

Embodied or Digital? Navigating the Tensions of Hybrid Teaching Practice Supervision in South African Higher Education

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Abstract


In South African higher education, student teachers must complete practical school placements under supervision. While supervision is crucial for teacher preparation, few studies explore how supervisors balance face-to-face and online modalities, especially in resource-constrained contexts. This article examines how teaching practice supervision is navigated, focusing on the interplay between physical presence and digital engagement, and the tension between administrative and mentoring responsibilities. An autoethnographic approach was used, drawing on the researcher's experiences across multiple supervision cycles. Data were collected through reflective journals, memory work, and field notes, capturing personal narratives and emotional responses. Three themes emerged: embodied presence fosters relational engagement and supports student teachers' professional growth; digital supervision provides flexibility but is constrained by connectivity and reduced relational depth; and institutional demands create tension with mentoring, shaping supervision quality. Adequate supervision requires a hybrid approach that integrates physical and digital modalities. Universities should prioritize school visits, strengthen digital infrastructure, streamline administrative tasks, and provide professional development in digital pedagogy and reflexive practice. These measures can enhance supervision quality, ensuring student teachers receive robust instructional guidance and meaningful relational support, even in challenging and resource-limited settings.

Keywords:

Hybrid learning models, Online modalities, Teacher education, Teaching practice supervision, South African higher education.

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Introduction

It is prudent to foreground this article with a brief overview of teaching practice in South African higher education to contextualize the researcher's experiences as a supervisor. According to the Department of Education (2007), student teachers must be placed in schools recognized as exemplary teaching and learning environments. These placements complement theoretical preparation with hands-on experience in authentic educational settings. They enable student teachers to observe school functioning, receive feedback on their instructional skills, manage classrooms, participate in staff meetings, and collaborate in educational processes (van Tonder & Fourie, 2018). Teaching practice allows student teachers to develop professional competencies that cannot be fully cultivated in lecture halls or through textbooks alone. Exposure to fundamental classroom dynamics provides opportunities to navigate complex interpersonal, cultural, and administrative aspects of schooling, preparing them for the realities of teaching in diverse educational contexts. Teaching practice is widely acknowledged as a core component of initial teacher education, requiring student teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic classroom contexts (Aglazor, 2017; Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Mannathoko, 2013; Matoti & Odora, 2013; Moosa, 2019; Phillips & Condy, 2023). Leng (2023, p. 1) asserts that:

One of the primary purposes of teacher supervision is to enhance the quality of instruction. Supervisors observe teachers in action, providing valuable feedback on teaching techniques, content delivery, and classroom management. This process helps teachers refine their skills and adapt their methods to better meet the needs of their students. Effective teacher supervision often includes mentorship and support.

Supervisors play a pivotal role in ensuring that teaching practice translates theory into effective classroom practice. Their involvement allows student teachers to reflect on pedagogical decisions, adapt methods to meet learners' diverse needs, and develop confidence in their professional identity. Effective feedback, central to supervision, is influenced differently by embodied presence in face-to-face contexts and technological mediation in online environments. Physical presence enables supervisors to observe classroom interactions in real time, noting subtle non-verbal cues, learner engagement, and classroom climate. While offering flexibility and access across geographically dispersed schools, online supervision can limit these observational subtleties and shift the focus toward verbal interactions, digital submissions, and technological problem-solving. These differences are further shaped by institutional expectations, workload pressures, and infrastructural constraints (Mosito et al., 2025; Perry et al., 2021). Understanding these differences is essential for framing the three themes explored in this article: relational dynamics of supervision, integration of technology, and negotiation of institutional demands in dual-modal contexts.

The emergence of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) has added complexity to teaching practice supervision. Unlike traditional face-to-face modalities, ODEL supervision must contend with challenges such as technological inequities, limited access to reliable internet, and disparities in learners' digital literacy (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2023; Dionne et al., 2024). At the same time, ODEL presents opportunities that include flexibility, scalability, and the ability to support geographically dispersed student teachers (Zou et al., 2025; Lundberg, 2025). This study situates supervision within an ODEL framework,



examining how dual modalities, physical and online, can operate as complementary rather than antagonistic strategies, a concept referred to here as Hybrid Supervision. Theoretical support for this approach draws on blended supervision frameworks that highlight adaptive, learner-centered, and contextually responsive pedagogical strategies (Akbari, 2025; Wessels & Grünwald, 2023; Dyrstad et al., 2024). Hybrid Supervision recognizes that combining physical observation with digital engagement enhances reflective practice, pedagogical responsiveness, and professional support for student teachers.

