



## Opening up the supervision process



### Chapter aims

This chapter begins to open up and examine the process of supervision by discussing:

- whether supervision is important;
- who is involved in the process;
- who supervision is important for ... and why;
- whether supervision is a form of teaching;
- different ways of describing the supervision process.

In different sections we draw on the views of a range of supervisors and students.

### Is supervision important?

Of course, my own answer is yes – otherwise I would not be writing this book. What about the views of others? A book chapter by Hill et al., back in 1994, highlighted several claims made prior to that time by different authors:

- Supervision is 'crucial' (Burnett, 1977: 17; Phillips and Pugh, 1987: 22).
- Supervision is 'pivotal' (Council of Graduate Schools, 1991: 22).
- Supervision is 'at the core of the project' (Connell, 1985: 41).
- Supervision is the 'single most important variable affecting the success of the research project' (ESRC, 1991: 8).

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Most supervisors, and students who have recently completed their theses, would agree with the sentiments behind these claims: supervisors are a vitally important part of the student's development and journey. The purpose of this book is to discuss the role of the supervisor and how students can best work with their supervisors in achieving their aims. We start from the premise that making the most of the supervision process is a joint responsibility, requiring equal commitment from both parties – the onus is a shared one.

### **Others are involved too ...**

Increasingly supervisors are not the only key element. The changing context of supervision, which we look at in more detail in Chapter 2, has brought about at least two changes which directly affect the supervision process and the relationship it entails. Firstly, the relationship is not quite the cosy, behind-closed-doors experience that perhaps it once was. In many cases it is not just a case of 'the student and supervisor' going it alone. One change has been the increase in co-supervision in many university departments which means that the process may involve three people (or even more in some cases I have come across) rather than the traditional two. (I have heard this described as a *ménage à trois* rather than a *folie à deux*).

In addition, students in most universities are signing up for a programme now rather than a supervisor or supervisors – this programme, whether a student is on a professional doctorate or a PhD, may well involve research training (often accredited), residential weekends, study schools, a peer seminar programme and events laid on by the Graduate School, doctoral centre or similar organisation. The doctoral journey has shifted from being likened to the apprenticeship years (with the novice and his master, to use the gendered language of the early days of apprenticeships) more towards a community of practice, in which the student gradually plays a more central part in the community after starting at the periphery. Both these ideas relate to the notion of 'legitimate peripheral participation' by the student (Hasrati, 2005) which we discuss and question later. Perhaps the most tangible or visible difference in the current context (compared to the 1990s from which the above bullet points were taken) is that there are now taught elements in the doctorate, programmes of training (even though that term is not to everyone's liking), a new skills agenda, greater possibilities for peer networking (either face to face or electronically), and new possibilities for collaboration and feeling part of a cohort or a community. In short, the supervisor is no longer the single pivot or crux on which the doctorate hinges (to mix a few metaphors). Isolation and 'cosiness' are to some extent things of the past now, although as we see in later chapters they still need to be guarded against.

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**Who is supervision important for?**

Most students view the process of being supervised as very important for them. As one of the students I interviewed put it:

I think it is important for me – I know from my own experience that after I've met with Jane [pseudonym] I'm really productive for the first few weeks after that. And in the days just before I meet her again I find myself a bit adrift again ... and then we meet and then I'm back on track. We e-mail a lot, almost every day, but it's not the same as actually meeting face to face. And I don't know what she does because she seems to have such a light touch ... but somehow she kind of gets me back on track. I'm puzzled often about what she does; I think she just asks a few, very pertinent, questions?

This student and others I have interviewed commonly use the notion of being 'off and on track':

When I'm 'off track' my thinking seems to wander about all over the place, and I can't seem to focus and go in a certain direction. I can't seem to alight on anything that takes me forward. And that stops after I've met Jane again. I stop wandering about. Very recently I think I do know where my track is going now [after 18 months of her PhD]. My supervisor kept reassuring me that this would happen and that really helped.

I think it's really important. It keeps you on track. It's good to have a time frame and to know that the supervisor will read your work and give you feedback. I can't imagine doing it without supervision. Moving from a taught course to a PhD is a complete change – going from lots of contact hours to very few. Supervision is necessary at regular intervals to ensure that the student is on track and hasn't taken too big a diversion from the question.

We also need to recognise that supervision is important for two other parties involved: the supervisor her or himself and the organisation they work for. Firstly, for supervisors themselves, the rewards may be intrinsic and extrinsic: the process is often a learning experience, a way of helping to keep up to date, sometimes a career development move, and for many a source of personal satisfaction. Equally, the presence of research degree students can provide kudos or status not only to a university lecturer but also to the department or the organisation as a whole. For example, in the research assessment exercises of the past, the presence of a critical mass of research degree students in a department has contributed to the grading of their research culture and environment and ultimately to the income they received.

