

# **Bridging the Continental Divide: A Reflective Account of Online Distance Supervision at the Durban University of Technology**

## **Abstract:**

While online distance supervision of higher degrees is fairly commonplace overseas, it is relatively new at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). This paper looks at recent endeavours in distance supervision with overseas international students. Even face-to-face supervision of masters and doctoral students is fraught with potential pitfalls, in particular, dealing with implicit expectations on both sides and negotiating the transition from dependency to autonomy. Therefore it is not surprising that, while most students and supervisors at DUT now rely heavily on email interactions, supervision carried out completely online is not usually seen as an option. It is difficult to forge a trusting relationship completely online, and the nuances of face-to-face communication do not always survive the translation into electronic print. While mixed-mode research modules have been piloted at DUT since 2002, supervision carried out completely online with international overseas students is a relatively new venture. However, DUT fields many enquiries from international overseas students about registering for higher degrees, as the Recession, combined with DUT's Incentives awards which pay for tuition, makes overseas registration an attractive option. This paper uses an interactive principle derived from a theoretical model of communicative functions as a lens for reflecting on online supervision. The principle has been found to be useful in offering insights into the effectiveness of various mixed mode courses, including undergraduate Communication courses, staff induction into web-based learning and research capacity building courses. A self study approach is used, with both supervisor and students reflecting on supervision and research practices.

## **Introduction**

The interwoven strands of this paper are reflective self study, supervision and the process of distance supervision entirely online. This is a new enterprise for me, as while, all of my previous publications have been, in a sense, "reflection on practice", this is the first time I have adopted a self study orientation and moved towards a more personal account. Perhaps the differences between this and my previous papers will not be so obvious: I *am* an academic, I am passionate about finding the causes of things, and I thrive on the multitasking involved in interacting with over 20 higher degree students (I have seriously lost count, as I am mentoring at least 10 more on the side). I have also very recently been a student, and my own struggle to survive the system is an integral part of my responses to all of my students, particularly novice researchers and those who have been damaged by the system, which sometimes seems to have been designed specifically to torture intelligent people. I taught English and the usual obligatory extra-curriculars for 22 years before becoming a university lecturer, and I do not believe that one can supervise without being a good teacher (see Moses, 1984:157). I am also a keen elearning practitioner, and most of my publications deal with elearning or some aspect of computer mediated learning (see <http://www.dut.ac.za/pages/30876>). To support the position taken in this paper, self study, (Pithouse *et al.*, 2007), together with auto-ethnography (Grossi, 2006; Harrison, 2009) and narrative accounts (Pithouse, 2007), is gaining both popularity and

credence. I have colleagues at DUT as well as several of my own doctoral students adopting this orientation. The SeStuTHE group (<http://sestuthe.blogspot.com>) pioneered at DUT by Professor Connolly encourages staff to develop research practices out of reflective self study. I think I do it the other way around, from the research end: I want to find out what works and why it works, this is guided by intuitions from actual teaching - and inquiry - practices, the concept crystallises, and then I can use it as a lens for reflecting on - and improving - practice. This paper follows my usual practice of using concepts developed in formal inquiry as a lens for reflection, but I shall first outline some of what I think are key issues in supervision as well as online supervision, paying due respect to the collective wisdom of other researchers and practitioners. I shall then briefly outline the conceptual framework used, and go about showing how online supervision worked for me and my students.

### **Face-to-face Supervision**

Actual (as opposed to virtual) supervision is not without its problems. Dietz *et al.* (2006) comment that universities “typically continue with the traditional model of a single supervisor supervising a strictly research-based thesis” although other models exist (2006:10). They categorise the following as “systemic problems” with supervision in South African universities:

1. The uncontrolled growth of doctoral student numbers and the corresponding lack of supervision capacity.
2. The quality of PhD supervisors.
3. The quality of doctoral student intake.
4. The lack of institutional selectivity with respect to supervisors.
5. The lack of an induction experience for new supervisors.
6. The lack of internal evaluation systems for measuring supervision competence.
7. *A compromised system of external accountability* for the final thesis.
8. The lack of an enabling departmental or institutional culture to support effective supervision (2006:11-12).

