

PERSPECTIVE

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How to create thinking environments in doctoral and research supervision

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Abstract

Higher education environments are often celebrated as contexts that generate high quality thinking. In this paper, we raise questions about this assumption with a specific focus on doctoral supervision. Most of the approaches or models available for doctoral supervision tend to focus on the nature of the relationships between supervisor(s) and supervisee, on issues of hierarchy, on the nature and quality of the relationship, or on concerns about pastoral support. While important, these approaches say relatively little about the ways in which doctoral students might be empowered and enabled to do their best thinking, for themselves. In this paper, we critically reflect on our employment of the Thinking Environment approach in doctoral supervision. Inspired by Nancy Kline's focus on creating 'time to think' in leadership and coaching contexts, we critically reflect on our use of this approach in doctoral supervision and the multiple benefits of this approach. As an interdisciplinary group of arts, humanities, and social science academics and doctoral researchers, we advocate for the increasing use of this model in doctoral and research supervision. We contend this approach – which centres mutual appreciation and witnessing – can generate significant benefits for doctoral students to enhance their independent thinking and improve their confidence in owning their own ideas thereby contributing to critical and creative approaches to doctoral education. Moreover, this model has the potential to transform the supervision experience for supervisors themselves, to enhance their practice and enjoyment of it.

Keywords Thinking, Supervision, Higher education, Research culture, Doctoral

1 Introduction

This paper is co-written by an interdisciplinary collective of academics and doctoral students in a UK Higher Education (HE) context increasingly typified by crisis [36]. Job cuts at our own university are a current reality. Given the intersecting pressures alive in this context, there can be a very real sense that there is 'no time to think.' We specifically focus on how this context can limit supervising and being supervised. Moreover, we argue that little training exists for doctoral supervision and, where it does, models tend to emphasize managerial tools rather than supporting thinking itself. In addition, the increasingly competitive funding landscape puts pressure on universities to ensure



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‘timely completion’ of their doctoral students [28], which further feeds into supervision as management and places time pressure on both students and supervisors which does not support time to think. This is supported by McKenna and van Schalkwyk’s [33] recent scoping review of doctoral education that pointed to the increased focus on structure and collaboration, including with industry. Our paper introduces the generative framework of the ‘Thinking Environment’ (TE) – which foregrounds relationships and exquisite listening — to address these intractable limits [25, 26]. Despite this framework having much to offer academic contexts, we argue it has been largely neglected. We seek to connect this framework with attendant conversations on the need for more slow, restful, collective academic ways of working [34] and stand with Brodin [9] in wanting to challenge the silences that exist when it comes to taking more creative and innovative approaches to doctoral studies. Our paper contributes to important debates about critical and creative approaches to doctoral and research supervision [8, 10] alongside demonstrating sensitivity to an important aspect of the ‘hidden curriculum’ [15] with doctoral education.

The approach we have taken with this paper is based on a collaborative autoethnography [2]; see also [11] as we have used our own individual self-narratives of using the TE approach in doctoral supervision sessions and then brought these into conversation with other supervisors and with our doctoral students to critically reflect on our experiences of using this approach. Using collaborative autoethnography is useful as it helps create personal and authentic accounts, foster empathy and understanding, and can be effective in bringing theory into practice [21]. There is also an important tradition of work that adopts an autoethnographic approach in relation to doctoral education (e.g. [22, 24, 31]). To support our collaborative autoethnography, we adopted an approach that mirrors [29: 748] employment of ‘kitchen table reflexivity’ to engage in informal conversations that offer a critical and reflexive engagement that helps to counter critiques of self-reflexivity and enhances our appreciation of the complexity involved.

In the writing of this paper, we engaged in this process to think carefully about our experiences of using TE, how the diverse relationships involved in doctoral supervision play out in this context, the complex power relations involved, and to critically reflect on the utility of adopting this approach. This involved engaging with our doctoral students about their experiences of using TE alongside our critical reflections as experienced academics working with doctoral students. Together then, we reflect on our experiments with this approach, providing lessons learned and routes for further inquiry employing vignettes from our experiences to do so. We have co-written this article in the generative spirit of the TE and employ reflexive autoethnographic vignettes from our conversations that are processual rather than an end product. Taken together these provide a model to cultivate more equitable, curious supervisory environments that value thinking.

1.1 Existing supervisory approaches

We are not without models of doctoral supervision (e.g. see [33] for a useful scoping review). Gatfield’s [18] four-fold model emphasizes: directional, contractual, laissez-faire, and pastoral styles of supervision. This framework is the basis of supervisory training many of us are familiar with. Each of these four aspects of Garfield’s model are framed around the extent of structure and the level of support offered. A directional supervisor tends to be highly structured without necessarily offering a lot of support.

