

Navigating a Complex Supervisory Path through the Complicated Waters of Academia

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Abstract

The author works in a university department which in general subscribes to what Davis and Sumara (1997) describe as a complicated view of life—in this case dominated by sociological discourses. In 2000 a small group of colleagues in the department introduced a new taught course called a Masters in Education (Teaching), which was advertised as being appropriate for those teachers wanting to re-connect with their passion for teaching. The author was responsible for teaching one of the core modules, Researching Teaching, which was based on principles from Complexity Science including a focus on enactivism. This paper focuses on the difficulties that arose for both supervisor and students, when several students wanted to continue engaging with these enactivist ideas in their research dissertation. How does a supervisor remain true to and apply ideas of emergence and interconnectivity when working in a very different traditional academic paradigm? What are one's ethical responsibilities ... to the students? ... to one's colleagues? ... to the academy?

The teacher research movement can assist by causing dissonance and trouble. Trouble that comes from conviction based on evidence drawn from research by those in the field who know that we haven't got education right and who are prepared to put their energies into getting something changed. The minute teacher research becomes comfortable; someone else needs to take over... If your research endeavour is uncomfortable, you know you are close to the edge, and you can be sure that beneficial learning is taking place. (Breen 2003, 541–542)

In the beginning ...

In 1998 a small group of academics at the School of Education at the University of Cape Town met at my house and with much enthusiasm decided to try to counter the prevailing apathy and sense of helplessness being experienced by many teachers coming to terms with the new conditions of teaching in South Africa. High on the list of issues some teachers were facing was a large scale reduction of the local teaching force as the need to change the teacher:pupil ratio, which had varied between 12:1 to 45:1 in different schools under the apartheid regime, to a more equitable 40:1 in all schools took effect. This was accompanied by a large number of experienced staff accepting the favourable severance packages that had been offered by the Education Department as an incentive to reduce teacher numbers. In addition teachers were facing the introduction of a new outcomes-based curriculum with a set of new demands dominated by requisite assessment procedures. Our plan as academics who foregrounded the importance of Teaching, was to introduce a new stream called "Teaching" into the existing menu of taught Masters degree offerings in our department. The stream would consist of two core compulsory modules, one called *Teaching and the Modern Condition* and the other *Re-searching Teaching*. These two modules would run for two hours once a week over a period of twelve weeks. The intention behind this scheduling (which differed from the existing model of two three-hour sessions per week for a month) was to allow the teachers to get a chance to test the theoretical work of the lecture room against their lived experiences in the classroom. Students would then be able to select their other two modules from the large menu of available options within the whole department. The degree was scheduled in such a way that successful completion of these four modules (with marks of over 60% for each) allowed students to move on to the dissertation stage.

We soon ran into difficulty as our planned specialization in Teaching did not fit into the current departmental mould of sociology-dominated offerings and we were (somewhat ironically) asked on numerous occasions to satisfy peers that this new stream would not be 'monologic'. However,

through persistent effort and some careful strategic thinking, we were able to introduce the new stream for the first time in 2000, with me taking responsibility as convener of the new stream.

Students entering the stream first took the *Teaching and Modern Condition* module. This module was designed to allow students to gain a macro view of the way in which their beliefs had been formed by modernist views. One of the challenging features of the course was the fact that the course was offered by two language education colleagues who often differed strongly in their ideas on modernism and post-modernism. The emphasis was placed on challenging the students to argue their own views and regular assignments were given—often in the form of letters to the lecturers. Having completed this module, the students went on to take my Researching Teaching module, which was designed to give teachers the tools to research their own practice. The theoretical framework for this module drew on Gadamer’s ‘becoming more experienced’ rather than ‘getting an education’ paradigm (Gadamer 1975), as well as the theory of enactivism (Maturana and Varela 1986 and Davis 1996). The initial intentions and details of the course are further described in Breen (2000, 2001 and 2002). It is not the intention of this particular paper to dwell on the details of this module, although details of the unfolding process will become apparent in what follows.

Instead, the rest of this paper will focus mainly on three particular students who successfully completed the four required modules and then decided that they wanted to continue to explore the themes from enactivism and complexity science, that they were exposed to in the *Re-searching Teaching* module, in their research dissertations. This seemingly simple step led to a concatenation of dilemmas that will be described in the paper. In each case, the dilemma placed me in the invidious position of having to enter new and uncomfortable ground that often caused me to take decisions in which my path led me away from my colleagues and the imperatives and guidelines of my university.

