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Title:

Acknowledging the affirmative: Evidence of supervision learning thresholds in thesis acknowledgements

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Abstract

Mantai and Dowling (2015) refer to the Acknowledgements pages of higher degree research (HDR) theses as “an under-utilised yet rich data source” (p. 106) and Hyland (2004) recognises the way in which thesis Acknowledgements have the potential to “reveal academic preferences” and “point to the processes of its [the thesis’] creation” (p. 305). Using a matrix analysis technique (Miles & Huberman, 2013; Patton, 2015), this study mines the Acknowledgements section of a sample of 120 Masters and Doctoral theses to investigate HDR graduates’ views of their postgraduate supervisors to augment our current understanding of the learning thresholds of HDR supervisors.

Based on the conference sub-theme of “Troublesome not tricky: not all that challenges is a threshold”, this paper considers the more constructive nuances of threshold concept theory in relation to the learning thresholds of postgraduate supervisors. Instead of furthering the discussion that threshold concepts have become synonymous with learner difficulty, the question posed is: What do the affirmative and joyous experiences of postgraduate supervision have to offer threshold concept theory associated with the pedagogy of supervision? This study layers the viewpoints of HDR graduates’ positive experiences about supervision alongside some of the more negative experiences of supervisors that typically incorporate “darker themes”, “threats”, “ordeals” and “disorientation” (Carter, 2016, pp. 1139, 1145) as well as “barriers”, “power conflicts” and “tensions” (Ismail, Majid, & Ismail, 2013, pp. 165, 168).

This study’s findings do not discount the challenging aspects of HDR supervision, as represented in earlier research. Instead, an intertwined representation is offered of the challenging “living through” experiences of the HDR supervisor with the rosier “looking back” views from HDR candidates at the completion stage of their studies. A collection of light *and* dark learning thresholds, acquired by HDR supervisors while developing a pedagogy of supervision, is offered for consideration.

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