The above are listed because they have direct bearing on the specific problems I have encountered or observed as Supervisor and Research Co-ordinator. The large numbers of new students tend not to have a community or family background in research (1. and 3.), so that expectations are inevitably wildly out of kilter with what is on offer. Costea’s (2007) project suggests that there is generally a mismatch between expectations of higher degree students and their supervisors, but that this changes during the course of the research, and needs to be re-negotiated on an ongoing basis. Inexperienced supervisors may stick to the original “contract”, and not realise the need for compromise, or feel their authority is threatened when changes are negotiated. This is exacerbated by the fact that too few Ph.D. supervisors have induction or training in advanced (or any) supervision methods (2. 5. and 8.), and are chosen merely because they have a Ph.D. (4.) Supervisors with a good reputation (and word gets around fast) can easily become overburdened. External accountability is not necessarily compromised only because of questionable affiliations, as Dietz *et al.* suggest, but also because there are not enough experienced and subject-expert Examiners to go around. Another important aspect of higher degree

supervision is negotiating the transition from student dependency to autonomy, which is difficult to achieve using the one-on-one model. Dysthe *et al.* look at a more collaborative approach to supervision; at DUT we have found mixed mode research modules particularly useful in building up a community of practice where peers take on roles usually held by the supervisor (Pratt & Peppas, 2008). As Ashburn points out, supervisor relationships with mature students tend to be more like client/consultant relationships, where the relationship is more equal, and students are better placed to “negotiate their own learning” (2003:2). However, we have found that our mature students, while many of them collaborate privately, seek quality time in one-on-one interactions with their supervisors. Moreover, mature students also tend to have personally relevant research projects, and are not keen to collaborate in group projects. In all fairness, they are mostly in full time employment, and are just too busy to make time to collaborate. Within the one-on-one model, is there any best way to supervise? A large scale study by Aspland *et al.* (1999) points to the importance of the supervisor/student relationship, feedback, evaluating progress and monitoring the whole process. Moses points out that individual supervision styles vary greatly, and that there is “no best way of structuring supervision” (1984:164). She continues:

The aim is still to accompany the student on the journey to competence in independent research work, assisting, guiding, and directing or interfering where necessary. This aim holds for those students who already have research skills, who are already independent learners, who like to work autonomously; and for those who still need a lot of direction, a lot of encouragement, and a lot of feedback. The starting point for each individual student is different; *thus the supervisory process must differ for different students*. It is the outcome that counts - the independent researcher (Moses, 1984:164, my emphasis).

It is my contention that it is the deep structure processes, of research, and of the learning interaction, which are the common factors in supervision. I will, however, discuss these after looking at some of the differences/problems one might expect in online distance supervision.

### **Online Supervision**

How does supervision translate into online supervision? There is no reason to suppose that online delivery dehumanises the interaction, which Greyling & Wentzel claim can actually be enhanced through use of ICT (2007:655-660). Stacey (1997) backs up this claim:

Electronic communication enables them [i.e. students] to share that sense of being part of a larger group battling the same problems and asking the same questions, and this often provides enough motivation to complete tasks and courses from which they might otherwise withdraw.

