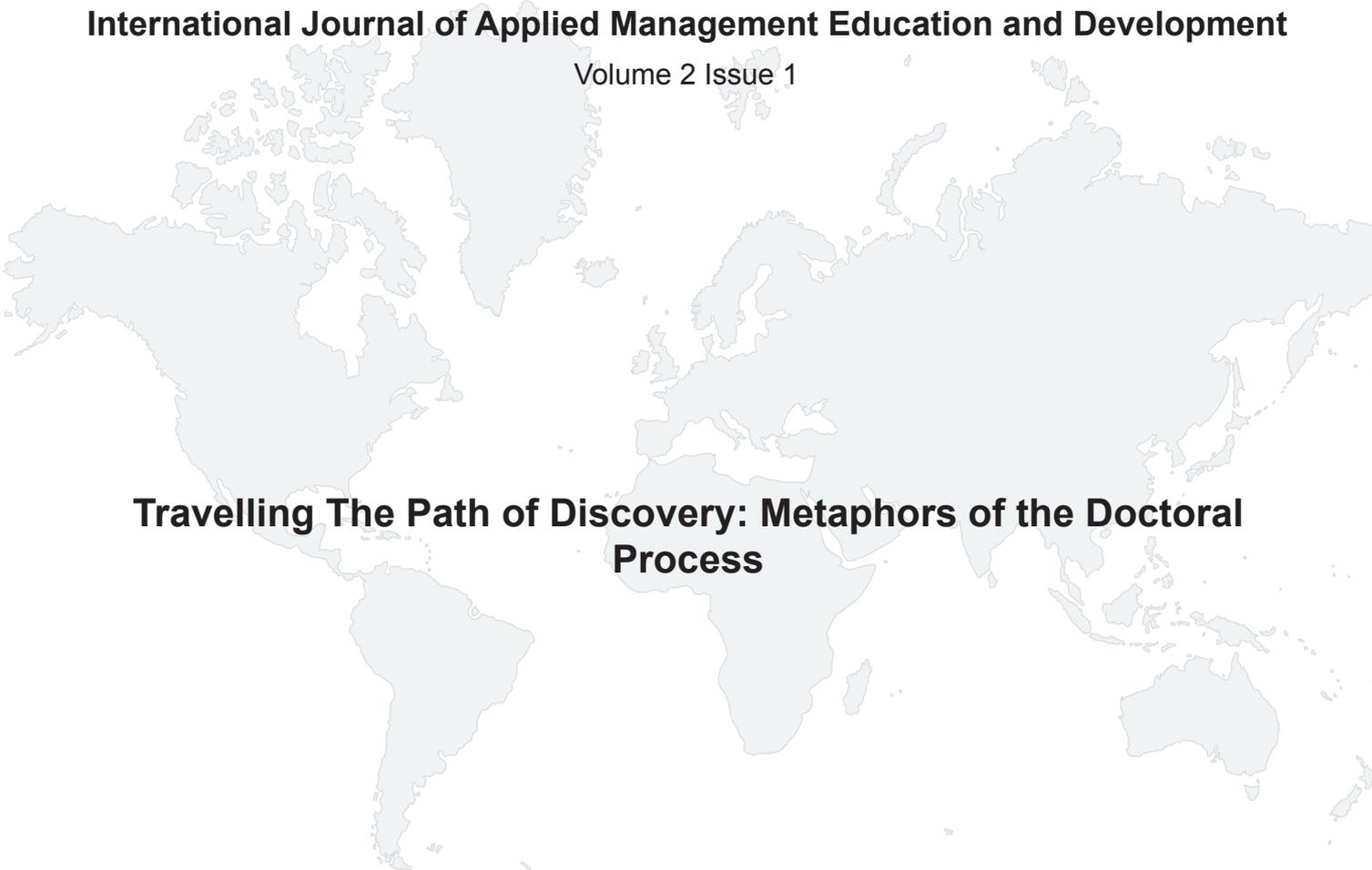


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Travelling The Path of Discovery: Metaphors of the Doctoral Process

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Abstract

This paper examines the discourse of Doctoral supervisors and Doctoral candidates that was derived by a series of in-depth interviews with these stakeholders. It explores the metaphors used by supervisors and candidates to describe their roles within the research award process. The analysis of this discourse can be used as a heuristic device to encourage reflection and learning.

