

## Doctoral learning: a case for a cohort model of supervision and support

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*We document the efforts of the faculty of education of a large research-oriented university in supporting doctoral learning. The development of a space for doctoral learning is in line with the need to develop a community of researchers in South Africa. We describe the historical origins of this cohort model of doctoral supervision and support, draw on literature around doctoral learning, and analyse a cohort of doctoral students' evaluation of the seminars over three years. The findings indicate that the model has great value in developing scholarship and reflective practice in candidates, in providing support and supervision, and in sustaining students towards the completion of their doctorates.*

**Keywords:** cohort; community of practice; doctoral learning; scholarship; supervision

### Introduction and rationale

*“The model of seminars is a superb one — the structure, deadlines and support is excellent — Hope it has been written up!”* (Anonymous doctoral candidate)

The debate concerning doctoral supervision and support persists in all higher education institutions especially regarding the best way of mediating doctoral learning. In this article, doctoral supervision and support towards doctoral learning are framed within an understanding of a doctoral cohort programme. The above quotation is from a comment on the evaluation form of a doctoral student in her third year of doctoral work. She was commenting on our cohort model of supervision and support, and it underscores the need to ‘write up’ and reflect on the model<sup>1</sup> that we have been implementing and refining over many years at this particular university. Bitzer (2007:1012) concurs that it is important that academics engage in their own research and that they write up their supervisory experiences:

*Supervising as a scholarly practice might be effectively promoted where academics themselves are closely involved in research, but also when they reflect, write and publish on their supervisory experiences, seek student feedback and allow peers to critique their work.*

We, as a team, have evaluated each session of the programme as a means of maximizing the benefits, as they pertain to the doctoral students and the supervising staff. Furthermore, writing about this collaborative supervisory experience affords us the opportunity to once again put the model under the spotlight and reflect on, and interrogate our work with the doctoral students.

The particular model of supervision and support which we describe here has a history<sup>2</sup> and has been adapted according to the changing needs of the students and staff. It has greatly contributed to the Education Faculty’s ability to consistently produce successful doctoral graduates. Producing doctoral graduates is a national priority and the National Research

Foundation (NRF) has called for strengthening of the processes that universities have in place to increase the number of graduates. South Africa is in need of a new generation of researchers to drive research in the country and also to replace the aging members of the academy. Some countries in Europe have managed to double their doctoral outputs within a decade (Enders, 2004). Hence, South Africa is also working towards increasing its doctoral output, which would hold considerable benefit for the country. This was reiterated in the key recommendations of the recent Higher Education Summit, confirming the need for the “development of a coordinated plan to increase the number of younger researchers” (Kinnear, 2010:3). Thus, capacity development for the supervision and support of doctoral students to complete their research is critical.

We, as part of a larger team of academics, have facilitated the supervision and support of a three-year cohort programme operating in the Faculty of Education’s doctoral programme. As one of many other models of support for learning and the development of scholars and scholarship, the cohort model operates over a three-year period and we felt the need to ‘*write it up*’ as a contribution to the debate of how to support students in developing scholarship and completing the doctorate. We acknowledge through this paper that sustaining the learning of doctoral students remains an undervalued dimension of assisting and assessing doctoral learning (Van Rensburg & Danaher, 2009). The research therefore aims to explore the nature of supervision and support in a doctoral cohort programme. We will therefore address the following research question: *What is the nature of supervision and support in a doctoral cohort programme?* In this article we first explain the notion of doctoral learning; second, we offer a description of the genesis of this particular model within a particular institution; third, we present the methodology; fourth, the discussion of the findings and finally we offer some conclusions.

## Doctoral learning

The literature describes the nature or purpose of doctoral learning in a variety of ways. There is also little agreement on what can be regarded as the optimal form of supervision and support. Therefore, examples of ‘best practice’ are hard to determine (Gardner, Hayes & Neider, 2006). Universities worldwide organize the supervision of doctoral research in a variety of ways. While the most common form of support remains that of appointing one or two supervisors, Rinne and Sivenius (2007) report that supervision of a doctoral candidate by one or two supervisors is not adequate anymore, or at least it is not as rich as one in which this is complemented by input from more academics.