The supervisor’s workload can be lightened by providing students with a wealth of online resources (Hansson *et al.*, 2009; Sheridan, 2006). However, as with face-to-face supervision, the supervisor/student relationship is important. As Stacey and Fountain emphasise, “Establishing a strong relationship with one’s supervisor online with an

expectation of regular electronic communication is an essential step to a successful research project” (2001:526). However, they also point out that a preliminary orientation and induction process is necessary. What then, when one has never met one’s student face-to-face: how to build trust, and deal with expectations? These inevitably revolve around who is responsible for what (Costea, 2007). This speaks to the balance between dependency vs. autonomy, as expectations that the supervisor will drive the whole process from start to finish will clearly discourage any move towards autonomy on the part of the student. Remember, too, that supervisors, carrying the “invisible” workload of electronic communication, might be touchy about being expected to do more than fits *their* expectations. When things go wrong, and there are misunderstandings, electronic communication is a poor substitute for a face-to-face meeting which could clear the air. When students – or supervisors – are traumatised, either by the research process itself, or personal problems, electronic communication tends to break down, which usually results in breaking off communication. Silence can be much more of an ordeal than a straight reprimand, as one does not know *if* one has done something wrong, let alone *what* (see “Are you still alive?” below). I myself had some disastrous experiences of online supervision, such as a six months’ silence before being told that my supervisor “did not understand” my thesis, and had I considered that it might be because I “did not write so well”? I did not think it prudent to reply that the world expert in the field (who had no problem understanding it) had meanwhile written:

Dear Dee

I am absolutely delighted by your work, both the ICET paper and the thesis draft, because of the careful application you did of the method which I have advanced, and also because of the power and the originality of your conceptual approach, and of the practical extension of your analysis.....

This supervisor/student misunderstanding was clearly not something which could be repaired by email, and probably not by any number of face-to-face meetings, either - in this case best to make a strategic withdrawal.

### **A Lens for Reflecting on Practice**

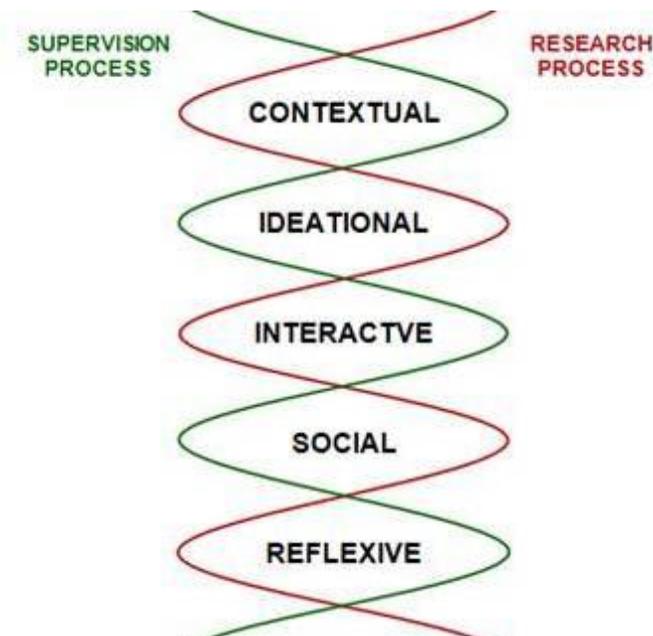
In my thesis (an augmented version of the draft mentioned above) I formulated an interactive principle which I later suggested might be viewed as a generative mechanism (Bhaskar, 1978; Franck, 2002) underpinning not only communication, but also knowledge construction in both learning and research (Pratt, 2009). This is because in all three social processes (i.e. communication, learning and research) the process needs need to be contextualised, message or knowledge content needs to be generated, interaction/s must take place, social constraints apply, and the whole process is regulated by feedback (see Table 1). In the *EISTA 2009* paper I applied this as a lens for explaining why the *BTech Research Model for Journalism* appeared to work so well. I argued that this was because the course design was underpinned by an interactive principle common to communication, learning and research, which gave the course “thematic coherence”. It therefore lends itself to reflection on the process of online supervision, which also involves communication, learning and research. However, in research, discovery is achieved as much by the process of writing up the thesis as by interaction with the

supervisor, so that I will model this slightly differently to the version given in the *EISTA 2009* paper.

