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Doctoral supervision and COVID-19: Autoethnographies from four faculty across three continents

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Doctoral supervision and COVID-19: Autoethnographies from four faculty across three continents

Abstract

Doctoral students represent the fresh and creative intellectuals needed to address the many social, economic, political, health care, and education disparities that have been highlighted by the 2020 pandemic. Our work as doctoral student supervisors could not be more central nor vital than it was at the beginning of, during, and following the pandemic. Written during the pandemic of 2020, the purpose of this paper was to describe how four faculty from three continents navigated their relationships with doctoral students in the research and dissertation phase of their doctoral programs. Using a common set of prompts, four faculty members each wrote an autoethnography of our experience as doctoral student supervisors. Even though our basic advising philosophies and contexts were quite different, we learned about the possibility and power of resilience, empathy, and mentoring online. Our findings imply that new online practices could be closely examined and retained after the pandemic to expand the reach, depth and impact of doctoral education.

Practitioner Notes

1. Shift the perspective of doctoral student-faculty interaction from a distant supervisory perspective to a more reciprocal advising and mentoring relationship.
2. Examine and bolster all efforts to use online technologies to reach a more diverse population and meet their needs .
3. Related to #2., but more specific, urge departments and universities to support, encourage, and share student and faculty ideas in their creative use of new online environments.
4. Keep the door open for international collaborations.
5. Encourage doctoral student advisors to develop, examine, and discuss their own advising philosophy.

Keywords

doctoral students, doctoral student supervision, autoethnography, Covid-19, pandemic

Introduction

The streets are empty. The schools are closed. Bars, restaurants, and retail shops are closed. Only grocery stores, gas stations and essential services remain open but with restricted hours. An eerie silence creeps over the city. A pair of Mallard ducks, who always keep to the creek blocks away, waddle up the deserted streets to my backyard for the shelled sunflower seeds dropped from my birdfeeders – Dannelle D. Stevens, journal entry, March 10, 2020.

The world in early 2020 changed; a pandemic circled the globe and threatened life as we knew it. The key characteristic of the virus, COVID-19, was that it can be transmitted even when a person has no symptoms. The speed of its transmission, the strength of its attack, and the relentless assault on all peoples showed how interconnected and interdependent we have become on this planet. Everything was closed - schools, universities, restaurants, bars, wineries, services, gyms, government offices, and retail shops. Lockdown. To avoid face-to-face contact and combat the spread (and if they have digital access), people switched to online shopping as well as communication with friends, family, community groups, doctors, teachers, and professors. As this paper's five authors from different continents realised, universities and our lives as university community members were not immune to disruption. Headlines from our home news outlets tell the story.

Coronavirus: Florida State University may tell students to stay home after spring break as it shifts teaching online. *Tallahassee Democrat*, March 10, 2020, Tamara Bertrand Jones

University of Cape Town: Facilities shut down as coronavirus fears mount. *The South African*, March 18, 2020, Rajendra Chetty, Addisalem Yallew

Students studying abroad left in limbo as universities suspend classes. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 16, 2020, Kerryn Butler-Henderson

University of Oregon switches to online classes as colleges respond to coronavirus. *Oregon Public Broadcasting News*, March 12, 2020, Dannelle D. Stevens

In March 2020, in the middle of the term, higher education faculty had to switch almost immediately to online instruction. As schools and universities, worldwide, temporarily discontinued face-to-face education, a massive and total shift to online instruction became the only choice to offer some form of education. An internet-dependent video conferencing platform, Zoom, dominated instruction, supported meetings of all types, and provided a location for connection with colleagues. Along with real time video interactions, Zoom offered screen sharing where faculty and students could discuss and edit manuscripts, watch videos, and collaborate in small breakout rooms.

The online classroom was a whole new communication and instructional mode for most faculty and many students. Along with their students, faculty had to figure out how to facilitate class discussions, make appointments, use small group activities, and administer or take tests and quizzes. Those faculty who had some experience with online teaching were at an advantage. From course offerings to advising sessions with undergraduate and postgraduate education, faculty had to quickly get up to speed or lose students, or even lose their jobs.

One central feature in the higher education landscape is the education of doctoral students. Certainly, because the next generation of scholars, “stewards of the discipline,” are enrolled in our doctoral programs (Golde, 2006, p.5), doctoral education stands out as a vital contribution to society. Despite the challenges that the pandemic presented and even exacerbated, we wanted these students to continue with their education. In fact, in many ways because of the pandemic, we needed these doctoral students. After all, doctoral students represent the fresh and creative intellectuals needed to address the many social, economic, political, health care, and education disparities exposed by the pandemic. Our work as doctoral student supervisors could not be more central nor vital than it was at the beginning of, during, and following the pandemic. Yet, how could the typical, intense face-to-face practices of doctoral supervisors be adapted without compromising quality? What is quality doctoral student supervision?

