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Group supervision: an appropriate way to guide postgraduate students?

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This article explores the potential of group supervision as a way of dealing with the growing number of students engaged in postgraduate studies. It refers to constructivist and cooperative learning theories which are applicable in this form of supervision, analyses the required changes in the supervisor's role, and discusses key success factors such as strong relationships, the important role of the affective domain, and effective communication. While the findings refer to the benefits of group supervision, the article also discusses the problems associated with this method.

Groepstudieleiding: 'n geskikte manier om nagraadse studente te begelei?

Die artikel ondersoek die potensiaal van groepstudieleiding as 'n manier om die probleem van stygende getalle nagraadse studente wat studieleiding benodig, aan te spreek. Dit verwys na koöperatiewe en konstruktivistiese leerteorieë wat in dié metode ter sprake kom, ontleed die nodige aanpassings in die rol van die studieleier, en bespreek die kern suksesfaktore soos goeie interpersoonlike verhoudings, die belangrike rol van die affektiewe terrein en doeltreffende kommunikasie. Terwyl die bevindinge die voordele van groepstudieleiding uitlig, word die nadele daarvan ook bespreek.

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Supervising research includes assisting students to engage in research that will play a role in improving practice, as product goal, and simultaneously paying attention to important process goals such as developing the researchers' skills in academic writing, sound reasoning, and in collecting and interpreting data. Eley & Jennings (2005: 2) summarise this well, emphasising that supervision should be viewed as having both research and teaching aspects. In the context of academic institutions, the added aim is to accomplish these objectives in the shortest possible time.

Supervisors are also under increasing pressure to guide an ever-growing number of students who lack training and experience in writing logically and correctly. Wisker (2005: 29) agrees that universities are under pressure because of the growing number of students doing research and the emphasis on completion rates. In South Africa the supervision of such students often includes students from disadvantaged areas and schools, who need help to break through their fear of independent writing; the supervision is also extremely time-consuming and labour-intensive. It is thus essential to find ways to address the problem of added pressure on the supervision capacity of universities.

This article aims to create an awareness of the benefits of group supervision by first explaining the nature of the group supervision process and, secondly, indicating how it is embedded in learning principles that contribute to creating a learning community in which both academically strong and weaker students can participate and develop.

1. The disadvantages of group supervision

Group supervision is not commonly practised and many supervisors are not convinced of the potential of this method to promote effective supervision. Several factors may contribute to supervisors' reluctance to use the method. Sales & Navarre (1970: 40) have noted some disadvantages of group supervision. They found that students in group supervision were of the opinion that time was often wasted in irrelevant discussions. Teachers in group

supervision situations found that it was difficult to respond to the students' individual problems. An added problem in South Africa, with a highly diversified student population in terms of academic background, is the varying levels of academic expertise represented in the majority of student groups.

2. Context

This article is based on my supervision experience in a coursework master's programme with two cohorts of students – one of ten and one of five students – thirteen of whom completed their treatises in just over a year, and the other two students taking two years. In the case of both cohorts, the process described in this instance started after the completion of the coursework section of the programme, which included a module on research methodology.

The supervision process requires that the group meets once every two months, over a period of one year, for a contact session lasting three days. Each contact session begins with a plenary session in which each student presents his/her work to the group. Students then work on their own, visit the library, and take time for individual sessions with the supervisor who make notes of their questions or mistakes. At an opportune time a second plenary session is held, in which the problem areas picked up during the individual sessions are covered.

The first meeting of the year is devoted to administrative issues, explaining the details of the programme, sharing students' envisaged research topics, and discussing the nature and structure of the research proposal. In the ensuing two months, students work on their proposals. They are required to bring copies of their draft proposals to the next contact session.

At this session, the proposal of each participant is presented to the group, and group members provide feedback on the work presented. Each member has a copy in front of him/her, and the student presenting his/her proposal simply takes the group through his/her work. This means that s/he reads some parts, explains others, and simply tells the story of his/her research. As the others follow on their

copies, they are encouraged to ask questions, challenge assumptions, make suggestions to improve the work, and relate certain aspects to their own work. This elicits positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson 1994: 58) in that each student is dependent on the others for information, advice and correction. The dependence is positive because as the presenter benefits, so each student who provides feedback learns via this process and better understands the issues being addressed.

