



Development of the Sisonke Supervision Mentoring Programme

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(Received: 21 September 2024; accepted: 9 October 2024)

Abstract

In this paper we map new ways of supporting and capacitating novice supervisors. During the COVID 19 pandemic, we hosted weekly online collaborative workshops designed to reflect on a process of common learning, in which established and novice supervisors engaged with and discussed their individual supervisory needs. This process revealed, with particular clarity, the complexities of mentoring supervisors at a University of Technology (UoT) and enabled the development of the Sisonke Supervision Mentoring Programme (SSMP). This new identification of key aspects offers insight and benefit to similar programmes. The Community of Practice (CoP) theory was appropriate for this context since it allowed the construction of mentoring spaces in which people could engage mutually in activities to improve their supervisory practices. Using an interpretivist paradigm and inductively and qualitatively analysing transcripts revealed four key subjects for discussion: learning should be non-hierarchical; collaboration and reflection take place in in CoPs; care rather than competition should be paramount; and mentorship supervision is a joint responsibility.

Keywords: community of practice (CoP), humanness, mentoring practices, qualitative approach, postgraduate supervision

Introduction

Globally, academics are under increasing pressure to enable more students across diverse disciplines to graduate at a higher level (Bitzer & Withering, 2020, Guarimata-Salinas et al., 2023), Kigotho (2018) argued that in the 21st century, African universities are experiencing a double bind: there is a burgeoning demand to produce doctoral graduates on the one hand while, on the other, there exist issues of quality and capacity in supervisors. To remedy this difficulty, we need more academic staff to be effective postgraduate research supervisors to enable more students to graduate satisfactorily within a reasonable time frame (Strebel & Shefer, 2016). Building programmes for sustainable and quality higher education mentoring supervision is essential if we are to allow more doctoral candidates to graduate successfully and on time. Effective mentoring is a vital component of the doctoral supervision process (Amador-Campos et al., 2023). Despite the National Development Programme (NDP) 2030 target stating that 75% of all academic staff at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should hold a doctoral degree, by 2020 this was true of only 50% (Mouton, 2022). This relative lack of highly qualified academics accentuates the need in South Africa and elsewhere to improve the supervisory capacity of postgraduates at HEIs (Nerad, 2021). Yet there continues to be a dearth of research conducted on the mentoring aspect of supervisory pedagogies (Bitzer, 2016; Frick & Mouton, 2021, Strebel & Shefer, 2016).

At Universities of Technology (UoTs) in particular, there is a need to facilitate professionally-based research, strengthen the abilities of established and leading applied researchers, and increase supervision capacity. The vision of UoTs includes claiming their space as leaders on the African continent (see, for example, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, 2020) yet there is still a long way to go if we are to ensure that all postgraduate candidates have the necessary skill sets required for national development and productivity, economic competitiveness, and societal well-being as well as those skills demanded by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Bitzer, 2016).

In this paper we show how, as part of a larger group of academics, we responded rapidly to the COVID 19 pandemic to develop an online alternative pedagogical mentoring strategy which maintained and improved previous supervision standards (Guerin & Aitchison, 2021). We focussed on the mentorship of supervisors, and offered, ultimately, more efficient and effective ways of mentoring supervisors both on-line and face-to-face. The core research question was: “How can the Community of Practice (CoP) theory help generate insights for a group mentoring programme of novice and experienced supervisors at a UoT in South Africa?” Sisonke, in isiXhosa (an official language of South Africa) means “together” or “to bridge” and was chosen as an appropriate name for our programme. We report on an online transdisciplinary research project that involved many parties, driven by an authentic problem, the findings of which transcend the confines of orthodox disciplinary knowledge and have the potential to produce transformative and sustainable supervision pedagogies. Mentoring of supervisors was the mutually agreed upon point of reference since it provided the basis for a shared language.

