Freire and dialogical pedagogy: a means for interrogating opportunities and challenges in Australian postgraduate supervision

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Discussions between new postgraduate students and potential supervisors prior to the formalisation of supervisor-student partnerships serve several useful purposes. One purpose is to explore the expectations that each partner has of the other and of themselves and the anticipated nature of the partnership. This article employs Freire's perspective on dialogical pedagogy as a framework to identify and interrogate opportunities and challenges in postgraduate supervision. Theorising and clarifying the postgraduate supervisory process in these terms at the outset of candidature and at strategic points along the way can save time and effort that might otherwise be devoted to misunderstandings and less than optimum progress. It also has implications for lifelong education for both supervisors and students that can be realised beyond the period of candidature and the substantive and methodological gains normally associated with successful completion of a thesis.

Introduction

The recognised foremost thinkers and writers whose ideas have inspired work on conceptualising dialogical pedagogy are the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire and the Russian philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin. While the conceptual bases of these writers shared some significant features and could be used in tandem to frame an interrogation of supervisor-student dialogue at the postgraduate level, each has a substantively distinctive take on the concept that warrants dedicated consideration before combining the approaches of both thinkers to the subject. This article represents the second paper in this trilogy, the first being an application of a Bakhtinian approach to dialogical pedagogy to the study of postgraduate supervisory practices (Danaher *et al.* 2006).

The earlier article drew upon Bakhtin's philosophical preference for dialogical language, with its focus on making meaning through dialogue, to monological language. Bakhtin described the tendency for monologism to consolidate the authority of the more powerful speaker in the conversation and to discourage further discussion. He compared this approach with the capacity of dialogism to open and extend the conversation without necessarily coming to closure with the final word coming from the more powerful person.

This article draws on Freire's take on dialogism and also applies it to an analysis of the opportunities and challenges presented in supervisor-student conversations in postgraduate education. In particular, it appeals to Freireian concepts of dialogue and dialogic spaces and the potential for dialogical pedagogy to lead postgraduate students and their supervisors to change asymmetrical power relations to positions where each learns from the other and students move from dependence to independence. These concepts form the organising framework for drawing on the authors' experiences in postgraduate supervision of Australian and international students.

The first section of the article, which describes Freire's conception of dialogical pedagogy, forms a necessary foundation for applying these concepts as a framework to interrogate opportunities and challenges presented in postgraduate supervision. The final section of the article looks beyond the expected substantive and methodological outcomes associated with the successful completion of a thesis to the more enduring gains made by supervisors and students who embrace a dialogical approach to the supervisory process and hence to some suggested implications for understanding and advancing contemporary lifelong education.

Freireian dialogical pedagogy

In beginning to understand Freire's (1972) concept of dialogue, it is useful to consider what Freire did not believe to be dialogue. The antithesis of dialogue is represented in situations in which one person,

who could be the teacher, imposes his or her views on those who are less knowledgeable or who are empty vessels waiting to be filled. The rejection of the concept of the banking system, in broad terms, is possibly the most commonly accepted of Freire's ideas by contemporary education. Yet this concept, which appears so simple and uncomplicated in theory, is easy to misapply or misunderstand, as the enquirer moves towards an understanding of what Freire means by dialogue and the concept of dialogical pedagogy. As Freire (1972: 61) noted: '...[T]his dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the participants in a discussion.' Freire further talks about searching together for truth rather than truth being imposed by one over another. Experienced supervisors of postgraduate students could apply this thinking critically and philosophically to the supervisory process.

