

Designing and evaluating the Supervision workshop series – embracing overlapping and contradictory views

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Abstract

This reflective piece focuses on the workshops of the Superb-Vision Network: a series of student-led workshops to support doctoral students' learning of their supervision experiences. As a continuation account of the writing in the previous volume of this journal, this piece introduces how the development and evaluation of the workshops has been informed by the principles of educational design research (McKenney & Reeves, 2018) throughout. As a co-created work between three authors, who acted as facilitators and participant in the workshop, this writing discusses how the multiple evaluation/reflection cycles break down facilitator-participant barriers and contribute to methodological inclusion in terms of improving the future workshops. This writing recognises various challenges in incorporating various feedback when evaluating the workshops and centralises inclusivity when facilitating innovation, such as how to embrace participants' contradictory views and critical feedback. In the spirit of educational design research, the other goal of this piece is to balance the need to develop a quality 'product' whilst simultaneously formulating broader design principles to contribute to 'scientific understanding', benefiting the development and evaluation of other peer-based learning initiatives.

Keywords: Networking, Doctoral Supervision, Education Design Research, Diversity, Evaluation

Introduction

This paper is a continuation of a previous writing published in the 2nd volume of JPPP journal, which explained how the series of student-led workshops to support doctoral students' learning of their supervision experiences was founded through the collaborative effort of two PhD students from different backgrounds (Sinclair & Lu, 2022). This piece focuses on the workshops themselves, how they were designed and delivered, how the participants responded to them, and how the three authors evaluate and reflect on the responses to implement changes in future workshops.

This article introduces educational design research (McKenney & Reeves, 2018) which lends its pragmatic, iterative, inclusive and solution-focused approach to the design and the development of the Superb-Vision workshops. Adapting the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) (Vitae 2010) to suit the need for guiding discussions about doctoral supervision experiences, the workshop series benefit from a consistent application of an interactive version of RDF throughout. At the same time, the workshops have captured the diverse voices of student participants, reflecting the complexity of doctoral students' needs in terms of supervision. This complexity is evident in the frequently overlapping and even contradictory views expressed by the students.

Informed by the educational design research, this article makes an approach in terms of involving two reflection cycles in evaluating the workshops designed. One cycle is describing the development and observation of the activities during the workshops by the two facilitators, with its own logical chain of structure, before addressing the second cycle, which involves the reflective accounts of one participant, as the third author of this article, in terms of his own experiences of attending the workshops. This article attempts to demonstrate how the two cycles should be considered separately and interactively, with the purpose of balancing the need to develop a quality 'product' whilst simultaneously formulating broader design principles to contribute to 'scientific understanding'.

Designing the workshops

“I attended all 5 face-to-face sessions of the Superb-Vision Network (SVN) workshops, just a few months in my PhD journey. Due to COVID-19 restrictions still being in somewhat in place at the time, I missed out on face-to-face induction unlike other PGR¹s. SVN workshops was the first instance I met other PGRs in a face-to-face setting. Given that it was held in the library, it also helped me get to know the PGR community which in turn allowed me to settle in campus life.” – Youn

The design of the workshops involved modelling of the five sessions, unpacking the actual topics (networking, collaboration, problem-solution, self-reflection, and work/life balance) in the context of doctoral supervision, designing sessions and the dissemination. While this process is itself pedagogically oriented, aiming for a three-step process (unpacking-designing-dissemination), the two facilitators had considered how the sessions would work in practice, including the unintentional results (Schoenfeld, 2009). The previous piece describes the consistent session plan applied in all the five workshops (Sinclair & Lu). Meanwhile, the post-Covid context was given special consideration, manifested in the intentional choice of starting the workshop series with ‘networking’ as the first theme.

The main task of the workshops was facilitating conversations around Warwick doctoral students’ supervision experience. On the other hand, the workshop design went beyond this pedagogical mission, carefully considering other ‘hidden enzymes’, including the length/frequency, the venue, the catering, and a departmental mailing list encompassing the contact of 34 Postgraduate Directors from the three Faculties at Warwick. The two facilitators also recorded a short video to introduce the aim and the arrangement of the workshop series, which was promoted on the main webpage of Warwick Doctoral College as part of the SkillsForge² sessions.

The workshop design also took into account the diversity of doctoral students at Warwick. We have predicted our participants could come from different levels of

¹ PGR refers to Postgraduate Graduate Research students as an acronym used in many departments at Warwick University.