Literature review

Doctoral student development is multifaceted and complex. During and after the early years in a program and at the dissertation research and writing stage, student progress depends on many social, emotional, intellectual, personal, and psychological factors (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Tinto, 1993; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). The dissertation advisor plays a key role in student development (Barnes & Astin, 2009; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). According to Lee (2008), supervisors traditionally attend to five key concepts of research supervision:

Table 1

Lee’s key concepts for doctoral student supervision

Key concept	Example of key concept
Functional (organization, rational progression)	Check on student timeline for completion of steps
Mentoring (emancipation)	Be a role model
Relationship-building (emotional intelligence)	Converse, question, be empathetic
Enculturation (gate-keeping)	Hold students accountable for high standards
Critical thinking (challenge, critique)	Provide specific feedback on writing

Adapted from Lee (2008, p. 4)

The big question was how do we engage in high quality advising and supervision as envisioned by Lee (2008) during a pandemic? Traditionally, this type of advising requires face-to-face interaction in faculty offices or coffee shops, not conversations over a computer screen from our homes. In a summary of focus group conversations with doctoral students and early career scholars, Levine, et al. (2021), noted the details of these challenges.

Moving work into the home caused disruption and challenges emphasized by many. Focus group participants discussed having difficulty in setting up work spaces, finding privacy for work, and having the right kind of equipment to work remotely. Some participants talked about having to work in cramped quarters with spouses, partners, or other household members working from home; others anchored on juggling the needs of children who also were at home. Some also talked about their struggle to create separation between work and home now that both were in the same place. Participants reported that it could be a challenge to find the mental focus to work when at home with many demands; it could also be a challenge to create boundaries and turn off work and step away from it. (p. 15)

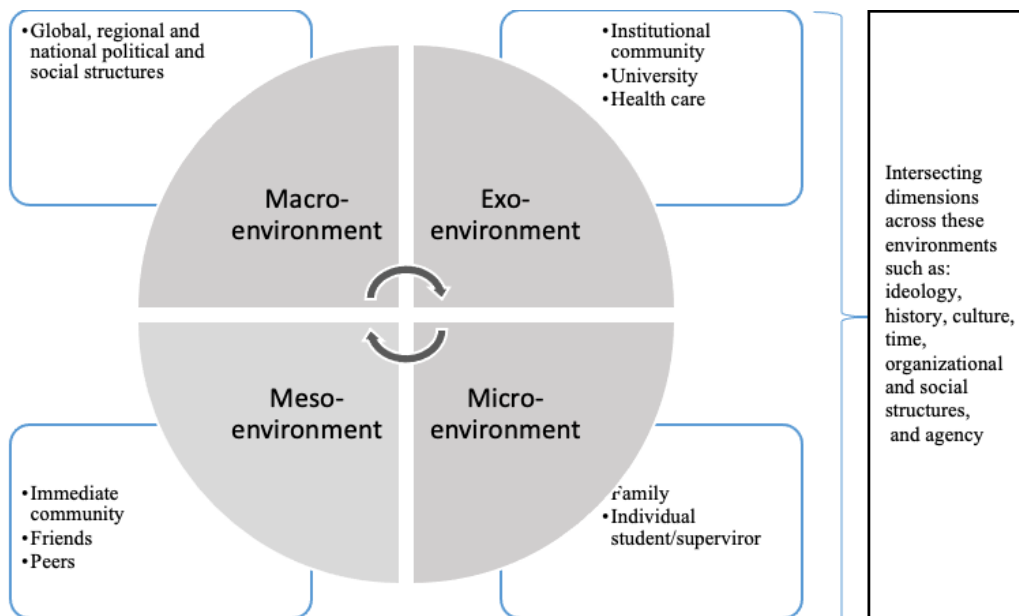
The environment in which doctoral students work was just not the same as it was prior to the pandemic. Doctoral students had to adjust quickly (Bal et al., 2020). As such, doctoral supervision and advising must undergo shifts in response.

Theoretical underpinning

For our research we opted to use person-environment theory as developed by Astin (1984) and Bronfenbrenner (1994). The theory helped us articulate our responses to the macro environment of the pandemic, which has been characterized as disruptive (Colpitts, Usick, & Eaton, 2020; Elangovan, Mahrous, & Marchini, 2020), stressful (Guidotti Breting et al., 2020; Hung et al., 2020; LeMoine et al., 2020), and anxiety-producing (Guidotti Breting et al.; Cao et al., 2020) while simultaneously considering our respective specific and micro contextual environments. The theory also enables us to reflect on our experiences considering interacting and intersecting dimensions across these environments such as: ideology, history, culture, time, organizational and social structures, and agency (Arnold et al., 2012). Based on their experience as graduate students, Wang and DeLaquil (2020) also employed person-environment theory to explain their doctoral student-advisor relationships. The power of the theory is that any individual current experience and response is nested and can be explained by forces in the macro-environment (political and social structure) through the exo-environment (institutional community) to the meso-environment (immediate community) ending up at the micro-environment (the family). During COVID-19 it seems that all of these environments were shifting and played a significant role in the daily lives of both students and supervisors.

