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**A narrative study of the experience of feedback on a professional  
doctorate: ‘A kind of flowing conversation’**

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# **A narrative study of the experience of feedback on a professional doctorate: ‘A kind of flowing conversation’**

Feedback has an important role in supporting learning. It is through feedback that learners can actively construct and clarify understanding, monitor their performance and direct their learning. Despite attention on feedback in higher education, limited research exists exploring the role and experience of feedback within doctoral programmes. This article focuses on student experiences of feedback during a professional doctorate in England. Analysis of the narrative of one recent Doctorate in Education graduate reveals several inter-related themes, illustrating the role of peers in supporting the move to autonomous researcher. This intensive focus on one student’s experience narrative contributes to a reconceptualization of feedback as dialogic, revealing feedback through the doctoral journey as an ongoing dialogue, with the doctoral researcher taking increasing responsibility for orchestrating the conversation. I argue that such a perspective moves beyond the traditional view of doctoral learning through the support of a supervisor to encompass both formal and informal learning experiences within a community of research practice, emphasising the active participation of the doctoral candidate in this community. I discuss the potential contribution of student experience stories to the development of doctoral relationships and practice.

Keywords: professional doctorate; dialogic feedback; student experience; narrative; communities of practice

## **Introduction**

Feedback has an important role in supporting learning. It is through feedback that learners can actively construct and clarify understanding, monitor their performance and direct their learning. The significance of feedback is evident in the ongoing drive by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to support institutions to transform assessment practices, promoting new approaches, dialogue, and self and peer assessment (HEA 2016). Although feedback has been the focus of considerable innovation in higher

education, within the broad context of research education such developments are less common, perhaps in part due to a privileging of discourses of research ‘training’ rather than research education (Boud and Lee 2005, 502). The increasingly popular professional doctorate may be well placed to redress this through a focus on doctoral pedagogy, as such degrees are typically structured, cohort based programmes in the early years of study, thus challenging the individualization of the doctoral researcher and the emphasis on supervision. Yet, despite the increasing number of students enrolling on professional doctorates, little is known about their experience of feedback during their programme. Through the analysis of the narrative of one recent Doctorate in Education (EdD) graduate, this article directs attention to student experiences of feedback on this predominant professional doctorate programme. Continuity of experience within a community of practice emerges as a significant feature, one which impacts on the doctoral researcher’s own pedagogical practice.

Professional doctorates (PD) aim to support doctoral researchers to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding required to research practices and issues arising in their professional work; this focus on professional practice is one of the significant differences between the PD and the PhD (Bourner, Bowden, and Laing 2001). A common feature of PDs is the inclusion of a modular phase, often comprised of research methods and philosophies courses with additional assessment requirements, in addition to the final research thesis. Increasingly, researchers propose a community of practice model as a more appropriate theorisation of learning on the doctorate than learning solely through supervision (Harrison and Grant 2015; Boud and Lee 2005). Student experience within such communities is under-explored even as professional doctorates continue to grow in popularity. The number and type of award are on the increase in England, with the Doctorate in Education dominating in several countries, particularly

in the US, UK and Australia (Kot and Hendel 2012) and emerging in countries such as China and Iceland (Wildy, Peden and Chan 2015).

In education, doctoral researchers typically embark upon professional doctorates as a form of professional development, their research closely aligned to their professional practice. Participants may be seeking ‘professional renewal’ (Wellington and Sikes 2006, 727), undertaking the doctorate in order to confirm or challenge their identities. These education professionals bring additional perspectives and experiences of feedback from their professional practice.

In this article, I argue that an understanding of feedback as dialogic facilitates participation in a community of research practice. This active participation has implications for both doctoral pedagogy and supervision practice. Existing research on feedback as part of doctoral learning points to the role it may play in supporting doctoral researchers to participate in the research community. This article contributes to this research with an in-depth narrative centred on the experience of feedback of one doctoral researcher, Isobel, a recent graduate of the EdD. The results of this study suggest that feedback on the professional doctorate may be conceptualised as a feature of the broader pedagogical environment, taking place within a community of research practice. Rather than being primarily focused on tutors’ and supervisors’ written comments, significant feedback experiences, both formal and informal, also involve peers. The study points to the iterative nature of feedback through the doctoral experience, highlighting identity shifts.

