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COMMENTARY

Reflecting on the Supervision Process across Diverse Contexts and in Our Own

Alison Stewart with Mao Goto and Zhou Xiaotong, Gakushuin University

I have been supervising master's degree students at Gakushuin University in Tokyo for the past eight years. Reading through the five research articles that are featured in this special issue of the Learner Development Journal, "Exploring the Supervision Process Across Diverse Contexts: Collaborative Approaches", I find a great deal that resonates with my own situation, as well as much that prompts me to question and review my own context and the practices that I have come to adopt within it. The articles by Crawley and O'Brien, Tu and Ronald, Hyatt and Hayes, Muller and Tsuruoka, and Ikeda and Shiba report on extremely diverse contexts and all of them offer new perspectives and insights on postgraduate supervision. Common themes that emerge across all five include the roles and identity of the supervisor/supervisee, the power dynamic in that relationship, and on communication and miscommunication. In this final article in the issue, I would like to offer some further reflection on these issues and on the puzzles and conundrums they pose in my own context.

To explore these themes, I invited Mao Goto and Zhou Xiaotong, my two master's students who graduated last March, to an online discussion. Mao and Zhou came to Gakushuin University having completed first degrees at other universities: Mao from a private university in Tokyo, and Zhou from an English-medium university in Guangdong, where she majored in international business. Mao was interested in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and she conducted an interview study to examine CLIL teachers' beliefs about this approach. Zhou wrote her master's thesis on translanguaging and identity among multilingual students in Japan. In addition to supervising their master's theses, I was closely involved in various other academic activities that Zhou and Mao undertook: Zhou wrote up a pilot study on translanguaging practices of Chinese students at the university, which was published in the university's Faculty of Humanities research bulletin (Zhou, 2019). Zhou and Mao also presented their research at the department's annual formal presentation day and at the Japan Association of Language Teaching (JALT) Graduate Student Showcase.

It had been six months since I last saw Mao and Zhou. Although their graduation ceremony at the end of March 2020 had been cancelled, we celebrated by taking photographs around the campus, and then I took them out to tea at a nearby café. When I emailed Mao and Zhou at the end of August to inquire if they would be interested in discussing the supervision process, both of them agreed instantly to the request, so I sent them short summaries of the five articles and set up a Zoom meeting. I also sent them questions, based on those formulated by Crawley and O'Brien, regarding language issues, power, feedback, and culture, and invited them to contribute questions of their own. Zhou sent back questions about the difference between Ph.D. and Master's, whether I had supervised Chinese students in the past, and whether Chinese students were different from my expectation, and whether I had a "vision" of being a supervisor. Mao did not send any questions, but she was keen to respond to the questions already posed and to raise new questions as they occurred to her during the dis-

cussion. After chatting about our lives during the pandemic for half an hour, we started our discussion, which was recorded on Zoom and Quick Time Player. The following commentary on the prominent themes raised by the articles in this issue draws on our discussion and on my subsequent reflections.

Roles and Identities

On reading through the articles in this issue, it struck me how three of the five (Crawley and O'Brien, Tu and Ronald, Ikeda and Shiba) describe the experiences of supervisors who were new to the role. Dai O'Brien, as a deaf person, and Jim Ronald and Ken Ikeda as non-Japanese working in Japan came to their experience from cultural backgrounds that differ from that of their current institutional context. As newcomers to the role, these supervisors were obliged to pay particular attention to the expectations of the institution and the needs of their supervisees. In addition, their newness had the effect of reducing to some extent the power gap between them and their students. In each of these three cases, we see the supervisor learn, adapt and change as a result of the process. In Hyatt and Hayes' account a similar kind of levelling occurs; through the students' initiative in forming a scholarship group, the supervisor David Hyatt comes to put into practice his ideals of a "decentered pedagogy". The success of the group depends on his and the supervisees' repositioning and consequent empowerment of the supervisees. By contrast, Muller and Tsuruoka's article investigates a supervision practice that is quite well established. Theron Muller has been conducting online supervision of master's dissertations for several years and continues to oversee large numbers of supervisees (this on top of his full-time job at a Japanese university). Time—in terms of how much we have accrued in supervising postgraduate students, or how little we have to spare in our busy lives—may be a key factor in the hardening of roles and, indeed, in a tendency for supervisors to avoid opening themselves up to change.

