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Email thesis supervision

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Abstract

Potentially, thesis supervision by email promises to overcome limitations of distance. It might be possible, for example, for a university to act as a broker between candidates and supervisors — placing a candidate from anywhere in the world in contact with supervisors anywhere in the world, chosen in terms of their suitability. But would it work? Or is face to face contact necessary? We've been co-supervising a number of PhD candidates overseas on behalf of a university in another state. One of us has also co-supervised, from Brisbane, thesis research being done in Lismore, Adelaide and Longreach. Taken together with our experience of other uses of email, this suggests to us that email can be an effective medium if the communication is frequent

enough, particularly if we also supplement it in other ways. This paper recounts our experience.

As a communication medium, email offers an important benefit — two people don't have to be in the same place, at the same time, to have a discussion. Yet it is swift enough that it captures qualities of dialogue that are missing in slower conventional mail. In short, it overcomes some important limitations of time and place.

This has implications for thesis supervision. Conventionally, the candidate chooses supervisors from those that are available at a particular university. As well, most universities have requirements about the supervisors being competent in the area of the thesis. A consequence is that candidates must often choose a topic which matches closely the interests of available and willing supervisors. This may not have been the candidate's preferred choice.

Email has the potential to overcome this limitation. It isn't just that people can be in different places. With adequate computer and network access, they can be *anywhere*. Potentially, the university can arrange contact between candidates anywhere in the world with supervisors anywhere in the world. The university can become a broker between candidates and supervisors. The result might be a much better fit between candidate and supervisory panel.

The two of us now have a little over a year's experience co-supervising five PhD candidates in Singapore. In addition, one of us has co-supervised, from Brisbane, candidates in Longreach, Adelaide and Lismore. With this experience, supplemented by our experience with other uses of email and the like, we can begin to evaluate the success of email for thesis supervision.

We begin by describing email as a communication medium. We then comment in turn on the benefits of using learning groups, tutorial material, and other media. We say a little about communication skills and email. Finally, we conclude that email is effective, but benefits if it is complemented by these other features.

Email as a communication medium

As a communication medium, email clearly lacks the immediacy of face to face contact. The gestures and expressions which carry much of the emotional meaning in speech are lacking. There are not even the paralinguistic features like tone of voice that are available in telephone contact. For those who like to think graphically, the difficulty of embedding diagrams in plain text can be a frustration.

At the same time, email has much to commend it. Above all it makes it easy for busy people who may travel a lot to stay in contact. Send a message to your supervisor, and it's usually there within minutes even if you are continents apart. It sits in the supervisor's electronic mailbox until collected, so different time zones are not a problem. If you wish to send it to more than one supervisor, that is simple too.

If most communication is by email, a written record accumulates. The candidate is documenting the work, and communicating with supervisors, in a single exercise. The historical record includes both the work by the candidates, and the comments on it by the supervisors. The supervisors can send material to each other, as well as to the candidate. Everyone, candidate and supervisory panel, can retain as much of this as they wish. They have a choice, too, of retaining it in hard copy or electronically.

Commenting on documentation is very easy. Most mailing software allows you to "quote" the original text, usually by marking it in the margin. The supervi-

sor's comments can be interleaved with the draft material. This is an alternative to squeezing comments into the margins or writing them on a separate sheet.

The result looks like this:

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> and French and Bell (1989) explain that action research is  
> the foundation for organisation development. A further
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I think it was 1990. There is a later (fifth) edition: 1995.
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You may want to define "organisation development". And I'll be  
interested to see how you relate organisation development to the  
theme of your study -- it isn't immediately apparent to me.
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For brief comments this can be done on-line, for a quick and convenient response. Longer drafts and comments, we think, are more effectively handled in a word processor. The short lines and short paragraphs are deliberate: they are more easily read on screen.

In addition, the act of writing can encourage a discipline of thought which is less evident in conversation. The spoken word, once spoken, cannot really be retracted. The written word can be read, and reviewed, and polished before it is sent. The logic, or lack of it, can be more obvious. The emotional dimension is not as strong; and for some purposes this is an advantage. It makes it easier for people to achieve some objectivity. (This also has its disadvantages. We speak later of using other communication methods to overcome them to some extent.)

In short, many of the advantages accrue because of the ease with which information and comments are shared with candidate and all supervisors. In an extension of this, it is possible to create learning groups. These are groups of candidates who communicate with, and help, each other.