The contact sessions continue throughout the year, with a natural progression of foci through the various stages of the treatise, such as the literature study, the empirical study and the findings. The intervals between the sessions are often either extended or shortened, depending on the needs of the group, or on other factors that may arise. As the students do not always work at the same pace, those who work fast can choose to leave the group and work on their own, meeting individually with the supervisor. Flexibility is a key element of the process to ensure that the needs of all participants are met. This is especially important in the South African set-up where supervision groups invariably include students from widely divergent academic backgrounds.

3. Learning principles

3.1 Constructivist learning

The learning principles that are relevant for this method of group supervision include those inherent in the theory of constructivist learning. Szabo & Lambert (2002: 205) identify, among others, the following principles of constructivist learning:

Learning is an active rather than a passive process; learning is by nature social and most likely to occur when learners share ideas, inquire, and problem solve together; to go beyond rote learning, [students] must have opportunities to make sense of new knowledge and create meaning for themselves based on individual and shared experiences.

The way in which the group supervision method has developed effectively puts the above principles into practice. The constructivist

approach is advantageous because the model incorporates an active process, which is, by its very nature, social and allows for individual meaning making from the individual's own and common experiences.

3.2 Successful learning

Race (2005: 26) identified five factors for successful learning that are also relevant to group supervision: wanting to learn (intrinsic motivation); needing to learn (taking ownership of the need to learn); practice (learning by doing); the importance of feedback (for the feedback to be most effective, it needs to be given as soon as possible after the action or performance), and making sense of things (to really understand what one is busy with, as well as why one is doing it).

The group supervision process encourages the presence of these factors. Participants following the presentation of another student's work observe the positive feedback they receive and immediately feel motivated to experience the same. In addition, everyone realises that s/he is obliged to finish the work, because the process could leave him/her behind. As they observe the others presenting their work, they realise that nobody is going to do the work for them. Spontaneous and immediate feedback from both peers and the supervisor plays a key role, and is a natural component of the work. The fact that it is predominantly peer feedback, with peer understanding and empathy, means that it is neither harsh nor vindictive, and therefore more readily accepted.

3.3 Co-operative learning

The two key co-operative learning principles informing this method are positive interdependence and individual accountability. According to Johnson & Johnson (1994: 58), positive interdependence implies that the group processes are structured in such a way that when one member of a group benefits, the other group members also benefit. On the other hand, if one member fails to do his/her part, the group suffers the consequences. As such each participant experiences an element of social pressure. This, in

turn, encourages the supervisor to remind participants that if one of them holds back a comment or a suggestion, the presenter is prevented from receiving support from that participant, and the group is denied learning from him/her. On the other hand, when a student gains a new insight and shares it with the group, the others also learn.

Kagan (1992: 48) explains individual accountability as the principle that every individual who participates in groupwork will, at some stage of the process, be held accountable for the work s/he has done. This happens in our model of group supervision when each participant has to present his/her work to the group. Each student's work is exposed to the rest of the group, with good work being praised and bad work being criticised. Students welcome praise but fear exposure or censure, and therefore have the incentive to work hard, in particular prior to a contact session.

Positive interdependence emphasises reciprocal processes of meaningful and mutual interaction which, according to Lambert, are "the result of time spent in meaning-making with others". In this regard, Freire (1973: 109) mentions: "Knowledge is not *extended* from those who consider that they know, to those who consider that they do not know. Knowledge is built up in the relations between human beings..." [original emphasis].

4. Relationships in a learning community

The relational aspect of learning is vital. A group engaging in a learning process is bound to develop strong interpersonal relationships. In fact, the group supervision process cannot work without strong interpersonal relationships among all participants, including the supervisor. The supervisor needs to focus on building relationships as a key priority for the effective running of the process.