Reflecting on the roles and identities that my supervisees and I brought to the supervision process, whilst I like to imagine that I am flexible and open to change, I can also see that many of my expectations and beliefs are fairly fixed. Coming from a different cultural background from that of most of my colleagues, I feel that it is incumbent on me to adapt to their expectations and practices, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, I realise that my beliefs and practices as a supervisor are to a large extent based on my own "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975) as a master's and doctoral student at universities in the United Kingdom. Our personal biographies can colour our expectations and lead to blind spots, but they can, if we are open to the possibility, also provide opportunities for understanding supervisees better. Ikeda's moving account of the silencing of his father, a Japanese immigrant to the United States, comes in response to his supervisee's intense feelings of discomfort as a returnee to Japan, who felt stigmatised because her English accent stood out from that of her peers. Working together on their narrative inquiry turns out to be an occasion for reciprocal learning: Shiba is able to gain a new perspective on her voice, while Ikeda gains an appreciation of students' sensitivity and the potential for supervisors to unthinkingly inflict pain.

From the questions that Zhou sent me prior to our discussion, it is clear that identity matters to her too. Initially, I did not realise that her questions could have been motivated by her personal interests. Accordingly, my answer to her question about the difference between a Ph.D. and a master's degree was based on my previous short experience of supervising a doctoral student, who dropped out when he was unable to balance this work with job and family commitments. I also took the opportunity to observe that patronage was more important than completing a Ph.D. in the traditional academic career path in Japan. Only then did it occur to me that Zhou and Mao might have been thinking of embarking on a Ph.D. themselves. When

I asked them if that was the case, both demurred: Mao said that she lacked “readiness”, while Zhou, who felt that her master’s research was too short and too rushed to allow her to do justice to her topic, commented that the thought was “attractive, but I don’t have enough level”. Did I discourage these students by ignoring the possibility, until too late, that they might have imagined this identity for themselves?

Zhou’s question to me about my expectations of Chinese students similarly brings identity to the fore. In our discussion, I claimed that Zhou’s identity as a Chinese in a Japanese university did not affect my expectations of her and that during the supervision process I viewed her as no different from her Japanese peers. Recently, there has been a marked increase in international students in Japanese higher education, with the majority coming from China. However, that is not the case in our department; Zhou is the first Chinese student, to my knowledge, to complete a master’s degree. Working in a tight-knit group of graduate students in the English department, Zhou appeared to me to have integrated very successfully. On reflection, however, I can see that I *was* conscious of her Chinese identity. Partly, this was because Chinese identity was something she brought to her research, conducting studies on firstly Chinese and then other transnational students. But Zhou also evinced a particular interest in the publications of Li Wei, primarily, of course, because of his defining work on translanguaging, but perhaps also because he is Chinese. In recent years, I have become interested in identity as recognition (Stewart, 2020), which leads me to reflect now whether Zhou felt that I had acknowledged her Chinese identity sufficiently during the process. Highlighting a difference from the rest of the graduate students could have been construed as exclusion or prejudice, feelings that are clearly felt painfully by Ikeda and Shiba. The balance between recognition and mis- or non-recognition is clearly a fine one.

Power

Issues of power and hierarchy are a key concern to all the authors in this issue. As Hyatt and Hayes observe, “the very terms ‘supervisor’ and ‘doctoral [/master’s] student’ or ‘supervisee’ are ones which construct subject positions for both parties” (this issue, p. 21). Nevertheless, this institutional positioning can be interrogated and re-negotiated. Power can be made explicit by analysing interaction between supervisor and supervisee (Muller and Tsuruoka), by clarifying and defining the respective roles in the supervision process (Crawley and O’Brien) and in the institution more generally (Tu and Ronald), by being mindful of the potentially harmful effects of power (Ikeda and Shiba), and by changing the power dynamic in the supervisor-supervisee relationship (Hyatt and Hayes).