Figure 1

Environments affecting the lives of students and supervisors during the pandemic.
Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1994).



The purpose of this paper was to describe how four faculty from three continents navigated their relationships with doctoral students in the research and dissertation phase of their doctoral programs during the pandemic in 2020. From the four faculty autoethnographic cases, we summarized key themes and recommendations. We are especially interested in sharing our insights about what aspects of the "new normal" relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors might be sustained after the pandemic and ultimately lead to improved doctoral student-advisor relationships.

Methods

We chose an autoethnographic research perspective to explore the phenomena of doctoral supervisory practice during the pandemic. As a form of reflexive research by combining elements of autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography capitalised on insights gained from researchers' personal experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Wilson et al, 2020). Autoethnography was well suited for this study because the approach is based on an in-depth reflection by individuals in their environment. What sets autoethnography apart from traditional ethnography was that the researchers themselves are positioned as a member of the group under study, and hence "form part of the representational processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story they are telling" (Anderson, 2006, p. 383). Grounded on the interpretivist paradigm (McIlveen, 2008; Morehouse, 2012), this approach challenges traditional ways of researching by treating research "as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 1).

We were cognizant of ethics in scholarship related to the use of autoethnography as methodology, particularly in research that endorses the authorial presence of the self in the reflective process together with engaging with narratives from different global contexts. As autoethnographic researchers, we were mindful to treat our reflections on doctoral supervision and university policies and procedures with objectivity, and to view our narratives through analytical and interpretive lenses to detect cultural undertones and bias. Since research data was accessed directly from ourselves through reflection, logistics, protocols and ethical clearance associated with conventional research were not necessary. Through a process of intensive collaborative critique and comprehensive evaluation of the four narratives, we ensured trustworthiness of the data and rigour in the reflective process.

As illustrated in Duarte (2007), we first developed descriptive narratives of experiences supervising students during the pandemic. Each author responded to a set of prompts about their advising practice. The prompts were:

1. Who are you? Who are you as an advisor? Tell us about the context of your program.
2. What is your overarching philosophy of doctoral advising?
3. How did you develop this philosophy?
4. How do you demonstrate this philosophy with students? How does this differ, based on student identities, personal circumstances, or professional goals?
5. What are/were the main issues that impacted on students during the pandemic?
6. In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the ways you advise?

7. How do you support students' writing during this time? Has that changed from pre-COVID-19?
8. Tell a story about a time when...

The participants, four faculty and one doctoral student, contributed to the development, implementation, analysis, and presentation of results. The doctoral student read the autoethnographies and collaborated on the development of the themes, checking them in light of her experience. We have a number of years advising doctoral students, teaching as well as coordinating and directing doctoral programs. All of us have tenure. After having read each other's autoethnographies, we developed a collective reflexive analysis of accounts looking for commonalities and divergences in our advising practices during the pandemic. Because the faculty authors were from South Africa, Australia, and the United States, we were able to explore cross-cultural and transcontinental experiences of PhD/EdD supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

The four tenured faculty who wrote the autoethnographies below are seasoned doctoral student advisors from across three continents and four disciplines- Educational Leadership, Curriculum, Sociology, and Health Sciences. The number of doctoral students they have advised through graduation varies from 10 to 23. All except one are full professors. All except one has had experience teaching online, but, notably, only one had experience supervising students online before the pandemic. Finally, besides teaching research methods classes, all of these faculty have had other leadership roles like chairing or coordinating the program or working with the Institutional Review Board in their departments or at the university level. They are accomplished scholars in their own right.

Autoethnography #1. Rajendra Chetty, University of Western Cape, Capetown, South Africa.

South Africa has four models of doctoral education. The dominant model is the traditional *apprenticeship model* characterized by an informal, unstructured, individualized, one-on-one mentoring relationship between student and supervisor. It does not include coursework; students learn the necessary skills and competencies from their supervisors. The *cohort-based model* represents a shared/group experience defined by a specified time cycle where candidates study together in workshops and seminars and it includes a strong course work component. The *course-based model* includes a structured curriculum in addition to individual supervision. It focuses on epistemology, research methods, critical thinking skills and discipline-specific theory. The PhD by *publication model* is based on the supervised research project but examined on the basis of a series of peer-reviewed academic papers in accredited journals.

I work at a historically disadvantaged university that was limited to black students during apartheid. My academic interest is in the areas of literature and the intersectionality of race, class and marginalization. I successfully supervised thirteen doctoral graduates, mostly within the apprenticeship model. In 2016 I experimented with the cohort-based model with three students in a major funded project on literacy and poverty and I had a graduate in the PhD by publication route.

My philosophy is strongly influenced by postcolonial theory, decolonial methodologies and radical intellectualism. I have a background in activism and resistance against the racist regime through

political mobilization of subaltern communities. I believe that an antidote for the poverty of modern agency is the radical turn towards conscious subjecthood based on the intellectual and reflective capabilities of students. Radical intellectualism inspires students to interpret and construct meaning, be critical of all knowledge and never silence their voice.