On the national front, Bitzer (2007:1010) rightly views “postgraduate supervision as a process involving complex academic and interpersonal skills”. Furthermore, Bitzer argues that such skills include guiding students in developing proposals, making correct methodological choices, writing and publishing their research, as well as maintaining both supportive and professional relationships. Successful supervision of postgraduate students requires higher order thinking and deep approaches to teaching and learning and this often poses challenges to both students and supervisors. In this regard, Bitzer (2007) reports that in many institutions priority is given to support and training for supervisors. Johnston and Broda (1996) and Aspland, Edwards and O’Leary (1999) comment on the challenges that postgraduate students face, namely, the relationships they have with their supervisors, the need for support structures, the problems of study isolation and confusion over accessing resources. The challenges experienced by both supervisors and students as cited above, seem to confirm the need for

support structures such as provided by our own cohort model, where ideas are shared and students learn in a safe space with other students.

The drive to provide university access is in line with the “massification of undergraduate education internationally” which “in recent decades has been followed by major growth at the doctoral level with pressures for change in doctoral education” (Pearson, Evans & Macauley, 2008:357). These authors further argue that such growth has seen an increase in the heterogeneity of doctoral populations. They provide examples from the United Kingdom where more formalised approaches to research training have been introduced in an attempt to reduce attrition.

In contrast to the formal supervision and support examples described above, a variety of informal support practices also exist outside academic institutions, for example, peer support groups, where the doctoral students themselves support each other. Such a model is explored in Harrison’s recent work, *Developing a doctoral identity: A narrative study in an auto-ethnographic frame* (Harrison, 2010).

Therefore, the formal practices of different universities, in different parts of the world, reflect a variety of approaches to supervision, the key one being an apprenticeship model, where one candidate is supervised by one academic staff member, who is an expert in the particular field of study. In some instances a co-supervisor, who has added required expertise, is appointed alongside the main supervisor. Another approach is that of allocating an advisory committee or a supervisory committee, where one candidate is supervised by a committee of three to five academic staff members. A further approach, complementary to the apprenticeship approach, and the one, we describe in this paper, is that of a cohort of doctoral students, working with a group of academics, who bring expertise from a variety of fields. The support for such doctoral learning thus takes place in various ways, including support from the main supervisor, the cohort of academic staff, as well as the cohort of peer doctoral students. Due to the complexity of the task, it appears that while the traditional one-on-one supervision and its related approaches cannot and should not be replaced, they need to be complemented by other strategies, such as the cohort approach that we report on in this paper.

## **A model to supervise and support doctoral learning**

### **The origins**

The doctoral cohort model of supervision we describe here emerged in the late 1990s from a Historically Black University (HBU) located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. In the early stages of the planning and development of the doctoral cohort model of supervision and support, it was conceptualized around a very strong discipline interest. The cohort model was set up as a ‘structure’ to support intellectual development and knowledge production in doctoral education research, through a community of learning. The aim of the cohort model was also to make research, as a phenomenon, present in an Education Faculty that consisted of mainly undergraduate students, and to introduce new ways of thinking about educational research. The cohort model also intended providing a safe and critical space for learning to work together to bring about this change.

According to the Higher Education Qualification Framework (South Africa. Department of Education, 2007), a doctoral degree requires a candidate to undertake research at the most advanced academic level, culminating in the submission, assessment and acceptance of a thesis. The input in the form of seminars in the cohort model is offered as preparation or value addition to the research, but does not contribute to the credit value of the qualification. Tradi-

tional approaches to postgraduate supervision are often characterized by isolated, intense and sometimes intimate personal relationships (the apprenticeship model referred to earlier). It often sets up a dependency relationship between the supervisor and student and potentially abusive and unequal power relationships. The supervision and support doctoral programme based on a cohort model is one approach of supervision which may serve to 'dilute' the supervisory relationship and yet complement the supervision process.

### The format

The cohort model is planned and designed to run over a three-year period as a supportive structure for the supervision of doctoral students. The value-added activities that are enacted in the different phases of the programme are designed to enhance the development of the student-researcher. The scaffolding of learning and development, which the cohort model creates through its processes, is not a taught doctoral programme. The team supervision that is made available through the seminars is not so much what the supervisors literally 'transmit' pedagogically, but rather how they enable the development of a critical exchange or dialogue between the student and the discipline. This dialogue is achieved by encouraging learning between and within a community of novice researchers.

