Cross-cultural doctoral supervision and conceptual threshold crossing

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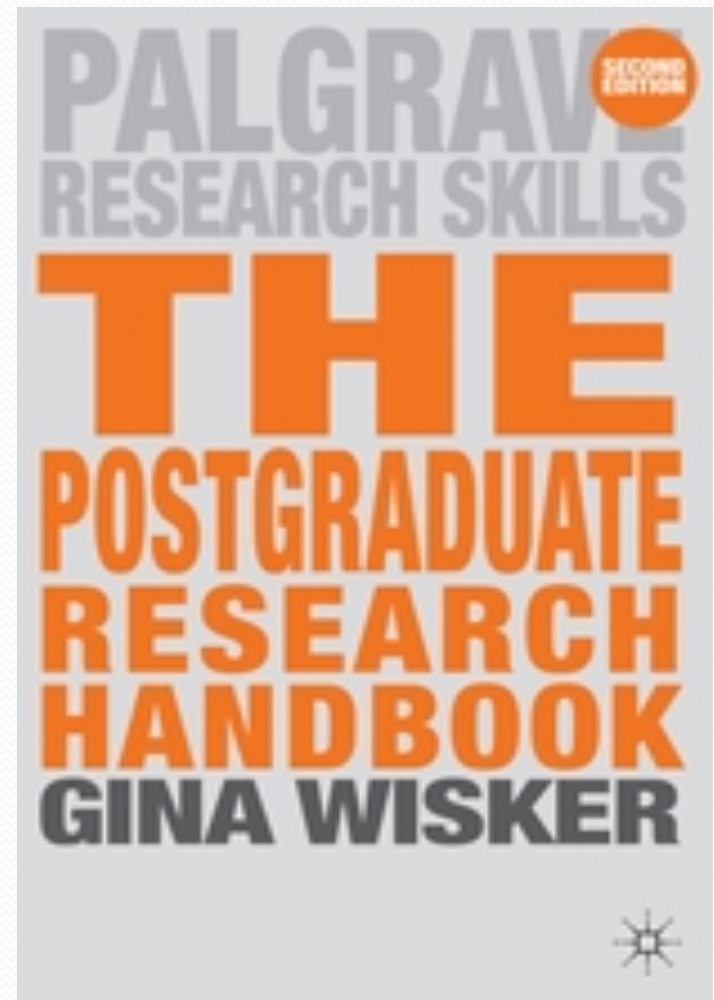
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Journey of talk

- Research learning and the projects *working internationally with postgraduates and supervisors since 1997*

    Context for and questions about **cross cultural supervision**

- Threshold concepts and **conceptual threshold crossings** (learning leaps)

- Doctoral students' comments about learning leaps

- Doctoral students' comments about working cross culturally

- Supervisors' comments and some ideas about nudging and enabling conceptual critical and creative research learning in a cross cultural context

- **We ask in our research - and I ask you**

- **1)** What makes good research learning?

- How do you as supervisor know the student is working at a **conceptual critical and creative** enough level for successful postgraduate work?

- **2)** What are the effects of cross cultural research and supervision on learning behaviours, knowledge creation, quality of learning and of supervision

- How can supervisors, communities and research learning behaviours 'nudge 'enable and empower learning development and recognition of it in cross cultural contexts and interactions?

- Supervising international doctoral students in both UK and other international contexts, issues include
- cultural capital
- 'culturally inflected voice'
- affect students' choice of topics, context, research methodologies and methods, and construction of knowledge.

- Qualitative research -face-to-face and email interviews with students and supervisors
- cultural inflection and perceived related effect to explore the learning, supervising and examining experiences of UK-based and international doctoral students, supervisors and examiners,
- participants from Canada, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, South East Asia, Israel and the UK and in China, Saudi Arabia, and Europe.

- Global increase in numbers of postgraduates
- Increasing mobility of postgraduates and supervisors
- cross cultural supervision now a norm.

