Practice to Theory: Co-supervision stories

Rebecca Spooner-Lane, Deborah Henderson, Robin Price and Geof Hill
Queensland University of Technology
Australia

Email: rs.spooner@qut.edu.au, dj.henderson@qut.edu.au, r.price@qut.edu.au, Geof@bigpond.com,

Abstract
Practitioner stories have been recognised as a valuable insight into practice as well as a means by which practice can inform theory. Our practitioner stories about our experiences of being co-supervisors in Higher Degree Research (HDR) supervision have enabled us to further our resonance with HDR literature and at the same time contribute to literature by proposing new issues related to this specific form of practice. Out of our juxtaposed stories we advocate a new model of co-supervision which addresses what we have experienced as levels of inequity within this professional relationship. This model advocates the explication of transparent expectations and opens the possibilities for mentorship and professional development in a realigned supervisory relationship.

Key Words: post graduate supervision, co-supervision
Introduction

This paper has arisen from a Community of Practice that was established within an on-line professional development program for Higher Degree Research (HDR) Supervision. The authors were among a number of research supervisors who shared their practice and in this shared practice identified a common ground over the issue of Co-supervision. We contend in this paper that Co-supervision offers a worthwhile contribution to the dominant liberal humanist view of social relations in the HDR literature in which, ‘supervision is understood to be a fundamentally rational and transparent process between autonomous individuals’ (Grant, 1999: 2).

Co-supervision, as the word suggests, involves two or more people being involved in supervising a higher degree student through the process of their research degree (Burgess, Pole & Hockey, 1994). Sometimes the term ‘supervisory committee’ is used to describe multiple supervisors and this is common with many North American models of higher degree education. In the Australian context in which this study is set the term co-supervision or joint supervision (HEFCE, 1996), as employed in the United Kingdom, are more commonly used.

Co-supervision is often recommended when a student’s topic is interdisciplinary (Phillips & Pugh, 1987; Pole, 1998) or when the university has instituted a supervisor training scheme and a neophyte supervisor is paired with an experienced supervisor (Bourner & Hughes, 1991; Phillips & Pugh, 1987); or as an insurance to counteract the consequence of academic mobility (Moses, 1984).

While co-supervision suggests collegiality often there is an imposed hierarchy because of university protocols related to supervision. At the university at which the authors of this paper are employed, there is a common model of research co-supervision that requires one supervisor to take responsibility for overall co-ordination of the student’s research. This supervisor is called the principal supervisor and all other supervisors are called associate supervisors. Often within this hierarchical model there is an unarticulated expectation that the associate supervisor, as the novice or less experienced supervisor, will also benefit from exposure to the practices of the principal supervisor. Significantly, as Pole observed, this form of
supervision can be ‘complex, multifaceted and dynamic’ (Pole, 1998: 263).

Phillips and Pugh (1987), while not denigrating co-supervision, outline a number of problems that can arise in situations of co-supervision. There can be a diffusion of responsibility if no-one is willing to take responsibility for the leadership of the supervisory team; there can be problematic situations arising from conflicting advice received from different supervisors; problems can arise if the student plays one supervisor off the other; and there can be problems if there is no-one in the group who can take an overall view of the thesis. Pole (1998) also highlights the potential for difficulties if the supervisors have different personalities and do not get on well. Bourner and Hughes (1991), in response to Phillips and Pugh (1987), list the merits of co-supervision as: the potential for greater expertise with multiple supervisory input; the option of a second opinion from someone who is familiar with the research; less likelihood of dependence on one particular person; and, insurance against supervisor mobility. These merits are matched by the similar merits of co-supervision proposed by Moses (1984).

Pole’s (1998) research identifies two models of co-supervision, the social science model and the natural sciences model. Within the social sciences, joint supervisory arrangements were rare, and the one supervisor model prevailed. Pole (1998) found that where joint supervision existed within the social sciences, two supervisors was the norm, and the joint supervisory relationship was a result of the nature of the project and the need for specialised knowledge. In each case there was an identified ‘senior’ supervisor, with ultimate responsibility for the student’s performance. Joint supervision was more widespread within the natural sciences, and the number of members of the supervisory team was likely to be higher. However, while the natural sciences model also had a designated ‘senior’ supervisor, this supervisor ‘did not play a lead or central role in the supervision of the student’ (Pole, 1998: 265). In this model, supervisory meetings with all members of the supervisory team and the student were rare, and it was the student’s responsibility to seek out advice from each supervisor individually.

