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## **Abstract**

Coaching has become an increasingly popular form of HRD intervention in recent years. One HRD context, which has yet to embrace this, however is that of doctoral supervision (Maguire, Prodi and Gibbs 2018). Although the potential relevance of coaching to doctoral supervision has been noted (see for example Lee 2008) research into it remains very limited (Godskersen and Kobayashi 2016), and there is a lack of clarity on how it could be implemented and the skills it would require. This reflects a broader lack of pedagogical thinking about doctoral supervision in universities and consequent paucity of HRD interventions to support it (Wisker 2015). This paper addresses these gaps through reporting on stage one of an on-going research project which assessed the applicability of an existing model of coaching, Cook's (2011) Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model, to doctoral supervision. Building on Cook's model, a new Collaborative Action for Doctoral Supervision model of coaching is proposed that identifies for supervisors and students individual and shared responsibilities and skills required for effective supervision. The paper argues that a shift in HRD in relation to doctoral supervision will be necessary if the benefits of adopting this coaching model are to be realized.

## **Key Words**

Doctoral Supervision, Coaching, HRD

This article sets out to apply an existing model of coaching to doctoral supervision practice. Following Doloriet, Sambrook and Stewart's (2012) argument that doctoral supervision should be seen as 'dynamic form of HRD practice', utilising key HRD models, techniques and tools, it demonstrates how the model may be adapted to this unique and challenging HRD context.

Coaching has been identified by the UK Vitae Researcher Development Programme (2018) as one of the key roles of the doctoral supervisor. However, academic research on coaching of doctoral students is 'virtually absent' (Godskersen and Kobayashi 2016, 147). Moreover, where it has been considered, the focus tends to be on coaching interventions outside the supervisory relationship (Godskersen and Kobayashis 2016; Kearns, Gardiner and Marshall 2008) rather than on supervisors adopting coaching techniques. Where the supervisor's role as coach is mentioned it appears as one undefined element of a mentoring relationship (Green and Bauer 1995; Paglis, Green and Bauer 2006). In order to address this lack of clarity around the application of coaching to doctoral supervision, this article proposes the implementation of an adaptive form of Cook's Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (2011).

Adopting a coaching approach also has implications for the development of doctoral supervisors. Wisker (2015) suggests there is a paucity of development for doctoral supervisors, while Lee (2008) argues that much of the support provided focuses upon policies and procedures rather than the wider issues of relationships development and emancipation which might be associated with coaching. Through application of Cook's model this article identifies the skills both doctoral supervisors and students need and so provides a basis for broader HRD interventions around doctoral supervision.

## **Coaching and Doctoral Supervision**

Gaining a PhD has been viewed as being about becoming a member of an academic community and discipline (Leonard 2001) and it is this academic community that has been expected to model the nature of supervision required. However, with the proliferation of practice-based and professional doctorates this single-minded purpose is no longer so evident. The projected career trajectory of such doctoral candidates is not solely focused on academia (Lee 2008). Students may wish to become academics; however for those with significant business experience the focus of their networks may lie outside academia in the professional community they seek to influence. Although experience of doctoral work and research certainly resides in the academic community, those from business backgrounds where one-to-one supervision and coaching is common place may have different views and voices to help shape our understanding of the needs of this more diverse doctoral community.

In this context questions have been raised for some time about the applicability of approaches to doctoral supervision that position a knowing supervisor passing on knowledge to an unknowing student (Bartlett and Mercer 2001). Maguire, Prodi and Gibbs (2018, 872) suggest that whilst the academic world inappropriately still holds on to the 'sacred tradition of master and apprentice' the world of work has long abandoned this approach. They suggest that in the last 30 years organizations have progressively explored individual development through mentoring and are now focused on coaching. The centrality of coaching to the world of work and the growth in practice and professional based doctorates populated by business practitioners creates an opportunity to explore the alignment between coaching and doctoral supervision.

The literature on doctoral supervision has mirrored the trajectory displayed by organizations, placing mentoring as one solution in doctoral supervision (Green and Bauer 1995; Paglis, Green and Bauer 2006). In Lee's (2008) framework mentoring is identified as important to PhD student development and in particular she identifies the supervisory role as a mentoring process encouraging self-discovery and self-experience and supporting the candidate's move from dependence to self-direction. Although Lee confirms the framework as being equally appropriate for both PhD and practice and professional based doctorates in later work (2018), she does foresee problems with supervisors using mentoring. She suggests that the mentoring role may go well beyond what some supervisors feel is appropriate to expect or provide.