Theoretical perspectives

Wenger’s (1998) CoP is characterised by three complementary elements, each developing independently from the others: *domain*, *community* and *practice* (Nisbet & McAllister, 2015; Pyrko et al., 2017; Wenger, 2000). The domain of the CoP in this study refers to the common or shared interest in the community in which all participants worked towards effective mentorship of postgraduate research supervision. Their engagement in shared activities through knowledge sharing and learning about supervision practices formed the community. Interaction with others, the building of relations, and participation in activities using language, resources, values, and principles determined practice in this community.

We drew on the COP theory of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) given their discussion of three distinct attributes: mutual engagement (what is it about?); joint enterprise (how does it work?); and shared repertoire (what capabilities are produced?). Mutual engagement supports the idea that groups of mentors and mentees, as a collective, engage in shared activities to learn about and improve supervisory practices by negotiating meaning and sharing their lived professional and personal experiences (Essien & Adler, 2016; Nicolini et al., 2022; Roberts, 2006). This mutual engagement resulted in a joint enterprise in which the focus of the activity that encompassed the mentorship of novice supervisors (mentees), brought mentors (experienced supervisors) and mentees together in a CoP. Weekly meetings

created opportunities for a shared community where established and novice supervisors participated equally. The CoP was formed to provide mentees with an opportunity to participate in the mentorship programme with the aim of developing confident and capable supervisors.

Mentees were legitimately accepted into the community through a process of peripheral participation. Once accepted as a member of the group, each mentee experienced a trajectory as they moved from peripheral participation to full participation that was indicative of how learning occurs in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Literature review

Mentorship in higher education

The European Commission (2005, p. 6) established the European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers and declared that institutions should prioritise the “working and training conditions in the early stage of researcher’s careers, as it contributes to their future choices and attractiveness of careers in research and development.” More recently, the South African National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (NPPSET) 2021–2030 (2020) emphasised the need to strengthen the capacity of postgraduate education and training to meet the aims of the country to build a fair, equitable, non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic South Africa. Many South African scholars (Maistry 2022; Maritz & Visagie 2012; Strebel & Shefer, 2016) have agreed that HEIs need to drive collaboration with strategic partners to continue developing quality postgraduate education that includes finding innovative ways to enhance and improve the mentoring of novice supervisors from within.

Research supervision is emphasised in South Africa, given this renewed vigour to produce higher volumes of postgraduates (a proposed 5000 doctorates per year by 2030, with 60% being in the Science, Engineering and Technology fields) in accordance with the National Development Plan (2013, p. 319). Alongside these challenges, in the 21st century, globally HEIs have become more aware of the current needs of society such as addressing climate change and environmental issues (Guarimata-Salinas et al., 2023, Guerin & Aitchison, 2021). This raises the need for graduate doctoral students who are curious critical thinkers and problem solvers and who are resilient and technologically competitive (Maritz & Visagie, 2012).

Mentorship supervision

Mentoring of novice supervisors remains an academic practice that requires continual learning and refining. More can be done to support supervisors in becoming comfortable and confident in this role (O’Madichie, 2021). In this domain, discussions on the best model for postgraduate mentorship are ongoing (Holliday, 2001; Maritz & Visagie, 2012; Ngulube, 2021; O’Madichie, 2021; Roofe & Miller, 2015; Strebel & Shefer, 2016). Roofe and Miller (2015) suggested that established researchers should make themselves available to mentor others as part of their professional workload. It is often thought that research supervision may

be seen to have a mentoring function, but frequently those providing supervision to postgraduate students are themselves in need of mentoring (Fowler, 2017; Holliday, 2001; McCallin & Nayar, 2012). It is often noted that the training of novice supervisors is situated in various faculties of a university, or either in academic development centres, human resource management offices or in research centres (Lee, 2018). In contrast, O'Madichie (2021) encouraged a process of mentoring of supervisors that is not the responsibility of one person, but is, rather, shared among several established researchers in institutions.