While there are recommendations within the RHD literature for students when clarifying supervisory needs and clarifying responsibilities in the event of a supervisory panel (Craswell, 1996), only limited attention has been given to the need for supervisors to clarify the co-supervisory arrangements. As Pole (1998: 262)
observes ‘the whole area of joint supervision is one which has received little attention in the research and literature associated with doctoral study’. Concomitantly, ‘the evidence for success or otherwise of joint supervision remains scarce’ (Pole, 1998: 266).

**Methodology**

The advocates of practitioner research (Anderson & Herr, 1999) encourage practitioners to reflect on their practice. Our practices of co-supervision were brought to light in the context of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), which was formed around an on-line professional development program related to higher degree research supervision. The professional development program involved reflecting on several higher degree research supervision issues with individual participants sharing their thoughts and experiences related to those issues. In response to one particular issue the authors found a common theme of experience with co-supervision.

We resolved to reflect on our practice by articulating our individual stories. In the Higher Education literature there are examples of HDR supervisors reflecting on their practice using their stories (for example Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2001; Manathunga & Goozée, 2007). Denning (2001) believes that storytelling is an appropriate way for individuals in organisations or human systems to see things in a different light, and from that insight, to make changes within those systems. He suggested that stories will “work” if they are brief, but with enough texture and relevance to a specific audience; are inherently interesting; are true rather than invented; embody a change message; and if the tacit knowledge of the stories springs the reader to a new level of understanding.

We initially wrote our stories and shared them with each other. This initial sharing prompted some rewriting of stories in response to detail we had read in each other’s stories. We further examined the stories for common themes.

We looked for what was common between the stories, arguing in this stage of the analysis that what was generic among four stories of co-supervision might also be common to other HDR Supervisors. We believe that such reflection on supervision practice reconfigures the possibility of it being a ‘negotiated process’ (Grant, 1999: 2). Thus rather than accepting the traditional principal and associate institutionalised model, supervision might be envisaged as an
equitable collaboration that provides opportunities for professional development.

Although our intent is not to generalise from our findings, we believe that stories can be generative, prompting rippling conversations as other readers read them, agree or disagree with them, and essentially make a more formal reflection on their own practice. To this end, we are hopeful of articulating a model of co-supervision as a proactive process. We have written our stories in first person and retained our own names, however, we have changed the names of all other characters in our stories.

**Geof’s story**

I came to doctoral supervision out of an action research background and had for some time been acting as a ‘critical friend’ to colleagues as they undertook their action research. There are many similarities between ‘critical friendship’ and ‘supervision’. A key difference is that there are no obligations to meet deadlines or to take responsibility for the research actually being completed.

My own experiences of being a research student were varied. My master’s degree which was co-supervised was a difficult experience. My doctoral degree, which was also co-supervised was the opposite and I saw a productive co-supervision working, even to the extent that when one supervisor went to another university the changeover to a new supervisor was made easier by the fact that the other supervisor continued with the work.

My first supervision experience was supervising a Master’s student but before I formally supervised a doctoral student I had worked in quite an involved way as the critical friend for a colleague who was also submitting her research for a doctoral degree.

My first doctoral student initiated the co-supervision himself. I had known this student through my Philosophy Café work in which I had been helping people understand the nature of Practitioner Investigation. One of my clients at the Philosophy Café asked me if I would supervise him. He had been given a supervisor in his university faculty but the supervisor was unfamiliar with living action research – his nominated methodology. He had hunted through the faculty unsuccessfully and finally gained approval from the faculty for me to act as an associate supervisor on the basis
that I was contracted to undertake other work related to higher degree research supervision at the same university.