My philosophical approach led to students' critical reflection on praxis and creative ways to connect knowledge with experience through continually examining their own reasoning, assumptions, biases and actions. They aimed to develop new knowledge, skills and dispositions and to foster critical contemplation of actions in real-world contexts. A transformative element, linked to critical theory, is integral to their studies. They used immanent critique to expose contradictions between claims and reality and dialectical thought as a mode of inquiry to seek the origin of social phenomena in the tensions between opposing forces. The dominant methodological framing is narrative research where the concept of 'voice' is central.

During the COVID-19 pandemic I supervised five candidates, all in the initial phase of their studies on decolonization, early childhood and rural education. Computer screens abruptly replaced campus spaces conducive for social interaction and dialogue. Now, more than ever, I have come to realise the crucial role of home conditions within the supervision process.

Students adapted well to the online mode. although all our previous engagements were face-to-face. There was anxiety, fear and stress around the pandemic and it influenced their studies. They preferred the traditional ways of supervision, missed the robust academic debates and yearned for the collaborative culture that characterised traditional interaction. A major challenge was access to libraries and unstable internet connections. Four of my students are mothers and being at home with children meant taking on the added role of teacher due to school closures. A student noted that she had to cope with being in an overcrowded, confined space and could only complete tasks at night when there were no distractions. Reflections included: 'my mind, body, and soul have been affected by this change'; 'being confined to one space all the time has made me reluctant to do any work'; 'I have been feeling depressed and unmotivated, which has contributed to the non-completion of tasks'; and 'no website or online reading is better than stepping into a library'.

We agreed in an initial meeting on how often, when, and how we will meet; and schedules were developed that took into consideration time constraints and difficulties encountered with isolation. Students sent emails with questions, issues that needed clarity and draft chapters. I responded swiftly to emails and cell phone messages. My challenge was to include a measure of interaction among students so that they can feel connected, hence I scheduled regular check-ins with each student individually.

I made a conscious effort to understand the circumstances under which students worked and their added responsibilities, such as childcare. The virtual collaborative space created with Zoom did not accommodate the preferences of all the students and some were distrustful of Zoom with regard to confidentiality of sensitive data. Although I tried to maintain effective forms of interaction, I was not sure how successful it was for ongoing productivity as I felt the morale was generally low. Reconceptualising an empirical study to textual analysis because respondents were not available was unsettling for students; one felt so traumatised with the change in her methodology that she thought of abandoning her project. It was imperative from a psychological perspective for me to demonstrate renewed commitment, support, and encouragement to their projects given their increased family commitments, stress, mental health, working environments, research curtailment, and financial challenges. Although I was considerate to the new needs that emerged and revised my

expectations of their progress, I was equally at a loss with the abnormal context, apprehensive and not confident about my guidance.

Nevertheless, it was heartening that all my students made substantive progress, milestones were achieved and two students had their proposals and ethical protocols approved. In cases where data was collected in 2019, students were able to analyse findings and adhere to their initial work plan. I was awarded two major collaborative research grants by our National Research Foundation and procured scholarships for two students. In terms of scholarly activities, students submitted articles to accredited journals and two articles were published, they participated in an international webinar and presented papers at national online conferences. I acknowledge that while my students have shown a great deal of resilience as researchers during this unprecedented time, the demand for the supervisor's support and understanding, was more than I have ever experienced during my career.

Autoethnography #2. Kerry Butler-Henderson, RMIT University, Boondurri, Tasmania, Australia

The Australian Qualification Framework (2020) specifies the structure, intention, and outcomes for doctoral programs in Australia, yet there is still a diverse range of doctoral experiences across Australia's thirty-nine higher education institutions. Whilst all universities offer a Doctor of Philosophy, which is typically a three-to-four-year full time (or part-time equivalent) research intensive program, a small number also offer a professional doctorate, a three-year full time (or part-time equivalent) program that includes a third coursework component and an industry focused research study. All doctoral programs are required to include a confirmation stage at the end of the first year, annual review of progress, and external examination of the candidature (typically a thesis). However, the universities have different requirements for research training, ranging from no accompanying training, optional participation in staff research development training, required completion of a research subject, through to completion of a graduate certificate alongside the doctorate. Annual reviews can be submission of a written report, a meeting with a doctoral coordinator, through to a formal presentation to a faculty. And examination requirements beyond the external examination can also vary, with some universities only requiring the external review and others also requiring an oral defense. As such, the doctoral experience can be quite different depending on the university, particularly for the part-time off campus candidate.