Some of the supervisors I interviewed expressed their personal views on the importance of supervision:

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I see it [supervision] as being essential in terms of the student, but I also see it as important for me, in keeping my currency in the field; and I think it's important for the University, especially the one I am at here, where the research culture has not traditionally been strong.

I learn an awful lot from my students because they inevitably introduce me to work and reading that I might not have come across from my own bat. But as well as that, some of the people I have supervised have become very good friends ... there is also a lot of satisfaction to do with helping somebody, not only with their academic life sometimes.

I think it's very important for both student and supervisor. It's important for me as an academic because it allows me to learn about parts of my own field that I don't necessarily know that well. But even in a field I do know well they will teach me things because they will take a different line of enquiry, they will often take an interesting methodological approach that I might not know that much about ... and sometimes they will take a conceptual approach that has a lot to teach me. In terms of the student, it depends on the student and they vary hugely, for two reasons. One is that they need to know the rules of the game. They can set off with some pretty free-floating ideas and they have to be reined in – also, ultimately, they have to produce a thesis which can be examined. And I know, having externally examined a lot of theses now, you can tell immediately how good the supervision has been.

Students should remind themselves of all the above points if ever they have feelings of being a burden on their supervisor or being demanding (as I have heard some supervisors describe certain students). Equally, I have heard supervisors tell their student how busy they are: yes, but supervision is part of the job, they are paid for it, it counts towards their workload and it brings recognition and income. It is not voluntary work.

### **Opening up the supervision process**

There has been a history of seeing supervision as something that takes place behind closed doors, between consenting adults – a 'secret garden' to use the popular cliché. As Pearson and Brew (2002: 138) put it, there has been a tradition of seeing supervision 'as a set of implicit and unexamined processes'. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2000: 135) suggested that 'Post graduate supervision – and more generally the pedagogic practices of the PhD – have largely remained unscrutinised and unquestioned.' There has been an assumption that if you can do research then you can supervise it, or if you have been supervised yourself to doctoral level then you know how to be a supervisor. This is about as valid an assumption as the belief that good

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footballers make good football managers (or the equivalent assumption in any sport or area of activity).

This has changed in recent years – and certainly since those articles were written – with the advent of a range of documents outlining the principles of and precepts for supervision, as well as the many publications which we consider in this book which discuss and sometimes theorise the supervision process. The supervision process is now beginning to receive the study and scrutiny that teaching and learning have received over the last century and before. In this book we consider what sort of a process supervision is and how one can make the most of it.

The word ‘supervision’ is in common use, certainly in the UK, but in some ways it has certain, perhaps unwanted, connotations. In many places the term ‘adviser’ is preferred. The verb ‘to supervise’ is related in most dictionaries to the verbs to oversee, to survey and to inspect. The noun ‘supervisor’ is sometimes defined as a person who ‘exercises general direction or control over a business or a body of workmen’ or as one ‘who inspects and directs the work of others’ (*Shorter OED*).

Many students and their supervisors would be very uncomfortable with the language of controlling, surveying, overseeing and inspecting. Some would be more at ease with the idea of ‘directing’, but we will see in later chapters that a delicate balance needs to be maintained between being left alone and being directed.

The varied comments from students and staff whom I interviewed for this book indicate a wealth of views on the supervision process and its importance. A range of descriptors and metaphors for the supervisor are used to express what the process means to individuals: a sounding board, a mirror, an anchor, a torch (leading the way, showing you where to go), a guide, a mentor ...

Supervisors’ views included:

I see myself as a critical friend – I am some people’s mummy too, but not everybody’s.

I respond rather than supervise.

I’m a bit like a tennis coach – you work on different aspects, it’s one to one, you’ve got to help them with style, and they have to compete at the end – well, ‘perform’ anyway, in the viva.

A student I interviewed described her supervisor as:

Like an anchor ... if I’m kind of like a ship, sometimes I can be sailing along quite smoothly, other times I’m in rough seas and I just need to drop the anchor, just to stay still for a bit. And I’m kind of in control: I can decide when

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to pull the anchor up, or decide when to drop it down. It's that real steadying influence that Jane provides. I can get a bit excitable and Jane always calms me down – it's not good to be that excited because then I don't think critically enough.

In summary, people draw upon a variety of metaphors and images when they reflect upon the supervision process. One of the main themes of this book is that no one metaphor, theory or model will fit the activity of supervising or being supervised. Every student–supervisor relationship is different. There is no one template, framework or style of supervision that can be relied upon in guiding supervision or in training people to do it. No one style or format will fit all. One of the supervisors I interviewed sums this up neatly by saying:

When I take someone on I always ask them what they want from me. Everybody is an individual ... and everybody interacts differently with me.