**Table 1** Systemic Commonalities in the Prerequisites for Communication, Learning and Research (from Pratt, 2009)

System of Functions	INTERACTIVE SOCIAL PROCESSES UNDERPINNED BY A COMMON PRINCIPLE		
	Communication	Learning	Research
Contextual	... must be contextualised.	... must be contextualised.	... must be contextualised.
Ideational	... needs message content.	... needs knowledge content.	... needs knowledge content.
Interactive	... constructs meaning in interactions.	... constructs knowledge in interactions.	... constructs knowledge in interactions.
Social	... is governed by social mores.	... is governed by academic criteria.	... is governed by research conventions.
Reflexive	... is regulated by feedback.	... is regulated by feedback.	... is regulated by feedback.

Figure 1 suggests how the processes of supervision and research are an interwoven double helix of learning (coded green) and inquiry (coded red); both are forms of knowledge construction, and both are recursive processes rather than a series of linear stages.



**Figure 1** Double helix modelling the supervision/research process

It must be emphasised that the processes in both Figure 1 are complex and recursive, looping back on themselves throughout the supervision/research process, and, as Moses (1984) has suggested, *students approach supervisors at very different stages of their research*. Supervision, however, like other learning interactions, has to start by being

contextualised, as supervisors have to know something about the context and what they are taking on, even if the student approaches them with a completed thesis draft, as in the case of R (see below).

### **Reflections on the Online Supervision Process**

The functions can be used as headings to reflect on the online supervision process, using feedback provided by the two students involved, as well as excerpts from the electronic texts. Note that the same mechanism can perform more than one communicative function, and that the same function can be performed by more than one mechanism. For example, Moodle can intensify the interactive function as it fast-tracks the interaction in ways in which email cannot (i.e. in terms of turn taking) and the thumbnail face images create the sense of actual people talking to each other. Moodle can also assist students to contextualise their interactions by setting them within different discussion forums: an online course gives a stronger sense of a “virtual meeting place” than email.

#### *Contextual issues*

R (in the USA) was in his fifties and had written a rough Ph.D. thesis draft. Like myself, he had had negative previous experiences of supervision, being first abandoned, then told to change his topic, and then told to change his format (short dissertation plus studio work for full research thesis). He had changed universities, had tried online supervision, which had not worked, and was trying for overseas supervision which *would* work to assist him to submit his thesis for examination. His empirical work, in my opinion, was basic on an exemplary piece of e-learning practice, flawed only by his inability to find anyone who would help him to write it up as a thesis. He was a good writer, but had been confused by the conflicting conventions imposed by a variety of supervisors, to the extent that he was not clear what his research should look like in a thesis form; in the course of email interactions I found that he had an excellent understanding of research processes. It was a question of finding an appropriate means of presentation. R’s full story unfolded gradually as we built up a relationship of trust, but his first email was, like S’s, a formal inquiry passed on by the secretary:

Dear Staff,

Does your college offer a research doctorate Ph.D. programme in Communications, Education or Journalism? If so, who would be the best person to contact?

[He then gives details of his lecturing position and the thesis draft he has completed.]

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please let me know if you have a suitable programme that I could enroll in through distance education. I can send you my current dissertation for your evaluation.

Best wishes,  
R

S (in Canada) was in his forties, had 20 years of experience as a journalist, and was now exploring the option of a masters in Journalism. Soon after he registered at DUT he was

head-hunted by a Canadian University and in September will start lecturing part time in its Journalism programme. While he starts his letter of inquiry with “Hello”, it is just as formal as R’s:

Hello,

My name is S \*\*\* and I am the \*\*\*\*\* Editor at the \*\*\*\*\* newspaper in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. I am responsible for writing large investigative series and feature projects for the Spectator, which is one of Canada's 10 largest English-language newspapers.

I am interested in beginning the process of obtaining my Master's degree, preferably by distance education.

