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Co-supervision of Doctoral Students: Enhancing the Learning Experience

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the advantages and challenges of co-supervision of doctoral students, as found in the literature and from our experiences. We define co-supervision and then discuss the process in detail. Examples are based on experiences of co-supervision from faculty perspectives as well as from the point of view of a former doctoral student. We propose that the advantages of co-supervision far outweigh the challenges and should be regularly considered by seasoned academics to enhance student learning. In addition, we suggest that co-supervision is intellectually stimulating for academics.

Keywords: co-supervision, doctoral education, graduate education, joint supervision, doctoral nursing education, supervision

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As early as 1988, Brown and Atkins discussed some of the common problems of students in doctoral programs, among which is "inadequate or negligent supervision" (p. 123). They expanded on the common criticisms of supervisors as: "too few meetings with students, no interest in student, no interest in topic, too little practical help given, too little direction, failure to return work promptly, absence from department, lack of research experience, and lack of relevant skills and knowledge" (p. 140). The use of multiple supervisors was offered as one way to deal with the problems that sometimes arise in one-to-one supervisory relationships.

Models of doctoral student supervision vary widely among graduate programs. Although the model of one supervisor and one student remains the most common in doctoral education, increasingly other models are being considered. Among these, joint supervision or team supervision is discussed in the literature (Bourner & Houghes, 1991; Watts, 2010). In this paper, we share experiences of co-supervision of doctoral students from the perspectives of both academics and a former doctoral student. We define co-supervision, describe the process and elements of co-supervision, and identify the benefits and challenges associated with this model. Our purpose is to encourage other academics and graduate students to consider co-supervision while recognizing the critical elements and challenges of this model.

Defining doctoral co-supervision

For the purposes of this discussion, co-supervision is defined as two academics sharing the entire responsibility of guiding a doctoral student from admission to program completion, including the selection of other committee members and/or examiners. However, when the term co-supervision is used in some of the literature it often refers to the interaction of the entire group of individuals who guide the doctoral student during their program. This is particularly the case in the United Kingdom and Australian contexts. In North America this group would usually be referred to as the doctoral supervisory committee. In the literature, other terms such as joint supervision and team supervision are used to describe shared supervisory arrangements similar to what we term co-supervision.

In Canada, solo supervision of doctoral students has been the norm, while the co-supervisory model has been used mainly to assist beginning academics to develop their supervisory skills. In this process, a novice academic is mentored by an experienced professor as they co-supervise one or more doctoral students. Once the novice professor has gained supervisory skills and has more fully developed their own research program, she/he then begins to supervise doctoral students independently. One of the assumptions underlying this way of using co-supervision is that ideally students should be supervised by one individual. We contend that co-supervision can be more than a rite of passage for new academics; it can be useful in and of itself when two

experienced academics choose to join their expertise, knowledge, and solid working relationship in a co-supervisory situation. This arrangement may in fact enhance the experience of supervision for faculty and students and may increase successful completion of doctoral programs more often than when there is only one supervisor (Ives & Rowley, 2005).

The process and elements of doctoral co-supervision

Students are normally admitted to a doctoral program only after a supervisor has committed to accept the responsibility of supervision. Prior to agreeing to supervise a new doctoral student, professors consider the fit between the student's interests and their own content and methodological expertise. The number of graduate students they supervise and current research, teaching, and administrative responsibilities are also taken into consideration. In the case of co-supervision, the two potential co-supervisors follow the same process but do so jointly. They consider their combined content and methodological expertise as well as their commitments, and thus their ability to jointly support a new student.

Early in the process, co-supervisors discuss the proposed supervisory model with the potential doctoral student. In this discussion the co-supervisors explain what each would bring to the supervisory relationship, what they bring as a team, and therefore how co-supervision could enhance the student's educational experience. Potential misconceptions are clarified to ensure understanding of the purpose and processes of co-supervision. The applicant is encouraged to ask questions and express any concerns about the proposed supervisory relationship. Some students may wonder, for example, if they are being singled out and offered co-supervision because they are perceived as needing more guidance than other students. Such misconceptions can be alleviated early in order to create the best possible learning environment.