Enter Neil

Neil is a school mathematics teacher who had been in my pre-service mathematics method class. He registered for the first intake of the new Teaching stream in 2000 and decided to complete all four of his taught modules in one year. For the first *Re-searching Teaching* module, I decided to invite John Mason (Mason 2002) to introduce the class to his Discipline of Noticing, a research method which asks teachers to become aware of their actions in the moment.

Neil became interested in the approach taken in this *Re-searching Teaching* module and, after passing all four taught modules with distinction, de-

cided that he would like to continue with this approach in his dissertation as it ‘opened a glimmer of possibility of a methodology that did not prescribe, but which rather provided tools with which one could open one’s practice’ (Eddy 2003, 12). I agreed to be his supervisor and his next step was to take the newly-introduced generic Research Methods course offered by academic colleagues in the Department. During this month long 8 x three-hour lecture session course which he started in January 2001, he reports that he found that ‘all those exclusionary walls of the academy that had been so effectively deconstructed during the coursework, were bulldozed back into place—seemingly twice as high and oppressive now that I had a view beyond them’. “If you don’t follow a set procedure for submission—you fail.” “If you allow a chink in your armour—you fail.” “If you do not add to the sum of human knowledge—you fail.” “If you haven’t started already—you’re late.” “Most people start a Masters and never complete it.” “Choose a small question, for which data is easily obtained, write it up and submit. Get the cloth on your back, prove that you can research, then you can start asking the questions that truly matter to you.” (Eddy 2003, 13).

Neil submitted the research proposal which had to be passed by the conveners of the Research Method course for him to proceed with his dissertation. I thought it was adequate, but rather sketchy in places, and I could see that he was losing interest in his research. His proposal was returned to him with comments as to where he needed to improve it before resubmission. The main problem for the course convener was that he had not delivered a clearly articulated question but rather wanted to examine his teaching in an open-ended format through qualitative and quantitative means. Neil came to me to ask for advice as he did not want to deviate from his planned course of action and was also not interested in having to continue a conversation with people who he perceived had such narrow views of research.

Dilemma One

How should I advise Neil? I could see that Neil was losing interest and I wanted him to get going with his research which I believed would be valuable. I believed that getting him to make the requested changes would break the tenuous thread that was keeping him registered. Should I assist Neil in getting on with his journey and collude with him against my colleagues? Or should I ensure that he worked on a revised research proposal and resubmit it to my colleagues for re-assessment?

I decided to support Neil and told him to get on with his research and leave the proposal and I would try to speak to my colleagues. Unfortunately, Neil had by this stage lost momentum and interest in his research and disappeared for at least a year.

Dilemma Two

What does one do as a supervisor when a student goes walk-about? There are departmental guidelines which say that a supervisor should meet with a student at least fortnightly. Should I insist on meeting with Neil and force him to submit work to me? Should I just wait for him to be ready to proceed? The Department was starting to be rated and obtained funding on the throughput of its research students (to maximize subsidy earning from the government). What sort of pressure should I put on him — and when?

I generally left Neil alone during this period, limiting contact from my side to the occasional telephone call or visit to see if he was ready to get down to work. Towards the end of 2002, I contacted Neil and advised him that he would find it difficult to re-register the following year if he had not made any progress with his dissertation. I told him that I thought the time had come for him to decide whether this was something that he wanted to do or not. (If it was not he had the option of exiting with a Postgraduate Diploma in Education with distinction for the taught modules he had passed). He contacted me to say that he was going to do it and we started to meet regularly over the next few months.

Dilemma Three

Neil found his inspirational reading came from a science fiction novel by Arthur Clarke. Right from the beginning, Neil started using extracts from this book to head each of his chapters. He also introduced a circular motif which grew and then diminished during the thesis and called the different sections of his work 'Collections of thoughts and actions' rather than 'Chapters'. This was a radical departure from the way in which all Masters students in the Department of Education had submitted their dissertations in the past and I knew that very few (if any) of my colleagues would be happy with this. Should I intervene and advise Neil against this format? In the Re-searching Teaching module, I had encouraged him to find his own voice and immerse himself in the topic so that the appropriate research methods would emerge. Was this the time to try to rein him in a bit and set some boundaries?

Six months later Neil submitted his dissertation and graduated in June 2003 with distinction (Eddy 2003). One of the external examiner's was so taken with Neil's work that he awarded him a mark of 95% and commended him for moving to the cutting edge in his choice of research techniques. As I started to write this paper two years later in 2005, I discovered that the university records indicate that Neil has not, as yet, passed the Research Methods course although he graduated with a Masters degree with distinction!