Over the years I have successfully supervised eighteen doctoral candidates, and involved with dozens as a research advisor, with a 100% completion rate either on time or under time, and all producing at least two publications in ranked journals during their candidature. And whilst this would be an expectation for any supervisor, the uniqueness with my supervisory experience is that I have never supervised an on-campus candidate. All eighteen candidates have completed their doctoral journey from interstate or overseas, with the majority working in full-time roles whilst completing their doctorate. I have taken this approach as a reflection of my own doctoral experience, where my supervisors supported me completing my own doctorate whilst working full-time. Over the years, I have developed a strong program to support the fully online doctoral candidate, which is agile to meet different candidate knowledge, skills, and needs, using technology as a tool to support not only a successful completion, but a positive, quality experience. I continue to undertake research and mentor many once they have completed their doctorate, as they move into their academic or research careers. So, in theory, my supervisory style was well suited for the COVID-19 way of working.

But what if all of your candidates are also front-line health professionals? The six candidates I supervised during 2020 were all registered part-time and lived throughout Australia. All were directly involved in the digital health strategies to manage data collection, analysis, and reporting needs across an organisation, a jurisdiction, or nationally. Several provided critical roles during outbreaks, whilst others returned to clinical roles to support overstretched and under-resourced services. And for all, their doctorate was furthest from their minds. So how do you support candidates when their doctorate is much lower on the priority list?

I met virtually with each candidate to discuss their mental wellness during this period and if they needed to take leave from their doctorate. Where leave was considered, we discussed what this meant and the time duration. Important in these discussions was the need for us to check-in with each other from time-to-time and to establish a return plan before starting their leave. Only one of my candidates took leave due to work commitments and has since returned to her doctoral studies. For those continuing, it was important to spend at least five minutes at the start of each meeting talking about non-doctoral matters. This is part of my standard practice because an understanding about their work and personal life informs when their doctorate may be impacted, but it was even more important to monitor mental wellness during this time. It was also important to be agile. Sometimes they needed to have more frequent, shorter meetings, and at a minimum, we would meet once per month for half an hour. Agility was also important with regard to progress. If a candidate had not done anything in the last month, we would spend the meeting reflecting and goal setting before the next meeting. Compassion, reassurance, and support featured heavily, with a strong dose of realism. Many of my candidates are high performers who would be despondent if they had not made progress in the previous month. Together we would discuss strategies that would work for them, whether it was working an hour or two every evening and ending the session with a note to themselves about what they need to do the next evening, or taking every second Friday as a study day and working for three days straight. Similarly, many of my research studies that involved industry collaboration also required adjustment and understanding. Considering the doctoral journey is a traineeship in academia, sharing these experiences with my candidates was empowering for them. Further, working with my candidates in a similar way reinforced the concept of mentorship.

Hence, whilst my previous program for candidate development was ideal for the COVID-19 environment, my leadership skills grew immensely to support my candidates to continue with their doctoral journey and play a critical role in our health system's response to the pandemic. The experience has enabled me to strengthen my pastoral care skills and to have a more person-centred approach to supervision

Autoethnography #3. Dannelle Stevens, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, United States

From small (1200 to 2000 students) private liberal art colleges to large (15,000 to 45,000 students) public state universities to mid-sized elite private universities, the 4000 US degree-granting higher education institutions are quite diverse in number of students, as well as location, focus, funding, and governance. The 260 US doctoral programs tend to reflect this diversity as well - public or private, small, or large.

The pandemic arrived at a time when US doctoral programs were already in flux with many moving to online instruction and considering other dissertation formats. US doctoral students receive either a traditional, research-focused PhD, or a more practice-focused, Ed.D. or a Professor of Practice (psychology). At some universities, students will take all of their classes online; others participate

in a hybrid program with some online and some classes face-to-face. Others still have only face-to-face classes. Many US university doctoral students are admitted as a group and become a “cohort” that take all of their classes together. Even the format for the dissertation itself was in flux, with some institutions requiring students to write and seek to publish three papers on their research topic rather than a five-part research study. Yet, with all of these programmatic changes, all programs seem to have one person as the “major advisor”, coaching and mentoring a doctoral student during the research and dissertation phase.

As a professor and dissertation advisor, my work with doctoral students grows out of my experience in my own doctoral program. Before I entered graduate school, I was a working professional, a classroom teacher for fourteen years, with little knowledge and experience in graduate work. I became a full-time doctoral student in a large, public, highly-regarded research university. Most of the time I felt confused about the academic expectations and the political imperatives swirling around me. I lacked confidence in my writing and research skills. By sheer grit, a few good friends and loving family, I survived and graduated.

Since then, part of my doctoral student advising focused on making sure that doctoral students do not have the same experience. Many of my advising skills that I honed over time served me well during the pandemic. My goals included expectations that doctoral students graduate with a critical awareness of social and political challenges, and the confidence and courage to write, teach, and address these challenges. I seek to develop critical awareness and writing skills from a student-centred perspective. I am a social constructivist in orientation, in that I believe that knowledge is “constructed” not in isolation but in communication. We work together to learn. I can be a listener, a model, a coach, and a source of written and verbal feedback. I seek to be an intellectual role model, not merely one who asks questions and leaves the student isolated to address them. I will “scaffold” their learning so that eventually they can perform the task on their own. I share strategies I have learned that have helped me. Some have referred to this kind of interaction as a cognitive apprenticeship where modelling, coaching, and scaffolding are the centrepieces of instruction. In the past this work was done face-to-face. During COVID-19, I shifted to video conferencing, frequently using the screen share feature to discuss their work.