Rick Bowers (2005) drew on Freire (with Bakhtin) to argue for the use of the dialogic classroom seminar in providing the conditions in which different perspectives and evidence can be weighed, in a process that involves students in their own learning and avoids the top-down structure of teacher over students. Bowers argued that Bakhtinian and Freireian perspectives could impact on the university seminar and it was in that context that Bowers unfolded the practice of dialogical pedagogy. We go one more step and apply Freireian procedures to the supervisor-postgraduate student relationship. Bowers (2005) compared Bakhtin and Freire on a number of levels, including their practical approach, for their commitment to the right to think critically and to present ideas in classroom seminars conducive to that form of dialogue. Bowers stated that Freire considered dialogical pedagogy to be fundamental for bringing about social change and freedom. At a more intimate level, it involves student and teacher learning together, both experiencing intellectual growth, with learning being not always comfortable but sometimes unsettling. At times it might be more comfortable to settle for closure than to continue to pursue knowledge when the process and what is learned may bring into contention what one thought that one already knew. Perhaps one way of keeping the atmosphere respectful is to question the knowledge rather than the credibility of the person while, at the same time, not retreating from accountability for what one claims in seeking a shared understanding (Rule 2004). It would be interesting to contemplate what this might mean in terms of the goals of postgraduate research and supervision.

Another parallel between Rule's (2004) discussion of dialogue and dialogic space and Freire's opposition to the antithetical concept of the banking system is the separate and shared roles of teacher and student. Despite the parallels drawn by Bowers (2005), it is important to remember that, while teacher and student each adopts or incorporates the role of the other, the teacher has a particular form of leadership role to enact. At the same time, both teacher and students have specific accountabilities and responsibilities and each has agency within broader structural relations to discharge those accountabilities and responsibilities.

Perhaps this is the most logical point in coming to understand dialogical pedagogy at which the interdependence between teacher and student can be best appreciated. On this subject, Bailey (2003) pointed to Freire's adoption of Hegelian logic, which emphasised how teacher and student had a mutual need and how it was necessary for both to recognise this interdependence simultaneously. Further consideration of these ideas leads one to appreciate that Freire's application of these concepts to adult learning by necessity had to incorporate a reflective element. As noted by Kathleen Hiyake (n.d.) in a review of Freire's (1993) book, *Pedagogy of the City,* Freire believed that improvements in teaching practice were dependent upon teachers reflecting on their pedagogy.

Further, Rich Gibson (1999) considered Freire's criticism of and alternative to banking methods in education, noting the imperative for students to be active participants in the acquisition of and experimentation with knowledge. Extending these thoughts to incorporate reflection, it would seem logical that student and teacher in dialogue would reflect not only on what had been learned but also on progress made in the extent to which both parties appreciated and recognised movement towards ideas important in Freire's concept of dialogue, such as sharing and interchange of ideas and building mutual understanding and co-creation as simultaneous acts. These ideas are applicable to the supervisor-postgraduate student relationship as described in the following sections of this paper.

Moreover, as the last section of the paper elaborates, this discussion is applicable to, and significant for, ongoing discussion of the meanings and effects of lifelong education policies and practice. This is partly because completing or supervising a postgraduate degree is a major commitment in time and energy. It is also because those processes of completion and supervision generally entail marked changes in understanding of and sometimes in outlook on the world, in association with the deeply based reflection outlined above. Those processes and changes articulate with broader questions, such as the opportunities and obligation to use that reflection for contributing to productive social change (Jarvis 2006, see also Jarvis 2000) and the appropriateness of lifelong education government and schooling policy-making in Australia (Chapman *et al.* 2005), where this paper is located. Similarly, there are likely parallels between dialogical pedagogy, with its focus on teaching and learning for transformation, and dialogical feminism, with its link with adult education (Merrill 2005), both within the wider field of lifelong education.

Opportunities for dialogical pedagogy in postgraduate supervision

This and the next sections of the paper are framed and informed by the authors' separate and shared experiences of supervising postgraduate students in two Australian regional universities with large international cohorts. That supervision has involved working in the disciplines of cultural studies, education and history and in face-to-face, distance and online modes. The majority of students have been Australians, like the authors/supervisors, with a couple being from the United States and working in the Republic of Korea and Switzerland.