Stories of research student experience provide supervisors with the opportunity to reconsider doctoral pedagogy, opening up the affective dimension of supervision (McCormack 2009). They have the potential to aid supervisors in reflection on supervisory practice, including on the practice of working in supervisory teams, a

somewhat neglected aspect of supervisory practice. I argue that such stories may also support doctoral researchers work with and through the challenges of doctoral study. I begin by developing a perspective on learning in the professional doctorate as part of a community of practice before considering the role of feedback in this community.

### **Doctoral pedagogy**

Research provides insights into what doctoral researchers learn (Mellors-Bourne, Robinson and Metcalf 2016; Wellington and Sikes 2006) but much less is known about how they learn. Learning ‘primarily through undertaking research under the expert guidance of supervisors’ (QAA 2011, 11) provides only a partial account of learning on professional doctorates where students are typically cohort based. The traditional hierarchical model of supervision is in need of review, not least due to the challenge posed to supervisors in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Harrison and Grant 2015). This model of supervision may have been superseded in practice, with several researchers (Boud and Lee 2005; Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, and Piert 2013) proposing a communities of practice model as a more appropriate theorisation of what actually takes place. Such a model focuses on ‘learning as social participation’ where participation entails active involvement in the practices of communities and ‘shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do’ (Wenger 1998, 4). Doctoral researchers become part of a community of research practice through a process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 29), where such peripherality is seen as positive and dynamic, opening opportunities for increasing involvement and a move towards full participation. Reconceptualising the research environment utilising a communities of practice model highlights a central goal of research education as a

‘process of “becoming peer” through participation in a community of research practice’ (Boud and Lee 2005, 504).

Students learn from many experiences during their doctoral studies; Harrison and Grant’s (2015, 563) Australian study reported a breadth of experiences including several which are likely to incorporate feedback in some form, for example, presenting research at conferences, reading and writing groups, and networking. The cohort experience of professional doctorates is an important source of peer support, providing the opportunity to learn as part of a community of experienced professionals engaged in research (Mellors-Bourne, Robinson and Metcalfe 2016). To account for the role of the wider environment, pedagogy may be viewed as extending beyond the boundaries of planned activities taking place within the university environment; reconceptualised in terms of ‘pedagogical relations’, it incorporates learning taking place in other spaces: the personal space, the work space, the professional space (Pratt et al. 2015).

### ***Doctoral research as a social practice***

As indicated above, doctoral pedagogy extends beyond the boundaries of the university; in professional doctorates the practice community is one important learning arena and doctoral students engage in identity work to reconcile membership of different communities. The concept of identity is central to Wenger’s model of learning in communities of practice, acting as a bridge between the individual and the community and giving us ‘a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities’ (Wenger 1998, 5). Relations with community members are central to the negotiation of identity. Identity is about how we live, a ‘very complex interweaving of participative experience and reificative projections’ (Wenger 1998, 151). As a constant process of negotiating self, it

is temporal, ongoing and complex. Narrative definitions of identity as ‘stories about persons’ (Sfard and Prusak 2005, 14) recognise both continuity, in the self-narratives that enable individuals to maintain a vision of themselves as stable, and discontinuity, experienced in the identity shifts that occur as individuals negotiate situations (Akkermann and Meijer 2011). Such identity shifts during the doctoral experience are under-researched. Fellow doctoral students, other researchers and supervisors are peers participating within a community of practice, where power relations may both provide and restrict opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). Participation in both formal and informal communities of practice are key in supporting the development of a researcher identity, as are structured opportunities to develop research knowledge, for example through presenting work in progress (Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, and Piert. 2013). In a professional doctorate in education issues of identity are further complicated, with candidates experienced professionals, often with roles in the academy. The identity shifts that doctoral researchers experience are set within the network of relationships in the various communities of which they are members.