I am hoping that you can provide me with some information about Durban University of Technology's Master's program in Communication and Journalism. My hope is that you might be able to walk me through the process and suggest how I might be able to find a supervisor who would be interested in taking me on as a student, if that is indeed possible. I would be interested in pursuing a Master's degree that can be obtained with a written dissertation covering a research topic while I remain in Canada... [and so on]

S’s enquiry came three months after R’s, so I was now faced with the prospect of two overseas distance students, with different personalities and histories, and each at different stages of research. In entirely online supervision one does not get a real sense of the personality of the student at the outset, as one can do very quickly from a face-to-face interview, because most overseas enquiries are in the form of formal letters. The student of course, has the same problem in gauging the personality of the supervisor, and trust is built up very slowly in written interactions. What I had not realised before engaging in this self study was that there were many synergies in our background, as shown in the summary below:

S: Working journalist, BSc Science (Science writer), about to take on part time lecturing.

R: Communication lecturer, runs e-learning courses, good teacher, bad previous experience of supervision.

D: Was Communication lecturer, runs e-learning courses, was high school teacher, thesis topic: written communication, ran online Research Module for BTech Journalism, bad previous experience of supervision.

These were the contextual issues which made it much easier for supervisor/student to “bond” and develop a relationship of co-operation and trust. I must point out, however, that initially I had never intended to supervise S, as my specialist area is not Journalism. I had been keeping S in “holding pattern” for his “real” supervisor, who could not, however, take over because of pressure of work. I was then S’s supervisor by default, almost, but have never regretted the decision to continue.

Another contextual issue driving the process was that different platforms were used for online supervision. S used email and a Moodle social forum, and went on to BTech Research Module to chat to students there. R used email only (he had a look at the Moodle *Higher Degrees* course, but did not appear keen to use it, probably because he

was already familiar with much of the content and processes). I sometimes used home email. In retrospect this must have helped to convey a growing sense of intimacy and trust. Both students made comments about the medium used (see below), and both expressed satisfaction with the choice.

Motivation is also a contextual factor. S attributed success or failure of online distance supervision to the student (S himself was self-motivated and worked independently):

Some general thoughts: I think it's safe to say (and probably fairly obvious, I guess) that distance education - and by extension, long-distance supervision - would not be the ideal format for every student.

Part of its success, or failure, depends to some degree on the student, not the supervisor. For it to succeed, the student needs to be self-motivated and able to work independently. If the student requires constant hand-holding or constant reinforcement and feedback, then long-distance supervision will not be the appropriate form of study for that student.

On the other hand, for someone who thrives in an independent setting and needs minimal ongoing support, this is an ideal setup. But again, it requires self-motivation. Because there is no face-to-face contact, no scheduled meetings, no classes to attend, there is little a supervisor can do to push along a lagging, unmotivated student.

He ends off:

All in all, I've found this to be a positive experience. But then again, I've always been an independent, self-motivated worker, so perhaps that explains why it's a good fit for me.

R, being an academic and online practitioner himself, used material from his thesis in his assessment of online distance learning:

**A. Summary of the advantages of being taught and supervised online:**

- \* Online learning is often self-paced and students can speed up or slow down as needed.
- \* Geographical barriers are eliminated. Travel time and costs are eliminated.
- \* 24/7 accessibility makes scheduling easy.
- \* Student costs are frequently less (tuition, residence, food, child care).
- \* Students can skip over material they already know and focus on topics they need to learn.

**B. Disadvantages being taught and supervised online:**

Despite the benefits of having the student being taught and supervised online, there is still some controversy. Young (2002) writes that online-only courses have received a high number of complaints from students. Even with all the modern educational technology available, human interaction is still preferred by many students.

R's approach is not that different from my own, as I myself am using a principle derived from my own thesis as a "lens" for reflection.