Enter Kendal

Kendal entered the Teaching stream almost by chance the following year in 2001 when she changed from the Curriculum stream at the last moment. For this second running of the *Re-searching Teaching* module I decided to teach it all on my own and I started to introduce more ideas from enactivism. I also introduced a system in which students had to collect and share 'moments' from their daily practice and use the Discipline of Noticing to examine them with others in the class to get a wider set of perspectives on the matter.

At the end of her taught modules, Kendal was certain that she wanted her research dissertation to provide the space for her to continue to explore the concept of learning. She decided that she wanted her research to track her own learning process as she went into the unknown (for her) territory of learning to be a Drama teacher. To do this she was allowed to register for a module on the Drama Honours course which focused on the practical aspect of teaching Drama and had a large component of school-based work. Like Neil, Kendal had also completed all four modules with distinction in one year and so registered for the Research Methods module at the start of 2002 in the company of Agatha (to whom you will be introduced in the next entrance). I had organized for Kendal to have a supervisor from the Drama Department to guide her through the Drama literature, but she was insistent, despite my many attempts to dissuade her, that she wanted me to be a co-supervisor for her research so that I could advise her on issues to do with research methodology.

Dilemma Four

What do I say to Kendal, if anything, about the generic Research Methods module? Should I warn her not to expect a great deal of support for the theoretical approaches that I had introduced her to in the Re-searching Teaching module? I know that the convener of this course is very much against what she calls anecdotal self-referential research. How should I prepare Kendal for criticism of her planned research approach?

I spoke to Kendal and told her that she should try to keep her focus on what she wanted to do in her research and not get too distracted by some of the contradictions that might arise from presenters on the Research Methods course. We met in passing from time to time during the Research Methods and she commented that she had indeed found opposition to her planned research, but that she was committed to her task. By this time the Research Methods course had become more organized and prescriptive in terms of what was expected in a research proposal. Students were told that in ap-

proximately 6000 words (the maximum word length for the dissertation itself is 25 000 words), they should include the following: a clear setting out of research question; rationale for conducting the study; literature review of empirical research in the field; review of relevant theoretical debates and issues; research design which states clearly how you will constitute your sample; preliminary proposals as to how they intend to analyse your data; and a time-line which maps out the phases and stages in completing the study.

Kendal took the task of writing the proposal very seriously and attempted to address each of the concerns that the presenters of the course had raised in opposition to her planned research. She included sections in her research proposal on such additional topics as validity and generalisability and by the time she had finished, she had assembled a proposal of over 20 pages—in the region of 14 000 words! She submitted the proposal for assessment and waited for comment. Instead of following the usual process, the convener of the Research Methods course sent me an email in which she said that she did not know what to do with this proposal as it seemed to be an entirely self-referential piece of work that couldn't really be called research. I was invited to take over the assessment of the research proposal and make my own decision as to its appropriateness.

Dilemma Five

What do I do? I can protect Kendal by accepting this offer that seems to ask me to take responsibility for the research while the course convener looks away. However, Kendal has gone to long and articulate lengths to answer the reservations that she knew the convener of the course would have, and was confident that she had done justice to her argument. Do I have the right to collude with the course convener in ignoring these arguments? Should I consult with Kendal before making a decision on what to do?

I decide that Kendal's attempt to engage with 'the opposition' needs to be respected and I ask the course convener to treat this proposal in the same way that all the other proposals are handled. In the end she decides not to do this by marking it herself, and instead passes the proposal on to the Head of Department for his reaction. The Head of Department takes this task seriously and writes a page long email which gets passed on to me. Although the normal procedure is for the course convener to present the reports to the student concerned, in Kendal's case I am asked to read the report and to mediate which sections of the report I decide to pass on to Kendal. I read the report and see that the Head of Department does not like the way that Kendal has used a surfing as a metaphor for research and advises her against doing this. He concludes by saying that "she needs to

display that ... she knows and will observe the appropriate standards of adequacy. These she has yet to display ... For something as intrinsically tricky as hermeneutic inquiry of this sort, something more than enthusiasm is required before we should be licensing entry" (Muller 2002).

Dilemma Six

Should I pass this report on to Kendal as it stands in full? My sense is that Kendal has already been deflected from her research path by her attempt to answer each aspect of the opposition she encountered in the Research Methods course. Will she be able to let go and continue without responding to this assessment? Should I take the invitation to mediate the report as an opportunity to censor the feedback or should I present Kendal with the full report?