Mentorship pedagogies

There is general agreement among academics that the mentoring process requires a “special pedagogy” (Bitzer, 2016, p. 283). There should be alignment between the expertise of the established supervisor and the expectations and demands of the novice supervisor and student (Mouton & Frick, 2020). Motshoane (2022), however, argued that lecturers are often expected to become supervisors by default and that they draw on how they had been supervised. The models of Motshoane (2022) and Ngulube (2021), for developing critical mentorship pedagogies encourage the link between knowledge sharing, support structures, and supervision practices to assist new and established researchers to learn the necessary professional, personal, and academic skills while on their doctoral journey. Cleary et al. (2012) extended this by stating that established supervisors should have “theoretical or empirical expertise, publications in the area, international reputation, experience of PhD supervision and previous examination experience” (p. 450). In a mentoring role, three skills may be shared with novice supervisors— “relational (being approachable and accessible, demonstrating humility and genuine care and being willing to tailor the experiences to the mentee needs), instrumental (enrichment of research and writing skills, and understanding of institutional rules and practices) and psychosocial (how to manage stress inherent in their roles)” (Amador-Campos et al. 2023, p. 359). This brings to the fore the aspect of human agency and interpersonal skills for emotional well-being in mentorship supervisory relations where the focus is on intellectual practices (Fenge, 2012). Patacsil and Tablatin (2017) believed that greater focus should be placed on the soft skills that should be embedded into the attitudes and approaches deployed in the mentorship process. These soft skills include and confirm the definition of Amador-Campos et al. (2023) that mentorship is about communication, the provision of guidance, protection, support and encouragement, collaboration on team projects, self-confidence, self-management, and respect.

Strebel and Shefer (2016) reflected on their mentorship model that aimed at mentoring academic staff enrolled for doctoral studies that had three components. The first of these held that individual meetings between one mentor and one mentee should occur regularly or when the need arose. Topics of discussion could include all the phases of the development of a completed thesis and the mentor could offer general support and encouragement. The second component could include regular monthly meetings with a group of mentees. Activities could include presentations by mentees on their proposals, presentations by the mentor or by guests on various aspects of research. The third component could include having the mentor and mentees participate in writing retreats where mentees work individually and follow this up with group sessions to report on the progress of their work and to obtain feedback.

The benefits and challenges of mentorship

Mentoring is critical to ensure that novice academics become able supervisors, so it is here that relationships based on trust, respect, flexibility, and accountability are developed (Roofe & Miller, 2015). The benefits of mentoring initiatives can impact institutional development and transformation if mentors are able to inspire, persuade, influence, and motivate novice supervisors (Okoye et al., 2021). Effective mentoring empowers both supervisors and students (Carmel & Paul, 2015; Fowler, 2017) and requires strong collegiality with high levels of collaboration. It cannot be seen to be an add-on to academics' own teaching and research duties but, rather, as an integral part of both (Holliday, 2001). Flexible, well-structured, and informed programmes change the dynamics in institutions and advance individual careers, expand collegiate thinking, increase scholarly confidence through collaborative work environments, and secure skills development, goal setting, and action planning (Roofe & Miller, 2015). Acquisition of mentorship respects diversity of culture and language (Guarimata-Salinas et al, 2023) and enables novice supervisors to be mentored to supervise doctoral students in the current context while remaining relevant in the changing context of higher education.

However, inexperience in mentorship processes and a lack of suitable supervisory skills can lead to obstacles to success (Roofe & Miller, 2015). Supervisory relations are complicated, dynamic, and often lengthy and participants may encounter conflict (Akala & Akala, 2023). Isolation, intense and often strained personal relations and confusion over accessing resources, can, however, be mitigated by creative support structures in which novice supervisors and students learn in a safe space (de Lange et al., 2011). By learning to better mentor postgraduates, academics become better at teaching undergraduates and conducting viable research.

Methodology

We used an interpretive paradigm within a qualitative approach to improve the supervisory mentoring skills at our UoT. The process was that of co-creating a mentorship supervision programme that responded to collective and individual needs of mentors (experienced supervisors) and mentees (novice supervisors). We set out to view mentorship supervisory practices through the eyes of participants, both mentors and mentees so as “to catch the[ir] intentionality and their interpretations” of their qualitative accounts of complex situations (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 385). Thinking, critiquing, learning, and doing were not separated: the process was regarded as a social construct accomplished by focussed weekly online gatherings.