Evidence of the role that relationships with peers take in learning on the doctorate strengthens arguments for a community of practice model. Kemp et al. found that students’ relationships with peers were at least as important as relationships with supervisors (2013). Adopting a model of socialisation, Gardner (2008) focussed on the experiences of chemistry and history doctoral students in the US as they transition to independent researchers. Support from peers was ‘mentioned over and above any other type of support, even that of their advisor’ (338). In their review of literature considering how the doctorate contributes to the development of active researchers, Sinclair, Barnacle, and Cuthbert (2014) call for further research into the significance of



a candidate's sense of 'becoming peer' (1983). Next, I consider how feedback may contribute to this development.

### **Towards a feedback dialogue**

Feedback, 'information about how the student's present state (of learning and performance)' relates to their goals (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006, 200) has an important role in supporting learning. In an analysis of research evidence on assessment feedback in higher education from 2000 - 2012, Evans (2013) defines assessment feedback as including 'all feedback exchanges generated within assessment design, occurring within and beyond the immediate learning context, being overt or covert (actively and/or passively sought and/or received), and importantly, drawing from a range of sources' (71). This all-encompassing definition appears at odds with taken-for-granted understandings of feedback, often conceived simply as tutors' responses to students (Boud and Molloy 2013), frequently via written comments on work. Effective feedback foregrounds the active engagement of students, providing space for dialogue (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). Large scale national surveys (for example the National Survey of Student Experience (NSSE) in the United States, the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK) provide information on student views of aspects of their university experience, including feedback. Internationally, such student experience surveys reveal dissatisfaction with written feedback (Nicol 2010).

For feedback to make a difference to learning, students need to be able to interpret the task, the assessment criteria and judge the quality required (Sadler 2010). These skills alone are insufficient; engaging students actively in the feedback process, ensuring that they are able to act agentically, is important. In an effort to achieve this and to address student dissatisfaction with feedback noted above, various initiatives

have been trialled. Frequently the focus of improvements is on written feedback provided to students. Despite a number of initiatives aimed at improving the clarity and timeliness of feedback, evidence from large-scale student surveys points to limited impact on learning (Nicol 2010). In part, this may be due to students' lack of strategies for acting on feedback, a feeling of disempowerment and resulting unwillingness to engage (Winstone et al. 2016).

Addressing the difficulties noted above regarding the active engagement of students in the feedback process, Boud and Molloy (2013) argue for feedback to be 'repositioned as a fundamental part of curriculum design' (699). They identify issues in applying a feedback process with origins in an engineering model, not least that such a model restricts student agency and increases dependency on teachers. An alternative, sustainable feedback model is proposed, one that views feedback as a 'process used by learners to facilitate their own learning' (703), with dialogue as a key feature. Calls for reconceptualising feedback as dialogic are repeated elsewhere (Carless et al. 2011; Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon 2011). Here feedback is viewed as 'an interactive exchange in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified' (Carless et al. 2011, 397).

### ***Feedback and the doctorate***

Feedback on professional doctoral programmes has several distinguishing features that point to a conceptualisation of feedback as dialogic. Firstly, it is interactive with ongoing dialogue supported through the supervisor relationship, where written and face-to-face communication provides space for students and supervisors 'to clarify understandings and expectations, and negotiate meanings' (Wang and Li 2011, 102). Secondly, it has continuity, both in terms of stable relationships with peers, tutors and

supervisors and in terms of the final goal, the doctoral thesis. Rather than being focussed on short or medium term assessment goals, feedback is developmental, providing space for students to learn about research.

If the doctorate aims to produce scholarly professionals or professional scholars then I argue that a third feature of feedback in the doctoral experience is part of the structured initiation into a community of research practice, one in which peer review performs a key function. Conceived in this way, feedback on the doctorate is part of learning to participate in that community. Although focussed on undergraduate students, a study exploring the use of peer review has implications for research students. Not only does the process of engaging students in reviewing the work of peers aid the development of the skill of providing feedback, but it also begins to address the issue of lack of agency, shifting some of the responsibility for feedback from tutors to students (Nicol, Thomson and Breslin 2014). In doctoral research, the notion of peer is complex, involving multiple positionings, yet it offers potential for theorizing research education (Boud and Lee 2005). There is a paucity of research focussing on student perceptions of feedback during doctoral studies (Can and Walker 2014). Where they do exist, studies focus on particular aspects of feedback, for example on peer assessment in an online forum (Crossouard 2008) or on feedback from supervisors and examiners (Stracke and Kumar 2010), rather than on experiences of formal and informal feedback.