The pandemic accelerated programmatic changes in regard to online interactions. We were all working from home. That one fact changed the context in which doctoral students research and write. Some students had already been enrolled in fully online programs. Now, more than likely, they must work from home, and they were not home alone. Their family was with them - children, partners, and pets. Their children were taking school classes online. Partners may also be working online. While in the past doctoral students may have been able to isolate themselves and focus on their dissertation apart from their family at university laboratories, libraries, or coffee shops, during the pandemic the family became a daily competitor for the student’s time and energy.

The doctoral students I supervise changed during the pandemic. Four years ago, I retired. Before retirement, I directed a doctoral program, taught face-to-face classes, and graduated 18 EdD students in a US Pacific NW School of Education. The university was a large (27,000) public urban comprehensive whose motto was “Let knowledge serve the city.” After retirement and during COVID-19, I started advising four doctoral students online from a private, urban, religious-informed university in Chicago whose motto was “Vocation meets virtue.” My doctoral students are classroom teachers located in New Jersey, Georgia, Texas, and Oregon.

Many of my online interactions with my new doctoral students were similar to how I worked before COVID-19, using a process and product approach. I emphasized the need to attend to the processes associated with research and writing like being organized, using a citation management system, writing goals, keeping a journal, etc. To this end and because of the distractions during the pandemic, I wrote up a “to do” list during our meeting so that they knew specifically what I expected to see completed the next time we met. Then, I provided guidance related to the product, doing the research and writing the proposal and final dissertation. I gave students handouts with writing assignments like developing their purpose statement, or writing crisp and thorough definitions of key constructs. I shared the dissertation rubric I created when I directed a doctoral program. I believe that the “to do” list and structures like the rubric built confidence and added clarity at a time when so many things were uncertain with the pandemic.

Doing a dissertation is stressful enough, but doing it during the pandemic exponentially increased all the stressors. Before we even chat about the dissertation, I check-in with them. “How are you doing? What effect is the pandemic having on your family and friends?” I was concerned about their physical, social, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional well-being. What I learned about them and their family tempered my interactions and expectations.

Autoethnography #4. Tamara Bertrand Jones, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, United States

My institution is a public research institution in the southeastern United States. Overall our doctoral education mirrors the structure that Dannelle outlined earlier. My department houses two types of doctoral programs - a doctor of philosophy and a doctor of education. I advise students in both programs. I believe firmly that I serve multiple roles as their major professor; I am advisor, mentor, and coach. Student needs and shared expectations determine which one, or combination they receive as part of our relationship. The COVID-19 pandemic only expanded these roles for me and my students.

A few years ago, my colleagues and I developed a framework that uses a Black Feminist approach to doctoral advising (Bertrand Jones, et al., 2013). Grounded in the experiences that Black women in academia face, this framework represents a culturally responsive approach to doctoral advising and underscores my personal advising philosophy. In the model, there are three advisor responsibilities, four main advising functions, and five characteristics/behaviours of the advising relationship. The five ethics that ground the characteristics/behaviours of the advising relationship reflect my personal approach to advising in both theory and practice.

Ethic of Community describes the advising relationship as one that is “built upon a communal dialogue, reciprocity, mutual respect and equality; the advising relationship is bi-directional and non-hierarchical in nature.” I recognize that I and my students are both a part of a community that we create and sustain. Especially because I inhabit a predominantly White institution, I am constantly aware of the ways that my students may not engage with colleagues who value and respect them as scholars and knowledge producers. So, I go out of my way to combat this by creating an insular community where they know they are safe - physically and intellectually.

Ethic of Empowerment is characterized by “a relationship that de-centres the traditional power and authority structure; embodies agency and collectivity.” There is a certain respect for hierarchy that is always present, despite my best efforts to show students that I struggle with some of the same

issues they do, like procrastination and impostor syndrome, despite my tenure status and having served in academic leadership positions.

By enforcing the Ethic of Accountability, I provide “a relationship that is honest and candid; advisees are regularly held accountable for their work and progress.” While students know that I am flexible and understanding of the many intersectional parts of their lives, I expect their best and hold them to a standard of excellence.

I believe that the Ethic of Caring represents “a holistic advising relationship that considers the academic, personal, and community responsibilities of the advisee; provides an advisee with a sense of caring and empathy for the “entire” self.” My advisees are not simply scholars, students, or researchers, they are parents and children, community members, church parishioners, homeowner association members, and serve in many other roles. They are people who deserve my respect simply because of their humanity.

As a Black woman scholar, I recognize the need for an Ethic of Diverse Knowledge, or the “promotion of inclusive epistemological standpoints and knowledge claims; ensuring that divergent (non-Eurocentric) perspectives or ways of thinking are respected, validated and legitimized.”