The concepts of a learning community and peer networking are both relevant in this instance. Wisker (2005: 5) advises that supervisors should encourage students to become part of academic and peer groups and networks, in which they are able to discuss their own

and others' work, share advice and provide mutual support. This is endorsed by Hart *et al* (2004: 215), who state that when participants share their ideas with one another, a process of building confidence develops, and this process prevents them from feeling isolated. In addition, because of the various perspectives discussed by different members of the group, the participants' insight is constantly being broadened.

Rhodes *et al* (2004: 14-5) define "peer-networking" as "two or more individuals working together to enhance information exchange, dissemination of good practices, and the organization of mutual support and learning". In these groups of professionals, individuals "learn from each other and with each other". Race (2005: 94) refers to "peer-assessment where learners are involved in assessing their own and each other's work to deepen their learning". On the other hand, Rhodes *et al* (2004: 88) maintain that these "peer-coaching" networks include in-class activities but continue outside of formal contact times. In the case of the two cohorts, relationships were built by means of social activities such as sharing meals during contact sessions, going to the movies, and in one case attending a conference, where the students made a joint presentation. This increased trust and openness among group members which, in turn, enriched communication between them during research group sessions. In some instances, contact between students was maintained after the completion of the course.

Hildreth & Kimble (2004: 15) refer to Communities of Practice (CoPs) that promote knowledge-sharing through their relationships and shared context. According to them (Hildreth & Kimble 2004: 38), this is the result of "trust-based relations" that develop from such communities.

5. Decision-making and control

Vella (2000: 4) emphasises the importance for adult learners to be decision-makers with respect to their own learning. My group supervision is structured in such a way as to consistently involve the participants in making decisions about the content,

time slots, individual involvement, dates and methods of the supervision process. This implies that the locus of control of the process resides within the group. Clark (1986: 130-1) considers choice and locus of control important for participants if they are to “share the responsibility for learning”. When students have choice and control, their “motivation, academic achievement and self-esteem” improve considerably. As long as control is external, the participant does not reach academic maturity and independence. Hart *et al* (2004: 186) refer to shared responsibility as “co-agency” or “joint control”. In group supervision, supervisor and students operate as partners on an equal footing, each playing a full and active role in the learning process.

6. The importance of the affective domain

The affective aspect of a learning community consists of the support and care that each member owes to the other members, as well as the spirit of trust and mutual respect between colleagues. For Mitchell & Sackney (2000: 8), the combined affective and cognitive aspects produce the passion that is one of the characteristics of a learning community. According to Arnold (2005: 35), this leads to the management of our own development, as we “acknowledge our potential to tap into the underlying dynamism of cognitive and affective states”.

In my work with students, I have noted how affective factors operate in various ways to influence learning. Examples include a student being under pressure before s/he has to present his/her work, students worrying when one of the group does not turn up for a session, an individual spending time to help another, students sharing accommodation when coming for a contact session, and the role of humour. Humour invariably reduces tension, and contributes to the level of enjoyment and relaxation, helping participants to feel safe and at home.

7. Communication

Communication plays an important role in group supervision. Dialogue, according to specific norms, and appropriate language use are prerequisites for the effective functioning and progress of the group. Baker *et al* (1997: 120) explain a dialogical discussion as a “verbal interchange and a sharing of ideas, especially when the exchange is open and frank.” For Gravett (2005: 40-1), a dialogical discussion “essentially refers to a respectful relationship”, in which the “adult educator does not assume the role of unilateral authority, thereby silencing the voices of the learners”. A dialogical discussion differs from a dialectical one, in that it takes place in the absence of competition between members, and the objective of the discussion is to “find common ground” which is essential for collaboration. In a dialogical situation, the process should allow “the information to ferment”, and everyone should buy into the concept that it is “in the processing of information, sharing of ideas, and struggling to understand and reconciling opposing points of view that unexpected insights occur” (Calabrese 2002: 70-1).

Baker *et al* (1997: 130-38) identify a set of eight “norms of collaboration” that refer to key elements of communication, in particular within a group. These “norms” include “pausing, paraphrasing and paying attention to self and others.” Applying these norms is vital for the promotion of a dialogical discussion. Typical questions are: “What do you mean by that?”; “Can you elaborate?”; “How does this relate to your title or research questions?” Group members or the supervisor can pose these open-ended questions that do not imply any power relation between the supervisor and the student. In my experience, this type of open questions encourages students to think and to formulate a response, thus keeping all participants involved.