*Ideational issues*

This relates to what message/knowledge content is generated during supervision interactions. What it is appropriate to include, however, is a social issue, which will be dealt with later. While written discussions lack the ease, flexibility and speed of spoken discussion, articulation of thoughts in writing is a key issue in research, and even

informal interchanges in which ideas are generated are an invaluable part of the knowledge construction process. The drafts showing emerging thesis content are part of the message, and also provide feedback as to how students are progressing. Drafts are not always in prose form: I was really impressed with a spreadsheet S provided of the data he had gathered, which was well indexed and thorough. What thesis content is generated depends on the nature of the interactions. I tend to read very quickly and give general feedback very quickly. However, I insist that my students are thorough in their preparation, and that their research proposals are clearly structured and correct, even though they are only drafts. I prefer students to work at the thesis as a whole, guided only by sections, although I will give feedback on chapters when asked. I encouraged S to draft the whole thesis in rough before I commented (apart from making encouraging comments). Once he has a complete draft, I will give specific responses to help him to shape and polish it. If students ask me to comment on chapters, I do not fine edit, but I do comment orally on good work and errors. I prefer students to take notes as I talk: this means they internalise the feedback and get used to the idea that textual corrections are something they, and not I, do. On the other hand, with really tricky patches, I will suggest phrasings which might solve the problem: it is their choice as to what they finally use.

While it is more difficult to “talk students through” texts via email, Moodle was a very effective context for working on S’s proposal: it seemed to generate quick responses, was less ponderous to use than email, text boxes were easier to format, and attachments could be used, as in email. It was also easier to follow through the content of discussions on Moodle, particular when new themes were followed through in separate discussion forums. Notes and links to information worked better on Moodle, as they stayed in sight, unlike in emails. This is partly an interactive issue, but then it is the interaction which generates ideational content.

S shared my sentiments about using Moodle in terms of providing necessary content:

As for the Moodle setup, I found it to be quite helpful, actually. There are a couple of neat features that made it useful. One, because it can keep a number of threads alive, it makes it easy to go back and find **answers** to earlier questions, without having to save dozens of emails and then try to sort through them for the correct one. The other nice feature is that it is a nice warehouse of what I would call **technical or bureaucratic information**. How to do this or where to find that. Also, such things as **guidebooks or graduate-level handbooks, style guides** - the type of technical info that can get lost in the shuffle. Moodle makes it easy to do one-stop shopping. And while I didn’t really require the **step-by-step roadmap** for putting together my proposal, it was easy to see that it would be useful for someone who needed such direction. It’s also nice to have a **forum** for the exchange of ideas or to seek input from others.

While S and I were using a private social forum (actually, a private course), he saw other Moodle setups on the *BTech Research Module for Journalism* (which he visited) and the *Higher Degrees Research Module*. His last comments confirm my impression that mature students (even ones who are novice researchers) do not respond so well to the structured type of online approach found in these two courses (coursework masters students do, though, as they have more motivation to share information).

R worked with me entirely on email (mainly Outlook) in preparing his thesis for examination: he had started with a mini dissertation plus studio work, but this option has been discontinued half way through his studies at another overseas university. It was difficult at first to persuade him to expand his content (even though his data collection was extensive) as he needed closure. He was a fluent writer, and had already published eight journal articles relating to his research. The problem was contextualising his research in a specific research orientation which would enable him to exploit the rich data he had gathered. His methodology for data gathering had been ethnographic, so he needed any expansion of the thesis to be congruent with that. His co-supervisor encouraged him to use a model of neural processing, which fitted in with his data and conclusions: this extended and added depth to his theoretical position. I encouraged R to read up on self study and auto-ethnography, pointed him to some theses following these approaches, and to Jack Whitehead's site, as auto-ethnography was the position I saw him as moving towards. The co-supervisor and I spent some time analysing R's initial draft; I think our main contribution was to give him a sense of audience and audience expectations.

### *Interactive issues*

Although written email responses take much longer to process than spoken interactions, I find them much more convenient (i.e. can be fitted in any time I am free), and I tend to respond very quickly (see R's comment below) so that messages don't pile up in my inbox. My overseas online students therefore may receive more of my more attention than my "home" students, but *mainly as a response when they write to me*. This approach seemed to work well with both S and R:

S: Personally, I've had no difficulties or particular challenges with the supervisor-student relationship that you and I have developed. Communication has been efficient, regular and helpful. Any questions I've had have been answered appropriately and in a timely fashion, and I hope that I have been just as timely in getting information to you when necessary. The time difference of six or seven hours, depending on time of year, has only been a minor factor. At worst, it's added a day to the communication cycle. But on the bright side, I often get to wake up to new mail from Dee, which is always a pleasure.