The supervisor here will be task-focused with priority given to timely completion of writing and submission of forms and other documentation with a focus on process and deadlines. Contractual supervision is high structure and high support where the supervisor is administratively efficient. Laissez-faire was identified as a low structure and low support approach with the supervisor not offering much direction at all and may appear to be quite disengaged. The Pastoral approach is low structure with high levels of support with the supervisor providing a lot of care and attention without necessarily being directive in their approach. What is notable in this literature - including in the typology offered by the likes of [18] is that clarity of thought and *being able to think* clearly is rarely mentioned.

Lee [30] equally identifies the focus on 'function' in supervisory practices but, drawing on interviews with doctoral supervisors, identified four additional concepts emerging from supervisors' reported experiences. These entail: first enculturation, when the student is supported to become a member of the disciplinary community; second critical thinking, when the student is encouraged to question and analyse their work; third, emancipation, when the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves, and finally, developing a quality relationship, when the student is cared for as well as inspired. Here ideas of demonstrating a genuine, active interest in the student's personal and professional development through the cultivation of belonging and creating spaces to nurture independent thinking (and the development of knowledge, skills, and confidence as an autonomous researcher), appear key to supervisors' perspectives on the purpose of their role.

Other approaches to doctoral supervision focus on issues such as the style of interaction between supervisors and supervisee (e.g. domineering and hands-on or participative and hands-off), or the tension between supervisors preferring a guiding approach whilst supervisees tending to prefer a more task-focused and controlled format [5]. Moreover, [32] consider dimensions of influence (dominance versus submission) and proximity (focusing on cooperation versus opposition) as important components in the doctoral supervision relationship. What is notable about these models and approaches is the marginal - if not absent - role of thinking itself as part of the doctoral supervision process, which motivated us to explore the possibilities of the TE approach in centering thinking.

The development of our framework for the use of TE in doctoral supervision (see below) theoretically aligns with other work on critical and creative approaches. ([10]: 159) propose a focus on critical creativity which includes focusing on the experiential, experimental, enunciated and eulogized aspects of doctoral studies which they argue helps to promote a form of pedagogy that is integrative and reflective. Moreover, [1] discusses four important domains of doctoral intelligence, one of which is thinking which is defined as 'higher level mental processing for quality doctoral work.' It is noted that this is often one of the hardest parts of doing a doctorate.

In our collective experience, different supervisors tend to lean towards specific styles of supervision based on their own experiences as a doctoral student coupled with what they have learnt works well (or does not work well) when supervising doctoral students. Likewise, the approach taken often changes throughout the PhD lifecourse as supervisees earlier on in the process may look for more guidance and direction but later on, they may take more control of their own work and come prepared with writing submitted in

advance and questions to be addressed at the supervision meeting. We now introduce a different model for doctoral supervision that centres thinking drawing on Nancy Kline's influential work on TE.

1.2 Generating high quality thinking in supervision

Kline's [25, 26] approach to creating time to think is based on the idea that everything we do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first, and the quality of our thinking depends upon the quality of the attention we give each other. Kline explores the concept of creating spaces that foster independent, quality thinking in individuals and groups. She argues that the way people interact and communicate can profoundly influence their ability to think clearly and creatively. Her book introduces ten key components that make up a TE emphasizing the importance of each in unlocking potential, improving relationships, and enhancing decision-making [25, 26]. In the realm of TE, several core principles converge to cultivate an atmosphere conducive to deep thought and collaboration. Central to this approach is *Attention*: the practice of offering undivided, respectful focus to others, allowing for uninterrupted expression and thorough exploration of ideas. *Equality* ensures that every voice is valued equally, fostering a balanced and inclusive environment where diverse perspectives thrive. Key here is the promise that you will not be interrupted [27] whether this be through notifications on mobile phones/email or through your sentences being finished for you. *Ease* reduces stress and pressure, facilitating relaxed and natural ideation. *Appreciation* celebrates contributions, nurturing positivity and cooperative spirit, resisting the temptation to always be critical and to point out faults or limitations. *Encouragement* empowers risk-taking and creativity by removing the fear of judgment and empowers the thinker to engage in a whole-hearted search for good ideas. Addressing *Feelings* enables emotional clarity, clearing mental barriers to effective thinking; the key point here is that the expression of emotion is embraced as positive as this release can enable fresh thinking and new ideas to emerge. Transparency through *Information* empowers informed decision-making, while embracing *Difference* enriches thinking as it ensures that any prejudices - emboldened by untrue assumptions - are removed thereby enabling clarity of thought to prevail. *Incisive Questions* when needed challenge and overcome untrue lived assumptions lived as true, sparking transformative thinking, and a supportive physical *Place* that says 'you matter' promotes safety and comfort, crucial for fostering open-minded dialogue and productive collaboration. Together, these principles form a holistic framework that not only enhances individual thinking but also cultivates a culture of innovation and shared understanding.