All phases of the graduate supervision process, including the selection of courses, the selection of doctoral supervision committee members, and the preparation for candidacy and final oral examinations, are shared by the co-supervisors. This does not mean that both individuals are always present and equally involved in each step of the process. However, it means that decisions are always made jointly and prior to supervisory meetings with the student.

Co-supervision is akin to co-parenting. Because of this, it is imperative that co-supervisors share similar values and beliefs about education, students, research, and the supervisory role. Likely the best co-supervisory relationships emerge when the two academics have already established a strong working relationship where communication is open and trust is well developed. Often co-supervisors have taught courses together, published together, and conducted joint research. In other words, they have already learned to successfully work together in a team context, and they enjoy their collaborative working relationship. Co-supervision also works best when it is student centered, and when co-supervisors view student learning as the primary goal of doctoral education. Individually, each co-supervisor must enjoy team work, be flexible and open to new ideas, and enjoy sharing academic pursuits and accomplishments with others. Watts (2010) agrees that working in a "horizontal team" where colleagues have a mutual respect and willingness to learn from one another creates a more satisfying teaching and learning environment than when one supervisor takes the lead and the second gives support.

The first two authors have successfully co-supervised three doctoral students including the third author of this paper. In addition, they have served as co-supervisors for ten additional doctoral students with nine other faculty members. In all these student–faculty relationships, students have successfully completed their doctoral programs on schedule or are progressing as expected. Using some of the literature in the area as background, we now share our experiences of co-supervision.

Benefits of co-supervision

Bourner and Hughes (1991) identified four benefits of joint or co-supervision: "greater expertise", a "second opinion", "avoiding dependency", and "insurance". The first benefit refers to the idea that "two heads are better than one". With more than one supervisor, there is a chance of greater content and methodological expertise and the likelihood that one of the supervisors will bring more supervisory experience than the other which could in turn benefit the student's progress. Rugg and Petre (2004) go even further, suggesting that the risk of supervisory incompetence is reduced and the likelihood of successful program completion is increased when joint supervision occurs.

The second merit of joint supervision involves the advantage of always having two people who offer

opinions about the student's work. This is closely linked to the third advantage known as "avoiding dependency" since when there are co-supervisors a student lacking confidence is less likely to become dependent on one individual to direct their work. By learning to interact with two academics who work well together and yet have their own perspectives, the doctoral student learns that there are multiple points of view and that academic discourse promotes the development of rigor in the conduct of scholarship.

Finally, "insurance" was discussed as a benefit of co-supervision. Quite practically, it means that if one supervisor leaves for any reason, there remains another supervisor to guide the student. Watts (2010) also speaks to this "insurance" advantage of team supervision in the unfortunate situations of illness, unplanned extended leave, or the death of a supervisor. Such times are referred to as "intellectual bereavement" by Delamont, Atkison, and Parry (2004, p. 84). Watts states that "team supervision clearly protects students from the traumatic upheaval caused by the loss/withdrawal of a supervisor who is the only supervisor on the project and, given the duration of the doctoral project, this benefit should not be underestimated" (p. 339).

We agree with the advantages of co-supervisions identified in the literature. We find that co-supervision brings added expertise and knowledge to the supervisory process. Beyond the content and methodological expertise that is multiplied in co-supervision, the combined backgrounds of each supervisor bring a range of experience to the student's supervisory team. One of us, for example, has significant expertise regarding the research ethics review process, while the other brings extensive expertise regarding doctoral education processes. In addition to sharing common substantive and methodological areas of interest, we each bring non-shared areas of expertise. There is variability in the extent to which co-supervisors complement one another. We believe that being complementary is an asset as it increases the repertoire of skills and knowledge available to students. For example, in our co-supervisory relationship, one of us has worked in acute care settings, is bilingual, and has knowledge related to the history of nursing and health care, and significant experience in curriculum development and evaluation. The other has worked in community health settings and practices in a faith community where she utilizes her expertise in spiritual care, has extensive knowledge of nursing leadership, and contacts with nurse leaders in Canada, the United States, and internationally. Together, we share administrative experience, knowledge of nursing education and programs and

a common philosophy of nursing and nursing education. We conduct research together and have co-published articles and book chapters. Our balanced academic portfolios have included extensive teaching and administrative responsibilities, as well as leadership in professional nursing organizations.