Three of the articles in this collection deal with doctoral supervision, while two of them are concerned with master’s supervision. What difference does this make to the supervision process? When I answered Zhou’s question about the difference between master’s and Ph.D., I focussed primarily on the requirements, observing that, in the context of our university at least, there is a significant jump from master’s level to doctoral level. Undergraduate students sometimes enrol in the master’s programme because they do not feel ready to start work, or have not been able to find a suitable position for themselves (although this was not the case with Zhou and Mao). The expectations I and my colleagues have for master’s degrees are far lower than those we have for doctorates. Hyatt and Hayes allude to the “liminality” of the doctorate process; doctoral students, unlike master’s students, are at the threshold, or an early stage, of their academic careers, and this strengthens the rationale for involving supervisees in the type of work academics are expected to engage in. Although we have only master’s students, it has been important for me and my colleague, Yuichi Tomita, to facilitate some kind of entry into the wider academic community because we believe it is empowering for

our students. Thus, Zhou was supported in her decision to write an article for the university research bulletin, and both Zhou and Mao presented their research not only at the department's open conference but also at the JALT international conference. For the publication and the conference presentations, the students received more rigorous feedback than they did for their theses, perhaps because their performance in these public activities would reflect on the reputation of the university (and on me, their supervisor!).

Whilst power and authority are inherent in the identity of supervisor, it is clear, talking to Mao and Zhou, that different supervisors assume this differently. In my own case, I want to establish a caring and relaxed relationship with my supervisees. Mao stated that some teachers made her "feel uneasy", especially if they were "teaching in a bossy way", but she didn't feel any uneasiness or fear with me. Zhou agreed, stating that she felt that, rather than a "power gap" or "authority", my role in our relationship was providing "supervision", by which she appears to mean setting deadlines and "talking a lot". Coming from a university in China where class sizes were large, Zhou had never experienced one-to-one teaching and "never imagined I could have a relationship with a professor in this way".

Whilst I am gratified to hear this, I also wonder whether my relationship with supervisees is actually equitable, and whether equity is necessarily a good thing. In their article, Tu and Ronald describe a critical incident that occurred because of a lack of clarity in communication and expectations. Ronald mentions that he knew Tu socially from his church and that this friendship enabled them in the end to become more open with each other and to get the supervision process back on track. However, is it possible that the cordiality and equality of a social relationship complicate, rather than facilitate the supervision relationship? Muller, who supervised Tsuruoka in a distance master's programme, notes that whilst Tsuruoka openly disclosed personal problems during the supervision process, he himself did not do so. This is something that resonates strongly with me. Although I hope that my attitude towards my supervisees comes across as kind and caring, I tend for my part not to share with them personal or health problems that I may be facing. Clearly, I do keep a social and emotional distance from them, perhaps as a way of maintaining some power and authority. But at the same time, I often wonder if I am sufficiently clear with and supportive of my supervisees, an issue that I come to next.

Communication and Miscommunication

Language is a prominent issue in all the articles in this issue. For Hyatt and Hayes, the focus is on academic discourse, and in particular writing for publication; for Tu and Ronald, language and culture pose problems for both the supervisor and supervisee's negotiation with other supervisors and the administrative staff; for Muller and Tsuruoka, it is not the language itself that is at issue, but rather the way in which the supervisor and supervisee communicate, for Ikeda and Shiba, language, in the sense of voice, becomes the object of discrimination by those with authority, a cause of alienation which in turn leads to trauma, and for Crawley and O'Brien, sign language is bound up with issues of ownership, identity and use during the supervision process. In my own context, language is perhaps the most prominent issue that I struggle with as a supervisor. I speak and read Japanese but am far from proficient, so almost all communication with my supervisees is in English, which is a second language for them. I should state that Mao and Zhou are both fluent English speakers, and thus the use of English did not appear to pose a particular difficulty in supervision meetings, which it sometimes has with previous master's students. But, as I have already indicated in my misapprehension of the motives for Zhou's questions for our discussion, the potential for miscommunication is considerable and ever present.

