

Chapter 18

Effective Intercultural Supervision: Using Reflective Practice to Enhance Students' and Supervisors' Intercultural Competence



Haoran Zheng, Henny Herawati, and Sanikan Saneewong

Abstract For international doctoral students who choose to engage with those from other cultures, participation in this globalised higher education environment offers collaborative academic, educational, and social opportunities. However, international doctoral students also face dilemmas in that they need to make sense of the knowledge and expectations existing in the transnational space while negotiating the structures of academia. One challenge that emerges from the literature is the intercultural experiences between students and supervisors. In this chapter, we propose that the use of reflective practice can encourage both international doctoral students and their supervisors to work simultaneously and collaboratively to tackle challenges and issues from intercultural supervision experiences. We suggest that reciprocal efforts are valuable for establishing a positive and efficient intercultural supervision relationship.

Keywords Intercultural supervision · Intercultural competence · Intercultural learning · Reflective practice · International student experience

Introduction

In the previous chapter, Cutri and Pretorius demonstrated that the higher education system has become increasingly globalised (see Chap. 17). For international doctoral students who choose to engage with those from other cultures, participation in this globalised higher education environment offers collaborative academic, educational, and social opportunities (see Chap. 22). However, according to Rizvi (2010), international doctoral students also face dilemmas in that they need to make sense of the knowledge and expectations existing in the transnational space while

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negotiating the structures of academia. This poses challenges including academic and English language issues (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2016; McClure, 2007; Sawir, 2005), financial stress (Akanwa, 2015; Burns, 1991; Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2009), and social disconnection (Gomes, 2017).

One important component of a doctoral journey is the student–supervisor relationship. Effective postgraduate supervision should involve the process of providing a social learning environment to international students where they can construct new knowledge grounded in the discipline’s community of practice (Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, & Yunus, 2013). The relationships established between supervisors and doctoral students through the process of supervision can evolve into broader partnerships and collaboration opportunities in future projects (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). However, intercultural postgraduate supervision can result in additional miscommunications and even potential conflicts between students and supervisors who are culturally different. Key to addressing this challenge while developing effective forms of cultural competence is recognising doctoral supervision as a site to develop intercultural knowledge (Manathunga, 2017), given the increasing recognition that the action of supervision can be a cultural practice (Grant, 2005).

In this chapter, we propose that reflective practice, as a pedagogical practice, can be an effective tool to understand, engage in, and enhance international doctoral students’ intercultural competence. By reflecting on our own experiences, we hope we can offer some insights into how reflective practice can help to deal with intercultural miscommunication. We also hope supervisors gain a valuable understanding of international students’ intercultural experiences, leading to improved intercultural supervision.

Intercultural Competence

Being an international doctoral student means constant negotiation of one’s new identities in a new intercultural space (Soong, Thi Tran, & Hoa Hiep, 2015). We, the authors of this chapter, are all international students studying at a large Australian university and supervised by domestic supervisors. While we are from different cultural backgrounds (Chinese, Thai, and Indonesian), all three of us have experienced similar challenges in terms of our intercultural interactions with our supervisors. Based on our experiences, we have highlighted one interaction in a supervision meeting below.

I was feeling upset and extremely worried after this meeting with my supervisors. Both supervisors had suggested that I make significant changes to my project. I did not think this new direction to my research was warranted, but I did not speak up. I did not have the courage to disagree with my supervisors or express my opinions. Instead, I just sat there nodding and thinking that obeying my supervisors was the best thing to do. Now they have given me a lot of additional reading for this new direction in my research, and I have to present my understanding at our meeting next week. Why did I not just tell them what I thought?

All three of us have had this type of experience. As we reflected on our experiences, we realised that the challenge described was significantly influenced by intercultural miscommunication. From the above excerpt, the root of the student's anxiety was triggered by differences in culture-specific teaching and learning.

My supervisors may not be aware of my opinions. In my culture, teachers are highly respected. Thus, to overtly disagree with them is deemed to be extremely impolite. My silence was a way to show respect to and avoid conflict with my supervisor. However, my supervisors probably understood my silence to be agreement with their point of view.

The interpretation of silence varied between the student and her supervisors, which led to misunderstanding and some confusion. If the student and the supervisors were able to develop their intercultural competence, the misunderstanding and confusion could be resolved.

The definition of intercultural competence varies depending on disciplinary differences. Intercultural competence is inextricably linked to the term *culture*. In this chapter, culture is understood to describe “intergenerational attitudes, values, beliefs, rituals/customs and behavioural patterns into which people are born but that is structurally created and maintained by people’s ongoing actions” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7). Generally speaking, intercultural competence is connected to an individual’s ability to think and act effectively across cultures (Whaley & Davis, 2007). In a broader sense, intercultural competence can be understood as a process of learning and adjusting to a new cultural context (Barker, 2015). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) propose that intercultural competence is the “appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive and behavioural orientations to the world” (p. 7). In this chapter, intercultural competence is defined as an individual’s ability to think and act effectively across cultures through accommodation of cultural differences (Dalib, Harun, & Yusof, 2017; Sandell & Tupy, 2015). Importantly, intercultural competence should be seen as an ongoing process rather than an intermittent activity (Deardorff, 2011). Additionally, it is important to note that intercultural competence takes time to develop as it involves self-reflection and assessment (Deardorff, 2011).

