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Nursing Graduate Supervision of Theses and Projects at a Distance: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Nursing graduate supervision of theses and projects at a distance is a new experience for many faculties. In our global and mobile society, nursing students frequently seek graduate programs that are geographically distant from their home communities. As options for nursing graduate education through distributive learning become increasingly available, the challenges for faculty to supervise graduate students at a distance pose issues and concerns. In this paper, key issues including difficulty deciding between a project and a thesis, difficulty identifying a supervisor, developing the mentoring relationship between the student and the supervisor, and conducting analysis at a distance are discussed. Strategies developed to address these challenges are presented and critiqued.

KEYWORDS: nursing graduate education, distributive learning, supervision, thesis

In our global and mobile society, students frequently seek out graduate programs that are geographically distant from their home communities. Whether they study at a distance in a distributed learning program or if they return to their communities before completing their projects or theses, supervising these students at a distance poses challenges and issues not normally encountered in traditional campus-based programs. Some of these challenges include difficulty deciding between a project and a thesis, difficulty identifying a supervisor, developing the mentoring relationship between the student and the supervisor, and conducting analysis at a distance. Difficulties such as these result in longer than planned completion times for theses or projects. In this descriptive paper, these challenges and some of the strategies to address them are discussed.

CONTEXT

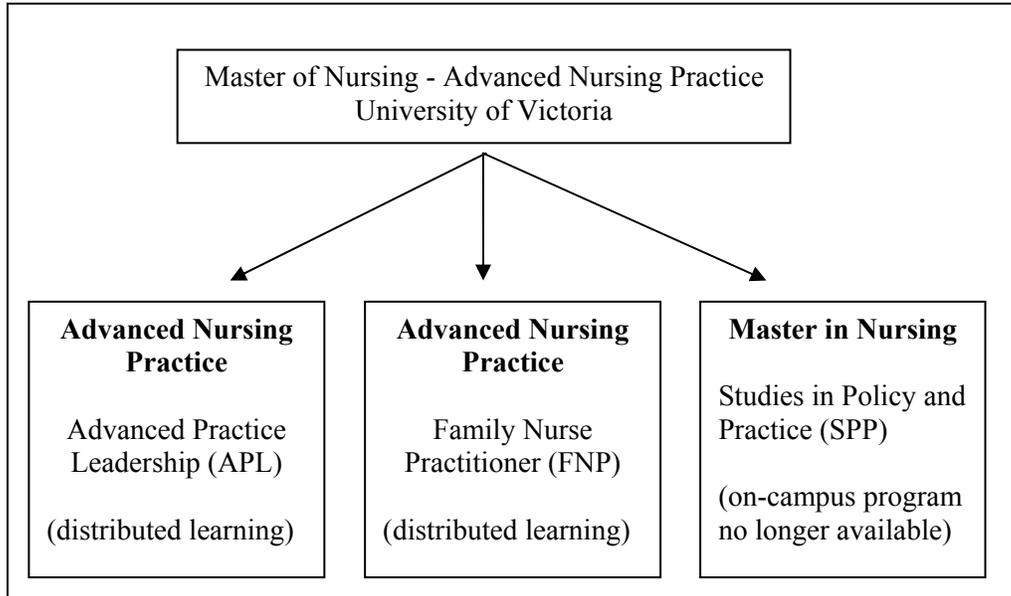
The University of Victoria School of Nursing in British Columbia, Canada has been involved in graduate education at the master's level for approximately 17 years. Until recently, this was primarily an on-campus Master of Nursing program offered in collaboration with the Studies in Policy and Practice (SPP) Program of the Faculty of Human and Social Development. Usually, fewer than seven students were admitted to the Master of Nursing program annually.

In 2003, the School implemented a new Master of Nursing by distributed learning with two options: Advanced Practice Leadership (APL) and Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) (see Table 1). The APL program offers both thesis (6 units) and project (3 units) options, whereas students in the FNP option complete a smaller evaluation project proposal (1.5 units). The supervisory requirements for these three options vary considerably.

The school can accommodate and has funding for approximately 25 full time equivalent (FTE) students in the two options within the Master of Nursing program. Because both full and part time students are admitted, there may be 30 or more individual students accepted in any given year. This expanded number of graduate students has greatly increased the faculty demands for graduate supervision. Furthermore, since these new programs are offered by distributed learning (DL), supervision is a different experience for the school and faculty members.

