

Undergraduate supervision, teaching dilemmas and dilemmatic spaces

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The dissertation is a highly valued form of teaching and learning in higher education, yet the practice of undergraduate supervision is understudied and under-theorised. Effective supervision is regarded as essential to student success – by students and supervisors alike, although training, resources and support for supervisors is limited. Drawing on data from qualitative questionnaires with eleven supervisors, this paper utilises the concept of teaching dilemmas to explore tensions and challenges within supervision. Three dilemmas were identified regarding ‘taking ownership’, ‘driving supervision’ and ‘challenging and encouraging’. Underpinning all of these was a tension between an ideal model of supervision (characterised by high levels of engagement from students and supervisors), and the need to flexibly adapt supervisory practice to suit students’ learning styles, needs and abilities. We suggest ways in which conceptualising supervision as a dilemmatic space could inform future research and training in supervisory practice.

Keywords: Teaching dilemmas, dilemmatic spaces, supervision, undergraduate, dissertation.

THE DISSERTATION (empirical project or independent research project) is highly valued within undergraduate programmes across a range of disciplines, including psychology, for offering students a unique opportunity to demonstrate autonomy, independence and mastery of their subject (Rowley, 2000; Todd et al., 2004). Accreditation with the British Psychological Society (BPS) requires research training in psychology to ‘culminate in an empirical project reporting on a substantial piece of research’ which involves students ‘carrying out an extensive piece of empirical research that requires them individually to demonstrate a range of research skills including planning, considering and resolving ethical issues, analysis and dissemination of findings’ (2019: 13). The dissertation represents a distinctive form of teaching and learning in the undergraduate experience, due partly to the complexity of the task, but also because students are expected to work with a supervisor – often on a one-to-one basis – to complete the project. Supervision is a key pedagogical practice, often uniquely associated with the dissertation, and is a resource intensive – highly valued – form of teaching which is resistant to change (Jaldemark &

Linberg, 2013). Yet, the practice of supervision is an understudied area of undergraduate higher education.

Research exploring students’ experiences of the dissertation suggests that although they value this form of learning and assessment for offering autonomy and ownership over the project, they find producing a specific research question, defining the scope of the project, gathering the data, and managing their time, especially challenging (Todd et al., 2004). Undergraduates experience challenges and ‘sticky’ feelings in completing their dissertations, including feelings of fear and anxiety, intellectual confusion and feeling stuck in crossing boundaries towards new understanding (Rand, 2016). Students and staff typically share expectations of the supervisor’s role, which can be summarised as: providing support in identifying and defining the research question; ensuring that the project is feasible in scope and ethically sound; advising on appropriate methodologies; and helping with project planning and meeting deadlines (Armstrong & Shankler, 1983; Stefani et al., 1997; Todd et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2006). Students particularly value supervisors’ alignment of research interests and/or ways of supervising, subject

expertise, constructive criticism, clear direction, guiding students in ways which empower learning and being supportive and approachable (Derounian, 2011; Roberts & Seaman, 2018a; Todd et al., 2004). Some of the difficulties reported by students include perceived inequalities in the amount of time and support offered by different supervisors; power imbalances where supervisors are too directive or do not listen to students' ideas; and lack of clarity from supervisors which prevented the student from moving on. Nonetheless, supervisor input and the supervisory relationship were often described as crucial to the success of the project, adding to what Derounian refers to as the 'pressured atmosphere' in which the supervisory relationship operates (2011: 92).

Despite its importance, research rarely focuses on undergraduate supervision. The more abundant literature on postgraduate supervision may have limited applicability given the specific challenges inherent in the undergraduate context: supervisors having diverse projects to manage simultaneously which may fall outside their area of expertise; students having less developed research skills and experience; the shorter time frame within which to complete the research; student and supervisor being relative strangers before they work together; supervisors working with different students at the same time, each with differing personalities, attitudes and values; supervisors having limited time to become familiar with students' learning styles and needs; and the unequal power relationship between student and supervisor (Derounian, 2011; Rowley & Stack, 2004; Shadforth & Harvey, 2004). These challenges are reflected in the small body of work which examines tutors' experiences of undergraduate supervision across the social sciences (Hammick & Acker, 1998; Roberts & Seaman, 2018b; Todd et al., 2006; Wiggins et al., 2016). As noted above, staff and students typically share an understanding of the supervisory role as one in which the supervisor facilitates the students' dissertation 'journey' helping them to make their