The authors' interrogation of these supervisory experiences is situated also in the literature on postgraduate student supervision (see for example Denholm and Evans 2006, Kiley and Mullins 2006). For example, Hodges *et al.* (2006: 55) used their examination of four cases in the supervision of workplace research to identify and explore four sets of challenges derived from a contemporary pedagogical framework for that supervision: '...representation of knowledge;...supervising community or organisational based research;. responding to dynamic workplace research projects[;] and the supervisor as coach and mentor'. Likewise Melles (2006: 65) put forward a framework for understanding the work of supervisors of second language research postgraduate students in the latter's 'socially-situated production of the thesis as genre'. Similarly, Martin, Drage, Sillitoe and Clingin (2006), working in universities of comparable age and size to those represented by the authors, discussed the development of a community of practice in direct response to the professional and personal isolation and marginalisation experienced by many postgraduate students and supervisors alike in those universities.

Thus both opportunities and challenges attend the application of Freireian dialogical pedagogy to the supervisor-postgraduate student relationship as well as to the lifelong education dimension of that relationship. The challenges are explored in the next section; here the focus is on three of the opportunities, which are unsurprisingly clustered around the affective and interpersonal elements of dialogical pedagogy and postgraduate supervision:
   • students' mobility across dependence, interdependence and independence;
   • collaborative approaches to co-supervision;
   • students' and supervisors' mutual interests and post-supervision relations.

Students' mobility across dependence, interdependence and independence
Rather than conceptualising a fixed and linear progression for postgraduate students from dependence to interdependence to independence in relation to their supervisors, the authors highlight instead those students' mobility across and within each of those idealised relationship types. Thus there are likely to be moments at different stages of conducting research and writing a thesis where students are more or less dependent on their supervisors, depending on an array of factors from the character of the topic to the processes of designing and enacting the study to unpredictable impacts and intrusions from 'outside' events. In all these situations, it is vital that the supervisor provides appropriate levels and types of support, with that appropriateness being decided *in situ* in close collaboration and communication with

the student. Equally, there might be times when the supervisor is dependent to varying degrees on the student, whether by the latter providing tutorial or marking assistance for the former's courses or by taking the lead in a field of literature with which the supervisor is not familiar in detail.

The common denominator in these various circumstances is a dialogical pedagogy that gives central place to a supervisor-postgraduate student relationship based on and lived through reciprocal regard and trust. What binds and links dependence, interdependence and independence is a mutuality of concern and goodwill that provides the framework for specific enactments of different kinds of co-dependence. This approach is a pre-requisite of making possible Freire's (1972) understanding of teacher and student searching together for truth(s), and also of charting a course that enables teacher and student to engage in the interactions that are sometimes uncomfortable and unsettling (Bowers 2005). These interactions are also likely to trigger shifting levels and sites of dependence in the relationship and provide another, albeit potentially risky, opportunity for instituting dialogical pedagogy in postgraduate supervision.

Collaborative approaches to co-supervision
Another opportunity for doing this arises from different approaches to supervision. In Australian universities, a common practice is for one supervisor to work with a research masters student and for two supervisors to work with a doctoral student, with one designated principal and the other designated associate supervisor. In the latter situation, the precise enactment of the principal and associate supervisor roles and the relationship between them and with the doctoral student vary widely, depending partly on the personalities and preferences of the individuals and partly on specific circumstances (such as one supervisor being on academic leave for part of the candidature). The authors' experience has been that the most effective approach to supervising doctoral students, and the one most likely to facilitate the application of dialogical pedagogy, is where the two supervisors are *de facto* if not *de jure* co-supervisors. A doctoral thesis is of such complexity and depth, and ranges over such an array of issues as literature review, conceptual framework, research design and data collection and analysis, that three minds concentrated simultaneously although from diverse perspectives are required to provide the strongest possible support for the student. This approach is sufficiently flexible to take account of different individuals' strengths and interests and yet strongly enough based in interpersonal relations to provide a robust foundation for the inevitably contentious and sometimes tense interactions that occur within the broader relationship. This allows the kinds of questioning of knowledge claims envisaged by Rule (2004) as a key element of dialogical pedagogy to be conducted by and of all members of the triad in both a rigorous and a respectful manner.