Introduction

This paper attempts to unpack some of the discourse of research supervision and candidature from interviews conducted to gain perceptions of the research award (Doctorate) process. Supervisors and candidates were drawn from a range of disciplines and requested to describe their perceptions of the process, which were then viewed as a form of discourse which could then be analysed as metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that all language is metaphorical and that it reflects the inner conceptualisation of reality, which the speaker holds. They maintain that the human conceptual system is structured metaphorically and that thought processes are largely metaphorical. One way of understanding metaphor is to explore the ontological correspondence between the target domain, the descriptions of supervision process by supervisors and candidates, and the source domain from which the metaphor is drawn. Lakoff (1993) illustrates how examination of such cross-domain mappings is central to current metaphor theory. The nature of metaphor, therefore, is not linguistic, but conceptual. Metaphors apparent in language are the surface manifestation of underlying conceptual schemata of which we may not be conscious. They offer a window on to understanding and provide tools, which can be used in a reflective process. Mumby and Russell (1989:121) have shown how a single metaphor can dominate a respondents language and how the conscious realisation of this can lead to a useful reframing of 'professional puzzles': "Careful attention to how one describes the world appears to give us clues as to how one constructs it. Such construction can come under scrutiny only when we speak or write, and then attend to the language we have used".

Metaphor has also been employed by Schön (1993) in his analysis of professional problem setting and solving. He argues that in professional environments, problems do not present themselves "ready-made" but are constructed, often in the form of metaphors, in an attempt to make sense of a situation. These metaphors frame the particular problem and may, therefore, limit the potential solutions.

Context

The Australian Government has now moved to a system of rewarding universities based on the number of Doctoral completions. These monetary incentives are based on the university receiving funding for a maximum period of candidature, 3 years for full time Doctoral research and 6 years for part time mode. Additional funding is generally not available after the maximum period of candidature has elapsed and so there is increased pressure on universities and in turn academics to provide "good" supervision that maximises the number of Doctoral completions. Matters of organisational prestige and funding levels depend upon Doctoral completions.

Methodology

The data for this study was collected using in-depth open-ended interviews conducted with a range of supervisors of varying experience and Doctoral candidates at varying stages in their candidature. The data was collected as part of a larger study that was conducted for a PhD study about "The Management of Research in Universities in Australia Post-Dawkins". One hundred and forty six respondents were interviewed. The interviewees were drawn from the disciplines of Business, Education, History, Chemistry, Biology, Computing Science, Accounting, and Agriculture within an Australian university. Permission was sought to tape and transcribe each of the interviews. The data cannot be generalised but have validity as a basis for identifying themes for further exploration and in developing a conceptual framework for analysing supervisory and candidate discourse. This study is specifically concerned with how supervisors construe their practice and how students experience supervision.

Supervisors' Stories

The aim was to examine closely what supervisors say about how they supervise and their implicit perceptions of what supervising involves. Using transcripts of the interviews metaphors were highlighted which related to the supervisor-student relationship, to the research award process, and to the roles that both assume within this.

The analysis was carried out by constructing tables from the speech data which identify the source domain, target domain and the source metaphor (Table 1). An extract from the analysis is included below to give an indication of the procedure adopted.

It was concluded that these varied metaphorical expressions could be identified as cross-domain mappings from five principal underlying source metaphors. These metaphors are:

- The supervisor is a manager
- The supervisor is a support
- The supervisor is a master craftsman
- The Doctorate is a challenging task
- The Doctorate is a journey.