In addition to the advantages of co-supervision already discussed in the literature, we have identified five additional central advantages. They are "the academic relay team", "dealing with language issues", "expanded network", "dealing with interpersonal issues", and "motivation for supervisors".

We discovered that one of the main advantages of co-supervision is what we refer to as the "academic relay team". Although Holloway (1995) and Ives and Rowley (2005) alluded to this advantage in the context of co-supervisors taking leave, we consider this advantage to be broader. In a typical single supervisory situation, when the supervisor is overloaded with their own responsibilities, delays often occur for the doctoral student. This is avoided in a co-supervisory model. Co-supervisors relieve each other when needed. For example, in these situations one of the co-supervisors can take greater responsibility in terms of providing the ongoing faculty contact. However, we find this practice to be successful only when co-supervisors remain in contact and continue to share in all decision making. This shared decision making is achieved by phone, e-mail, or face-to-face discussions between co-supervisors even when one of them is taking the lead in the current student activities.

The advantage of the co-supervisory "academic relay team" is also present in other aspects of student supervision. Co-supervisors can alternate primary responsibility in assisting students to apply for research funds, present findings at conferences, and prepare manuscripts. Doctoral supervision also involves numerous requests for reference letters, progress reports, post-doctoral applications, and eventually references for future employment. Again such requests may become very time consuming and may be required at inopportune times. Co-supervision alleviates some of the pressure by determining who in the partnership has more time to respond to the immediate request in a timely fashion.

We find that co-supervision can be particularly advantageous when "dealing with language issues", such as when the language of instruction is not the first language of the student. Such situations may require significant supervisory time and guidance especially in the writing phases of a program. In co-supervision, this responsibility is shared. Furthermore, in our practice the student receives extensive feedback from two supervisors

which provides varied and comprehensive review of student writing which is similar to a normal process of manuscript review.

Critical to the doctoral student process is recruitment of additional committee members and examiners who offer content and methodological expertise and are able to critique the student's work at critical points in the program. Co-supervision provides an "expanded network" of colleagues from which to recruit these experts. From the beginning of a co-supervisory relationship with a doctoral student, both co-supervisors are actively thinking about, discussing and recruiting appropriate faculty members from the nursing discipline and other related disciplines to join the student's committee or participate in the various examination processes. As the team of people working with students broadens, additional expertise is shared which maximizes learning and ultimately provides a rich research experience. These additional members contribute to the student's course work as well as to the student's comprehensive exams, candidacy exam, and final oral exam. The advantage of co-supervision in this part of the doctoral student supervision process is that the pool of available additional faculty members is significantly increased when two supervisors combine their professional contact networks. The final step of a doctoral program involves locating and securing an external examiner from another university either in Canada or selected from international experts. The role of the external examiner is to provide an outside perspective on the quality of the doctoral student's research and knowledge of their area of developing expertise. It has also been our experience that the pool of possible external examiners expands when a co-supervisory team is in place. Each co-supervisor has different professional contacts from which possible external examiners can be drawn.

Authors of related literature suggest that interpersonal relationship issues may arise between students and their supervisor. For example, Nelson and Friedlander (2001) found that students reported stress and self-doubt and that many had to seek support from peers and other professionals to overcome power struggles with supervisors. We find co-supervision useful in "dealing with interpersonal issues". In a co-supervisory situation it is unlikely that tensions will develop between the student and both supervisors. If tension exists between one of the co-supervisors and the student, the other co-supervisor can act as a mediator to diffuse tension. In addition, co-supervisors can support one another and work together to strategize when student situations become challenging. We have experienced times when

one of us reached a point of frustration or exhaustion in working with a student and the other co-supervisor was able to take over for a while. Usually with time and space, the situation or the co-supervisor's perspective changed and the threesome regrouped and carried on to completion. In such cases, the student was able to continue working on their progress through the program without unnecessary delay.

