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‘Learning supervision’: trial by fire

Cheryl Amundsen^{a*} and Lynn McAlpine^b

^aFaculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada; ^bDepartment of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

This paper explores the experiences of new graduate supervisors, individuals who have just moved as it were from one side of ‘the table’ to the other. We describe how their learning to ‘do supervision’ relates to their understanding of academic work and how they make sense of the transition from doctoral student, someone supervised, to someone supervising, how they connect the past to the present (and future). The particular contribution is the examination of new academics’ experience of supervision within the broader context of undertaking to establish oneself as an academic. This study is part of a broad research programme in Canada that investigates the experiences of doctoral students and the academic staff who support them and then works collaboratively with those in the units in which we are collecting data to ensure the findings can inform and support doctoral policies and pedagogies.

Keywords: doctoral supervision; new academics; higher education

Introduction

This study is part of a broad research programme in Canada, the goal of which is to investigate the experiences of doctoral students and the academic staff who support them. In conducting this research, we have increasingly viewed the journey of becoming an academic as a continuation from doctoral studies, moving through the years spent as a new academic and on to becoming an established academic. In this paper, we investigate the experiences of new academics learning to, and trying to, ‘do’ graduate supervision. Supervision is central to the work of most academics and is inherently a social activity. That is, supervision requires intense work with a student and (in North America) one or more other academics serving as committee members while at the same time attending to the expectations of the local community in which one works and the broader scholarly community. The experience of supervising can also be seen as an individual activity in the sense of *privately* making sense or meaning of the supervisory role. In this process, as we see with some of the participants in this study, there is an ongoing clarification or repositioning of one’s scholarly values and identity as, on the one hand, the supervisor supports the production of a quality thesis that will meet the expectations of the examination process and, on the other hand, supports the entry of the doctoral student into the broader scholarly community. This is consistent with the notion that engaging in academic work, in this case the work of supervision, underlies one’s developing identity as an academic (Paré, McAlpine, & Starke-Meyerring, 2006). As individuals use the particular ways

*Corresponding author. Email: camundsa@sfu.ca

of thinking and acting of their field and are recognised by others for this (Tonso, 2006), identity is evoked through expressions of agency, the individual capacity to perceive personal goals towards which one may direct action (Edwards, 2007), and related emotions.

Over the past 15 years, there has been a growing number of studies of the supervisory role in doctoral education (e.g., Acker, Hill, & Black, 1994; Murphy, Bain, & Conrad, 2007). Such studies document a range in supervisory styles and the degree to which these styles are influenced by a focus on the inquiry or the student–supervisor relationship. Concurrently, another area of research has been looking at the socialisation of new academics (e.g., Olsen, 1993; Reybold, 2005). The approach taken here links these two, examining the experience of supervision of new academics within the broader context of undertaking to establish oneself as an academic.

Conceptual framework: Activity Theory

In this study, as in our broader programme of research, Activity Theory (Engeström, 1999) is used as a conceptual framework. Specifically, we have used it here to develop data collection tools and to ground the data analysis and interpretation. This was done for a number of reasons. First, the unit of analysis is the complete activity system and meets our desire to view supervision within the broader context of academic work. Engeström and Miettinen (1999) explain, ‘the analyst constructs the activity system as if looking at it from above’ (p. 10). The six elements of an activity system (subject, object, tools, rules, community and division of labour) applied to the activity of graduate supervision is instructive given that this role involves interactions with a range of different individuals, with different roles and intentions and the use of different resources. Second, Activity Theory describes a dynamic process at the heart of which is change, including self-change. This is of value to us given our interest in developing identity as an academic. Roth’s interpretation of Activity Theory (2004) suggests that: ‘Although the Engeström triangle depicts the structure of activity, it is inherently a dynamic structure, continuously undergoing change in its parts, in its relations, and as a whole ... That is, practical actions do not just make nice artifacts but bring about changes in the entire system, including the identity of the subject’ (p. 4). Thirdly, Activity Theory embodies aspects of community consistent with our view that supervision is inherently a social activity extending beyond the primary relationship with student and supervisor, and also having implications for change at the level of the individual. Roth (2004) suggests ‘the individual not only produces outcomes, which are distributed, exchanged, and consumed, but also, in the same process, produces and reproduces him- or herself as a member of the community’ (p. 4). The broad question driving this study is: What are the range of experiences and perceptions described by new professors directly and indirectly related to their role as doctoral supervisor? Kaptelinin (2005) argues that activity theory is not only ‘a powerful analytical tool to understand what people are doing but also why they are doing it’ (p. 5).