Table 1

Master's in Nursing: Advanced Nursing Practice options via distributed learning



The University of Victoria School of Nursing has offered undergraduate post-diploma baccalaureate education to registered nurses for more than 30 years. This expertise fostered the development of a variety of skills and resources for DL providing a sound base for graduate program offerings.

To support the School and the faculty in preparing graduate supervision at a distance, a development grant (MacDonald & Graduate Education Committee, 2004) from the University's Learning and Teaching Centre was awarded to assist in: (1) defining the meaning of "effective graduate supervision" and "satisfactory student progress" in the distance master's programs; (2) developing School processes and/or policies that will support effective graduate supervision and satisfactory student progress; and 3) implementing an orientation workshop for faculty supervising graduate students at a distance. Selected aspects of the work undertaken through the grant are reported in this paper.

TIME TO COMPLETION

Distributed learning enables students to work independently with greater control over study schedules. Students accessing DL often study part-time and are juggling career and family commitments (Besser & Donahue, 1996; Carr, 2000). At the University of Victoria, as elsewhere, graduate students are practicing nurses with multiple work and family responsibilities. Many students continue to work, usually out of necessity, and these employment demands must be managed alongside course assignments. This often results in longer than expected time for project or thesis completion.

Delayed completions are evident when comparing student progression in the APL and FNP programs which both began in 2003. In 2005, 10 NP students graduated followed by 9 in 2006. During this time, 9 APL students were admitted in 2003, 14 in 2004 and 20 in 2005 for a total of 43; however no APL students had yet completed the program. In fact, the first four APL students did not graduate until 2007, compared to 19 from the FNP program in 2007. This difference was striking given that the NP program requires substantially more course credits. In part, the difference can be explained by the nature of the programs and the degree of structure and choice provided to students. In the NP program, there are more pre-requisites than for APL students, and specific sequencing of coursework is necessary. Nurse Practitioner students have less choice in what courses they are able to take in a given term, and during the practicum courses, they must be registered full time because the primary health care theory and practice courses need to be taken concurrently. This degree of structure, the limited choices in course offerings, and the requirement to maintain full time status during at least 3 terms of the program means that NP students progress more quickly to graduation than APL students.

Longer completion times have implications for students, the School of Nursing, and the University. Master's students are expected to complete all requirements for the degree within five years. As in many universities, students who exceed this prescribed timeline must request an extension, and if granted, students incur substantial additional fees. For students, the financial burden of taking longer to complete the thesis/project is only one implication. Students may simply run out of energy, and the learning process becomes burdensome. This seems to happen when students take time away and the momentum and immersion in thinking and writing get dispersed, leading to the potential risk of abandoning their program. However, very little research addresses this trajectory or the quality of scholarship or experience when students take longer to complete.

CHALLENGES IN DECIDING BETWEEN PROJECT AND THESIS

Students at the University of Victoria have the choice of completing a project or a thesis. A completed project receives 3 units (6 credits) of academic credit and a completed thesis receives 6 units of credit. To facilitate completion of either the project or the thesis, students are required to register in an on-line course entitled *Thesis/Project*. This course included topics such as deciding on your research question, conducting a literature review, selecting a supervisor, deciding on a project or thesis, the thesis/project defense, and publication. Although some structure was provided within the course for the various steps in the process, students remained uncertain about the difference between a thesis and a project. Offering only a thesis option for many years, it was also not always easy for supervisors to clearly identify differences between a thesis and a project.

Faculty intentions were for both theses and projects to be rigorous and contribute to nursing knowledge, and the articulation of clear guidelines for students and faculty to delineate differences was not anticipated. At the same time, faculty wanted to avoid the potential for status differential between thesis and project where either faculty or students would see the project as a choice for students who could not meet thesis standards. Several strategies were considered including assigning equal unit value to the thesis and project as one way to avoid a status hierarchy. However, it was agreed that in most instances a project would not carry the same workload as a thesis and thus assigning the same weighting was not justifiable. While the thesis option was recommended for students considering doctoral education, they were also informed that most doctoral programs no longer require a master's thesis for admission. All faculty members agreed that both a thesis and project should demonstrate the student's critical thinking and a scholarly approach to inquiry. The aim was to provide students with the opportunity to link their projects with the goals of an employing agency or one in which they were completing their practice placement. Thus, there was a need to clarify policies and practices.