research plans achievable and concrete and empowering them to be independent and autonomous researchers. Yet, despite relative consensus on the supervisory role, tutors experience tension between what Derounian (2011) refers to as the 'intellectual' and 'counselling' aspects of the role in practice. Supervisors are often acutely aware of the need to balance the pastoral and intellectual aspects of the role – by being encouraging, nurturing and supportive whilst avoiding being too directive and structured, or being responsive to students' needs while fostering independence (Derounian, 2011; Todd et al., 2006). Staff adopt differing supervisory styles – ranging from formal to informal – and may respond to these challenges in very different ways (Todd et al., 2006). For many staff, undergraduate dissertations are the first encounter with supervision and limited access to training, resources, and support can make the experience stressful (Wisker, 2012). Supervisors express concern about how best to supervise or their lack of research experience (Hammick & Acker, 1998), sometimes feeling ill-equipped in the role and 'thrown in at the deep end' (Wiggins et al., 2016: 9). The typical model of one-to-one supervision may intensify feelings of isolation especially when supervisors do not feel able to seek support from colleagues (Wiggins et al., 2016). As several scholars have noted, there is little formal training in undergraduate research supervision, and a scarcity of resources and materials to facilitate training (Todd et al., 2006; Wiggins et al., 2016; Roberts & Seaman, 2018b; Kiley, et al., 2009).

In sum, undergraduate supervision is a highly complex, pressured teaching practice for which there is little training and guidance. For students and supervisors alike, the experience is variously associated with immense satisfaction and personal achievement or dissatisfaction, stress and anxiety – not least because it weighs heavily in terms of assessment. In this paper we introduce and explore the concept of 'teaching dilemmas' as a useful theoretical lens through which

to understand the experience of undergraduate supervision and suggest ways in which it might usefully frame training in supervisory practice. Understanding of teaching dilemmas has emerged in the context of teacher education and draws attention to the inherently complex and ambiguous nature of teaching practice (cf. Cabaroglu & Tillema, 2011; Kelchtermans 2009; Lyons, 1990), yet this notion has rarely been explored in relation to higher education. We briefly discuss research on teaching dilemmas below before presenting the current research.

Teaching dilemmas

Teaching dilemmas represent the unavoidable choices which teachers must make between the conflicting demands and different roles which they are expected to adopt in professional practice. These are subjective decisions which teachers make about how best to 'do' teaching – what practices to adopt, what relationships to build with students, and what teaching aims to prioritise. Such decisions are shaped by the knowledges, values and priorities of teachers as they respond to the unique dynamics of a specific teaching situation, set of students and institutional context. They are dilemmas because teachers need to weigh up the relative advantages of multiple, equally viable, courses of action where there is no one right way of acting. As such, dilemmas are never fully resolvable and teachers may experience 'moral stress' as they try to balance the imagined consequences of each course of action (Colnerud, 2015).

Studying dilemmas illuminates the high level of professional thinking required to make the multitude of decisions teachers face in their everyday practice. This opens up for scrutiny gaps between theory and practice, the strategies that teachers adopt in response to dilemmas, and how these strategies are shaped by teachers' knowledge, values, priorities, awareness of alternatives and ability to be reflective (Kelchtermans, 2009). Although rarely adopted in higher education research, the concept of teaching

dilemmas has recently been used to explore how lecturers balance meeting the goals of a session, managing students' responses to material, and responding to institutional constraints when teaching through critical classroom discussions (Yannuzzi & Martin, 2014), and the complexities of when and how to intellectually challenge students in order to stimulate learning (Scager et al., 2017).