Coaching has received less attention in the literature. Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) suggest that as part of the facilitative process of support and challenge supervisors should coach the research project, and Lee (2008) acknowledges this and includes coaching in her framework of concepts in research supervision and as a legitimate role for supervisors. However, she concludes that further work is needed to understand how this translates into hands-on doctoral supervision. As yet, this has not been fully explored. McCarthy (2012), in a review of literature on doctoral supervision and coaching, concludes that coaching within doctoral supervision is a novelty, and although Godskersen and Kobayashi (2016) conclude that coaching for doctoral students is beginning to take place, either within universities or by external coaches, they too find research on coaching in doctoral supervision is scarce. Their own work focuses on the external coach, and they suggest that the coach's role is different from that of the supervisor in that they are freed from interest in the subject and have no role

in judging the quality of the work and are therefore able to create a ‘room for reflection’ (Godskersen and Kobayashi 2016, 149). However, coaching is seen as a key supervisory role in the UK Vitae Researcher Development Programme (2018), and although the external coach can bring valuable support for doctoral students we suggest that it is not an approach that should be completely outsourced from the academic community.

Lack of research on coaching in doctoral supervision in part reflects a wider lack of pedagogical thinking about supervision. Franke and Arvidsson (2011, 9) note that “how supervision should be conducted pedagogically within the administrative framework laid down by their respective institutions has to a large extent been left to supervisors themselves to decide on.” Others have been critical of the paucity of supervisory training, with largely untrained supervisors passing on poor habits to students (Wisker, 2015). Guerin, Kerr and Green (2015), noting that supervisors tend to pass on their positive or negative experiences of supervision to their supervisees, call for a range of innovative strategies to be developed to fill this void. Coaching could be seen to be conceptually aligned with effective doctoral supervision and therefore contribute both theoretically and practically towards these innovative strategies. However, whilst coaching conceptualizations of doctoral supervision provide a language to articulate the complex nature of supervision, there is little in-depth discussion of how a supervisory team would operationalize these theories and models.

### **Coaching– the theoretical starting point for our study**

The existence of a range of different definitions of and approaches to coaching is well noted. Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie’s (2008) review of the literature, for example,

identifies 37 definitions, encompassing a range of purposes and processes. One key dimension along which approaches to coaching vary is in their adoption of directive or non-directive processes (Ives 2008). Hui, Sue-Chan and Wood (2013) therefore propose two possible types of coaching: guidance, in which the coach adopts a directive approach in order to give advice, and facilitation, in which the coach assists the individual to develop their own appropriate responses. While Ives (2008) regards directive coaching as instructional, a distinction could be made between these two terms in the sense that you can direct someone but they can still choose whether or not to apply this direction, whereas an instruction may be more for a situation where there is no choice, e.g., in doctoral supervision following university procedures. Non-directive derives more from person centred coaching in which there is an “assumption that people have the potential to develop, and to grow, and that when this inner potential is released they are able to move toward becoming more autonomous, socially constructive, and optimally functioning” (Joseph and Bryant-Jefferies 2007, 211).

Given the plethora of roles in doctoral supervision identified by Vilkinas (2007) and Lee (2008), having a focus on directive and non-directive approaches may be appropriate in that context. Our study is therefore interested in how both of these approaches may work together in doctoral supervision, with the supervisor sharing advice and guidance whilst creating the space for the student to be independent. To do this our study draws on Cook’s (2011) Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (CACL) model that combines both directive and non-directive approaches with the purpose of enabling the transfer and sustainability of learning to outside the coaching session. As Cox (2013, 138) states, “one of the unwritten goals of coaching is to ensure enduring learning and development for the client that can be sustained long beyond the end of the coaching intervention”. This is

similarly an important goal of developing independent doctoral researchers.

### **Collaborative action in the learning process**

Cook’s (2011) model emphasizes the need for coach and client to work collaboratively with both individual and shared responsibilities (figure 1).