Our specific sub-questions are:

- What is understood as the purpose(s) of the supervisor role?
- What and how is the role of supervisor learned?
- What affect has been experienced (pleasures and tensions and challenges) related to work as a supervisor?

- What activities are individuals engaged in that are not directly related to thesis supervision, but are seen as supporting students to complete their graduate work?

Research design

Participants

The eight assistant professors from two large Faculties of Education in two Canadian universities (four from each university) were chosen from those who volunteered because they represented a range of programmes in the two faculties. All participants were ‘pre-tenure academics’. In Canada, and more generally in North America, full-time academics are hired into ‘tenure-track’ positions as assistant professors; these positions are only secured five or six years later if the individual is deemed worthy of ‘tenured’ status.

Among the eight participants, years as a pre-tenure academic ranges from one and a half to seven years (in the latter case with several years not in a tenure-track position) (see Table 1). Three of the eight come from outside of Canada and all but one are in institutions different from their doctoral experience. Several worked in other contexts before or after earning their doctorate. Three of the eight had supervised a master’s student to completion and two had supervised a doctoral student to completion. All are currently supervising a number of students, both master’s and doctoral students. None of the eight had any formal preparation for their roles as supervisors, and none was required by their respective institutions. Further, while both institutions had policies regarding when new academics could begin supervising doctoral students, these were not referred to and did not appear to be followed.

Table 1. Academic and supervisory experience.

Participant	Years experience as academic	Number of master’s to completion	Number of doctorates to completion	Current number being supervised
Maria	7 full-time years, 10 years part-time work while doing MA and PhD	5 – one co-supervision	0	4 doctoral, 5 master’s (two are co-supervision)
June ^a	2	0	0	4 EdD, 4 MA
Janet	3.5	0	0	6
Valerie	3	0	0	2 PhD, 2 master’s
Simone ^a	1.5	2 MAs (inherited)	0	8 MA, 1 PhD
Kate	5 – comes from science and business background	17 three-credit independent research studies	0	5+ co-supervising a student elsewhere; also supervising 4 three-credit studies
Howard ^a	3 – in his programme academics take on students post coursework	0	1 EdD just completed	5 EdD, 1 MA
Stuart	3.5	3 MSc	1 PhD	7 PhD, 1 EdD, 6 MSc

^aNo senior faculty members in programme area.

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Data collection

Pre-interview questionnaires and interviews comprised the dataset; both were developed based on the six elements of Activity Theory and were purposed to also draw out systemic and dynamic aspects (e.g., contradictions; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999) inherent in the activity system of supervision. The responses on the pre-interview questionnaire were used by the interviewer in focusing the interview questions.

The pre-interview questionnaire requested (1) background information about personal experience and understanding of supervision including the purpose of supervision, their expectations of students, major difficulties they thought students experienced, and used and desired resources, (2) the description of a supervisory experience participants felt had been particularly successful, and (3) a list of activities not directly related to thesis development, yet considered to support graduate student progress. We intended to draw out participants' perceptions of the activity system of graduate supervision specifically related to activities with the students they supervised and more broadly as related to other students and colleagues situated both locally in the home institution and in the broader scholarly community. We also wanted to capture the affect associated with supervision, the tensions and the pleasures, perhaps associated with contradictions in the activity system.

Analysis

The analysis proceeded in several stages, allowing for increasing levels of abstraction (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

- (1) Tentative broad themes (within the *a priori* structure of Activity Theory as well as unexpected emerging themes) were named by the two authors after reading through the eight individual datasets (questionnaires and interview transcripts).
- (2) Each author, working with four of the datasets, identified all of the excerpts that related to the identified themes.
- (3) Identified excerpts were exchanged and clarified and then examined in order to develop descriptions of the variation as well as similarities of experience.
- (4) Finally, a brief profile was written about each participant to preserve and highlight the uniqueness of the individual experience amidst the cross-data thematic analysis.

Findings

We report our findings organised by our four sub-questions.