We could identify only one example of research drawing on the concept of teaching dilemmas to examine research supervision (Vereijken et al., 2018) which focussed on undergraduate and master's supervision in the biomedical sciences in a Dutch university. Novice supervisors were interviewed following video-recording of one-to-one supervision meetings and asked to identify instances from the video in which they felt that they needed to guide the student. The researchers identified four dilemmas: fostering student agency; interpreting students' needs; maintaining the student-supervisor relationship; and, the supervisor's professional identity. The following interview extract illustrates dilemmas about identifying students' needs:

And that's what I am most concerned about. Are the tasks that I propose to her impossible to do? Yes, because she says she can't do it. Well... Is it too difficult for her? Or is she just cutting too many corners (p.9).

The authors went on to examine the different pedagogic practices supervisors adopted to manage these dilemmas, including: 'Giving directions' (providing feedback, hints or instructions); 'Promoting knowledge construction' (checking students' knowledge level); 'Fostering motivation' (encouraging the student and making supervision pleasant); 'Thinking along' (collaborating with the student); and 'Creating awareness' (encouraging the student to underpin steps taken in the research process). Thus, this research usefully articulates both the actions that staff undertake during supervision, as

well as the reasoning and decision-making behind these actions.

Here, teaching dilemmas did not inform the design and implementation of the study – supervisors were not asked about their experience of dilemmas as was the case in previous research (e.g. Scager et al., 2017; Vereijken et al., 2018) – rather the concept of teaching dilemmas was adopted *post facto* as a theoretical lens through which to analyse and interpret the data.

Method

Educational setting: The research took place in a post-1992 university social sciences department in which completion of a double-weighted dissertation running across two semesters of the final year is mandatory and contributes substantially to the final year grade. Students produce an 8–10,000-word report on either empirical data collection/analysis (mandatory for psychology students) or a critical literature review. Students are supported by a lecture programme addressing common issues (e.g. literature searching, ethics, project management), eight hours of supervision meetings, feedback on drafts, and extensive support via a handbook and virtual learning environment. Students are offered a free choice of dissertation topic (within the practical and ethical limitations that they face), and supervisors are allocated (rather than chosen) on the basis of this and their proposed methodology.

Sample: Eleven supervisors participated, aged largely between 35–45 (64 per cent) and female (73 per cent). All identified as White and had been supervising undergraduate dissertations for between 2–20+ years.

Method: Participants completed an in-depth online qualitative questionnaire exploring perceptions and examples of good supervisory practice, challenges and difficulties, and experiences of supervising students with disabilities.

Analysis: Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns and commonalities across partici-

pants' accounts. Using teaching dilemmas as a theoretical lens meant paying attention to contradictions and tensions (in practices, values, representations of supervision or of students, etc.) both within individual accounts and across the data set, as well as the strategies and practices which supervisors adopt in order to negotiate dilemmas.

Results and discussion

Three key teaching dilemmas were identified: 'taking ownership', 'driving supervision' and 'challenging and encouraging'. Although these dilemmas are presented individually below, they are experienced by supervisors as intersecting and interdependent. Moreover, underpinning these dilemmas was an over-riding tension between an 'ideal model' of supervision, and the need to flexibly adapt supervisory practice to suit students' learning styles, needs and abilities. Focusing on dilemmas, difficulties and contradictions enabled this 'ideal' to come clearly into focus since it was reflected in the way that supervisors described their own good practice, their hopes and expectations of students, their disappointments, frustrations and failures, and the values and motivations which underpinned their practice. This ideal rested on a high level of student autonomy, independence and responsibility – both for the inception and completion of the project itself, *and* for the management and negotiation of the supervisory relationship. The 'ideal' student which emerges from this research is one who is highly engaged, autonomous, proactive, open to challenge, honest about their skills and abilities, and has insight into, and is able to communicate, what they need from their supervisor clearly. 'Ideal supervision' is regularly scheduled by the student, driven by the student's agenda, is a critical dialogue, shaped by the student's needs, and requires knowledge and skills which are within the capabilities of the supervisor. At the same time, supervisors acknowledge that the dissertation is a new and complex learning task for students, and that engaging in supervision is also novel, therefore a variety of supervisory

practices were needed to scaffold the student towards this ideal. Moreover, supervisors also recognised that it was important to flexibly adapt and shape supervision to fit the individual needs and requirements of students and their unique projects. These tensions between competing values underpin each of the dilemmas outlined below.

