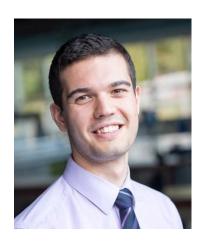# Setting up the Superb-Vision Network

Establishing a "dispersed learning community"

Ben Sinclair

PhD student, Department for Education Studies, University of Warwick
Correspondence: b.sinclair@warwick.ac.uk

Ben worked in Coventry as a secondary mathematics teacher before beginning his PhD in Mathematics Education at the University of Warwick. His current project focusses on embedding principles from Acceptance and Commitment Training into the classroom in order to address mathematics anxiety and promote mathematical resilience. His other academic interests include mathematics task design, instruction, and mastery; and contextual behavioural science (functional contextualism, relational frame theory, evolutionary science, psychological flexibility). Ben also teaches on the PGCE Secondary Mathematics course and the Introduction to Secondary Mathematics Education undergraduate module.

Bing Lu

PhD student, Department for Education Studies, University of Warwick
Correspondence: B.Lu@warwick.ac.uk

Bing is a doctoral researcher in Department for Education Studies (DES) and an early career fellow in Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) at University of Warwick. Her doctoral research investigates how returned doctorate holders conduct doctoral supervision in their home countries. Her main research area is in exploring the transnational flows of highly skilled intellectuals and mapping the global picture of doctoral supervision. *View my Warwick profile*

Abstract

As universities gradually re-open to face-to-face teaching, innovative approaches that encourage engagement and stimulation in the "new normal" have been readily welcomed. The Superb-Vision Network (SVN) was a response to such a call: a series of student-led workshops to support doctoral students in enhancing their supervision experience. This article is a reflection on the process of setting up the network. We will explain the decisions and actions taken and explore several critical incidents which demonstrate what

collaboration between those with dissimilar perspectives and backgrounds can look like in practice. Considerations around sustainability, inclusivity, and safety posed additional challenges that vastly shaped our thinking and plans, allowing us to find balance in our social and educational outcomes. Informed by the notion of "distributed" learning (Lea & Nicolle, 2013) and "dispersed" pedagogic system (Boud & Lee, 2005), this article advocates facilitating a "dispersed" learning community for doctoral students with an emphasis on peer learning (Boud & Cohen, 2014). We hope that this interesting case study will motivate and inspire others to use opportunities, however small, to add value to their community.

Keywords: Networking, Collaboration, Problem-Solving, Innovation, Doctoral Supervision

Introduction

Universities are often described as institutes of innovation. Research pushes the boundaries of our understanding and teaching staff are given freedom to experiment with different pedagogies and approaches. Whilst there is doubt that these two avenues are always as invigorating in practice as claimed (Schultz, 2019; Jones *et al.*, 2021), much progress in research and pedagogy has been demonstrated (Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022). Innovation can also arise from more humble origins: the individual departments within universities that often provide opportunities for staff and students to explore new ideas in a safe and supportive environment.

This article demonstrates how we, as two Postgraduate Research (PGR) students, used such an opportunity to set up the Superb-Vision Network (SVN): a student-led series of workshops to facilitate and capture discussions around the supervision experiences of doctoral students. To help structure this reflective piece, three distinct stages of the process have been identified: the initial informal sharing and development of ideas leading up to the application of funding; the solidifying of these ideas in planning the workshops; and the running and evaluation of the events themselves. The "messiness" of the initial developmental phases is often disregarded in reflections in favour for discussions of the outcomes and final product (Naveed *et al.*, 2017). However, we value what was learnt in this formative stage and want to share the critical moments that lead to the network. Informed by the notion of "distributed" learning (Lea & Nicolle, 2013) and "dispersed" pedagogic system (Boud & Lee, 2005), this article advocates facilitating a "dispersed" learning community for doctoral students with an emphasis on peer learning (Boud & Cohen, 2014).