I decide to use the gap and mediate the report. I omit the last sections of the report that contain the section quoted above. I ask Kendal to bear these comments in mind as she continues with her research, and tell her that I am satisfied that her research proposal is of a sufficient standard for her to continue with her research (a strong contradiction of the final sentence in the report which said that the license to enter should not be granted at this stage). I send an email to the effect that I am satisfied that Kendal has made the necessary changes to her proposal to the convener of the Research Methods course (she has made no changes!). Kendal continues with her research and decides to continue foregrounding her surfing metaphor throughout her dissertation. She broadens her research method to include action research as well as the Discipline of Noticing. She graduates with distinction at the end of 2003 (Bennie 2003). One of her external examiner's comments is that he would have liked the surfing metaphor to be extended to include descriptions of specific surfing experiences that would assist in exploring the similarities and differences between surfing and teaching and learning!

Enter Agatha (again)

In many ways, Agatha entered this story a long time ago. She had joined the Mathematics Education Project (MEP) that I had been directing at UCT as an inservice staff development field worker in 1993. She was part of a group of MEP staff who had explored the Discipline of Noticing before the Masters in Teaching was conceptualized. She was so confident that she wanted to do the Teaching Masters that she registered for it in 1999, before it had been officially advertised for commencement in 2000. Her writing for her assignment for her mathematics education module in 1999 as well as for a co-authored chapter in a book on Teachers as Researchers (Breen, Agherdien and Lebethé 2003) was included in one of the articles I wrote for

the Researching Teaching course in 2000. So she was part of the same class as Neil when John Mason was the main presenter.

She finished her four modules at the end of 2000, also gaining a distinction pass for each of them, and entered the 2001 Research Methods course. By the end of this Research Methods she was keen to do some research that explored gender issues in mathematics education and was enthusiastically being feted by the conveners of the Research Methods course as a potential student to fall under their supervision. I was strongly supportive of this development. Sometime during that year, she changed her mind and decided that she wanted to explore the voices of the teachers that she was working with in schools in the townships, and that she wanted me to supervise this research. She took this plan with her and repeated the Research Methods course at the start of 2002 with a willing and supportive confidante in Kendal.

Agatha wanted to explore narrative enquiry as a research method and she wanted to work from the basis that she could not be an objective observer of the teachers as they spoke. She believed that she needed to write herself into her research. She ran into similar objections to those that Kendal received from the presenters of the Research Methods course and ended up by also writing a 20 plus page research proposal that attempted to address the concerns of the course presenters. Her proposal was greeted in the same way as Kendal's. It ended up being referred to the Head of Department, who saw her proposal as "a sprawling display of where she is 'at' at this stage of her dissertation. She has devoted considerable effort into doing this and parts of the proposal are charming and persuasive. However, this version of her proposal tells this reader that she is presently far too ambitious ... and that this over-ambition is compounded by a conceptual confusion/conflation.... Read one way, Ms Lebethe proposes to analyse the narratives of 4 mathematics teachers on her course in the SDU. Read another, she proposes to analyse her own participation in the narrative capture situation via the discipline of noticing. These are 2 quite distinct things." (Muller 2002). Again I was faced with dilemma six above as to how much to pass on to Agatha and how to assess the impact that the report might have on Agatha. Agatha had been an associate member of the department for almost ten years so was very familiar with the people and the ongoing debates and tensions. I decided that her situation was different to Kendal's and since I agreed with many of the concerns that had been expressed (as things to think about in the future rather than obstacles that should be removed before continuing with the research) I decided to pass the full report on to her.

Agatha was very enthusiastic about her research. In particular she wanted to find a way of representing her research that would resonate with

her intentions of writing herself and the supporting literature into the research. She wanted to attend carefully to details such as occasion when she met with the teachers and wanted to explore her own interaction with the data. She began to explore with me the idea of handing her thesis in as an interactive disc rather than the traditional written report. She wanted readers to be able to click on various words or concepts and be taken immediately into a glossary or film clip or ...

Dilemma Seven

Agatha's planned research methodology is already going to break the majority of conventions. To what degree should I collude with her in encouraging her to play with the very form of her submission? Should I continue to support her and see what freedom exists in other departments across campus for such an approach? What about the assessment of her research proposal which contains the comment that the research is already too dispersed? Does the plan to change the medium not add to this dispersion?