What is understood as the purpose(s) of the supervisor role?

All eight participants felt strongly that their job was to structure, chunk, create goals and timelines consistent with Zhao, Golde, and McCormick's report (2007) that students particularly welcomed regular and constructive feedback on their progress as well as their research. For example, Simone describes what she does:

Now with all the ones that I have been working with, right away I sit them down and say 'Okay, this is the big picture and what we are going to do is we are going to chunk it out

so you are not overwhelmed and anxious about it so that it is manageable ... Together we will decide – really collaborative.

Other participants emphasised highlighting for the student the progress they were making:

Believe in their work and support it. So I'm always very 'this is great what you're doing and this is so important' ... I think they just need to be reassured that it's not going to be so awful. (Maria)

This belief contrasted with the view of one participant that the doctorate was the time to leave the student more alone:

I have a very hands-off management style. I'll let them sink or swim on their own so they need to be highly motivated and independent ... they are transitioning from student to scholar ... they are going to become reputed experts in their area and so they have to rely more on themselves ... much more kind of an evaluative support. (Howard)

Several participants noted that what 'worked' with one student need not work with another one. This was sometimes linked to the idea that there were constants, but with variation.

Things that are universal [for all students] for me so far ... [are setting] expectations ... long term and short term ... [but] tailor[ed] to the student ... so they are always seeing the bigger picture ... the rest of it is individualised to how that student works and their particular personality. (Valerie)

Stuart described how he tried to systematise the supervision process, but 'I am having much more success with this at the master's level'. He sees the supervision of a doctoral thesis as much more challenging than a master's thesis because it is a 'very personal journey' for both student and supervisor and he is trying to 'systematise it as much as I can without compromising that'.

Some described how different students required different kinds of interaction and perhaps called on them to assume different kinds of supervisory roles.

Mentor, first of all ... To facilitate the dissertation process – however that manifests itself as agreed upon by the supervisor and the student. I believe the relationship is a negotiated one. (June)

This largely depends on the student. In some cases I am more of a sounding board, other times I am more of a guide, and other times I am the conceiver and director of educational research. (Stuart)

One could characterise many of these statements as representing negotiated order. This stance reported by Acker et al. (1994) of supervisors in the field of education (and more generally by Manathunga, 2007) is characterised by uncertainty, uniqueness, with mutual expectations subject to negotiation over time given the intertwining of differing personal experiences and histories.

While all participants identified the primary object (of the supervisory activity system) as successful completion of the thesis, there was also a naming among most of the importance of supporting students to develop a sense of community, of belonging. For some, this was motivated by the positive experiences they had themselves in,

for example, belonging to a research team or presenting or publishing with their supervisor, other senior academics and/or doctoral student peers. These were all activities that had helped them feel connected to a wider scholarly community and develop a sense of confidence as a contributing member of the community.

That's something that I think is really important for the students, to feel that their community is not just them and their cohort of other PhD students ... there's the faculty and then the international community of people. I want them to feel that these people can be their colleagues, not their superiors ... I want them to feel that the community is a community because it is. (Maria)

What and how is the role of supervisor learned?

Participants were clear that they were learning from and through experience and that more formal sources of learning, though desired, were not available. Consistently and often unsolicited, participants referred to their learning as emerging from personal experience. Principal sources of learning were their own experiences as doctoral students and their own experiences as supervisors. However, some noted the potential of watching others in committee and team meetings and having a co-supervisor or other colleague to call on to test out ideas.

Learning from experience as a student. Clearly most participants had spent some time thinking about their own experience as a doctoral student, reflecting on what they had found and not found useful or helpful and positioning themselves in relationship to their own doctoral supervisor.

Right now I do it the way that I was myself supervised ... most of what I know is what I've picked up myself as a grad student ... I don't think I'm exactly like my supervisor because I've learned from his mistakes too. (Valerie)

So what I do with my students is nothing like I received although both experiences were positive, they were not mentoring, they were not on-going sort of meetings, or step-by-step here is how you need to do this. (Simone)

Learning from experience as a supervisor. At the time of the interview, Howard was still elated over the successful thesis defence of his first doctoral student the previous week. He stated that he 'felt pride and satisfaction, and excitement about ongoing work with this student'. In reflecting on the process of working with this student, he thought the policy documents were not very helpful, nor did he feel that there was any mentoring about supervision to speak of. He talks about learning everything from 'embedded' experience. 'Everything I know about supervision I learned through this [first] experience.' This was echoed by Valerie, 'there's no lesson plan on how to be a supervisor so you pick it up as you go'.