The three themes of collaboration, problem-solving, and innovation underpin many of the decisions we made and will be used in our final section to reflect upon the overall process. These themes are made especially pertinent when the substantial differences between the two authors are considered. How does collaboration work when teaching philosophies are radically different? Whose solution to the problem should be implemented? How can you consolidate different values and intentions to promote innovation? The resolutions to these contentions resulted in a pedagogy that developed in parallel to our session planning: our teaching philosophies informed our practice, and our practice informed our teaching philosophies.

Stage 1: Advert to Application
"I think we need a coffee"

The desks were filling back up again. Each day more students cautiously joined the postgraduate workspace trying to kickstart their "new normal". Social distancing was still present, but people were more willing to have a mask-muffled conversation across a desk. Having just returned to his doctoral studies after teaching in schools during the pandemic, Ben was keen to immerse himself in "PhD life". A tower of articles to read, a literature review to write, and several other teaching jobs to manage. This did not discourage Bing who had an interesting proposition for him. She had noticed an advert on the Doctoral Colleges Teams page: funding available to set up a new student-led network. In their first year of their PhDs, Ben and Bing had organised a friendly "three-minute thesis" event for doctoral students in the Education Studies department. Having been a great success, they had resolved to work together again at some point if the opportunity arose. Bing hadn't forgotten.

She wanted to collaborate to create a network based around her research interest, supervisory relationships. The anecdotes that Bing shared made it apparent very early on that many students don't realise just how idiosyncratic their supervision experience is. The same supervisor may take radically different approaches with their students, but also supervision styles vary massively across different university departments. Being essentially hidden, the supervision space allows for rich diversity, but also disparate quality. Prescribing what "good" supervision looks like is therefore unhelpful but there still might be interdisciplinary, and even international, qualities which mediate a productive supervisor relationship. This

network could be an interesting way of finding this out.

Bing wanted a network that would encourage students to come together after the pandemic to discuss their experiences in a less formal setting. Ben agreed but wanted it to be more than just a social network. He wanted it to be educational. He wanted there to be challenging content for the participants to wrestle with each session. "Workshops" not "jollies". Bing's own research had shown the value of asking open questions and carefully listening to the experiences shared. Ben wanted participants to converge on new and exciting ideas whilst Bing wanted divergence as they explored each other's perspectives. We had shared their visions and intentions, but these didn't match - compromise and coffee was needed.

"Get them to do all the work!"

A resolution came about when we decided that some kind of "product" would be helpful. We could encourage participants to share their ideas but then we would "capture" these and organise them in a new model for thinking about supervisions. In fact, we didn't need to do it at all – the participants could do it collaboratively: a framework by PGRs for PGRs... We quickly realised that establishing an innovative model as a "committee" might be quite difficult. Instead, we opted to find an existing framework that could be adapted to for our use. Bing suggested the Researcher Development Framework (RDF; Vitae 2010) – a framework that is used by many universities to support professional development of academics. It collates 63 individual descriptors such as collaboration, work-life balance, and research impact, which are organised into 4 domains (see resource list). The model was not designed to be used for our purpose, but we thought that it was a suitably rich framework to be

examined through the lens of the supervision experience.

"What's the funding for again?"

Whilst an application form could be considered a dry formality, we found the resource stimulating. We took the questions very seriously and considered how each could be integrated within the network. Safety and inclusivity were key concerns. We wanted the workshops to be in-person but we also didn't want to exclude anyone who was not yet comfortable to join the group face-to-face. The resolution was to plan five workshops over the ten-week term, running each as an in-person session one week, followed by an online version of it the week after. We contemplated adopting a hybrid format, but we both had negative experiences of attending and hosting such events so we decided that keeping the modalities separate was the simplest approach for now. The contentious issue was what to do with the funding. After getting a clearer idea of what we wanted the workshops to be, it became apparent that the workshops themselves wouldn't need any financial input: we would run each event for free; they would be hosted in a room that the library would allow us to use; and participants would bring something to write on and something to write with, so resources were low. The guidelines were clear that funding was not to be spent on promotional materials which corresponded with our sustainability goals, and besides, the universities electronic screen advertisements were free to use. Here, we had to remind ourselves of one of our original outcomes: to bring people together after the pandemic. We therefore decided to use the funding to buy refreshments for the events: teas, coffees, juices, biscuits, and even a few pizzas! As we'll discuss in a future article, these touches became an essential asset that gave the workshops a friendly feel, and we believe, got some more people through the door. With the application form complete, we submitted it and nervously awaited the outcome.