Well, uh, yes, and I also enjoy reading S's emails, as he has a wicked sense of humour. This can be seen in his reaction after I had not emailed him for over two weeks:

Are you still alive?

Have I offended you from afar?

After explaining that I had been busy supervising R's examination corrections and organising his bound thesis for submission to the library, I ended off: "Uh, was I supposed to answer something you wrote? (Sorry!)" To which S, undaunted, replied:

You're alive !!

Thank God. I thought maybe someone had vuvu'ed your zela.

The reader should not be deceived by S's insouciance, as he is an extremely able student, and his proposal had been passed by the Faculty Research Committee without any revisions or corrections, which is quite an achievement. In spite of S's humorous approach to my omission to respond to his having nearly completed his thesis draft (an earlier message I had obviously been too tired to register), I mentally filed a note to myself *not* to do this again.

R commented on the quality of the supervision interactions as follows:

**A. What works:** The general quality of the online supervision at Durban University of Technology was excellent. Dr. Pratt was very **responsive** to my questions and comments sent by e-mail. She provided **prompt feedback** to the written sections of the thesis that I submitted. Both of us seemed to agree that the e-mail supervision was effective enough to bring this thesis to its logical conclusion.

S identified some of the problems of online supervision:

If I were to point out any challenges, there are only a couple. One, because questions get asked and answered by email or through Moodle, it can be a multi-step process at times, because one question and its answer might lead to five more questions, which get answered in a back-and-forth manner that takes time. If it was a face-to-face encounter, you could ask and answer a long list of questions in a short period of time and be done with it. Two, there are times, clearly, where it would be nice to have **interaction with a real person** instead of conducting an entire supervisor-student relationship in electronic form.

R echoes S's need for "interaction with a real person", and mentions some of the problems which could have been solved by "in-person visits":

**B. What did not work:** Despite the fact that the American and the South African versions of the English language are similar, occasional **in-person visits** would have been helpful to clear up any disagreements or **misunderstandings about language use** or **expectations** for the research. Dr. Pratt did offer to use all of the available technology (such as Skype) to stay in contact.

Apart from the tediousness of "multi-step" textual interchange noted by S, communication via electronic text alone has more serious consequences, as identified by R: expectations are not so easily broached - and clarified - in writing, and nuances of language can be overlooked. Note also (in A.) that R and I "seemed" to agree about using email: at one stage I would have found it much easier if, like S, he had gone on to a Moodle social forum, but I did not want to push the issue. In retrospect, email did work better, and I was interested later to find Blair and Hoy's endorsement of ordinary email:

...we have found in our work with online adult learners that traditional interpersonal email communication between instructor and student and among peers has been among the most powerful tools in teaching and learning (2006:33).

R also missed the "real" presence afforded by "in-person visits". So did I, and I could not use Skype as I could never guarantee that I would be free when a transmission was planned: that is the nature of my current job.

### *Social issues*

This section deals with what conventions/mores governed the supervision interactions. Both supervisor and students came from different geographical and cultural settings: we had different communication styles, and adjustment was needed on both sides. Moodle provided a context which was more school-roomish, which had an impact on style. Perhaps that is why it worked so well for the preparation of S's research proposal, although there were some very informal interchanges on Moodle. Email provided a more adult, yet more intimate, platform, perhaps accounting for Blair and Hoys' endorsement of its use for adult learning. As can be seen from the above interaction between S and myself (i.e. "Are you dead?") our style was pretty informal and jokey, although this came about gradually. R and myself also moved towards to a more casual style of interaction. Contrast R's tone in his first enquiry (above) with that in a much later email:

Subject: Re: Thank you in over 465 languages!