Maria also spoke of her successful experience in supporting one student to completion, but about the problems with extrapolating that experience too broadly.

Based on my experience – that's only a sample of one ... So it was easier with subsequent students and I found I repeated what had worked well with xx ... What I'm finding though is that I can't extrapolate from xx ... I'm kind of new at this.

Learning from colleagues. Participants reported that they depended heavily on colleagues for support ranging from information about policies and procedures to

more complex issues of how to work with particular students. One participant, Valerie, found she learned by observing in all kinds of ways, at faculty meetings and in other research teams. Simone reported struggling to find the right balance between too much support for her students and not enough support. She has observed the way other faculty members fulfil the supervisory role and is positioning herself in relationship to them; she wants to have a ‘mentorship orientation’ because she likes to be mentored herself.

So, there is evidence of workplace learning (Eraut, 2007), learning through asking questions, listening and observing, locating resource people, reflecting, learning from mistakes, giving and receiving feedback. Yet, this workplace learning was not just contemporaneously located; it moved back and forth between earlier experiences as a doctoral student and present experiences with students and colleagues. What was also interesting was the lack of mediating artifacts or tools (e.g., clear policy statements, pedagogical tools) which Eraut (2007) notes can support learning and Activity Theory distinguishes as the means by which the subject interacts with the community to transform the object into an outcome (Engeström, 1999).

Three of the eight were already experiencing or desired mentoring from senior colleagues. Kate noted that a more senior colleague had offered to mentor pre-tenure colleagues and although this was informal, she found his advice very helpful. Simone feels that there could be more and better organised mentoring of new faculty as concerns graduate supervision,

some hands-on faculty mentoring with people who have been doing it for a long time ... it seems like I always have to do things the long way, the hard way ... So I think that could be a very interesting concept – small groups – not like a group of 10 or something – like a group of four or five with one mentor.

While some mentoring programmes are reported in the literature that include aspects of formal preparation for supervision (Gaffney, 1995), Manathunga (2005) contends after a review that many ‘focus solely on the administrative roles and responsibilities of supervisors, attempting to provide technical ‘fixes’ that deny the genuine difficulties and complexities involved in supervision relationships’ (p. 17).

What affect has been experienced (pleasures and tensions and challenges) related to work as a doctoral supervisor?

Participants described the pleasures or positive experiences they had related to supervision. Janet spoke of joy in finding a positive direction in which to proceed.

I felt really great and I was like ‘Wow!’—like we [she and her student] tried something new and it really worked and I was very optimistic about how things would progress from there.

Others talked about the pleasures of witnessing true progress on the thesis or other student work and basking in the glow of the part they had played.

That’s when they are getting there and that’s what I really enjoy. I really enjoy co-constructing understanding because it is different every time. (Stuart)

Finally, many spoke of how much they enjoyed the close relationship they were able to cultivate with some students, for example Simone related the following,

Like I say I really enjoy the supervision—the research supervision because it is a close [relationship]—and so far most of them have been—and appreciation both ways—and I’m able to appreciate what they are doing and they are appreciating sort of my role in it.

Despite our focus (in the pre-interview questionnaire and then explored in the interview) on relating a successful supervision experience, there were many stories of tension or challenge existing alongside the pleasures. These were defined as affective experiences of worry (pressure, stress, nervousness), conflict (friction, opposition, hostility), and being tested (deal with, face up to, contend with). All eight reported tensions and challenges in at least two of the following three areas: with students, colleagues and institutional structures and policies.

Students. For one participant, only recently a doctoral student herself and perhaps even younger than many of the students she supervises, she felt that it was sometimes difficult to be taken seriously. June feels she looks younger than she is and referred several times to what she sees as the problems with this, ‘sometimes I am taken as being young or ignorant about certain things so they underestimate me sometimes and so I think that that has been a personal challenge for me in supervision’.

Others were entertaining the view ‘from the other side of the table’ as it were, and were often perplexed about what they saw. Simone talks about her displeasure with the expectations of some students.