Stage 2: Success to Sessions
"What even is 'networking'?!"

After a few weeks, we received confirmation that our proposal had been accepted and funding was granted. We were very proud of this and got straight to work in planning the workshops. Despite a strong focus on the practicalities during this time, we still managed to have many intense and often philosophical conversations over coffee about the topics for the sessions: networking, collaboration, problem-solving, self-reflection, and work-life balance. We wrestled with each from many perspectives: our own notions of the topic; how the RDF conceptualised them; what the literature said and how the PGR participants might perceive them. We weren't looking to prescribe a definitive definition but wanted to navigate some of the "messiness" in order to be able to confidently direct the discussions. It also allows us to design tasks that accomplished two opposing outcomes: to encourage participants to refine their understanding of the concept by considering their supervision experience; whilst simultaneously expanding their conceptualisation by hearing other students' perspectives that challenged their own. The alternative of trying to resolve these conflicting experiences was simply to "capture" them. To ask each participant to record their story in their own words. To achieve this, we created a Padlet version of the RDF which allowed participants to describe experiences or raise a concern for others to respond with helpful advice.

"You can't do that"

A pivotal step for us was when we met with a member of staff from the Doctoral College (DC) to discuss our plans. This

was not required as part of the application, but we felt that if we were able to align our intentions and outcomes with the DC then there may be a place for the network in their future direction. We were delighted to hear that this was true. The DC were aware of the issues that we had identified within supervision system and were already exploring many different means for addressing them. The support and confidence they gave us was invigorating and motivated our efforts even further. One takeaway from the meeting was critical: no advice is to be given. Not from us and not from the participants. If someone acted on one of our suggestions which then had an adverse result (e.g. losing money or a visa), then we could be held accountable. This helpfully reinforced our initial aim: to share and capture students' supervision experiences. Our growing collection of stories could be read by other students, and they could take from it what they wanted: to be inspired, reassured, cautioned, shocked, motivated... The highly contextual nature of an experience requires it to be seen from a distance. The participants may be able to relate to aspects of it, but there will always be a sense of "translating" to their own perspective in order to make sense of it. With these considerations explored, we created a promotional video, an event registration system, and a mailing list, and then were ready to start planning sessions.

"Every doctoral college around the world will be using this!"

In the spirit of sustainability, we wanted to design just five workshops, but a session structure that we could use across each. Innovation is not about throwing out all the rules; it is about creating the rules you want to use. Having a clear structure each week would encourage us to be creative within each of the sections whilst retaining a shape that both we and the

participants could become familiar with over the term. Each workshop would begin with a supervision-themed entry task for participants to complete after they had settled down. This ensured that they were thinking about supervision from the moment they walked into the room and set the tone for the workshop. This would be followed by a short introduction to the session, the RDF, and the theme before reviewing of the entry task. After some discussion, we would continue by using another task that encouraged them to think more closely about the theme and how it related to their supervision experience. We wanted this technique of purposefully narrowing from the broader topic of supervision to the theme to support the participants in refining their thinking by adding further detail and considerations layer by layer. This would culminate in the section of the workshop where the participants experiences would be "captured". After time to share their stories and concerns with others on their table, each participant would use a link or QR code to access the Padlet in order to anonymously write them down for others to see. We believed that the resulting collection of first-hand accounts organised by the RDF descriptors would be an immensely useful resources, not only for doctoral students looking to resolve issues and reassure themselves, but also the DC, supervisors and researchers who rely on understanding how their students perceive their work.