The question of how supervisors and students understand doctoralness is key to any discussion of feedback; students need to know what they are aiming for. There is surprisingly little research on this apart from some evidence that supervisors base their supervisory practice on their own experience (Lee 2008). Wellington, reflecting on his supervisory career, explores several aspects in his hunt for 'doctorateness'. Although he states that 'complete agreement on the nature of doctorateness' is unlikely (Wellington

2013, 1491), he argues that it is important to ask the question, to ‘remove some of the mystique’ (1502) and make the characteristics of the doctorate explicit. In considering the purpose of the doctorate, Wellington distinguishes between a doctorate driven by process, for personal development or preparation for a career, and one driven by the product, the contribution to existing knowledge. Discussion of the nature of the differing emphases on process and product is important for supervision and for the viva (Wellington 2013); it will also have implications for feedback dialogues.

### **Methodology and methods**

This article draws on data from an initial enquiry phase of a qualitative study of doctoral researchers’ expectations and experiences of feedback, addressing the gap in research into how feedback is used, its influence on professional identity, and its role in supporting an understanding of doctoralness. The following research questions framed the study:

- what is feedback and how does it support doctoral researchers’ understanding of doctoralness?
- what are doctoral researchers’ expectations of feedback?
- how do doctoral researchers use feedback?

Participants were current students, recent graduates and supervisors on a Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme in a university in England where the author was programme lead. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants from three distinct groups (2 current students, a recent graduate and 2 supervisors).

In this article, I develop the narrative of the recent graduate participant in the study, Isobel (a pseudonym). The reasons for the selection of Isobel's narrative are threefold: firstly, unlike the current doctoral students, who were at an early stage of their studies and the supervisors who were somewhat distant from their own doctoral studies, Isobel recounted her story shortly after she completed her doctorate. This period of transition marks a turning point, providing an opportunity to study how feedback is experienced. Secondly, Isobel's role as an academic gave her an alternative perspective on feedback; in addition to experiencing feedback as a doctoral researcher, she was also responsible for providing feedback to higher education students. Finally, initial analysis of the project data revealed that Isobel's narrative provided particularly rich accounts of her engagement with feedback, articulating shifts over time. She experienced feedback on the doctorate as relational, constructed in/between dialogue with peers. Her narrative exemplifies themes present in the stories of the other participants in the study. Such strategic selection and use of in-depth narratives for exploratory studies has a long history in social research (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). In common with other individual case-centred narrative studies, the aim of the focus on a single narrative is to add depth to existing knowledge within a particular context, here the professional doctorate (Riessman 2008). However, it is important to emphasise that this is one student's experience at a particular time; other students (and indeed the same student at a different time) will have different experiences.

### ***Data collection***

Isobel responded to an email to recent graduates of the EdD, inviting participation in the study. Participants were aware of my dual role both as researcher and as course leader for the EdD. Recently appointed to this role, I had no prior relationship with Isobel. A research assistant not associated with the EdD conducted individual face-to-face or

telephone interviews. Ensuring anonymity in a narrative study such as this is difficult; although a pseudonym has been assigned, Isobel was made aware of the possibility of her story being recognised and was offered the opportunity to have identifying features removed. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the university ethics committee.

Narrative approaches which build on Dewey's (1938) notion of continuity of experience, recognise that 'there is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 2). Such approaches are appropriate for this study, with its focus on doctoral researchers' experiences, facilitating a consideration of the continuity of Isobel's experience, as she reflects on it at the end of her studies. The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space comprising temporal, personal and social, and place is a complex space with 'shifting ground' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 126). Temporality reminds us of the need to 'try to understand people, places and events as in process, as always in transition' (Clandinin, Pushor, and Murray Orr 2007, 23). The story below, both as told and as reconstructed, marks a point in time, one which is embedded within the past experience of narrator and researchers and one which is constantly shifting, this article but one possible (re)construction. The personal and social dimension of the narrative inquiry space focusses attention on Isobel's inner hopes and feelings, her relationships with others and with the broader environment.