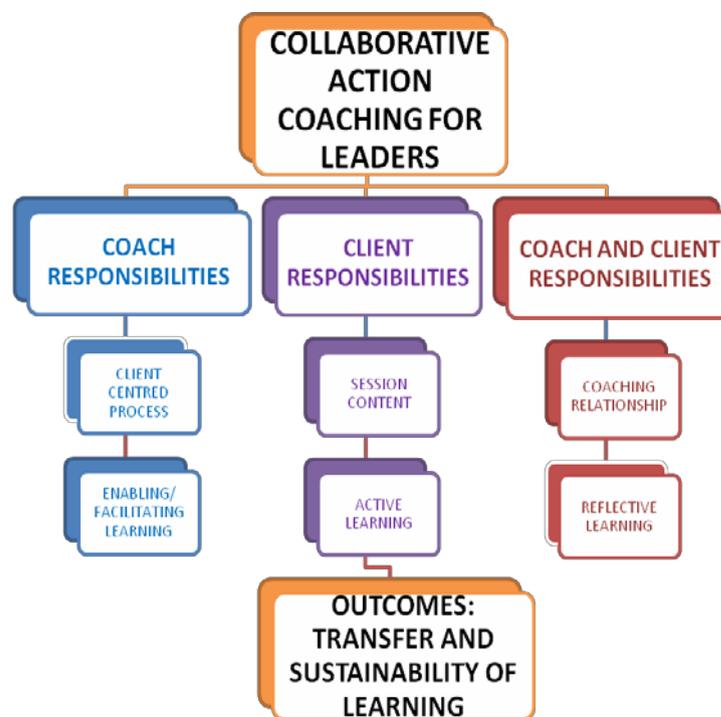


Figure 1: Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (Cook, 2011)

Other empirical models also espouse the importance of collaborative action in the coaching process. Olivero, Bane and Kopelman (1997, 466) for example regard all aspects of the coaching process to be important including “collaborative problem solving”, while Law, Ireland and Hussain (2007, 142) come to the conclusion that “common ground exists among different coaching approaches; they are a collaborative intervention between

coaches/mentors and coaches/mentees”. This view is further supported by the work of Natale and Diamante (2005, 372) who determine that “executive coaching is viewed as a collaborative alliance focusing on change and transformation”.

Cook’s (2011) model outlines the importance of both the coach and the client taking responsibility for the transfer of learning outside the coaching session, thus beginning to address the co-learning issue identified by (Lee 2008) in relation to doctoral supervision. However, the equal responsibility for transfer of learning in Cook’s model implies an equal relationship which could be seen as challenging in doctoral supervision where the supervisor is perceived to have greater skills, knowledge and experience.

### **Importance of relationship**

One of the joint responsibilities identified in Cook’s (2011) model is that of developing the coaching relationship. Through honest dialogue in a safe and confidential environment the client is encouraged to transfer their learning. Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) also suggest that the coaching relationship is critical to the success of executive coaching. Connor and Pokora (2012) meanwhile talk about the initial establishment of a working relationship between coach and client which is referred to in the Cook (2011) model as the contracting or starting point stage, with the coach in charge of the process and the client in charge of the content. Lee (2008) records that relationship could be similarly important in improving doctoral supervision practice.

### **Reflective learning for supervisors and students**

Reflective learning is another important element in Cook’s model. Schön (1991, 68) argues that “when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He

is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case". Reflection in action is a theme of 'active learning' in Cook's (2011) model, and also forms part of the 'reflective diary' theme under the 'reflective learning' category, which is a shared responsibility of both coach and client. This could be important not only for the doctoral supervision, but also for the review of student and supervisor training as suggested by Zeegars and Barron (2012).

When conducting research under pinning the CACL model, client participants completed reflective research diaries as part of the data collection process. It was these diaries which, in part, enabled the transfer and sustainability of learning. This has a direct parallel with a student being encouraged to keep a research diary and reflectively learn not only about research process but also about their individual capability and perspective. Therefore, an established research mechanism already exists to help embed reflective learning for the student.

Cook's (2011) model also encourages the coach (supervisor) to reflectively learn. In line with this model, reflective learning would focus on the doctoral supervision relationship and processes with a view to improving their practice during and outside supervision sessions. These reflective learning processes could help raise self-awareness for both students and supervisors and aid in the identification of learning and development needs to feed into the design of development opportunities for students and supervisors.

In this new era of more varied and complex supervision environments, it may be time for new skills to be developed to ensure that practice is aligning itself with these new challenges. The use of Cook's (2011) CACL model to enable the transfer of learning and

improve practice could be important for both doctoral student and supervisor skills and development.

