DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: A REFLECTION ON PRACTICE IN A DEVELOPING ROLE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflection on practice was to reflect on how my professional identity developed through supporting dissertation chairs within the evolving supervisory and coaching aspects of becoming a research specialist. The conceptual lenses for this reflection were derived from strands of research on reflective practice, professional identity, and doctoral supervision. By reflecting on a supervising and coaching process as a research specialist, I offer insight into the dynamics of professional identity within a changing profession. This fulfills the need to understand the changing aspects of a profession by reflecting on the development of professional identity, given the supervisory and coaching aspects as a research specialist in the doctoral college are constantly evolving. A collaborative partnership was formed between several dissertation chairs and myself with regard to learners, which in turn has served as a basis for future interactions. Future reflections on practice using alternative models and other practices as a research specialist will help to strengthen my professional identity and practice.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

For the professional, reflective practice can be understood as a basis of professional identity (Finlay, 2008). Finlay's (2008) description of reflective practice as a type of professional practice, coupled with the competence to rationalize existing practice, resonated with me. Meaning in my work emerged as I reflected on Finlay's (2008) description, and it guided how I reflected on my practices as a doctoral education professional. Although what is understood as reflective practice differs among researchers, there is consensus that the reflective practice process involves professional learning through and from experience (Finlay, 2008). Learning and experience precipitated new insights of my practices and myself, the exploration of assumptions about my everyday practice, and self-awareness, which enabled my ability to evaluate my responses to practice situations. Although reflective practice was a challenging way of thinking, it has strengthened my ability to recapture my practice experiences. It has become second nature to critically consider my practice experiences in order to gain new understandings to improve future practice. Subsequent to a survey of literature on reflective practice, a need in me arose for what Finlay (2008) described as tacit ways to adopt thinking approaches to practice. The agentic nature of reflective practice produced significance to the multitude of moments of independent introspection and critical dialogue about how I engaged dissertation chairs. As a result, a professional identity and sense of purpose has morphed from the challenges I face in practice. Consequently, a broad objective of this reflection on practice is to demonstrate the importance of professional identity as a component of professional development (Finlay, 2008; Jones & Charteris, 2017).

The purpose of this reflection on practice was to reflect on how my professional identity developed through supporting dissertation chairs within the

evolving supervisory and coaching aspects of becoming a research specialist. The conceptual lenses for this reflection were derived from strands of research on reflective practice, professional identity, and doctoral supervision. Unlike other forms of published research, reflective practice is a type of self-study useful to develop reflexivity, to construct meaning, and to communicate insights (Abrahamson & Chase, 2015; Attard, 2012; Holley & Colyar, 2012; Madsen & O'Mullan, 2018). This reflection on practice is similar to Madsen and O'Mullan's (2018) reflective narrative because it is a narrative of a process I use for engaging dissertation chairs. During the process of reflecting on my approach to engaging dissertation chairs, it became obvious that becoming a professional who supports dissertation chairs in a supervisory and coaching capacity necessitated an understanding of who dissertation chairs are, the changes in the work they do, and the complexities of their work within a team supervision model. During the process of writing this reflection on practice, like Madsen and O'Mullan (2018), I became aware of my decision-making process as I worked toward developing a participatory structure for supporting dissertation chairs. The theoretical underpinning for this reflection is situated within Dewey's (1933) notion of reflection and Schon's (1983) notion of reflection-on-action. Reflection is a unique type of thinking that is prompt, purposeful, and resolution oriented (Dewey, 1933). From Dewey's perspective, reflection emerges from inquiry, doubt, hesitation, or perplexity connected to an experienced situation. Dewey argued that reflective thinking causes people to diverge from routine thinking and action and in the direction of careful, critical consideration of previously assumed knowledge. Hence, reflection starts with experience and learning from practice. Consequently, professionals think out problems before framing assumptions to find the most successful reflective situations and then use the situations to plan action and test out ideas.

