

Independent thinking: Cross-cultural possibilities

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This performative vignette represents a snapshot taken from a recent cross-disciplinary Action Research/Action Learning project at Curtin University of Technology. The cameo conveys the nature of our participation as staff, students and facilitator in addressing the development and enhancement of the FLOTE (first language other than English) students' communication skills in the context of their postgraduate studies. You will hear the multiple voices of the supervisors from Pharmacy, Social Work and Teacher Education, together with those of their respective PhD and Masters students, and that of the project facilitator.

We focus upon the elusive nature of the concept of independent thinking in advanced scholarship. This has necessitated that we become mindful of the students' 'totality', power relations and interpersonal communication within the supervisory process, and the necessity for reflective practice. In representing how the different stakeholders dialogued on these complex issues, we hope to convey some of the process and outcomes attached to this Action Research Project.

The Project: A Critical Approach

The primary aim of this project was to develop models of supervision for enhancing the English language communication skills of NESB postgraduate students, based upon the assumption that lecturers/supervisors in their respective disciplines, 'set great store by the capacity of their students to give the appropriate *expression* to knowledge' (Malcolm, 1996:1). Genre analysis (see Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990) suggests that students are initiated into communities of learning which may be conceptualised as:

discourse communities, that is, aggregations of people of common interest who have ownership over certain modes of expression (usually written expression) and who confer, or deny, membership of the community to aspiring members on the basis of their control, or lack of control, over these modes of expression. (Malcolm, 1996:1)

Hence literacy in particular, and education in general, 'can serve to domesticate populations and reproduce hierarchies of inequality and injustice' (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993:379). From such a positioning, we would argue that action (critical) research is not a process which can determine its own effects or speak its own truth, for the learning that takes place is implicated in its relations to the sociopolitical context, and 'particular economies of truth, value and power' (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993:381).

Power Relations

A critical awareness of power relations within the supervisory relationship informed my decision, as the project facilitator, to build two Action Learning Sets into the Action Research project: one for the 'Supers' and one for the 'PGs' (please see Appendix 1). This was based on an understanding that people do not possess power, 'but produce it and are produced by it in their relational constitution through discourse' (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993:13). The aim of this tactic was to give 'PGs' a space within which to be reflexive and develop their own voice, and 'Supers' a space for reflective practice. The *actions* that emerged out of the two Action Learning 'Sets' then fed back into the respective supervisory sessions.

Emancipatory Potential

The emancipatory potential of human beings, particularly when they act collectively, can truly change the world. (Weick, 1994:223)

By working collectively in this Action Research project, we were all privileged to experience how emancipatory potential can be nurtured and released. We hope that the collective voices in this paper, and on the accompanying video, will demonstrate that there is more to literacy than syntax and spelling!

Nduduzo's Road to Independent Thinking

Background and Expectations

My English-speaking background started during my years of schooling when I studied English as one among other school subjects. Then, rarely did I engage in prolonged use of English outside the classroom and the English lesson. In my adult life, not much changed. I would speak, read and write in English, but that constituted a fraction of my daily experiences. Coming into the Internationalisation project as a postgraduate student faced with writing a professional research report, I expected the project to complement my research endeavour, improving my reading and understanding of technical language in the literature, organising my literature search, and contextualising the research into my culture.

My previous supervisors and lecturers portrayed power-wielding people who set boundaries and strict guidelines, dwelling on my outward deficiencies that characterise 'the species of outsiders' (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993:401-2) or 'strangers in academia' (Zamel, 1995:506).

Becoming an independent research scholar

The project has been all about sharing; with the other students, as individuals and as a group, and excitingly within myself. Practising self-reflection, self-expression and listening to multiple voices struck me as very relevant in nurturing communication, yet these are often ignored particularly in cultures like mine.

Peter has not made secret his intention to devolve power to me so that I take responsibility for my efforts and achievements, own the process of my learning, but like a baby, learn confidently knowing that he is available in case I falter. To enhance my communication skills, I should slowly come out of 'the cultural cringe', taking advantage of my being a 'cultural border-crosser'.

The project has improved my self-image, realising the importance of reflecting on my actions so as to improve my future performance. From sharing problems and solution strategies with fellow students I learned the importance of not assuming that my supervisor understands my problems before I formally present them to him. Personalities and facial expressions are not enough to portray personal meanings; the power of the (authentic) spoken or written word is unquestionable.

