Student and supervisor perspectives on engaging in collaborative thesis supervision as an online group

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This teaching reflection explores a group thesis supervision process, where each member shared reflections on the purpose of the group, as well as the strengths and challenges of learning together. Perspectives were gathered from each member of the group who answered six open ended prompts. Reflections were expanded further, through candid conversations, which facilitated a shared analysis process (Cohen et al., 2018).

Ortlipp (2008) discusses how a reflexive approach is widely accepted as a way for researchers to talk about the impact of their choices, experiences, and actions during the inquiry. The supervisor and student adopted a reflexive approach to talk about and reflect on the roles they played within the group thesis supervision process. Just as Ortlipp (2008) promotes keeping and using reflective journals, the group used a similar approach to answer the reflective prompts. During this process, the group reflected on their experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings about carrying out the group supervision process. During the candid conversation that followed, the group came together and reflexively analysed the feedback. Together, they openly examined personal assumptions and clarified their collective understandings (Ortlipp, 2008) of the supervision process. This article therefore is a reflexive account of the significance of group thesis supervision.

COMPLETION AND CONNECTION: THE PURPOSE OF GROUP SUPERVISION

The rudimentary reason behind creating the supervision group was to ensure that the four MEd students had regular online meetings with their supervisor in a timely manner. "Although our thesis topics were vastly different", the group asserted, "we still had a common purpose: to complete our thesis alongside a

supervisor" (shared reflection). Most meetings were characterised by core notions of social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023), creating space for each group member to actively support the learning of each other through discussion and co-construction of knowledge. Through shared reflection, the students found that they "all looked forward to seeing each other and were excited for each other's learning". Shelley captured her peers thinking when she said, "It was fun and an honour to witness all this knowledge being produced", highlighting the genuine excitement that was felt for each other's progress.

The purpose of participating in group supervision changed as the student/supervisor relationship grew. The purpose of regular group meetings, a staple of the shared supervision process, began to include the celebration of students' milestones. As relationships strengthened, the members also offered "a supportive ear when we [the students] had challenges with teaching and leading in our respective roles" (shared reflection). The students and supervisor discussed a unique sense of familiarity that developed as they were remotely 'in' each other's homes. "We got to know each other's children and even pets, in a way that individual, face-to-face supervision would never have allowed for" (supervisor reflection). Wisker et al. (2021, p. 618) refers to this as "pedagogical homeliness", and the group talked of how the online meetings went a long way in combating the isolation often felt with postgraduate studies (Cohen et al., 2018).

REGULARITY AND CONSISTENCY: A STRONG MEETING STRUCTURE.

Establishing dedicated meeting times for the supervision group to meet online became an important element of the shared supervision structure. Having consistent meeting times and communication provided stability for the group's work together. The group met fortnightly during semester time, with each meeting lasting around one hour. The effectiveness of the regular fortnightly meetings was evidenced by limited need for rescheduling, demonstrating the students' commitment. As a group, the students agreed how valuable they found attending was for their learning. The regularly scheduled, fortnightly meetings, also meant the supervisor was able to keep abreast of progress, while the students "were able to set and reflect on micro-goals, fortnight to fortnight" (Tiffany).

Celebrating progress, whatever that looked like, became a cornerstone feature of every meeting. Tiffany felt that "each meeting was relationally strong but topically discrete". The group reflected on the rare times someone missed a meeting: "If a meeting was missed by anybody, it just meant the welcome was all the warmer at the next one".

REFLECTION AND GROWTH: BENEFITS OF GROUP SUPERVISION

As the group supervision process developed, it provided a shared reflective space for the students and supervisor. Vaughan et al. (2021) acknowledged how online supervision can open a space for learning and reflection to occur. The students stated how their supervisor "helped us gain a deeper understanding of the process by encouraging us to discuss our process and ask questions, which meant the whole group benefitted from rich conversations" (Maymoona). The group size of

four proofed to be an effective number for group reflection, because "everyone had ample time to talk, to reflect, and to learn while remaining manageable for Debbie to provide responsive, individual support" (shared reflection). Students became aware of the impact of their participation in the group, and the part they played (cf. Ortlipp, 2008) in supporting the learning of others.