Several months were spent developing guidelines to clarify thesis and project expectations. A project was defined as a systematic investigation of an area of interest, program, or policy. The project could be practical as well as conceptual and most often highly related to the student's area of advanced nursing practice. It was to involve the integration of theoretical, methodological, and research knowledge and typically would not require data collection, data analysis, or ethical approval. Students were urged to avoid primary data collection for projects, because of the time needed to obtain approval university and agency ethics committees. Examples were provided of possible forms of scholarly

endeavors, that would qualify as a project including: program evaluation planning, concept development/analysis, integrative literature review, development of clinical practice guidelines, curriculum plans, research utilization plans, and policy analysis and critique. Examples of completed theses, projects, and proposals for theses/projects were added to the course web-site. In sum, projects were distinguished from theses in the following ways: students completing projects demonstrate practical application of systematic inquiry rather than conducting empirical research; projects are less complex, narrower in scope with fewer credit units; and focus on practical links to nursing practice.

After clarifying the guidelines for projects, the *Thesis /Project* course was restructured so that students would have three major goals in the first term of the program: identify an area/topic of interest to pursue, decide between thesis and project, and select a supervisor for the project or thesis. After the supervisor was selected, students could then work through the remaining decisions about their project at their own speed under the guidance of their supervisor. Following completion of the *Thesis/Project* course, students could continue to discuss the issues related to thesis or project completion through the remainder of their program using a blog established specifically for this purpose,

Faculty development was also important, since faculty had varying expectations of the project and thesis. In addition to the Graduate Education Committee meetings where guidelines were developed, two faculty development workshops were held to develop consistent expectations for projects. On-line access to completed projects and theses is underway to provide exemplars for students and faculty.

IDENTIFYING A SUPERVISOR

While students finalize their decision about which option of project/thesis best meets their needs, they must also identify a supervisor. Although the supervisory relationship is considered fundamental in guiding students' learning (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Bradbury-Jones, Irvine, & Sambrook, 2007; Ricks, Kadlec, Corner, & Paul, 2003), graduate students at a distance face challenges in identifying a potential supervisor. Traditional approaches to supervision at the graduate level have most commonly been based on an apprenticeship model, where the student engages with faculty in a closely structured educational process, usually directed by the faculty member (Salmon, 1992). Frequent face-to-face interaction between student and faculty member is assumed to be important to build collaborative working relationships and to promote successful completion of

the graduate degree (Rodger & Brown, 2000). In part, these face-to-face exchanges serve to sustain productive supervisory relationships.

Within the context of distributed delivery of graduate education in nursing, opportunities for face-to-face interaction with potential supervisors is limited as students often reside at a substantial distance from the institution. Therefore, many graduate students have to identify potential supervisors and begin developing relationships with them without the benefit of meeting them in person. Typical ways of identifying potential supervisors, such as having ongoing interaction with faculty in courses, participating on School committees, working as an assistant on faculty research, talking with faculty informally, and getting advice from other graduate students, are possible with distributed delivery approaches, but it may be more challenging. Students and faculty must find other ways to determine whether they share work and learning styles that will complement one another and facilitate successful student-supervisor relationships.

When the Master's program began, each student was appointed to a faculty mentor. The role of the faculty mentor was to provide general support and advice to students so that they had a "contact" person in the school with whom they could discuss questions. The intent was that the mentor role would end when a supervisor was selected by the APL students, and when the NP students moved into their practice courses. Mentors and students were not matched on interests and contact was not mandated; it was left to each faculty member and student pair to determine the degree of involvement they wanted. Early evaluation data suggested that the role was not very effective in supporting students (Gamroth, Shields, & Brown, 2006). At that point, a more formal role for faculty members called "Faculty Advisor" was created. The faculty advisor was expected to have contact with his/her students early in the program, and was responsible for such things as assisting students with high GPAs to apply for funding, and selecting a supervisor. Students and advisors were then matched on the basis of shared interests. A document outlining the roles and responsibilities of the faculty advisor was created and provided to faculty members. Despite the re-defining of the mentor/advisor role, challenges with moving students through the program, particularly the APL option continued.