The principal supervisor, the student and I met initially, but from then on I met the student alone on a regular basis. As the student approached completion there was another meeting to look at the final draft of his thesis. The principal supervisor and I spoke occasionally on the phone and as there was never any discussion about my services being compensated it appeared to me that I was doing this work gratis. During my time as an associate supervisor I met each month with the student and read all of the drafts of his work. In theory I was advising on the methodology, however as time went by my understanding of the topic grew and I found that I was also providing feedback on the content-related issues.

There was no formal discussion between the principal supervisor and myself about the division of labour and I knew that the student only met with the principal supervisor sporadically and often when a milestone report was due. In many ways I felt I was acting as a principal supervisor in all but name.

Upon completion of the thesis, the student received feedback from the examiners that was very favourable. There were few corrections to be made. I particularly encouraged the student to keep focused because there was an agenda at the university to address the fall off in student interest following the receipt of feedback from the examiners. The student finished in under the specified time.

When the student was writing the citation for his graduation the principal supervisor was encouraging him to mention in the citation that the thesis had been passed by one examiner with no changes. I expressed my discomfort about such a statement as I felt that it was misappropriating the student’s success for the supervisor’s own agenda. The faculty office vetoed the citation so the issue was no longer an issue. When the student graduated the principal supervisor took the entire credit for the success. At no time was there acknowledgement from either the faculty or the Office of Research to acknowledge the work that I had done and the form signing off for the student indicated that the principal supervisor had done 100% of the supervision. I chose not to challenge this as there had been no formal discussions about the dividing of workload, and I was not part of the faculty.
While the student had acknowledged my contribution to the completion of his doctoral degree I was disappointed that neither the faculty nor the university did this. I later learnt in discussions with the Office of Research that when a student completes the research they only write to the principal supervisor.

My experience of being a co-supervisor was a valuable one in that I gained insights into the types of poor supervision that I had read about. It also gave me the opportunity to gain first hand experience of co-supervision to compare with what the literature had described as co-supervision practices.

Robin’s story

I am currently supervising two students and both of them are in co-supervising situations. One student has two supervisors because he is undertaking a study across different faculties. For a while, he had three supervisors, but as the nature of his project evolved over time, the need for a supervisor with a psychology background became unnecessary and the third supervisor was dropped. This was done in consultation with the third supervisor, who had already realised that they were no longer needed. A second student is within my faculty, but the project crosses disciplinary boundaries and requires a broader range of experience than any one within the faculty has the capacity to provide. Co-supervision is the norm within the faculty, and indeed is the model under which I undertook my honours and PhD at another university.

As a student, my experience with supervision has clearly coloured my thinking about the relationship between supervisors. For my honours thesis, my two supervisors did not speak to each other and indeed I did not meet with them both in the same room. This meant I actively had to look at each supervisor’s strengths, be quite specific about what I wanted from them, and manage the process. I had four supervisors over the period of my PhD. One got a postdoctoral fellowship and left, while another took a ‘suck it and see’ approach to my research. This meant that I had five separate versions of a literature chapter, each diverging into different literatures and approaches. It became clear that I could no longer answer the question I had initially set out to, and therefore I needed a supervisor that was able to place limits on my research focus. I was proactive in finding another supervisor who in 30 minutes asked me what I knew and what questions I could answer and together we devised a structure for the thesis, which I then
went away and wrote. Another less experienced supervisor replaced the supervisor who accepted a post-doctorate position. I suspect if I had not changed supervisors, I would still be completing the thesis. This has made me really conscious that each supervisor in a co-supervising relationship possesses varied strengths and that students can benefit from the diversity of their supervisory team.

In my current supervision role of a within faculty student, my role has evolved to become the ‘bad cop’ as one of the supervisors had a pre-existing professional relationship with the student. This requires me to be the bearer of bad news and confront the student when necessary. The third supervisor provides the contacts with the research organisation and a greater level of understanding of the statistical methods used in the student’s research project. This arrangement works well for all of us. We get together prior to meeting the student and decide on a common approach and then all meet with the student. This is a student who does not write well and is a great ‘doer’, but not strong on the theory, so it is a case of all of us contributing and developing the research skills of the student.

