


Supervising Dissertations of Struggling Research Scholars: An Autoethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract

In this autoethnographic study, I explore research scholars' emotional and psychological challenges while preparing their dissertations. To gather data, I reflect on my experience supervising three M Phil in English Language Education students at a university in Nepal. These scholars faced difficulties from the initial stages of preparing their dissertation proposals to defend their dissertations and went through a range of experiences, from trauma to satisfaction. To better understand the scholars' perspectives on dissertation writing, I examined McCann and Pearlman's (1990) theory of vicarious trauma, Astin's (1999) theory of person and environment, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of ecological models of human development. The study revealed that scholars often experience depression and trauma at certain stages of dissertation writing. This study highlights the crucial role of the supervisor, not just in academic matters but also in the mental well-being of scholars. The insights contribute to the discourse on how personal characteristics and environmental factors influence an individual's academic development. It emphasizes the importance of the supervisor's role in understanding scholars' needs and interests to create a suitable research environment for struggling scholars.

Keywords: *Supervision, dissertation, struggling, scholars, academic trauma.*

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Introduction

Supervising dissertations involves both emotional and intellectual challenges. Hence, it requires a practical approach. We, supervisors, are pressed by the dilemma of the university quality control and scholars' emotional and academic challenges. As a supervisor, I always try to integrate the personal experiences of my scholars and their cultural identities and provide support through guidance and feedback in the research process.

I work at one of the teaching and research universities in Nepal. My department specializes in teaching and research in language education. I specialize in theoretical and applied linguistics, particularly in the discourses on the impact of Western ideology on the indigenous knowledge system and postcolonialism, focusing on marginalized communities, western hegemony and local varieties of English. I successfully supervised approximately 45 M Phil in English Language Education dissertations in the last ten years.

My university's M Phil program contains coursework and a dissertation. To be an M Phil graduate, a scholar must complete 24 credits and a dissertation of nine credits. It is a three-semester program to be completed in one and a half years.

However, most scholars take extra time to meet the requirements, particularly in writing the dissertation. As a university requirement, scholars prepare research proposals and defend them before the research committee, usually during the course. The scholars work under the assigned supervisors, and supervisors recommend dissertations to the research committee when they consider the documents ready for defence. After the defence, scholars work further to address the feedback from the research committee members. In this way, supervising a dissertation is a continuous process of mentoring scholars.

In this autoethnographic paper, I critically reflect on my experience supervising Master of Philosophy (M Phil) dissertations. Postcolonial theory, decolonial methodologies and indigenous knowledge systems influenced my academic scholarship and philosophy. I studied English literature and linguistics at university and taught courses on critical discourse analysis, advanced qualitative research, contemporary thoughts, and World Englishes. Reading and continuous discussions with my students in these areas enabled me to understand the Western hegemony on marginalized communities' educational and cultural spaces in South Asia. I advocate the agency of indigenous communities in my writing and formal and informal discussions. I believe the agency provides these communities with their voice of conscious subjecthood through my research scholars' intellectual and reflective capabilities. In the meantime, such intellectual capabilities inspire scholars to interpret their world and construct meaning in order to make their voices heard forever in a more expansive academic space.

To explore and reflect on my experience as a dissertation supervisor for M Phil in English Language Education (ELE), I follow the research method of autoethnography. Autoethnography as a research method involves self-reflection and narratives to analyze personal experiences in the author's cultural context. On the other hand, it combines ethnography and biography with a focus on self-analysis. In this paper, I use my experience to understand the relationship between the supervisor and scholars and their academic achievements. My experiential anecdotes connect the supervisor's self with the social context of my research area (Ngujiri et al., 2010), i.e., the M Phil in ELE communities. Like a typical autoethnographic study, I use my personal experience to explore my social and professional context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Mendez, 2013). I believe this autoethnographic study provides the Nepali scholarly community with a unique perspective on dissertation supervision through self-reflection and analysis in supporting scholars' academic and professional growth.

The concept of student involvement in higher education received ample discussion from theoretical perspectives, particularly in writing a dissertation. For this paper, I looked into the issue from two theoretical frames— the vicarious trauma theory (McCann & Pearlman, 1990) and the person-environment theory (Astin, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1993). McCann and Pearlman (1990) argue that exposure to traumatic events impacts an individual's academic achievements. Individuals often experience these traumatic events, fearing rejection

by the research committee members. Repeated exposure to such events affects the scholar's mental well-being and leads them to hopelessness and depression, causing anxiety. In this paper, I explore the emotional well-being of scholars and the role of a supervisor in creating a supportive environment for their successful completion of dissertations.