In common with many experience-centred narratives (Squire 2013), this study is based on semi-structured interviews. Prompts supported a focus on the research questions, whilst also permitting participants to introduce or follow topics of interest. These narrative interviews aim to generate detailed accounts and reflections on experience, with stories elicited or arising spontaneously (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

In an acknowledgement of power issues, this more conversational style was used to promote a more equal relationship between participants (Riessman 2008). The following questions and prompts were used to elicit responses about Isobel's experiences and expectations of feedback and its impact on her professional practice.

- What is feedback?
- What are your expectations of feedback?
- What were your experiences of feedback during the EdD?
- How did/do you use feedback? How does/did it impact on your professional practice?
- What is doctoralness? [(How) did feedback support your understanding of doctoralness and your progress towards it?]

### ***Data analysis***

Following intensive reading and re-reading, Isobel's responses were initially summarised and collated together with those of other participants in the wider study; this drawing together of voices with a range of perspectives on the doctoral experience acting to re-sensitise the re-reading of individual transcripts, highlighting similarities and differences. Restructuring Isobel's responses around the research prompts was followed by an iterative coding process, cycling back and forth between her account and the collated responses. Ultimately, the goal was to preserve sequences, maintaining a sense of the story as told, rather than fragment it (Riessman 2008, 74). Isobel's narrative was re-storied, locating and sequencing key elements of the story (Creswell 2014; McCormack 2004) and returned to her for verification. This sequencing acknowledges the importance of time and space and preserves 'the wealth of detail' in the narrators' accounts (Riessman 2008, 74).

Five inter-related themes were identified in Isobel's narrative: individual growth; the iterative nature of the feedback process; challenge and support; the impact of feedback experiences upon practice; and the location of feedback as part of the broader pedagogical environment. This latter, rather than being treated separately, is evident in each the following sections. This thematic narrative analysis was guided by an understanding of the communities of practice models and theories of feedback discussed earlier.

### **A feedback narrative**

In the following narrative, Isobel, a university lecturer at the time of the study, recounts her experiences as a doctoral researcher, re-interpreting them from her transitional stance, having just obtained her doctorate. Her stories focus on her feelings and motivations, set in the broader social context of the doctorate and her relationships with others.

#### ***From passive recipient to active learner***

Isobel found feedback on the doctorate contrasted with her earlier experiences of academic learning. For Isobel, feedback is

##### **Feedback is...**

what you gather that influences your thinking and your output... it's very easy to think it's just like the stuff that the tutor gives you and it's about assignments, but I think it's a bit broader than that...I learned a huge amount from other students on the course. [Feedback is] material that makes you think and on those grounds, there were multiple inputs and they didn't just affect the way that I did my assignments...or affected my thesis but actually something fundamental about me and my thinking and the way that I was approaching issues in a very much more broad way.



Prior to her doctorate, Isobel's overall experience of feedback was as judgement rather than part of a developmental process. Initially, this was at the level of "That's right, that's wrong". I never ever really thought about what it was saying about me or my performance'. Later, she felt she 'learned how to learn', becoming more interested in her feedback. The iterative, dialogic nature of the feedback process during the EdD provided her with an alternative perspective. In her interview, Isobel reflects on the way that both feedback and her response to it has changed throughout her studies, as she takes increasing responsibility for directing her learning. She describes how she has taken ownership of the process, actively looking for feedback to test out ideas and aid her development:

**A rampantly selfish learner**

At the beginning, I had perhaps a somewhat stereotypical view of feedback which is it's what the tutors are going to give to me about my written work and I think now I've broadened out my view considerably in that I'm consciously aware of changing as I change I think and I look for opportunities to change.... I will go looking for it ... in a way I don't think that I would have done at the very beginning. And I had it as very formal and it was about assessment and being judged whereas I think I've shifted completely and it's all about me now! [Laughs]  
A rampantly selfish learner.

Not only are the process and the feedback different, with the iterative nature of feedback on the EdD important, but Isobel recognises that **she** is different. This feedback is demanded by the learner, a demonstration of the more equal relationships between doctoral researcher and peers, whether these peers are fellow doctoral researchers, tutors or supervisors. The move from peripheral to a fuller participation in the community of research practice is evident in her narrative.

