



Promoting Effective Doctoral Supervision through Relational Pedagogy: The Supervisor as Shepherd and Counsellor in Doctoral Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines relational pedagogy as an effective approach to promoting success in doctoral supervision. The author reflects on his relationship with his thesis supervisor and advocates for teachers and supervisors to consider ways in which relational pedagogy may become a key element and approach in doctoral supervision and education. It reveals how his doctoral supervisor cultivated a trusted shepherd-counsellor relationship that led to the expected outcomes. The study proposes that promoting shepherding and counselling roles in doctoral supervision is a supportive way to foster such rapport for successful candidature. The paper positions dialogue as a vital element of relational pedagogy. It sees the need for supervisors and higher educational institutions to adopt shepherding-counselling roles to provide students with the right assistance to become successful in their doctoral journey.

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INTRODUCTION

Relational pedagogy enhances the supervisor-student relationship to achieve (an) educational goal(s). Many scholars have pointed out the crucial place of supervision in doctoral education. Wendy Bastalich observes that “supervision is the key to both quality and efficiency in higher degree research” and that “supervisors are often blamed for unsatisfactory completion and higher withdrawal rates” of candidates.¹ Citing K. Owler, she notes that “the efficiency gaze has fixed on students and supervisors, or their relationship, as the ‘problem’ to be managed, in need of administrative regulation, skill improvement or perhaps emotional management.”²

Similarly, researchers, Adam Crownover and Joseph R. Jones; R. Boyd, N. MacNeill and G. Sullivan; and J.M. Aspelin, see relational pedagogy as an approach where educators, administrators, and those involved in the teaching-learning process cultivate “positive relationships with students”

¹ Wendy Bastalich, “Content and Context in Knowledge Production: A Critical Review of Doctoral Supervision Literature,” *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 7 (July 3, 2017): 1145–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1079702>.

² Kathryn Owler, “A ‘Problem’ to Be Managed? Completing a PhD in the Arts and Humanities,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (2010): 289–304.

through meaningful social interactions and well-considered instructional approaches.³ It is a way of managing supervisor-candidate roles to facilitate the doctoral journey to achieve meaningful outcomes.

According to Katherine Fulgence Swai, doctoral education is “a process through which knowledge is acquired...knowledge is generated” and transmitted to other knowledge seekers.⁴ As educators pursue the transmission of information, the impartation of knowledge, and the promotion of skills training for impactful service, it is significant that they go about this, not just as conveyors of only thoughts and views. Supervision that is done with a sense of feeling as dealing with people whose needs and lives extend beyond the routine of merely reading, providing feedback and the occasional meeting with the student, is rewarding.

The author features how the vital components of relational pedagogy (dialogue, counselling and shepherding) intersect with the supervisor to promote effective supervision for impactful doctoral education. Narrating specific experiences in his doctoral journey, he reflects on the transforming supervisor-student relationship with his supervisor and sees the need for supervisors, mentors, educators, and Higher Education Providers (HEP) to foreground relational pedagogy and to assume shepherding-counselling roles to provide students with the right support to earn their doctorates. The paper uses education and training, doctoral candidate and student interchangeably.⁵

A Particular Journey

Owler refers to the PhD as a candidate’s personal “journey of exploration.”⁶ The author’s doctoral journey concluded in 2016 at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture (ACI), Ghana, where he spent years investigating the role of the indigenous language in the establishment and expansion of Christianity in Sierra Leone, particularly focusing on the pioneer missionary Hannah Kilham. It all started with an admission letter and scholarship from the venerable Ghanaian theologian, the Late Professor Kwame Bediako.⁷

The ensuing years of study at ACI were full of motley experiences – some pleasant moments as well as challenging times, but they enabled him to discover how a supervisor’s use of relational pedagogy significantly contributed to altering what he refers to as a disengaged teacher-student relationship.