The theoretical frame of person-environment (PE, hereafter) emphasizes the interdependence between individuals and their environment (Astin, 1999). Astin argues that the environment in which individuals exist, not their innate characteristics, shapes their behaviour and development, including academics. In other words, the environment shapes individuals' behaviours and characteristics. Based on Astin's argument, I recognize that the environment at the university, the research community and the supervision process contribute to completing writing dissertations. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes ecological systems theory, and I consider it an extension of PE theory. I argue that not only the immediate environment of a scholar but several other systems influence their academic environments. These systems could be micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. According to Bronfenbrenner, a microsystem is a scholar's immediate environment; different microsystems interact in the mesosystem. The exosystem does not directly interact with the individual's choice but influences their development. The scholar's cultural and belief systems form the macro system. This theory enables me to recognize that these different sub-systems influence the scholar-supervisor relationship, affecting the supervision process based on the university's ideology, research community and cultural values of the scholar's immediate environment.

Emotional and Psychological Aspects

I critically reflect on the emotional and psychological aspects my scholars undergo while preparing their dissertations. One of my most moving experiences as a supervisor was working with Nani, an M Phil scholar in English Language Education. Nani came from an indigenous community in the Kathmandu Valley, and her educational background was in literature, not education.

One evening, when I was preparing to sleep at about half past ten at night, my mobile phone beeped up, and a low voice came 'sir' from the other side and remained silent for the next thirty seconds. I said 'yes' and expected the caller would continue the conversation. However, the prolonged silence irritated me, and I asked what I could do. A girl in a depressed voice said, 'I would give up writing the dissertation'. Now I know the caller was Nani, who defended her dissertation proposal that day, and the Department head assigned me to supervise her. 'Why do you want to give up?' I asked. After a few seconds of silence, she said, 'I think I am not made for things like all these things. I feel as if I were empty and knew nothing.' 'How can that be?' I asked her not to panic and to see me in the office whenever she felt free. I also asked her to sleep well. Then I bade her good night.

Nani's experience was traumatic when she defended her dissertation proposal. I sensed a feeling of humiliation and failure in Nani's conversation. All these feelings of inadequacy are common reactions to traumatic events. McCann and Pearlman's (1990) vicarious trauma theory provides a framework for understanding Nani's experience. This theory argues that an individual traumatic experience leads her to a new cognitive, emotional and physical functioning. The person internalizes these shifts, leading to symptoms like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Coming again to the case of Nani, she experienced emotional stress because of a traumatic experience while defending her dissertation proposal. The emotional distress caused her feelings of humiliation and a lack of response to the comments from the research

committee members. The comments triggered these emotional reactions, causing her to give up the idea of writing the dissertation.

Such emotional reactions are frequent among research scholars. Regular meetings with the supervisor and counselling sessions can prevent the scholars from having a severe traumatic experience. These meetings and counselling sessions will mitigate the impact of trauma when she gets adequate support and guidance. In this way, I understood that the supervisor provides academic guidance and emotional support to scholars. In this case, Nani's exposure to the trauma profoundly impacted her academic journey, especially her emotional and psychological well-being (Shaw, 2020).

Unlike Nani's case, the case of Shanta was different. I knew Shanta had some issues with coherence when writing academic texts. He was good at reading volumes of books and articles but found it challenging to filter out what was relevant and not in a particular context. We worked hard, and I could not see any further improvement in his writing. I had two options with Shanta. First, I could ask him to give up the idea of getting a degree. Second, recommend the dissertation and face the research committee. I opted for the second. I could not go for the first. I realized he learnt a lot of things and read a lot, though he failed to create coherence in academic writing; despite my guidance, he could not do it independently. I took his dissertation to the research committee. The research committee decided the dissertation needed improvement, and the candidate had to defend it again. He was a bit frustrated because he thought he did it well. It took about three months to convince his shortcomings in the dissertation, and finally, he agreed to defend it again. He defended and graduated. Now, he works in a reputed institution.

