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FEATURES OF GOOD MENTORING: INSIGHTS FROM
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE DOCTORATE MENTORS

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INTRODUCTION

In 2024, Otago Polytechnic's Doctor of Professional Practice (DProfPrac) entered its eighth year of delivery. This programme represents the sole practice-led postgraduate work-based learning delivery at Levels 9 and 10 in Aotearoa New Zealand. Derived from the Middlesex model of professional doctorates (Costley, 2010), it is one of an increasing number of such professional doctoral programmes in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Robinson, 2018). Otago Polytechnic's DProfPrac differentiates itself through its accommodation of alternative, subversive, and iterative methodologies as appropriate to the form and substance of a candidate's doctoral claim and contribution to knowledge.

This short article can be considered an early-stage enquiry from a broader study investigating distinctive aspects of mentoring, mentor support, and the *ākonga/learner* journey. It nestles within a wider consideration of how mentoring for work-based learners is distinctive from mentoring in other, conventional, doctoral programmes. This involves thinking through the affordances of good mentoring. The socio-political context in 2024 is that of education providers still struggling with how neoliberal processes coexist with the contested ideas of quality assurance and excellence, which I have addressed elsewhere (Andrew, 2024). Here, I ask what lessons the learnings of experienced mentors can teach mentors of professional practice doctoral candidates.

In a Socratic study of the DProfPrac candidature, Goode and Andrew (2021) chart the scope of their mentor/learner journey towards making an original contribution to professional knowing. They begin with an agreed trajectory of the journey and a shared understanding of roles to reduce the apprehension of the power differentials Polkinghorne et al. (2023) identify as significant obstacles. From a programme perspective, these researchers personalise graduate attributes. In working together, the mentor/learner dyad needs to consider:

- the level to which [learners] are self-evaluating and are able to deploy strategies to explore new personal insights;
- their critical understanding of how learning occurs in their workplace and how learning has occurred for them through their career;
- diverse strategies for engaging in work-based learning;
- an analysis of how learning at work has informed their professional identity;
- approaches they use to evaluate knowledge gained from their practice;
- approaches they use to engage with theory relevant for a range of contexts, and apply that theory to practice, and
- how their prior and current learning impacts their ability to design and conduct research projects. (Goode & Andrew, 2021, pp. 21–22)

Within this partial curriculum, the work of the mentor lies in their ability to identify, apply, and leverage these various strategies and approaches into an integrative approach about *becoming* and ultimately *being* a researcher and *belonging to* and *socialising into* a community of practice of future graduates.

LITERATURE

One purpose of this review is to identify features, or affordances, of heutagogy in professional practice doctorates. It then moves on to consider professional identity trajectories, alignments with facilitation and coaching theory, and the methodological and transdisciplinary potential such programmes afford within the heutagogical strategies. Studies of the impact of professional doctoral programmes are emerging (Boud et al., 2021), despite a gap in studies of mentor voices articulating what their work needs to look like from an experiential perspective. Work on good supervisory – as opposed to mentoring – practice has a long history (Polkinghorne et al., 2023) and feeds into this study.

The literature includes studies of mentoring as coaching (Bordogna & Lundgren-Resenterra, 2023) and facilitation (Carpenter & Ker, 2021); critical reflection as practice doctoral pedagogy (Cunningham, 2018), and the value of communities of practice as means of socialisation and belonging for both mentors and learners (Lambrev, 2021). Coaching is “a practice that allows an individual to reflect and gain awareness of who they are and what matters to them in order to make changes in their personal or professional life” (Bordogna & Lundgren-Resenterra, 2023, p. 102), and aligns with the identity focus of the professional doctoral trajectory. All these aspects of supervision facilitate formal and informal critical friendships which characterise organisational and faculty-wide research cultures. The critical friendship is often seen as a good model for the mentoring dyad or sometimes triad (Polkinghorne et al., 2023). The mentor as facilitator of knowing/knowledge and academic and professional socialisation is a key affordance of, or factor in, this programme – and professional doctorates worldwide.

Heutagogy

In addition to facilitating socialisation, applying a learner-determined, heutagogical approach is another differentiating affordance of professional practice (Kenyon & Hase, 2010). This approach combines “existing work practice ... to articulate [learners'] new professional framework of practice” (Mann, 2020, p. 22). This is because self-directed and self-determined approaches fostered through reflective practice are needed within workplaces (Kamenetz, 2010). The types of learning fostered through the heutagogical collaboration on the road to autonomy include double-loop learning, where learners consider the problem and the resulting action and outcomes, as well as “reflecting upon the problem-solving process and how it influences the learner’s own beliefs and actions” (Mann, 2020, p. 26). Reflecting on the learners’ journey towards addressing wicked problems is a key affordance of heutagogy.