One final advantage of co-supervisory relationships that has only been alluded to in the literature (Bourner & Houghes, 1991) is that it can serve as "motivation for the co-supervisors". For us, this is a major benefit of the co-supervisory model. Co-supervising doctoral students gives us more opportunity to participate in joint scholarly endeavors which are intellectual stimulating and enriching, while also preventing the isolation that can arise in academic life.

Challenges of co-supervision

Phillips and Pugh (1987), a widely read book for people considering or already in doctoral programs, identified potential perils of joint supervision. They are: "diffusion of responsibility", "getting conflicting advice", "playing one supervisor off against the other", and "lack of an overall academic view". These perils have also been discussed by Bourner and Hughes (1991) who have added a fifth: "meetings bloody meetings" (p. 22). We will discuss each of these possible challenges of co-supervision and share from our experience how these perils are avoided.

The first possible challenge of co-supervision is the possibility that the commitment of each co-supervisor is less than when there is only one supervisor, thus resulting in a "diffusion of responsibility". In such cases there is a chance that a student's problem is ignored because each co-supervisor thinks the other is dealing with it (Phillips & Pugh, 1987). In our experience, this is not a concern because our relationship as colleagues is clearly defined and has been tested in previous academic endeavors. Another way by which this peril is avoided is that normally supervisory meetings with students are conducted with both co-supervisors present. An agenda is jointly constructed by the student and the co-supervisors, and meetings notes are recorded by the student. These notes are then shared with both co-supervisors to ensure that each person in the triad has the same understanding of what has been decided. With such a thorough process of documenting supervisory meetings, there is little room

for anyone to assume that someone else is taking responsibility for something that has indeed been assigned to them. Phillips and Pugh (2000) also suggest that all members of the team, including the student, should be clear about respective team members' responsibilities following a supervisory meeting.

Another danger of co-supervision could be students "getting conflicting advice" resulting in the student either being caught between the co-supervisors or experiencing confusion because of unclear directions. As discussed earlier, we hold pre-supervisory discussions when we believe we may disagree on a course of action, and as well we ensure that supervisory meetings are well documented. Paramount to successful co-supervision, we discuss and reach agreement regarding any issues prior to each supervisory meeting. This is accomplished in person, by phone, or by e-mail. These pre-supervisory meetings help each of us articulate our position and rationale prior to meeting with the student. This step in and of itself helps us learn about each other's perspectives and build consensus prior to meeting with the student. Watts (2010) reinforces the importance of such pre-supervision communication between supervisors regarding their views of the student's work and overall progress in order to avoid splintered messages to the student.

In a worst-case scenario, a co-supervision relationship could result in a student "playing one supervisor off against the other" in order to avoid following advice that they might not wish to take. An example of this happening might be akin to a child going first to one parent and requesting something and then when not successful, going to the second parent to make the same request or even suggesting that the request will be granted by the other parent if the second parent agrees. As in these parenting situations, such situations can be avoided if there are few meetings with the student and one of the co-supervisors. When such meetings occur, they might be for reasons other than decision making. To avoid this situation, the ground rules are set early in our triad relationships and this curtails the likelihood of experiencing this phenomenon. One of the ground rules is that most supervisory meetings occur with all members of the triad present. A strong relationship between the two co-supervisors enhances the chances of a solid supervisory relationship that cannot be affected by a student who might have other goals in mind. Co-supervisors should ask themselves a number of questions before taking on co-supervision to insure that a good working relationship exists. Some of these questions include: (1) Have I worked with the other co-supervisor in a number of different types of academic experiences? (2) Have I felt a sense of wanting to work collaboratively with this colleague? (3) How have the other co-supervisor and I handled conflicts that have emerged in previous joint working situations? (4) Do I get the feeling that the other proposed co-supervisor enjoys working in a collaborative situation with me or do I sense a more competitive environment in the situation of working with the other co-supervisor?