- potential cultural imperialism in supervision,
- gender and culture play a large part in any research relationship. (Grant, 2008; Manathunga, 2007) (Grant and McKinley, 2010).
- The invisible hegemony of any culturally dominant group can be illuminated and challenged when difference is recognized and respect for, enabling, and celebration of the differences that students bring is part of the creative contribution to and enrichment of research cultures, however challenging. Research into supervisor and examiner behaviours and decisions rarely considers culturally inflected differences.

We look at

- 'the culturally inflected voice', which the student develops in their research and its outcomes.

- This focus recognises and values the impact of cultural difference on choice of topic and conduct of research, the cultural contextual inflections reported by postgraduate students,

- suggests effective ways of supervising and enabling these cultural inflections in a research context which differs from that of the international student.

- asks early tentative questions about the effects of culturally contextualised issues upon completion of the PhD.

threshold concepts and conceptual threshold crossings

- Threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2006)
- Conceptual threshold crossings (Wisker, Kiley, Robinson 2008--)

- Early work (Wisker, Kiley, Trafford & Leshem) has started to identify **threshold concepts and conceptual thresholds** at the research education level (EARLI 2007, QPR 2006, 2008, Threshold concepts conferences 2006,2008, 2010, 2012; EARLI 2009)
- Postgraduates' experiences with threshold concepts and conceptual threshold crossing
- Supervisors' experiences of identifying students' conceptual threshold crossing and 'nudging' them across.

Conceptual Threshold Crossing in Doctoral Learning Journeys

- We developed the notion of **conceptual threshold crossings** to identify moments when postgraduate students make learning leaps and begin to work at a more conceptual critical and creative fashion-

- Developed from threshold concepts in the disciplines

Threshold concept

- The absolutely essential concepts for understanding how knowledge is constructed and the world is seen in a discipline

- 'Akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress….' (Meyer & Land, 2003)

Threshold concept & conceptual threshold crossing

Threshold concept
- *Transformative*
- *Irreversible*
- *Integrative*
- *Troublesome Knowledge*