Despite the growing literature on teaching practice supervision in South Africa, there remains limited exploration of supervisors' lived experiences traversing dual modalities (Aglazor, 2017; Matoti & Odora, 2013; Steyn & Mentz, 2008; van Tonder & Fourie, 2018). Most studies adopt descriptive or evaluative approaches, neglecting supervisory practice's emotional, relational, and contextual dimensions. This article innovatively adopts an autoethnographic methodology, which positions the researcher as participant and observer, enabling deep engagement with the complexities of supervision. Autoethnography captures personal, professional, and emotional dimensions, allowing the researcher to reflect on tensions, adaptations, and moments of insight in real time, while situating these experiences within broader institutional, socio-cultural, and policy contexts (Younas et al., 2025; Zondo & Adu, 2024). By focusing on the supervisor's narrative, autoethnography illuminates the affective and cognitive labor involved in supporting student teachers across hybrid environments, offering a richer and more nuanced understanding of supervision than conventional methods.

The socio-political context of South African classrooms further shapes the supervision process. Supervisors navigate multilingual and socio-economically diverse settings, balancing the needs of learners, schools, and student teachers. Supervision can therefore be understood as a form of critical social justice practice, where guidance, mentoring, and feedback are deployed to address inequities in learning opportunities and pedagogical support (Jojo, 2023; Maphalala & Ajani, 2023; Mosito et al., 2025; Perry et al., 2021). This aligns with international perspectives emphasizing culturally responsive supervision in diverse educational contexts (Dionne et al., 2024; Younas et al., 2025).

The global relevance of hybrid supervision is also notable. Studies in North America, Europe, and Australia increasingly document the integration of digital supervision strategies, highlighting challenges such as equity gaps, technological infrastructure, and professional development needs (Zou et al., 2025; Wessels & Grünwald, 2023). Comparisons with developing contexts demonstrate that many countries face similar structural and socio-economic challenges, reinforcing the importance of adaptive supervisory strategies sensitive to context (Dyrstad et al., 2024; Lundberg, 2025; Akbari, 2025).

This article addresses these gaps by presenting an autoethnographic account of supervising teaching practice in South African higher education through physical and online modalities. Drawing on the author's role within the University of South Africa's College of Education, the study provides first-hand insights into the tensions, adaptations, and innovations inherent in hybrid supervision. By foregrounding individual experiences within broader policy, technological, and socio-cultural frameworks, the study contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of teacher supervision. Ultimately, it responds to the need for reflective, culturally



situated research that captures the complexity of preparing teachers for increasingly diverse, multilingual, and resource-constrained classrooms while remaining relevant in global debates on digital and hybrid teacher education.

Conceptual Framework

In South Africa, Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) has transformed traditional approaches to teacher education supervision. According to Maphalala and Nkosi (2025), ODeL represents a revolutionary platform for democratising education by providing marginalized learners with flexible, accessible, and inclusive pathways to learning. This perspective is reinforced by Tabe et al. (2025, p. 2) who observe that:

The integration of technology into Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) in higher education has emerged as a transformative force in South Africa and beyond, where accessibility and inclusivity are critical challenges. As digital platforms offer flexibility and scalability, they promise to bridge the gap between traditional education and diverse learner needs.

Based on this statement, it is evident that ODeL plays a crucial role in reshaping higher education by widening participation and enabling institutions to reach students in geographically dispersed or resource-constrained contexts. Tabe et al. (2025) further note that ODeL can transcend traditional educational paradigms, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive higher education landscape that empowers students to drive meaningful societal change.

While ODeL broadens access and supports geographically dispersed student teachers, it also introduces new complexities that influence the quality and equity of supervision. Key challenges include technological inequities, limited access to stable internet connectivity, and variations in digital literacy among student teachers and mentors. Van Wyk (2021) observes that during the COVID-19 lockdown, ODeL students faced numerous barriers, such as expensive data bundles, expiring passwords, poor connectivity, inconsistent discussion forums, and slow system synchronization. Similarly, Ouma's (2019) study in Uganda revealed that students from rural areas often lacked adequate ICT skills and infrastructure to engage in online learning environments effectively. In Zimbabwe, Tanyanyiwa and Madobi (2021) found that the absence of appropriate technological infrastructure and digital devices impeded the realization of ODeL's potential at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), noting that many students' laptops malfunctioned and their mobile phones were unable to connect to the internet. Comparable challenges have been reported in Eswatini, where most learners reside in rural areas with poor connectivity, limited computer skills, and financial constraints that hinder the successful implementation of ODeL initiatives. Collectively, these factors result in inconsistent communication and uneven feedback quality, particularly within rural or under-resourced contexts, thereby affecting the overall effectiveness of ODeL supervision.