Progress with the author’s PhD research work had stalled for some time due to health reasons on the part of the primary supervisor, Professor Andrew Walls, so Professor Allison Howell was appointed to that role. He had only interacted with her in the lecture room and on official matters. This next period of engagement with her enabled him to see other empathetic attributes veiled behind the image of a stern, disciplined and officious lecturer.⁸

The author’s PhD viva voce was delayed for some time, but it finally took place very close to the graduation date. After his defence, Professor Howell invited him to her office to read the examiners’

³ Adam Crownover and Joseph R Jones, “A Call for Teacher Educators to Rethink How Teacher Candidates Are Trained to Combat Bullying,” *Journal of Thought* 52, no. 1–2 (2018): 17–28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90022688>; Ray Boyd, Neil MacNeill, and Greg Sullivan, “Relational Pedagogy: Putting Balance Back into Students’ Learning,” *Curriculum Leadership: An Electronic Journal for Leaders in Education* 13 (2006); Jonas Aspelin, “Beyond Individualised Teaching,” *Education Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (January 28, 2014): 23926, <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v5.23926>.

⁴ Katherine Fulgence Swai, “A Theoretical Perspective on How Doctoral Supervisors Develop Supervision Skills,” *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 14 (2019): 721–39, <https://doi.org/10.28945/4446>.

⁵ Bastalich, “Content and Context in Knowledge Production: A Critical Review of Doctoral Supervision Literature.”

⁶ Kathryn Owler, “From Anti-Structure to Structure: Comparing the Traditional and Contemporary Experience of PhD Writing,” in *Research and Development in Higher Education: The Shape of Higher Education*, ed. Melissa Davis and Allan Goody, vol. 39 (Australia: Herdsa, 2016), <https://www.hersda.org.au/publications/conference-proceedings/research-and-development-higher-education-shape-higher-23>.

⁷The Late Professor Kwame Bediako was founder and first Rector of the erstwhile Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre (ACMC), now ACI. He had passed on before the author commenced my Master of Theology (MTh.) degree programme in 2009 on my way to pursue a PhD.

⁸ The author recounts a number of selfless endeavours on the part of his supervisor including, spending a good part of her night to digitise a document he badly needed for his research work and also, purchasing a set of relevant books and allowing him to use them until he had completed his studies.

reports and recommendations. Two of the reports were very good but the third required major changes in the thesis. After reading the report, he then narrated how a dream he had had predicted the outcome of his examination, but another crucial event overtook both of them. Prof. Howell became critically ill and required emergency surgery. She was mostly unavailable for the next three months. Although the author missed graduating that year, he was able to complete the corrections to graduate the following year. The shepherd-counsellor role she cultivated through a dialogical approach transformed the disconnected student-teacher relationship into a liberating one of trust and care of a supervisor. In a way, this endorses Noddings's view on the need to reposition theory and foreground the need for a caring and relational attitude with the learner in educational systems.⁹

Doctoral Supervision and Relational Pedagogy

Swai observes that recent publications are replete with student-supervisor relationships.¹⁰ Supervision, as a component of education, is relational in nature. It is the activities of providing leadership in the doctoral process as they relate to students' pursuit of their PhD. This process of teaching and supervising and the principles that guide it constitute what is referred to as pedagogy. Bishop and Starkey see pedagogy as "the profession, art, and science of teaching".¹¹ Although the root word "pedagogue," has acquired less professional and objectionable nuances such as pedantry and dogmatism, its origin in the Greek, *paidagogos*, refers to a boy's tutor; and it carries the idea of an agent of learning, one who looks after, attends to, escorts, or leads a child to school.¹²

Pedagogy has the potential to greatly influence supervisor-doctoral candidate relationships in ways that articulate the meaning of doctoral education for the student. Doctoral education thrives through the relationship with those in academia. Knowledge acquisition as a social construct is represented by various paradigms including, mutuality and dialogue, according to Thayer-Bacon, who asserts that "we become knowers and are able to contribute to the constructing of knowledge due to the relationships we have with others."¹³ This knowledge and social dimensions form the core of a supervisor's work.

Relational pedagogy, therefore, focuses on the importance of relationships that are created in the learning environment. Relationship in education refers to the positive connections and interconnections between students, teachers, supervisors, and other members of the learning community that "foster positive social interaction and establish a nurturing environment of trust and support".¹⁴ Two basic forms of relationships: student-student and supervisor-student exist in this context, but the focus is on the latter as pivotal in the doctorate endeavour.