Table 1: Example of analysis of source metaphors from transcribed data analysis of metaphors in supervisor and candidate discourse

Metaphorical Expression	Source Domain	Target Domain	Comments	Source Metaphor
Apprenticeship	Master/ apprentice	Student/supervisor roles and relationship	Supervisor as a guide. Leading and teaching the student, student enters a period of learning before gaining necessary knowledge and becoming proficient in the trade	SUPERVISOR IS A MASTER CRAFTSMAN
Voyage of discovery	Adventure, explore the unknown	Doctoral process	Supervisor helps student prepare, get equipment together, map out the trip, provide advice on possible dangers	THE Doctorate IS A JOURNEY
Provide a safety net	Originally - acrobatic safety device used to protect and reduce possibility of injury in event of a fall	Student/supervisor roles and relationship	Supervisor ensures no harm comes to the candidate, catch them when they fall, provide support or a confidence boost when the candidate loses confidence, feels anxious or depressed	THE SUPERVISOR IS A SUPPORT
Fitting jigsaw puzzle pieces together	A number of interlocking pieces which when reassembled correctly form a complete picture	Doctoral process	Successful progress and completion	A DOCTORATE IS A CHALLENGING TASK
Crack the whip	To get animals to start doing something quickly or do something with increased speed	Doctoral process Student/supervisor roles and relationship	Successful progress meet aims, goals and achieve speedy completion Encourage candidate to meet deadlines, manage time, and generally bring to order	A DOCTORATE IS A CHALLENGING TASK SUPERVISOR IS A MANAGER

The Supervisor is a Manager

The images that supervisors used to describe their role in the student's Doctoral process included being a critical and controlling taskmaster. Students needed to be managed, that is, they needed assistance with planning and setting critical delivery points. Students relied heavily on supervisors to identify the milestone that they must pass in their journey. A rough map of the terrain needed to be drawn so the student had some clue of where they were going. Students needed help with organising their journey so they had the necessary equipment to cope. Organising included workshops on interview skills, research survey design, SPSS, NUDIST and other computer package training, and qualitative methodologies including discourse analysis and grounded theory. Control was emphasised as most important. A business (management) lecturer talked of on the one hand "feeling for students but having to be cruel to be kind". It was necessary to get students to face the fact that "it is bloody hard work getting a Doctorate" It was emphasised that students could not "coast along". Supervisors were there to supervise and "manage the show" but not complete the Doctorate for the student. A Doctorate has to be a student's work. A supervisor in biology described how he regularly gave students "a kick in the pants" so they don't get any ideas of slacking off and that such action took care of the lazy student.

Doctoral supervisors mentioned their need to make students meet deadlines, manage their time and meet their obligations. Supervisors talked about students needing to keep to the three year time frame for which they are funded. Supervisors mentioned that they also had pressure on them to see the student successfully complete and hence "they had to crack the whip" and at times appear "hard-nosed and unfeeling".

Supervisors also talked of providing management strategies to students. Suggestions included "breaking the task into smaller manageable bits". Supervisors remarked that many students were overwhelmed at the enormity of the task (thesis), and "taking smaller bites" meant that students could see results for their efforts in a reasonable time frame, thereby motivating them to "take another bite" and keep on going.

The Supervisor is a Support

The supervisor is a support is a broad metaphor that covers a range of supervisory roles in the research process. Within this metaphor there are two metaphorical expressions that are different in terms of the level of interaction and the nature of the relationship between supervisor and student. These are: "the supervisor is a master craftsman" and "the supervisor is a support". Eleven supervisors referred to their role as the master craftsman, wherein the relationship of supervisor and student can be viewed as one of master and apprentice. The supervisor holds the necessary knowledge, whilst imparting information and knowledge to the student, guidance is also provided to the student. The master draws upon their experience to guide and lead the student through a period of learning, before the student gains the necessary knowledge to be proficient in their trade.

Supervisors mentioned their role as a support. They referred to their loosening of the reins giving over more control of the Doctorate to the student by encouraging them to explore and test out new ideas. The supervisor becomes a co-worker providing advice and support as the student takes some risks for themselves and makes decisions about what will essentially be their research work and thesis.

The supervisor's advice and support is a safety net to ensure that no 'harm' comes to the student. The risks are quite measured to the student's ability and if it appears that the student is "lost", "has run down a blind alley" or "off the track" the supervisor will provide more direction and stronger guidance until the student "finds the track and is back on it".