At the same time, ODeL presents significant pedagogical and logistical advantages. It allows for flexible scheduling, reduces travel costs, and enables supervisors to maintain ongoing digital contact beyond the temporal boundaries of physical school visits (Lundberg, 2025; Zou et.al, 2025). Through virtual meetings, recorded lessons, and digital feedback tools, ODeL supervision expands the supervisory reach of universities while



supporting student teachers' autonomy and reflective practice. The challenge, therefore, is not whether ODeL can replace physical supervision, but how it can be leveraged to complement embodied forms of engagement. The nuanced navigation of these challenges and opportunities provides the foundation for hybrid models of supervision.

Hybrid Supervision: Theoretical Framing and Complementarity of Modalities

Hybrid Supervision refers to the intentional integration of physical and digital modalities in the mentoring and evaluating student teachers during teaching practice. Rather than positioning online and face-to-face supervision as opposing practices, hybrid supervision conceptualizes them as complementary dimensions of a unified pedagogical approach. This view aligns with adaptive and learner-centered frameworks in blended learning and networked pedagogy, which advocate for flexibility, contextual responsiveness, and relational engagement (Akbari, 2025; Dyrstad et al., 2024; Wessels & Grünwald, 2023).

Theoretically, hybrid supervision draws on constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, recognizing that learning and, by extension, supervision are both situated and mediated. Physical supervision supports embodied observation, affective connection, and contextual understanding, while digital supervision enables asynchronous reflection, scalability, and ongoing mentorship. The intersection of these modalities creates a “pedagogical middle space” (Pather & Naidoo, 2018) where embodied presence and technological mediation coexist to foster access and relational depth. Thus, hybrid supervision is not merely a logistical adaptation to contemporary realities but a deliberate pedagogical strategy that redefines how supervision can be equitable, relational, and sustainable in ODeL environments.

Method

Research Design

This article adopts an autoethnographic research design, a qualitative approach that situates the researcher's personal experiences as both a site of inquiry and a lens for interpreting broader cultural, institutional, and social phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography allows researchers to examine how personal experiences intersect with larger social, institutional, and cultural dynamics. This study employs a critical-analytic form of autoethnography, moving beyond purely evocative narratives to include explicit connections to social theory, institutional policies, and data analysis. The analytic dimension enables reflection on lived experiences and their broader implications for teacher supervision practices, particularly in dual-modality contexts where physical and online engagements intersect.

Autoethnographic narratives are rich and detailed accounts of prior experiences, including thoughts, feelings, and observations. They can be produced individually or collaboratively in multiple forms, such as written stories, interviews, and audio-visual recordings (Ellis et al., 2011). These narratives are typically selective and retrospective, centering on events that deviate from routine practice or are particularly significant. They are often supported by supplementary materials such as news articles, blogs, videos, photographs, journal entries, field notes, and recorded conversations, which help to contextualize and triangulate memory-based accounts. Such



experiences are frequently emotionally charged, including periods of crisis, cultural conflict, belief confrontation, or moments of professional insight (Ellis et al., 2011; Sims, 2023). This study focuses on the supervision of teaching practice in South African higher education, specifically examining the dynamics of dual-modality supervision involving both physical and online engagement.

Research Context

The study is in the College of Education at the University of South Africa, a large, open, distance e-learning institution. The Teaching Practice Office is critical in placing student teachers in schools and providing professional support during the Work-Integrated Learning component of their studies. The researcher's responsibilities as a teaching practice supervisor include liaising with mentor teachers, conducting in-person school visits, and engaging in online supervisory activities through digital platforms. The dual-modality supervision context emerged as a response to logistical challenges, technological developments, and institutional policies and was further influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data for this study were drawn from two supervision cycles spanning 2025 (second term and third term), providing a temporal boundary that captures evolving practices and adaptations during significant disruptions to conventional teaching and supervision.

Researcher Positionality

As the primary data collection and analysis instrument, the researcher occupies a dual role as participant and observer. Kennedy and Moore (2021) distinguish between an autoethnographer and an autobiographer, noting that the autoethnographer simultaneously assumes the roles of researcher and participant. In contrast, the autobiographer focuses solely on narrating a life story. This dual positionality facilitates deep insight into supervisory practices but requires conscious reflexivity to address subjectivity, bias, and emotional involvement. Reflexive practice was maintained throughout the study, allowing the researcher to identify assumptions or initial biases and revise perspectives based on reflective analysis. For example, the researcher initially questioned specific institutional procedures for digital supervision but, through reflection, recognized their role in maintaining quality assurance and pedagogical standards. This example demonstrates how reflexivity can challenge and reshape preconceptions in practice.

