made following the second data analysis process.

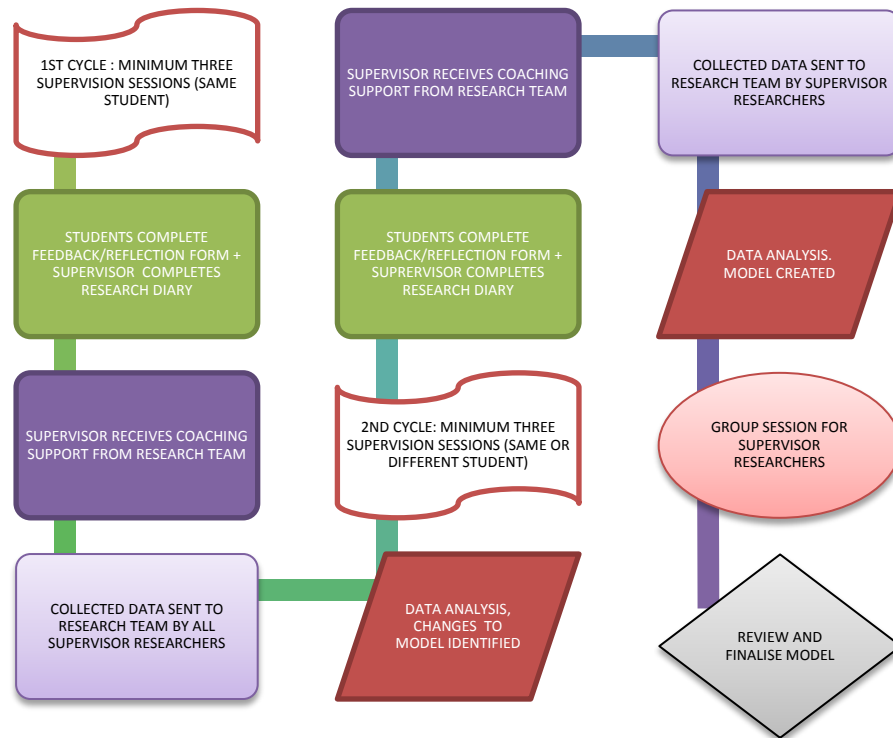


Figure 3: map of phase two collaborative action research process

This is a fairly challenging collaborative action research environment as the collaborative researchers are across a range of organisations and it is only the research team and the conceptual model which are linking them together for the purposes of this research study. To help meet this challenge, one member of the research team will not be a collaborative researcher and will concentrate on briefing participants on the conceptual model and the research design both initially and will be a point of contact for all collaborative researchers throughout the action research process; the other member of the research team will be a collaborative researcher, experiencing firsthand the data collection and action research processes. These roles and responsibilities will be reviewed upon completion of the first action research cycle.

Implications for doctoral supervision practice

As stated in Cook, Nichol and Loon (2014), “the existing literature suggests that the growth of professional and practice based doctorates and the diversification of the student populations 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)”. This indicates a need to explore and develop an alternative approach to doctoral supervision which is more relevant, appropriate and marketable. Whilst collaborative action research across a range of UK university business schools and doctoral supervisors and students is challenging, it is intended that phase two of this research study will actively contribute to the development of an alternative paradigm for doctoral supervision. We are aiming to answer the question of whether the doctoral supervisor is coach, mentor or master which seems to be much needed in the doctoral pedagogy and in UK business schools with the changing student demographics. At the same time, we are developing a model which aims to use coaching and mentoring to enable the transfer and sustainability of learning from the doctoral supervision session to outside the experience and the improvement of quality. Phase one of our research study suggests that we will also be making recommendations regarding the skills needed to implement this new model which will be of use to any UK business schools considering applying this model to their doctoral supervision practice.

References

- Bartlett, A., Mercer, G. (Eds) (2001). *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (R)Elations*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Bassey, M. (1998), *Action Research for Improving Educational Practice*, In Halsall, R. (ed), *Teacher Research and School Improvement: Opening Doors from the Inside*, Buckingham:Open University Press
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Carr, W., and Kemmis, S. (2004). *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. London: Routledge.
- Cook, J. (2010). Collaborative action research: The ethical challenges. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, October(4), 141-150.
- Cook, J. (2011). *The effect of coaching on the transfer and sustainability of learning: coaching for leaders, a collaborative action research study*. DCM Thesis, Oxford Brookes University.
- Cook, J., Nichol, L. and Loon, M. (2014). *An exploration of the use of coaching and mentoring in the supervision of doctoral students in UK university business schools*. UFHRD 2014, Cork, Ireland.
- Cox, E. (2005). Adult learners learning from experience: using a reflective practice model to support work-based learning, *Reflective Practice*, 6(4):459-472.
- Cresswell, J. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*. London:Sage.
- Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1988) (3 ed). *The Action Research Planner*, Australia: Deakin University.
- Lee, A. (2008). How are doctoral students supervised? Concepts of doctoral research supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*. 33 (3), 267-281.
- McNiff, J. (2013). *Action Research: Principles and Practice* (3rd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pearson, M., Kayrooz, C. (2007). Enabling critical reflection on research supervisory practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*. 9 (1), 99-116.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research*, Oxford:Blackwell.
- Zeegars, M. and Barron, D. (2012). Pedagogical concerns in doctoral supervision: a challenge for pedagogy. *Quality Assurance in Higher Education*. 20.1, 20-30.