

Commentary

Geography's role in nurturing postgraduate students

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In this commentary we encourage thinking about how to effectively nurture postgraduate students in geography. We offer some ideas and strategies for supervisors who mentor postgrads for careers in and beyond the academy. We also consider how supervisor–student relationships can take advantage of geography's interdisciplinarity to develop a well rounded postgraduate experience.

KEY WORDS: mentoring, nurturing, postgraduate supervision

Introduction

In this commentary we use the theme of nurturing to examine postgraduate (doctoral) student supervision in geography. We highlight the idea of 'nurturing', or instilling a set of caring, responsible, and ethical practices into postgraduate mentorship programs. While individual supervisors may be making efforts in this direction, we feel that examining the benefits of creating a nurturing training environment in a structured way and from a geographical perspective is of pressing concern. We write this commentary because we feel that we as geographers (and academics in general) do not reflect enough on postgraduate training strategies (though see Fagan *et al.* 2001). Moreover, we feel that the increasing difficulty for postgraduate geographers to obtain sufficient funding to finish 'on time' and then later secure full-time work in an area of their expertise necessitates such introspection. Here we recognise that budget constraints are taxing supervisors and force them to do more with less support, including mentoring students. Indeed, postgraduates are demanding more of 'us', their supervisors, in an era when institutions have ramped up their expectations for tenure, promotion, and contract renewal. In short, pressures on both supervisors and students have risen, necessitating a discussion of the development of a nurturing atmosphere in geography.

We begin this commentary by defining nurturing and explaining its relevance to mentorship in geography. We contextualise this situation with three real-world examples – the temporality of mentorship, career development, and fieldwork – from our postgraduate training experiences as geography faculty. In conclusion, we consider the extent to which geography is positioned to contribute to an increasingly interdisciplinary institutional academic environment. In particular, we highlight geography's role in training students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, who have a broad set of interests, and who demand proficiency in a multifaceted set of skills.

Nurturing as an approach to geographical mentorship

In this commentary we define nurturing as a process of mutual learning, care, and guidance that recognises geographical development to cover more than training students to be researchers and teachers. We understand nurturing to be a collaborative process that begins with the position that in order to train students in geography effectively we must now attune ourselves to postgraduate intellectual and professional demands. It is worthwhile to question whether we should adjust our own research interests, teaching strategies, and service requirements to respond to

postgraduate needs. Nurturing is a response to evolving postgraduate needs that are not necessarily bound by the traditional academic norms of training students who have an eye on attaining tenure-track or research-oriented jobs (Solem *et al.* 2008). Our focus here, following from Monk *et al.* (2012, 1433), is on using the concept of nurturing to maintain a focus on the 'career aspirations of (our) students' whether they be in academia or otherwise. We also aim to use nurturing to 'enfranchise a greater diversity of geographers, attract a wider variety of students, and open the discipline to a broader array of voices' (2012, 1433).

More broadly we are inspired by Lawson's (2009, 210) argument that care, as a kindred term to nurturing, is 'absolutely central to our individual and collective survival' as geographers. Collectively, over the last 25 years, American geography programs have seen a substantial rise in the number of postgraduate degrees awarded (Solem *et al.* 2008). We seek to maintain a nurturing environment in the face of this growth and in a discipline that has not enjoyed a corresponding increase in the number of tenure-track or tenured professors (Solem *et al.* 2008). In an individual sense it may seem counterintuitive to argue that our survival as supervisors relies upon successful postgraduate supervision. After all, the current reward system in place for many geography faculty around the world does not generally compensate supervisors on the basis of the quality (or quantity) of their postgraduate supervision. However, we feel that the intangible values that arise from postgraduate supervision – building leadership skills, developing new research interests, discovering new ideas, establishing professional contacts, and honing time management strategies – are crucial for successful careers inside and outside of academic geography. We agree that postgraduate 'supervision is the most exciting part of what (we) do as a teacher and maybe as a researcher as well' (Fagan *et al.* 2001, 274). In nurturing postgraduates we are nurturing the discipline of geography (2001, 262). We are drawn to the vital, constructive, and malleable nature that a nurturing form of mentorship implies. Nurturing is not bound by a specific approach but is rather a sentiment, a mood, and a normative understanding of how postgraduate mentorship should unfold.