Kline's concept of the TE has made a meaningful impact across various fields, particularly in coaching, leadership development, and organizational psychology. Coaches use TE to create a supportive and empowering space for their clients to make transformative changes to their everyday lives. This approach emphasizes generative listening to help individuals clarify their thinking and make informed decisions [17]. In business and organizational contexts, TE is utilized to cultivate effective leadership. Leaders are encouraged to create inclusive environments where team members feel valued and encouraged to contribute their ideas openly. This fosters innovation, enhances problem-solving capabilities, and improves overall team performance [12]. Therapists and psychologists integrate TE principles into their practices to facilitate deeper client reflection

and exploration. It supports therapeutic processes by creating a non-judgmental space where clients can explore their thoughts and emotions freely [7]. Despite its wide influence, the generative uses of TE are curiously absent in our field of HE, a field which tends to celebrate the value of critical thinking and clarity of thought.

We propose the following framework when applying a TE approach in a standard PhD supervision meeting upon agreement of the doctoral student involved. The adoption of this approach works through the creation of a thinking partnership - this is where one person is the thinker who thinks out loud, and the other is the thinking partner, listening and paying full attention to the thinker. After settling into the meeting and checking in with others, the specific format could include an initial period of twenty minutes where the student is asked "what would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?" Key to this is that the supervisors listen with their undivided attention, do not interrupt, and embody as much as possible the ten components of the TE. At the end of this initial period, there should be mutual appreciation. The student then has ten minutes to ask questions or seek clarification about their research. Following this, one of the supervisors would then think aloud for 15 min whilst being given the undivided attention of the listener. This ensures equality and provides the student with the unique opportunity to learn from and about their supervisor's thinking. Mutual appreciation follows. Then, there are ten minutes or so left for any final discussion points and the plan for the next meeting. To be clear, we are not advocating the employment of this approach in *all* supervision meetings but that this is an option to be adopted and adapted in some supervision meetings at specific points of the doctoral process, as appropriate. Moreover, we cannot claim that the framework presents a simple answer to the ongoing challenges of doctoral supervision outlined above. Pressures associated with funding deadlines or institutional approval processes mean that more directive forms of doctoral and research supervision still have their place. Furthermore, some doctoral researchers, some supervisors, and specific disciplines may not be inclined to employ TE at all and may prefer alternative approaches.

While existing supervisory models do engage with the importance of critical thinking in some respects, we see room for giving thinking a more central role. For example, the notion of 'pastoral' care noted by Gatfield relates to TE principles of *appreciation* and *attention*. However, they are distinctive. We contend that conventional models which centre pastoralism risk embedding a hierarchical relation of the carer/cared for. The TE, on the other hand, centres the principle of *equality* thus shifting this relationship beyond familiar pastoral roles. What this opens up, in our experience, are new ways of working together as co-learners in ways that do not necessarily breed dependency, especially with regards to thinking. There remain important spaces within the university for a primarily pastoral relation, but perhaps it is worth asking: is pastoralism the defining relational dynamic of supervision? This offers a challenging provocation in a context where supervisory roles are increasingly typified as pastoral. This does not mean we advocate for a supervisory model based on an imagined split between thinking/feeling nor deplete of personal engagement. Acknowledging and making space for *feelings* is central to this framework; however, this remains within clear boundaries that work towards sustaining an equal thinking partnership that are distinct from, for example, a counsellor/client relationship. The latter requires its own set of protocols grounded in professional expertise. As academics often without this training, learning to signpost students for these

spaces whilst retaining *equality* is precisely what a TE model offers. This aspect of equality and reciprocity is explored in more detail below in our practice-based vignettes. Furthermore, while the models explored previously provide different routes for supervision, what we've experienced in our own practice is the interlocking possibility of these ten components provides a more rigorous opportunity to generate thinking, develop confidence and ownership, and shift power, beyond what we have previously encountered. There are helpful contributions to literature that focus on the development of critical and creative thinking skills (e.g. [8]) and we see this article as contributing to these debates.

Vitally, we approach these components as extending related conversations about the need to 'slow down' within the academy [6, 23, 34]. 'The Slow Professor' argues that the neoliberal university model which emphasizes targets, speed, and deliverables is at odds with the intentions of creating deep thought, and emphasizes practices that nurture slowing down [4]. Specific examples include creating collective slowing down 'contracts' between colleagues, including agreeing to not send emails during certain periods [34]. Even as we recognize that the ability to slow down and rest can itself be a privilege of career stage and job security, we see this attentiveness to time as a condition of the commitments of the TE. Indeed, without attention to time it is hard to envision enacting the principle of deep *attention*. Where TE opens further possibility is in its grounded focus on other dimensions which we have agency in producing, especially in supervisory spaces.

