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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Two People, One Path: A Supervisor and Supervisee Talk About Doctoral Support

By Dr. Geraldine Brady and Shirley [Durell](#)...

In this reflective viewpoint we aim to capture the experience of doctoral supervision from the perspective of a doctoral student and a member of her committee for whom PhD supervision was a new experience.

Texts about the professional relationship between supervisors and doctoral students focus on managing each other in order to satisfactorily reach the end goal of a PhD. Our contribution is more interested in the 'messy contingencies' of research, including the fine line of professional and personal relationships between supervisor and student, the influence of gender and of 'non-traditional student' backgrounds within the academy.

Having reflected on four years of doctoral study, we feel that a conversational format best illustrates the relational aspect of our journey. Our intention is to share our experiences with those concerned with learning and working in Higher Education, while contributing to the growing area of reflective practice in research which recognises the centrality of subjectivity in producing knowledge (Letherby *et al*, 2013).

Mutual doctoral supervision experience

Supervisor: When I was invited to be part of your supervisory team I was pleased. I had long been making my research interests known to the postgraduate administrative team that recruit doctoral students at the University.

I was part of a Faculty that was largely focused on business when my skills and experience relate to health and social policy, my profile was somewhat invisible to potential students and they were unlikely to look for me within my department or research centre.

When you were offered the studentship, I was asked to jointly supervise and this was an exciting but rather daunting prospect! I didn't have expertise in your substantive area but having read your proposal I knew I could contribute to the participatory methodological aims of your study.

Being part of a doctoral supervision team also presented me with developmental opportunities in terms of my career and I was keen to be involved in mentoring students. What were your first thoughts about your supervisors?

Supervisee: It is interesting to note your initial apprehension in a lack of 'expertise' in my chosen field of study, as this never concerned me. I was more interested in how I could learn from a sociologist researching in the field of children and young people.

As a Registered Learning Disability Nurse, I have always worked within multi disciplinary settings and I knew that I could also draw from your wealth of experience. When I read your 2004 PhD thesis and other publications I was struck by your application of reflexivity to the research process and the social justice principles that underpin your work. I wanted to follow in your research footsteps.

Supervisor: Knowing that Professor Anonymous had been asked to join the team, as he had a number of PhD completions already, added a new dimension for me. I felt nervous in my role as supervisor and decided that I needed to be very professional to establish credibility. I also knew that I had a lot to gain from watching how the other two committee members directed you. Did you sense any of this?

Supervisee: Anonymous was not present at our initial meetings and I did notice a change in our group dynamics when he joined us; I believe that this was mainly because of his former senior managerial relations with you. As a Principal Lecturer in Social Work, Anonymised name also brought a wealth of experience to the table and in the early days, it must have been quite daunting for you.

Nonetheless, I had already recognised your academic, personal and professional attributes. As a group, you complemented each other. This presented me with an ideal supervisory team scenario to support me throughout my doctoral endeavours.

Supervisor: In those early days I tried to be what I thought was 'professional' with you too. In the role of PhD supervisor I wanted to be taken seriously (whatever that means?) so I thought carefully about maintaining a distance.

What I could not have known was that you would not let anyone be distant. From the outset you asked questions about my home life, family, previous research and relationships with my own PhD supervisors. You talked – a lot – and it would have felt uncomfortable and strange not to answer your questions and share information about our lives.

Supervisee: I didn't mean to be intrusive! I was genuinely interested in how you had developed your career in the world of academia, while maintaining your home life and other personal relations. There were things that I did not feel I could discuss with the rest of the committee, not that

they would not have understood or that they would not have been empathetic, I just felt (at times) more comfortable talking to you.

Supervisor: Do you think it relates to gender? Our journeys as women - entering the academy as mature students from non-traditional backgrounds - led to some sharing of understanding.

Carlene Boucher & Anne Smyth, in 'Up close and personal: reflections on our experience of supervising research candidates who are using personal reflective techniques' state that it is fundamental to recognise PhD supervision as relational: "it is about engagement, interaction and connection in ways that go beyond the intellectual and surface." Doctoral study is not only an intellectual endeavour; it involves the mind, body and self and is an embodied experience.

Supervisee: Yes. In my case, it appears that supervisors' gender mattered. It was about women supporting women and my instinctive need of a female role model (see for example, Jens-Christian Smeby's "Same-gender relationships in graduate supervision")..

Supervisor: Do you remember how passionate you were (and still are) about making a difference for people with learning disabilities? Coming from a traditional nursing background and having worked within a self-advocacy organisation, you had been fighting all of your professional life to get the voices of people with learning disabilities acknowledged, and I choose the term 'fighting' quite deliberately.

Supervisee: How I wish I had met you all earlier! Not everybody takes it as read that there has been (and there still remains) a lot of research that does not necessarily have a 'positive' influence on the lives of people with learning disabilities.

I was excited to do research with the intention that it generate knowledge of use to people with learning disabilities and their supporters in their struggles against oppressive practices (As Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes call it in *The New Politics of Disablement*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). Without your ongoing support, it would have proved difficult to sustain such principles to my research.

Supervisor: I guess it helped that I still felt close to my own experience of doing a PhD. I empathised with the struggles over fieldwork, meeting milestones, the practicalities of writing and the need to manage our conflicting, changing identities.

Being a woman and a mature student from a non-traditional background I know that friends and family's reaction to our studies is not always positive. It is often a time of profound change and those closest can find that quite threatening. More importantly for you was the shift from advocate/employee to researcher.

Supervisee: This 'shift' that you mention did prove difficult for me. Moreover, while people with learning disabilities were at the heart of my study, I missed their expertise and friendship during the concluding part of my doctoral journey.

Your empathy proved to be invaluable and kept me going, particularly in the latter writing stages when I was in the process of re-writing chapters, as I felt that I had no more to give. While I had a strong circle of support in the form of family and friends, I was able to talk openly with you about my more personal issues, which I would not have felt comfortable relating to others, even to my closest relations.

Final reflections – supervisor and student

The transfer of knowledge and expertise over the years of the PhD was not experienced as linear or hierarchical. We both gained from using our life experience as a resource.

Within the context of structural change in the higher ed sector, talk of economic efficiency and increasingly malestream (from the point of view of men) ideas of highly structured and micro-managed doctoral studentships, there can be an assumption that there is a 'right' way of being a supervisor or supervisee. Including the personal within research and teaching experiences stood in contrast to neoliberal notions of student as consumer and Higher Education as a business, with an over-riding focus on output and completion within timescales (see Rebecca Boden, Jane Kenway and Debbie Epstein's *Building Your Academic Career*, Sage, 2005).

Situating ourselves within the process of the supervisory relationship is not for everyone; it might not be desirable for all supervisors to cultivate such a relationship with their doctoral students.

However, it is important to resist managerialist tendencies to force a certain kind of supervisor and supervisee relationship. Supervisors should advocate for alternative ways of co-producing knowledge - through the sharing of ideas, the recognition of the interface of the public/private, reason/emotion, personal/professional and the establishment of an intellectual space for creativity, scholarly activity and emotional labour.

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