Taking ownership: Scaffolding autonomy

Ideally, supervisors expect students to ‘take ownership’ over their project by pursuing their own intellectual curiosity, devising an original research question, engaging with the topic and driving the academic direction of the project. Since students have a relatively free choice of dissertation topic at this institution (i.e. topic choice is not directed by staff research interests or limited to specific staff-determined projects), autonomy is evidenced by a passionate engagement with a research question which enthuses and interests the student. Part of the supervisor’s role, then, is to ‘encourage the student to be engaged with, and challenged by, and excited about their topic’ (Fiona). As Karen notes, supervision is ‘enjoyable when they choose an area they are genuinely interested in and have a passion for. The key to enjoying it is seeing them proud of their work’. Topic choice is highly valued within the departmental culture and supervisors emphasised the importance of working *with* students’ interests, helping them to clarify, build on and formulate these initial ideas into coherent research questions and designs. Participants described initial supervision sessions as crucial for ‘getting a real sense from students what they are hoping to do, what their interests are in the dissertation, and getting them to think about how they might achieve this in their thesis’ (Tina). Describing the first supervision meeting as a kind of ‘explorative conversation’, Cleo explains how she tries to ‘tap into the student’s interest in their topic and where it comes from’ in order to ‘tease it into a research plan or what it is that they will actually do’. Working *with* students’

interests also requires supervisors to demonstrate their own interest and engagement with the project by suggesting ‘reading and research avenues’ (Elsa) or ‘theoretical and empirical work they could consult’ (Fiona). ‘Without this enthusiasm and a sense that you genuinely care about what they think’ says Cleo, ‘it is difficult to form a meaningful supervisory relationship’.

One dilemma for supervisors is balancing this enthusiasm against the need to help students to produce a researchable question, and a suitable research design, which will be realistically completed within the limited time frame and meet the assessment criteria. As Lisa observes, the project is ‘a black box for students: they don’t know what they need to know until it’s over’. This makes visible the disparity between the expertise and experience of the supervisor, and that of the student. Supervisors need to draw on their expertise without disempowering the student:

Supervision is a juggling act; we must keep the student engaged and excited about their project, whilst also ensuring that they don’t over-reach and attempt something unachievable in the given time frame. (Cara)

The difficulty of this ‘juggling act’ is reflected in participants’ descriptions of mistakes, problems or areas for improvement in supervision. Reflecting on experiences of supervision, Cara notes that she previously ‘tried too hard’ by suggesting research questions or ‘ideas that they could have arrived at themselves given time’, while Kate observes that she needs to ‘encourage more independent thinking and research in the first few weeks’ to avoid student research questions which remain ‘far too broad for a long time’. Getting this wrong, might mean that:

[Students] say their ideas have been discounted by their supervisor as unachievable, but they have not been given advice about how to move

forward [...] they have lost confidence in their own ability. (Cara)

In addition to fostering students' intellectual curiosity and engagement with their topic by working *with* students' ideas and interests, supervisors also emphasised different ways of facilitating 'a sense of student responsibility for all aspects of the project from the start' so that students 'have ownership over the whole process' (Tom). Participants outlined the ways in which students should draw on their expertise by using supervisors 'as a sounding board' and academic advice and guidance, rather than as a way of obtaining all the information they need (Karen), and should not expect their supervisor 'to "fix" problems' (Tom), or to 'provide them with definitive answers (but instead respond to questions and suggestions to pursue their own ideas)' (Fiona). Strategies for achieving this included sharing explicitly with students the understanding that supervision is a place for dialogue, debate, guidance and facilitation, rather than something more didactic – e.g. 'Setting up a clear expectation that supervision is predominantly a place to share and test student's ideas, in dialogue' (Tom). Supervision should 'empower the student to make their own decisions' and to 'trust their own judgement', although this is 'individualised and differs depending on learning style, ability, and on the level of confidence a student has when they begin the dissertation' (Cara).