My other student has a real driving passion for his research and therefore is easily distracted, but is quite capable in the technical aspects of research. Here, what is needed, is someone to keep him on task and to help simplify the process and enable him to grasp the big picture. In both co-supervision relationships, the supervisory team met during the formative stage of the research project and agreed on a tentative break up of the work load. We also acknowledged that the division of work is itself a working document and will need from time to time to be reviewed. For example, in my cross-faculty supervisory arrangement, the percentage allocated to each supervisor has changed three times in the past 18 months to accurately reflect which supervisor is doing the work. In all my supervisory experiences there has been a degree of openness and negotiation over each supervisor’s contribution and the allocation of the percentage of work performed by each supervisor has been adjusted over the period of the candidacy. There is, however, a nominal principal supervisor.

My experiences with co-supervision have generally been positive. Perhaps, in hindsight, this is a result of learning from some poor supervisory experiences as a student. As a new, relatively inexperienced supervisor I see that there is a professional development benefit in that I can learn from experienced
supervisors. I also see the benefit of supervisors bringing different viewpoints when examining a student’s work. I have also valued the feedback from my co-supervisors who have been very collegial and supportive and expressed thanks for my contribution, as have my students. This has built my confidence in my supervisory ability. Whilst my strengths as supervisor tend to be in my detailed approach, my colleagues are able to view the big picture and therefore our strengths complement each other.

I am not sure how the division of workload affects the overall compensation. Indeed, since one of the student’s that I supervise is based on another campus and in another faculty, I have queried what financial compensation my school receives and have not been provided with a satisfactory answer. During my involvement in the professional development program for HDR supervision, I have since learnt that each faculty gets a proportion of the completion payment. In one case, the workload is divided on a 50:50 basis with the experienced supervisor as the principal supervisor. On completion, funding flows on a 50:50 basis to each faculty. Within my faculty, each full-time student supervised attracts a one hour reduction in teaching load per semester, and this is divided amongst the supervisory team in accordance with their percentage contribution. This is not immediately relevant to my current situation though, as I am a postdoctoral research fellow and have no teaching commitments. Whilst undertaking my postdoctoral research, I will continue to supervise students as I feel I have contributed so much to these students that I want to be involved in their successful completion.

Deborah’s story

I have participated in two completely different supervisory arrangements with senior colleagues in my university. The first experience left me feeling disillusioned, powerless and ‘used’. The second and current arrangement is both professionally and personally rewarding. The discrepancy in both the nature of these shared supervisory arrangements and the quality of supervision I observed concerns me – how can supervision relationships be so different?

My own experience of the supervision process as a PhD student was a very positive one, so when I was asked to supervise a student on a 50% basis by a colleague I had previously worked with on a project, I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to develop
my supervision skills in a collegial style. I signed the university forms oblivious to the fact that the actual percentage of the supervision allocation was left blank. I accepted that I was nominated as the associate supervisor, assuming that I would still be treated as an equal and this would be reflected in the process and in the workload. I was incredibly naïve.

Before I met the student I was asked via e-mail to recommend readings by my colleague as he was taking leave and would be overseas for several months. The student then contacted me directly to request particular articles and further references that she either couldn’t locate or wanted more guidance with. Soon I was photocopying materials for her and was editing carefully her first drafts. When my colleague returned a pattern quickly developed where the three of us would meet but I would come with the student’s draft carefully edited and sit as my colleague – who on some occasions had obviously not read this work – would talk at a more general scale about the submitted draft. Whilst I was happy to accept the role of associate supervisor, given my lack of experience, I soon became concerned at the different approaches and standards and my colleague would request that I follow up on locating references and articles for this student.