1.3 Practicing thinking environments

We now reflect on our employment of TE in supervisory settings. Our vignettes are grounded in our different perspectives as supervisors and students building upon our collaborative autoethnographic work. Taken together, these vignettes offer several insights into the ways that TE opens a new model for supervision. We illuminate how TE helps break down hierarchical relations embedded in both conventional pastoral and authoritative supervisory models. From a students' perspective, we suggest TE offers new ways of appreciating supervision but also supervisors themselves as a 'work in progress' which generates a more engaging co-learning environment. We also reflect on how providing protected space for thinking using TE provides opportunities for supervisors themselves to work together mutually, challenging conventional hierarchies between first/second supervisor. Finally, based on experience, we suggest that TE provides an important mechanism for challenging intractable 'imposter syndrome', thus enabling more enjoyable and authentic academic relations.

1.4 Care, vulnerability, gender and voice (Sally)

I have been supervising PhD students for fifteen years and until my introduction to TE I had not questioned the traditional model of supervision instilled primarily through my own experience as a doctoral student. The fact that my students completed successfully and in a timely manner entrenched my belief in the efficacy of my supervisory practice. Questioning my own practice through TE has made me think more deeply about the dynamics of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, particularly in relation to power structures and gender. All my PhD students, with one exception, have been women, identified as women or as woman adjacent. I currently supervise four doctoral

students and have experimented with TE with each of them, in one-to-one supervisions, from which the following reflections are drawn.

In a recent supervision with one student, we utilised TE to review their first semester of study, and I had hoped too that this would lead to some clarification of ideas around their proposed study. Interestingly, although the initial thinking centred on academic challenges, the student's focus on progress, or what they perceived to be lack of progress, soon took the supervision in a different more personal direction. This supervision made me reflect on the connection between the personal and academic. The privilege of sharing in the student's personal journey conflicted with my desire to get the meeting back on track and address the academic goals. Yet when I asked the student to reflect on the session, it was clear that she had valued the space to talk about the personal issues which were impacting her work and that these issues needed verbalising before the cognitive brain could engage. This supervision highlighted the value of the TE as a therapeutic space for addressing complex *feelings* through *attention*, *ease* and *place*, promoting self-regulation and holistic development which in turn enabled clarity of thought. This practice of care, central to the TE, is reciprocal as both supervisor and supervisee experience the vulnerability of being a thinking partner. Initially I was fretful about the section of the supervision where the supervisor talks for 15 min and the supervisee listens. What would I talk about? Would I reveal too much? Was this self-indulgent? Would what I had to say be relevant to the supervisee? It was clear however that my willingness to speak honestly about an issue on my mind fostered *equality* and in doing so reversed the duty of care. The TE breaks down the hierarchy implicit in the pastoral model disrupting traditional power dynamics and potentially the, often gendered, labour of care.

Imposter syndrome in academia is experienced more commonly by those at the beginning of their career and by women at all career stages [35], an intersection which impacts female postgraduates disproportionately. It is within this context that I am interested in the connection between gender, confidence and voice in the supervisory space. Women often have a complicated relationship with their voice, not surprisingly given the silencing of women's public voices in the past and present [3]. I have noted my female students' lack of confidence in their own voice resulting in a struggle to articulate their thoughts. This is particularly apparent in supervisions which follow traditional supervisory models and in which all the supervisors are present. In contrast, TE provides a space where, through *attention*, *encouragement* and *appreciation*, voice can be nurtured facilitating the expression of deep and expansive thought. The absence of interruption is critical here and led me to recognise the tendency, implicit in the didactic model, for the supervisor to prioritise their own thoughts, interrupt the student's thinking and to think for the student. It has been revelatory to observe my students coming to their own creative solutions without any interjection on my part. In my experience, TE is transformational in that it builds confidence in public speaking and rapidly accelerates the development of independent and critical thinking.

1.5 Developing autonomy (Emily Jayne)

The concept of the TE was introduced to me by Sally in the second year of PhD study. Initially I was sceptical, as we had mainly followed a traditional supervisory structure in meetings prior to this, but as I was struggling in a particular area of my thesis composition, I was willing to try, as I could see that this problem was causing significant setbacks

to my progress. I have found TE a valuable supervision method which allows the supervisee greater autonomy in an environment where the traditional model distinguishes 'student' and 'supervisor' in a strict hierarchy.

