

The Pursuit of 'Balance' by a Greenhorn Supervisor

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Abstract. This article explores the transition process from being a research supervisee to being a first time doctoral research supervisor. This is a difficult and trying endeavour. The lack of previous supervision experience at this level results in many supervisors referring to their own time as doctoral students and supervising in the same manner as they experienced. It is important to break this cycle and realise that just like teaching, there are many different models of supervision. Much of the research conducted in the area draws conclusions about the type of characteristics or traits that make a good supervisor. This article takes a different point of departure and gives a personal account of the author's thoughts and experiences in attempting to make the transition from supervisee to supervisor. These experiences are explored with reference to existing literature with the intention of unearthing and documenting key issues for first-time supervisors to consider and develop their own understanding of effective supervision practice. The author hopes that documenting these issues through a personal, reflective account will help others who decide to continue the journey and make the transition from supervisee to supervisor.

Keywords: Research Supervision; Higher Education; Reflective Practice; Research Experiences

Introduction

Insufficient attention has been given to research supervision as a topic requiring scholarly investigation (Armstrong, 2004; Halse, 2011). This is best summed up by Park (2007) who described supervision as a secret garden where student and supervisor engage with limited outside interference or responsibility. This is regardless of the argument that effective supervision is one of the most important reasons for the successful completion of research theses (Jonck, & Swanepoel, 2016; Lee, 2008; Sambrook, Stewart & Roberts, 2008). Given such importance, the supervision of PhD students' needs to be enhanced to reduce withdrawal rates and improve the quality of research (Maor, Ensor, & Fraser, 2016; Bastalich, 2015). Without doubt I wouldn't have been awarded a doctorate five years ago without the help, support and guidance of my supervisor. Since then the wheel has turned full circle and I am now at the stage of my academic

career where I am supervising a PhD student. However despite the complexities and challenges of such a role (Stephens, 2013; Hockey, 1997), advice for new supervisors is scant in the literature (Gordan, 2003). The doctorate is a learning process for students but also for doctoral supervisors (Halse, 2011). There is a growing body of research around PhD supervision (Berry & Batty, 2016). However much of this research draws conclusions about the type of characteristics or traits that make a good supervisor. This article takes a different point of departure and aims to give a first-hand account of my personal thoughts and experiences in attempting to make the transition from supervisee to supervisor. These experiences will be explored with reference to existing literature with the aim of unearthing and documenting key issues for first time supervisors to consider and develop their own understanding of good supervision practice.

Background

My progress onto the rungs of the supervision ladder have been slow and unhurried. It began with the supervision of undergraduate students' theses, Masters students and then onto a single Ph.D. student. Each of these steps has given an insight into the processes involved in thesis completion and the role the supervisor is expected to play in such processes. Perhaps the most helpful step of all was my enrolment in a Research Supervision in Higher Education training course provided in the university where I work. This six week professional development course broadened my thinking and encouraged me to reflect upon many alternative aspects to supervision. Up until that point I had considered my own personal supervision experiences to be the norm. It was enlightening to hear others recall their own paths, both positive and negative. Everyone has their own individual journey of research and it is important to learn from each other (Dash & Ponce, 2005). During the training course the literature around Ph.D. supervision and the different models of supervision which have been developed were considered. If I could sum up in three words the most important thing I learned regarding research supervision thus far, it would be to "*find a balance*". There are an indefinite number of aspects to supervision. However *finding a balance* between the key aspects is vital. In this article I aim to outline and discuss five important aspects to PhD supervision which I have encountered and which I hope to draw upon to help me become the type of supervisor that I aspire to be. Each of these aspects will be addressed through the lens of *finding a balance*.

Balance of Supervisory Styles

There are many different styles of research supervision (Boche, 2016). At their broadest these can be referred to as direct (hands-on) and indirect (hands-off) styles of supervision (Gurr, 2001). A balance in the selection and appropriate use of these styles is important and should be appropriate to the students overall level of development. Gurr (2001) argues that at the beginning of the supervision period a more hands on style is needed. For example at the beginning of my PhD, my supervisor would organise regular meetings in which he would offer support and feedback. However in the latter years my supervisor had adapted a much more hands off approach and it was up to me to organise a meeting if, and

only if, I needed some advice. At this stage it was my responsibility to make the everyday, run of the mill decisions regarding my research.