As this was my first experience supervising a PhD student I had no previous standards or procedures against which to judge the situation. I found myself reflecting on what I had experienced as a PhD student and realised that I was intuitively trying to copy the way my supervisor had supervised me. Given that this was so positive, I assumed I was approaching the task correctly – but became increasingly dismayed by my colleague’s casual approach. This situation came to a head when, after a year, we had to sign some forms for the student’s forthcoming research proposal acceptance and, in front of the student, the supervisor listed an 80% workload for himself as the principal supervisor and myself on a 20% allocation as the associate supervisor. I was shocked as I’d performed more than a 50% load over the year. When I had the opportunity to question this allocation after the student left, my colleague told me that this was “what the university preferred”. I told him directly that this was not fair and was very unhappy that the percentage on the official form did not reflect his invitation to supervise with him on a 50% basis and the work I performed. He then claimed that it was “university policy” for the principal supervisor to receive an 80% allocation and he was also more knowledgeable and my superior!
My second experience is with a highly regarded and productive Professor. She asked me if I’d like to work with her as an associate supervisor and explained that I would be given a 20% loading. She was very precise about the situation - and that although this wasn’t fair it would be my opportunity to “learn the ropes” and work towards accreditation. We were both very frank in our initial discussion, I knew she was an expert in the field and I had a more “general knowledge” of the area. I was also interested in the student’s research questions and I wanted to learn from someone who knew the university system well and was experienced and ethical. I liked this woman’s direct and honest approach. I was willing to work hard on a 20% allocation as I viewed this as a Supervision “apprenticeship”.

The situation is working very well. My colleague reads our student’s drafts in a “forensic” and highly detailed manner. She forwards all her comments on the draft to the student and to me before our scheduled meeting. I am expected to do the same then the three of us meet for at least an hour to discuss our feedback and plan the next stage of the research and writing. I find this highly structured and organised approach to be most effective and our student has completed the research proposal acceptance process. I appreciate my colleague’s very high standards and feel secure that I am learning from someone who really knows what they are doing. I can see that our student is secure and satisfied with this arrangement and she is progressing very well. One of the great bonuses is that my colleague is mentoring me in other aspects of the research process and has discussed strategies for writing grant applications.

So the second ‘tale’ is a positive one. I derive both professional and personal satisfaction from this working relationship and am so pleased I accepted the invitation. Thank goodness it is so different to my experience.

Rebecca’s story

My current co-supervision arrangement could be considered somewhat unusual in that I am currently a principal supervisor for a doctoral student despite being an early career academic with limited supervising experience. My colleague, an associate professor, who has seen several doctoral students through to completion, is the associate supervisor for this student. We became supervisors to this student midway through his doctoral degree
following the breakdown of his relationship with his former principal supervisor. When this student approached me to be his supervisor, I was initially hesitant. I had read through the student’s research proposal acceptance document and I was aware that he needed a high degree of support. His confirmation document suggested that he had received very little guidance during the conceptualisation phase of his research and despite being midway through his candidature, his thesis still posed no clear research question, it was poorly organised with numerous technical flaws, and his research argument and theoretical framework did not seem to be in alignment. John had indicated to us that his previous supervisor had offered multiple suggestions as to how he could improve his thesis, but he often felt very confused as to what direction he should take; often trying to encompass all the recommendations. At the time, I was unsure whether I would be able to meet all his supervisory needs. For instance, John (pseudonym) was using a qualitative research methodology and I come from a strong quantitative background. Before I could accept his request to become his principal supervisor, I was aware that I would need to find a highly competent associate supervisor who was strong in the research areas that I was lacking to be able to appropriately support John for the remainder of his doctoral journey.

I was extremely thankful that my experienced colleague agreed to assist me in supervising John. We decided on a 50:50 supervision arrangement and this was formally documented. Prior to meeting with John, we both met to discuss John’s supervisory needs (both personal and technical support). I was aware that John tended to overload himself with work commitments which often meant that his thesis did not receive the attention it required. To help John stay focused we decided that it would be best if we both met John on a fortnightly basis and that I would discuss with John his workload and how he could use his time more efficiently. We thought it would be best not to overwhelm John with feedback concerning his thesis, so rather than go through the entire research proposal acceptance document with John in our first meeting, we gave him feedback in relation to his introductory chapter and then in following meetings proceeded to give him feedback one chapter at a time. We also realised that John’s past supervisory experience had left him feeling quite shaken and lacking in confidence, and so we spent some time in the initial stages of our meeting building a relationship with John. We helped John to formulate some realistic goals and also shared some of our own expectations of the supervisory relationship.
My colleague and I have now been supervising John for six months. We always meet 15 minutes prior to each meeting with John to share our impressions of John’s work and to decide how to clearly deliver the feedback. I believe that this pre-meeting has played a very important role in John’s continuing progression. Together, we collate the key feedback points and consider the research tasks that require John’s immediate attention in order for him to continue his thesis writing in an organised manner. It has been very reassuring to me that my colleague and I have similar perceptions on how John’s work may be improved. This pre-meeting also ensures that when we meet with John he receives a unified response from his supervisors about how he should progress forward.