We have now used TE three times, and each time prompts a development of some sort: whether this be personal or professional. The initial session focused on my frustrations regarding my literature review. My research is interdisciplinary therefore I am engaging with a large variety of papers and had become overwhelmed in my efforts to include as many aspects as possible. Being permitted, in a safe space, to speak openly to someone who had familiarity with my work was invaluable, as I was aware they had already been through this process, having completed a PhD themselves. However, this dynamic whereby I was encouraged to talk myself for twenty minutes without interruption was the crucial element, I feel, to the TE succeeding. It encourages PhD students not only to voice their problems, but to think uninterrupted. Talking through my problem in detail prompted various levels of self-reflection throughout the session. This is something I generally endeavour to implement but had not done so previously in such an open manner. Sharing difficulties in academia can seem daunting, but I would argue that discussion of failure is just as valuable as discussion of success. Both prompt development and are inevitable dichotomies in the learning process. In fact, I feel that this open acknowledgement of the struggles I was facing was a necessary part of my learning process in order to move past this block, which largely turned out to be a mental block on my part.

Coming from a background where I am the first in my immediate family to attend university, it is often challenging to voice difficulties and discuss progress with others who have not been through the PhD process. Forms of encouragement such as 'you can do it' and 'we believe in you', are of value in promoting self-confidence, but they are far more valuable when combined with academic support. Having this distinct space to think and verbalise progress and problems has also increased my general confidence in verbalising my research. Encouraging collegiality and challenging academic hierarchies allows PhD students to step into the light and find their confidence in their research and academic abilities, beyond the scope of traditional supervision. At the end of the day, we are encouraged to actively assert ourselves as experts in our respective fields: this is a successful way of doing so.

1.6 Shifting student and supervisory relations (Renzo)

As an undergraduate you are very rarely asked to speak your thoughts out loud. I remember as an undergrad, really you are not asked to speak very much. You can get away with hardly speaking. Even in seminar spaces, some people will be more inclined to speak while others will be able to withdraw because of the way the space is set up. All my housemates come from a Fine Art background so they are very much used to the format of the 'crits' where they are trained to speak about their work, and the thinking process behind their work and other peoples' works. That is part of the training - to articulate yourself out loud to others. We don't get that so much in social sciences.

And yet, it's very important as training. This ability to articulate yourself. When you go out in the world, to get a job after your degree, there's going to be a moment when you are asked to articulate your ideas to others. And the TE is that kind of training. So I see the TE as having this wider benefit, not just for helping ideas emerge in education,

but beyond. It can be exhausting and a bit stressful to speak for twenty minutes straight like you do in the TE format. But that's just because I'm not used to it, I haven't had a lot of opportunities to develop this as a skill, to be able to really draw out the ideas. Mostly we share ideas as a quick and snappy answer to "what's your PhD on?" That approach is really lacking in a way because, again, it's not really developing deeper thinking.

Also, I really notice the TE teaches you to speak whilst thinking. Again, not something that we do very often. Usually if you are speaking it's when you've shared something already prepared, rather than thinking as you go. Sometimes when you start a multi-clausal sentence it's hard to finish, so actually you also learn to speak differently through this - to simplify your ideas which can help gain clarity.

One thing that surprises me is how quickly time can go. Twenty minutes of speaking goes quite quickly. Even if at first the structure of the TE can feel kind of...funny. Also the section stages after "what do you want to think about?" when the listening partner shares their appreciation - it's really nice because you don't often have this kind of appreciation directly in a PhD or in education. In our sessions at the end the thinking partner - who is my supervisor - has 5–10 min to share what they are thinking about. This is really interesting because I get to hear about my supervisor's process as a work in progress. I realise that they are also having similar challenges that I am: thinking about method and ethics, and I realise it's not just a PhD problem!

1.7 From shadows to circles of co-learning (Jen)

Even with it being such a big part of the job, I've never had any supervisory training. I've chatted with colleagues, taken the occasional optional (usually quite short) session, but practical guidance on supervision is in short supply. Mostly I've learned through supervising with others, usually alongside a more senior co-supervisor. This arrangement is not unusual. This relationship can be broadly described as 'shadowing,' where the junior supervisor watches and learns how someone with more experience does things in practice. While this method of observing has been illuminating, one thing that has been limiting is the way that the student (and myself as earlier career supervisor) tend to look up to the senior supervisor for affirmation and for answers.

This can be subtle, but sometimes explicit. Occasionally the student will physically turn their body towards the senior supervisor, affixing their gaze asking direct questions like: "so, what do you think?" There are times when the 'second' supervisor has only said a few words which feels like something has been lost. In cases where I'm looked up to for the answer, I often feel unsure in how to encourage the student's own reflection and also how to bring the other supervisor more fully into conversation.