Schon (1983) informed by Dewey's notion of reflection suggested professionals could become aware of their implicit knowledge and learn from experiences to facilitate developing into reflective practitioners. Building upon Dewey's arguments, Schon (1983) determined there are two types of reflection, which are reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection on action involves the review, description, analysis, and evaluation of past practice in an effort to gain insight to improve future practice. Conversely, reflection in action examines experiences and responses in occurrence. Both types of reflection are similar in that a professional seeks to build new understandings to shape their action in the unfolding situation. Thus, Schon (1983) referred to reflection as an art because of the complexity, lack of predictability, and messiness of professional practice. Further, Schon (1983) suggested professional practice requires coping that involves the professional having the ability to do more than follow a set of procedures. Coping includes practical experience and theory, causing professionals to have to think on their feet and improvise to revise, modify, and refine their expertise. In short, Schon (1983) argued professionals become more expert by developing skills to monitor and adapt simultaneously in practice. Since, the day-to-day work of a research specialist involves the engagement of dissertation chairs within the context of a doctoral college and supporting dissertation chairs in a supervisory and coaching capacity, reflecting on the development of doctoral education professional identity in engaging doctoral supervisors is appropriate for this reflection on practice.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Supervision and mentorship in doctoral education is among one of many developmental relationships within the dissertation process (Lindén, Ohlin, & Brodin, 2013). Supervision refers to the combination of the educative, supporting, and controlling functions of a doctoral supervisor within the supervisor and student relationship (Lindén et al., 2013). A challenge in the practice of doctoral education is pedagogy in doctoral supervision remains underdeveloped (Halse & Malfroy, 2010). Changes in the work of doctoral supervisors have added complexity to the work of doctoral supervisors, such as doctoral supervisors' active role in student development to address a lack of capability and changes in research contexts (Halse & Malfroy, 2010; Lindén et al., 2013). Shifts in university workplace demands have caused doctoral supervisors to be strategic in the administration of interactions, management, and pedagogical constraints (Halse, 2011). Researchers have argued that one supervisory strategy can be

favored over others and the prolonged engagement and varying support strategies affect the quality of the supervision process (de Kleijn et al., 2015). The aforementioned intricacies have the potential to add complexity to the work of doctoral supervisors who work within a team supervision model. With these arguments in mind, it became critical to consider how the changes and problems stated above may have affected the organizational context of this reflection on practice.

Research has established that team supervision is a contemporary model of doctoral supervision (Boehe, 2016; Guerin et al., 2015). Little is known about how the dynamics of team supervision might affect the supervisory styles of doctoral supervisors (Boehe, 2016). With regard to professional identity, there is a need to understand the changing aspects of professions (Barbour & Lammers, 2015). The research specialist role is a new role within the doctoral college. Research specialists actively support, supervise, and coach dissertation chairs who work within a team supervision model in the doctoral college. This reflection on a supervising and coaching process as a research specialist could provide insight into the dynamics of professional identity within a changing profession. Thus, this reflection on practice will fulfill the need to understand the changing aspects of a profession by reflecting on the development of professional identity, given the supervisory and coaching aspects as a research specialist in the doctoral college are constantly evolving. How the changes in the research specialist role are inter-woven with phenomena of, the doctoral college deserves careful attention because the changes are linked to the supervisory styles of dissertation chairs who work in a team model. The process of reflecting on practice through the lenses of Dewey (1933) and Schon (1983) enabled careful critique of my supervisory and coaching practices as a doctoral education professional. Moreover, this reflection on practice helped to establish an awareness of the importance of negotiating identity to facilitate success (Madsen & O'Mullan, 2018). For the sake of this reflection, the term dissertation chair will be used to describe those engaged in the practice of doctoral supervision henceforth.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

The College of Doctoral Studies (CDS) developed a unique role utilizing a group of doctoral prepared professionals, called research specialists, to mediate issues that arise in the dissertation process (Garrett & Johnson, 2016). The supervisory and coaching aspects of the research specialist role are associated with concerns with dissertation chair performance. Research specialists manage the challenges of virtual relationships between learners and dissertation committee members. Research specialists support dissertation chairs through coaching in the timeliness, tone, delivery, and quality of communication and feedback (Garrett & Johnson, 2016). To initiate the process, as a research specialist, I requested a brief narrative from the dissertation chairs with two guiding questions: (1) would you please send me your perspective on your experience as the learner's chair thus far, and (2) would you please inform me with any concerns you have with the learner thus far? The guiding questions were intentionally framed to demonstrate care and support for the dissertation chair, which has made an allowance for insight of dissertation chair work from the dissertation chair's perspective. Iterative steps were taken to construct the guiding questions based upon feedback and dialogue with dissertation chairs. The guiding questions also enabled rich information that continues to inform practice (Madsen & O'Mullan, 2018).