As highlighted by Lee (2006), we are shaped by our culture; our ways of expression and beliefs are culturally influenced. In her reflection, the student notes that openly disagreeing with her supervisor would be a sign of disrespect. However, her silence is misinterpreted by her supervisors because of cultural differences in understanding silence. In some Asian cultures, silence can be interpreted as expressing a position or voice; in contrast, many Western cultures interpret silence more negatively, thinking that it shows a lack of competency or critical thinking (Bao, 2014). These intercultural differences can be overcome by both sides understanding their cultural differences, becoming interculturally competent students and supervisors.

To be interculturally competent, individuals must understand the social customs and systems of the host culture. Chen (1989) asserts that there are four dimensions of intercultural competence: personal attributes, communication skills, psychologi-

cal adaptation, and cultural awareness. The personal attributes dimension refers to a person's ability to know themselves, while the communication skills dimension includes the ability to communicate both verbally and non-verbally (Chen, 1989). The psychological adaptation dimension refers to a person's ability to handle psychological feelings such as frustration, stress, and alienation in a new environment (Chen, 1989). Finally, the cultural awareness dimension describes a person's understanding of how environment shapes personal thinking (Chen, 1989). Deardorff (2011) further developed the understanding of intercultural competence by arguing that critical thinking, attitudes, and the ability to see from others' perspectives also play an important role. Deardorff (2011) defines intercultural competence as effective management of an interaction between people from different nationalities, ethnicities, or religious backgrounds. Deardorff (2011) also explicitly categorises these concepts into five elements, developing a model which includes attitudes, knowledge, skills, as well as internal and external outcomes. It is important to know that this model of intercultural competence emphasises the acquisition and processing of knowledge about one's own culture as well as developing an understanding of other cultures.

The model described by Deardorff (2011) moves from the individual level of attitudes and personal attributes to the interactive cultural level such as internal and external outcomes. We contend that the individual attributes of international doctoral students can be fostered through the supervision process so that both internal and external outcomes can be achieved. In research degrees in Australian universities, collaborative team supervision is now regarded as the best practice for supervision of doctoral candidates (Robertson, 2017a). However, under this model, the power relations between multiple supervisors, as well as between supervisors and students, can be complex (Robertson, 2017b). As a result, international doctoral students' intercultural competence can act as a mediator to negotiate the student-supervisor relationship (Lev Ari & Mula, 2017).

Intercultural Supervision

The use of intercultural competence in student-supervisor interactions can be termed intercultural supervision – a pedagogical concept that is rich in possibility but also a “place of puzzling and confronting complexity” (Grant & Manathunga, 2011, p. 351). Although intercultural supervision is prevalent in Australian higher education due to the significant intake of international students (Singh & Chen, 2012), it is interesting that this field is notably understudied. The leading researchers in this field are Manathunga and Grant whose work draws on the concepts of power and identity dynamics to explore intercultural supervision. For example, in two studies exploring intercultural doctoral supervision from the supervisors' perspectives, Manathunga (2014, 2017) found that some supervisors held assimilationist perspectives and had deficit opinions toward students from other cultures. In one interview, one supervisor even noted that they did not have time to understand their

doctoral students' different cultural backgrounds that shaped their students' experiences (Manathunga, 2014). This supervisor believed that treating all doctoral students equally helped to maintain academic standards and thesis quality (Manathunga, 2014). Similarly, another supervisor commented that international doctoral students' English issues could be concerning and that, therefore, she had lower expectations for them (Manathunga, 2014). In contrast, when it comes to intercultural supervision, international doctoral students expect their supervisors to have a certain level of knowledge about their culture (Ryan, 2012). From these examples it is clear that there is a miscommunication in expectations from supervisors and students.

Both Manathunga and Grant highlight that there is a tendency for supervisors to focus on identifying intercultural issues, rather than proposing approaches and strategies that students, supervisors, and other stakeholders can employ to achieve success in intercultural communication (see, e.g., Grant, 2005; Manathunga, 2014). We contend that both supervisors and students should incorporate personal reflective practice to enhance their intercultural interactions. Reflective practice first emerged through the work of Dewey (1933). Since then, many scholars have extended the understanding of reflective practice. In this chapter, we term reflective practice as the international doctoral students' practice of understanding, analysing, and evaluating their experiences in order to enhance their intercultural competence. This type of intercultural reflective practice can foster students' and supervisors' ability to explore their own experiences, beliefs, or knowledge to promote personal growth and improve intercultural understanding.