Strategies for Finding a Supervisor

To assist students in identifying a potential supervisor, a number of strategies have been employed. Upon program entry, graduate students are assigned an interim supervisor, who acts as a resource person for the student until such time as the student acquires a thesis/project supervisor. Efforts to match

clinical and research interests of students and interim supervisors are made as much as possible, with the aim of connecting students and potential supervisors early in the program. Students are also provided with a student handbook that outlines tips for choosing and working with a supervisor. The thesis/project course also helps them identify a potential supervisor and to prepare them to write a thesis or complete a project. One of the learning activities includes reviewing the websites of faculty members to identify shared interests, and to interview three to five faculty members by telephone who might be potential supervisors or supervisory committee members. The websites also include recorded audio messages by faculty members who identify their research interests and approaches to working with graduate students.

All of these strategies promote “virtual” opportunities for students and potential supervisors to get to know one another and enhance students’ comfort level in approaching faculty for supervision purposes (Rovai, 2002). Still, approaching faculty can be difficult and intimidating for some students, particularly if a prior relationship has not been established. Ultimately, much rests on potential supervisors themselves, their ability to create a welcoming learning environment, and on their capacity to accurately interpret, accommodate and monitor the demands of the student-supervisor relationship (Manderson, 1996; Rodger & Brown, 2000).

ROLE OF SUPERVISOR

The need to rethink the role of supervisor was identified by the task group for the Learning and Teaching Centre grant. Their findings showed that many students did not have a holistic conceptualization of the program and its requirements. Students seemed to engage with the program on a course-by-course basis, in piecemeal fashion, with little consideration to how their work in a given course related to the program as a whole. This meant that they were not taking advantage of opportunities to build on their learning and experiences from one course to the next in preparation for both their practice experiences and their thesis/project. Faculty members felt this was likely a function of the DL program format because this same issue was not experienced with on-campus students.

Since the intent was for students to be thinking about the program holistically, it became clear that faculty also needed to think more holistically about student supervision. Rather than provide students first with a mentor/advisor and then have them switch to a thesis supervisor, with a different role, graduate supervision was conceptualized more broadly to include the entire program and not just the thesis or project. Thus, as mentioned previously, an

interim supervisor role was created. This person is responsible for providing guidance to the student throughout the program, or until such time that a primary supervisor is named, usually at the time the student begins the thesis or project. Understanding and application of this notion is still evolving, but clearly it does not mean that the same person will necessarily be the supervisor throughout a student's program, although it seems more likely that this will happen now that the role has been reconceptualized this way. Because students are matched with a faculty member on the basis of shared interests, and because they have mandated contact early in the program, clear written expectations, and required "products" of the interaction (e.g., a progress report each term), students may be better able to form a closer relationship with the supervisor than previously, thus facilitating an ongoing supervisory relationship.

In 2006, an APL Coordinator/ Faculty Advisor role was introduced. This individual serves as the chairperson of the APL program sub-committee and is responsible for overseeing the APL program and providing support to students leading up to, and after, admission. The Coordinator, with the Associate Director for Graduate Education and the Student Advisor, reviews the student admission list and assigns interim supervisors to students based on the fit between the students' known interests and the scholarly/practice focus of faculty members. This person is also responsible for monitoring student progress.

A series of graduate supervision workshops for faculty development have been initiated, and written policies and support materials for faculty to guide them in their supervision constructed. Students have been provided with more structure than previously, with more clearly defined timelines and requirements that must be met at points in the program. Further, several documents were combined to develop an APL Program Guide for students available on the School Website. Recent feedback suggests that students find this guide helpful and "user friendly." These changes may result in faster and smoother progress of students through the program (Gamroth et al, 2006), but further evaluation is required.