In early January 2021, I contracted COVID-19. The virus greatly impacted my health and thus shaped the ways I interacted with the students I teach and the doctoral students I advise. I had to reconsider many aspects of my advising philosophy, mainly because my health was compromised and I could no longer physically perform my regular and routine work. I fully expected the virus to be completely gone after two weeks of quarantine and rest, as directed by the Centre for Disease Control in the US and other media. Unfortunately, this was not the case. During the two weeks of quarantine, I continued to work, feeling obligated to my students and colleagues. After the two weeks, while I was supposed to feel normal again, I felt anything but. For weeks I continued to have a loss of taste and smell, experience extreme fatigue, and even brain fog. For someone who was accustomed to working from a full plate of responsibilities, those responsibilities took a toll on me physically and psychologically. I felt badly about not being able to meet deadlines, not bouncing back as quickly as projected, and even experiencing a lack of desire to continue with all of the tasks I did before I got sick. The ethic with which I approached my work and advising as described above began to become overwhelming. As I reflected on the illness and my life at the time, I knew I needed to make significant changes, for my personal well-being, and for the model I provided for my advisees.

The main issue I saw with students, and experienced myself in COVID-19, was the blurring of clear lines. Before COVID-19, school or academics had a clearer boundary than it has now where Zoom and state-wide shutdowns have brought work into our homes in more intrusive ways. We have had to adjust to working, sleeping, and living in the same space, while continuing to share our space (for some of them) with family or others. For students who are parents or full-time caregivers, the additional strain on resources at home became apparent. To help combat this for myself, and for students, I encouraged them to take a day off. I took Saturdays. I check no email and worry about nothing academic. Seeing me model this behaviour students noted that it has given them permission to take personal time, without the guilt of not being “productive.”

Since the pandemic, I do more group advising. The group advising has increased because students are not seeing each other regularly, so the informal opportunities for conversation and exchange of ideas are not happening as frequently, if at all. As such, I felt compelled to create small spaces

where students come together virtually. Not only does this help build community. It also helps me to reduce the number of redundant meetings where I would share the same information multiple times. I am still available for one-on-one meetings.

I have committed to exposing the hidden curriculum of academia by making plain the unspoken rules and ensuring my advisees are knowledgeable about the steps in the entire doctoral process and beyond. Most times this involves me providing additional documentation to help students than my program provides, much of it has been developed for myself and my students, and other faculty use to create their own. More recently, this has included frank discussions about the ways that academia can be leveraged for both personal and community advancement.

While the pandemic has been disruptive in countless ways for both my professional and personal life, I am grateful for the reflection it provided of the ways that I was both a willing victim of the overwork and overburdening of Black women in academia. It reminded me that I do have the agency to make changes necessary for my well-being. A lesson that I am passing on to my students as well.

Discussion

The autoethnographies of four experienced doctoral supervisors explored the nature of doctoral supervision during the pandemic of 2020-21. The doctoral student participated in the development of the literature review and analysis of themes. Our four universities, three continents, and three disciplines seem quite different. Our philosophies have different foundations from the health sciences to critical theory to educational psychology to the ethics of doctoral advising. Yet, our basic interactions and relationships with our students share some worthwhile themes.

First, each of us embraced a philosophy of supervision that was adaptable, nimble, appropriate, and effective in retaining our students. Certainly, as Lee (2008) notes, the functional part of supervision is to keep our students moving along in their programs. A big part of our job was helping students maintain their commitment during the stresses and anxieties of graduate school that were exacerbated by the pandemic.

Second, the unique issue presented by the pandemic is that both the supervisor and student were experiencing disruption in every aspect of their lives from going to school to buying groceries to caring for children and parents. All autoethnographies documented these disruptions and details of the impacts. Because doctoral student supervision is a long journey, sometimes over years, students and faculty often get to know each other quite well. However, during COVID-19, this understanding deepened. We met virtually with students from our homes. We met their pets and partners. As Reis & Grady (2020) observe, “Doctoral advising requires being in the “now” not in the “when” and integrating the realities of life into the relationship. Orienting life experiences into learning transforms both the advisee and advisor, and creates a more diverse and supportive advising practice” (p. 139). Largely because of the close personal context of our interactions over video conferencing, we also learned more about our student’s emotional lives, not only the things that worked but the things that created anxiety and stress.

Third, the pandemic exposed the fragility and inequities of our health care and educational systems in the meso-environment. The vulnerable suffered more. Those with digital tools survived and even thrived; those without suffered economic, psychological, and social losses. The doctoral student on this paper had to cut her video when conferencing with us to have enough Wi-Fi strength to communicate. One weekend she had no Wi-Fi at all. This may complicate the communication flow.

As advisors, we had to be alert to and act on disruptions in communication due to technological or health challenges.