The model revolves around supporting a cohort of doctoral students in three phases. The first phase focuses on refining and finalizing the research proposal; the second phase focuses on data generation and the third phase focuses on data analysis and 'writing it up'. Students who work at a faster pace are not locked into a phase, but move to the next phase relative to the actual work which has been done. The students who do not manage to complete the thesis within the three-year time frame then move out of the programme and continue under the 'apprenticeship' of the supervisor. According to Samuel (2008), learning in/through a cohort model has a three-fold structure: *students* learn to become researchers and knowledge producers through a range of activities (peer review, oral presentations, defending work in progress, and so on) while simultaneously learning to supervise; *staff* learn about supervision (mentoring/team supervision, offering supervisory advice and critique), and there is *collaborative support* for learning through each of the phases (progress).

The programme is offered over six weekends of the year, and takes place on the university campus. The ideal number of students would be between 12 and 18 with three to four promoters. The structure is as follows:

#### *Friday afternoon, 16:00 – 18:30*

This is a plenary session, where either an invited guest lecturer addresses a certain aspect of the research process, or a recent doctoral graduate presents his or her work. There is also a reflection session on the process of research and the writing of a thesis, followed by a discussion of the plenary in the smaller groups.

#### *Saturday, 08:30 – 16:30*

In this session, various activities, such as input by academics regarding certain aspects of research, presentation of the students' work, critique and feedback by peers, sharing of literature, writing time, and so on, are carefully organized to the maximum benefit of all.

#### *Sunday, 08:30 – 13:00*

This session consists of a continuation of the activities from the Saturday, followed by a

forward planning session where the doctoral students can flag what they require to be focused on in the next doctoral weekend, as well as an evaluation session.

Although each phase meets separately, tea and lunch breaks are taken together, with the specific aim of creating a space for rubbing shoulders with the other students who are either ahead or behind them on the research journey, as well as with staff members from the other two phases.

### Theoretical underpinnings

Lee's (2008) typology of research supervision approaches is helpful in understanding student support and learning through the cohort model of supervision. Effective support produces a new identity for the postgraduate student (Nekhwevha, 2002), intellectual growth (Connell, 1985), learning opportunities that promote critical exchange or dialogue between the student and the discipline (Lusted, 1986), and new ideas of autonomy and independent scholarship (Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000). Lee's (2008) study shows that supervision relationships involve five key elements: functional elements, enculturation elements, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development. Each of the five elements necessary for student learning in/through the supervisory relationship provides a different understanding of the student-supervisor relationship, and hence of the function of support and feedback within that relationship. The strength of the functional element, according to Lee (2008), lies in its transparency and consistency whereby growth can be monitored. There is a rational progression of the students' learning and development through tasks directed by, and through, the supervisory process and managed by the supervisor. Supervision calls for "the active engagement of a supervisor" (Lategan, 2008:4) and requires the supervisor to reflect on his or her role in the relationship, not only as provider of support, but also as a co-developer of knowledge and identity production (Calma, 2007). Lee concurs with this "active engagement by the supervisor through the research process [= circle of activities] to lead/assist the student to solve [= find solutions to] a research problem" (Lategan, 2008:4). Enculturation, on the other hand, requires the doctoral student to engage in, but also to comply with, "community formation" (Lee, 2008:13). Supervision occurs through a community of research practice into which novice researchers are inducted in order to support their learning and development. The supervisor still occupies the position of expert, but his or her expertise is reconfigured to include many experts. Learning happens in a transitional way whereby the supervisor supports the movement of the student from novice to expert as part of the postgraduate pedagogy. Critical thinking enables the students to reflect on, and analyse, their work (Lee, 2008), supported by the supervisor, who challenges the students to think critically. To do this, the supervisor needs to inspire his or her doctoral students with confidence so that they find their own voice, and through the students' critical inquiry, to enable personal meaning-making and thinking. The power of emancipation lies in the development and growth of the candidate (Lee, 2008:13). Supervisors, by encouraging research values with integrity, without overpowering the students (Lategan, 2008), encourages autonomy and intellectual growth of the student. For Lee (2008), relationship development is central to the supervision process, with emotional intelligence being a key construct. Some relationships may be "marked by neglect, abandonment and indifference" but "there are those that show careful instruction or the positive and proactive exercise of pastoral power" (Johnson *et al.*, 2000:136).