A primary goal for this approach was to remove potential frustration and angst, provide quality support, and afford dissertation chairs an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and practices within their responses. In practice, my experiences as a research specialist had coincided with an observed trend toward an emphasis on the professional development of dissertation chairs. The trend led to a surge of studies investigating the work of dissertation chairs (Guerin et al., 2015; Halse, 2011; Lindén et al., 2013). Some argue the focus on professional development in doctoral supervision is purely systemic because routines, procedures, policies, and practices are deeply embedded in the university structure (Halse, 2011). However, this argument ignores the realities higher education administrator's face when there are observed issues in dissertation progression. This has the potential to exacerbate when administrators are faced with resistance from dissertation chairs

and in situations where pedagogy in training may be failing for any given reason.

A connection between my experiences as a research specialist and observations of the literature on doctoral supervision became obvious for justifying the importance in the approach of the perspective request process. The awareness of the need for this type of approach to practice had more meaning when I realized I was in the practice of engaging another doctoral education professional, that is, the dissertation chair engaging in the practice of supervision. The perspective request process has, (1) served as a form of reflective practice because it demonstrates the tendency to rationalize existing practice, (2) enabled the determination of whether practices as a dissertation chair were performed in a non-critical manner, and (3) influenced reflection in areas of practice and revealed assumptions that work against resolution of challenges (Finlay, 2008). Thus, prompting dialogue on the use of professional practice and reflection on action in an effective manner. Reflective practice is hard to do because it reveals the pretense for self-centeredness (Finlay, 2008). To reflect critically, professionals must strive to avoid assuming and embracing non-critical, disconnected, and reductionist ways toward reflective practice. With the aforementioned challenges taken into consideration, the subsequent sections are guided by Finlay's (2008) four guiding principles for nurturing effective reflective practice, which are (1) present reflective practice(s) with care: motivate, offered within context, and models emphasized as a range of tools, (2) provide adequate support, time, resources, opportunities, and methods for reflection, that is, working in a dialogical team context that enables them to hear the alternative perspectives so vital for reflective practice, (3) develop skills of critical analysis, and (4) take proper account of the context of reflection.

PROPOSED REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

Some of my experiences as a research specialist are consistent with the literature regarding challenges within different types of academic teams. Madsen and O'Mullan (2018) reflected on their experience with issues within an academic team and concluded a lack of participation and mutual engagement produced significant challenges. Likewise, Gardner (2013) highlighted hierarchy within an interdisciplinary team created issues with collaborating. More often than not, dissertation chairs have to endure such conditions for extended periods of time, which can in turn affect the quality of their work. The challenges within academic teams appear to highlight the relevance of the argument that prolonged engagement and varying support strategies affect the quality of the supervision process (de Kleign et al., 2015). However, Abrahamson and Chase (2015) argued new ontological structures could emerge from the struggle to create practical routines for collaboration within an academic team. Considering tacit assumptions are not easily recognized (Jones & Charteris, 2017) then perhaps team, collaboration might be hindered especially if participation is lacking. Abrahamson and Chase (2015) inquired, "What does collaborative reflective practice look like?" (p. 372). Madsen and O'Mullan (2018) suggested narrative reflecting to prompt critical consideration on the impact on one's own practice. Halse (2011) argued the omission of pedagogy is one of the reasons why dissertation chairs may resist training.

I argue the same reasons may be applicable to resistance to coaching and support from a research specialist. A drawback of approaching supervisory and coaching aspects of the research specialist role in a non-reflective manner is that it can reinforce biases and bad practice, leading dissertation chairs to hold on to assumptions that work against their efforts. There are various modes of reflection, which are indicative of the different models of reflective practice. A research specialist is not bound to one method and can use different models of reflective practice that have emerged across professions. It is important, however, the method of reflective practice be applied selectively and thoughtfully by a research specialist. I further argue that failure to apply one or more components of Finlay's (2008) principles such as working in a dialogical team context may hinder the research specialist professional identity development because it prevents the ability to gain alternative perspectives vital for reflective practice. Finally, I argue a lack of pedagogy in research specialist practices may warrant dissertation chair resistance to coaching and support because the research specialist may approach the practice with preconceived assumptions. Finally, without using research-based approaches to reflective

practice as a research specialist, the agentic benefits are valueless, because critical dialogue and tacit ways to adopting a thinking approach to practice (Finlay, 2008), thus hindering professional identity development.