Data Sources and Collection

Autoethnography relies on personal memory and subjective experience as primary data, with the researcher as the central data source (Adam et al., 2015; Kennedy & Moore, 2021; Tarisayi, 2023). Standard methods include self-observation, reflexive journaling, memory work, artifact analysis, and external data collection to contextualize experiences (Tarisayi, 2023, p. 58).

In this study, the primary data sources include:

1. Reflective journals are maintained throughout supervision to document observations, interactions, challenges, and successes in physical and online contexts.



2. Institutional records and correspondence, including placement documentation, communications with mentor teachers, and digital supervision logs.
3. Memory work reconstructs past supervisory experiences and reflects on them in light of current understanding.
4. Field notes recorded during school visits and online sessions capture descriptive and interpretive interaction aspects.

These sources enable a multi-layered supervision account, integrating immediate observations with retrospective reflection. They also support analytic autoethnography, where personal experiences are systematically connected to theory, policy, and broader educational practices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a narrative thematic approach (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). The researcher engaged in repeated reading, coding, and writing cycles to identify recurring themes across the data. Narrative thematic analysis allows for flexibility in emphasis, ranging from detailed coding to broader consideration of historical, institutional, and social contexts (Riessman, 2008). In this study, the process was iterative, with writing functioning both as a tool for analysis and as a means of meaning-making. This reflexive analytic practice facilitated connections between the researcher's experiences and broader sociocultural and technological contexts, particularly regarding negotiating physical and digital supervision responsibilities.

Ethical Considerations

In line with autoethnographic principles, this study does not involve data collection from other participants, thereby reducing ethical risks associated with informed consent and confidentiality. As the sole participant, the researcher maintained ethical responsibility through reflexivity, honesty, and academic integrity. Institutional references were carefully selected to avoid misrepresentation, ensuring the narrative remained professional, accurate, and respectful of organizational relationships.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

Trustworthiness in embodied or digital? Navigating the tensions of hybrid teaching practice supervision in South African higher education was established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility emerged from prolonged engagement in supervision, reflective journaling, and triangulation of data sources such as institutional records, memory work, and field notes. Dependability was achieved through consistent documentation of supervisory processes, while confirmability was strengthened by reflexive self-examination and alignment with existing literature. Thick, contextual descriptions of teaching practice supervision within the University of South Africa enhanced transferability, allowing insights to be applied to similar open and distance learning contexts.



Results

It is prudent to foreground this section by noting that the following research questions were developed based on my experience to guide this article:

- How does embodied presence influence my effectiveness in physically supervising teaching practice?
- What challenges and benefits arise from technological mediation in online teaching practice supervision?
- How do institutional demands affect my ability to balance administrative duties with relational supervision roles?

Based on the research questions, three key themes emerged from my reflective journals and memory work about supervising teaching practice in South African higher education: Embodied Presence, Technological Mediation, and Navigating Institutional Demands. These themes capture my experience of balancing in-person and online supervision, highlighting the role's physical, technological, and administrative aspects. Each theme is explored through personal narratives and connected to relevant academic literature, providing a deeper understanding of how supervision unfolds within complex institutional and socio-cultural contexts.

Theme 1: Embodied Presence – The Tangibility of Physical Supervision

Perhaps it is important to emphasize that being physically present as a supervisor during teaching practice is essential for both the student teacher and the supervisor. Physical presence creates a profound and immersive experience for student teachers, fostering a deeper connection to the teaching environment. This statement was supported by Kolman (2018), who mentions that supervisors and mentors must have quality time with student teachers during the teaching practice to provide effective and sufficient support to student teachers. One journal entry from August captures the atmosphere of a school visit: *“Stepping through the gates, I felt the dust cling to my shoes and the warm air wrap around me. The sound of children’s laughter was my welcome.”* In those moments, my role extended beyond evaluation; I became part of the fabric of the school day.

The physical presence allowed me to pick up on nuances that might otherwise be missed: a student’s hesitant question, the subtle reassurance of a mentor teacher’s glance, the rhythm of the classroom. As I recorded: *“It is not just what you see, it is what you feel in the space that shapes your understanding.”* The researcher’s lived experiences align with the findings of Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009), who highlight that the school context is a crucial bridge between theory and practice. Being physically present exposes student teachers to authentic learning environments where pedagogical theory is enacted and tested. Similarly, Hathorn (2020) stresses that adequate supervision is rooted in relational engagement, a connection and trust that can only be nurtured through face-to-face interactions. Physical visits foster these relationships by allowing supervisors to engage directly, observe in real time, and respond to the dynamic nature of teaching and learning. Physical presence in the school provides a rich, multi-sensory understanding of teaching practice, reinforcing the literature’s emphasis on the importance of contextual immersion in teacher education. Through this embodied engagement, supervisors can more fully support and guide student teachers on their journey from theory to practice.