Emerging from this outline, we believe that nurturing includes a number of features integral to postgraduate supervision in geography. Nurturing takes *time*: learning from others requires not only a sense of inventive collaboration but also an openness to compromise. With the high number of obligations and expectations befalling faculty members today, mentoring postgraduates in a nurturing manner may not be a prescription for conventional academic success. We argue that in order to be a successful mentor who nurtures students there must be time committed to listening to the needs of our students

and learning from and with them. We introduce the following example to reflect this point.

Mentoring postgraduates in an era of 'time compression'

Recent funding setbacks throughout the world have asked geography programmes to 'do more with less'. This mandate has arguably affected postgraduate training as much as any aspect of academic life. Postgraduate applications in geography and the social sciences have increased as funding streams have become more competitive. The dollar amount of grants awarded to students has deteriorated; and in some cases, funding opportunities have dissolved entirely. While many students must now pay their own way through self-funding, an increasing number must rely on unpredictable and fluctuating supervisor-led grants to stay in school. As a result, postgraduates may be encouraged to substantially reconfigure (and in many cases compromise) their research projects to be more in line with funding streams. The phrase 'guaranteed funding', synonymous with postgraduate promise and achievement as little as 10 years ago, now seems to be a distant memory for students studying geography. Adding insult to injury, students who are competitive enough to be accepted in graduate programmes often must extend their candidacy by taking part-time and full-time jobs to pay for their schooling, limiting the time they can do their research – raising even more questions that a healthy work/life balance is achievable in graduate school. Time has become the enemy in their 'hundred yard dash' to finish before the money runs out.

This situation has at least two outcomes: only the best and the brightest make it into postgraduate programs; or more nurturing is required on the part of supervisors. With respect to the former, admissions committees are increasingly looking for strong proposals rather than expressions of interest in potentially stimulating research areas. Students must arrive '(pre)tooled', ready to start research immediately, without having time to explore the discipline or to consider how an interdisciplinary project may look. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of the authors of this paper did what they proposed to do in their original PhD applications, but our students likely will have to if they want to have their funding renewed and their trajectory positively assessed. Admission committees must also judiciously spread scholarship offers out across the academic year without compromising the overall quality of the cohort. A major concern in this period of evaluation is that interdisciplinary projects may not catch the eye of specialist-only researchers, and therefore the prospective student may appear too unfocused to warrant acceptance.

The difficulty of the second outcome lies with those who are not necessarily prepared. Upon arrival, supervisors must immediately assess strengths and

weakness before planning a timetable of research, whereas in the past this assessment might have taken place during a course or in a graduate research seminar. With a condensed timeframe, a steep learning curve might prevent some students from doing particular types of research, e.g. ethnographical research in a foreign tongue. With respect to fieldwork, supervisors must maintain strong ties with collaborators on the ground who can help prime studies before they commence. Closer attention must also be paid to all aspects of student research to avoid situations that may cause delays. A common example is ensuring a contingency plan is in order in case samples are lost in transit before analysis can be done, or research locations cannot be accessed because of unforeseen circumstances (e.g. natural disaster, political turmoil, insufficient funding).

Time compression creates a situation whereby supervisors can no longer afford to have the attitude that students who are worthy of a degree should work everything out alone. In some instances, a platooning approach may be beneficial – one for which experienced post-docs and students help nurture the inexperienced, for example. Another likeminded strategy is the formulation of mentoring teams to share in various aspects of supervision.