Because of this emphasis on heutagogy – pedagogy for adults, professionals, and experts – the self-regulatory, synergistic model of ‘supervision’ identified by Styles and Radloff (2001) serves as a template for the modes of ‘mentoring’ professional practice learners. It pivots on *motivation, beliefs, management strategies, and affect*. It is integral to achieving confidence, independence, and autonomy, supported by an increased grounding in advanced professional practice (Stock, 2011). These, among other aspects, feed into a doctoral learner’s frame of professional practice, which serves as a springboard to their proposed and agreed, potentially change-making or transformative, enquiry. Ideally, doctorates, particularly professional ones, will create individuals who are critical in advancing knowledge and innovation in society, and who make a difference to both economic and social development (Bordogna & Lundgren-Resenterra, 2023).

Linking the learner’s professional experience and understanding to how they learned in practice is a crucial aspect of doctoral mentoring heutagogy. This involves naming and analysing learnings with a critical incident lens, told as a retrospective critical autoethnography. The act of naming begins a process of entering into the world of the metalanguage of research. By first understanding any strengths a professional practitioner brings to their new role as researcher/learner, it is possible to describe their *habitus* as an experienced practitioner at the start of a research enquiry, and to imagine future communities or workplaces where their *habitus* will be that of a thought leader or expert practitioner.

Importantly, acts of collaborative effort and mutual participation characterise the traits of the professional practice mentor identified in the emerging evidence set within this study. Polkinghorne et al. (2023, p. 48) foreground the fact that timely doctoral supervision or mentoring is relational, “a collaborative process which means that the relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student is of key significance.” Trust, and of course honesty, over time, are key.

Professional identity

Another key feature of professional doctorates is their potential for maximising learners' and mentors' contributions to their professions (Larmer et al., 2019). A focus on professional identity is key. Qualitative studies where the identities of those involved in mentoring are given voice include work by Sambrook et al. (2008) and Styles and Radloff (2001). Such studies in professional practice are still rare, particularly those evoking real-world dilemmas and expressed as praxis (Arnold & Mundy, 2020; Goode & Andrew, 2021) or case studies (Stephenson et al., 2006). A best practice review of supportive techniques across all species of doctorate emerged recently (Polkinghorne et al., 2023). It states that “supervisory support is the foundation upon which a doctoral student can fulfil their future academic, or industrial, career aspirations, and is crucial in terms of establishing the appropriate research culture which underpins their whole student experience” (Polkinghorne et al., 2023, p. 55).

Fostering belonging to future imagined communities is part of the socialisation towards professional identity. Wisker (2001, p. 37) suggests it is part of the supervisor's role “to encourage [learners] to attend appropriate conferences and introduce [them] to others in their field.” In professional practice, learners will already be members of professional bodies and organisations, or will be seeking to become more core members of these communities. They may also seek to internationalise their sense of belonging. Belonging also applies to the gaining of qualifications: belonging to the community of those holding doctorates. Often there are multiple communities, with the key one linked to professional practice within core organisations.

Facilitation and coaching

The work of the mentor is facilitative in nature. Carpenter and Ker (2021) itemise key skills needed by learning facilitators as: relationship building; listening and questioning skills; facilitative (reflective) questioning and connecting, as a coach or counsellor would do, and listening for the “glue” that holds the bits of told life together (p. 34). Thus, the mentor's work overlaps with that of the coach (Bordogna & Lundgren-Resenterra, 2023). A coaching-led approach indicates the need for mentors to possess and increase the emotional intelligence, compassion, and empathy necessary for coaching doctoral learners in our age of embracing change with resilience and buffering disruption with critical reflectivity. For learners, then, a coaching approach is shown to strengthen agency, empowering learners to recognise their strengths in times of enhanced crisis.