² Warwick SkillsForge is a platform that advertises professional development courses for doctoral researchers.

study, disciplinary background, as well as the departmental culture. Therefore, the design of the activities in the workshop was kept open-ended, displaying examples from different student bodies. As the above paragraph shows, the workshop seemed to have created a community of development; for first years, participating the workshops also complemented their overall induction experience.

Observing participation

“My most vivid memory from the SVN workshops was the situational conversations regarding you and your supervisor. Contemplating on light-hearted (or maybe not) situations such as if your supervisor invites you for dinner as well as more serious (and perhaps more feasible) whereby you have a disagreement with your supervisor on thesis topic was a unique experience to say the least. It really made me reflect on my relationship with each of my supervisors, recognising that whilst each relationship can be so different, it is a two-way relationship. In other words, we are always taught throughout our educational journey, but supervision is slightly different in that supervisors are also learning during supervision. This means that the relationship can be moulded by both student and supervisor. SVN made me realise that it is important for PGRs to make an active effort to do so, to get the best out of the relationship. This has served me well since, but I do wish that SVN sessions was extended to supervisors as well as I believe this ‘realisation’ needs to be two-way.” - Youn

Delivering the workshops was a combined experience of interaction, analysis and retrospection. In spite of the various attendance of each session (from five to over 20 students), the workshop series had witnessed the richness of participants’ conversations about their doctoral supervision experience. It was noted that such diversity influenced each session in terms of interactional style, as well as the focal debates, such as the preferred supervision mode (individual or team supervision) and the purposes of doctoral education. The dynamics of such influence was too complex to prototype. Even one of the authors has substantial expertise in supervision research per se, familiarising with the main strands of literature, they

were amazed by the new interest/issues emerging from students' conversation each time, due to the highly contextual nature of every discussion.

One noticeable observation of the sessions is how participants had contradicted views in terms of supervision. The situational conversations, as Youn reflected in the above account, often elicited most contradictory accounts. For example, one of the designed situations was inviting participants' opinions on a variety of situations with their supervisors, including what if the supervisor invited you for dinner, and what if the supervisor cancelled a supervision session in the last minute. The reactions to these situations were different – positive, negative, no comments, never happened on me. On the other hand, these conversations often ended up reflectively – many participants demonstrated a process of coming to terms with their own situations, which of course did not mean that institutions do not have to avoid the responsibility to tackle the mentioned issues.

The other observation is the frequency of participants overlapping their comments across different sessions. Similar issues around supervision were pointed out repeatedly, from lack of support and isolation. This almost sits at the opposite side of diverse views – students collectively and consistently long for more support from supervisors and departments, keen in a secure community for concrete connection, with the entire PGR stakeholders including supervisors. Regarding these contradictory and overlapping views, the two facilitators strove to adopt a neutral position, 'no advice is to be given', as also advised by staff members in Doctoral College. However, is it realistic not to take any side during the conversations as cool outsiders? Did we manage to do so successfully? Seen from Youn's account above, participants could often think through their 'problems' through communicating with others – they were not really seeking 'advice' but 'understanding' in many cases.

Evaluating and reflecting

"Whilst I enjoyed most SVN sessions, I felt that at times some of the conversations were too theoretical and/or abstract, which was hard to follow as a first year PhD student. An example of this was the presentation of the 'problem continuum' by

Welsh whereby a park and wilderness metaphor was used to describe issues in a PhD journey. I appreciate the intention in doing so, but the constant attempt to work within a framework to link theory and practice was perhaps too academic and did not match the informal nature of the workshop. However, at other times this was more fitting, including the use of the SWOT analysis on your supervisory relationship. This allowed for a quick reflection and gave a sense of where you are at within your relationship.” - Youn

Evaluating the workshops is not only for the purpose of producing a quality ‘product’, but also formulating broader design principles to ‘advance scientific understanding through iterative testing and refinement during the development of practical applications’ (McKenney & Reeves, 2018:9). The term evaluation in this piece is broadly and informally approached, referring to any conscious attempt to collect reflective insights that could inform the design of future workshops. On the ‘scientific’ side, it is hoped that this case study will provide other doctoral students the inspiration and tools to develop their own practice in a reflective and value-based way, exerting ‘an external scientific community of the results and their possible utility for others’ (McKenney & Reeves, 2018:161).