### *Feedback as an iterative process*

The previous section provided evidence of the way that Isobel's perspective on feedback shifted during the doctorate. She characterises the feedback process as an iterative one of gradual transformation.

#### **An iterative process**

[Feedback] became kind of integral to the content ... it became a very iterative process ... a constant cycle of not just information but actually perceptions and understandings and contextualisations, you know, it might be that my ideas weren't wrong but they were a bit narrow and so it was about opening those up and taking them on ... The thing that has been so different about [feedback on the EdD] as a process has been the iteration and reiteration of the same thing, just keeping on going with this thesis, working it and reworking it, ... [this] was a new experience, you know, because previously it had been 'yeah, done it, move on', whereas this was 'done it, go back!' and that was kind of tough in a way but also truly developmental, you were changing something, the same thing.

Continuity, in the form of ongoing work on the same project, the thesis, provides Isobel with the opportunity to make direct use of feedback, the conversations with peers (including supervisors) providing the spaces to enable her to work on her understanding. Feedback impacts on her understanding of doctoralness, which she describes as about 'recognising complexity and recognising self' together with developing a 'capacity to transmit that complexity in a written format'.

#### ***Challenge and support: Peers and supervisors***

Learning from peers features in Isobel's definition of feedback as an integral part of the iterative feedback cycle, one that incorporates both formal and informal learning, 'something that was going on **all** of the time'. This support comes not only from the immediate cohort group but also from those at different stages in the doctoral journey.

### **Raising my game**

Some of the best feedback I had, absolutely invaluable and quite transformative was from somebody else that was a little bit further on in the course who read my first assignment and said ‘no, you know, that’s not it, that’s not getting there’ and then explained to me what she thought I needed to do in order to raise my game. And she just gave me a shunt that just carried me in, which was brilliant.

This same student, further on in her doctoral journey than Isobel, provided challenge and alternative models of doctoral writing when they both attended an intensive overseas programme around the time that Isobel was working on her first assignment:

### **A quantum leap**

She showed me her assignments and that was feedback, that was ‘this is where you need to pitch yourself, look at that in relation to this’ and it was a quantum leap for me in terms of expectation.

These critical moments helped Isobel to understand the expectations of this community of doctoral researchers. Challenge was also a feature of ongoing discussions between the student cohort.

### **‘Do you really think that?’**

I can think of one or two instances when somebody said, you know, something as simple as ‘do you **really** think that?!’ or ‘can’t you see it in another way’ and it’s those kind of little flips, those little kicks that just, kind of, stop you in your tracks and make you question.

The language of movement is evident in each of these fragments of narrative, the leaps, flips, shunts and temporary stops conveying a vivid sense of entry into a community of peers.

Challenge and support were also features of the supervisory relationship. Isobel had a team of two supervisors during the thesis phase of her doctorate, referred to here

as supervisors A and B. For Isobel, Supervisor A was ‘phenomenal’; she describes the support she had from this supervisor as an ongoing conversation.

### **Supervision as a flowing conversation**

I had a model there of amazingly supportive and motivating support, so feedback developed into a kind of flowing conversation, ... there might have been hiatuses and pauses but it was an ongoing conversation about the same topic which was my thesis and how to approach it. And [supervisor A] was able to be just what I needed...I can remember telling [them] one time that I was stuck, I’d got writer’s block and there was this sort of outpouring of emotional outreach...nothing to do with academics...in an incredibly constructive way... ‘This is what I’m hearing you say, and these are resources that you might find helpful’...very practical ...ideas around just speaking, just recording, listening, not even trying to write. So that was phenomenal. ... And [supervisor A’s] feedback on my written work ... I would never have written such a good piece of work had it not been for the feedback that I received. It was constructive, it was full of ideas of what I needed to do but also how I could do it.

Following these conversations with supervisor A, Isobel said she might ‘walk away feeling confused but I would never walk away feeling beaten’. The relationship Isobel had with this supervisor, developed over the years of her doctoral study, enabled this ongoing conversation, a continuing dialogue that provided academic, practical and emotional guidance.

The three-way conversations with her supervisory team provided alternative perspectives on Isobel’s work, creating a space for her to listen to and engage in critique and debate, and ultimately to find her own way.