Methodological possibility in professional practice

Valuable methodologies for presenting professional practice research include autoethnography (Costley & Fulton, 2018), particularly autoethnographic action research (Arnold & Mundy, 2020; Hayes & Fulton, 2014). My interest extends to alternative ways of knowing, including transdisciplinary approaches, design thinking strategies, and emergent methodologies. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008, p. 1) write:

Emergent research methods have sprung forth as a result of where we have been, where we are, and where we envision ourselves going in the future ... Therefore, as the social world and our understanding of it have progressed, so too has our repertoire of social research methods.

Being, or potentially being, transdisciplinary is a further affordance of this doctoral programme. As applied to professional practice doctorates, the Otago Polytechnic mentor team understands “transdisciplinarity” as Hoffman et al. (2017) do. The term refers to research that tackles real life problems and addresses their complexity by involving a variety of actors from science and practice to explore and explain these problems from diverse perspectives. What is created is knowledge that is solution-oriented, socially robust, and transferable to both scientific and societal practice (Hoffmann et al., 2017).

Professional practice also understands the potential thetic output as more than a scientific ‘thesis.’ Thesis can be considered a holding pattern word for whatever form the mahi (work, output) needs to take. The ‘thesis’ is often an album of practice performances; the potential of bricolage as a potentially transdisciplinary mode of representing multiple and eclectic practices (Andrew & Karetai, 2022) is upheld, and non-traditional modes of knowing (Stock, 2011) accommodated as artefacts of a particular practice.

The fact that the DProfPrac is designed as – and often plays out as – ‘multiple’ is a further characteristic of the programme. Workplace knowledge, Lester (2011) maintains, moves past immediate contexts of research and opens possibilities of doing, creating, making and writing research in an authentically transdisciplinary space. Lester (2011) reasons that

complex change-oriented issues ... approached with a researching and critically reflective orientation can be a powerful source, not only of contextual insights but of academically and professionally-valid knowledge, giving rise to new concepts, models, theories and critiques as well as different ways of doing things. (p. 279)

Bricolage is a valuable approach in the professional doctorate toolbox for a range of reasons. It aligns with the transdisciplinary turn because it allows the solving of wicked problems among multiple stakeholders (Andrew & Karetai, 2022). Further, bricolage offers an opportunity for multi-perspectival or multi-vocal textuality, and it understands the continually evolving processes and practice of complex real-world problems (Yardley, 2019). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) unveil bricolage as a fresh ethnographic approach in qualitative methodology:

This person is an artist, a quilt maker, a skilled craftsperson, a maker of montages and collages. The interpretive bricoleur can interview; observe; study material culture; think within and beyond visual methods; write poetry, fiction, and autoethnography; construct narratives that tell explanatory stories; use qualitative computer software; do text-based inquiries; [use] focus group interviews; and even engage in applied ethnography and policy formulation. (pp. 681–682)

Collectively, these affordances of the doctorate, and doubtless others that space excludes, contribute to the learner’s desired attainment of autonomy both as a professional practitioner in an extended area of practice and as a researcher.

METHODOLOGY

This article examines the distinctive features of this doctorate through a literature review and a qualitative study involving the re-presentation or restorying of shared and often co-constructed narrative data (Riessman, 2008). I draw here on the pooled shared experience of a small tranche of five mentors, the first participants in a broader project. This data comes from a broader project of mentor *habitus* that is ongoing. The project is ethics-approved by Otago Polytechnic (#87, 2020). Clearly, sample size and self-report are recognised as limitations. Ethical and reflective spaces are afforded by participants’ transcript checking.

Epistemologically, the study sits in the naturalistic and interpretative spaces where stories of experience are shared with a researcher who is a member of the community of mentors – in other words, mentors interviewing mentors (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). In terms of evidence (data) generation, this study draws from both

collaborative email data (Drake, 2015) and dialogue (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990), including e-meetings recorded with open consent. As a small-scale study, its themes are reached via qualitative content analysis, “a dynamic form of analysis of verbal and visual data that is oriented toward summarising the informational contents of that data” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338) rather than staged thematic analysis. Patterns and regularities in the evidence set point to findings under several headings, to which I now turn.

FINDINGS

This section settles on five themes. In addition to elucidating the features of heutagogical mentoring, I examine the relational ambience of the mentoring team – the ‘we’ feeling critical friends create. Fostering autonomy emerges as key, as does tolerance for change. More instrumentally, there is the need for mentors to possess a broad knowledge base.