Against the backdrop of disparities in experience, expertise and power between students and supervisors, supervisors experience tensions in how to foster students' ownership of the intellectual direction of the project whilst helping students to narrow the scope of their project to be realistically achievable within the time and resources available (a recognised difficulty for novice researchers). They experience dilemmas in how to share their knowledge and expertise without disempowering students. At the same time, they attempt to foster within students a way of understanding supervision,

and a particular approach to seeing guidance. Alongside this, as Cara's last comment reveals, this delicate 'juggling act' must be tailored to the individual needs and abilities of the student.

Driving supervision: Modelling professional relationships

For supervisors, good supervision is reliant on highly engaged students who drive supervision by proactively arranging supervision ('coming to see me regularly [...] even if just for quick 10 minute catch ups', Liam), by determining the content of meetings ('providing meeting agendas and meeting notes', Lisa) and by checking in regularly with updates on progress ('regular contact with supervisor', Tom). Managing (or taking ownership of) the supervisory relationship was a form of 'professional training' (Lisa) for life beyond university, and evidence of independent and autonomous learners. Nonetheless, supervisors vacillate between supporting students to drive supervision, and driving it themselves as they attempt to manage a number of competing priorities and demands, including: a desire to help students complete the dissertation in a timely way, helping students to develop professional skills, being responsive and flexible in their approach, responding to students' behaviour, and trying to establish what support students need.

This tension is evident in supervisors' deliberations about the timing and frequency of meetings. Supervisors agree that good practice means being student-led, rather than directing the pace and content of supervisory meetings themselves. As Cara says, 'I have also realised that most students know better than I when they need my help'. Yet, this wish to be student-led sat alongside an understanding that regular supervision was important. Supervisors were concerned about 'students not coming to see me until the last minute' (Liam), or 'starting later than they should' and 'missing planned meetings' (Karen). As Barry explains, although he tries to:

... persuade them to see me regularly to discuss progress. Far from all students follow this advice, and my impression is that it is a diminishing number.

Against this backdrop, supervisors experience uncertainty about how to share responsibility for meetings. Given the limited time frame for project completion, the early start and limited supervision hours, first supervision meetings held particular significance:

With regards initiating contact, I try and allow the student to do this to give them a sense of ownership over their dissertation, and also so as not to waste a meeting. (Cara)

I chase students by email where needed for a first meeting because it is so important. We set a (flexible) schedule of meetings which is important for grounding the number of supervision hours in their minds. After the first meeting I expect them to contact me. I rarely chase because at this point, they need to own the process. (Cleo)

In these examples, different tensions are at play. Cara ‘tries’ to allow students to initiate meetings, believing this to engender ‘ownership’ of the project, but implies that this is not always successful. Tutor-initiated meetings are characterised as a ‘waste’ if the student is not ready. Alternatively, Cleo ‘chases’ students to arrange the first meeting, but is also concerned about ownership and supervision time. Supervisors’ desire for regular student-initiated contact, is balanced against the recognition that students inevitably differ in their supervisory needs: ‘Some want a more rigid programme, whereas others are more flexible’ (Tina). Ideally, this is explicitly negotiated with students identifying and communicating their preferences: ‘we draw up a plan of what the student thinks will work for them in terms of contact’ (Tina). Yet, despite their expressed desire for student-led supervision, staff often work hard to maintain the supervisory relationship by ‘book[ing] the next appointment in

at the end of the session (Elsa), ‘suggest[ing] key points for them to [make contact]’ (Lisa), or ‘Emailing them to remind them of deadlines, suggest meeting times’ (Fiona).

Similarly, supervisors agreed that meetings should be ‘led by student’s questions and concerns’ (Tom), but guided students by: ‘Asking them to come with question’ (Fiona), or to ‘send me a synopsis of progress and what they want to discuss prior to the meeting’ (Karen), or to prepare ‘a series of questions relating to their research plan and/or what they have read’ (Tom). While supervisors describe setting clear expectations and scaffolding behaviour, students respond to these expectations in different ways. Whether students do (or do not) lead discussions, prepare for meetings, or set agendas, in turn, influences supervisors’ judgements about their skills, abilities and commitment. ‘The good ones’, says Liam, ‘send you clear bits of work in advance or have specific question/agenda for a face to face meeting’. Or, as Barry explains:

[I] ask them at the beginning of meetings what they want to discuss, and if they are an engaged student, I try to let them run the meetings [...] With less engaged students I often feel I need to be taking a more pushing role to get/put them back on track.