Peter's Supervision for Empowerment

This report focuses on how my participation in Curtin's Internationalisation project helped me to enact the goal of student empowerment in my supervision of Nduduzo, an overseas postgraduate student undertaking a Master's degree.

Theory to Practice

I learned to voice my concerns about problematic aspects of my supervisory practice. At an early meeting I explained that I was wondering how to challenge my student's use of the term 'training' for describing his professional activities. From my perspective, training connotes learning as performance (and, perhaps, indoctrination). I wanted to persuade him to consider using the term 'education' which has a richer connotation of learning as a mindful activity (e.g., reflection, scepticism, conceptualisation). While being questioned by my fellow supervisors about my rationale for wanting to alert the student to this issue, I realised that I too should adopt a questioning approach with Nduduzo that was similar to the one that I was experiencing right then.

Accountability

By participating in this project, I learned to become accountable in a public forum. I now attach high value to the process of explaining my practice, admitting to its problematic nature, and negotiating possible solution strategies; a process that entails reflecting critically on the theoretical warrants that I evoke to justify my practice. The project provided me with the means and the confidence to declare that I am comfortable with being held to account for my supervisory practice beyond the comfort zone of my own university office.

Reciprocal Communications

I now find myself explaining and justifying my own supervisory strategies, especially those based on my ideal of student empowerment. This is easy to do because it is a discourse that we have practised in the project group meetings. Nduduzo's enhanced sense of agency as a learner bears testimony to the way that this type of self-disclosing, reflective and reciprocal discourse has enlivened our communicative relationship. Recently, he has begun to set the agenda (by email) for our weekly meeting, and I find myself asking what are your needs right now, and how can I help?"

Henny and John's dialogue

'Independent thinking' and cultural differences...

Henny: I had no concept of independent thinking in my mind, when I arrived here to do my higher degree in 1994. What I know was that in Western educational system, student should be critical and work independently in the laboratory. I did not realize that it included thinking independently in the meaning of having my own voice, based on searching and analyzing literatures critically and discussing it with somebody in the field of research (e.g. my supervisors).

In my culture we used to think that teacher's opinion and what was written in books or journals were unarguable. We were raised to be dependent and did not have an opportunity to arise or listen to our own voice. Besides, language limitation makes me unconfident or reserved at times expressing my ideas to staff.

John: The subject and contents of Henny's thesis, when it is written, is probably of lesser importance than her gaining an ability to think independently, critically analyse data and be prepared to think laterally. The thesis is the first step in a professional scientific career but the ability to identify problems and assess solutions will support the rest of that career.

In the sense that science is supranational there should be no cultural differences. However, I recognise that FLOTE students will experience difficulties in the Australian university environment. Henny is an able and diligent student and, irrespective of her background, will succeed but will need extra support during the period of thesis preparation.

Reconciling expectations...

Henny: I expect staff or my supervisors will give me their guidance and advise particularly in undertaking my research. In addition I hope that there is a good interpersonal relationship with my supervisors and other staff which will allow me to reduce the tension and feel free to express my idea.

It takes a long time and encouragement to adjust to this new situation. I learn much from the process of taking a decision in my experiment and the discussions with my supervisors and also friends to be an independent thinker. I just realised that I should have my own voice and listen to it.

John: Henny, as a FLOTE student, faces a bigger hurdle in the preparation of her thesis than would an English speaking student. I find it intellectually more honest to assist a student if I am presented with the draft of a thesis that is intellectually complete but requiring minor corrections of English syntax and spelling.

Having supervised a student such as Henny for a period of years one becomes her friend. However, while recognising her difficulties as a FLOTE student she must ultimately produce a thesis which is substantially her own work. If Henny can think independently this process will be inevitably easier for both her and I.

Project benefits...

Henny: Generally this project benefited me, especially in interpersonal relationship with John and getting to know his

expectation from me to be an independent thinker. In this project I keep writing a learning journal which is a good practice to express my own idea or my feeling about anything. In addition I also got an opportunity to meet other post-graduate students, sharing our problem and getting the feedback from them.

John: I believe that meeting in this action-research project has forced Henny and I to address some of the fundamental questions regarding the relationship between student and supervisor. In this sense we have both benefited and I will be more conscious of my mistakes. Henny has proved forgiving of these. The major lapse is in withdrawing support over time for the minor technical problems that she has faced without informing her that I intended to do so. I feel that the project has been an enriching experience for us both and I would like to think that other post-graduate students and supervisors may benefit from our participation.