## **Research Study**

The overall aim of the research is to consider and evaluate the student and supervisor experience of doctoral supervision and specifically the value of using Cook's (2011) CACL model. This paper presents the findings of a concurrent mixed methods research study (Bryman 2006) exploring the existing experiences of students and supervisors in doctoral programmes in one UK business school. We focused on doctorates in business disciplines as coaching is widely prevalent in corporate organizations. We were guided by our research question: can the use of coaching in doctoral supervision in UK business schools enable higher quality supervision and transfer of learning? We simultaneously administered a questionnaire and conducted ten one-to-one interviews with six students and four supervisors. The questionnaire had a limited response rate but did confirm the usefulness of applying coaching to doctoral supervision and the appropriateness of undertaking more in-depth discussions with both students and supervisors. The ten interview participants, including supervisors with a range of experience and students at different stages doing both traditional and professional doctorates, took part in one hour semi-structured interviews designed to encourage reflection on experiences and expectations of supervision. The outcome was the development of a conceptual doctoral supervision model using coaching.

## **Findings**

The material from the interviews was analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006); key responsibilities and skills for a coaching approach in doctoral supervision were identified. It was clear from the perspective of both students and supervisors, that Cook's

(2011) CACL model of coaching (Figure 1) can provide the foundation for a new conceptual model of coaching contextualized to doctoral supervision (Figure 2). In this new model both the student and the supervisor have clearly defined individual as well as shared responsibilities. Together, these have the potential to create an overall collaborative process and relationship to enable transfer of learning. In addition, a range of skills for both supervisors and students emerged from the analysis that will underpin effective implementation of a coaching approach to doctoral supervision.

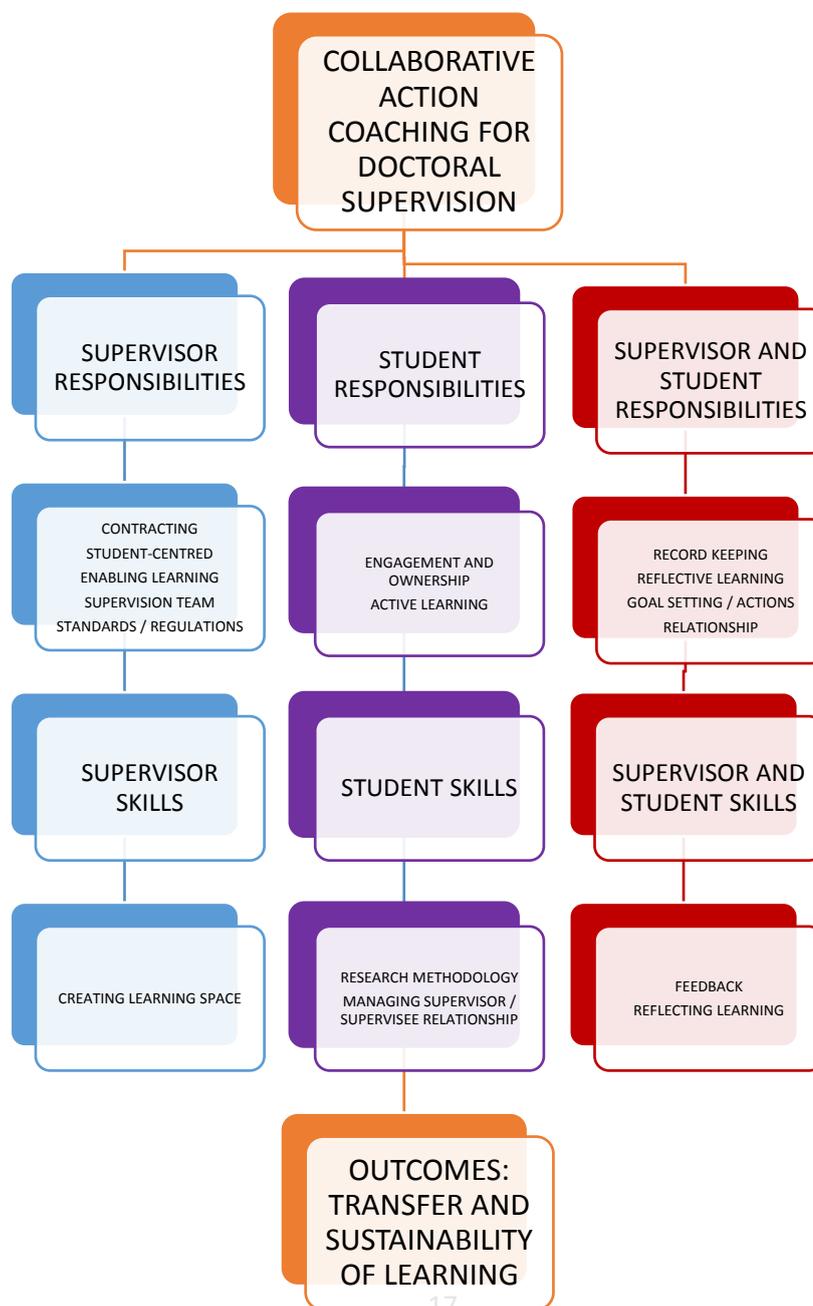


Figure 2: Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision conceptual model