University context and participants

Our UoT originates from a previous higher education structure that entrenched a focus on applied research and effective collaboration with workplace partners. In this university context the demand for postgraduate studies is growing rapidly and academic staff, including those with little or no supervision experience, are increasingly required to supervise postgraduate students. This difficulty created the need to develop supervision skills among

those supervising postgraduate students in different programmes. Choosing to be part of the Sisonke Supervision Mentoring Programme (SSMP) was an individual decision but, more importantly, there was the intersection of individual choice, participants' capabilities, and their willingness to expand their supervision and mentoring skills in a community environment.

A core team of interested academics from different disciplines was nominated by university management to facilitate the implementation of a programme. They made the decision to prepare for this mentoring supervision programme through a collaborative process of co-design with the participating postgraduate supervisors. The core team of established and novice researchers consisted of nine individuals (three academics, two postdoctoral fellows, two management personnel, and two administrative personnel). The volunteer group of mentor and mentee supervisors, with varied levels of experience and from all six faculties, made up an additional 25 participants. Given the demands of lecturing, research, and managerial duties, however, not all volunteers attended all sessions; on average 12 participants attended each of the weekly workshop sessions.

What was unique to this project was that the CoP included participant members who were both established and novice supervisors, thus offering rich and new perspectives in an environment in which participants learned from each other. The dominance of old-timers, as termed by Contu and Wilmott (2003) and Levina and Orlikowski (2009), did not reduce the input of the newcomers thus allowing the position of expert to shift and for participants to change practices. Established and novice research supervisors came together, in a culture of collaboration and mutual respect to think and guide each other through their shared understanding of a mutually recognised authentic process of mentorship. This joint study had the potential for novice supervisors to create new opportunities, resulting in the reconfiguration and renegotiation of existing power relations (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009).

The use of online sessions via MS Teams allowed mentors and mentees to meet regularly during the COVID 19 pandemic. We held 13 online sessions on Friday afternoons from 16:00-18:00 between July 30 and November 19, 2021. Having the flexibility of no fixed location and online communication allowed participants the agency to remove obstructions and to gain increased freedom to realise their own human accomplishments and function as valued contributors.

Data collection

Data collection was limited to 11 verbatim transcripts of teams' discussions using both inputs of mentors and mentees. During the data analysis process, we found that the last three comprehensive transcripts related to the process of the development of the Learning Programme and provided data saturation by continually yielding similar codes, categories, and interactions. Using a manual coding method, we developed categories into themes with appropriate evidence located in the text (inductive analysis) and linked to the theory (deductive analysis).

Ethical considerations

The SSMP was initiated by institutional management with the support of all faculties. Prior to the commencement of research activities, an ethical clearance letter was obtained from the Faculty of Education's Research Ethics Committee.¹ Attention was paid to ethical dimensions of this study involving human participants who were all academics. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Signed informed consent forms and all other documents related to the study are electronically stored with password access. Confidentiality of participants has been maintained by removing names and other identifiers from the data and by introducing the use of pseudonyms where appropriate. This anonymisation of data adheres to standards for protection of personal information and the South African Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA).

Results and discussion

In an attempt to answer the research question, "How can the CoP theory help generate insights for a group mentoring programme of novice and established supervisors at a UoT in South Africa?" and after deductively and inductively analysing the data we saw the following themes emerge: learning as non-hierarchical; collaboration and reflection in CoPs; care rather than competition; and mentorship and supervision as joint responsibility.

Learning as non-hierarchical

The CoPs formed centralised hubs where mentors and mentees were bound by the common interest of the non-hierarchical sharing of knowledge related to developing supervision skills and practices. This formalised shared domain was used as a tool to create opportunities for situated learning as well as legitimate participation (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) for both the expert and novice supervisors. The practice in the CoPs in this study engaged mentors and mentees equally. Although mentors were in a facilitative role of mentoring mentees, an authoritative stance was not taken, as articulated by a mentor, "I never see myself as knowing more than the student or the mentee." This was corroborated in a mentee response, "The fact that there's two-way learning ... I think that's something to stress within a mentor/mentee relationship." The mentor mentee relations were reframed in the absence of hierarchical structures: rather than have mentors focus on being knowledge providers, they promoted thinking and discovery.