Conceptual threshold crossing - 'learning leaps'
- *Ontological change*
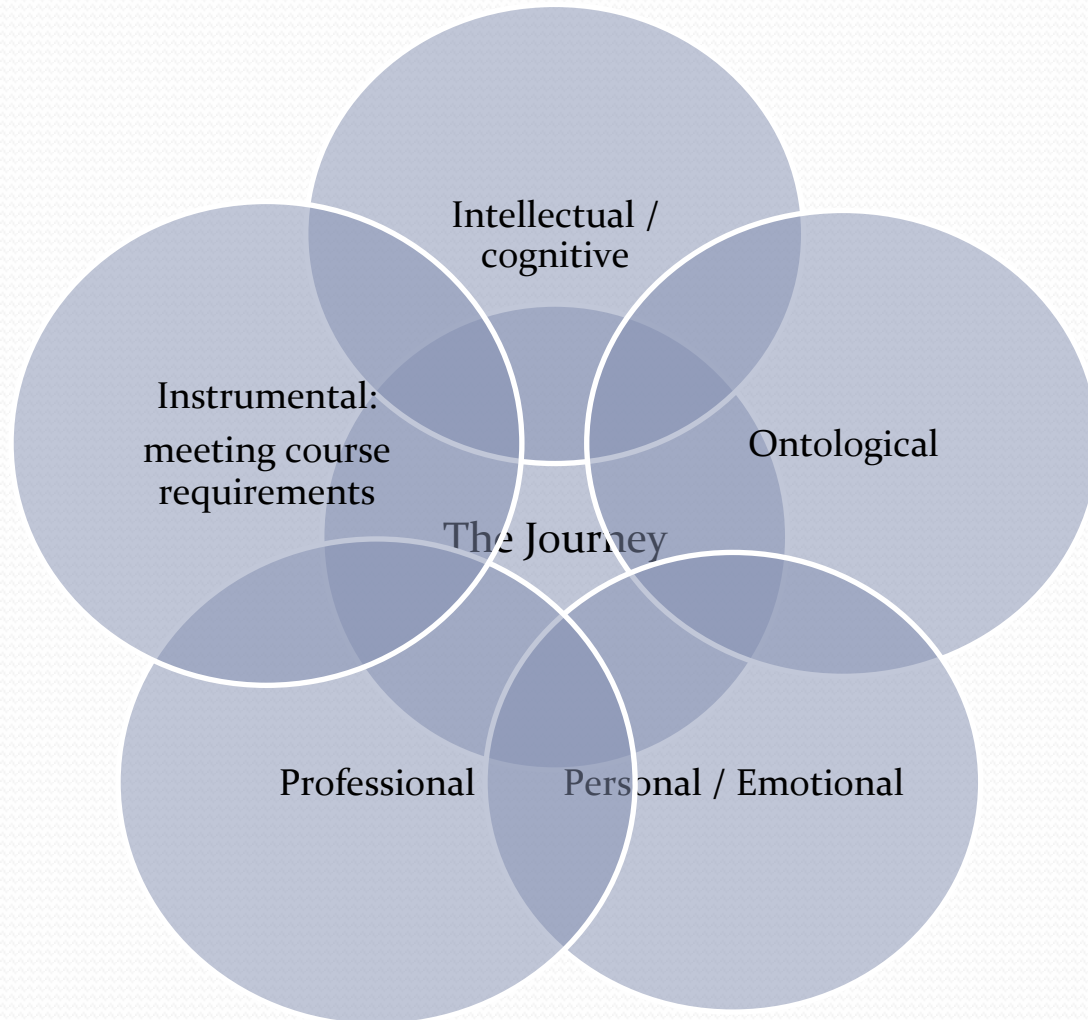- *Epistemological contribution*

Question   Please consider

- Does the idea of
- crossing a threshold,
- making a 'learning leap',
- working at a new level,
- working at a conceptual, critical, creative level

- Sound like a way of describing your own experiences of key moments in your development as a learner, particularly as a researcher, a postgraduate?

Research questions for 1 & 2

- How do doctoral students signify their awareness of working conceptually?

- How do students' conceptual grasp and comments display crossing of subject-specific and generic doctoral thresholds?

- How do supervisors recognise students' conceptual grasp of research?

- What strategies and activities do supervisors use to encourage or 'nudge' conceptual grasp by doctoral students?

- How do examiners identify and assess conceptually-robust research outcomes and skills developments?

Research learning journeys: multi-dimensional. Culturally inflected contexts, approaches and cross cultural supervisory interactions relate to all of these

Intellectual / cognitive

Instrumental: meeting course requirements

Ontological

The Journey

Professional

Personal / Emotional

Identity and the way you see the world

- We argue that when a candidate's behaviour changes it suggests that they have crossed a particular conceptual threshold and that this indicates an ontological shift, a change in identity
- Behaviours such as:
  - Working conceptually, critically and creatively rather than just busily
  - Production of an abstract and a conclusions chapter which deal with concepts not merely facts
  - Being able to put forward an argument supported by evidence

Identifying conceptual threshold crossings

- A stage/stages when students develop project ownership and researcher identity
- New ideas- feeling the work becoming 'clever'
- Theoretical breakthrough-literature review
- Fieldwork breakthrough
- Breakthrough in accepting supervisors' guidance
- New perspectives and more complex understanding enabled by dialogue, casting new light

- A gradual process
- A single process
- A series of learning leaps

learning moments/ crossing conceptual thresholds

Learning moments where students indicate conceptual threshold crossing

In both the survey and interviews, postgraduate students have used a variety of metaphors to describe their learning journeys and experiences.