Although supervisory styles can be further broken down into more detail, the need for balance is just as important. For example, supervisors need to find a balance between supporting and challenging and between guiding and critiquing their students work. In one instance the role of a supervisor is to offer direction to students on their research. However supervisors are also the primary critic and are obliged to ensure the student produces work which meets the requirements of a PhD thesis. This is a difficult balance to strike and highlights the complexity of the relationship that exists between the supervisor and the student. Supervisors need to become aware of how to limit the help they give to their students while at the same time balancing this with support and constructive critique of their students work (Hockey, 1997). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe (2002) acknowledge that there is a fine line between providing feedback, which highlights flaws, and providing praise and encouragement to try harder. The way in which everyone engages with such critique and feedback, whether it is the student or the supervisor, is important and will often depend on the existing relationship between them.

Balance of Relationship between the Supervisor and the Student

This relationship between supervisee and supervisor has been described as one of the most essential components of successful doctoral completion (Orellana et al., 2016; Bastalich, 2015; Ives & Rowley, 2005). The development and maintenance of a helpful, and constructive relationship over time is central in producing a good quality thesis (Wisker, 2001; de Kleijna et al., 2015). I was fortunate to have such a relationship with my supervisor. We had very good rapport, communication and mutual respect. However this seemed to happen naturally and I had not considered the situation if this was not the case. Listening to other's recall some of their negative experiences of PhD supervision has led me to believe that very careful consideration must be given to this relationship. There are two sides to the coin. It is essential that you develop a good interpersonal working relationship but also ensure that there is a balance between the professional and social aspects. Perhaps one the most important aspects here is the selection and allocation of supervisors and students. Supervisors and students should have a choice of whether they wish to work together and should not just be matched because they share the same research topic. In an Australian study carried out by Ives and Rowley (2005) supervisors and students noted that when it comes to supervisor allocation, it is much more important to get the interpersonal aspects aligned rather than assigning on the basis of expertise in the content area. This is backed up by Phillips and Pugh (1994) who state that the selection of supervisor and student is probably the most important step that each will take.

Balance of Control

Many supervisors struggle to find a balanced equilibrium in the freedom and control they express towards the progress and development of their students work (Hockey, 1997). This is difficult for any supervisor. *'It is a hard balance to strike because different students respond so differently'* (Supervisor interviewed in

Hockey, 1997). On the one hand it is important that supervisors enable students to take sufficient control of their own research. This allows them to develop intellectually and to produce innovative and original research. On the other hand many students struggle, at least initially, with such freedom. For example students coming directly from undergraduate programmes often struggle with the apparent lack of structure within PhD programmes (Gurr, 2001). It is important to help the students to develop from an initial state of dependency to relative independence over time (Gurr, 2001). This is where the balance of control has to be achieved between giving well-timed help in some instances, and not interfering in others. This balance of control varies from supervisor to supervisor. Some supervisors have rigid regimes - *'we see them monthly and they produce 500 words before each meeting'* (Supervisor interviewed in Lee, 2008). In my own experience as a PhD student, there was much a freer rein. Work was submitted to my supervisor when I had it complete but there were very rarely any deadlines. While this particular model worked well for me I can see issues where student motivation begins to falter. Perhaps the findings of Hockey (1997) are advisable in which supervisors initially impose a strict degree of control over their student's work. This can be relaxed through positive student performance, with a more balanced input from all parties driving the research forward (Hockey, 1997).

Balance of Expectations

Similar to any form of teaching and learning, it is important for supervisors to set high expectations for their students. Research has found that such expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001). However it is also important that such expectations are realistic and achievable. These expectations might be regarding the standards of academic writing, critical thinking or even dissemination skills. While I was doing my PhD, my supervisor also had four other doctoral students at the same stage. He was aware that we all had our individual strengths and weaknesses and so set individual, realistic, yet challenging expectations for each of us. For example at the start of the PhD process the supervisor said he expected each of us to start presenting our work at conferences as soon as possible. This is a challenging expectation to some, but perhaps not to others depending on life experience. However the supervisor, using an array of institutional, regional, national and international conferences, tactfully pointed us in different directions ensuring that each of us were challenged sufficiently, without being entirely outside of our comfort zones. This balance of expectations proved an invaluable experience for each of us in building confidence while sharing our research and gradually opening the gates to the academic community.