Through mentor modelling and mentee observation, learning occurred (Li et al., 2009) which was justified in the following mentee statement, "We create and share knowledge, so we all build one another." Mutual engagement, during CoPs, was essential for mentorship since it provided a context for "thinking together" to take place (Pyrko et al., 2017, p. 391). This knowledge sharing through the process of thinking together in the CoPs resulted in people

¹ EFEC 1-5/2021

building on each other's knowledge and practice where learning together as well as learning from each other became the focus (Pyrko et al., 2017).

Stoffels et al. (2022) purported that knowledge and resources are exchanged among peers in CoPs and that this leads to increased understanding and learning. Pyrko et al. (2017, p. 391) reminded us that in CoPs "learning is portrayed as a social formation of a person rather than as only the acquisition of knowledge" which one mentor supported in saying, "... it's not just a knowledge transfer but it's really about sharing experiences and practices." This was further substantiated by the following response: "... learning together and growing as supervisors ... gaining all of the competencies and skills ... we do it in this really insightful and deep personal way." We need to acknowledge that learning in the CoP is fundamentally social and is derived from interacting directly with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through this strong online learning community, a centralised, social structure was created for mentors and mentees to share ideas and support, and help each other to make sense of the new knowledge presented. This involved a process of transformation as mentors and mentees acquired new knowledge through interacting with practitioners from different generations, including both established and novice supervisors during collaboration and reflection.

Collaboration and reflection in CoPs

Following Lave and Wenger (1991), the CoPs in this study were comprised of mentors who were the more established supervisors and mentees who were novice supervisors, with both focussed on improving supervision skills through collaboration and reflection. Through reflection processes peers learnt from the reflections of others in the community but also from their own self reflections in demonstrating the effectiveness of using CoP models as collaborative learning spaces (see Akella et al., 2021).

Reflecting on that practice helped to hone supervision skills which allowed mentors and mentees to improve their practice by accepting responsibility for their own learning and development (Helyer, 2015). This was evident in the comment, "If you have an experience, reflect on it, you learn through that reflection and you take action." Through collaboration and reflection, the means (resources mentees needed) became the end (what mentors and mentees were able to do and be with the available resources) creating capabilities and allowing mentees to "achieve their potential doing and being" (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020, p. 1). Mentor and mentee reflections on how to improve collaborative experiences in the CoPs were evident in the following questions they posed: "[How can we] try to improve on what did not work; How can we do this better?; How can we help each other?; How can we share [and] think purposefully?; It's about us helping you . . ." Engaging in this constant process of questioning and reflecting on the inner workings of the communities resulted in a sense of self-awareness that led to professional development for mentor and mentee supervisors (Liu, 2015). Pyrko et al. (2017) suggested that in productive CoPs there needs to be a core group of experts interacting with a group of peripheral mentees through a process of legitimate peripheral participation. The process of becoming a full participant requires mentors and mentees to reflect on their practice, and create opportunities for re-assessing their objectives

so as to develop competence in their practice, thus moving from peripheral to full participation in the CoP (Nicolini et al., 2022).

Resulting from collaborations, many possible challenges which could be experienced in the CoPs were offered. Mentors and mentees, however, reflected on these and offered suggestions of how to counter the challenges; these included: “[Have] a quarterly check-in between mentors/mentees [with] feedback and monitoring; Recalibrate to see if both parties’ needs are being met as a continuous process; Both have to be very honest and say what works for them and what not; Acknowledge that everybody is different.” This collaborative exercise between mentors and mentees created the opportunity for learning, both from their self-reflection and group reflection activities. These collaborative and reflective conversations were key to creating problem-based solutions resulting in stronger partnerships in the CoPs (Lui et al., 2015).