EVALUATION OF PROPOSED REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

Understanding the norms and behavior of a community is a part of developing professional identity (Mackay, 2017). The process of becoming a professional starts with the development of knowledge, a skill set, and a way of being identical to others within the profession (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). As a result, people identify themselves in terms of professional relationships, networks, education, specialized knowledge, and the capability to judge important matters in uncertainty. In practice, professional identity is the use of practicality and thinking, technical and interpersonal skills, critical self-assessment, and self-directed learning. Barbour and Lammers (2015) argued a person's beliefs shapes how they think and act. The authors conjectured belonging, attachment, and belief are related components of professional identity. Belonging referred to the membership of a profession, whereas attachment referred to the intensity of an individual's perception of their connection to the profession. Results from the Barbour and Lammers (2015) study suggested professional identity partially reflects the dominant judgements to which individuals familiarized or identified with their profession. If there is a heavy focus on doing academic work, rather than being, becoming, and belonging, then identity formation may be hindered (Billot & King, 2017). After critically reflecting on my engagement with dissertation chairs in the perspective request process, I discovered that my professional identity was developed in the negotiation of strategies for success with dissertation chairs. In this sense, I identified with Billot and King's (2017) argument that negotiating is the connecting component between professional identity and merely understanding roles and responsibilities.

The research specialist role was developed to mediate issues that arise in the dissertation process (Garrett & Johnson, 2016). However, the research specialist role has presented a unique opportunity to revisit dissertation chair practices and work. The changing landscape of dissertation chairing practices cannot be ignored (Guerin, Kerr, & Green, 2015). Within the perspective request process, it became obvious that these practices have caused a need for new strategies for interactions and management given pedagogical constraints. In retrospect, by restructuring my perspective request process to facilitate a reflective narrative, I enabled a better understanding dissertation chairs diagnosing strategies, practices, and work. Using Finlay's (2008) guiding principles, offered a systematic approach to identify how reflective practice could be used to prompt a dissertation chair to reflect on their practical knowledge. The process subsequently revealed my practical knowledge as a research specialist.

I was able to link the culmination of experiences with the perspective request process. It is important to note that I also discovered the culmination of experiences is what prompted me to continuously reiterate my perspective request process. Much like the participants from the Billot and King (2017) study, I too discovered my ways of being were informed by the development of my professional identity. As I worked through the process of finding value in the challenges of supporting and coaching dissertation chairs, I developed a deep sense of connection to my everyday work, practices, and values. Essentially, using the perspective request process as a form of reflective practice afforded me the opportunity to develop professional identity by learning from the activities of diagnosing needs and intervening with adaptive support strategies (de Klein et al., 2015) within dissertation chair work.

DECISION

The focus on becoming a research specialist coupled with prior professional experiences within the doctoral college, higher education, and a corporate context has been central to becoming a doctoral education professional. Despite the challenges of the role, it is commonplace for me as a research specialist to seek new ways to operationalize successful approaches to my work. A possible explanation for the ability to operationalize processes in the ever-evolving aspects of being a research specialist could stem from what Abrahamson and Chase (2015) called "ontological innovations" (p. 374). The aforementioned perspective request process emerged iteratively

from the struggle to create practical routines for collaboration within an academic team. In the process of trying to become a research specialist, I also had to learn to become a supervisor and coach to dissertation chairs. Trede et al. (2012) argued the process of becoming a professional must begin with the development of knowledge, a skill set, and a way of being identical to others within the profession. The perspective request process triggered my becoming a professional in the context of the doctoral college because coaching dissertation chairs required me to develop the same knowledge, skills, and sense of identity. In this case, the professionals I identified with were the dissertation chairs. The guiding questions for the perspective request enabled me to observe the tacit and practical knowledge of the dissertation chairs. Often times, because the dissertation chairs knew the process stemmed from a supervisory and coaching aspect, the narratives they provided demonstrated how their beliefs shaped how they thought and acted. Confirming the dominant judgements, the dissertation chairs familiarized or identified reflected their professional identity as Barbour and Lammers (2015) conjectured.