The case of Shanta is representative of the challenges that scholars face while writing dissertations. Shanta found it difficult to filter out relevant information from his experience and reading and use it appropriately to create coherence in his writing. He struggled to do it independently. I recommended his dissertation for the defence so that I could protect his self-esteem and he could maintain his academic aspirations. As informed by vicarious trauma theory (McCann & Pearlman, 1990), I understood that working with struggling students causes additional emotional stress. The ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) and Astin's (1999) theory of person-environment theory informed me that Shanta's extensive reading enabled him to understand his issues. Shanta's case was representative of average Nepali students. We all come from the oral tradition. Therefore, seeking coherence in academic writing is alien to someone like Shanta, who hailed from a remote village in eastern Nepal. Shanta's generation was the first to read and write in his community.

Reflecting on these socio-cultural aspects of our society, I understood I should not overlook his academic achievement in the dissertation writing process. My decision to recommend his dissertation for defence created an environment to achieve his academic goals, though it meant additional work for both of us. I realized the university's academic environment and the research committee's guidance allowed struggling students to face academic writing challenges. As a supervisor, I realized exemplary efforts and timely advice helped the student achieve positive outcomes, though the path to success was not straightforward.

Personal and Environmental Aspects in Writing Dissertation

Personal and environmental aspects influence the quality of academic writing, like a dissertation for a university degree. In this section, I explore the story of Narul, whose dissertation I supervised. He struggled with academic writing because he never studied the course of academic writing in his school and college education. I examine how understanding

scholars' personal and environmental factors enables the supervisor to design appropriate learning environments based on their needs and preferences.

Narul came from a remote district of eastern Nepal. In his district, he went to one of the government schools that never focused on academic writing. When he joined as an M Phil scholar in English Language Education, he felt empty with any academic writing. He told me to guide him in preparing his dissertation proposal that he had to defend before the research committee.

The anecdote tells how an individual's experience and environment can impact academic performance. In this case, Narul's schooling in a remote government school did not provide him with the necessary academic skills for academic writing, particularly in the context of a higher university degree. Astin's (1999) person-environment theory informs us that an individual's experiences and environment can significantly impact his/her academic performance and readiness for certain tasks. In Narul's case, several factors contributed to his academic performance. His school and college curricula did not prioritize academic writing, a prerequisite for a higher university degree. Lack of exposure to academic writing in his school and college environment could have resulted in not valuing this skill. However, the change in environment, i.e., from a remote village school to a highly-resourced university environment, provides him with opportunities for learning new skills and professional growth. The new environment at the university provided him with the opportunity to interact with faculty members and peers and positively improved his writing. Individuals' backgrounds shape their values, interests, and attitudes, influencing their motivation to learn and succeed in different areas. Astin (1999) suggests that educators need to be aware of these factors and design learning environments appropriate for individual learners' needs and preferences.

Narul was interested in learning English through technology. Based on his interest, I decided to work on how teenagers exploit smartphones when learning English. Then, he started working on the concept. I asked him to talk to students about using smartphones to learn English.

This anecdote highlights the importance of understanding and aligning a student's interest with the research area. Aligning the student's interest with his research engages the researcher in the research process. After a series of meetings with him, I recognized his area of interest; I suggested he should work on learning English with technology. This suggestion triggered his interest, and he immediately accepted. I asked him to read some literature in the area so that we could be specific. This approach improved his engagement and motivation towards his research. Astin (1999) argued that students' involvement in academic activities and their sense of belongingness to the academic community are fundamental to their academic performance.

Following Bronfenbrenner (1993), I argue that Narul's professors and peers formed his microsystem. He interacted with several professors, his class peers, and other university research scholars. This was his mesosystem. Despite the academic discourse he created with his reading and interactions at the university, Narul had the cultural and social values that remained with him. These values formed his macro system. These theories enabled me to understand that supervisors can facilitate struggling students by creating an environment that fosters a research environment, creating an exosystem and aligning their research to their interests.

I asked Narul to write a chapter on the historical development of the use of technology in Nepali education. I wanted him to get acquainted with the relevant literature.

He wrote a few pages, but that was not enough to include a chapter in his dissertation. However, that gave him an idea of how scholars write academically. Our several meetings convinced me that he was a good storyteller and better at making stories from others. So, I asked him to use narrative inquiry as his research method and read the literature. He brought interesting stories from teenagers about how they brought smartphones to classrooms, though they were prohibited.