Care rather than competition

The cultivation of strong social connections and increased awareness of self and others in the CoPs was strongly linked to authentic and durable learning. Mentors and mentees needed to work on the formation of strong connections for strong caring relations to be forged. This led to the following questions: “Where is the real value of self and the willingness to share, relate and connect with other similar-minded colleagues?” and “How can we ensure the well-being of all mentors and mentees in their quest to acquire this new learning?” Throughout our process, many participants commented on the human and nurturing aspects when human agency was recognised and acknowledged. These included comments about the importance of, “... the pedagogy of care...; ... humanising pedagogy...; ... the humanising aspect...” among others. While the focus in CoPs was on intellectual development during mentorship, we could not divorce this from the important role human agency and interpersonal skills played in relationship development between mentors and mentees (see Fenge, 2012). A mentee felt that in the online CoP there was a need for “... maybe a kind of social support, emotional support.” In Akinyemi and colleagues’ (2020) study it was found that support and encouragement from group members was important since it eliminated any fear of being judged and elevated the level of trust and care among the participants resulting in strong connections. Strong social connections derived from social cohesion in the CoPs which could have existed only when mentors and mentees experienced the humanising aspects such as “feeling comfortable with another person, trusting their intentions and judging their willingness to share” (Batchelor, 2020, p.10). A feeling of strong connectedness among CoPs led to a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging was critical for productive CoPs with mentees justifying it as “... everyone wants to feel as if they are a valued part of the community and being valued is something as simple as acknowledgement... and ... [will lead to] open and respectful relationships ... [which can be] ... very, very dynamic.” The sense of community was enhanced when participants felt respected and accepted and could positively influence their behaviour in the community (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016) leading to more robust and vibrant CoPs (Batchelor, 2020).

The value of considering humanness in CoPs was justified by a mentor: “When it comes to the human aspect, what I found in mentoring other mentors or other people at the university, a lot of it has to do with guiding them, encouraging and also a lot of soft skills... and ... the soft skills are just so, so important.” Patacsil and Tablatin (2017) claimed that soft skills include communication, the provision of guidance, protection, support and encouragement, collaboration on team projects, self-confidence, self-management, and respect. They went on to explain that soft skills are embedded in our attitudes, behaviour, personal qualities, and our approach to others. According to Akinyemi et al., (2020) if the members of the CoP have high levels of personal confidence, there will be care and trust and members will be more receptive to reviewing their own practices and beliefs resulting in positive relationships in CoPs.

Mentorship and supervision as joint responsibility

During the 13-week mentorship period, learning experiences were explicitly planned and encouraged; mentors and mentees came together to share their ideas and guide each other so thinking and learning were socially constructed. Nicolini et al. (2022) extended this argument by saying that groups engage in mutually shared activities to improve their own practices. Mentors and mentees understood their role in the mentorship process and showed positivity, commitment and a joint sense of responsibility to the process, “This new model gives everybody the responsibility for the output and we all work towards one goal ... and ... we are drawing on our supervision experience and our research experience and practices, to look at what we would be as mentor supervisors, or supervisor mentors.” The mentorship relationship is one that comprises the mentor, mentee, and the community. It is a reciprocal bond which could prove to be ineffective if any one party is not committed (Nunan et al., 2023). In this study, mentees confirmed that for a relationship to flourish, there needs to be dedication and responsibility from both mentors and mentees in that community.

Mentor-mentee interaction has to be purposeful. Mentors in this study realised the value of understanding mentee needs. This was evident in the following comment, “... we thought that it’s more important for us ... to get the needs, ideas and contextual factors, based on the lived experience of the people participating in this program ... and ... it’s developing the person as a researcher.” This needs-based approach to the mentorship process served as an empowering tool for all mentors and mentees in the CoPs. Mentees in Nunan and colleagues’ (2023) study agreed and felt that the mentoring should be planned for a particular reason and there should be targeted developmental goals set for mentoring in the CoP sessions. This process of mapping identified needs created a mentoring roadmap which benefited the mentorship process in the CoPs (Montgomery, 2017).