Needless to say, good supervision entails good communication. Muller assumes in his detailed study that this means "uptake", that supervisees accept the advice that is given and implement it in their work. This notion of uptake, however, gives me pause for thought. In my own experience of being a supervisee, the discussions I had with my doctoral supervisor often resulted in further reading and re-thinking of my subject. (I know that my constant rewriting drove my poor supervisor to distraction.) Thus, rather than uptake, which to me implies the acquisition of specific skills or ideas, I found the effect of supervision to be transformative. I expected that this would be the case for my supervisees too. When Zhou wrote an article for publication, I spent a great deal of time rigorously and extensively editing it. I hoped that this reworking of her article would be of service to Zhou in the writing of her thesis the following year. I was thus frustrated to see in her drafts that she reproduced large chunks of the article and otherwise had not improved her writing. Similarly, Mao struggled to organise her interview data and maintain any focus in her thesis. In the final stages of writing, she contacted me frequently and I felt that I gave her far more specific instruction than I expected to or wanted to. Although both students completed their theses successfully, I felt that neither had realised their potential, and I wondered whether I could have done more. Could I have communicated more effectively? How did Zhou and Mao see this?

In fact, both of them put the responsibility for any shortcoming onto themselves. Zhou claimed that the feedback she received, particularly the recasting and corrections she received on the first drafts of her published article, was "useful" and that she "read it over and over and try to figure it out". She admitted that the final thesis that she submitted was not as good as she had hoped and felt that her research topic of translanguaging and identity could have been (or could be in future?) explored in more depth. Mao, for her part, apologised for demanding so much help in the final weeks leading up to the submission deadline. Since she had been unable to complete her thesis the previous year because of mental health problems, I was especially anxious that she not drop out again. But eventually, it was too much for me, and I asked her to stop sending me her drafts. As she recalled, "my mental [state] was insane at the time," and added, "I knew it was wrong, but I needed to do that". Was it because of a lack of confidence, I wondered? Mao agreed that it was, but that completing the thesis and the master's degree gave her "so much confidence". As I reflect back on our supervision meetings, I remember that these sessions always seemed to end on a positive note, and I had the impression that Zhou and Mao had found some clarity as a result of what we said. But that clarity they appeared to find when we were together seemed to elude them the moment they stepped out of my room.

Vision/Supervision

In our discussion about the supervision process, Zhou's final question—about my vision—was the hardest to answer. Do I even have a vision? Perhaps I do, and that it is simply that I want all my supervisees to do the best they can, to produce work that they feel proud of. I have spent much of my teaching career thinking about autonomy, and as a supervisor I want my supervisees to be independent, questioning, and always developing their thinking. Like Hayes and Hyatt, I hope that students will take initiatives to share and develop their own learning, something that Zhou and Mao certainly did. Crawley and O'Brien remind me to be mindful of the identities, skills, desires and needs that my supervisees bring to our work together. And like Ikeda and Shiba, I need to be careful not to forget my position of power and inflict hurt or offence to students who may not feel able to speak up or resist. Muller and Tsuruoka encourage me to think about the nature of my interaction with the students, and to think more deeply about how I can communicate my intentions and my ideas more effectively, while at the same time ensuring that students retain agency throughout the supervision

process. Finally, Tu and Ronald remind me that the supervision process takes place in a particular context. That context is social, institutional, and emotional, and its complexity means that there will never be any perfect solution to the pitfalls and mistakes along the way.

Perhaps a better way to look at the notion of "vision" is in its literal sense of seeing what is before us. Rather than an ideal, something that can only be imagined, this sense of vision prompts us to look closely at the practices that we take for granted, at events that happen and are forgotten, and at the context in which this process unfolds. Looking back at the supervision experience that I went through with Mao and Zhou and talking to them about it shows me that my vision as a supervisor is limited and partial. I take this insight forward into my supervisory relationships to come.

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