The personal characteristics of Narul, for example, are his storytelling abilities, which interface with the environment, i.e., writing about the use of technology in Nepali education. This interface shaped his learning and academic development. As a supervisor, I realized that he was good at telling stories; I exploited his ability to create narratives of his research participants. Since Narul was writing a dissertation for an academic degree, he had to show that he thoroughly understood his research area.

Narrative inquiry as a research method enabled Narul to explore the stories of his teenage research participants who brought smartphones to classrooms despite the prohibition. Narul's use of narrative inquiry for his dissertation illustrates the importance of understanding the impact of his ability on his academic development. I also consider the prohibition of smartphones in classrooms to be an environmental factor that influences his research participants' behaviour. The students and school authorities perceived the use of smartphones in classrooms differently. Narul further explored the teenagers' positive attitudes to technology in the classroom environment. Informed by Astin's (1999) theory of person-environment, I argue that Narul's narrative inquiry enabled him to understand better the environmental impact on his participants' learning behaviour.

Narul again struggled in the stage of data interpretation and discussion. I asked him to take a month's leave from his school and stay with me at my home. We cooked together and discussed his dissertation over dinner and tea time. He learned that interpretation refers to converting the raw data into the jargon of the research area. After interpretation, a researcher discusses how he created new knowledge substantiating his claims from the relevant literature.

Bronfenbrenner (1993) provides a framework for understanding how the interaction between various environmental systems influences an individual's development. Narul's struggle with data interpretation and discussion of his interpretation from the theoretical perspective of the digital divide links to the ecological system theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner. At the microsystem level, Narul struggles with his dissertation and takes a month's leave from his school. At his mesosystem level, Narul interacts with his supervisor, other professors and peers at the university. These series of interactions enabled him to conceptualize and develop the dissertation. Taking him home and providing direct support and guidance gave Narul a new perspective to reflect on his dissertation writing. The macrosystem is the third system in Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological model of human development. I interpret Narul's struggle with data interpretation and developing themes related to his socio-cultural norms since he was never exposed to academic writing before, i.e., in his school and college education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

During the research process, he extensively read the theory of the digital divide, mainly concentrating on the writings of van Dijk (van Dijk, 2005). He talked to his teenage research participants and their teachers and realized he was perceptually wrong about using smartphones in classrooms. Narul, a school leader, previously believed that using smartphones spoils children. One day, he confessed that children use smartphones for creative works, solving physics and maths problems, though some use them to watch pornographic materials. However, he concluded that their interests did not last in such materials, and they

concentrated on their studies. He experimented at his school by allowing smartphones in his classroom, and he reported his children enjoyed learning English with smartphones. These days, he is teaching his students how to exploit the learners' creativity with a chatbot like ChatGPT.

Narul's experiences working with me shaped his beliefs and perceptions of using smartphones in classrooms. Individuals' behaviour and development are the product of the interaction between their characteristics and environment (Astin, 1999). My supervision, reading about the digital divide and interacting with his teenage research participants influenced Narul's perception of using smartphones in classrooms. Before writing the dissertation, Narul perceived that smartphones spoil children, as many parents and teachers do in South Asia. This perception was the product of his experience and socio-cultural beliefs. However, his continuous interaction with his research participants, the part of his environment, and reading van Dijk's theory enabled him to challenge his assumed beliefs. Instead of banning smartphones in classrooms, Narul experimented with using them in classrooms, and it was quite a different experience. This experience enabled him to develop new teaching strategies to harness students' creativity.

Conclusion

For this paper, a critical reflection on my experience supervising three of my scholars reveals that research scholars face emotional and psychological challenges while preparing their dissertations. Regular meetings with the supervisor to sort out the issues serve as counselling sessions for the research scholars as these meetings provide them with emotional support. The cases of Nani and Shanta demonstrate that academic writing challenges lead to emotional distress and traumatic experiences. Different factors could trigger these challenges, but the most common is underscoring their work by the research committee members.

The story of Narul illustrates that personal and environmental factors significantly affect academic performance. I discuss these findings using Astin's person-environment theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. By aligning students' interests with the research area, creating a conducive research environment, and addressing the impact of the environment on students' behaviour and development, supervisors and educators can facilitate students' engagement, motivation, and academic performance. Ultimately, the article concludes that with the right efforts and timely guidance, students can overcome academic writing challenges and achieve positive outcomes, even though the path to success may not always be straightforward.

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