Hi Dee,

Thanks again for all your wonderful help, it sounds like the bound thesis is looking good. Is there any chance of still making the September graduation? It sounds like the main thing right now is to get the final approval of the HDC. Let me know if there is anything else that I can do for the current D.Tech project, and/or if there is anything that I can do to help DUT, such as the academic database collaboration here in the US.

Take your time and enjoy some rest, you deserve it!

Best wishes,  
R

Another social issue is that social conventions govern what one can write about or not write about. This is also affected by ethical - and even humane - considerations. How do you tell an overseas student that he must remain registered in the wrong degree programme for a year because of an administrative error? Apart from the anxiety this might generate, you do not want to make the student feel he is registered in a place full of idiots (and his supervisor works there too....) Try telling a student he has not really passed because there was a glitch about paying his fees. *Not* telling the student strains the trust relationship when he eventually finds out; telling the student in a reassuring way is not easy. Office politics, too, are something students pick up really fast when they visit an academic department in person: but some things just cannot - and should not - be discussed in print. I like to level with my students, but online communication really strains my language skills and interpersonal skills at times.

### *Reflexive issues*

Feedback is a very important part of the supervision process. Online mail/forums make it very difficult for a supervisor *not* to comment on student progress or student texts, and, as R says:

R: "She [supervisor] provided prompt feedback to the written sections of the thesis that I submitted."

It must also be remembered that electronic interactions generate more reflection because the act of writing itself prompts self-reflection: I frequently found students double-guessing my responses, or “thinking aloud” Writing also invites more clearly articulated responses than conversation. This extract from a Moodle discussion forum shows S reflecting on the nature of academic (as opposed to journalistic) prose:

Hi again,

Thanks for getting back to me.

I'll set to work trying to fix the review, adjust titles and see if I can add some more "academic" language. I showed it to Dr. [name of Co-supervisor] (I hope you don't mind) and he said "Great, but it's too clear." I have to learn the lingo, obviously. I told him that I've spent my journalistic life striving to take complex issues and make them clear for the reader, now I have to do the opposite.

I'll see if I can get it done this weekend.

I was horrified at the thought of S spoiling his beautifully clear prose in an attempt to sound “academic”, so I replied:

...we are desperately trying to get our higher degree students to make a clear argument backed up with evidence (worth rubies!) We don't *want* all that obfuscated rubbish which poses as "learned", particularly at proposal level, where you *have to be clear* about what you're doing (so do we).

You'll find that, if your argument moves logically from point to point, and the references go in to back up your points, it immediately looks authoritative, unlike that waffly nonsense where even the student doesn't know what s/he means.

And later:

I read the passages again: your style is perfect, butcher it at your peril!"

## **Conclusion**

I must admit that at the outset I had not been at all confident about my ability to carry out online distance supervision. However, feedback from the students suggests that it has gone very well so far, with one thesis passed and the other being written up. In preparing for this account, I was very pleased to find both the possibilities and problems of online distance supervision pre-empted in the literature, which to a large extent echoed my own experiences. While I had come to some implicit conclusions about my experiences as an online supervisor before writing, I found that articulating the experiences using the communicative functions as lens, as well as finding examples from the students' and my own texts, raised many issues I had perhaps brushed over too quickly in the carrying out of this project. Once these issues are documented and reflected on, however, it becomes more difficult to ignore them, and the main object of self study is to enhance and improve one's performance. I also intend to raise awareness in the university about how students are treated, particularly with regard to the administrative aspects of their higher degree studies, which often swallow up more of my time than the actual supervision process itself. It has become obvious that online supervision involves much “hidden labour”, and

that online supervisors need to lobby to gain institutional recognition of - and some requisite compensation for - the unacknowledged work that goes into this enterprise. For myself, the learning experience has been well worth it, and I hope to engage more fully in the practice of online distance supervision in the future.

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