In our meetings with John, whilst I might initially commence the meeting, both my colleague and I have equal input into the meetings where we both feel comfortable to provide advice, guidance and support. Often I will make a suggestion and my colleague will support my suggestion, and sometimes offer further scaffolding for John. We both maintain a professional, but also light hearted approach to supervision and so whilst our meetings with John are enjoyable, they are also task orientated and highly productive. As a result I have observed that John has also become increasingly focused in our meetings and his work output has not only increased but also significantly improved. I believe John is now on target for reaching his doctoral goals.

In my meetings with John, I feel comfortable checking periodically with my colleague to ensure that my thoughts and views are congruent with her ideas and opinions. I believe that the relaxed atmosphere we have created has also enabled John to express his concerns and issues and to ask questions. Through observing my associate supervisor, I have also learnt useful questioning techniques that have helped John to look more critically at his work and make more scientifically rigorous decisions. I tend to use open ended questions such as “I was wondering what criteria you used when choosing the sample for your study?” “How might you convey this to your reader?” or “Could you tell me what prompted you to use this theoretical model?” “What other models are you aware of that might explain this?” to help John reflect on his writing. I consider this approach has enabled John to feel a closer connection to his thesis because he is able to maintain control in the shaping of his thesis. I have been grateful for my colleague’s strong guidance
in this co-supervision relationship and have welcomed the opportunity to enhance my research and supervising expertise.

Overall, I believe that the co-supervisory arrangement I share with my colleague has enhanced the quality of supervision I provide to my doctoral student. By both of us attending each meeting, we are able to feed off one another’s ideas and reinforce each other’s ideas so that they are clearly understood by the student. I have simultaneously gained a deeper appreciation of how to facilitate a collaborative, co-thinking supervisory relationship, where I am able to maintain a balance between sharing my personal knowledge and encouraging my student to construct his own views.

**Key Themes from Supervision Narratives**

Reviewing our four stories we found that some parts of our stories affirmed what we had read in the literature - a model of co-supervision enhances both research student achievement and supervisor professional development. We also found common experiences around an issue that we had been unable to locate in higher degree research literature. We refer to the way in which there were divisions of labour and proactive ‘power relations’ (Grant, 1999) within the co-supervisory relationship. This could be both affirming for the associate supervisor and could also be seen as an exercise in symbolic power (Green, 2005), applied not to the student supervisor relationship, as was Green’s intention, but to the parallel relationship between two supervisors. Working with this notion of power imbalance, we have also drawn attention to a model of co-supervision that we present as a transcendence of the power imbalance in which the more experienced supervisor takes on the role of associate supervisor, and from this role takes a mentoring responsibility for the principal supervisor, the less experienced supervisor.

**Concepts affirmed.**

As Bourner and Hughes (1991) suggest, bringing together multiple supervisors broadens the range of experience and the opportunities for the student to benefit from different points of view. These variations appear as differences between big picture and detailed supervision (Robin’s story), structure and light heartedness, methodological backgrounds and even sometimes as ‘good cop’ ‘bad cop’ partnerships (Robin’s story). Even when there appears to
be no difference, it is reassuring when co-supervisors have similar perceptions of the way in which a student’s work might be improved (Rebecca’s story).

The literature also draws attention to co-supervision acting as a supervisor training scheme (Phillips & Pugh, 1987: 109; Bourner & Hughes, 1991: 23) in which the neophyte supervisor has an opportunity to ‘learn the ropes’ (Deborah’s and Robin’s story) from a more experienced supervisor. This is particularly the case when (as Deborah’s story explains) the co-supervisor has transparent standards and really appears to be the more experienced supervisor from whom one can learn. The reflection on another’s practice, leading to one’s professional development does not solely have to stem from exposure to ‘good’ practice. Even exposure to poor supervision can provide insights into ways that you might not practice as a supervisor (Geof’s story).