Students' and supervisors' mutual interests and post-supervision relations
What helps to bring varying manifestations of co-dependence and co-supervision into alignment, and also to advance dialogical pedagogy in postgraduate supervision, is the notion of interests (see also Anteliz *et al.* 2001). All humans are located in networks of multiple types of interests, ranging from self-interest and shared interests in small groups and communities to global interests such as climate change. At a fundamental level, it is in the interests of the supervisor and student alike for the student to graduate with the postgraduate degree. This can sometimes lead to pathologies, such as different supervisors promoting the claims and outcomes of their students at the cost of the students of their colleagues (such as in the case of competitive scholarships and conference funding) in order to progress their own interests. That kind of pathology is as much antithetical to dialogical pedagogy as the banking metaphor of education (Freire 1972) because it is predicated on challenging and destroying others' cultural and social capital rather than on co-constructing new capital as dialogical pedagogy espouses and on the Hegelian recognition of mutual need between teacher and student (Bailey 2003).

Post-supervision relations are often an accurate litmus test of the extent to which dialogical pedagogy has underpinned the supervisor-postgraduate student relationship. Paths cross and crisscross and trajectories converge and diverge as each person's life changes, yet often effective relationships mutate into collegiality and co-authorship as well as into friendship, with supervisor and student each acting as academic or personal referee for the other as the occasion requires. One potential yield from the investment of dialogical pedagogy is seen when the kind of social change and freedom envisaged by

Bowers (2005) comes about. This might indeed take the form of being activists together; it might be manifested by the supervisor being invited to speak or work with the ex-student's students; it might be seen in supervisor and ex-student becoming co-supervisors of new students. Regardless of the range of possible displays, it is almost certain to entail the highly engaged and participatory reflection by both supervisor and ex-student as an element of the ongoing and lifelong acquisition of and experimentation with knowledge that form part of and emerge from the application of dialogical pedagogy (Gibson 1999).

Challenges for dialogical pedagogy in postgraduate supervision

The previous section of this paper explored the opportunities for, and advantages of, adopting a dialogical pedagogy approach to postgraduate supervision. While such advantages are considerable, it would be wrong to underestimate the challenges involved in implementing such a pedagogy. Indeed, being conscious of and open about such challenges, while not necessarily overcoming them completely, does help to provide a reflexive space within the context of the supervision through which both postgraduate students and supervisors are able to generate a degree of autonomy.

Here it is useful to distinguish between Bourdieu's (1972) concepts of the autonomous and heteronomous poles of cultural fields as they apply to the institution of higher education in general and to postgraduate research in particular. For Bourdieu, cultural fields and institutions are structured around the tensions between autonomous values, which derive from the field itself (in the case of universities, knowledge being a good in itself), and heteronomous values, which derive from the interaction between that field and others, particularly those with considerable social power, such as the economy and politics. The values promoted within Freire's (1972) model of dialogical pedagogy—actively participating in the acquisition of and experimentation with knowledge, sharing the interchange of ideas and building mutual understanding—clearly articulate with the autonomous values of higher education. That is, they are concerned with the particular ongoing dialogue among scholars within the field (in this instance students and supervisors), rather than being shaped by the dictates of the economic market or political agendas of the time (see also Olssen 2006). Thus a context in which, in Australia as elsewhere, governments and economic markets are increasingly interested in intervening and staking claims upon the values of higher education, rather than respecting its autonomy, presents particular challenges to the principles of dialogical pedagogy.

One of these challenges relates to the accountabilities and responsibilities alluded to earlier, that supervisors and students bring to their relationship. Within a relatively autonomous setting, these accountabilities and responsibilities are shaped by such factors as the need to share faithfully ideas, concepts and relevant information, thereby being 'true' to the spirit of scholarship and the values of the particular field under research. On the other hand, heteronomous forces impose other responsibilities and accountabilities that can be antipathetic to these autonomous principles. For example, if the postgraduate supervision is understood principally as a means of generating income for the university, or enabling it to meet its quota of research students, the principles of dialogical pedagogy are threatened. In other words, there need to be compelling reasons beyond the heteronomous concerns with quotas and research income for this postgraduate research to be undertaken and for a relationship to develop between supervisors and students.