One final thought for discussion is that autoethnographies are limited by the capacities of authors to introspect. Our autoethnographies document our self-reflection and insight in doctoral student supervision. Le Roux (2017) acknowledges the challenges of doing autoethnographic research while maintaining a level of rigor:

Reporting on one's own experiences requires self-reflection which in turn requires careful thought about one's own behavior, experiences and beliefs. Self-reflection requires the capacity to exercise introspection and leads to inquiry into the human condition and human consciousness. This requires stepping back from an experience and considering how one thought or acted, but at the same time, immersing oneself in the event and reliving the experience in all its dimensions. (p. 197).

All four narratives note that the advisors have high levels of experience and are recognized as departmental and university leaders in their institutions.

Conclusion

The person-environment theory (Astin, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1994) helped us examine and explain the powerful effect of the pandemic. The theory focused less on what is being developed and more on the where and how of development (Patton, et al. 2006 in Wang & DeLaquil, 2020). The environment played a central role in individual development. The individual's personal life intersected with the sociohistorical context of the pandemic. COVID-19 and the pandemic became the sociohistorical context surrounding our lives and our students' lives. We were immersed in it. It was the sea in which both the supervisor and student swam. The pandemic merged the macro- and micro- environments and, in the process, expanded our thinking about all the factors that affect quality doctoral education and foster student persistence.

As Duarte (2007) notes, "Autoethnographic writing... develops into a reflective analysis ... to generate new insights and to enhance the researcher's sensitivity towards the knowledge gained in the process (p. 2)." Our insights centered around personal qualities needed to sustain our students as well as ourselves. Fostering resilience in the face of uncertainty was essential. Empathic listening became the foundation of our interactions. We persisted with our students. We listened to them and to each other. Even writing this paper gave us hope and insight that strengthened our work and interaction with students. We developed and discovered new capacities and strengths as advisors and realized these were possible online. The commonalities from four faculty across three continents were astounding and reassuring.

Given the above reflections from discussing, writing, and reading each other's work, we offer the following recommendations about future doctoral supervision practices. We strongly believe that the pandemic, though presenting challenges, offered many opportunities to refine and bolster doctoral student work for faculty and students alike.

Recommendations for future doctoral supervision practice

Shift the perspective of doctoral student-faculty interaction from a more top-down supervisory perspective to a more reciprocal advising and mentoring relationship.

As evidenced in our narratives, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has signalled a much-needed shift in doctoral supervision. Given the changing landscapes of higher education, Guerin and Green (2013) called for research on supervisory practices. Traditional models of relationships with doctoral students can be presented in a continuum that ranges from supervision to advising to mentoring. Each of these indicates a different level and type of power relationship. For example, supervision of the doctoral process typically involves oversight of the doctoral research process, while advising focuses on the academic and professional milestones needed for degree completion. Mentoring, on the other hand, includes aspects of supervision and advising but extends these functions to include a more personal investment in the professional and personal lives of our students. Mentoring represents a reciprocal relationship where we both give and receive from our engagement. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic supported our approaches to advising and our interactions in ways that were counter to the traditional distance that was thought to be required between doctoral supervisors and doctoral students. With this distance gone, supervisors and students both got glimpses into each other's home lives, thus opening the door to integrating the humane aspects of our lives with our work and becoming more authentic with each other.

Examine and bolster all efforts to use online technologies.

We can advise doctoral students successfully online. We did it. Faculty shifted overnight to online instruction and, in this case, advising. Three faculty in this study had experience with online teaching. One did not. For the three experienced faculty, the transition from teaching to advising was not especially jarring. Yet, even with experience, we found new ways of working with students. Video conferencing added the visual and social interaction component we all yearned for during the pandemic. Online for us was not a monologue but a rich dialogue and opportunity for real time conversation over manuscripts as well as sharing challenges in our personal and professional settings.

Urge departments and universities to support, encourage, and share student and faculty ideas in their creative use of new online environments.

The virtual environment presented challenges to sustaining any relationship (Colpitts, et al, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020). Yet, as Wang and De Laquil (2020) note "it is crucial to find and even create virtual spaces for complex interactions and meaningful engagement (p. 1350) [during the pandemic]." They urge students, programs and departments to construct and support "peer support, faculty mentorship, and participation in research and publishing (p. 1350)." The social development of a graduate student seems to lead to higher completion rates as well (Reis & Grady, 2020; Wilson, et al., 2020). We explored group advising and student virtual writing groups as well as collaborating across three continents. We recommend an investment in creative ideas from students and faculty to continue and expand online accessibility and competency. New online practices should be retained after the pandemic to expand the reach, depth and impact of doctoral programs. More research needs to be gathered to examine the impact of new online practices on doctoral student education and retention.

Finally, as we consider the future of doctoral programs, we are encouraged. Online technologies have opened up doctoral education to the world. Certainly, we must solve the problem of the digital inequities. However, as we work toward that distant but achievable goal, we now have some new tools in our toolbox like video conferencing and online instruction. Doctoral education can now reach those who are isolated in rural settings. Doctoral programs can tap the rich resources found across the globe to tackle the global, not just national, challenges ahead.

Conflict of interest

This research was not funded by any organisation. In addition, even though we spanned four universities, there were no conflicts of interest.

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