Learning leaps are often described metaphorically, in visual terms ('a lightbulb moment') or kinaesthetic terms ('things clicked into place')

- as are moments where students feel they are stuck, e.g. 'I hit a brick wall'.

The learning leaps or conceptual threshold crossings are likely to occur when researchers

- Identify research questions;
- Engage with the literature in a dialogue
- Determine relationships between existing theories and their own work;
- devise methodology and engage with methods;
- Analyse and interpret data
- See self as 'researcher', practitioner within field, e.g. sociologist
- Become part of academic community
- Contribute knowledge, engaging in debate
- Take ownership of and responsibility for work
- Reach conclusions - conceptual as well as factual.
- Present to peers and others.

- **Supervisors can support, enable and 'nudge ' these developments through dialogues, reading, organising opportunities and reflection**

Student responses: crossing a conceptual threshold….

- *In terms of learning moments I think you have those small or medium moments every now and again, don't you, when you read and you are exposed to new ideas and you think ah now, I've got it and then actually a couple of weeks later you're a bit further but then you have another one of those moments and so you kind of gradually I guess get closer and closer to the final thing, the final shape of your theories and ideas about it.*

- (2nd year Philosophy student)

- *A couple of weeks ago I found that things have stopped ... mentally I found myself up against a brick wall... I just felt that I was kind of stuck and it wasn't moving and it was all bitty, I'd done all these chunks of work but I couldn't really see how they fitted together and yeah so I reached quite a crisis point. Especially when I got negative feedback I just felt quite down hearted about it and, but like I say I think having the supervision, talking it through, taking a step back from everything, taking it to bits and being questioned about everything and then having to simplify everything, in order to present. I mean over a couple of days - my supervision was one day and my presentation was the next day...*

- *I came out of that whole process feeling that I could kind of see it, I could see that there was shape there... I can see shapes. (1st year Gender Studies student)*

- ***(so what nudged or helped them proceed?)***

Taking ownership

'The balance in the relationship between us is tilting slightly as well because where I was prepared to be guided, going back to assignment one where you are at the beginning stage, the actual balance itself is quite, it's more of an equal partnership in the discussions now.

…So I'm coming with more and more ideas and more and more thoughts and more about, you know, can we meet quickly to discuss this as this has come up as opposed to waiting 'til the next session when we will sit and discuss.'

Becoming part of an
Academic Community

'A big learning experience for me has been that doing a doctorate is not a search for the truth but is really just taking part in a conversation. This doesn't stop me thinking that an 'expert' knows all of the answers and I suppose this is about confidence on my part... [But they don't have my experience] So how can they know everything? and what I have to offer is just as important as theirs, and I suppose that is also a learning experience in that when I sit with the 'learned' in a conference I feel confident in challenging them as I now see myself as a peer.'

Transformation

- *'As time goes on and you start to, you almost develop this skin that is academic and this persona within yourself and as you… get the feedback that comes back and you're thinking about you're doing this the right way and so you begin to start, it's like watching a butterfly I suppose emerge from chrysalis pupa or pupa chrysalis and so on like that and so you begin to develop and I think as that goes on then you gain a certain amount of confidence.' (S3)*

Integration

- *And then there are these wonderful moments where things just slot into place, but only after a long engagement and in depth knowledge ...then suddenly all relates to each other, like my argument is revealing itself to me. Of course this isn't the case... I can't really explain what happens, but it does feel like the pieces of my puzzle physically move towards each other. (S10)*

Supervisors:
Increased confidence

Well, they've got an extra dose of confidence. They've got an extra dose of clarity. They're more confident, they're clearer, and they're probably very inspired to go and do something else quickly, to take advantage of those changes. I think that's right. (S8)

Writing

- *In terms of the reports they can give to you, you can see they've become more sophisticated in their thought process, they're more sophisticated in their analysis of what they're looking at and as to how they're thinking (S9)*