Assessments of students as ‘engaged’ or ‘good’, inferred from their behaviour, influence ongoing supervisory practice. Supervision is adjusted to suit the student – or the supervisor’s *perception* of student needs.

In sum, the ideal model rests on students being highly self-directed, able to explicitly communicate needs, know when to seek help, proactively update on their progress and plan the timing and content of supervisory dialogues. In practice, supervisors work hard to engender appropriate behaviour, empower students, and maintain supervisory contact. This ‘ideal model’ is negotiated in relation to competing demands and priorities and through complex relational dynamics between staff and students in ways

which shift the supervisory relationship closer or further away from this ideal.

Challenge and encouragement

Supervisors acknowledge that the dissertation is an inherently complex and challenging task, and that students differ in the skills, experiences and abilities that they brought to this task. Supervisors tried to strike a balance between challenging students to develop and improve their work and encouraging students through the 'pitfalls and pressure points' (Lisa). In the first two themes, supervisors are challenging students to take ownership over the intellectual direction of the project and over the supervisory relationship. In addition, supervisors challenged students' intellectual development by providing 'critical and constructive feedback on draft work' (Tom) and helping students to 'review their work critically' (Fiona). This desire to challenge students was weighed against an understanding that completing is difficult and challenging, and a desire to engage and encourage students. Supervisors described ways of giving feedback on written work, often trying to anticipate how students might respond to the constructive criticism offered:

I try to be as constructive as possible with any feedback so as not to dishearten the student. A dissertation can be a difficult piece of work for some, so I try to make supervision meetings fairly informal and non-confrontational. This is both to ensure the student feels comfortable coming to me with any problems, and – hopefully – to keep a steady momentum throughout the process. (Cara)

Cara's desire to challenge students intellectually by critiquing their work is balanced against her concern about potentially discouraging them. Acknowledging individual differences, she adapts her supervisory style (being informal and non-confrontational) to maintain the relationship. Cara also encourages students to receive feedback in person because 'I worry they will only see the nega-

tives and become frustrated and/or disheartened' if they only read written feedback.

Reassuring students and soothing worries was a key part of supervision. According to Lisa, a key part of supervision is:

Acknowledging that much of the dissertation process is about venturing into the unknown. Reassuring them that they can do it. Reassuring them that failure and mistakes are part of the process and showing that they are stretching their skills.

Cara agrees that 'Many students often exhibit anxiety and self-doubt when doing a dissertation' and consequently feels that 'providing support, encouragement and reassurance along with practical advice about the process are key aspects of my role'. Knowing how much to challenge or when to encourage is a complex judgement in which supervisors must try to gauge students' level of anxiety or anticipate how these might respond to feedback in order to alter their supervisory practice. Talking about challenging students to drive the content of supervision, for example, Liam says:

I ask them to come with questions unless I think that will freak them out, in which case I make it all very relaxed and cheery and draw questions out of them informally.

Acknowledging that staff expectations, supervision or the dissertation itself can 'freak' students out, leading them to withdraw from supervision, was an underlying concern. While supervisors might prefer to 'wait for students to contact me', they have to decide how long to wait weighing up their desire to be led by students, concern about the progress of the project and concern about the wellbeing of the student – 'if this does not occur, I will see how they are' (Karen). Supervisors who are faced with the student who 'just vanishes and stops responding to emails' (Kate) often find this particularly difficult since they have no way of knowing why the student is not in contact,

or whether this is cause for concern. Most supervisors work hard to re-establish contact: 'If I have not heard from students and there are key milestones to be met, I will email them' (Kate). As one supervisor notes 'I do everything I can to avoid the student going AWOL' (Cara). Ideally, students would 'Tell me when they are anxious, nervous etc.' (Lisa), but supervisors recognise that some students 'become very worried when they feel they are falling behind and are reluctant to ask for help' (Fiona). Ultimately, as Fiona observes, 'it is difficult to see a way to work when a student isn't engaging with the supervision process'.