I decide to stress that she needs to work on a written form of her thesis before she tries to put it in a different form of media presentation as I am concerned at the amount of difficulty I foresee her having in containing her creative ideas.

Agatha submits her first two pieces of writing to me and I become even more concerned with what has happened during the Research Methods course as she seems to have lost her way with writing that has no sparkle and is over-obsessed with justifying each and every step that she takes. She seems to have lost the momentum and drive with which she started the project.

Dilemma Eight

Again the issue of the responsibility of the supervisor comes back in a different form. Agatha is heavily involved in her work with teachers at the university. She keeps asking me to intervene and assist her by providing direction, but I am very reluctant to step in at this stage. I sense that Agatha has something very individual and important to say and that she will be very disappointed at a later stage if she does not remain true to her own intentions. How should I respond to her request for support?

I decide to tell her to re-write this section as I can't hear her own voice coming through in her writing. This does not produce a satisfactory reaction as she ends up disappearing for a year, making only very slow and intermittent progress. In late 2003 she starts to gain momentum and starts to produce work that includes art work by Salvador Dali; photographs of

her own hands; poems and other writing that she has written to reflect her interaction with the teachers' data; Sacred Stories instead of Chapters; informal Xhosa fire-side *ntsomi*'s as a way of telling a story that is accessible to the reader; as well as various other innovations.

Agatha's voice shines through this draft and I am moved by the power of her writing, but she has spent her energy in getting to this stage and the Head of Department's prescient mention of a sprawling display are evident in the draft that I have been given. As I read the draft I struggle to hold the grand picture that she is attempting to describe so that I can advise on an appropriate overall structure that will hold this *magnus opus*.

Dilemma Nine

Up to this stage, I have been consistent in trying to minimize the intervention that I have made in any of these students' work. Agatha's draft needs some very serious re-structuring and containment. Is this a task that I should pass back to her to do? I am reminded that this is only a minor Masters dissertation. Does this give me the right to take a more vigorous role in the dissertation?

I decide that Agatha's voice is clear and strong and that this was my major request to her. I spend a great deal of time suggesting some reasonably radical changes to the structure of the thesis and return the work to Agatha for her to respond as she sees fit to submit her final draft without another intervention from me.

Agatha submits and graduates in December 2004 (Lebethe 2004) with distinction and one of the external examiners comments that he would love to see her bring the same creativity to the structure of the thesis that she brought to the research process. He goes on to mention innovative methods such as photography; video diaries; song; dance; poetry which would have enhanced Agatha's way of working.

Enter Jill—standing in the wings?

Jill is a member of the most recent intake of the Masters in Teaching in 2004. She is a lecturer in Design at the local University of Technology. I have by now gained a great deal of confidence in my Re-searching Teaching module and I am more certain of my intentions in this the fourth running of the module. The course still runs once a week over 12 weeks for 2 hours per session. Sessions have become very interactive and students are asked to develop their own understanding of the material offered in class and in the readings. Before the start of the next session, students have to submit a page which reflects on the previous session as well as a minimum of another page in which they reflect on an aspect of the week's reading. These feed-

back assignments help me plan the next session as well as the next week's readings, so the course develops as it goes along according to the interests and concerns of the class. Students still collect moments from their week and share them with their peers and attempt to intervene and change their own habits. I do not comment or mark their assignments. They are intended to be personal material that they can use for their assignment which is basically aimed at being a personal response to the course. The course thus unfolds as it progresses and each student has the space to follow a direction that meets their own particular interest.

At the end of the course Jill submits an assignment that defies words to describe. It centres around a collapsible box that opens to reveal her project. She 'occasions' (Davis 2004) a learning experience for both myself and the external examiner who she has asked to be present at hand-in. She asks us to be aware as we explore the various artifacts and communicate with each other of the uniqueness of our interaction. We are taken on a journey that is spell-binding, informative and playful. As we come to the end we open a parcel in an earthenware bowl that contains matches and we are asked to liberate the words from the assignment which have been constrained into two-dimensionality by setting fire to the paper which entraps them so that they can take wing and be released from their chains!

Jill has completed her four modules this year (again all with distinction) and has taken leave navigating a Complex Supervisory Path through the Complicated Waters of Academia.