Over-emphasis on the apprenticeship model of supervision
One effect of these challenges to the autonomous principles of dialogical pedagogy can be an over-emphasis on the apprenticeship model of supervision. In this context, the supervisor is configured as the master, the bearer of some privileged, esoteric or expert knowledge that is passed on to the student. It is evident that for heteronomous interests the apprenticeship model has certain appealing factors. It seems to lay down clearly defined lines of accountability and responsibility; it assumes that, with appropriate governance, the relay of expert knowledge can be effected relatively smoothly between appropriately qualified masters and their apprentices; and it implies that that relayed knowledge can have measurable outcomes in terms of public utility. In short, it appeals to an image of a smooth progression between one generation of researchers and the next.

However, the apprenticeship model places severe limitations on possibilities for dialogical pedagogy. It places the student in the role of dependant, affirming an asymmetrical power relationship between student and supervisor(s). Indeed, it can seem to confirm what for many postgraduate students is an almost instinctive sense of being an impostor, somebody who is yet to show that s/he really is entitled to a position within the field of knowledge production that research constitutes. Perhaps as damaging, it positions the master/supervisor in the role of expert, proclaiming absolute truths about the field in which the research project is conducted. As such, the possibilities for genuine dialogue, and of engaging with the unsettling and uncomfortable character of learning, are restricted in favour of a largely monological, fixed, top-down model of knowledge acquisition. In this context the enabling movement outlined above among the roles of dependence, independence and interdependence is circumvented.

The managerialist approach to the former Research Quality Framework
In the Australian context, the emergence of the former Research Quality Framework (RQF), proposed by the previous Australian government but abandoned at the end of 2007 by the new government, also created challenges for dialogical pedagogy (see also Yates 2005: 12-13; Shaw and Holbrook 2006: 15). Like the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom, the RQF was a government initiative designed to measure the research outcomes of universities across a range of indicators, among them publications, citations, external grants and postgraduate completions. In terms of the last of these, the RQF promoted an emphasis on successfully completing study within a fixed time period. This managerialist approach extended to delimiting the possible topics of research and the relationship between student and supervisor. Research topics that were relatively manageable in terms of being comparatively risk averse, lending themselves to being completed within the requisite time frame and fitting in with designated research areas were favoured over those that were risky, required a longer commitment to processes of knowledge acquisition and were concerned with going beyond designated areas, for example by extending or cutting across disciplinary boundaries. From this perspective, rather than a prospective postgraduate approaching a university indicating what s/he was interested in studying, s/he would rather be informed what it would be appropriate to study. From the beginning, then, a dialogical approach based upon unsettling outcomes and knowledge experimentation would be restricted in favour of a rigidly structured approach.

The cultural specificity of dialogical pedagogy
A further challenge to dialogical pedagogy is its cultural specificity. It should be noted that Freire (1972) and Bakhtin's (Danaher *et al.* 2006) educational values emerged within particular cultural contexts, deriving from their experiences in Brazil and the Soviet Union respectively. And while such values and methods enshrined in the concept of dialogical pedagogy might lend themselves to being appropriated in other educational settings—for example, those that value a co-operative above a competitive approach towards knowledge acquisition or those that favour the risks, provisionality and experimentation involved with interdisciplinary research—we cannot assume that its principles are universally applicable. Some students accustomed to the Confucian traditions of the Chinese educational system, for example, with its basis in structures of authority and deference, might find dialogical pedagogy so unsettling as to be ultimately destructive. Likewise Kumar (2004: 559) depicted Singapore's approach to policy-making about lifelong education as 'pragmatic and rational' and as 'one of the economic drivers used by policy makers to enhance Singapore's competitiveness and...an antidote against unemployment'. Similarly most if not all postgraduate students, including adult part-time students (Yum *et al.* 2005), have many and often competing culturally specific priorities, and might not always be readily able to devote to their study the time and energy assumed by dialogical pedagogy.