### **Is supervision a form of teaching?**

Many discussions have suggested that supervision is a form of teaching (for example Connell, 1985). Brown and Atkins go further (1988: 115) by arguing that 'research supervision is probably the most *complex and subtle* form of teaching in which we engage'. Writing from a supervisor's perspective I would tend to agree. Supervision is a form of teaching and my own experience is that it requires subtlety, tact, patience, understanding and rapport. In short, it involves both the cognitive domain and the affective (which we discuss fully later). However, many teachers would argue that teaching of any kind and at any level is complex and subtle and is premised on the same requirements as I have listed above. Perhaps the big difference is that supervision of a research degree involves several factors that may not be present in teaching at (say) secondary school level, college or university.

Firstly, it requires the development of a long-term working relationship (some would also argue that the relationship is to an extent a personal one too; in reality, the two are often linked). This is probably more complex and subtle than a one-off lecture or even a lecture programme for a group of 100 undergraduates; certainly and obviously, the supervision of a research degree is a far longer-term experience, especially for part-time students.

Secondly, and unfortunately in my view, the dominant metaphor for teaching at many levels is that of 'delivering': a metaphor that I often call the Postman Pat model of pedagogy. The word 'delivery' is now so prevalent in meetings and committees that it has become hard to avoid. It implies a

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transmission model of teaching: the expert teacher is conveying a commodity called knowledge to the students who lack this commodity (often compared with filling a tank with petrol).

But the supervision of a research degree can never be a matter of delivery. As some of my supervisor interviewees put it:

I see it as a developmental role with the individual, not a transactional role ... it's more intimate, and it's a more direct communication with the individual learner. It's much more a developmental relationship with a peer, or a near peer, rather than with a student in a more subordinated role. That's important because the person who will be the expert in the student's field will be the student, not me. In other teaching, I approach the students as to some extent in deficit that they need some discrete knowledge that is transferred to them.

I think it is a form of teaching because you are kind of guiding somebody through the literature and helping them shape their ideas ... it's different because they have potentially quite a bit more freedom to shape things than, say, a student writing an assignment. The other difference is that, although you learn a lot in any teaching, in PhD supervision you learn a lot more from them. The one-to-one relationship is obviously different to your main teaching and the chance to get to know somebody over three or four years or whatever is much greater. You do have to start with where the students are and their interests ... but having said that you also have to display your expertise. There are things that supervisors know but students don't and that's where there is a kind of formal teaching side to it, in any supervision.

I suppose I don't think of supervision as 'teaching'. But in the sense of my own reflection on what's happened during a supervision session, and how things worked or didn't, and what I've learnt from it and what I would and wouldn't do again then it is a form of teaching. But the power relationship is different to teaching in a classroom – in supervision I don't think of it in that way, or I try not to, because in many instances the students know a great deal more about what they're doing than I do. I see it more as a 'mirror' in a sense where sometimes your role is to reflect, to bounce questions back at them, to be a critical friend – to ask 'what is it you really mean here?' One of the things I ask them to do is to see me as their critical reader. I see my role as being that critical reader and saying 'you've not convinced me yet'.

In most situations, the supervision process involves guiding a student through something of a personal journey. Thus the dominant metaphors for supervision are likely to relate to guidance, companionship (even friendship), navigation, direction and motivation rather than transmission or delivery. A student who enters a supervisory relationship with the latter two models (transmission and delivery) dominating their expectations is likely to be

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disappointed. Equally, the extent to which the other metaphors are taken literally in the supervisory relationship needs to be reflected upon and we return to this later in the book. For example, to what extent should the supervisor be a 'director'? Or even a 'navigator'? One supervisor I interviewed describes his role as:

... a companion, with them on their doctoral journey. So my job is to be supportive, to be open, to be there, to be present. I've never set out to be a 'friend' but I do try to be someone they can rely on and trust – and equally to be honest, as you would expect a friend to be.

### **In conclusion ...**

Supervision and a student's relationship with her or his supervisor are vitally important for success at postgraduate level. But there are other important elements in the journey: peer networks, ICT and library support, critical friends, other academic and administrative staff in the department, the presence of a community of practice and the cohort effect in many professional doctorates. We discuss these in different chapters throughout the book.

Supervision can be seen as a form of teaching, and is complex and subtle. But it differs from other models and modes of teaching at different levels of education and is often described using a variety of different metaphors. No one metaphor or model of supervision will fit all situations. The key features of good supervision in the current context are adaptability and flexibility.



### **Further reading**

- Eley, A. and Jennings, R. (2005) *Effective Postgraduate Supervision*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Johnson, L., Lee, A. and Green, B. (2000) The PhD and the autonomous self, *Studies in Higher Education*, 25 (2), 135–47.
- Leonard, D. (2001) *A Woman's Guide to Doctoral Studies*. Buckingham: Open University Press.