Small tweaks don't seem to make the difference here. I've become increasingly convinced that what is needed is more seriously questioning the models of supervision we have inherited, models typified by this word: shadowing. As we know, a shadow is a dark area or shape produced when an object blocks a source of light. The region behind the object does not receive direct light from the source, creating the shadow. I wonder: does this often taken-as-given model of shadowing in fact block the more earlier career, seemingly less authoritative, supervisor and student themselves from doing their own thinking?

Experimenting with TE principles has shifted this shadowy dynamic, notably. I sense less a triangular geometry of supervisor A (leader in the light) with supervisor B

(occasional helper) and student (passively groping in the dark) and more of a circular relation emerging. With the student starting the supervisory session by reflecting on their own set of questions, immediately we have interrupted the entrenched triangle. And by sharing gratitude for each participant, it feels there is a mutual respect growing and sense of reciprocity. Maybe it's moving towards circles of learning instead of hierarchical triangles?

I've recently learned the phrase '*self-regulated learning*' which is a style of learning centring the student as an empowered guide in their own educational journey, and one who does not rely on teacher-as-rescuer. I've noticed how following the TE principles of intentionally building space for the student to reflect without interruption enables this self-regulation to be possible, even if just slightly at first. Rather than looking outwards to the supervisor (often the senior one) the student does a lot more looking inwards. As the student's thinking wanders and flows during 20 uninterrupted minutes so too the gaze shifts. For example, in a session with Renzo I've enjoyed seeing how he very rarely looks to us for answers per se (unless for the occasional procedural issue, like 'when is my annual review due?') Interestingly, as we do more work together even these procedural enquiries seem to fade, with Renzo independently sourcing this information which is usually accessible to him. I notice this becoming a new habit that establishes different power dynamics that both seem both more agentful for him as the student and definitely one that leaves me feeling less drained or depleted as the supervisor. Rather than being turned to as the answer-keeper, I feel my role is shifting towards holding space for the student to develop confidence - and cast greater light - on their own intellectual abilities. This shift also has the effect of feeling more *co-supervisor* with my colleague Peter. There feels less a dynamic of first/second supervisor, deepening a sense of collegiality and co-learning.

1.8 Power and fit in multilingual spaces (Elaine)

I'm an Applied Linguist and have been supervising PhD students for eight years. I took a non-standard route into academia and completed my PhD in my late 30s, having worked as a language teacher for many years. My brief supervisory training had focused on the procedural aspects of supervision, my style leaned more naturally towards pastoral, my approach became a combination of the two. For several years I felt that I lacked the research expertise to advise on content so instead I guided the process. Using TE in my supervisions has changed that. All the students I have supervised to date have a similar professional background and are experienced language educators, researching topics of personal relevance to their professional contexts. My students have their own students who then become participants in their research projects. In this way, they are my peers as well as my students. We are both educators. When I undertook the TE training, I connected intuitively with the principles of *equality*, *appreciation* and *encouragement* as they were already present in some form in my approach to doctoral supervision. Through using TE, my relationship with each principle has both strengthened and deepened.

It is impossible to consider *equality* in the supervision space without reflecting on power. My students are my professional peers and my slow journey towards establishing the research part of my career means my role as 'expert' is not as apparent as it may be for other supervisors, but I hold privilege in other ways. Language background, race,

gender, academic socialisation, religion and age are all dynamics that unsettle the professional equity I long strived to cultivate. With two exceptions, I have exclusively supervised international students who are non-native speakers of English and from the global majority. Eight of my current and former students are Muslim and have been resident in the UK during a time of increasingly visible Islamophobia [20], something that would often come up during meetings. Many are parents or become parents during their PhDs, with an almost equal gender split, and most are not operating in the same academic environment where they completed their undergraduate studies or where they teach, although many have completed Master's programmes in the UK. For all its benefits, it would be naive to believe that TE within doctoral supervision is sufficiently transformative to fully shift power when it intersects in so many ways. However, for that hour when we apply TE principles during a meeting, the student and I are equal listening and thinking partners.

There is much more to explore regarding the use of TE with international doctoral students, especially in multilingual meetings. I am only beginning to scratch the surface of this, but the early signs are positive. What I can attest to is the transformative effect on me as a supervisor which relates closely to my career trajectory and, more generally, how I view my 'fit' within academia [13]. As a working-class woman whose first attempt to attend university at 18 was unsuccessful, imposter phenomenon is ever present in my career and therefore the student/supervisor relationship. The TE principles that have represented the biggest shifts for me are *attention*, *ease*, *information* and *incisive questions* and each has, in its own way, cleared space for my students to focus on thinking. Applying these principles has grown my confidence as a supervisor and, alongside that, the joy and satisfaction I feel when watching my students develop as independent thinkers.