Standing Back

Varela (1987, 62) uses his own translation of a poem by Antonio Machado to introduce the image of 'laying down a path in walking' as a metaphor to be used with enactivism. The process that I have come to use in offering my *Re-searching Teaching* module has quite clearly become one of laying a path while walking in the company of the group of students. Despite the initial protestations from students who want the security of forming their learning around the beliefs and prejudices of the lecturer—ignoring Maturana's words that 'your failure is that I be identical to you' (Maturana as quoted in Zohar and Marshall (2000, 290))—they all become able to argue their differing views with grounded conviction. The students guide me through their reflective writings and work together on developing their understandings. The Discipline of Noticing provides us with a framework for sharing our interpretations of their accounts of critical moments in both their teaching and personal lives.

The supervising process has also evolved according to the initial conditions that I have faced and have depended on the needs and directions cho-

sen by each of the students. In the cases that I have described in this paper we have sat for some time waiting for the thesis to emerge and for the writer to find his or her voice. The students are to a large degree expected to be self-regulating as they work within their own context. We have definitely each enriched the other as we have worked together. It seems to me very much as if these (emerging) principles of supervision have much in common with educational theories that are derived from complexity science. The trouble is that this supervision is taking place within a context that is distinctly governed by a different complicated system (Davis and Sumara 1997) where there is a programme of planned enculturation into a particular canon of research in the Research Methods course. In the face of a system which wants efficiency, throughput to maximise subsidy earnings, standardized expectations and prescriptions of best practice for supervisors, I am left to feel as if I am considered to be a dangerous maverick. Certainly each of the dilemmas described in this paper show how my decisions have in many (most?) instances taken me along an oppositional path from that prescribed by my departmental colleagues and the university system.

This extended process of my supervisory practice is intended to allow for the authentic voice of the teacher to emerge rather than for my voice to have a dominant and guiding presence. One of the ironies (and injustices) of the product of this process has been the extent to which the students' work has been attributed to the influence of their supervisor. The problem is that while this is obviously true in the sense that as supervisor I provided an unusual space for each of them, each of their pieces of research (Bennie 2003, Eddy 2003, Lebeth 2004) is unique and each has used a very different methodology and way of reporting. Each of them has gone through an exhausting process in coming to write with their own authentic voice. The fact that they have all strayed from the norm has placed them into an externally created narrow category of 'different' and linked them to a single supervisor. This homogenizing process lumps all three dissertations together and labels them as being the product of a single supervisor. This process not only negates the individual inspiration and uniqueness of each of their work but also it makes invisible the extent to which each one of them has profoundly influenced me both as an academic and as a supervisor. The concept of this mutually interactive process lies at the heart of complexity science.

The final concern that I want to address in this paper is the extent to which I have failed each of these students through the degree of my domestication that, in hindsight, I can now detect has resulted from my over-extended stay in my academic environment. In both Kendal (surfing metaphor) and Agatha's (multi-media data) cases, one of the external examiner's

has made comments that indicated that I could have shown more trust in their preferred uniqueness and supported them more. Some of their examiners were surprised that their dissertations had not been upgraded to doctoral theses—something that had not crossed my mind!

Recent developments point to the way in which my choices of response to the above dilemmas have been received by my colleagues. At face value it would appear that the Teaching stream has been successful both in attracting a high student intake over the years and in leading to the submission of research dissertations which have been strongly commended by external examiners as being on the cutting edge of research methodology. However, towards the end of 2004, the departmental Masters committee proposed that the Teaching stream merge with the Bernstein-driven Curriculum Studies stream. My arguments which attempted to point out the difference between these two approaches were deemed to be unconvincing. These proposals have yet to be implemented but I have not advertised the Teaching stream nor offered the *Re-searching Teaching* module for the past two years. This conference paper has provided an ideal opportunity to take stock and identify and reflect on the major issues. It has also renewed my determination to create a space for teachers to research their own practice in the future.

Throughout the process that has been described in this paper, I have been reminded of the work of Briggs and Peat (1999), who point to three themes that arise from a consideration of chaos theory—control, creativity and subtlety and then describe the personification of chaos as being the trickster. Supervisor as trickster seems to be an appropriate (and reasonably accurate?) portrayal of the way I have tried to navigate a complex supervisory path with this particular group of students, but, to continue the metaphor, it has definitely not been clear sailing! I am (sometimes?) comforted by returning to my initial (self-referential) quotation that since this research endeavour is undoubtedly uncomfortable, I can be assured that learning is taking place!

Note

My thanks and appreciation go to Agatha Lebethe, Kendal Bennie and Neil Eddy in the first place for the confidence and trust they placed in me and for all the valuable learning that I have already gained from our ongoing journey together; and to Jill van Digteren and the other students waiting in the wings to keep me on my toes and who will try to teach this old dog new tricks!

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