The challenges of meeting these responsibilities and the skills required to do so are explored below.

### **Doctoral Supervisor Responsibilities**

The value of, but also the difficulties of, **contracting** and setting expectations particularly in the early stages were discussed frequently by participants. Some supervisors led contracting with explicit statements of the ‘deal’ between themselves and the students from the beginning. Others gave no guidance, ‘no sharing of expectations and needs’, leaving the student feeling ‘quite intimidated’. This contracting and re-contracting and managing the expectations of both parties throughout the process of supervision were identified by both parties as a key supervisor responsibility. Although problematic, it appeared to become easier with time or when there was secure and defined ground for both parties to work on, such as the joint authorship of articles and when the student was less vulnerable and inexperienced.

Time appropriate intervention and support is key to being **student centred**; a bespoke response to the student’s situation and development. It is about seeing each student through a personal as well as academic lens. Although identified as a key responsibility, for some

supervisors being student centred was a challenge and required going beyond traditional discipline based approaches.

The oscillation between challenge and support was seen as a vital supervisory responsibility in order to **enable learning**. The supervisor is responsible for providing a sounding board for students to be able to think differently and for developing intellectually; responsible for challenging by using dialogue and appropriate tools and tasks. As in the coaching approach, it is about ‘helping [the student] to open their eyes’ and encouraging them to ‘add a new dimension’ to their thought processes. Participants described this constant interaction as ‘honest dialogue’. By being both ‘friendly and intellectual’, challenge, safety and comfort are held in appropriate balance.

Unlike coaching, doctoral supervision often involves more than one ‘coach/mentor’ in a **supervision team**. Parallel and uncoordinated intellectual challenge from several supervisors was perceived by students as confusing, potentially contradictory and stressful. The need for a framework to establish and manage responsibility within the supervisory team was voiced in order to avoid student anxiety and confusion and ensure adequate coverage of all aspects of the research. Some requested a hierarchy and needed to know which member of the supervision team was ultimately responsible in times of dispute. Maintaining standards and adherence to **regulations** appeared to be one of the more straightforward directive responsibilities with supervisors supporting students in line with an institution’s regulatory framework and maintaining academic standards, often through feedback on draft work.

## **Doctoral Supervisor Skills**

Supervisors need to have the skills to create a learning space; to listen in order to ‘encourage the conversation in their [students’] own heads, out loud’, to enable students to undertake a ‘transformational journey’. Reflective observation, open questioning, suspension of assumptions and resisting the impulse to interject are seen as valuable approaches to enable students to ‘think and speak’. They need to be empathetic to the student’s situation to know when to oscillate between being directive and non- directive, creating a space where a student can make informed choices about their research. Content was seen to be the student’s choice; the supervisor was there to create the environment to enable them to make sense of it. Too much direction by a supervisor was seen as problematic and stressful. Supervisors recognized that implementing these approaches was a challenge, however, as Lee (2008) suggests, current development for doctoral supervisors focuses on institutional regulations and fails to address these needs, or at best leaves it to informal peer support.

## **Doctoral Student Responsibilities**

Many of the findings relating to supervisors’ responsibilities and skills is focused on creating a space for exchange and learning. For this to flourish, doctoral students also have responsibilities. **Engagement and ownership** were seen as vital; with students needing to be **actively learning** and driving the agenda by their preparation and discussion for every supervisory session. It is very evident that students need to own their development as researchers both within the supervisory sessions and beyond. Establishing an internal and external network of peers to gain feedback from within the wider research community is central to this.

## **Doctoral Student Skills**

Beyond developing appropriate skills in research methodology, operating in this shared supervisory space requires considerable skills in managing the interface with their supervisors, particularly when supervision was team based. There was evidence that students often come to doctoral work unknowing about the nature and demands of the work and unprepared to maximize the opportunities that supervision provides.