The features of mentoring

This section begins with guidance from one of the five participant mentors as to the features of their own practice. Their quote mentions core themes that resonate both with the literature above and with the experiences of the other four participants:

- Judgement refers to supporting the learner by careful guidance – meeting the milestones, signposting and referring the learner when they meet the roadblocks of over-reading, underwriting or misdirection.
- Intuition relies on the core skills of listening and observing and checking in on the learner in terms of how they are feeling about their learner experience and progress.
- Compassion is the demonstration of support and empathy for the learner at moments of challenge, overload and stress.
- Expertise is the deployment of subject matter expertise for mutual benefit within the facilitation relationship. (Mentor 2)

Mentor 3 comments on the centrality of treating the learners as experts and professionals, hence the need for leveraging a heutagogical approach among professional equals. The power relationship characteristic of traditional doctorate journeys is replaced by ako-led reciprocity and mutual professional respect.

The components of good mentoring are embodied in the dispositions of the individual mentor and constitute a careful balance of good judgement, attentive intuition, relational compassion, and potential to leverage research and heutagogical expertise.

Relational ambience

Asked to nominate the affordances of successful mentoring in a professional practice doctoral setting, Mentor 3 spoke independently but in thematic alignment with Mentor 2 to describe what I call “relational ambience,” that intangible feeling of being able to ‘vibe’ together with candid trust. “Ambire” is the Latin verb for “to embrace warmly,” but also signals a desire to want something desperately. Mentor 3 stated that mentoring is:

a recognition that the ‘mentee’ is developing in their critical analysis of a certain topic/area. The most important aspect is the *whānaungatanga*—the relationship between the mentor [and the mentee]. The reciprocity of respect from both is also key. A good mentor shows empathy and keeps the space for whatever comes out.

In addition to the relational ambience that *whānaungatanga* brings, Mentor 3 speaks of critical friendship: “One of my doctoral learners speaks constructively with a peer whose methodology and approach overlap ... I feel I am furthering a learning journey that has already started through her peer conversations.”

The affective and relational aspects of mentoring are foregrounded in the evidence set, with a sense of mutual sharing of life's moments (*whānaungatanga*) setting the scene for building trust, and empathy characterising the developing interactional relationship. Mentor 4 echoes this theme: "The mentor needs to understand the psychology of their student, and to find a way of communicating with the students that motivates them and brings out the best in them."

Fostering autonomy

A function of heutagogy is the ideal fostering of researcher autonomy or self-management. This is figured by Mentor 4 in terms of promoting opportunities for critical decision-making: "I'm conscious of holding the space for the learner to make their own decisions about the directions they take in their inquiry." An aspect of autonomy is self-management of timeliness: "I've learned that meeting progress deadlines allows the learner, and me as a mentor, time to review the work done, and to make changes or additions if needed to strengthen the work" (Mentor 4).

Tolerance for change

All five mentors in this pilot sample allude to a mentor's need to be open to changes in a learner's journey. According to their voices, mentors are appreciated for their ability to tolerate the "as-yet-not-known" (Mentor 1); or as Mentor 3 puts it, "those things which emerge, and are not accessible when the learner first proposes a project and predicts its methodological direction." Mentor 4 comments that in traditional PhDs, "what is presented in the approved proposal must be replicated in the final thesis." Also making this contrast, Mentor 1 suggests that doctoral research envisaged as "thetic" [a written thesis] ended up being "multiple," as "a pastiche, a bricolage," because that was the form natural to the collected evidence set.

While COVID has shown the need for resilience and flexibility in project managing mentor and learner journeys, mentors' experience of professional practice journeys amplifies the necessity of tolerance *of* and *for* change. Mentor 1 speaks of the need to "expect the unexpected" and Mentor 2 shares stories of how changes in learners' workplaces or practice bases led to divergence from proposed lines of enquiry and shifted the emphasis of phenomena under investigation. Mentor 2 states: "I needed to support the learner [in pivoting] methodologically and shifting from exploring [phenomenon X] to [phenomenon Y]. This is where I realised the importance of seeing methodologies and areas of enquiry as iterative, not static."

Having a broad base of knowing

Accessing and applying a broad base of knowing and making it accessible is another affordance of good mentoring. Mentor 5 considers their own candidature and her current co-mentors in describing the attributes of a good mentor of work-based doctorates. The following is a paraphrase:

- Having a wide skill set from experience and knowing which skills to draw on to suit different scenarios;
- Understanding different communication styles and learning styles and adapting to the students;
- Being clear on timelines for the project and also managing one's own time;
- Building a deep trust bond over time;
- Encouraging oneself to be endlessly curious;
- Staying in a learning space alongside the student;
- Staying forwards-focused on what can be done now, in place of what might happen, and
- Suggesting upcoming conferences and opportunities to present and share work.