Accordingly, the usage of the perspective request was a way to study dissertation chair practical knowledge, and I was able to reflect on my own practices by making connections with their experiences. The process allowed for subsequent dialogues with the dissertation chairs in which I expressed the intent to develop a bidirectional relationship, to develop reflexivity, to derive meaning from their perspectives, and to communicate insights so that I could be an effective form of support as a supervisor and coach. The results have yielded opportunities for sustainable collaboration and engagement between research specialists and dissertation chairs. In some cases, additional opportunities for support on processes, and engaging challenging learners, have emerged. In fact, several dissertation chairs requested additional opportunities to engage in discourse on their practices. Thus, a greater sense of partnership and engagement emerged because the dissertation chairs had been offered an opportunity to reflect on who they are as doctoral education professionals, the changes in the work they do, and the complexities of their work within a team supervision model.

Since I actively demonstrated a high degree of care and support for the dissertation chairs, they often shared their knowledge, expertise, and willingness to develop a partnership for team success. Over time, my knowledge and expertise expanded, which resulted in being considered a colleague and the identity of a doctoral education professional was formed. In reflecting on these experiences, I was reminded of a statement made by Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt (2017) that the identity of a professional is formed when others share the identity in the same role. As a research specialist, I do not supervise doctoral learners, but my work does involve activities that have required me to diagnose needs and intervene with adaptive strategies in engaging learners to resolve issues (de Kleijn et al., 2015). Thus, a collaborative partnership was formed between several dissertation chairs and myself with regard to learners, which in turn has served as a basis for future interactions. The partnerships I have developed with dissertation chairs have resulted in refined negotiation for meaning, continual development, and transformation as posited by Tan et al. (2017), in correspondence to previous research.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

As a research specialist and professional, my sense of belonging, attachment, and belief in my profession, coupled with my tacit knowledge, has become vital in practice. This reflection on practice has caused me to actively reflect on the culmination of my professional experiences and how to recognize my assumptions and tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is discrete because tacit knowledge is a type of practical intelligence, skill, and knowledge experience (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Inkinen, 2015). Practical intelligence is an individual's ability to assess and adapt to the demands of an environment. Skills are related to individual expertise and capabilities, while knowledge experience is relative to individual knowledge gained through involvement. Theoretically, my reflective critique was formed based on how the dimensions of professional identity have guided my practice as a research specialist. Constructs, such as work experiences integrated with differential skills related to tacit knowledge, professional judgment, and reasoning, guides the considerations for the nuances of my work (Trede et al., 2012).

Over time, awareness of my need to build upon the unique characteristics of my practitioner-based knowledge, my abilities, approaches, creativity, and adaptability to my work were strengthened. This awareness continues to serve as a compass and a basis of how these characteristics link to not only outcomes of my work, but also constructs of my professional identity, such as my sense of belonging, attachment, and belief in how my professional identity has evolved.

This reflection on practice further demonstrates that reflective practice has the potential to improve professional practice, competence, and professional identity. However, it is important to note this reflection on practice was limited to my professional experiences with a role that may not be common in other contexts similar to the doctoral college. Thus, it is important to consider the criticisms offered by Finlay (2008). Reflective practice has been critiqued for its cultural and personal risks. Professionals may find reflective practice taxing and difficult to engage in due to busyness and being overextended. Thus, causing the process to be routine or avoided, which may result in a preference to forego consideration for context and reflection and rely on preconceived understandings and outcomes. Along this same vein, I caution those who consider adding reflective practice to their daily work and conducting future self-narratives or study participants in context to complete narratives to consider the mental abrasion required. Toward the latter stage of completing this reflection on action, some aspects of reflecting in action had to be applied.

Like any other methodological approach, reflective practice involves ethical concerns such as the potential for conflicts of interest, emotional impacts on the person reflecting, negative implications of enforced reflective practice, inappropriately high levels of disclosure, the individual reflector constant striving for self-improvement, and feelings of self-disapproval and self-rejection (Finlay, 2008). Throughout the duration of the reflection, I had to intentionally be aware of my tendency to rationalize my existing practices. Although the perspective request process described above has been effective, it requires time, effort, and care. The most distinct challenge faced during this reflection was to contend with dominant cultural assumptions. Some dissertation chairs regarded my efforts as a way to devalue their work. Therefore, prompting a sense of responsibility to consider alternative models of reflective practice. Given, Finlay's (2008) four guiding principles ungirded my practice, the aforementioned challenge warrants concern for inappropriate use of the reflective models in some cases. Future reflections on practice using alternative models and other practices as a research specialist will help to strengthen my professional identity and practice.

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