## **Doctoral Student and Supervisor Responsibilities**

The shared space for learning created by using a coaching approach creates a need for shared as well as individual responsibilities. **Goal setting** and any resultant **action** is perceived as a joint responsibility. **Record keeping** mainly lies with the student; however it emerged that supervisors find it helpful to keep records from their own perspective, as an aide memoire for the future and to form the basis for reflective learning. It was also noted that institutional requirements for record keeping had a different focus to reflective learning.

Whilst the data indicated that currently most of the reflective learning and reflective diary entries are completed by students, it also revealed that reflective learning is important for both parties to enable the supervision process and relationship to develop positively and effectively.

The **relationship** between coach and the person being coached is crucial and perspectives on maintaining this in the context of doctoral supervision were varied, although the responsibility was always viewed as shared. There is evidence of social interaction from some supervisor/student teams, where for others interaction was more focused on work

only. The relationship was seen as ‘intimate’ and often ‘long lasting’ for years beyond the conclusion of a doctorate. Keeping in touch was highly valued, along with mutual honesty in the dialogue. Despite an aura of equality and mutuality there was evidence of the need to be mindful of power imbalance even when working with students who are senior practitioners. The supervisor has the status; the word supervise implies one person has more knowledge. One person already having a doctorate has inherent power which marginally hinders the power dynamic. In this regard, the supervisory relationship may differ to that between a coach and a client.

### **Doctoral Student and Supervisor Skills**

Two areas emerge where both supervisor and student require the same skill: feedback and reflective learning. If the space is to be shared and the learning is two-way, both parties need to be able to seek and provide appropriate feedback on the supervisory experience. Such activity feeds into reflective learning supported by mutual sharing of individual reflections.

### **Doctoral Supervisors as coaches – implications for HRD**

The findings from this research study suggest that a new approach to doctoral supervision based on coaching can be developed to form a cornerstone form which to further develop pedagogic thinking about this under researched area.

The value of coaching in doctoral supervision is already recognized (Vitae Researcher Development Framework, 2018). However, there is a paucity of literature on the coaching of doctoral students by members of the supervisory team rather than by an external coach (Godskersen and Kobayashi, 2016). This research project has established the relevance of adapting Cook’s Collaborative Action Coaching for

Leaders Model (2011) for doctoral supervision. The newly developed Collaborative Action Coaching for Doctoral Supervision Conceptual Model could be the basis of new pedagogical thinking in doctoral supervision. By elucidating the individual and shared responsibilities of supervisors and students and associated skills it provides an opportunity for those working with doctoral students to reevaluate their practice and consider their own responsibilities and skills as well as those of their students. It is not however without challenges for supervisors, students and Higher Education institutions.

Taking a coaching approach to doctoral supervision places great emphasis on the relationship between supervisor and student forged in doctoral supervision discussions. The supervisors who participated in this research recognized how ill-equipped many supervisors are likely to be to operate consistently within this new paradigm of supervision. Existing development for supervisors often concentrates on institutional procedures (Lee 2008) which only addresses one of the supervisory responsibilities of the Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision Model. In the absence of development in relationship to other responsibilities supervisors often replicate their own experience of being supervised (Guerin, Kerr and Green 2015). Not only does this mean they may reproduce poor practice but also replicate the ‘master and apprentice’ (Maguire, Prodi and Gibbs 2018, 872) approach they experienced which may no longer be appropriate for the new more diverse range of doctoral students.

In contrast the Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision Model questions any model of supervision in business disciplines that passes knowledge from the knowing supervisor to the unknowing student. However as the participants already noted this provides challenges and creates development needs for both supervisors and students. There may be

troublesome gaps in supervisor's and also student's skills. For example, many supervisors may not feel confident with reflective learning and the skills that underpin it, or the skills that maintain an appropriate balance between directive and non-directive practice. Also, students may be prepared for receiving but not giving feedback. HRD interventions will be needed to develop these skills if coaching is to enhance the transfer and sustainability of learning in doctoral supervision.

These challenges of adopting coaching for supervisors, students and HE Institutions are not explored in the current literature where coaching is cited as relevant option (Lee 2008) but there is no model on which to base practice. The development of Cook's Collaborative Action Doctoral Supervision Conceptual Model fills this gap and creates an opportunity to undertake further action based research with doctoral supervisors and students to implement and evaluate the model, and develop the HRD interventions necessary to support it.

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