Balance of Workload

Undoubtedly, the central aim of both the supervisor and the student is thesis completion and this requires a huge workload. One of the main responsibilities of the supervisor is to ensure a balance to this workload. There are many milestones to be met throughout the process and a well-planned and thought-out workplan can ensure that each of these milestones are reached in a timely and balanced manner. As a novice researcher, this is an area of concern. More

experienced supervisors are more likely to predict the time required for literature reviews and the collection and analysis of data (Hockey, 1997). However it is difficult starting out to foresee how much time and output is needed in each case. The student often looks to their supervisor for guidance in such matters. In the first year of my PhD, I can recall constantly asking my supervisor 'am I doing enough?', 'how long should I spend on this section?', 'how many words are needed here?' Novice supervisors need help and guidance themselves in answering these queries. This is where the importance of mentoring and collegial support comes to the fore. It is important that there are opportunities for informal interactions where novice supervisors can access the tacit knowledge of their peers on an on-going basis (Stephens, 2012). This will ensure that there is a balance provided for students not just in workload, but also in many other aspects of the supervision process.

This balance of workload does not only apply to the students. It is just as important that supervisors strike a work balance. Many supervisors fall into the trap of taking on too many PhD students (*'I know of places where there is a PhD factory'* - Supervisor interviewed in Lee, 2008). This is not fair to the supervisor who has an unsustainable workload or to the students as they vie for individual time and attention.

Discussion and Going Forward

Finding a balance in each of these five aspects to PhD supervision is a complex endeavour and highlights the difficulties and challenges that lie throughout the doctoral supervision process. Guthrie (2007) puts forward the notion of a PhD student embarking on a journey. However I would argue that this journey does not necessarily end when their PhD has been awarded. For many, this is the first cycle as they continue into the supervision process. When I completed my PhD I had no intention of continuing on such a journey. It's not that I was against the idea, simply the thought had not crossed my mind. In my opinion it is impractical to think you can become an effective PhD supervisor the moment you make it through your own Viva examination. As mentioned previously I have worked my way slowly onto the rungs of the supervision ladder. I agree with Hockey's (1997, p.47) assertion that "you cannot learn to be a supervisor without actually doing it" and in this sense my experience in supervising undergraduate and Master students theses has been invaluable. It has given me confidence. Confidence in imparting domain specific knowledge and methodological guidance, but more importantly confidence in guiding students through the research process, from the development of a proposal to thesis submission. There were a plethora of different emotions present when these students graduated in their respective programmes. Having worked closely with the students over a number of months, there was obvious joy that the hard work and endeavour had been rewarded. However as a 'greenhorn' supervisor my overarching feeling was one of relief. Relief that the guidance, direction and feedback I had given students had not been wide of the mark. Relief that an examiner and external examiner had deemed the work to be satisfactory. Nevertheless, through these experiences I learned a number of important supervisory lessons.

Perhaps the most important lesson was that I had been overly involved in the supervision process. I had yet to find a balance in my hands-on supervisory style and my control in the management of students' progress. As mentioned previously, supervisors need to find a balance between supporting and challenging and between guiding and critiquing their students work. I must admit that in the early stages of my supervision journey I found this difficult. I had an attitude and ethos that is best summed up in a statement from Anderson (1988) "No that is not the way to do it. Do it this way". This attitude resulted in my students developing little autonomy or creativity in their work through my over involvement. It goes against the advice of Philips (1992) who stated that supervision is about helping the student to be their own supervisor. Ultimately a student's research thesis is their own work and it is their responsibility for arriving at the destination (Lee, 2008). Research supervision is a facilitative process (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004) and in many cases supervisors need to curb the assistance they provide and ensure they act as first line examiner of their student's work (Hockey, 1997). This highlights the importance between striking a balance between intellectual involvement and supervisory styles and control and is a valuable lesson as I take the next steps in my supervisory journey.

