Exploring trust in online doctoral supervision

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Background

• Moving to an online supervisory environment led to noticeable behavioural differences in my approach and aroused my interest (see abstract for further details);

• Guccione’s work – first in SRHE 2016 (and now in her published report of 2018). She has examined the issue of trust in campus based (predominantly STEM) students and supervisors.

• Conceptual analysis of ‘Trust’ needed was needed, on which to base any empirical study. This would ensure participants’ and researcher’s conceptual understanding are aligned.

• Hence my first research question:
RQ1- What conceptual models or frameworks of trust may be useful to understand and explore the issue of trust in doctoral supervision?
Definition: what does it mean for one individual to trust another?

Guccione (2018) and I both resort to management sources for a definition but we have settled on subtly different ones:

“a willingness to accept uncertainty and make oneself vulnerable in the face of insecurity” (Hope-Hailey, Searle & Dietz, 2012, p5)

“the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party, based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party”

(Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995, p712).
A model of Trust (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995)

Factors of perceived trustworthiness

- Ability
- Benevolence
- Integrity

Possible developments to the model suggested by the authors (Schoorman, Mayer and Davis, 2007):
- Reciprocity
- Context specific variables eg Virtual Environment

The trustor’s judgment of a trustee

Note Hope-Hailey et al propose predictability as an additional factor.
Propositions of the model (Mayer et al 1995)

• Proposition 1. The higher the trustor's propensity to trust, the higher the trust for a trustee prior to availability of information about the trustee.

• Proposition 2. Trust for a trustee will be a function of the trustee's perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity and of the trustor's propensity to trust.

• Proposition 3. The effect of integrity on trust will be most salient early in the relationship prior to the development of meaningful benevolence data.

• Proposition 4. The effect of perceived benevolence on trust will increase over time as the relationship between the parties develops.

• Proposition 5. RTR (risk taking in relationship) is a function of trust and the perceived risk of the trusting behaviour (e.g., empowerment of a subordinate).

• Proposition 6. Outcomes of trusting behaviours (i.e., RTR) will lead to updating of prior perceptions of the ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trustee.
Possible RQs for an empirical study

- What strategies do supervisors use to establish and build trust with on-campus PGR students?
- What strategies do supervisors use to establish and build trust with online PGR students?
- What supervisor behaviours do students (on campus or online) perceive as effective in establishing and building trust?
- Are there any discernible differences or adaptations needed for online supervisory practice in relation to trust?
Might there be something different about supervising online?

• In order to explore whether an empirical study was warranted, I asked fellow online supervisors for short vignettes of where they felt there might be a difference in their supervisory relationship, due to it being online.

• These vignettes are not meant as evidence to support a claim that there is a difference, merely as points for discussion, reflection and to see if others felt an empirical study was warranted;

• I will share four vignettes with you to stimulate discussion

• *I am interested in your views ......do you think there may be something different about supervising online?*

• *If so, does it relate to trust?*
“I have one student who has been taking a while to write up his thesis, despite good discussions in supervisions and some fascinating research emerging. The student has been working on his thesis for just over three years, and is now beginning to make some progress (if still reasonably slow given a pressing deadline on his end of studies). He has taken a while to get his writing going, and to make space in his life for his studies. Prior to the thesis stage the social obligations and regular tasks kept him engaged, but with just the single supervisory relationship he has slowed down significantly from the earlier pace on the pre-thesis stage. The lower levels of wider social engagement does seem to have been a factor in this. The online dimension is relevant to this in that it enables him to remain fully rooted in his existing environment, but doctoral work is highly demanding and does need one to accord it significant priority”.
“I have a student who keeps going AWOL and I feel helpless to get him back on board because he can just ignore me online. Every week I write in our BB classroom, checking in with him that all is going well and no reply. I try email – no reply. So then I message him and say he needs to be the one getting in touch now – nothing! Then out of the blue he sends me something to read or requesting advice and he sets unreasonable time limits – ‘I need this by Wednesday’ type thing, on a Monday! My campus students would never treat me like this because I see them, and they know they need to keep in touch. They also know that I have many demands on my time and other students, because they see me action in the department. I feel Patrick thinks of himself as being in isolation and doesn’t see himself as part of a working department with many other stakeholders”.
“I have a student who I met once online at the start of her thesis and she was writing her proposal. The time differences are awkward so we just kept in touch asynchronously while she drafted her proposal. We had discussed briefly how I approach supervision and what her expectations of me are, but it felt a bit awkward; not like when I do that face to face with a campus-based student.

She sent me her draft and I went through it, using comments and track changes. I posed questions where things were not clear in the proposal you know ‘what does this mean?’, ‘How do you know that?’ – that sort of thing. I sent the feedback for her to read and we were due to meet 3 days later via Skype. She emailed me the next day absolutely furious and saying she didn’t expect to have to answer all these questions, she expected her supervisor to have some knowledge about the topic. I am still trying to repair the relationship 6 weeks later”.
“I have a student who requests to have either a telephone supervision or Skype without the video. I am not a great fan of seeing myself on screen either but you get used to it. The thing is, I find it really hard to have those informal chats using just audio, and I can’t see her response to my suggestions. So I start off asking about what she has been doing since we last chatted and she keeps it totally about the thesis, no small talk. Whilst I respect her wishes, it is just so different to my on-campus supervision. I think that ‘small talk’ can be helpful in building the relationship. The conversation was so stilted, I thought maybe she was shy.

The other week she was late and said she had to reinstall Skype on her phone. I had not realised she was using her phone to Skype, I thought it was a PC or laptop. For the first time she had the video on (not sure she realised). I could see that when I was feeding back on the work she had sent me, she wasn’t reflecting on the advice or taking notes; she clearly disagreed with it but didn’t say anything. I always encourage debate and my campus PGRs are happy to argue the toss with me – but she clearly wasn’t comfortable doing that. I feel it is because we haven’t built up a rapport online”.
• Do you think there may be something different about supervising online?

• If so, could it relate to trust?
References for abstract and presentation