As part of the workshop design, each session intentionally sought participants’ feedback at the end through a QR code directing to a short questionnaire. However, this purposeful approach did not generate enough empirical evidence to inform the understanding of participants’ experience. Then the two facilitators reflected on their own observation and notes kept during the workshop in a retrospective way, including the main activities and outputs generated by the participants. After that, individual participants were approached for their comments, as is shown in the above accounts.

According to McKenney and Reeves (2018), ‘reflection is benefitted most when approached through a combination of systematic and organic techniques’ (p.86). One important consideration is how the multiple evaluation cycles should be interpreted so that they can be of value to improve the future workshops. For example, in the above account, when a critical comment was received about the

obscurity of some terms used in the workshops, such as ‘problem continuum’, or a preference of the SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat) analysis, how these feedback should be addressed? Likewise, when the facilitators observed the repetitive and contradictory views during the sessions, how these views could be incorporated to enhance participants’ experience in the future workshops? Seen from the various feedback received, the anonymous questionnaire, the on-site observation, and the individuals’ critical accounts, methodological inclusiveness comes to centre of attention, sometimes comprising a systematic and rigid model. In addition, various barriers preventing the evaluation cycles need to be recognised, with developer-participant barrier the most salient, due to the two parties’ different ‘positions, perspectives and identities’ (Cook-Sather, 2015, p.2), including different interests, purposes, and time constraints. For example, participants may seek short-term, on-site ‘diagnosis, whereas the developers may be more interested in the long-term agenda to facilitate change. The power dynamics in the sessions also need to be recognised.

This piece demonstrates an effort in addressing the complexity of multiple evaluation cycles by breaking the facilitator/participant barrier. As a participant, Youn’s reflective and critical accounts exist independently of the workshop development which would be taken into consideration in the future workshop design. Involving multiple actors in the evaluation cycle contributes to the methodological inclusion. On the other hand, the two facilitators’ original workshop design, anticipation of the potential results/challenges, observation during the sessions, have their separate space. For example, both facilitators realised that eliciting participants’ contradictory views through purposeful activities during the sessions has its own function. The workshops provided a space exposing doctoral students to different views, inviting them to stand back from their own supervision experience behind the doors and connect with each other through exploring subjects that matter.

Implementation

“The most important aspect of SVN to me was the fact that it brought together PGRs from different backgrounds and disciplines, in an informal setting which allowed them

to converse freely. In that aspect, I found it very similar to courses such as APP PGR³, which on top of having an agenda, provides a space for PGRs to meet and converse. This allows participants to not only benefit from the session content but an opportunity to build their network and foster a ‘community’ feeling. All in all, SVN was a brilliant series of workshops and I wish that it was extended beyond those 5 sessions as the sense of a strong community was just starting to forge.” - Youn

There was no internal agenda between the three authors when they reached the same conclusion about how the exposure to a wider doctoral community could benefit the participants immensely. Even though actual implementation has not happened until next time the relevant parties sit together to plan for the sessions. This piece has served the purpose to think through multiple evaluation cycles in the spirit of educational design research. In addition, this joint effort made by both the facilitators and the participants has reflected on the workshop experience, anticipated possible changes and next steps. Besides the major takeaway which is embracing the diversity of participants’ views, the following implementations have been drawn:

- Sticking to a prepared consistent session plan with flexibility in terms of length/order of activities;
- Observing the sessions attentively and keeping notes actively after obtaining consent from the participants;
- Highlighting the peer-based, cross-disciplinary, informal nature of the session whilst promoting the development purpose;
- Inviting different stakeholders in designing, leading and evaluating the sessions.

³ APP PGR refers to the Academic and Professional Pathway for Post-Graduate Researchers which is a course offered to PGRs at the University of Warwick that help develop and build confidence in their teaching. Successful completion of the course leads to participants being awarded the Associate Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy.

Conclusion

This reflective piece brings together the three authors as facilitators and participant in the Superb-Vision workshop series and demonstrates the significance of inclusivity facilitating innovation in terms of session design and evaluation. Informed by the spirit of design-based educational research, this piece shows the value of multiple evaluation cycles conducted by different actors involved in the same situation and advances a combination of systematic and organic approaches in term of collecting feedback. As a small-scale programme, the workshop series do not aspire to achieve national wide impact, but we do aspire to develop some effective interventions that could assist the development and wellbeing of doctoral students and could be implemented in some departments at Warwick. In addition, the other goal of this piece is to provide some basic principles through this case study to help other students who would like to design and develop similar peer-based learning initiatives. We hope both goals could be achieved through this writing in the foreseeable future.

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