Although not specifically in the co-supervision literature, Kandlbinder and Peseta’s (2001) observation that supervisors’ approaches to supervision are commonly influenced by the ways in which they were supervised is evident as a common theme in our stories of co-supervision. Each of our stories refers to higher degree student experiences and exposure to models of co-supervision. These experiences are what we draw from to inform our own practices of research supervision.

**New ground**

Each of our stories refers to the issue of division of workload. For some this is explicitly negotiated as one of the many aspects of the co-supervision relationship. In this explicit negotiation we acknowledge (Robin’s story) that “the division of work itself is a working document that will need from time to time to be reviewed”. The allocation of the percentage of each supervisor’s contribution is an aspect that needs to be discussed with a degree of openness. When there are university imposed divisions of labour by way of the titles of principal and associate supervisor, there is an expectation that the principal supervisor will carry the higher burden of responsibility. These expectations may even be expressed in terms of a university policy, and then it is important that the reality of work matches the requirements of the policy.

For others the lack of explicit negotiation of the nature of the co-supervisory relationship, and specifically a lack of negotiation of
workloads often led to the less ‘powerful’ supervisor, the ‘associate’ supervisor in positions in which they felt that they ‘used’ (Deborah’s story), or doing the work without receiving the recognition (Geof’s story). This lack of explicit discussion can also impact on the nature of the professional development with associate supervisors not only feeling that they have been used, but also coming out of the relationship without any clear identification of what, or how, they have learnt from the more experienced supervisor.

**An alternative model**

The literature predominantly talks about the neophyte supervisor being with an experienced supervisor (Phillips & Pugh, 1987: 109; Bourn & Hughes, 1991: 23) and where roles are allocated, the role of principal supervisor is usually allocated to the experienced supervisor. Our sharing of stories has given rise to an alternative model in which the neophyte supervisor undertakes the role of principal supervisor and the associate supervisor acts as mentor. This model has explicit negotiation of participant workload as well as the explicit acknowledgement that one supervisor is learning from the other. Thus, in sharing our stories and proposing this model we take up Cullen et al’s (1994) challenge to “reframe issues” and “rethink practice” (p. 4). As Rebecca reflects in her story:

> Overall, I believe that the co-supervisory arrangement I share with my colleague has enhanced the quality of supervision I provide to my doctoral student. By both of us attending each meeting, we are able to feed off one another’s ideas and reinforce each other’s ideas so that they are understood by the student. I have simultaneously gained a deeper appreciation of how to facilitate a collaborative, co-thinking supervisory relationship, where I am able to maintain a balance between sharing my personal knowledge and encouraging my student to construct his own views.

At the same time, we acknowledge that the use of the term ‘mentoring’ has the potential to mask issues of power, rather than eliminate them (Manathunga, 2007). Therefore, we assert that the mentoring relationship should be explicitly documented and re-negotiated in the same way that the student-supervisor relationship is (Craswell, 1996). Just as universities have formal processes to allow students to evaluate the adequacy of their progress and satisfaction with their supervisory arrangements on a yearly basis,
we suggest that members of a supervisory team should also be provided with an opportunity to evaluate the adequacy of joint supervisory arrangements.

**Conclusion**

In writing and sharing our stories, and comparing them to what is currently ‘known’ in the higher education literature, we have moved beyond describing personal practice to a point of advocating effective practice both for ourselves and others.

The practice of co-supervision which is common in day to day higher degree research practice, receives little comment within the literature. It is our intention that by making explicit our experiences and practices, we can generate more critical discussion about this particular aspect of research supervision.

We also endorse a model of co-supervision in which the expectations of each of the participants are made transparent and explicit such that it can be recognised that workloads are regularly renegotiated and, despite imposed administrative models of principal and associate supervisor, there is an atmosphere of collegiality in which both supervisors benefit from explicit professional development to improve their practice.

We also encourage others to adopt the model that we have found inspiring in which the more experienced supervisor takes the role of associate supervisor and mentors the less experienced supervisor.

**References**


Phillips, E. and D. S. Pugh (1987). *How to Get a PhD*, Buckingham,
U.K., Open University Press.