We show how these elements feature in a variety of ways over time in the cohort model of supervision in the doctoral programme offered at our faculty of education.

## **Research methodology**

To answer the research question, we employed a qualitative, descriptive, interpretive and contextual research design (Mouton, 1996), to explore the notion of doctoral supervision and support through a cohort model. A single case study was used as research strategy. The students often spoke about the value of the cohort model and we were encouraged by the students to ‘write it up’. We therefore acquired their consent to use the evaluation forms filled out at the end of the weekend programme, also ensuring them of confidentiality and anonymity.

## **Context**

The research was conducted over a three-year period in a large university with a large faculty of education. Doctoral students at this institution are allocated a supervisor and have a choice whether to enter the cohort model of doctoral supervision and support or not, but are usually firmly encouraged to do so. Each of the three phases, as described earlier on, is coordinated by one academic, complemented by three to five academic staff members — both senior and junior, and from various academic disciplines — to collectively supervise and support the cohort of doctoral students.

## **Sampling**

A convenience sample was used, as we drew on the cohort of doctoral students we had supported in the first three years of their doctoral work. The number in the cohort varied from year to year, for various reasons (and some were excluded after phase one, not being able to complete the required proposal in the stipulated time, while others moved ahead to the next phase once they had accomplished the ‘task’ of the phase). In 2007 the first phase of the cohort consisted of 16 students (14 females and 2 males), in 2008 the second phase consisted of ten students (9 females and 1 male) and in 2009 the third phase also consisted of ten students (9 females and 1 male). The cohort included African, Indian and white students. Not all were English first language speakers, but they were proficient in using English. They were mature students who mostly studied part-time, except for three who studied full time.

## **Data generation**

At the end of each doctoral weekend the students were required to evaluate the programme so that we could use their input to further refine and improve the programme. We used a very simple evaluation form with three open-ended questions, i.e. What did you like and why? What did you dislike and why? What suggestions do you have? These evaluation forms were submitted anonymously. The data for this study was thus drawn from the same cohort of students’ evaluation of each doctoral weekend programme over the past three years, evaluating phases one, two and three. The majority of responses were related to what they liked and only some to what they disliked, with few suggestions being offered.

## **Data analysis**

The raw data, the responses to the three sections on the evaluation form, were analysed using Tesch’s open coding (Creswell, 1994). All the responses were read, units of meaning were written in the margin, similar ones were grouped together to generate themes and subthemes. The themes were then discussed by two of the researchers and consensus was reached on the themes. Through abstraction, appropriate theme headings were created to answer the research

question. The findings were then re-contextualised in the existing literature (Poggenpoel, 1998).

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative inquiry cannot be judged by the criteria of reliability and validity (Geelan, 2003) and therefore Guba's measures of trustworthiness were applied, i.e. credibility (truth value), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency) and confirmability (neutrality) (Krefting, 1991). Credibility was ensured through, for example, our prolonged engagement of three years in the 'field', as well as the spontaneous discussions about the value of the programme which are corroborated by the data on the end-of-the-weekend evaluation forms; transferability was ensured through a thorough or thick description of the context allowing other researchers to decide whether the findings are applicable to their own settings (Finlay, 2006); dependability was ensured by providing a clear description of the methodology used and the direct quotations from the data as an audit trail; while confirmability was ensured through the reflexive discussions of the three authors around method and findings.

### **Findings and discussion**

Doctoral research is not only about graduating, but also about being inducted into a community of researchers. Therefore, the key is not only to support and develop capacity for producing new knowledge, but also to ensure that this is paralleled by a shift in identity from practitioner to scholar (Lusted, 1986).

The data from the evaluation at the end of each seminar resulted in the emergence of the following three themes, concerning doctoral support and supervision, through the cohort model: supportive practice, reflective practice, and community of practice.