A growing number of research works in pedagogy speak in support of a genuine, trusting teacher-student relationship as a fundamental element in the education process.¹⁵ They observe that a trusting relationship explains several positive outcomes in students, including their empowerment, adjustment to education, academic performance, individual initiative and engagement with studies, empathy and cooperation in the teaching-learning environment and process. The converse may result

⁹ Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 2nd ed. (Teachers College Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Swai, "A Theoretical Perspective on How Doctoral Supervisors Develop Supervision Skills," 723.

¹¹ Wendy Bishop and David Starkey, "Pedagogy," in *Keywords in Creative Writing* (University Press of Colorado, 2006), 119–25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt4cgr61.28>.

¹² Bishop and Starkey, "Pedagogy," 120.

¹³ Barbara J Thayer-Bacon, *Relational"(e) Pistemologies"*, vol. 226 (Peter Lang Pub Incorporated, 2003). Other scholars represented other models include: Avi Mintz, "The Midwife as Matchmaker: Socrates and Relational Pedagogy," *Philosophy of Education Archive*, 2007, 91–99; Albert Bandura and Richard H Walters, *Social Learning Theory*, vol. 1 (Englewood cliffs Prentice Hall, 1977).

¹⁴ American Institutes for Research (AIR, 2020). 'Safe Supportive Learning Environment' www.safesupportivelearning.ed.gov 16-08-2020.

¹⁵ Poalo Freire, "From Pedagogy of the Oppressed," *Race / Ethnicity Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 2 (January 2009): 163–74,85 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236820631_Chapter_2_from_Pedagogy_of_the_Oppressed; Christopher Murray and Mark T Greenberg, "Children's Relationship with Teachers and Bonds with School an Investigation of Patterns and Correlates in Middle Childhood," *Journal of School Psychology* 38, no. 5 (2000): 423–45; Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 107.

in “increased levels of anxiety and depression” and demotivation in students.¹⁶ This inter-human phenomenon connects and influences other levels of relations in the social web in which the student participates. Supervisors’ expected outcomes have also been observed to increase with positive supervisor-student relationships.¹⁷ This is why Crownover and Jones describe relational pedagogy as “the systematic construction of appropriate relationships embedded within the schooling [education] process.”¹⁸ This involves a deliberate effort to not only build but also, to maintain relationships in ways that aid the supervising process to realise the transformative goal of doctoral training. Since relational Pedagogy promotes a shared “relational commitment” among all those involved in the learning community, it does not place value on students based on a form of gradation. Worth and respect are premised based on a common humanity and a common cause. Reflecting on his PhD studies, he sees his supervisor’s attempt at outlining the steps on how to overcome major hurdles in the doctoral programme – with an unbiased position on quality assurance issues – as a commitment to this ideal.

Supervisors wield a lot of power and inappropriate exercise of this influence may result in the abuse of students. Frick also opines that supervisors’ inappropriate use of power “may hamper students’ development of scholarly independence, calculated risk-taking and creativity.”¹⁹ Supervisors’ ignorance or disregard of these negative consequences makes the academic environment a place that promotes oppression.²⁰ One way to prevent this and foster healthy conditions for growth is for supervisors to initiate dialogue with students.

Dialogue in Relational Pedagogy and Doctoral Education

Doctoral education is dialogical in its accommodation of reasoning and encouragement of students to consider alternative viewpoints and interpretations. In basic terms, dialogue is a conversation between parties or entities. It is a situation in which one person seeks to understand another person through communication by expressing his or her opinion while trying also to fit the other person’s view into his or her own. This encourages what Richard Paul describes as cooperative learning - a situation where learners learn by reasoning together with others, drawing from each other’s thinking, suggestions or proposals and analyses, and finding insights to problems and issues, and implications that may arise.²¹ Dialogue becomes dialectical when it involves “extended exchange between different points of view or frames of reference” and analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of the various perspectives to arrive at a conclusion.²² As Paul argues, dialogue translates into dialectics when viewpoints vary in the conversation and require assessment of positions.²³ The assumption here is that knowledge acquisition and its application to situations is a goal of true education. It requires the student’s active participation, investigation and analysis of issues and formation of positions, and application of the knowledge gained.

In other words, doctoral education does not entertain acceptance of absolute judgments without subjecting them to the scrutiny of reason. It is the commitment to develop in students this quality of thought processing and that sets Prof. Howell apart and distinguishes her from some other doctoral

¹⁶ Crownover and Jones, “A Call for Teacher Educators to Rethink How Teacher Candidates Are Trained to Combat Bullying,” 25.