Conference presentation

They could be things that happen externally, they could be somebody does a conference presentation and they realise that their work is comparable with other people presenting (S6)

Confidence building through challenging

I think it's very important that, you know, the supervisors **are able to challenge** *what the student is writing down and actually saying about the literature. Sometimes students are a bit frightened about critically appraising other people's work. it's not until they get to the end of their PhD, when they've transferred, and you say right, now it's time to go back and have a look at this chapter, see what you think about these people's writing now, and it comes back and it's quite different. So I think there is something in there about building confidence and I think you can do that, you can try to do it early on.(S7)*

Allow / encourage students to experiment

Well exactly, that's what I say, there is a risk that you might lose some time but if you come to realise that's not the best way to do things then that's something that they've learnt (S8)

Writing and finishing

- *When they are writing that's when I work really hard with the students. They send me each chapter sometimes several chapters. It's me that goes through the threshold.*

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Cross cultural supervision questions

- How far are topic, academic research practice, process and skills culturally inflected?

- How far are learning and teaching and research methods and approaches culture free and just good practice?

- Cultural imperialism??How far might we be insisting on a Western /masculinist/ positivist/ post-positivist or other learning/teaching or research paradigm, just from familiarity?

- How can research both enable the culturally inflected voice and local influence, and also more widespread, even global, relevance and influence?

- **Considering**
- Some cultures consider that knowledge developed and constructed is shared, so we might enquire about the impact on the Western construct of the individual PhD. (Grant et al, 2010).
- Some cultures consider it insulting to argue with elders or authorities, which affects critical debate (Biggs, 1992).
- Some students might not easily gain access to their population, or 'truths', because of differences in culture, status, or insider/outsider position.
- Some students and supervisors might need to prepare in terms of cultural awareness before engaging in the process together

Early Research into international postgraduate student learning -Israeli Phds 1998-2008 : findings

-preconceptions of learning

-previously rewarded methods and strategies for learning

-learning practices, approaches, motivation, sought for outcomes-accumulation approaches and transformational outcomes-identified through RoLi(Meyer and Boulton Lewis 1997)

- Tertiary literacy

- Power relations

- Avoiding cultural imperialism

- Ensuring mutual cultural respect

- Cultural confusions, misinterpretations, clashes in supervisory context

- Gender , class, religion, age, sexuality inflect learning behaviours, constructions of knowledge, access, interpretations

Students' case studies
Respect, individual research

◆ **Case study 1** - one thing I liked in particular was that I could talk to my English professors as a colleague. They always gave me the feeling of being equal.

◆ **Case study 2** -from discussions with doctorate level students in Israel I anticipated that I would be asked to do a bit of research that interested my advisor; this in addition to course requirements

◆ **Case study 3-** my relationship with staff members was surprisingly friendly in addition to its being professional. Being an orthodox Jew, I am never sure what effect my skullcap will have on others. In addition, many of our sessions took place on Saturdays, a day when I do not write, record, use electricity, or travel. I often felt that the staff members were more accepting of these practices — and hindrances to our work — than some of the secular Israelis.

Case study 4 supervisor

● **Terminology-language**
● -the use of specific terminology poses two challenges. The first is of introducing the candidates to a whole new range of terms and concepts that they have never encountered and the second is of transmitting the meaning of such terms from one culture to another.

- **Culturally located topics and global significance**

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- I think that when writing research about local issues, student has to be aware of it and make effort to explain this local issue in a broader context - what aspects or factors in this research is similar or significant in other countries or cultures? What is this research contribute to universal knowledge?' (Miri Shacham, Interview 27).