Doctorate as a Challenging Task

The challenges to moving forward and progressing the Doctorate are conceptualised in terms of motion forward and force in terms of spurred or self-propelled movement. Lakoff (1993) examined a range of metaphorical expressions and illustrated how abstract notions like processes; actions and purposes are regularly conceptualised metaphorically in terms of space, motion and force. Many of the interviewees in this study conceptualise both the research process and the supervisory process as a challenging, progressive task consisting of:

- long-term purposeful activities (identifying the jigsaw puzzle pieces);
- purposes are over coming challenges, completing the task, and feelings of achievement and self-fulfillment);
- means are paths or tracks and different ways of fitting the pieces together;
- difficulties are impediments to moving forward;
- expected progress is a game plan or strategy;
- action can be spurred or self-propelled movements.

Interviewees responses also highlighted examples of challenges or difficulties which occurred metaphorically as impediments to motion such as: unexpected potholes, distractions, lack of energy, waning enthusiasm, disappointments and trying times. Supervisors emphasised that there was not a well-laid out plan that worked every time to provide a solution, it was a case of working with what you had, in terms of the student, the topic and the resources available. Supervisors needed to be flexible in their approach to the Doctorate and the student whilst using their greater knowledge of the task ahead to provide sound advice and guidance. Supervisors indicated that it was "not a case of travelling uncharted routes", that there were "only so many ways that you could layout the jigsaw puzzle pieces before fitting them together to complete the task". A supervisor's job was to "help the student to understand what will be the milestones and significant events".

The Doctorate is a Journey

Many supervisors, twenty seven in all, referred to a Doctorate as "a voyage of discovery", a journey that involves "adventure" and the opportunity to "explore the unknown". Supervisors expressed that some students found the voyage quite frightening. Students were often feeling insecure needing support and reassurance from the supervisor. On the other hand, supervisors mentioned that "some students really shone when allowed to have their head". The supervisor's role with confident students was one of "helping the student prepare, get equipment together, map out the trip, and provide advice on possible dangers and then you set them off on their voyage". Very few supervisors felt comfortable in this second approach of setting them [their Doctoral students] off on their voyage. All supervisors felt a level of responsibility towards their Doctoral students; however, the level of personal

responsibility felt differed significantly from minimal levels to quite intense levels akin to "a mother hen with her chicks under her wing".

The different levels of responsibility felt by supervisors towards their Doctoral students can be seen a matter of personal style. However all supervisors mentioned their own Doctoral or research experience and how they supervised. Metaphors drawn from supervisor's personal experiences with their Doctoral or research experience provide an insight into how supervisors arrive at their personal supervision style. Supervisors, who were anxious and unsure during their Doctorate and received reassurance and encouragement, recognise that students will have different levels of capability and confidence in their ability to complete a Doctorate. These supervisors have adopted a more nurturing style to assist students overcome their fears and anxiety.

Supervisors who had appreciated a non-directive style from their supervisor believed that as it worked well with them "it can work well with anyone".

Conclusion

The metaphors used by research supervisors in this study provide a reflection of professional practice. The themes that emerged from the interviews provide a range of views regarding the Doctoral supervisor's role. The themes range from a master craftsman who passes on knowledge through leading and teaching the student; to the supervisor as support who nurtured the student infusing energy and confidence into the student; and the supervisor is a manager who manages and drives the student to reach the goals, meet deadlines and achieve speedy completion of the Doctorate. Supervisors who reflect on their practice can be more aware of what they are doing as opposed to what one previously assumed one was doing. The advantage of using metaphors as a tool in reflective practice is well stated by Schön (1993) who maintains that professional problems are constructed in metaphors which frame the particular problem and thus limit the potential solutions, becoming aware of the underlying conceptualisation of their practice may, therefore, allow supervisors to restructure the frame and discover new perspectives on, and an increased understanding of, how they operate. As suggested by Clegg (1998) such reflection could lead to new angles of reflecting and discussion on practice, new solutions to difficulties and, hopefully, to improved supervision. Given the increased pressure for supervisors to ensure greater numbers of Doctoral completions and an equal pressure on universities to increase the national knowledge base through successful and completed Doctoral training of students there are compelling reasons to require supervisors to regularly reflect on their practice and seek assistance from professional development and teaching enhancement units within the university. Whilst this study was undertaken in an Australian metropolitan university, its findings have wide applicability to universities internationally and therefore it is recommended that this study be replicated in other international settings.

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