### **The team were just brilliant because they were so different**

[My] supervisory team ...were just brilliant because they were so different...I got [Supervisor B] who was like a cheerleader, ...was just so warm in terms of [their] enthusiasm for what I was thinking and doing was just always undiminished, ...so I would do something and it was like ‘oh wow, this is amazing, look at this, look at that!’ and then I’d got [Supervisor A] who was much more tempered and would

say ‘yes, this is good but then there’s this yawning gap’ and they would spark each other off and so they would have very interesting conversations ...they were incredibly respectful of each other and also [of] me and that meant that I could go ‘this time I like what you’re saying’ and ‘this time I like what you’re saying’ and it meant that I could weave my own way, if you like.

These conversations with her supervisory team, focussed as they were on her research, enabled Isobel to work on the periphery as her supervisors engaged in debate (‘**they** would have very interesting conversations’), but ultimately the responsibility for the direction of the study was hers: ‘**I** could weave my own way’ (emphasis added).

### ***Impact on professional practice***

Isobel is an experienced practitioner in the field of education, designing learning experiences, teaching and assessing her own students. This adds another layer of complexity to her experience of feedback as doctoral researcher, heightening her awareness of feedback conversations in her teaching. Her experience of feedback on the EdD impacted upon the way she approached feedback in her practice, leading to the introduction of a dialogic element and the development of a more constructive and inclusive approach.

#### **Feedback: A model for my practice**

I think it has made me very, very aware of being constructive, I think that is one of the great models that I think my supervisor ... showed me and that was how to start from where that person is, be positive about it and still move on, ...I think that that is very much my model of trying to engage students in their own reflective processes ... so I will ... try to get that sort of dialogical element in rather than me just, kind of, battering people. So I think there [are] two elements there, one is being constructive about whatever you do but the other is making it inclusive so that the person ... comes with me on that sort of critical journey.

Here Isobel discusses reflecting on practice, adapting it in the light of the feedback

model provided through her doctoral supervision. The active engagement of students is significant; Isobel stresses the importance of students' capacity to engage with feedback over the form or content of the feedback itself: 'I'm much more guided by... their capacity to hear it and make use of it'. Isobel's experience of feedback on her own doctoral work appears to have heightened her awareness of the needs of individual students.

## **Discussion**

This single narrative facilitates an in-depth study of one student's experience. Focussing attention on an individual's story foregrounds continuity, seeing feedback as it is experienced rather than as it is designed. The aim is to provoke discussion about the experiences of others, including those who chose not to participate in the study, to consider how they may be supported. Consideration of how feedback is used and how it affects practice reveals the importance of relationships and of emergent spaces for learning, highlighting ongoing identity work. The narrative provides evidence of participation in a community of research practice, at times on the periphery but increasingly as an active participant, moving towards full participation. Mutual engagement in that community of practice creates and sustains relationships with supervisors, peers and others, relationships that exhibit complex mixtures of challenge and support, 'authority and collegiality' (Wenger 1998, p. 77). Such relationships are important: difficulties in establishing collaborative relationships with supervisors and lack of support from peers are factors associated with dropping out of doctoral studies (Leijen, Lepp, and Remmik 2016).

Increasing participation in the wider research community is part of the trajectory of the developing researcher. On a professional doctorate, the cohort may be a student's first encounter with a community of researchers, others may already participate, albeit

peripherally, in this community through their professional work. In the narrative account analysed here, the narrator attaches significance to unplanned, informal exchanges with peers; such exchanges carry reduced risk and are important steps towards full participation (Wenger 1998). Highlighting the importance of the wider environment raises a challenge as a recent review of provision of professional doctorates in England found that candidates had few opportunities to interact with the research community in their institution (Mellors-Bourne, Robinson and Metcalfe 2016). Professional doctorate candidates tend to be part-time students with full-time jobs, making integration with the wider community more difficult.