Actually a lot of students, even at the doctoral level, really don’t have a clue what you do and why maybe it took you three or four days to get back to them. So I think there is some learning for students about that and I think sometimes we act as if they can’t understand or they shouldn’t be expected to sort of adhere to some basic human [considerations].

Colleagues. Working with other academics in the role of supervisor had its challenges. Most of what we heard had to do with ‘inheriting’ students left without a supervisor for some reason and getting good and timely feedback for students from colleagues. Three were appointed to new programme areas where there were no senior faculty so there was no possibility of a mentor with close programme ties.

Four ‘inherited’ students when other supervisors retired or when the previous supervisory relationship had not worked out. For one participant, this situation worked out quite well, but for the other three it was a struggle. Janet describes her experience having inherited a student who was just finishing her coursework:

An element of frustration for me is that I didn’t want to work with this student from the beginning. She ended up with me because no one else in the programme wanted to work with her ... it came down to whose research like fits best ... so it was me.

June discussed the tightrope she felt she was walking in seeking out colleagues she wanted on her students’ committees.

And there are people ... that don’t give any feedback ... and that is frustrating to work with. So I guess just appreciating the people that do that and trying to be very cautious about not asking them to be on too many committees. But then it is a double-edged sword because you know that they are quality people to have on your students’ committees and you want that but then you also don’t want to over-burden those individual faculty members. So, it’s tough.

Institutional. All participants described trying to manage in what could be described as clearly an unstructured environment, one without clear guidelines for most aspects of their work. Kate was somewhat taken aback by this, 'there is so much that is unclear. That surprised me'. Kate cited unclear expectations for graduate supervision around many issues including co-authorship with students, the number of students to be supervised, expectation of completion times and committee membership. And yet when she tried to initiate a conversation about establishing guidelines for the supervisory process, she met resistance.

People go back and entrench themselves in their usual way of being and their positions and I know there is a strong resistance to standardising what we do with doctoral students. And people get very upset.

Another area of tension mentioned by some was the expectations about the breadth and scope of thesis work and their observations that this varied considerably in their respective units. For example, Howard describes his confusion regarding a master's thesis as compared to a doctoral thesis.

I see degree creep ... talking to a master's student who is doing some reading research and she was doing a three-year longitudinal study on the implementation of a reading curriculum and I was thinking 'Why is this a master's thesis?' ... and some other work that I read would count as a PhD thesis ... So in my own issues of confusion within what the Faculty of Education sees as appropriate for master's students and doctoral students.

All participants explained how they were trying to achieve a balance between various aspects of their work and how this fit with tenure decisions and more broadly, finding a balance between work and their personal lives.

Kate wonders about the expectations for how much time it takes to provide feedback to students:

It's a lot more work than I ever anticipated! ... I mean as a grad student you don't think about that. You think 'Oh, here's my 30 pages, they can read it in two hours!' In order to do it right, it takes so much work and I really had no way of gauging that timing before. And so I guess I've come to appreciate how extraordinarily time intensive it is to do it right.

Janet felt that there were few guidelines about what is expected in terms of workload and supervision for pre-tenure academics, 'I don't know what a reasonable amount is ... the workload that I should carry ... there's no clear-cut ways of evaluating that ... I don't think it [supervision] is reflected in the merit system'.

Finally, several spoke of difficulties in finding a balance between work and personal life. Maria, for example, is a mother who completed her PhD while a mother so has a sense of the difficulties of the female academic. She draws on this experience to verbally reinforce for students that 'life comes first ... you don't have to be half a person when you do this'. Thus, she considers that one of her 'failures' is the fact that two of her master's students have told her that while they had originally imagined doing a PhD they have changed their minds seeing the nature of her work.

All of these expressions of tension or dilemma can be usefully viewed with an Activity Theory lens as contradictions internal to the activity system, rather than perspectives that simply describe the system. A next step would be an analysis of the location of the contradictions within the four subsystems of the activity system

(production, exchange, consumption, distribution) in order to understand the impact on the system as a whole.

What activities are individuals engaged in that are not directly related to thesis supervision, but are seen as supporting students to complete their graduate work?