Some would be concerned that with more than one supervisor, there is a "lack of an overall academic view", with no one taking complete responsibility for the student's doctoral education process. This as well has not been a concern. In our experience, the opposite has actually occurred. When two faculty members are responsible for a student's progress and the production of a doctoral dissertation, there is often double the concern that a scholarly product is the end result. When one of the co-supervisors overlooks some important detail in the doctoral student's process toward completion, the other co-supervisor often remembers the specific detail. In our experiences of working together in a co-supervision relationship, several examples come to mind. In one instance, one of the co-supervisors remembered to remind the student to register in each term of the PhD program even though no courses were being taken and only dissertation/thesis credits were included in each term's registration. In another situation, one of the co-supervisors remembered a specific university policy about the invitation of external examiners who must not have been in that role within the university over the past two years and who have supervised to completion PhD students of their own. Remembering these policies when inviting an external examiner saved considerable time. Had these details not been remembered by one of the co-supervisors, the external examiner might have been invited, have accepted the invitation, and then have been denied by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research because they did not meet the criteria, thus delaying the process of determining the external examiner in the final stage of the PhD program.

Finally, there is concern that co-supervision will consist of "meetings bloody meetings". This is a legitimate concern in times of increasing academic work loads. However, this concern is alleviated by holding meetings only when absolutely needed, most often at the call of the student or at the request of the co-supervisors when student initiative is lagging. Each meeting is well planned and carefully documented to insure maximum benefit for everyone involved. The student has clear directions as to next steps and the co-supervisors have clear ideas about what their next responsibilities involve. Most often, the meetings are established at regular

intervals with the frequency being influenced by the stage of the student's program. During the early part of the program while the student is taking courses, there is limited need for frequent meetings. However, when the student gets into the phases of comprehensive exams, proposal writing, data collection and analysis, and write up of the dissertation, there is often a need for more frequent meetings. At the beginning of a term, mutual dates are set for the entire term and meetings are canceled if not needed. This eliminates the frustration of trying to book meetings for three people on the spur of the moment. The student initiates the meeting agenda for each meeting and the co-supervisors add agenda items. The student takes the initiative of writing up the meeting notes after each meeting. They are then sent to the co-supervisors to ensure accuracy, and each member of the triad keeps a record of final meeting notes.

We have presented the benefits and challenges of co-supervision from the literature as well as the perspectives of two faculty members who have vast experience with doctoral student co-supervision. Next we consider the views of a former doctoral student, now a faculty member herself, in terms of how co-supervision benefitted her. She will also consider any challenges that co-supervision presented her while she was a doctoral student.

Views from a former doctoral student

I (third author) came from Pakistan to Canada to begin my doctoral studies and was initially guided by one supervisor who facilitated every aspect of my studies and my adaptation to a new country. After one year of studies, circumstances arose, which led to the need to change supervisor. The search for a new supervisor ultimately led to two faculty members (first and second authors) agreeing to co-supervise the remainder of my doctoral studies. Initially I was overwhelmed with the process of changing supervisor and was wondering if co-supervision was being proposed because I was perceived as a "trouble maker".

In my first meeting with the co-supervisors, the meaning and process of co-supervision were explained. It was clear that both of them would be equal in their role and that all decisions would be made with both supervisors. I was also told to communicate with both of them for any matter pertinent to my studies. Moreover, they requested that I write notes after each meeting and share these notes with them, so that we all had a

common understanding of decisions made and next steps to be taken. This form of co-supervision was different from how I believed the process would unfold. I had assumed I would contact one faculty member who would communicate with and seek assistance from the other faculty member as needed. In retrospect, the information about clarity of roles and communication among the triad was a key for success in the co-supervision arrangement. If it had not been made clear to me, that both would be fully involved, I might have been inclined to communicate and depend on the one I already knew. Consequently, the authority of the other co-supervisor would have been undermined, albeit inadvertently, and thus may have led to conflicts among the triad (Phillips & Pugh, 1987) which I happened to observe with other fellow students.