#### **A supportive practice**

The theme of supportive practice is underpinned by the following categories: a well-planned and organized/co-ordinated programme; committed academic staff; and doctoral students who engage with each other's research and research learning in a respectful and meaningful way, to enhance the learning opportunities available. Through critical engagement and participation, the cohort model is more than just a student-supervisor relationship. Rather, it is about "the importance of collaborative knowledge sharing environments and collective models of supervision" (Malfroy, 2005:177). Lategan (2008:4) views postgraduate students "as one of the most important sources contributing to the development of new knowledge".

The cohort model that we put under the spotlight provides the space for exploring the nature of the support and learning through collaborative knowledge sharing environments. As a case in point, we argue that the cohort model supports doctoral learning and identity development.

#### **Thorough planning and organization: Functionality**

The cohort programme enables "productive working relationships with the supervisors who provide feedback" (Muller, 2008:42) and encourages the idea of students as important partners. Hence, it is necessary that boundaries are clear and explicit at the very beginning of the working relationship in order to foster lifelong partnerships (Van Rensburg & Danaher, 2008). The following quotations from the doctoral students underscore the importance of a cohort programme that is well-planned and orchestrated. The students commented on the merits of our setting up clear parameters and planning thoroughly:

“... *good planning, organization and professionalism, punctuality ...*”

“*Overview of expectations and scope of PhD and what is a valid PhD project*”

“*PhD plan for the year was useful ...*”

Supervisors in the cohort play an important role in guiding and gradually introducing the students to becoming part of the academic community through *enculturation* (Van Rensburg & Danaher, 2008). We can see from the comments described above how belonging to a cohort requires the students to not only engage, but also to comply with the guiding framework. We circulated the contact details of all the students in the cohort to each other which encouraged sharing and communication between and amongst the doctoral students. We also sent out brief notes, recommended readings and the negotiated plans for the coming seminar, clearly indicating what advance work was required. They were appreciative of this as the following quotations taken from the ‘what I liked’ responses indicate:

“*A database of contact details ... emailed to everybody ...*”

“*... forwarding all seminar notes on email ...*”

The importance of modelling, dedication and commitment by the academic staff members is crucial in engendering and sustaining the motivation required to complete the doctorate and to minimize attrition. Van Rensburg and Danaher (2008) remind us of the need for students to be inspired, encouraged and cared for by their supervisors, within a multifaceted and dynamic supervisory relationship. Through the cohort model, students are exposed to the views and understandings of many supervisor-facilitators. The participants in this study were appreciative of the qualities of the cohort staff, as is clear from the following responses:

“*The commitment of the staff ...*”

“*Enthusiasm of facilitators ...*”

“*Getting new motivation to keep going little steps*”

### Respectful engagement: relationship development

A key part of a supportive practice is to engage respectfully with the doctoral students and their work, something we diligently modelled amongst ourselves as academics and which we also encouraged amongst the doctoral students. Stevens and Asmar (1999) concur with the merits of the need for both students and supervisors to be more explicit in their expectations of each other so that mutual respect can be established. The following quotations bear testimony:

“*I think that the ambiance of the cohort weekend is largely due to the leaders. Respect, support ... all those elements. I learn so much about relationships, researching — deep learning that stays with me and develops the better part of me.*”

“*... X has a respectful and accommodating manner.*”

“*I really like the way we interact in these cohorts, they are empowering and help us with the progress for our studies.*”

For Lee (2008), *relationship development* is centred on the emotional and relational connections between doctoral students and their supervisors, with emotional intelligence being a key construct. The support for the development of students with regards to their academic scholarship and their identities as independent scholars, calls for respectful engagement (but without holding back), providing an honest critique of the work presented. Van Rensburg and Danaher (2008) remind us that the doctoral journey offers the space for students to reflect and analyse their work through *critical thinking*. Therefore, supervisors should foster the partnerships with their students and encourage research values with integrity, without overpowering the students (Lategan, 2008). The importance of addressing the issue at hand, without



denigrating the person, encourages the doctoral students to be more willing to present their work. The cohort programme allows them to be critiqued in a safe social space, as demonstrated by the following statements:

*“Critique process was helpful and insightful ...”*

*“I enjoyed receiving feedback without being made to feel inadequate.”*

*“As always, good advice without putting people down ...”*

*“... the supportiveness of the team” and “... collegiality among the group”*

*“Keep encouraging us (as you always do)”*

*“I loved seeing how good everyone is feeling about the work they have done this year”*

Kumar and Stracke (2007:466) also note that the “expressive function of feedback, which comprised praise, criticism, and supervisor’s opinion” is valuable and is of most benefit to the student. A key aspect of the cohort model, as the above excerpts show, is that it provides a space for the students to feel safe enough to engage critically with their own and others’ work, and it encourages greater participation. Creating a ‘home’ for opportunities and space to talk informally, to present their work, to give and receive critique and also to write, is what is used in the cohort programme. It is in contrast to the notion of a student being a nomad or exile, exhibiting or embracing a state of homelessness. Said (1994) suggests that feeling at home is when the true intellectual does not give in to comfortable, static and sedentary ways of thinking, being and acting, nor does he or she engage in a “rhetoric of blame”. Instead of adapting and reconciling to hegemonic systems and ways of thinking, the doctoral students’ intellectual growth is about developing a resistant consciousness and engaging in strategies of contestation (Said, 1994:57).

### High level of participation: Emancipation

The defining quality of a learning community is that there is a culture of learning in which everyone is participating in a collective effort of understanding. Doctoral learning in a cohort works in ways to advance collective knowledge and in that way supports the growth of individual knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994). The comments by the doctoral students regarding the quality of their learning experience in the cohort programme are indicative of the need for students to participate actively and freely with issues from different perspectives and expertise, as the following quotations suggest:

*“Participative format selected by guest speakers really ensured we were ‘active’ ...”*

*“... interaction is energizing ...”*

*“Relaxed atmosphere — all felt free to contribute ...”*

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994) state that experiencing the freedom to comment and use each others’ diverse knowledge and skills as resources to collaboratively solve problems and advance their understanding goes beyond the development of scholarship. They argue that such freedom to comment supports the identity of an independent scholar whose “difference” is respected and valued within the learning community.

### Reflective practice

The second theme which emerged focused on reflective practice, which is a crucial part of doctoral learning. The cohort system allows doctoral students an opportunity to present their own work and be critiqued, so as to learn from each other, and also to develop the skill of reflection. Furthermore, while listening to the other students’ presentations, they are able to reflect on what can be learnt from the research experiences of their peers, and apply that to

their own work.

There are various models of reflective practice to draw on within the field of learning theories, but Kolb's (in Kelly, 1997) early model highlights four key aspects of reflective practice, i.e. experiencing (immersion in the task); reflection (what did you notice?); conceptualization (what does it mean?) and planning (what will happen next? what do you want to change?). These four aspects help to inform one's understanding of reflective practice in the cohort programme. The doctoral candidate is immersed in the task of doctoral work, and presents an aspect of it to the cohort, putting it out in the "public domain" for "testing". The cohort provides a critique upon which the candidate can reflect, and conceptualise what the critique means for his or her work. Such reflection then requires further immersion in their research so as to think and plan what needs to be changed. Being constantly challenged to reflect, hones the reflective skills of the candidate, and pushes him or her toward further critical reflection. This we believe concurs with Kolb's experiential learning theory, which moves educational thought from the locus of the instructor (or supervisor) or other members of the cohort, back to the learner, the doctoral student (Kelly, 1997). This change of locus is one of the strengths of the cohort programme. It also positions the students' learning as participation (doing) rather than acquisition (having) (Edwards, 2005). Such learning then offers opportunities for constructing and reconstructing new knowledge positioning (Forbes, 2008). This is encapsulated in the following three categories: reflecting on others' research, reflecting on one's own research, and reflecting on one's own critique of others.