Many participants were purposefully involved in activities that support students in their progress as a doctoral student in addition to that directly related to thesis development. Some examples are reading courses with the expressed purpose of gaining a broader view of the relevant literature and one's place within it, and jointly developed conference presentations and publications with the same purpose of coming to understand the scholarship in the field. Also noteworthy was work on the curriculum to target scholarly values.

Based on the range of activities described by the eight related to supporting doctoral students yet not specifically related to thesis supervision, it is clear that they view their supervisory role in broad terms going much beyond work with individual students. Several noted how their more general teaching responsibilities (as well as service activities) were linked to their supervisory relationships. We believe this is an unreported aspect of supervisory experience which seems to point to the activity system of supervision as being networked to or embedded in a range of academic practices and not viewed as a discrete aspect of academic work.

Conclusion

These stories remind us that like doctoral students (Austin, 2002) there is still minimal systematic developmental preparation for life as academics and particularly supervision. Nevertheless, these new supervisors, each and collectively, were articulate in describing a range of purposes or intentions in their work with doctoral students. What emerged was a growing, but provisional, sense of themselves as supervisors; we are mindful that a number felt they could not know if they had been 'successful' until they had students who had completed. 'Wait until I have some students who finish ... I feel like I'm such a novice' (Maria). 'I don't know how it's going to pay off because I haven't graduated anyone yet but I've got my fingers crossed' (June).

We were struck by the unevenness with which emotions were reported; there appeared to be at least as many tensions and challenges as pleasures. A primary purpose of our research is to systematically articulate the tensions or contradictions, which Engeström (1999) sees as the drivers of change within any activity system, and locate them within the activity system of supervision. This can lead to concrete actions to remove contradictions. Roth (2004) emphasises there is the possibility that without such actions, the subject (the new academic) may internalise the contradictions and attribute them to themselves without being aware of it (p. 6). A possible result is the misunderstood self in a particular context. For example, the experience of difficulty in reconciling competing demands may be seen as a failure of personal organisation rather than a structural aspect of academic work.

Schrodt, Cawyer, and Sanders (2003) note that the pre-tenure time can be a frustrating one in which one feels frequently isolated, experiences high stress, low satisfaction and a lack of role definition. One is learning to budget time, create relationships with colleagues, and engage in research activities; yet, collegial relationships may not be a common experience. Olsen (1993) has reported that an important task at

this time in one's career is minimising the impact of conflicts and developing relationships; one needs to tread carefully. Our findings clearly represent how these eight academics are undertaking to learn to do supervision within the broader context of their other academic responsibilities while at the same time experiencing a lack of clarity regarding role expectations in general. Reybold (2005) describes the pre-tenure time as one in which there are experiences of conflict narratives or professional dilemmas. While too many of these can contribute to demotivation and ultimately disillusionment with academic work, Activity Theory provides a tool for also viewing these as a source of professional learning.

We suggest that there is a need to re-conceptualise the experience of pre-tenure academics as a continuation from doctoral student through to more established academic and to situate supervisory experience within the broader development of academic practice. Doctoral students are experiencing anticipatory socialisation (Golde & Dore, 2001), an imagined set of possibilities whereas pre-tenure academics are experiencing one of the many imagined possibilities in a particular setting, the nitty-gritty of the actual encounter (Olsen, 1993). Just as with doctoral students (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007), there are tensions and challenges in integrating into academia and just like doctoral students there is still often minimal systematic developmental preparation or support (Golde, 2005).

If pre-tenure academics are not to experience so many professional dilemmas that they become disillusioned and leave, the academy and those of us more senior clearly need to address the preparation of supervisors, not just when they are pre-tenure academics, but earlier as doctoral students.

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Notes on contributors

Cheryl Amundsen is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, Canada. Her primary programme area is Educational Technology and Learning Design. Previous and ongoing research has focused on how university professors develop pedagogical knowledge in relationship to their subject matter, how they come to understand teaching (and graduate supervision), how they make instructional decisions and the effects of these from the learner's perspective.

Lynn McAlpine is professor of higher education development at the University of Oxford where she is Director of the CELT Preparing for Academic Practice, and senior research fellow in the Department of Education. She was formerly Director of the Centre for University Teaching and Learning at McGill University, Canada. Her research in Canada and the UK documents the perceptions of academic identity and academic work of doctoral students, research staff and new supervisors.

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