In this article, I argue that feedback within an EdD may be experienced as an ongoing dialogue with supervisors and peers. Rather than feedback being conceived as an ‘attribute of the curriculum’ in doctoral research (Boud and Molloy 2013, 706), it is positioned as an attribute of the communities of practice that students belong to, thus emphasising both the role of participation and the central place of feedback in research practice. This positioning acknowledges the importance of the learning environment whilst recognising that students’ experience is ‘highly complex and individual’ and that deliberately influencing learning is difficult (Pratt et al. 2015, 56). In the case of the EdD, the doctoral students’ practice of teaching is a significant arena for making sense of their experiences as a learner, providing the opportunity to experiment with strategies they have been exposed to as students. The way this learning about learning impacts professional practice - in this case, feedback practice - warrants further study.

The complex interaction between the planned EdD programme and the learning that takes place both within and on the fringes of that programme is revealed in Isobel’s story. This interaction of the planned (teaching) and the emergent (learning) raises questions, not least how one may enable and inform the other (Wenger 1998, 267).

Although he asserts that learning cannot be designed, Wenger (1998) notes the importance of designing social infrastructures to support learning, a task that requires an understanding of the complexity of learning. Within learning communities students must be challenged to take responsibility for their own learning, in such communities ‘a curriculum would then look more like an itinerary of transformative experiences of participation than a list of subject matter’ (Wenger 1998, 272). Within the professional doctorate, the practical challenges that candidates face in engaging in the wider community may be alleviated through programme design, including the incorporation of additional opportunities for interaction within formal programme structures. Continuity is important here too, requiring space to develop and commit to shared practices, including the relationship work that often features as an early part of cohort-based programmes.

The narrative reveals the doctoral process for one individual; the stories highlight the importance of understanding issues from a range of perspectives, being aware of one’s position with respect to one’s research and adopting a reflexive stance. In one extract from her story (‘Do you **really** think that?’), Isobel described how she was challenged by peers to justify her stance. Active engagement, independent thought, critical thinking and engaging with complexity are features of doctoralness evident in this narrative. This echoes Costley’s (2013) interpretation of the UK Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) descriptors for qualifications at doctoral level, emphasising ‘acting autonomously in a situation that is likely to involve complexity’ (Costley 2013, 13). Achieving doctoralness entails a shift in understanding of feedback: from feedback as comments transmitted by lecturers to an ongoing conversation about the thesis; from passive acceptance to active engagement, with the doctoral researcher orchestrating feedback opportunities; from seeing feedback as being the solely the role of tutors to a



position where feedback may come from a range of sources including own reflections, peers and tutors.

Isobel's feedback stories exemplify the identity shifts that doctoral researchers may experience as they move between student and researcher roles. The transformation in her engagement with feedback and the responsibility she takes for seeking it out add weight to Wang and Li's (2011) argument for differing amounts and types of feedback, in response to changes in 'growth and confidence as a researcher' (109). All parties in the supervisory relationship need to recognise that this relationship will change over time, that any positioning of the supervisor as authoritative knower must be revised.

The narrative highlights an understanding of feedback as a dialogic, iterative process, one that is echoed in the supervisors' narratives that were gathered as part of the same study. This iterative process is a feature of doctoral supervision, with students with a high degree of self-confidence and a strong sense of responsibility towards their research responding positively to it, working with their supervisors in a collegial relationship rather than one that holds the supervisor as authority (Wang and Li 2011). This shift in emphasis, from a focus on tutors' written comments on written work to feedback as experienced in the wider research community, has implications for programme design.

### **Concluding remarks and implications for further work**

Stories have been used to aid supervisor development (McCormack 2009); here I propose that they may support doctoral researchers make sense of their own learning and identity work, provoking reflection on experience, relationships and practice, surfacing taken-for-granted assumptions about feedback. Examining our assumptions through the experience of students and the lens of theory are two processes that Brookfield suggests may aid in the negotiation and democratization of power

relationships (2015, 16). The reconstructed story presented in this article provides a starting point for groups of doctoral researchers, supervision and course teams to reflect on structures, devices and ways of working which support learning through the doctorate, facilitating the development of a shared understanding of what feedback is and what it could become. Although the focus here is on the experiences of doctoral researchers, the article contributes to the wider 'feedback landscape (Evans 2013), illustrating the role of dialogic feedback in learning (Beaumont, O'Doherty, and Shannon 2011). The themes highlighted in this exploratory study continue to be investigated in a longitudinal study, working with current doctoral students to explore their experiences of feedback.

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