These situations all speak to the concept of nurturing. While certainly present before, nurturing is becoming more necessary today. And yet it is by no means widespread. In some cases, those who can do it well benefit in the form of advising awards, co-publishing, and developing life-long professional bonds built of trust and respect. In this paper we argue that nurturing is not only a good approach to geographical training, it is vital in the academic world today. In the next section we argue that geographical training must widen our existing view of postgraduate career development.

Transforming postgraduate career development: taking a broader view

Developing a nurturing attitude toward postgraduate mentorship demands rethinking how we quantify postgraduate success. Historically a successful postgraduate geography student will have graduated with single-authored and jointly written papers, have secured research grants, will have finished her degree in a timely manner, and is soon to embark on a well respected, full-time academic job. Given the miserable academic job market (especially in North America and Europe), this is no longer a realistic training path for a significant percentage of geography postgraduates. To add to this difficult situation, geography programmes that offer advanced degrees have seen postgrad applications rise, a resultant higher quality of candidate pool, and (as mentioned earlier) funding opportunities dwindle.

A nurturing approach to mentoring postgraduates offers a responsive and pragmatic solution to these troubles. In the first place, we as mentors need to realise that academic jobs may be increasingly out of reach for most of our graduate students. Relatedly, masters candidates will be less likely to be interested in pursuing a PhD with the goal of working in academia (Monk *et al.* 2012). These realities require mentors to be sensitive and open to a range of different career paths for our students. Papers, for example, retain important caché when seeking a job after graduation because they provide job candidates with a respected form of currency that translates well in a number of different professional settings (policy, government, non-profit, education, corporate, academic). Writing is a skill that needs perpetual nurturing and practice whether it occurs in graduate school or not. In this light we feel that working together with students on research manuscripts is more important than ever. By this we do not mean that supervisors should (necessarily) write and publish with their students. Instead, we should be encouraging publications early in a postgraduate's career and be willing to work with students in discovering which paths to publication will link to their career aspirations. In some cases this means abandoning conventional geography journal outlets and embracing alternative, multidisciplinary, and e-publication opportunities. Linking career development to our prior point about time management, the often lengthy interval between manuscript submission and decision facilitates nurturing a number of different research opportunities and drawing from other resources on and off campus to drive an interdisciplinary project. Moreover, research grant opportunities are very competitive, yet the exercise in applying frequently results in a period of intense interaction between supervisor and student. This opens up a space where supervisors can efficiently collaborate and learn from their students. Finally, geography programmes may need new metrics to gauge postgraduate achievement, including the very subjective yet very important nurturing component, which must be considered if an advanced degree programme wishes to grow. These new metrics would place value on the 'importance of the research', a concept that in itself is difficult to quantify, and may not be reflected accurately by citation counts or placement in a particular journal (Smith *et al.* 2013).

Fieldwork as a 'value-add' for geography postgraduates

Perhaps the most important way geographers discover the linkages and tensions between scales is through fieldwork. It is during fieldwork when geography comes alive; the field is where the challenges that come with proposal/grant writing, coursework, and academic reading evaporate and the 'here and now'

activities of the field become prominent. And yet it is remarkable, according to Driver (2000, 267), 'how rarely we have reflected on the place of field-work in our collective disciplinary imagination'. In response to this, we advocate for the central place of the field in fostering a sense of nurturing in advising postgraduates.

While this may seem to be an obvious point to make (for some), we would like to consider how fieldwork both distinguishes geography from other disciplines and assumes an important role in shaping a multidimensional learning path for postgraduates. In the first place, although geography cannot claim ownership over the field as the primary object of investigation, it can claim some intellectual authority over relevant terms like space, scale, territory. These are terms that are applicable to the world outside of academia that also play out during fieldwork. Solem *et al.* (2008, 359) argue that participants across a variety of workforce sectors are most interested in hiring students who can 'think geographically, not just technically'. Fieldwork and internships are noted by postgraduate students as 'significant among a department's initiatives to offer connections outside academia' (Monk *et al.* 2012, 1439).