Theme 2: Technological Mediation – Seeing through the Screen

The COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa primarily prompted the shift to online teaching practice supervision, which compelled students to learn remotely or online. Jojo, 2023, 77 supported this) who states that before the COVID-19 epidemic, teaching practice monitoring was carried out physically in the schools selected by the students for placement by both external and institution-based internal supervisors. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities adopted remote teaching and learning, which includes teaching practice supervision (Jojo, 2023; Maphalala & Ajani, 2023).

This transition altered not only my practice but my sense of connection, as in my journal, I wrote: *“My office is now a rectangle of light the school compressed into a screen.”* Technology enabled unprecedented reach. *“I could connect with a student in a rural town hundreds of kilometres away in minutes,”* I noted. However, there were limitations: *“The lesson froze mid-sentence; I lost the flow. I could hear the teacher’s voice, but the learners’ responses were lost to the ether”*. This mirrors Hendricks & Mutongoza's (2023) observation that while online modalities expand access to supervision, they risk diluting in-person interaction's relational depth and immediacy.

This was supported by Zaw and Hlaing (2024), who mention that digital learning platforms offer a valuable tool for expanding educational access in developing countries. They enable students in remote areas to access quality education and provide a means to overcome the limitations imposed by teacher shortages and scarce resources. Similarly, Mabidi (2024) highlights that digital platforms in teacher education can bridge geographical divides but require careful pedagogical adaptation to avoid reducing supervision to mere technical observation. Technological mediation offered flexibility and inclusion but also redefined the very texture of supervision. It revealed that accessibility does not automatically equate to richness of engagement, an insight consistent with research on the trade-offs of remote teacher education.

Theme 3: Navigating Institutional Demands – The Balancing Act

Institutional requirements shaped my daily work as much as my professional instincts and personal commitment to supporting student teachers. Reflecting on a particularly demanding week, I wrote in my journal: *“I am constantly between two worlds, one where I am in the classroom with the student, and another where I am answering emails in my car before the next visit.”* This tension between direct engagement and administrative responsibilities was a persistent reality.

Balancing the demands of meeting placement deadlines, submitting timely reports, and adhering to policy frameworks often competed with the relational and developmental aspects of supervision that I deeply valued. I noted: *“The human part of this work, the mentoring, the encouragement, has to find space between the forms and the deadlines. This was not only challenging but also a learning experience.”* The pressure to comply with institutional processes sometimes risked reducing supervision to a series of bureaucratic tasks. Yet, it also compelled me to find creative ways to maintain the relational core of my work despite time and resource constraints.



This experience aligns closely with Marais and Meier's (2004) findings that teacher education supervisors in South Africa must consistently negotiate the 'dual demands of administrative duties and provide pedagogical and emotional support to student teachers. Their research highlights that supervisors often function within tightly regulated systems, prioritizing quality assurance, sometimes overshadowing developmental needs. Similarly, the *National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development* (2007) institutionalizes this duality by embedding supervision within both regulatory and formative roles, ensuring accountability while aiming to foster professional growth.

Navigating these competing demands required adaptability, creativity, and resilience. I had to develop strategies to integrate administrative tasks with moments of genuine mentorship, often improvising to carve out time for meaningful engagement. These qualities are echoed in the literature, where scholars emphasize the importance of resilience and flexibility for supervisors working in resource-constrained and policy-driven environments (Hathorn, 2020; Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2023; Jojo, 2023). The complex interplay between institutional demands and personal professional values shaped my supervisory practice profoundly. It underscored that adequate supervision in South African higher education involves pedagogical expertise and managing systemic constraints with empathy and strategic agency.

Perhaps, it is prudent to mention that Table 1 illustrates how the three key themes relate to the research questions and highlights the balance of benefits and challenges inherent in hybrid supervision. It offers a concise visual summary of the lived experiences captured through reflective journals, memory work, and field notes. This multi-layered representation emphasizes the interplay between physical, technological, and institutional factors in shaping supervision practice.