Discussion and conclusion

Three key teaching dilemmas in undergraduate supervisory practice were identified: 'taking ownership', 'driving supervision' and 'challenging and encouraging'. Taking ownership captured supervisors' desire to ensure that the project reflected students' intellectual interests and their strategy of working *with* students' ideas – something which is highly valued by both supervisors (Roberts and Seaward, 2018b) and students themselves (Todd et al., 2004; Roberts & Seaward, 2018a). At the same time, supervisors must help students to shape their projects to meet the requirements of the assessment, using their expertise, knowledge and experience of research process to do so, without imposing their own interests, ideas or designs on students. Previous research has demonstrated that students value this aspect of supervision highly, and often struggle to turn their idea into a researchable project and manage their time (Todd et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2006). Driving supervision captured supervisors' desire to empower students to direct and manage the supervisor relationship, including the frequency and content of supervision meetings (see also Todd et al., 2006; Roberts & Seaward, 2018a). This has to be weighed against students' differing needs and abilities and supervisors' concerns about student progress and wellbeing. This is also reflected

in the third dilemma in which challenging and pushing students to reach their potential is measured against the need to support and encourage – especially in the context where the complexity of the dissertation as a learning task is acknowledged. This kind of critical interrogation of the work is valued by supervisors and students alike (Stefani et al., 1997; Todd et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2006), and although the emotional support is highly valued by students (Roberts & Seaward, 2018a) although supervisors can feel that this aspect of supervision is under-valued (Roberts & Seaward, 2018b). Although this study utilised a small sample, from a single institution, the echoes of these dilemmas evident in the extant literature provide reassurance that they are not idiosyncratic. However, typically these are characterised as the 'role and responsibilities' of supervisors, or as features of good practice. Using the theoretical lens of teaching dilemmas draws attention to the complexity of supervision as a pedagogic practice and highlights the ways in which these dilemmas are under-pinned by a tension between an 'ideal' way of working (based on supervisors' experience, values, and motivations), and the need to respond flexibly to students' (expressed and implicit) needs and preferred ways of working. A focus on teaching dilemmas also illuminated the inherent power differential between staff and students, and attempts by staff to mitigate their own power in order to democratise supervision as a 'collaborative partnership' (cf. Derounian, 2011), or to ensure that supervision is student-led. The importance of this study lies in exposing the inherent complexity of supervision as a pedagogic practice, exposing the competing motivations, values and priorities supervisors juggle, and articulating the strategies supervisors adopt when responding to these dilemmas.

Usefully extending theorising from teaching dilemmas towards Honig's (1996) concept of 'dilemmatic spaces', Fransson and Grannäs (2013) argue that this concept has the potential to deepen our under-

standing of the complexities of teachers' everyday practices. Rather than conceptualising dilemmas as particular events or things which happen or come into being, Fransson and Grannäs suggest that dilemmatic spaces should be considered as ever present and people as always 'reacting' within these spaces. Dilemmatic spaces are 'social constructions resulting from structural conditions and relational aspects in everyday practice' such that 'dilemmas emerge in a space between individuals and the context in which they find themselves' (p.7). Although this study often explored dilemmas in the abstract, supervisors' responses reflected the ways in which dilemmas arose in response to the individual needs, skills, and knowledge of students and/or the ways that students did (or didn't) engage with supervisors' suggestions about how to work together. Acknowledging that spaces are inherently relational brings into focus the ways in which supervisors actively position themselves in relation to others (as collaborators, guides, facilitators, etc.), and are also themselves positioned by the actions of students (as pushing, directing, criticising, etc.) and by objects, policies, organisational culture and so on. Therefore, dilemmatic spaces inevitably involve positioning and power and, as Fransson and Grannäs note, these relational dynamics have consequences for how individuals intersubjectively construct individual (supportive, approachable, etc.) and professional identities as effective supervisors. Before discussing the practical implications of adopting a dilemmatic lens for understanding supervision, I briefly review the limitations of this study and make suggestions for future research.

