# REFLECTIONS ON PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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pena persada

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# Long-distance Supervision amidst Pandemic: A Self-reflection of a PhD Student's Experience

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## Introduction

Research supervision is unquestionably one of the most important parts of pedagogies in higher education since it links to the accomplishment of good research and it is even "about the development of a person and not just the successful production of a thesis" (Cherry, 2012, p.9). In general, supervision had been generally conducted on campus through traditional face-to-face meetings. However, in recent years, online supervision has become more popular due to the significant rise in the number of students undertaking their studies online and now it has become mandatory because of the current situation where all educational institutions are closed as an effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 virus.

This is a self-reflection of my online supervisory experience as a PhD student, shifting from blended (online and offline) to online supervision due to the lockdown of campuses. I am now in the second year of my study at a university in Australia. Here, I present the strategies my supervisors and I do during this long-distance supervision and the challenges we face. Addressing what Helfer & Drew (2019) note about the significance of understanding how students think, their preferences, and their perceptions of roles in a supervision process, I hope this article could provide useful insights for me

as the candidate in particular and for supervisors and students in higher education, in general, to enhance the quality of supervision amidst this outbreak.

## The matching of expectations and roles

To set expectations and roles early and clearly in online supervision is of great importance. The fact that all supervisory processes in my university changes to online mode forces my supervisors and me to re-manage expectations just like at the start of my PhD study. Therefore, supervisors and I openly discussed and outlined each party's expectations and roles and then agreed. We expect each other to make sure that we will always stay connected to do virtual meetings on a regular basis. This includes the availability of time and technological devices needed for the supervisory meetings.

James & Baldwin (1999) argue that one of the best practices of effective supervision is when supervisors involve students to establish reasonable and agreed expectations. The clarification of each party's expectation could avoid the mismatch that might arise due to different assumptions my supervisors and I have (Gray & Crosta, 2019). As the candidate, I am supposed to keep doing the process of research well and send the draft regularly usually one week before our meetings so that my supervisors could perform their role to read and provide high-quality feedback on my writing. As the candidate, I have the responsibility as the main researcher, while my supervisors help me make an informed decision about how I shape my research project and ensure I sustain continuous progress to finish my study within the intended time (Hothi, 2020).

**Intense and regular communication**

Supervisor-supervisee communication could be very challenging but is essential as its effectiveness might result in good-quality research and reduce the possibility of thesis completion delay (Almeatani et al., 2019). As a consequence, to build effective communication in online supervision, some strategies should be set, agreed and applied. In my case, supervisors and I maintain our communication through three ways, virtual face-to-face meeting, email, and phone when necessary. For regular online meetings, we choose to use Zoom (you can use some other apps such as Skype and Google meet) as the platform for it has audio-visual features that can reduce the feeling of having the 'distance' because we can talk, see, and listen each other just like in traditional face-to-face meetings.

The other communication tool we have is email exchanges. This email is highly beneficial since it allows me to ask more questions and discuss more issues which I cannot do in regular meetings due to time constraints. In addition, it provides me with a more written record to which I go back when I forget some parts of information I need. The last tool we use is a mobile phone, but I do not recommend this as the main means since supervisors are busier than us students; they are supervising other students, having many classes, or being involved in a research project. In my experience, phone talk or SMS is not used unless there is an emergency that needs a fast response from both supervisors and students.

**Relationship building: "Go Ahmad team, go!"**

Supervision is a social interaction between two people who might have differing views but the same objectives (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). Effective supervision depends a lot on

the quality of the supervisor-student relationship in the research where they engage (Cotterall, 2011). But, online students, like me, are often committed to the feeling of being isolated. Fortunately, my supervisors initiated a healthy relationship between us. Instead of treating me as merely a student, they consider our relationship as a team. My supervisors assure me that we are a team in this project, with me as the main researcher. I do remember when they emailed me and said, "Go Ahmad team, go! :-D" when they encouraged me to finish my research ethics application. This is very motivating and encouraging and I had not undergone it in my bachelor's and master's studies. The relationship as a team is also clearly shown in preparing my confirmation examination (in Indonesia we usually call it a *seminar proposal*). My supervisors advised me what confirmation looks like and accompanied me online to do three-time rehearsals for my presentation about the project. On the day of the confirmation, they listened and helped me clarify some of my answers to the questions from the panel team when necessary.

Furthermore, communicative strategies play a key role in maintaining relationships and trust between supervisors and candidates. My supervisors always start by asking about my condition. Even though we are supposed to talk about the research project, they never miss to ask me "how are you?", "is your family OK?", "How is the current situation there?". To me, these simple questions could increase the feeling of closeness and comfort during supervision. Then in the main discussion, my supervisors always remind me about the main argument of my research. They often ask me questions to empower me and to increase my understanding. In line with Agricola et al., (2020), I find this strategy highly helpful as stimuli to think independently and critically for my research.

**Challenges in online supervision**

To keep online supervision run well, it is a good idea to understand the challenges so that the potential problems could be anticipated. The following are some challenges or obstacles I, and possibly other supervisors and candidates, face during online supervisory activities.

The first challenge is access to technology and connection. As I live in an area where internet connection is not always stable, it is kind of challenging to make sure everything is okay to support the communication in online supervision. This is because the access to technology and internet connection for both supervisors and students is a key aspect to avoid some trouble during the meetings. When there is a problem with the connection, I always talk to my supervisors to see what other options are possible. For example, if there is a problem with bandwidth availability, it might not be possible to hold a quality video conference and an audio conference would be more conducive to avoid technical problems during the meeting.

The other challenging part of my supervision is writing production. For the supervision to continue, I have to send a draft of my research progress every 2-3 weeks as discussion material in the online meeting. But, as a non-native English speaker, I find writing one of the most tedious and boring tasks in my PhD journey. I need to write regularly and frequently to help me develop ideas and organize thoughts, express the emerging arguments and conclusions, and communicate these to my supervisors in proper academic English. This is indeed undergone by those studying on-campus, but in online settings, I could say it becomes more difficult as I have to work without face-to-face support from supervisors and get more distracted by other activities and family conditions.

Last but not least is to stay motivated. In online PhD studies, supervision is the main, and probably the only means to track the progress of the study. However, I face certain problems related to learning motivation. Often, it is hard for me to work independently and self-monitor my work. The lack of social interactions can engender a feeling of isolation that in turn impacts my driving force and confidence to work on my research over a long period. In addition, family issues often distract my concentration and time for studying. As a father of a one-year-old baby, I have to help my wife do all the housework such as cooking, cleaning up, taking care of the baby, and so on. Thus, I am trying to always connect with supervisors and colleagues to maintain or recharge my learning motivation.

## Conclusion

In this cutting-edge technology era, online long-distance supervision has been highly feasible and so far, I find my online supervision run well and helpful for my study. However, it is pivotal to be aware of some challenges and obstacles such as access to technology and connection, writing production, and motivation issues. These challenges are, by no means, unsolvable, and some studies have confirmed that online supervision can give satisfying and meaningful experiences for both students and supervisors (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2015; Doyle et al., 2016; Kumar & Johnson, 2019). This depends, of course, on how well supervisors and students perform their roles.

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