The key for me in recognising this lesson was reflecting on my experiences as a supervisor. Such reflection was facilitated through my enrolment in a Research Supervision in Higher Education course. This was a voluntary training course offered free to charge to staff members by the university. My only issue with the course is that it was voluntary. It is unnerving to think that I could have begun doctoral supervision without receiving some kind of formalised training and broadening my thinking regarding the supervision process. I signed up to the course with some very clear objectives in mind. I wanted to know the university supervision policy, its plagiarism policy, and its preferred referencing style. I wanted sample timeframes that I could share with students and examples of successful ethical approval applications. Thankfully the six week course did not provide any of those nuggets of information. Such information can easily be accessed online. Instead the course encouraged me to reflect upon my own understanding of supervision and what alternate understandings were possible. I have since realised that reflection is one of the key processes of developing an underlying understanding of supervision. This reflection can take place individually or collectively through discussion with colleagues (Wright, Murray & Geale, 2007).

The support of experienced colleagues is crucial for the greenhorn supervisor. Traditionally a supervisor's learning process was a solo journey (Hockey, 1997) and was essentially trail by error (Becher, 1996). Learning from making mistakes was the norm (Halse, 2011). In recent years there has been considerable effort to enhance the quality assurance of research supervision (Maor, Ensor, & Fraser, 2016). Training courses such as the one I attended are one facet of this effort. Mentorship between experienced and less experienced colleagues is another. Many issues and concerns be critically analysed through mentorship (Hockey, 1997). Perhaps the most extreme form of mentorship is joint supervision with an experienced colleague.

I am currently in the initial few months of supervising my first PhD student. However again I am doing this taking small steps as I am co-

supervising the student with an experienced member of staff in our faculty. This has provided huge support for me personally. As the focus of the PhD is in my research area, I have been designated as the 'main' supervisor. However it is reassuring to know that there is someone to discuss key decisions with and seek assistance, when and if required. Co-supervision is becoming more and more common (Guerin & Green, 2015) and there are lots of advantages, not only for inexperienced supervisors, but also for the students (Ives & Rowley, 2005). An Australian study conducted by Pearson (1996) found that students who were receiving regular supervision from more than one supervisor had higher levels of satisfaction. The concept of a "developmental niche" for researchers (Dash, 2015) extends mentorship and joint supervision even further and recommends several people and processes to be involved. Such collaboration would dispel the myth of supervision as a solo journey and would further lend to the pursuit of balance in each of the five areas that have been outlined in this article.

Conclusion

Until recently, few researchers have studied the transition from supervisee to supervisor (Rapisarda, Desmond, & Nelson, 2011). This is an important transition and many testing and important decisions have to be made by the supervisor throughout this process. Hockey (1997) determines that the ability to make many right decisions in PhD supervision is often acquired by previous experience. Unfortunately for novice researchers such as myself, the main experience we have is to refer to our own time as a doctoral student. This may be one of the main reasons why, similar to teachers teaching the way they were taught (Lortie, 1975), many supervisors tend to supervise in the same manner as they experienced (Lee, 2008; Doloriert, Sambrook & Stewart, 2012). It is important to break this cycle and realise that just like teaching, there are many different models of supervision. These models and decisions relate to each of the aspects outlined in this article and will vary depending on each individual supervisor, student and situation.

Thus far, I feel my transition from supervisee to supervisor has gone relatively smooth. However I am in no doubt that challenges lie ahead. Whether or not I am equipped to deal with these challenges, only time will tell. Through completing the training course and reviewing literature for this article I have acquired valuable knowledge on many aspects of the supervision process. However I have also learned that perhaps the most valuable and meaningful knowledge can only be generated through continuing and reflecting on my own journey of doctoral supervision.

There is no perfect model of supervision which can be applied in all situations (Beddoe & Egan, 2009). However ensuring that there is a balance of styles, relationships, control, expectations and workload will go a long way to improving a greenhorn supervisor's experience of supervision, and that of their students as well. It is my hope that by documenting some of my own thoughts and experiences, this article will help others who decide to continue the journey and make the transition from supervisee to supervisor.

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