Rather than regarding these challenges as so daunting as to render dialogical pedagogy a mirage or an ideal that is good in theory but that ultimately can be realised only tendentially, we would suggest that they constitute part of the ongoing conversation about postgraduate supervision and higher education more broadly. That is, dialogical pedagogy implies that the discussion is not limited to the particular research project with which the student is engaged, but extends to embrace the institutional, cultural and wider political and social factors that frame the conditions of possibility for that research. Dialogical pedagogy, then, emphasises the situatedness, play of interests and other forces that, to extend the metaphor, compose the subtext within which the conversation of postgraduate supervision takes place.

Implications for lifelong education

This final section of the article looks beyond the expected substantive and methodological outcomes associated with the successful completion of a thesis to the more enduring gains made by students and supervisors who adopt a dialogical approach to the supervisory process. As such, it suggests some implications for understanding and advancing contemporary lifelong education.

In this context we might apprehend lifelong education in both its latitudinal and its longitudinal senses. Longitudinally, a dialogical approach might help to fashion and sustain an enduring and productive relationship between supervisors and students throughout their academic careers, which might be expressed through such ventures as collaborative research and teaching, joint publications, joint supervision of subsequent postgraduate students and the establishing of research networks. From a latitudinal perspective, the dialogical approach might be extended beyond the postgraduate supervision to other contexts in which the students and supervisors are involved, and which come under the broad ambit of lifelong education. Such contexts might extend from coaching sport to community theatre to family communication.

Lifelong education in Australia, as elsewhere, is regarded as vitally important in sustaining community and individual lives. Like other Western nations, Australia is experiencing the impact of an ageing population as birth rates decline and scientific and other developments enable people to live longer, healthier lives. Organisations like the University of the Third Age and local community education centres provide classes in a range of areas that help sustain the lives of older Australians. Maintaining intellectual growth is regarded as a fundamental part of healthy ageing, and the principles informing dialogical pedagogy—reciprocal regard and trust, willingness to take risks and ongoing moves among relations of dependence, independence and interdependence—lend themselves readily to this dimension of lifelong education.

One area in which the relationship between dialogical pedagogy and lifelong education might have particular significance, alluded to earlier, is climate change. Now that the overwhelming scientific consensus identifies human activity as being at least partly responsible for accelerated global warming, there is considerable popular interest in Australia in initiatives that will remedy or at least ameliorate the destructive impacts of climate change. Such initiatives impact significantly on lifelong education practices and extend across such diverse areas as architecture, food production, transport and travel, energy and water sourcing, and employment. As such, there is an urgent need for postgraduate research projects across a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields to explore the implications of climate change for Australia and abroad, and to propose solutions. Such projects, however, cannot be limited to the academy, but clearly need to be articulated across every dimension of lifelong education, from the local scout group to creating ecologically sustainable home environments. Here the dialogical pedagogical principles of reciprocal regard and trust and of accountabilities and responsibilities might be applied to our relationship with natural ecosystems and environmental forces. That is, this approach to lifelong education configures the ecology as a participant in the dialogue, rather than as something to be acted on and utilised for the benefits of others, a perspective which dialogi-cal pedagogy would recognise as a pathological relationship that is ultimately unsustainable.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the value of dialogical pedagogy in postgraduate supervision for the promotion of lifelong education. Using Australia as a context, we have focused on the relationship between supervisors and postgraduate students as a site in which the principles of dialogical pedagogy can be realised. The article has canvassed both the opportunities for, and the challenges to, the adoption of a dialogical pedagogical approach to supervision, and has explored the implications of this approach for broader dimensions of lifelong education.

More broadly, the argument prosecuted here both accords with and builds on existing studies. For example, there are clear resonances between dialogical pedagogy and the recognition that the personal is as influential as the social in learning throughout life (Billett and Pavlova 2005). From this and other perspectives, the reciprocal regard for and trust between participants that are a key principle of dialogical pedagogy, we feel, provides a basis for fruitful, ongoing and sustainable lifelong education.

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