### Reflecting on others' research

As time is of the essence when reading for a doctorate we often underestimate the value of time spent in engaging with other students' work. This has clearly extended the development of students in terms of being able to express themselves on research matters in an academic environment and to develop their own ideas. As such, the engagement with others' work is understood as 'learning by doing' (Edwards, 2005) and places the candidate in a position to fully re-engage with his or her own work, as the following quotations highlight:

*"The developmental attitude within the presentations allowed me to really reflect on my study and see different/new avenues of exploration"*

*"I saw a number of similarities with my own and started to reflect to see how I could address some issues"*

*"I liked the opportunity of listening to all the students' presentations- I now have an idea of what is expected of me at this level"*

*"To be able to give input to others has boosted my confidence and improved my dialoguing with others"*

The "community of practice" is a model that is often invoked in relation to such issues described above, whereby there is a sharing of knowledge and ideas.

### Reflecting on critique of own research

One of the most difficult things to do in research is to look critically at one's own work. This is largely due to being too deeply involved in the work and not being able to look at it from a distance, and also due to not having sufficient time to think. The cohort programme allows input from the other students and the academic staff and also some time for reflection. The fact that all the students are at the same stage of their research journey and are grappling with similar issues, encourages reflection on the critique offered, allowing them to weigh up the

value and importance of the critique. Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts (2008:82) acknowledge the challenging issue of “giving and receiving feedback”. They say that “genuine constructive critique can often be perceived as being ‘negative’ (bad and painful) or ‘positive’ (nice and encouraging) when it could be argued that all feedback is positive in its attempt to improve performance” (Sambrook *et al.*, 2008:82). The following quotations point to the positive reception of the critique:

*“It challenged me to look at other angles and questions ...”*

*“Having to present forced me to clarify the lenses and frameworks through which I must analyse the data ...”*

*“It gave us time to think of our own work and the progress”*

*“I’ve started gaining confidence on saying what’s bothering me ... [in my own research]”*

*“I realized what areas of my writing I need to ditch because they are not adding to my thesis — causing confusion”*

*“Thank you for honesty and transparency — ‘the real truth’ ...”*

Lusted (1986:3) refers to this as “recognizing the productivity of the relations and it renders the parties within them as active, changing and changeable agencies”. The feedback to the students should therefore be helpful and release the energy and enthusiasm to sustain the doctoral learning. Kirby (1994:19) describes this release of energy as “[the] passion for the power in learning” and the “delight in the flirtatiousness of intellectual debate ...”.

### Reflecting on own ability to critique

Critique is also viewed as a way of knowing and a way of learning. Lamm (2004) concurs that critique is part of supervisory interactions, which creates opportunity for learning. The cohort programme provides opportunities for students to work within a supportive community of peers and creates space to develop their capacity to critique their own and others’ texts (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Considering the development of the ability to critique and to make their voice heard in a research context, but also having to accept critique of their own work, made one doctoral candidate realize:

*“... that it is easier to critique others’ work than my own.”*

Such insight is useful as self-reflection, and touches on the challenge of subjectivity in one’s own work.

### A community of practice

The third theme reflects on how a cohort programme offered in a faculty of education can result in a learning community amongst developing doctoral students. Supervising and being supervised in a cohort programme serves to support and develop the capacity for producing new knowledge, to work with and to listen to others, and to develop ways of dealing with complex issues and problems that require different kinds of expertise (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). However, it also serves to ensure that this is paralleled by a shift in the doctoral candidate’s mindset, from practitioner to scholar (Lusted, 1986).

This happens best in a space where peers are engaged in a similar academic endeavour. This is framed within a sense of belonging, a sense of learning and a community of supervision.

### A sense of belonging

Intellectuality and knowledge production in the traditional one-to-one supervisory relationship

is conceptualised as a lonely and difficult journey, requiring deep reflexivity, commitment and sacrifice (Johnson *et al.*, 2000). However, learning and development, through the cohort programme, ensures that doctoral students are confident to take risks and explore different topics in the comfort of a community of researchers. The cohort programme thus reduces the sense of isolation, and creates a sense of inclusion and an increase in social interaction. This is clear from the quotations from the doctoral students:

*“... growing sense of belonging to a community of learners”*

*“... share my thoughts with a group that has developed a sense of trust”*

*“Being with people who have the same academic interest I have”*

*“Camaraderie that has developed ...”*

### A sense of learning

The activities of learning communities must provide the means for individual development and collaborative construction of knowledge. It involves the sharing of knowledge and skills among the members of the community and articulating and making visible the learning processes. It encourages individual and group research, group discussion, and working together to make public what is learnt, including the development of new ways of learning.