Limitations and further research

Three limitations suggest caution in utilizing the findings from this research. Firstly, the research drew on a small sample of supervisors recruited from one institution. It would be useful to expand the study to a wider group of supervisors from a range of different HE institutions. Given that

dilemmatic spaces are constituted by the policies, practices and regulations as other structural elements of institutions as well as by relational dynamics, we might expect dilemmas to be experienced, enacted and negotiated differently in institutions with differing research cultures (e.g. research intensive vs teaching intensive universities), with different practices for supervisor allocation or project development, or with different models of supervision (e.g. individual vs group supervision). Secondly, the data were collected via qualitative questionnaires which were not specifically designed to explore dilemmatic aspects of supervision. Innovative methodological approaches have been adopted in other research which could usefully be exploited in future research exploring supervisory practice. For example, Scager et al. (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with teachers who were asked to reflect on a specific dilemma in detail (realising challenge), whilst Vereijken et al. (2018) used video-recorded supervision sessions as a prompt for immediate reflections on dilemmas and the practices used to manage these dilemmas. Thirdly, this study only considered supervision dilemmas from the perspective of supervisors. If supervision is a dilemmatic space shaped by relational dynamics, as both Fransson and Grannäs and our data suggest, then future research which illuminates the dilemmas that students experience, the values that they bring to bear to resolving these dilemmas, and the impact of institutional structures and cultures on these dilemmas would do much to expand our understanding of the student experience.

Implications

Despite the complexity of the task, undergraduate research supervision is poorly served in terms of training, professional development and resources (although see staff-student contracts, Derounian, 2011; guidelines for the supervision of qualitative dissertations in psychology; Gough et al., 2005; and books, Wisker, 2012). Dilemmatic thinking promotes an alter-

native way of thinking about the support which moves away from rigid ‘guidelines’ or ‘how to’ approaches which prescribe a particular course of action towards exposing the complexity of supervisory practice. Reflecting on dilemmas offers powerful opportunities for learning and can facilitate the training and development of supervisors of undergraduate research in higher education. Dilemmas require supervisors to use their judgement – these judgements are often implicit and made intuitively without explicit reflection on the values, constraints and habits which underpin them. Having opportunities to identify and reflect on dilemmas may provide a useful mechanism for helping novice supervisors to develop their professional judgement, and interrupt established patterns and habits for more experienced supervisors. Framing supervision as dilemmatic recognises explicitly the very complex nature of supervision and the subjective weighing up of values, knowledge and practices inherent in supervision. This may help to unsettle the cultural expectation that everyone ‘just knows’ how to do supervision and enable teachers to critically reflect on their own educational beliefs and practices (Pareja Roblin & Margalef, 2013). Since dilemmas have no ‘right answer’ or resolution, collective and collaborative reflection would provide teachers with the opportunity to examine and explore different (equally valid) alternatives (Scager et al., 2017), and help to promote a collaborative environment in which colleagues feel able to consult others about decisions and practices – including greater recognition that not all supervisors

can be expert on everything. The concept of dilemmatic spaces dissolves the idea dilemmas are located within, or are owned, by an individual. Supervisors can experience dilemmas as threatening to their sense of professional identity and competency when they feel at a loss regarding the correct or right solution to a difficulty. Conceptualising dilemmas as relational – as arising out of the intersections between student, supervisor and the context in which the supervision takes place – may enable a shift away from self-blame and towards opening up spaces for professional development and consideration of alternatives to managing dilemmas which do not rest on individual actions (Fransson and Grannäs, 2013). Further research which evaluates the effectiveness of training and development for supervisors which incorporates an understanding of supervision as a dilemmatic space is needed.

In sum, reconceptualising undergraduate supervision as dilemmatic spaces in which structural conditions, relational dynamics and professional knowledge, identities and values all shape supervisory practices may better capture supervisor’s experience and suggest new directions for research, training and professional development.

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