It is our belief that supervisors need to think more clearly about how some of our discipline's core concepts relate not only to their own research or to debates within the discipline but as they function for their students' needs after graduation. This requires an ongoing dialogue with students as they begin pilot studies in the field, as they conduct fieldwork, and when they return from the field about how core concepts in geography can be translated from field to thesis, and subsequently to their chosen professions. It is presumed that postgraduates will see themselves as apprentices, and it may be hoped that postgraduates will initiate dialogues of this nature with their supervisors, but supervisors must be open to these kinds of conversations. This is the nurturing side of supervision that requires strong listening skills and a good deal of patience, and such expectations should be set out in the initial phases of the student-supervisor relationship (see Moxham *et al.* 2013). Ideally, of course, supervisors should spend some time in the field with their students, although we recognise that this is not always possible.

In the second place, the field acts as a binding agent among disciplines. Working on a project at a field site is primarily an issue- and question-based endeavour and therefore lends itself to a more open dialogue with geography's cognate fields. The authors of this paper work together with academics (including botanists, zoologists, ecologists, engineers, biologists, anthropologists, and sociologists) and practitioners (commercial, NGO and government partners) in fieldsites throughout Asia, and we encourage our students to join us in order to participate in interdisciplinary projects. While they are not always

successful, we believe that our collaborative work with academics and practitioners outside of geography mimics the kinds of experiences our postgraduates will have when they enter the workforce.

Conclusion

Before offering a final comment on nurturing postgraduates, we wish to mention the importance of geography's role in nurturing postgraduates in an interdisciplinary setting that characterises modern-day academia. Training geography postgraduate students to do interdisciplinary research effectively requires a breach of modern disciplinary, specialist-only borders. This is perhaps a tall order because many educators are resistant or reluctant to change, partly because the academic setting often does not reward them for stepping outside their specialist comfort zones. However, the academic setting in some countries is pushing to move beyond traditional disciplinary borders. Examples in the UK include the recent formation of Doctoral Training Centres and Partnerships by the major Research Councils to encourage interdisciplinary research and training. Geography is represented in these initiatives, especially relating to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). While geography's role in these programmes is still being determined, our discipline faces challenges from new cross-disciplinary programmes, such as 'global studies' and 'international studies'. Programs like these in many instances have emerged independently of geography despite having foundations that are firmly within the boundaries of geography. As such, we believe geography is well placed to take the lead in interdisciplinary research because geographers' activities often drive projects over and above research precedent, conventional geographical methods, or existing faculty interests (though these also certainly still retain value).

To finalise our discussion, we believe that an emphasis on creating a quality research programme alongside our students empowers postgraduates. We feel that nurturing a high-quality product means being supportive of the research process because it mirrors the demands that the 'real-world' places on checks and balances, the processual nature of work, and cultivates individual accountability as a part of a larger whole. Moreover, being able to show how a successful product came to fruition (and the steps taken to make a research project a high quality one) enhances student competitiveness across a range of job opportunities. A speedy research agenda does have its merits because it shows self-assurance, the ability to respond efficiently to roadblocks, and demonstrates 'big picture' thinking that employers of various stripes require. However, speed and efficiency

should not subtract from working toward a high-quality research mission.

Nurturing postgraduate students involves great patience, risk, and reward. But we were reminded by the editor when writing this paper that nurturing postgraduates is not a one-way street: postgraduate students 'nurture' us, their supervisors, in critical professional and personal ways, too (see Lindén *et al.* 2013). This sense of reciprocity and collaboration is often lost on both supervisors and postgraduates because asking anyone to be a 'nurturer' in the neoliberal university world we live in may sometimes feel anathema to our contractual obligations. It is easy to let postgraduate student relationships languish as other, more immediate benchmarking criteria are focused upon. We recognise we are making an argument that is problematic in many ways. Given that many postgraduate students characterise their time in graduate school as a period of 'survival', the importance of nurturing becomes paramount in effectively training postgraduates in an interdisciplinary setting. We believe geographers are best suited to take up the call to mentor students in ways that will render them competitive, well versed, and cared for.

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