Intercultural Reflective Practice in Action

This chapter uses the "What? So what? Now what?" model of reflective practice (Driscoll, 2000; Pretorius & Ford, 2016; Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2001). As was described earlier in this book (see Chap. 4), this approach is simple and flexible for individual introspection. In the following section, we use the student's experience detailed earlier to provide some insights into how this model can be used to facilitate intercultural communication between doctoral students and supervisors.

What?

The *What?* dimension focuses on describing the situation (see Chap. 4). We have already described the situation that the student experienced in her supervisor meeting. In brief, the supervisors had discussed a potential change in the student's research focus. Even though the student did not agree with the suggestions, she remained silent, nodding as her supervisors gave her more reading.

So What?

The *So what?* dimension of reflection is designed to help us examine our thoughts and feelings to better understand the experience (see Chap. 4). In her reflection, the student noted that she was feeling extremely unhappy and worried after her meeting. Additionally, her upcoming supervisory meeting was causing her even more stress and anxiety. By deeply reflecting on her experience, the student realised that her anxiety was caused by a miscommunication between her and her supervisors. This miscommunication resulted from cultural differences and the power imbalance between her and her supervisors. The student realised that, if she wanted to improve her supervision meetings in the future, she needed to develop a better understanding of the culture in which she was embedded.

I needed to take a conscious look at my emotions and reactions to understand my experience and problems. I realised that, even though I did not agree with my supervisors, I did not discuss my misgivings. My silence was misinterpreted for agreement, and as a result I had a lot of additional reading to do in a field that I did not think was relevant to my project. After the meeting, I felt unsure. I was reluctant to embark on this new direction of research. The readings my supervisors gave me seemed unclear (from my perspective anyway), but I was reluctant to email my supervisors for advice. This further affected my motivation, causing me to procrastinate instead of doing what I was supposed to.

Now What?

The *Now what?* dimension allows us to develop a step-by-step action plan to overcome the challenges identified in the reflection (see Chap. 4). Thinking about ways she can improve, the student notes:

I now realise that I should have said something. In the future I should discuss these issues with my supervisor, instead of just accepting their points of view. If I remain silent to try and avoid conflict, it will only increase my stress and lead to more misunderstandings between me and my supervisors. I need to organise a meeting with my supervisors to communicate my feelings and thoughts that have arisen as a result of this reflection. This will help our student-supervisor relationship. If we can understand each other better, our supervision meetings will be much more successful. Once I step out of my comfort zone, I will be able to engage more critically in discussions with my supervisors. This can also influence my peers' actions in terms of communicating with their supervisors.

Supervisors' Perspectives

We have illustrated the What? So what? Now what? model from the student's perspective. However, it is important that supervisors also reflect on their experiences. When thinking about the above-mentioned situation from the supervisors' perspective, it was culturally reasonable for the supervisors to assume the student's silence

was a sign of agreement. However, given the cultural background of their student, it would have been prudent for the supervisors to reflect on the interaction. Effective reflection on the meeting and subsequent interaction with the student would highlight potential issues in the student–supervisor interaction. We would recommend the following strategies for supervisors to improve their ability for intercultural supervision.

- Attend cultural competence workshops to better understand international doctoral students’ backgrounds.
- Discuss supervisory styles with students early during the student–supervisor relationship.
- Explore cultural backgrounds of both the student and supervisors early in the student–supervisor relationship.
- Keep in mind that the power dynamics between student and supervisors can influence a student’s willingness to voice their opinions. Try to provide a safe environment for the student to voice concerns during supervisory meetings.
- At subsequent meetings, discuss the outcomes of the previous meeting, highlighting potential thoughts and feelings that hindered success from both the student’s and supervisors’ perspectives.

Concluding Remarks

Due to the proliferation of international doctoral students enrolled in Australian higher education (see, e.g., Chap. 17), intercultural competence has become an increasingly important aspect of the student–supervisor relationship. In this chapter, we have argued that the use of reflective practice as a pedagogical activity can develop international doctoral students’ and supervisors’ intercultural competence so as to thrive during the PhD journey. We, therefore, recommend that continuous reflection should be practiced throughout the student–supervisor relationship. This reflection for learning approach (see Pretorius & Ford, 2016) will help both students and supervisors to audit themselves and make changes to foster effective intercultural supervision. Consequently, we believe that reflective practice should be embedded in supervisory practice.

Tips for Success

- Both doctoral students and supervisors should be aware of and recognise cultural differences.
- Both doctoral students and supervisors should work on the development of individual intercultural competence to achieve an optimal doctoral learning experience.
- Both doctoral students and supervisors are encouraged to adopt the “What? So What? Now What?” reflective practice model used in this chapter to help them resolve intercultural supervision challenges.

- Both doctoral students and supervisors should develop a strong willingness to engage in open communication to help establish a trusted reciprocal supervisory relationship that allows for meaningful conversations.

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