Zimmerman (2002: 110) refers to Lambert and Gardner’s distinction between “reductionist” language and language that is “transformative or constructivist”. In their view, reductionist language implies language that is limiting, that carries undertones of power. This type of language is comparable to what Clark (1986:

127) calls “debilitating” language, which “makes one feel depressed, hopeless, worthless, incompetent, and unloved”. For Zimmerman (2002: 110) “transformative” language reflects “dynamic, engaging, inclusive, participatory, open, reciprocal, and/or unpredictable” assumptions.

Arnold (2005: 203) mentions the following: “It is worth remembering that the imperative form of language, such as ‘Do not’, ‘You must not’, ‘It is forbidden to ...’ tends to put people off ... It is better to think of a way to engage others’ co-operation”. The supervisor needs to set the tone by using language that models a respectful collegial atmosphere, free from undertones of power, competition and control.

8. The role of the supervisor

Some of the above-mentioned principles are also relevant to the individual supervision of students and are therefore not unique to group supervision. However, the role of the supervisor in the latter context is different from that associated with the standard or traditional way of supervising postgraduate students.

The process of group supervision changes the role of the supervisor, who, in my experience, becomes a facilitator of discussion, a protector of the space among participants, and a teacher with a limited role to play at “teachable” moments – which s/he must wait for and learn to recognise. Vella (2000: 73) states in this regard: “Here’s a new role for the professor. When learners are deeply engaged in a learning task, the teacher’s role is to sit still, keep quiet, and pay attention [...] When invited, we offer a response to the questions asked, and then we leave”!

Group supervision often casts the supervisor in the role of coach, facilitator and observer. In a one-to-one supervision set-up, the supervisor takes an active role throughout. S/he is constantly in control, providing feedback, making suggestions, and trying to convince the student of the right way to approach the study. In group supervision, this role is merely a starting-point: as the process unfolds, students start taking over these functions. For this to happen, the supervisor

needs to be sufficiently comfortable to cope with unforeseen issues and situations. S/he must accept the fact that when the student can say something the supervisor wants to say, learning is being enhanced, because each time a student says something meaningful, s/he learns, has made that connection him/herself, and will not forget it. This basically implies that the supervisor always holds back, remains sensitive to the students, and refrains from taking control of the discussion. An academic finds this to be the hardest part to adjust to in-group supervision!

9. Group facilitation skills

Prendiville (2008: 13) defines facilitation as

... a developmental educational method, which encourages people to share ideas, resources, opinions and to think critically in order to identify needs and find effective ways of satisfying those needs.

This summarises the role of the supervisor in the context of group supervision, that is, if the supervisor is prepared to allow the group to become the co-teachers with him/her, or in the real sense of the term, peer teachers.

The above discussion describes the facilitation process in-group supervision. For Bee & Bee (1998: ix) facilitation can only happen in a motivated and cooperative group. Such a group needs guidance and support, but not commands and teaching. The objective is not to provide answers, but to facilitate the process of problem solving.

Bee & Bee (1998: 39) list four essential facilitation skills: building rapport between all participants; active listening and observation; effective listening to reveal issues, and knowing what to do with the emerging information from the group. In my opinion, the third chapter's title, "Picking up signals from the group" summarises this well (Bee & Bee 1998: 41). Prendiville (2008: 56) states that facilitators cannot force individuals to participate, but could create the context in which participants feel safe to participate.

10. Research design and method

10.1 Introduction

The exploratory nature of the group supervision with the two cohorts of ten and five Master's students, respectively, necessitated a qualitative research approach. Various methods of data collection were used to compensate for the small group.