The CoPs created a space for mentors to “... go through all of these cycles together with our mentee, and learning together and growing as supervisors, but also to ... have well-established rules of engagement within these spaces.” The CoPs were transformed into practice orientated spaces in which mentors and mentees worked together to increase their knowledge, thus creating a shared repertoire of resources (Batchelor, 2020), while, at the

same time, respecting boundaries negotiated previously by the communities, thus ensuring joint responsibility and meaningful experiences for mentees and mentors.

Conclusion

At the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic it became obvious that the research staff at our institution had to develop a strategy for sustaining the supervision of postgraduate candidates. It was also apparent that we had to develop this new programme in a short space of time. We did so successfully and in quite a new way. We developed a 13-week online workshop which was transdisciplinary in nature. Participants were drawn from various disciplines across the six faculties and support units. No strict criteria applied to the identification of mentors and mentees, and participants identified their own individual roles.

After the conclusion of the COVID 19 pandemic in 2022, it became clear to the researchers who had been working closely on the development of this newly designed online SSMP, that several of the key strategies which had been identified and implemented could in fact be of value in a post-COVID 19 supervision situation. A significant finding in this study was the creation and organisation of non-hierarchical learning hubs where mentors and mentees were bound by a common interest and learnt eagerly from each other. Mentors and mentees were brought together, engaged in discussions, shared information, thought together, learned from, and helped each other. These organic CoPs, with different levels of participation, became the social arena in which expertise was shared willingly with a focus on the members and on building new knowledge, rather than hierarchical authority.

The study demonstrated that through collaboration and reflection, the CoPs became transformative spaces in which mentors and mentees considered how to improve, help, and guide each other. Mentors and mentees provided possible ways of evaluating the practice based on member needs. Akella et al. (2021, p. 4339) justified the transformative nature of working in communities of practice and stated that “collaboration, dialogue, and reflection can become the passwords” to its success.

Although there are various supervision programmes available at many universities globally and in South Africa at present (Guarimata-Salinas, et al., 2023; Guerin & Aitchison, 2021; Motshoane, 2022; Mouton & Frick, 2020; Ngulube, 2021; Strebel & Shefer, 2016), few of them take into account the importance of humanness, which stresses the need for a sense of collective responsibility in breaking down silos, with a focus on caring about the wellness of others rather than about competition, and communicating sensitively with mentees. This emphasis on creating strong social connections encouraged working together in teams where unconscious power relations were acknowledged. In this process, boundaries were crossed in transferring knowledge from theory to practice between established and novice mentors using brave and safe spaces. The use of the CoP theory led to the development of a mentorship supervision model based on a pedagogy of care, where members experienced a sense of belonging and where established and novice supervisors were seen equally as individuals, cared for, and in turn, cared for others (Greer, 2023). The findings describe the value mentors and mentees placed on respect, trust and other soft skills within the relations.

One of the benefits of this Sisonke programme was making mentors and mentees conscious of the reciprocal constructive nature of the knowledge gained through the use of this SSMP. Too often, valuable research projects in South Africa have been obstructed because both mentors and mentees have been unaware of the existence of any such support structures or professional programmes. This unfamiliarity has frequently caused mentors to fall back into a default position in which they are assumed to own all the information while the mentee is the empty vessel which needs to be filled. It is recommended, therefore, that all mentors and mentees in South Africa engaging upon supervision of postgraduate candidates complete such a programme as the SSMP, especially with the emphasis on humanness.

We acknowledge a limitation in that this was a participatory online research project conducted at one UoT during COVID-19. In order to maintain the worldwide quality of mentorship of novice supervisors, we recommend that HEIs develop explicit policies and guidelines to ensure coherence and excellence. We consider that these findings will be of benefit to other institutions wanting to engage in support for mentoring novice supervisors. For a mentorship programme to be initiated at any HEI and to be sustainable, applicable leadership and mentor and mentee support structures need to be in place.

Funding details

No funding was available.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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