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Research Questions, Benefits, and Challenges with References

Theme	Research Question	Benefits (References)	Challenges (References)
Embodied Presence	How does embodied presence influence physical supervision?	Immersive classroom experience (Kolman, 2018), real-time observation (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009), relational engagement (Hathorn, 2020; Steyn & Mentz, 2008)	Time and travel constraints, limited reach across dispersed schools
Technological Mediation	What challenges and benefits arise from online supervision?	Flexibility, access to remote students (Jojo, 2023; Maphalala & Ajani, 2023; Zaw & Hlaing, 2024), scalability (Zou et al., 2025)	Digital divide (Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2023; UNESCO, 2023), reduced relational depth (Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2023), dependence on digital skills (Ouma, 2019; Tanyanyiwa & Madobi, 2021)



Navigating Institutional Demands	How do institutional demands affect balancing administrative and relational roles?	Accountability and quality assurance (Department of Education, 2007; Marais & Meier, 2004), structured reporting (Mosito et al., 2025; Perry et al., 2021)	Risk of bureaucratic supervision, tension with mentorship (Hathorn, 2020; Jojo, 2023)
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Source: Researcher

Synthesis of Themes

The narratives drawn from my autoethnographic reflections reveal a nuanced understanding of teaching practice supervision in South African higher education, far from existing as mutually exclusive or competing modalities, physical and online supervision emerge as complementary tools, each offering distinct affordances while presenting unique constraints. This synthesis underscores the evolving nature of supervision, where the future lies not in choosing between physical presence and digital interaction, but in embracing a hybrid approach that thoughtfully combines both strengths.

A journal entry encapsulating this emerging perspective states, *“The future of supervision is not in choosing one or the other, it is in learning how to dance between the two.”* This metaphor vividly conveys the dynamic balancing act supervisors must perform as they negotiate the demands of in-person engagement alongside the practicalities and innovations enabled by technology. Such a dual modality reflects the realities of contemporary South African higher education, where geographic dispersion, resource limitations, and the push towards digitalization coexist. Physical supervision offers rich, embodied experiences that foster deep relational connections and contextual understanding. Being physically present in schools allows supervisors to capture subtle non-verbal cues, classroom atmosphere, and school culture dimensions crucial for mentoring and authentic assessment (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Hudson, 2013). These embodied encounters ground supervision in tangible realities, enabling supervisors to respond holistically to the student teacher’s developmental needs. However, physical visits are often constrained by logistical challenges such as distance, time, and funding, which can limit the frequency and reach of such interactions.

Conversely, online supervision expands accessibility, offering flexible and immediate channels for communication and support, especially for student teachers in remote or underserved areas (Jojo, 2023; Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2023). Digital platforms facilitate ongoing engagement beyond formal visits, allowing supervisors to provide timely feedback and maintain contact despite spatial barriers. However, online modalities risk reducing supervision to transactional exchanges and may lack the sensory and emotional richness that face-to-face interactions afford (Quinco-Cadosales et al., 2024). Technological challenges, such as poor connectivity or limited digital literacy, further complicate this modality, highlighting the digital divide within South Africa’s education system (Mabidi, 2024; Zaw & Hlaing, 2024). The synthesis of these themes suggests that hybrid models integrating physical and online supervision can effectively harness the complementary strengths of both modalities while mitigating their limitations. Pather and Naidoo (2018) argue that when thoughtfully designed and implemented, hybrid models create flexible, inclusive, and contextually responsive supervision systems



capable of addressing diverse student needs. Such models encourage supervisors to be adaptive, employing digital tools to maintain continuity of support while preserving opportunities for embodied engagement whenever possible.

Furthermore, the interplay between institutional demands and supervisory practice reinforces the need for hybrid approaches. The administrative and policy frameworks governing teaching practice supervision require efficient monitoring and reporting, which digital platforms can facilitate. At the same time, the developmental and relational aspects of supervision demand the kind of presence and engagement that physical visits nurture (Marais & Meier, 2004; Department of Education, 2007). Hybrid supervision offers a pragmatic solution, allowing supervisors to fulfill regulatory responsibilities digitally while prioritizing in-person interactions for mentorship and formative support. This synthesis foregrounds the evolving role of the teaching practice supervisor as one who must skillfully navigate between physical and virtual spaces. Embracing hybridity reflects current technological and institutional realities and enhances the quality and reach of supervision. The challenge lies in developing integrated systems that leverage technology without compromising the relational core of teaching practice supervision. This balance is crucial for preparing competent, confident, and reflective educators in South Africa's diverse higher education landscape.

Discussion

This article has argued that teaching practice supervision in South African higher education involves a complex interplay between physical presence, technological mediation, and institutional demands. Adequate supervision requires pedagogical expertise and adherence to institutional policy and deliberate relational engagement, reflexivity, and adaptive strategies to navigate systemic constraints. Hybrid supervision, which integrates physical and digital modalities, emerges as both a practical necessity and a pedagogical opportunity in this context.