10.2 Data collection

Data gathering consisted mainly of participant (student) observation as they interacted with each other and with me. As a participant observer (Mouton 2001: 148), I conducted the research as a naturalistic study (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 39) within the interpretive paradigm, desiring to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences and perceptions. This confirmed Gay & Arasian's (2000: 212) view that making observations as a participant has the advantage of deeper insights into the process and the development of relationships with the other participants. The disadvantages of becoming subjectively involved with the participants and of not having the opportunity to make detailed field notes, also indicated by the above authors, were real. For Delamont (2002: 132) observation requires the researcher to remain alert, and this is difficult in a continuing process. Both these problems were to a large extent compensated for by the fact that the contact sessions usually lasted three days during which I had no other responsibilities. This implied that I had the opportunity to objectively reflect and consider the detail of the day and write down my observations in the evenings. One frequently noted problem of participant observation is that of "observer effects". Schumacher & McMillan (1993: 393) are of the opinion that the time spent by the researcher in the research situation plays an important role in reducing elements that cause the data to be invalid. The hours and days I spent with these supervision groups caused a natural situation in which the formal roles and levels of role players faded, and there was little if any need for being unreal or pretentious.

In addition to participant observation methods, the participants and I spent time as a group to reflect at the end of each contact session. This provided time and space for them to give feedback on their experience of the contact session. I constantly asked them questions about improving the process. These informal interactions provided valuable insights which, noted as memorandums, combined with the information gathered through participant observation, helped to develop a clearer overview of the entire process of group supervision.

Towards the end of the process conducted individual interviews were conducted with each of the students who had experienced the full process of group supervision. The reason for this is that, as Gay & Arasian (2000: 219) correctly observe, interviews assist the researcher in obtaining information that cannot be collected from observation. This includes anxiety, feelings of rejection and other individual experiences of which the researcher remains unaware. A common problem with interviews is the issue of who “controls” the interview (Gay & Arasian 2000: 219). When one has spent a year of 3-day contact sessions with a small group of students, the relationship between the supervisor and students becomes so natural that an interview in fact takes the form of a discussion in which questions and answers are exchanged in a relaxed and open manner. This type of interaction can in a sense be best described in what Delamont (2002: 8) refers to as “reflexivity”, which implies an “endless cycle of interactions and perceptions which characterise relationships with other human beings”. A high percentage of the data gathered emerged from the interactions as basic understanding of what was taking place at the time, and of what the students were experiencing.

Questionnaires were handed out to the students to obtain anonymous feedback about their experience of the process, and to solicit suggestions for improvement. While Gay & Arasian (2000: 281) emphasise the saving of time as an advantage of the questionnaire, I used it primarily as a means to give participants the opportunity to make comments they did not want to say to me for fear of embarrassing me. The questions focused on what they liked and disliked about

the process; how they viewed their own role and that of their peers, and how they wanted the contact sessions to develop (*cf* Appendix).

10.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process. Delamont (2002: 138) mentions that both analysis and interpretation must be done “as you go along”. The analysis consisted of identifying categories as they emerged from the data (Schumacher & McMillan 1993: 479), and of interpreting these categories in the light of the questions concerning the effectiveness of the group supervision process.

11. Findings and discussion

In general students were satisfied with the process and recognised the learning principles. One student stated: “In terms of the methodology of the research I have grown tremendously. All spheres regarding this research journey have improved through these contact sessions”.

11.1 Reciprocal processes

Participating in the group sessions in which they present their work, participants experienced what Lambert describes as reciprocal processes. The continuous interaction, the listening and responding to the humour, the encouragement and the advice form part of this process. One student wrote: “It was wonderful working together. I enjoy working with this team: we talk, laugh and enjoy sharing ideas.” This again points to the daunting aspect of the process, namely the supervisor’s responsibility to allow freedom, while ensuring both that the process does not derail and that it maximises its potential for learning and growth for all involved.

One of the key advantages of the method of group supervision adumbrated above is the fact that students learn about their own work and that of others, and gain from their own experience and that of others. After she had presented her work, one student stated: “It gave me a chance to hear other perspectives and critique on my work

which was very helpful. I can go back and change and improve my proposal.” Another mentioned: “Other candidates played a major role because mistakes or improvements that I had made were sometimes similar to what they had experienced.”