*“The writing opportunity, each to his/her own laptop, and with his/her own thoughts, also proved valuable”*

*“The quiet writing session was beneficial. I found I could cover a lot ‘in this controlled environment”*.

*“... love the idea of a writing weekend”*

To advance collective knowledge in research, as a way to support the growth of individual knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994), the cohort programme makes available particular kinds of learning opportunities to support the movement of the student from novice to expert. In exploring what capacities are being developed and by what means, the shared dialogue is real, relevant and often inspiring:

*“I enjoyed the two speakers — PhD graduates who have been through the cohort process are an inspiration”*

*“... given me a sense of direction”*

*“... one learns from those debates”*

*“... learning from others’ problems”*

*“... the diversity of topics and rich discussion”*

*“... very novel method of research shared ...”*

*“Sharing of ideas and resources ...”* and *“... sharing articles”*

*“It’s interesting to see how conceptualizations have shifted”*

Doctoral students and supervisors are linked to each other by having the same objective. In this instance, they are working collaboratively towards developing capacities and supporting scholarly autonomy, especially regarding the different roles that students take on during their journey towards the completion of their study.

### Community supervision

The traditional approach to supervision is characterized as isolated and intense, and often sets up a dependency relationship between the supervisor and students. However, learning communities of research practice have the potential to open up spaces into which novice researchers can be inducted, mentored, coached and supported, without diluting entirely the

supervisory relationship. The cohort programme encourages the formation of “learning communities” that change the conditions and the means by which doctoral students come to know (Lusted, 1986). The notion of being supported by a range of people is clear from the following quotations:

*“Meeting with other groups (PhD phases)”*

*“Nice to see senior faculty mixing with students”*

*“I value the contribution by the sages but also the feedback I get from my fellow PhDers”*

*“The whole cohort process is extremely valuable! We learn from half a dozen ‘supervisors’ and twenty peers.”*

Community supervision through a cohort support programme alongside the traditional one-to-one supervision relationship opens up other voices. These learning opportunities demonstrate that the supervisor no longer needs to be the “master” (Johnson *et al.*, 2000:145), but a teacher of particular skills, ways of thinking, and who helps create a socially just world (Engeström, 1999). The supervisor in this community is seen as mediator between the student and the discipline or field (Connell, 1985). Lusted (1986) concurs with this and explains the importance of setting up a critical exchange or dialogue through various learning activities or opportunities. Hence, the end result of the research process is the empowerment of the candidate (Generett, 2009).

## Conclusions

The above discussion does not suggest that the cohort programme is without challenges. It is acknowledged that there are issues regarding time, the size of the cohort, and the supervisors’ participation that need to be taken into consideration. As most of the doctoral students in this study were part-time students, finding time to participate in the weekend programme was difficult for them. Yet once they had committed to taking time out for their studies, it became an extremely productive endeavour for all. Although the programme is offered with a view to complement the traditional apprenticeship model, not all supervisors chose to participate. This can lead to the student having to work with conflicting ideas, if the cohort and the supervisor are at odds. However, we turned this into an opportunity for scholarly development, requiring the student to weigh up the received inputs or critiques and to arrive at his or her own position.

We have put forward our iteration of a cohort model of supervision and support, which has been refined over time, to meet the needs of the students. Such a supervisory process is an intensive procedure, which can also be time consuming. However, we argue that it has great value in developing scholarship, providing support and supervision, and sustaining doctoral work towards completion.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it also serves to develop a community of practice, which is in line with the government’s request for academia to cultivate a much needed community of researchers in South Africa.

## Notes

1. The cohort model was initiated at the then Durban-Westville University by Michael Samuel and Renuka Vithal in 1998.
2. We acknowledge the efforts of all the academic staff who, over the years, have contributed greatly to the refinement of the cohort model, and all the doctoral students who have helped us learn how to provide support.
3. Of the 10 students in the third phase six submitted their theses and graduated in 2010.

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