Lena and Fran's narrative

Lena: Participating in this project, I have developed academic sophistication and the personal confidence to listen to my 'inner voice'. Developing interpersonal skills and the ability to 'culturally map' what is permissible in supervision are my indicators of maturing independent thinking.

The Supervision Meetings

Fran and I have met regularly since the beginning of 1996. When we agreed to take part in this Internationalisation Project, we met at another level, in a much more 'public' domain.

Previously our meetings were loose and informal. Though I enjoyed our discussions and the mental gymnastics, I often was left bereft of a clear direction. At least that is what I thought. Reflecting on the process, I see how my Research Question changed focus and refined. This would not have happened if our supervision sessions were more 'task-focused'. What I interpreted as informal discussions, allowed me to develop my own thinking.

My own 'baggage' coloured the process. In my culture of origin rote learning is valued, while asking too many questions can be a sign of 'trying to be smart'. My training is to (try and) shut up.

Postgraduate Meetings

Sharing in the 'PG' set, I soon found others had similar issues. Together we explored the nature of our supervisory relationships and strategies for better communication. This process was freeing as I came to realise that I and not Fran was responsible for my research. In this safe environment, I was able to voice my doubts. "How do you manage the readings? What kind of records should I keep?" Discovering such practicalities are something all students learn on the run, I now feel comfortable in swapping ideas and tips.

The Role of the Facilitator

Kisane's role as a member of the dominant group was crucial. In facilitating the process of sharing (in the 'PG's' set) and strategising as 'one of them', she helped us culturally map authoritatively.

What has this to do with independent thinking? The strategies and confidence emerging from our interaction with Kisane, were then enacted within the supervision process.

Fran: Having recently been an international student myself, I was interested in exploring further the ways in which cultural differences could be integral to the learning process rather than labelled as a hindrance. Related to this was my relatively novice status as a postgraduate supervisor, and my enthusiasm for the opportunity to work collaboratively with others to name and practice effective supervisory skills.

Emic Knowledge

Independent thinking emerged as a recurring theme in this project. Though I did not have that phrase in mind at the time, in discussing with Lena the idea of joining the project, I was highly conscious of who she was as a student. Lena entered our research program with Indian qualifications in sociology and a passion to understand more about her Australian experiences of working in the field of welfare services for NESB women. She knew these experiences in ways that I could only ever know about. Hence, I saw that researching these experiences was something I could best

nurture, support and challenge but not direct. This research project then became a vehicle through which the relationships necessary to such discourse could be both widened and focussed.

Lena's feedback on how she initially experienced my supervisory style has been useful and something that I may have remained unaware of without the opening of communication this project supported.

Independent Thinking

A 'Supers' set made up of three researchers familiar with action learning could have been a powerful force for three research 'PGs' to question, despite the best facilitation. It was, on reflection, John's unfamiliarity with the concept of action research yet ease with independent thinking that in my view made for much of the strength of this project. John questioned but did not close down on judgement until 'the truth' of the method emerged in action. If he had walked away because it did not accord with his fixed universe of truth, I imagine the dynamics of the project would have been very different. This affirms the necessity for openness in communication among all stakeholders in higher education but also signals how seductively easy it is for other human considerations of power and control to subvert this.

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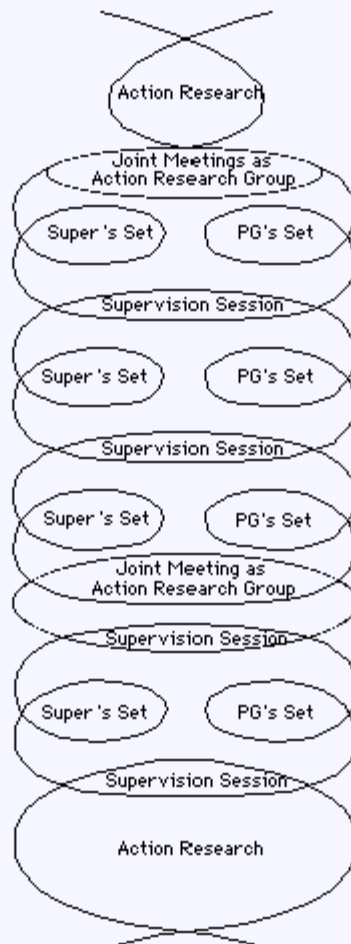
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**Supervision of Postgraduate Students
Whose First Language is Other Than English:
Action Research Process**



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