As reflection grew, so did student expertise. The supervisor recognised how "each student grew in confidence and was empowered to contribute their growing expertise to the discussions" (Supervisor reflection). Ranjani recognised this too; "some [group members] had wider experience and knowledge in certain fields, which gave others' ideas or a kickstart in something that we probably were struggling with". Ranjani links to the notion of tuakana/teina (Ministry of Education – Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, 2009) to represent the symbiotic relationship which became a strong characteristic of the group. Further evidence of reflexive practice was that students and supervisor were aware of power relationships (cf. Ortlipp, 2008), which promoted the sharing of opportunities to lead. As the supervisor was keen to celebrate, "students leading parts of the meeting was a characteristic that became more balanced across the group as time went on", with less reliance on the supervisor for motivational support. The recognition of expertise is a key facet of social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023), which the students and supervisor were increasingly realising through their ongoing work together.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AS A GROUP: SOCIAL LEARNING

Whilst it was the supervisor's core responsibility to ensure that every student completed their thesis, she also had the responsibility to keep the momentum of the group going. Therefore, one of the most visible and influential roles of responsibility was that of the supervisor, whose leadership was foundational to the group's success. As Tiffany stated, "It took a relational supervisor to lead a relational space, and she did it beautifully". The supervisor, who believed in focusing on experience and expertise, stated how she "adopted a strengths-based approach that focused on celebrating individual successes". Students reported how "with Debbie's guidance, we enjoyed a shared supervision experience that was characterised by strong relationships and opportunities to exercise leadership".

In fostering an environment of 'empathy and celebration', the students stepped willingly into the responsibility of unconditional support for each other. The group's shared reflection highlighted the importance of accountability, celebrating progress, and positive, supportive interactions as key success factors for their work together. Carter and Curtis (2010) suggest these relational characteristics are essential for exploring learning opportunities. Maymoona explained, the students "trusted each other, learned from each other, were confident to ask questions and support one another". Maymoona was describing relational trust, which defined the group's dynamic. Relational trust and unconditional support were identified as essential for collaborative work (Carter & Curtis, 2010; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). Supported by their supervisor, the students "developed a strong sense of belonging and responsibility" (Ranjani) and demonstrated relational trust consistently in their time together. The supervisor discussed how she, "saw the balance of support and accountability in

the way the students constantly showed up for each other… physically as well as intellectually".

WEIGHING UP FACTORS OF GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL SUPERVISION

The group's shared reflection emphasised the significant value gained by students, which outweighed any challenges presented by group supervision. The student's willingness to overcome potential challenges exemplified successful social learning (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). The students reflected in earnest about the challenges they faced.

One of the areas the group weighed up was whether group supervision could function solely, or whether it also required times for individual supervision. Löfström et al. (2023) identified that one of the challenges with group supervision is the potential for supervisors to be unaware if individuals needed help. This was considered by the supervisor who asserted it was "important for the students to know that they could have individual meeting times with me as their supervisor whenever required". For some stages of thesis writing the group process suited students perfectly, while other stages also required one-to-one supervision. Some students wanted to progress their research at a faster pace than others, therefore individual meetings played a crucial role in supporting their progress. For Shelley, who spent much of her research time overseas, individual meetings with the supervisor were essential. Occasionally, due to time differences, Shelley could not attend the group meetings, so individual meetings were crucial for her learning and sense of connection.

During the shared conversations the students referred to the notion of "double-dipping" (shared reflection) on the supervisor's time, i.e. having time with her individually and within the fortnightly group. However, whilst this was a concern, reflective discussions revealed that both supervisor and students found this balance of individual and collective meetings a productive and efficient use of time. In hindsight, the supervisor could have reiterated at the beginning of the process that individual and group supervision will be a normal part of this process. Developing a culture of openness is perhaps an aspect of group supervision that deserves attention (Carter & Curtis, 2010; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this text, we provided critical reflection on online group thesis supervision. Our experience showed a shared co-constructive, relational teaching and learning environment for both the students and supervisor. Rich social learning developed a framework to support success. On a practical note, for the supervisor, the group process proved to be successful in teaching students in a timely and efficient manner, and for the students, it provided opportunities to grow as researchers. For the many advantages the students and supervisor identified, one disadvantage would be if the group process was the sole form of supervision provided. Everyone agreed that a group thesis process must also be flexible enough to allow for the provision of individual meetings, as required. This

reflection showcased the achievement of the students as emerging researchers during their thesis enrolment, and as writers and disseminators, after the completion of their studies.

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The authors are thesis graduands who studied within a Master of Education (ECE) programme at Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand, and their supervisor (Dr. Debbie Ryder). Thesis topics included: Across-sector collaboration in Kāhui Ako (Tiffany Williams); Mentoring relationships in teacher registration (Maymoona Benfayed); Professional learning for infant and toddler teachers (Ranjani Lata); and online ECE pedagogy (Shelley Auld).