Reflection

As co-authors of this article and co-creators of the Superb-Vision Network for doctoral students, we have collaborated and solved problems at different stages of setting up the network and planning the sessions for the five themed workshops. With different prior teaching and learning experiences, we managed to bring to

the table our own expertise in the delivery of the five workshops, with a consistent theory-informed structure and open-ended questions as prompts for soliciting supervision experience narratives. In this process, we put the vertical learning mode into question. This means that learning does not just happen in a hierarchy (from the knower to the learner), but also horizontally (between learners) (Boud & Cohen, 2014; Lea & Nicolle, 2013). In the same token, we intentionally encouraged discussions around a "dispersed learning community" (Boud & Lee, 2005) pertaining to networking, to diversifying and democratising open and reciprocal learning relationships between doctoral students. We could not have jointly launched the supervision workshop series without a reflective and critical engagement with collaboration, problem-solving and innovation.

As for collaboration, we have learnt how to listen to the other person with different teaching philosophies. Collaboration has been proved as a key idea throughout our practices of setting up the SVN network and planning the sessions. Collaboration was more than "working together" but presented to be much messier in our practice. The idea engages collaborative relationships with co-workers, as well as with other organisations and bodies (Vitae, 2010). We have developed a more practical understanding of collaboration through our own experience, including how to be open to different perspectives and how to negotiate different values. Figuring out when to make compromises was also necessary. Sometimes, collaboration "naturally" emerged when we took a proactive approach – active listening was the key. We often had radically different stances - the practice of collaborative work then presented more like a "problem". This

leads to the next theme that pertains more to solution.

In terms of problem-solving, we have realised that not every problem had a solution – recognising and articulating the problem could benefit a critical pedagogical approach. When discussing how the workshops would be, we identified different "problems" and sometimes came up with rather complex questions. The initiative of seeking solutions to the identified problems made us see things we could have not seen before. With our prior held convictions, shaped by our identities, such as being a Chinese woman and a white English man, what may be a "problem" for one person could be routine for the other. For example, Bing wanted a less-structured, more flexible session plan which allowed the space for unpredictability, whereas Ben suggested a structured, more guided session plan which might lead to a tangible product. Neither of us was absolutely right; some "problems" are still left unsolved. Only when the "problem" is acknowledged, there is a possibility for change and even for solution. Ignoring an identified problem due to fear is deeply problematic, making the implicit explicit matters.

We believe that both collaboration and problem-solving provide a path to innovation – essential in advancing projects, ideas, and people. In our context of preparing workshops for the doctoral students like us, we started with the initiative of creating something new, something different, something incorporating inclusivity, sustainability and interdisciplinarity. The experience of working with each other promoted both of us to reconsider our previously held positions which have been culturally, institutionally, and disciplinarily shaped. These multiple perspectives provide us the condition for creating a pedagogical approach that embraces differences. Embracing these

differences is to acknowledge the various needs of doctoral students coming from diverse backgrounds of ethnicity, gender, culture, and disciplines. Innovative progress could hardly be made unless diversity was seriously considered in every stage of designing and delivering the workshops. Backward moves can happen when one pedagogy is considered universally good without any consideration of the people that are behind the pedagogy – an issue we have highlighted and addressed in this article.

Conclusion

This article discusses how the two authors, from quite different backgrounds, collaborated, solved problems, and made innovative attempts in setting out and carrying out a series of workshops with doctoral students. The contrasts between us could not be greater, yet we share the same postgraduate community within the university which has more structural similarities. As individual teachers, we can each contribute to this community and facilitate various changes. We argue that the discourse of postgraduate education, where doctoral students can take up opportunities that are available, needs to be situated in the overall doctoral community which increasingly highlights the provisions of originality and transferable skills.

Acknowledgements

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For more information about the Superb-Vision Network: https://warwick.ac.uk/services/dc/phdlife/phdnetworks/superbvision/