The findings indicate that physical supervision provides an immersive and meaningful experience for the student teacher and the supervisor. Consistent with Kolman (2018), who emphasizes the importance of supervisors spending quality time with student teachers, my reflections show that being physically present enables supervisors to capture nuanced classroom dynamics, such as non-verbal cues, teacher-learner interactions, and classroom rhythms. A reflexive insight occurred when I initially prioritized lesson observation over relational engagement. Reflective journaling revealed that attending to relational and emotional dynamics is crucial for student development. These observations align with Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009), who highlight the importance of the school context in bridging theory and practice. Hathorn (2020) similarly underscores that trust and relational connection, central to adequate supervision, are nurtured through sustained face-to-face interactions. Steyn and Mentz (2008) support the idea that integrated models of teacher training, combining practical immersion with reflective engagement, strengthen pedagogical competence.

Technological mediation offers flexibility, access, and inclusivity, particularly in contexts characterized by distance, resource limitations, and high student enrolments (Jojo, 2023; Maphalala & Ajani, 2023). However, the South African digital divide, including poor connectivity, limited access to devices, and high data costs, creates



systemic constraints that shape online supervision's ethical and practical application. My reflections capture these limitations: "The lesson froze mid-sentence; I could hear the teacher's voice, but learners' responses were lost to the ether." Hendricks and Mutongoza (2023) note that online supervision can dilute relational depth, particularly in under-resourced rural contexts. Zaw and Hlaing (2024) and Quinco-Cadosales et al. (2024) emphasize that digital platforms can bridge geographic and resource gaps but require careful pedagogical adaptation to maintain meaningful engagement. Recent research indicates that hybrid supervision can optimize both flexibility and relational depth if supervisors intentionally design interactions to account for socio-economic and technological disparities (Akbari, 2025; Dyrstad et al., 2024; Lundberg, 2025; Younas, El-Dakhs, & Jiang, 2025; Zou et al., 2025).

Institutional demands also significantly shape the supervisor's role, often creating tension between administrative obligations and supervision's relational and developmental aspects. This aligns with the Department of Education (2007) framework, which highlights the dual mandate of supervisors in South Africa to ensure quality assurance while fostering professional development. A reflexive moment occurred when I initially regarded strict reporting requirements as bureaucratic obstacles; further reflection revealed that these processes ensure fairness, accountability, and quality. This demonstrates that administrative compliance can enhance, rather than detract from, relational supervision.

The findings suggest that adequate supervision in South Africa requires complementary integration of physical and digital modalities. Steyn and Mentz (2008) advocate for models that combine practical immersion with reflective engagement, while Perry et al. (2021) emphasize that blended approaches enhance scalability, equity, and flexibility. Reflexive, creative, and persistent qualities are crucial for supervisors negotiating these challenges, a point reinforced by Ellis et al. (2011) and Cooper and Lilyea (2022), who highlight the value of autoethnography in capturing the emotional, relational, and practical dimensions of professional practice. The autoethnographic perspective provides unique insight into how supervisors navigate competing institutional, technological, and relational demands, offering a lens to challenge assumptions that online supervision is inherently inferior to face-to-face supervision.

This study situates supervision within South Africa's socio-linguistically diverse and socio-economically unequal classrooms, aligning with UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2023), which advocate for contextually responsive teacher support. By foregrounding lived experience, the study demonstrates that hybrid supervision requires ethical and pedagogical consideration of digital inequities while maintaining relational depth, flexibility, and resilience. The findings support the concept of hybrid supervision as a model that leverages embodied presence and digital innovation to balance accessibility with meaningful engagement (Dionne, Gagnon, & Petit, 2024; Mabidi, 2024; Mosito et al., 2025; Leng, 2023; Zondo & Adu, 2024).

In conclusion, adequate teaching practice supervision in South African higher education is a dynamic, contextually situated process that requires integrating physical presence, technological mediation, and institutional compliance. Reflexive, adaptive, and resilient supervisors are essential for bridging theory and practice, nurturing student



teacher growth, and negotiating systemic constraints. Hybrid supervision models that leverage embodied and digital modalities, while remaining attentive to equity and accessibility, provide a practical and theoretically informed framework. These findings contribute to the discourse on teacher education by offering an autoethnographic perspective that captures supervision's complex, lived realities, informs policy, and offers guidance for practice in both developing and developed contexts.

Conclusion

This article has provided an autoethnographic exploration of the evolving practice of supervising teaching practice in South African higher education, revealing complex interactions between physical presence, digital mediation, and institutional structures. Beyond recounting the lived realities of supervision, this study invites a more profound reconsideration of how supervision is conceptualized and enacted in contemporary educational contexts marked by rapid technological change and systemic challenges.