Challenges in Developing a Supervisory Relationship

One of the primary goals in the supervisory relationship is to facilitate development of independent scholars in the field, capable of adapting to various practice and research settings (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006; Grevholm, Tersson, & Whall, 2005; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Ricks et al., 2003). Green and Bauer (1995) suggest that graduate students who have supportive mentorship relationships with faculty tend to be more productive, are more actively engaged in their graduate programs, and are more satisfied with their programs than students who have not

had supportive mentorship relationships. As such, mentorship has become an important concept within the context of graduate supervision, and there is increasing literature addressing how faculty can best support and mentor their graduate students (Manathunga & Goozee, 2007).

Mentoring relationships between students and supervisors are, to a large degree, developed over time and through a series of ongoing interactions. Often, mentoring relationships begin when graduate students have had opportunities to work with and/or be taught by their supervisors prior to the project/thesis stage, in which case the foundation for a productive working relationship may have already been laid. In the context of distributed learning, this is certainly possible, but requires faculty (and students) to re-conceptualize their notions of the mentorship relationship typically understood to include ongoing face-to-face interaction.

Several strategies for developing and maintaining productive mentoring relationships have been suggested in the literature, and most of these can be adapted for students enrolled in distributed learning programs. In the University of Victoria program, both interim supervisors and faculty members who become the primary supervisor are encouraged to maintain ongoing email and telephone contact with their students, at least once per semester, and more frequently with students who are engaged in project/thesis work. Faculty development workshops and new faculty orientations focus on supervision at a distance and quarterly meetings are held where junior and senior faculty meet to discuss supervisory issues and potential solutions. This provides support, particularly for junior faculty with limited supervisory experience and who have the additional challenge of distance supervision. Because open and respectful communications are cornerstones of productive mentoring/supervisory relationships, faculty are encouraged to work with their students to clarify expectations of their respective roles and responsibilities early in the relationship. This might include clarifying short and long-term student goals, deciding upon contact frequency and how often feedback will be given, outlining expectations of what first drafts of projects/theses should look like before submission, discussions about intellectual property, and philosophy and expectations of co-authorship. In addition to these more formal activities, graduate students respond positively to ongoing interactions that make them feel welcome and part of the School. Emails or telephone calls to “check in” or to say “hello” go a long way in helping students to feel connected to their programs and remind students that supervisors are interested in their experience of graduate education and career development.

DATA ANALYSIS AT A DISTANCE

Data analysis supervision at a distance thesis poses potential challenges. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis may require intensive involvement of the supervisor and/or other committee members. Thus far, it has been our experience that excellent students are able to manage the process of data analysis with relatively little difficulty. Students residing in other countries have successfully completed theses using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our recommendations include that students take research courses in the specific methods they will be using for their thesis. In addition, students are encouraged to develop relationships with faculty members at universities in close proximity, if available. Often these faculty members can be formally added to the supervisory committee. Regular and frequent e-mail and sometimes telephone contact between the student and supervisor are required as students work through the myriad of questions that emerge during the analysis process. Sometimes data are sent between the student and faculty member for analysis. Consideration needs to be given to managing data security with strategies such as password protected files on shared networks or CDs, and removal of any identifying information. Some students are urged to consider spending time with their supervisor during the analysis process, this is not usually required.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Graduate supervision at a distance requires that faculty explore the relational needs of DL students so that appropriate approaches can be developed to ensure students are well supported and able to complete in a timely manner (Evans, Hickey & Davis, 2005). With this in mind, the challenges for graduate students in deciding to do a project or thesis, identifying a supervisor, developing a mentoring relationship between student and supervisor, and conducting data analysis at a distance have been examined.

Much rests on potential supervisors and their ability to create a welcoming learning environment and on their capacity to mentor within the student-supervisor relationship. Recommendations include formalized structures and guidelines for students and faculty to facilitate this relationship early in the student's program. Examples of strategies aimed to clarify processes and expectations include: assigning interim supervisors on admission based on common interests of both students and faculty members, having a web-based student handbook that outlines tips for choosing and working with a supervisor, audio messages from faculty members who identify their research interests and

approaches to working with graduate students on the website, and completion of term progress reports co-written by supervisor and student.

Graduate supervision at a distance is a new experience for many faculty. However, on-going faculty development through workshops and helpful guidelines ensure timely student progression through their programs. While there are challenges in developing mentoring and supervisory relationships at a distance, the enhanced access to graduate education for nurses makes DL an important modality worth developing.

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