¹⁷ Bastalich, “Content and Context in Knowledge Production: A Critical Review of Doctoral Supervision Literature.”

¹⁸ Crownover and Jones, “A Call for Teacher Educators to Rethink How Teacher Candidates Are Trained to Combat Bullying,” 25.

¹⁹ Liezel Frick, “Models of Supervision”. Course material of Module 4 of the DIES/CREST Training Course of Supervisors of Doctoral Candidates at African Universities. Stellenbosch University, 2021.

²⁰ Candace L Williams, “My Intimacy with Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* 2, no. 2 (2009): 6–11; Paulo Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” *New York: Continuum* 356 (1996): 357–58.

²¹ Richard W Paul and A J A Binker, *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World*. (ERIC, 1990). Freire accentuates the significance of dialogue in education when he states, “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education”. Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” 92-93.

²² Paul and Binker, *Critical Thinking*, 309-310.

²³ Paul and Binker, *Critical Thinking*, 312.

educators – those who equate education with “gathering content and a body of information”; who treat students “as boxes to be filled gradually with logically arranged packets of information” without scrutiny.²⁴

In George Hillock’s assessment, teachers’ effectiveness correlated with their belief that their students’ work will improve. He argues that:

Teachers [supervisors]...who are not optimistic about their students will have no reason to change. Because [these supervisors] so seldom engage in reflective practice, they will have little evidence of any need to change. And because they have low expectations of their students, they will not be surprised when their students fail to learn.²⁵

One significant way in which the author’s supervisor facilitated his cultivation of certain attributes and enquiring mind was through her role as shepherd and counsellor. Impacting relational pedagogy creates a dialogical connection between the roles of shepherd, counsellor and doctoral educator.

Shepherding and Counselling Roles of a Doctoral Supervisor

An effective and efficient supervisor combines the roles of pastor and counsellor to facilitate the achievement of their own objectives and the goals of their students. As teachers, supervisors initiate dialogue with students to support them identify their individual goals and intentionally guide them to achieve the desired changes in their lives. In doing this, supervisors assume some shepherding and counselling functions in fulfilling their varied roles. Nkechi et al. have observed that “counsellors...proffer guidance to the [student] in a quest of moulding the [student] in the right path to take in their life pursuit.”²⁶

The author recalls how this became apparent to him in a meeting with his supervisor after his defence. They were revisiting and addressing comments of one of his two external examiners, who had requested a revision of the term ‘Native’ to ‘Indigenous’. Noticing his insistence and reluctance to revise the expression, Prof. Howell restated the examiner’s requirement and then enquired from him, whether he wanted to complete that revision and move on with life. Of course, he desired to open a new chapter in his life so he accepted to revise ‘Native’ to ‘Indigenous’ and proceeded to conclude his PhD journey.

Soundararajan sees the counsellor’s objective precisely in this regard,

...to provide support to clients’ goals by assisting in decreasing their stress, aiding the effort to provide a healthy environment, and helping them focus on personal and career goals, thereby contributing to their clients’ motivation, performance, and satisfaction with their life.²⁷

Swai captures this in her summary of qualities and attributes expected of good supervisors – “professional guide”, “a flexible personal guide”, “a career guide”, etc.²⁸ Successful counsellors do not only put themselves in clients’ shoes but, after listening and understanding, they also facilitate clients’ development of a better understanding of themselves and their respective situation to arrive at “a realistic, practical solution”.²⁹ This responsibility interconnects with shepherding. Anthony Yeo

²⁴ Ervin Budiselić, “An Apology of Theological Education: The Nature, the Role, the Purpose, the Past and the Future of Theological Education,” *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 7, no. 2 (2013): 131–54.

²⁵ George Hillocks, “At Last: The Focus on Form vs. Content in Teaching Writing,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 40, no. 2 (2005): 238–48. The parentheses in the quote are the author’s additions.

²⁶ This kind of care and support is rooted in the very nature of true shepherd and counsellors. Einstein Moses Egebe Anyi, “The Role of Guidance and Counselling in Effective Teaching and Learning in Schools: The Cameroonian Perspective,” *International Journal of Educational Technology and Learning* 1, no. 1 (2017): 11–15.