Learning groups

In our experience, many candidates report that thesis research is lonely work. Physical isolation can amplify the loneliness. The candidates in Singapore are not as isolated as some. All of them work, and are doing their PhD part time. They have regular contact with work colleagues. As they are using action research for their methodology, they can use their work situation as the object of study. Even so, they have found it useful to meet regularly as a group. We suspect that a learning group could be even more useful for people doing research which does not involve interaction with people.

The learning group in Singapore meets face to face at intervals of about a month. They have been using the concepts of “action learning” (Revans, 1983) in doing this. As with action learning, their task is to help each other learn from their experience.

As they all live in Singapore it is relatively easy for them to meet face to face. If this were not so, however, an email learning group would enable them to provide material help and psychological support. We don't have direct experience of email learning groups for thesis candidates. However, one of us has used email learning groups to accompany an on-line course in action research. This appears to have functioned well, and to have been useful for the people concerned.

The Singapore group uses email to keep their learning group in touch and organised. Email allows more regular contact than their meetings can provide. They circulate an agenda before each meeting. We get copies of this, for our information. Similarly, their reports to us about their thesis are circulated to all members of their learning group. Because of this, they are well informed about each others' work. Their help to each other can be help informed by good understanding.

In short, email supervision and learning groups are a beneficial combination. Each enhances the use of the other. The learning group also helps to overcome

some of the limitations of email as a medium for supervision. There are other on-line resources which can also assist.

On line tutorial resources

We had encouraged each member of our learning group to get an email account. It was then a small step to provide some further encouragement to make use of resources available through email. Two mailing lists at Southern Cross University proved useful for this purpose. One is a conventional mailing list for action research (ARLIST-L@SCU.EDU.AU). All of the learning group are using an action research methodology for their thesis. The other is an on line course in action research (AREOL: action research and evaluation on line). They have served a useful purpose for those who have used them.

ARLIST-L The mailing list serves to introduce them to a wider community of scholars who are using action research. It carries material which they can use, for instance on literature and methods. In addition, there is an associated archive which contains past material from ARLIST-L, and other resources.

Perhaps more importantly, it allows them to make contact, as peers, with other members of the action research community. They are not limited to seeking advice from supervisors. They can post general inquiries to the list; in doing this, they reach almost 400 subscribers in almost 30 different nations, many highly experienced. They can also approach individual people about specific points which arise on the mailing list.

This has become quite apparent with the Singapore learning group. Using arlist as the starting point, they have made valuable contacts. They have also taken charge of their own learning, organising overseas travel and other forms of contact to assist them (individually and collectively) with their research and learning.

AREOL The information gained from a mailing list is not always very focused or systematic. It tends to be driven by whatever concerns or interests the subscribers at a given moment. The AREOL course is a more systematic introduction to action research as a methodology.

It consists of two parallel mailing lists. One carries the material, in about sixteen weekly sessions. The other is a discussion list where subscribers may ask questions, seek clarification, and offer examples. One AREOL program is offered each semester. The current program is the second, and is almost half completed. Evaluation so far has been positive enough that the program may be offered for credit next year.

For this particular learning group, the mailing list and on line course are appropriate. If they were using a different methodology, there are other mailing lists they could use. In some instances, there might also be other on line courses which would be appropriate.

Other media

It is becoming apparent, at least to judge from experience so far, that some people find email alone is not adequate. The Singapore learning group have made good use of our time when we have visited them. For our part, we find it useful to know the face and voice which goes with a particular name.

Similarly, an email learning group (formed as part of AREOL) spontaneously organised telephone contact. Some of them commented at the time that they found it much easier to communicate by email after they had talked on the telephone.

On other occasions, facsimile has been a useful adjunct to email. It has been particularly useful to send material which is more easily conveyed graphically than

in text. (While there are ways of attaching graphic material to email, our experience hasn't been entirely happy because of compatibility problems.)

Communication style

Finally, a minor point about communication style. Email requires its own conventions. Lacking the ability to convey tonal and gestural features, it can sometimes be misinterpreted. A statement that would be softened by tone of voice in face to face interaction can appear unnecessarily blunt in text. Especially when people respond on line, without reviewing what they have written, misunderstandings easily arise.

We have found it helpful in email to use the principles of communication which are most useful in difficult in face to face communication. Seeking to create an atmosphere of mutual inquiry rather than debate seems valuable. Good relationships, where people trust each other, can make it easier to deal with misunderstandings when they do arise.

In summary...

We are optimistic about the future of thesis supervision at a distance. The greatest benefit is in removing the constraints of time and place. There are also disadvantages. But these can be ameliorated by the use of learning groups, and various electronic resources such as mailing lists and on line courses.

Notes

Revans, R.W. (1983) *The ABC of action learning*. Bromley: Chartwell Bratt.