1.9 Developing the doctoral researcher AND the thesis (Rosalind)

I have worked across multiple disciplines and contexts in HE in academic and researcher development for 15 years or so, and my own disciplinary backgrounds are in education, geography and TESOL. I currently focus on doctoral education across humanities and social sciences. Within doctoral education there is an understandable emphasis on 'producing the thesis', but through conversations with students who come to my sessions, I've noted that this can be at the expense of the student's wider professional development [19], personal wellbeing [37] and ultimately the completion of the research itself [14]. The imperative for doctoral students to 'complete' perhaps mirrors a focus on productivity in academia and the associated need for tangible indicators of time being well-spent (e.g. the oft touted maxim of 'publish or perish') which could be perceived to encourage 'doing' at the expense of expansive and creative thinking. Equally, this focus seems to discourage spending time on professional development to become more effective and confident in our work, or from being a supportive colleague within a wider research team or culture. I am, however, minded of a colleague who commented that the outcome of a PhD is a well-rounded and capable researcher AND a strong thesis. Having worked with and listened to doctoral students share their experiences in my workshops and modules for several years, I realised there seemed to be relatively few protected and facilitated spaces to make sense of their experiences as a doctoral researcher, with a view

to learn from them and continue to make progress on their research project, alongside their own development as a researcher.

I first encountered the TE through a three-day workshop. Being ‘freed up’ to think without interruption was really liberating and I experienced several occasions where multiple waves of thinking during the practice activities led me to mini breakthroughs. These allowed me to make better sense of a work situation or challenge, resulting in a fresher and more constructive perspective emerging. Given my academic development background, I immediately recognised the potential benefit of having uninterrupted time to think on something of personal or professional importance, and equally the value of having a listening partner who could support the development of your thinking through generative *attention*. TE’s coaching origins, the valuing of the *equality* of each person’s thinking, and *appreciating* each other’s strengths, seemed to lend itself well to a peer-coaching context. Specifically, I could see how this could be utilised by doctoral students not only to facilitate their own thinking about their research project but also to promote regular reflection on their experiences as a researcher. By that I mean being able to identify significant experiences, to evaluate them and surrounding contextual factors, exploring it to identify the assumptions which their thinking and beliefs are based on, ascertaining whether these assumptions are true and/or helpful (often through self-posed *incisive questions*), and identifying learning which can be derived and applied to future situations.

Recognising the potential value for students, I was keen to invite students to experiment with the approach. Over the last three years I’ve introduced it as one of a number of tools and approaches to support reflective practice within a credit-bearing module I offer as part of a postgraduate certificate in research training. I’ve focused on the Thinking Partnership process, and two of the ten components – (generative) *attention* and *appreciation*. Students have then paired up and been encouraged to ‘play’ with the approach for a short period, swapping roles, and afterwards offer their thinking on their experience, which I noted at the time. Their observations appear to centre on the roles they played as the ‘thinker/speaker’ and the ‘listener’:

Being a thinker/speaker:

- “I found it hard to speak for an extended period of time – it made me feel uncomfortable”,
- “I didn’t think I would be able to speak uninterrupted but I did!”
- “it felt really refreshing to know that I wasn’t going to be interrupted”.

Being a listener:

- “it was a bit weird not to be expected to verbally contribute as the ‘listener’”.
- “I kept wanting to respond, it was hard to stay silent”.
- “I enjoyed listening and showing I was listening”.

Being critically engaged students (who continue to teach me things all the time!), they have raised questions around the TE’s applicability, for example: in cross-cultural contexts - where turn-taking and other communication norms may differ between participants; or around how the multi-variable question prompts could prompt overwhelm/not be as effective for neurodivergent students. I think these can be addressed with some modifications. The biggest barriers for students have seemed to be the ‘unknown’ and ‘fear of getting it wrong’, so clear instruction, the permission to ‘experiment/play’, and

the inability of ‘getting it wrong’ seem to have been central to overcoming concerns/reluctance.

Over each module’s iteration, I’ve included the TE earlier and earlier in the module and provided additional practice opportunities with the aim of developing familiarity with the approach, and more firmly embedding the practice in students’ repertoire of reflective and generative strategies. Students now tell me that they are interested in continuing to practice, and it’s left me considering whether there is some work to do around expanding the practice across the doctoral community (which could tie in well with supervisor training). In other words, forming part of the development of a supportive ‘doctoral learning ecology’ [16] for students with the aim of supporting the progress of their research, and their professional development as a researcher. Finally, given the finite numbers of academic jobs available, there is a responsibility for those working with doctoral students to facilitate the development of knowledge and skills which can transfer across a range of potential future career contexts.