She says, "Mentors need the capacity to see the big picture before the learner does so that they can bring it all together." This comment aligns with that of Mentor 1: "One of my learners is involved in multiple projects at

work all with different approaches and various desired outcomes. I try to represent all of the variance to show [learner's name] how versatile they [the learner] are." Having bricolage as one possible method of evidence presentation enables such professional versatility to be demonstrated.

DISCUSSION

Professional practice journeys are collaborative ventures where the ākonga/learner is the expert in their practice and the mentor presents support and scaffolding to enable the learner to make a claim for self-managed autonomy (Stephenson et al., 2006) and hence doctorateness (Andrew, 2021; Stock, 2011; Yazdani & Shookooh, 2018). Thus, they contribute substantively to their area of endeavour and workplace. The qualities of good judgement, compassion, intuition and subject or methodological expertise emerge as facets of the mentor who may begin to take a learner towards substantial and critically reflexive doctorateness. They are also, I would maintain, affordances of mentoring heutagogy.

The affective factors characterising mentoring are relatively unexplored in contrast to the instrumentalist and process-led facets of supervising. One affective factor, the mentor's need to tolerate change, is both a sign of the times – post-COVID and during the neoliberalist perma-crisis – and a function of professional practice, where iterativeness and recursivity sit well with a transdisciplinary approach. The journey is not the straight line Goode and Andrew (2021) initially hoped, but, partly due to affective factors, fraught with unexpected messiness, as their study demonstrated.

A further point of interest is that outputs within the programme may be multiple rather than the singular thesis, so a portfolio of artefacts held together by strategic bricolage is a possibility.

There is agreement about positive mentoring because all mentors share the discourse of a mentoring community of practice, but also because the mentor group shares practice in a way that matches experienced with less experienced mentors. Thus, that a culture of shared practice, discourse and enterprise is formed; key features of the community of practice in action (Lambrev, 2021).

The extracts presented touch on a range of themes at the intersection of affective factors and Māori values and tikanga. They foreground whānaungatanga as a component of trust and as a characteristic of the shared journey, and ako as a function of the reciprocity that supports the mentor/mentee dyad. Operating well, mentoring dyads develop a natural and empathetic synergy born of trust (Styles & Radloff, 2001). With this synergy comes the shared motivation, both instrumental and integrative, to support the professional doctorate learner to completion. All mentors describe a full and broad skillset revolving around skilled and sensitive communication, a keen eye for timeliness, a capacity for caring, and a sense of foresight or tolerance of the emergent. One mentor speaks of the value of critical peer friendship, and also of regarding the mentor as a critical friend. Learners' desire to belong through their presence at conferences is also mentioned (Polkinghorne et al., 2023).

In professional practice, as the mentor voices emphasise, mentors must record their reflections with discipline and rigour (Andrew, 2021). In addition to reflective capacity, mentors also need big picture thinking; an ability to think holistically as learners' evidence from their projects falls into place.

CONCLUSIONS

The article, grounded in mentor autoethnographies and supported by research about the heutagogical underpinnings of the professional practice doctorate, suggests that our mentoring team's learnings can contribute to a broader understanding of doctoral mentoring. The collective mentors' view is that 'mentoring' is an authentic term for heutagogical strategies that occur during negotiated transdisciplinary professional practice research journeys and that have positive impacts on developing identities. Importantly, 'mentoring' recognises the affordances of coaching (Bordogna & Lundgren-Resentera, 2023) and understands a candidature as being on a co-constructed, facilitated journey (Boud et al., 2021; Carpenter & Ker, 2021). It is about forging and maintaining connection and thereby creating the foundation for ongoing critical reflection while creating an original contribution to self-knowing, professional coming-to-know, and (trans)disciplinary knowledge (Costley, 2010).

Work-based and professional practice doctorates need a fresh understanding of mentoring and its alignment with coaching, an understanding of the value of critical friendship and communities of practice for mentor and learner support, and an openness to a range of iterative and emergent methodologies grounded in the practice journey of the individual. If a mentor is in any way skeptical of such methodologies as autoethnography or bricolage, or of any disruptive technologies such as generative AI, they already belong to yesterday.

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