11.2 Learning and teaching processes

Engaging in an open-ended learning situation in the absence of specified day-to-day outcomes paves the way for the teaching to focus on individual needs as they become evident, or on aspects of which the supervisor is reminded in the discussion. In considering the teaching strategy inherent in this mode of group supervision, I realised that when a group is presented with one of the students’ work, and talks it through, many processes can and do happen simultaneously:

I become aware of what I forgot to tell the students, and I have both a receptive audience and teachable moments to share these.

I find students suggesting things I had not considered.

I experience a student’s personal growth when the quiet one with the threatening inferiority complex risks a thought, and the others respond positively.

I notice students turning to help one another.

I notice that a student has made a grave error, and while I am looking for a way to respond sensitively, another student shows her mistake, and she takes it well.

I notice how students learn both from the strong points of their peers’ work and from their omissions.

I notice students making notes on the presenter’s draft, knowing that this draft with all its annotations will serve them well when they revise their own drafts.

11.3 The changing role of the supervisor

As the group supervision proceeded, participants started to say things they had heard me saying, such as: “How does that sentence

read, G?"; "If you say that you disagree, you have to say why." My role was changing, and I was only commenting when the students missed an important point: "How can we improve the heading?"; "Are you happy with this formulation?"

The supervisor must remain alert to various aspects of creating and maintaining a safe learning environment, as well as to the subtle nuances that can destroy this environment. S/he must focus, in particular, on protecting every participant from being hurt, marginalised, ridiculed or over-powered. S/he must ensure that there is sufficient time for allowing the "richness of ideas existing among us" (Lambert: pp?) to surface. I was therefore duly gratified when a student wrote: "I found the environment safe; therefore it became easy for me to air my views."

In one's efforts to create a safe environment, a phrase such as "I think you have to redo your proposal" comes down very hard on the student. A softer line such as "Let's see how we can change your research questions" reflects an attitude of helping, rather than of assessing. One student wrote after a session: "I must surely express my gratitude for your patience and calm nature with which you address our fears and uncertainties."

The most important role of the supervisor may be to accord affirmation when it is due. When, towards the end of the process, I returned one of the weaker students' work in which I had made some positive comments such as "well done!" or "excellent!", she stood up, turned around and showed my comments to all the other students, who responded with huge acclamation.

11.4 The personal growth of students

There were clear signs of personal growth among the participants. At the beginning students took small tentative steps, such as saying: "According to my gut feeling you should have an introduction; I do not know, but this is what I am thinking." One of the weaker students said tentatively: "Does this sentence fit here?" Another student expressed his experience leading up to the presentation of the proposal as

... characterised by conflicting emotions/stress/frustration/sense of dejection followed by new bursts of energy – however now more than ever, [he feels] committed to succeed – [feels] much more inspired and motivated to grapple with the complexities of research.

This student also added that he “initially [had] a sense of humiliation” in his presentation of the proposal, but then afterwards realised the need to improve the first draft. Another said: “I was very nervous in the beginning, but afterwards very relaxed.” I often noticed that each had to present his/her work to the group, help them cross a psychological barrier which they were all glad to have done when they were through. It is evident that the principle of individual accountability played a decisive role.

It soon became evident how much the students benefited from their own and each other’s inputs. One student wrote: “The more I contributed, the more I grew. I always felt honoured by being given the opportunity to express my thoughts about others’ work.” Another stated: “The peer input into your work becomes important as you realise your own shortcomings. It also places one in the position to be able to comment and assist your fellow students in their endeavours.”

11.5 Students taking responsibility for one another

It was found that, as students gained confidence, they increasingly started taking responsibility for one another. While we were busy with student B’s work, student A would for, instance, say: “What I wanted to say about this issue in B’s work ...”; B then replied: “I can respond to your suggestion in the following manner: What I can do is the following ...” They also shared knowledge about possible sources of data. As we proceeded, the suggestions made became more valid and useful. Students also started to challenge one another, and others would then join in the discussion. Their concern for one another grew wider than the academic process. In the case of the group of five, one lagged behind, and would possibly have dropped out. The others constantly telephoned him until he ultimately rejoined and in the end graduated with them.