A key new insight emerging from this study is recognizing that supervision is fundamentally a relational and adaptive practice transcending modality. Adequate supervision hinges on the supervisor's capacity to create spaces of trust, dialogue, and professional growth, whether through physical visits or online engagements. This underscores supervision as a dynamic process of co-construction, rather than a unilateral act of assessment or oversight. The fluidity and responsiveness required of supervisors mirror broader shifts in higher education towards learner-centered, flexible pedagogies that accommodate diverse student realities and evolving professional identities. Another critical insight relates to the role of technological tools not simply as replacements or supplements to face-to-face supervision, but as active agents that reshape the supervisory relationship and pedagogical possibilities. Technology introduces new visibility, interaction, and record-keeping forms, raising questions about presence, authenticity, and equity. This article highlights the importance of critically engaging with technology beyond instrumentalist perspectives, recognizing its capacity to enable and constrain meaningful educational encounters. Such reflexivity invites supervisors and institutions to thoughtfully design hybrid models responsive to logistical needs and the socio-emotional and cultural dimensions of teaching and learning.

While often perceived as obstacles, institutional demands offer a framework for reimagining supervision as a site of innovation and professional agency. Rather than viewing administrative tasks and policy compliance as competing with relational mentorship, this study suggests they can be integrated into a holistic supervisory practice that values accountability alongside developmental support. This calls for institutional environments that foster collaboration, provide professional development tailored to hybrid supervisory skills, and create flexible policies to accommodate diverse supervisory contexts and modalities. Furthermore, this article points to the transformative potential of autoethnographic inquiry in professional practice research. Therefore, by centering the researcher's voice and reflexivity, autoethnography illuminates the emotional and contextual complexities that often remain hidden in traditional research approaches. This methodology enriches understanding and models a form of supervision grounded in critical self-awareness and continuous learning, essential for navigating the ambiguities and tensions inherent in teacher education today.



Lastly, the findings encourage a shift in how success in teaching practice supervision is defined and measured. Beyond standardized checklists and formal evaluations, success should encompass the cultivation of professional identities, resilience, and reflective capacities among student teachers. Supervisors are learners in this process, developing new competencies and perspectives as they negotiate physical and digital spaces, institutional expectations, and relational dynamics. Recognizing supervision as an evolving, co-creative journey can lead to more humane, effective, and contextually meaningful teacher education. This article contributes to ongoing debates by reframing teaching practice supervision not merely as a procedural obligation but as a nuanced, relational, and adaptive educational practice. It advocates for hybrid supervisory models informed by critical engagement with technology and institutional realities, and grounded in reflective, autoethnographic insight. As South African higher education continues to transform, embracing these perspectives can help build supervision systems that are resilient, inclusive, and capable of nurturing the next generation of educators in all their complexity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, teaching practice supervision in higher education requires a careful balance between physical engagement, technological support, and institutional demands. Universities should prioritize regular physical school visits, allowing supervisors to engage directly with student teachers, observe classroom dynamics, and provide meaningful relational support. Being present in the classroom enables supervisors to capture subtle interactions, non-verbal cues, and the overall learning environment, all of which are critical for fostering professional growth and bridging the gap between theory and practice.

At the same time, the use of digital platforms should be enhanced to complement physical supervision. Online supervision can increase accessibility and flexibility, particularly for students in remote areas, but it must be carefully integrated to maintain meaningful engagement. Institutions should invest in reliable digital infrastructure and ensure supervisors have the skills to use technology effectively. Hybrid supervision models that strategically blend in-person and online modalities can provide the best of both approaches, enabling supervisors to adapt to varying contexts while sustaining rich pedagogical interactions.

Administrative responsibilities should be managed to allow supervisors to focus on mentoring and pedagogical support. Streamlining reporting requirements and creating dedicated time for engagement can help reduce the tension between compliance and relational aspects of supervision. Supporting supervisors through professional development in digital pedagogy, adaptive management, and reflective practice can strengthen their ability to navigate complex institutional and socio-cultural environments.

From a policy perspective, universities should develop frameworks that recognize hybrid supervision as a legitimate and practical approach, ensuring that quality assurance measures do not overshadow developmental goals. Future research could explore the long-term impact of hybrid supervision on student outcomes, professional identity, and teaching efficacy, and examine how supervisors across different contexts manage the interplay between physical, digital, and institutional demands. These recommendations aim to promote a holistic,



responsive, and contextually aware approach to teaching practice supervision.

Author(s)' Statements on Ethics and Conflict of Interest

Ethics Statement: Although this article is an autoethnographic study based solely on the researcher's personal experiences and therefore did not require formal ethical clearance, all relevant ethical guidelines and standards were strictly observed throughout the research and writing.

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