²⁷ Radhika Soundararajan, *Counseling: Theory, Skills and Practice* (Tata McGraw-Hill Education, 2012).

²⁸ Swai, ‘A Theoretical Perspective on How Doctoral Supervisors Develop Supervision Skills,’ 724-725.

²⁹ Soundararajan, *Counseling, Skill and Practice*, 111.

sees it as “a shared ministry” and as such, this task also falls to other members of the academic community.³⁰

A healthy Shepherd-Counsellor relationship rests upon trust. Frick outlines the meaning of trust thus:

A belief of truthfulness, and reliability or faith in another person’s ability; A form of power; Taking a risk by confiding in the new and unknown, a critical element of knowledge creation; Making the decision to act with others in spite of uncertainty, which is vital for independence; Placing yourself in a position of vulnerability, and giving up power, in anticipation of reciprocity...[that] enables voice, resilience and creativity in teams.”³¹

The true shepherd-counsellor has a strong relational capacity that enables them to “relate to a student’s actual person and potential existence.”³² This capacity, however, thrives on reciprocal trust in the shepherd-counselee relationship and resonates with the notion of mutuality in counselling. David Shapiro del Sole explains the beneficial aspect of mutuality in counselling. He says that “mutuality is not about you and me. It is simultaneously about *Us*. The *Us* of this moment is engaged in speaking and listening at the same time...One can think of it as *Us* speaking to you and me. And of course, *Us* is also listening to you and me.”³³ The author recounts moments during his doctoral thesis revision when he felt that he and his supervisor were now more at ease with each other to relate as friends. They had a sense of mutual understanding, acceptance and support. They felt comfortable sharing prayer needs, and testimonies and sometimes praying for each other at the end of the revision meetings. Encouraging emails and telephone calls were also not unusual during that period, and these continued for a while even after his graduation.

Joseph R Jones and Sharon Murphy Augustine have observed that “knowledge about one’s own students raises awareness of the [education-related problems]” that they go through. Awareness then becomes a significant first step in addressing students’ challenges and is “best attained by developing quality [supervisor]-student relationships.”³⁴ Howell fulfilled these changing roles as a good supervisor “who helps the student to learn.”³⁵

CONCLUSION

Relational pedagogy is favourable to doctoral education. Its benefits to the educational process and community are far-reaching. Supervising doctoral students using this approach is productive and commendable. Prof. Allison Howell’s adoption of this path and its positive effect on the author’s educational outcomes highlight the need for agents of doctoral education to factor the place of dialogue, shepherding-counselling into the relational pedagogy equation. The emphasis should be on human qualities and individual potential. This becomes evident as supervisors pay attention to each student’s [sheep’s] needs and guide the student to meet those needs in positive ways. Differences in background and potential of doctoral students, therefore, make supervising in doctoral education part of an unceasing process of learning and unlearning approaches in the life of a doctoral supervisor. The author therefore recommends that supervisors’ preparatory and refresher programmes should consider relational pedagogy when training them and deliberate workshops and courses such as the CREST

³⁰ Anthony Yeo, “Counseling in the Twenty-First Century-A Personal Perspective,” in *The Christian Church in the 21st Century Singapore*, ed. Isaac Lim (Singapore: National Council of Churches, 2000), <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=siQsAAAACAAJ>.

³¹ Frick, “Models of Supervision”.

³² Crownover and Jones, “A Call for Teacher Educators to Rethink How Teacher Candidates Are Trained to Combat Bullying.”

³³ David Shapiro del Sole, “Mutuality in Counselling Is Important | David Shapiro Del Sole,” Highlands Counselling, 2016, <https://highlandscounselling.com.au/2016/11/10/mutuality-in-counselling/>.

³⁴ Joseph R Jones and Sharon Murphy Augustine, “Creating an Anti-Bullying Culture in Secondary Schools: Characterists to Consider When Constructing Appropriate Anti-Bullying Programs,” *American Secondary Education*, (2015); 73–84.

³⁵ R. M. Harden Crosby Joy, “AMEE Guide No 20: The Good Teacher Is More than a Lecturer-the Twelve Roles of the Teacher,” *Medical Teacher* 22, no. 4 (2000): 334–47.

Training Course for Supervisors of Doctoral Candidates should also be part of institutional faculty development plans.

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