Across these vignettes, we have each reflected on our experimentation with TE given our commitment to critical and creative approaches to enhancing doctoral education. Our reflections as doctoral supervisors and students – but also as educators interested in creative approaches to doctoral education – highlight the multiple benefits that we found from using the TE approach. The positive aspects of this approach have included enhanced clarity of thinking (of both doctoral researchers and supervisors), increased confidence of doctoral researchers in their own ideas and research, greater sensitivity to power relations in doctoral education, and enriched relationships between supervisors and students that feel more egalitarian and unrestricted.

2 Conclusion: a new thinking-centred model for supervision

Our exploration of TE in doctoral supervision challenges traditional supervisory models by shifting the focus from hierarchy, management, and pastoral care toward cultivating independent, high-quality thinking. Where existing models centre on task completion, structural efficiency, and pastoral oversight, our approach emphasizes *attention*, *appreciation*, and *equality*, fostering a supervisory environment that actively generates expansive thought. Moreover, in focusing on TE, we are making an important contribution to work on critical and creative approaches to doctoral supervision (e.g. [8, 10] and to work that draws attention to the hidden curriculum within doctoral education (e.g. [15]).

Grounded in practice, our diverse vignettes highlight the transformational potential of TE in disrupting entrenched power dynamics in supervision. Conventional models often position the supervisor as the primary intellectual authority, reinforcing a hierarchical structure where the doctoral student is primarily a receiver of guidance. In contrast, TE operates on principles of reciprocity and co-learning. As demonstrated in Sally’s and Elaine’s vignettes, TE nurtures doctoral students’ confidence in articulating their ideas without the habitual interruptions that often undermine their academic self-assurance. It also supports supervisors in resisting the impulse to intervene, allowing students to navigate their own intellectual pathways.

Moreover, the TE model fosters a more inclusive and empowering supervisory dynamic. As Renzo’s vignette suggests, conventional supervision often fails to equip students with the skills necessary for thinking aloud and articulating their evolving research

ideas—a crucial skill both within and beyond academia. By providing structured space for uninterrupted thinking, TE enables doctoral candidates to develop their ability to formulate and refine arguments with confidence. This not only enhances their immediate academic performance but also strengthens their long-term professional and intellectual independence.

Unlike the majority of approaches to doctoral and research supervision, TE prioritizes the cultivation of deep thought thereby making an important contribution to debates about creative and critical approaches to doctoral education [8]. While pastoral models acknowledge the emotional dimensions of doctoral study, they often reinforce dependency between the student and supervisor. TE instead promotes emotional clarity within structured boundaries, recognizing *feelings* as a vital component of cognitive clarity without conflating the supervisor's role with that provided by a professionally-trained therapist. This shift, as Jen's reflection illustrates, can redefine the nature of supervisory relationships, moving away from hierarchical models that emphasize 'shadowing' (with one often left in the shade) toward more equitable circles of co-learning.

This model also carries broader implications beyond individual supervision. As Rosalind's and Emily Jayne's reflections show, integrating TE principles into doctoral education more widely—through peer coaching, researcher development training, and structured reflective practices—has the potential to reshape institutional research cultures. TE does not merely serve as a technique for individual supervision but as a mechanism for challenging the entrenched productivity-driven structures of academia, aligning with calls for slower paced and ultimately more thoughtful universities [4, 34]. The very method of this paper illuminates how the principles of TE need not be confined simply to supervision. In creating this paper we held a series of TE sessions where we each had the opportunity to think uninterrupted which was followed by individual and then collective writing sessions. Through this process we discovered a sense of joy in writing that many of us, given highly individualistic academic contexts, have felt largely estranged from.

While we recognize that institutional constraints may make the full integration of TE challenging—given pressures around completion times and procedural supervision demands—the findings from our collective experience suggest that even partial adoption of the TE principles can create meaningful change. Carving out protected spaces for thinking within supervisory meetings, however briefly, can help doctoral students reclaim intellectual autonomy and improve the overall quality of their research experience.

Ultimately, TE supervision offers more than a new model; it represents a shift in values. By embedding TE principles into supervisory structures, we resist the managerial logic that prioritizes efficiency over intellectual depth. Instead, we advocate for a form of supervision that upholds thinking as its central aim—one that values doctoral candidates not only as emerging scholars but as thinkers in their own right. In doing so, we move toward a more responsible, equitable, and generative culture of doctoral supervision—one in which the quality of thought is not merely an implicit expectation but an intentional practice at the heart of our work.

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Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The project did not require ethical approval according to our institutional policy as new data was not collected as part of this work. the project did not involve the collection of new data from participants so consent to participate is not required.

Consent for publication

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