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College of Engineering

- **Supervising cross culturally- issues relate to:**

Learning approaches which may be:

- accumulative/meaning oriented
- deferential/critical or questioning
- dependent/independent
- Research approaches which may be biased towards particular methodologies and epistemologies:
- e.g. quantitative/qualitative
- Expected levels of tertiary literacy in reading, writing and speaking
- Expected academic standards
- Religious beliefs
- Pride, hierarchy and status
-
- (Wisker, 2000; Taylor, 2007)

- **While in institutional terms more broadly, concerns which have emerged include:**
- Lack of support and training for supervisors
- Cultural discrimination
- Lack of respect for other cultures
- Lack of cultural empathy
- Lack of cultural awareness
- Supervisors' beliefs that they are academically superior
- Inability to hear the student's voice
- Communication difficulties
- Misunderstanding
- Difficulty in adjusting or changing practice to meet the varied needs of international/culturally diverse postgraduates

Supervisor expectations –research learning approaches

- "I think some international students find the need to work and study independently very hard because there is a very wide spectrum of what people expect from a PhD in X. That is very hard for people who come from a culture where everything is documented." (Interview 10).

- "She found it difficult to be critical and to do critical analysis and would take things very much at first glance. She had very fixed notions, which were impossible for us to change." (Interview 10).

- **Supervisors seeing mutual learning and exchange as a way forward, both recognising cultural inflection, and enabling a dialogue across cultures:**

- 'It is my impression that the way to surmount these cross-cultural difficulties is by a fully engaged dialogue which is fluid and continuous all along the duration of the process.'(Interview 24).

- **Literature reviews** need to be conducted more globally not just US/UK/???
- **Research topics**- Carrying out culturally situated and inflected research has changed the self-image, the confidence and the status of international cross culturally supervised students/graduates .
- **The achievement** of their PhD has enabled them to take their findings and recommendations directly back into their own context and to effect changes built on the back of their new standing as doctors in their community. In these cases, the sense of achievement, usefulness and right to make suggestions for improvements is palpable in their comments.

- **Findings and discussion: What can we do to ensure avoidance of cultural imperialism and to enable transculturalism?**

- seeking the culturally inflected voice alone might well be a limiting factor since:

- 'I believe that in almost every research we have to search for universal contribution to knowledge as we are living nowadays in a "global world" and not in a local culture.' (Miri Shacham, interview 27).

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Ideas and questions

- **How can we help students develop critical, problematising questioning approaches? In a cross cultural supervision context? so that they cross conceptual thresholds and work effectively- conceptually, critically and creatively?**

- How do we find out about culturally different contexts, issues, learning styles, expectations, behaviours?

- How much do we adjust our supervision? How?

- Should we 'accept' 'encourage' 'enable' 'empower' different learning approaches and research modes? What does this mean? When is it in appropriate? How can we do it?

- How and can we put students in touch with tertiary literacy support if needed - what sort of support? What are the issues? How much do *we* need to 'work with their English?'

- But it is important to note that successful PhD students often wish to subsume the cultural context in to the doctoral achievement, so one notes: 'it transcends the cultural setting it doesn't invalidate' (Interview 29).

Cross cultural supervision- comments

- 'Foremost in my mind is the level of trust that should exist between them. In my opinion this is one of the most important issues that a supervisor can attend to. It is relevant in general but more so in the case when the supervisor and candidate operate in different cultures. '

- 'In my experience, cross-cultural interaction when done with care and commitment can be an immensely enriching experience for all participants. I can attest from my own personal experience that I fully enjoyed this interaction with my supervisor and her colleagues.' (Interview 15).

Some effective practices

- Increased awareness of, adjustment to and, where appropriate, foregrounding of *culturally different contexts, learning styles, expectations and behaviours*

- Acceptance of and support for *different learning approaches and research modes,* where this is appropriate

- Need to ensure that students have appropriate access to *tertiary literacy support -for writing, and examination*

- Appropriate selection of supervisor and examiners who have *cultural sensitivity to issues which grow from culturally affected topics, context and expression*

- Enable students to engage with and use research and discipline terminology
- Support culturally contextualised and inflected topics- where appropriate
- Respectful interactions
- Challenging entrenched culturally originated learning behaviours (for both supervisors and students)