For the first few months, my experience of being co-supervised was somewhat challenging, as working in a triad was different from working with one supervisor. I missed the interpersonal closeness with one supervisor; I was cognizant of their roles as "equals" while my level of comfort and bonding was not the same with both supervisors. I made a conscious effort to view them as equal. Coming from a very hierarchical culture in Pakistan, sometimes I used to wonder which supervisor's name to put first in my communication with them and finally decided to go alphabetically except for matters where I was responding to a message that was received from one of them, but made sure the other supervisor was copied on the message. Similarly, for any initiative requiring supervisor's approval, I had to consult both of them unless one of them was on vacation.

Endorsement from two people was not an issue for me except in situations when there was a time constraint. For example, once I was applying for a student travel bursary that needed the supervisor's endorsement and when I learned about the opportunity, it was the last day of application. If I had not been pressed for time, I would have written to both of them and would have met them as per their suggestion and availability. However, I knew that one of my co-supervisors would be in her office, so I approached her and explained the situation. My need was met and the information was communicated to the other supervisor without any issue. Before taking this step, I was anxious about the outcome of this approach because in a way, I was violating the set guidelines of taking endorsement from both the supervisors. Without a trusting relationship, such situations could become a source of tension between the supervisors and thus affect the student. I was fortunate to have co-supervisors who shared a long professional association, knew

each other well and shared common views about supervision. My advice to doctoral students in seeking co-supervisors would be not only to consider their content and methodological expertise but also to seek information about the length and quality of their previous collaboration.

The power differential between student and faculty is a known phenomenon (Clark, 2008; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2001). At first, I feared that this power differential would be doubled with two supervisors who had an established relationship; basically, I was the newcomer to this triad. However, gradually, as I developed a relationship with both faculty members I began to enjoy the intellectual discourse that occurred in our triad, and increasingly felt comfortable and valued.

Concurrent with advantages of co-supervision (Bourner & Houghes, 1991; Rugg & Petre, 2004), I greatly benefitted from the varied expertise of my co-supervisors. I gained knowledge and skills from the advisement of two professors. I learned from them about undertaking and writing research, but also learned about their approaches to supervision and their styles of feedback. For example, one of them would ask questions that allowed me to think deeply, whereas the other would sometime use sign language (e.g. happy face) in providing feedback on my written work. Having seen the positive impact of these strategies on my own learning, I have adopted both of these strategies for giving feedback to my own graduate students. I learned valuable and different approaches to academic writing from each of my co-supervisors.

Because my studies were sponsored, I had to complete my doctoral program within a specific time frame in order to return to my faculty responsibilities in Pakistan. In addition, unforeseen family obligations required me to return home on several occasions. These factors were stressful. However, with the consistent support and coordinated efforts of my co-supervisors, I was able to complete my doctoral program successfully and on schedule.

Contrary to the perils of "diffusion of responsibility" and "getting conflicting advice" in co-supervision (Phillips & Pugh, 1987), I truly experienced the advantages of an "academic relay team". Although the degree of feedback that I received from my co-supervisors varied, their advice was either similar or complimentary instead of conflicting. Moreover, when their suggestions appeared to be contradictory, their differing perspectives along with solid rationale led to good discussion and additional learning. For example, I recall a discussion about research methods that occurred when I was writing my research proposal. In this case I was receiving two different suggestions from the co-supervisors. Our discussion stretched my thinking and helped me arrive at a sound decision. Exposure to such situations offered me an opportunity to become more open-minded, value professional dialogue, appreciate diversity of approaches, and develop research leadership skills for the future.

In summary, I believe that co-supervision has more advantages than disadvantages for the student when the co-supervisors work well together. This experience has been useful in developing my own supervisory skills and abilities when I co-supervise graduate students in my country.

Conclusion

When doctoral students report dissatisfaction with their graduate experience, it often relates to supervisory issues. As the three of us reflected back on our experience of a supervisory triad, we came to the collective conclusion that when well-executed, co-supervision may be one of the best models for increasing student and faculty satisfaction, promoting quality scholarship, and ensuring timely program completion. Our reflections also further confirmed that co-supervision should not be solely reserved for mentoring novice faculty members. There is too much to be gained from co-supervision to limit its use only to the early stage of one's academic career.

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