One student acknowledged the other members of the group as follows in her treatise: “My colleagues, who studied, travelled and rented flats with me. If we did not do this together, I do not think that we would be where we are today.” Another said about a group member: “[Thank you] for making our lives seem so easy. When we thought the worst of things, you joked about it, making the work accessible to every member of the group and always put our needs first before yours.”

11.6 Joint decision-making and control

In the process of supervision, a relationship of openness and trust is vital, and one should guard against any utilisation of power which curbs the student’s development or thinking, or which keeps him/her from following his/her own intuition or passion. There is a very thin line between facilitating the thinking process and being directive. It is important to allow the format of the sessions to be determined in an open process of negotiation between the supervisor and students as equal partners in the process.

At one session, two of the stronger students were of the opinion that they wanted to continue working on their final chapter. It was agreed that they would stay at home the next day to work on this chapter. On that day I had time to work with some of the weaker students on the marked copies of their literature studies, with them making notes of issues they had not understood from my comments. On the following day, the other two were back, and one of them provided us with copies of the draft of his final chapter. This afforded us the opportunity to work through an example of a final chapter, to make comments and suggestions, with the weaker students asking questions. Everybody was fully involved, because the presenter wanted feedback and the others were all too aware that they would have to present their own final chapters at the next session. In this way, the principles of positive interdependence and individual accountability were being implemented for all the students concerned. This example assisted me in finding a way to deal with the problem of an academically diversified group of students referred to earlier.

11.7 Problem areas

Despite the positive reaction of the participants, the process of group supervision has several pitfalls that should be avoided or anticipated and provided for.

The main problems that arose in our group supervision processes were related to participants working at a different pace; the risk of keeping the group together for too long; the problem of students falling behind, and the question of the effective use of time.

Groups of participants split due to the different pace at which students work. This can imply that the group sessions lose their relevance for some participants. As participants' work progresses, their interests start to diverge. The group sessions work up to a point, but then students need to be allowed to choose whether or not to continue on their own. This is a very real aspect of the programme, and one for which we made provision.

The problems referred to by Sales & Navarre (1970) earlier, namely the issue of group discussions irrelevant to individual needs, and the challenge of supervisors to deal with individual students' problems, are real problems to which the supervisor needs to pay attention continuously. It was found that once a student falls behind, s/he finds it difficult to catch up with the group. One way to guard against this is to insist that every student submits written work at each contact session, so that his/her work can be discussed, and s/he keeps up with the others. This has to be enforced, even if the work is not completed, or still in an early stage. As soon as an individual is not an active part of a session, s/he will struggle to catch up with the others.

The question of time is a big challenge for this type of group supervision. One cannot embark on something of this nature unless one is prepared to devote a great deal of time to it. This refers, in particular, to the time spent waiting for students to air their views, and of course the time spent looking at each student's work in detail. This has to be weighed up against the fact that when one supervisor works with a group of students, s/he saves much time in that s/he does not need to repeat everything to individual students. Ultimately,

the process can yield a higher throughput rate of students than in a one-to-one situation, because the students encourage each other to persist, and postgraduate study becomes a less lonely process than it often is when students work on their own.

12. Conclusion

The findings indicate a very high level of personal satisfaction for the supervisor. It is as if what has been written about group facilitation comes true, and one is privileged to, as it were, be a spectator of a process of a group's development and growth, both as individuals and as a collective.

The current reality in South Africa is that a group of Master's students will, for a long time to come, include students who are struggling to cope with the work. Supervising the research component of modular programmes also implies a high workload for supervisors of large numbers of students. Universities will need to find a way to accommodate students in a research environment that does not become a debilitating drain on the staff. Group supervision can offer a solution to this problem in a way that not only allows the supervisor to cover the entire group when giving guidance on the research and writing processes, but also involves students in the development of themselves and their peers. The basic aspects that work successfully include interaction and joint learning between lecturers and students within a safe environment, where peers play an important role and the role of the supervisor is always changing – increasingly becoming that of a facilitator whose function is to affirm students and protect the space where learning can occur.

In the current and future context of supervising large numbers of diverse students, a more cost- and time-effective method of supervision will be hard to find.

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