

THE BALANCING ACT

Three Case Stories

Full-Time Students' Experiences of Postgraduate Research

Maggie: What do I need a supervisor for?

Bobby Sue: I just never thought it would happen to me...

Akiko: My supervisor isn't a bit like my Professor in Japan...

Maggie: What do I need a supervisor for?

When I first registered for the PhD degree it felt like a good idea. I now see that I had absolutely no understanding of how much time and what sort of commitment I would have to set myself. The required completion date seemed a long way away and surely I must be able to finish before the set time. I had no idea what I would need a supervisor for. I thought that doing research was a solitary exercise which I would do independently. I suppose I expected to show finished chapters to a supervisor who would make suggestions for minor improvements and correct my inevitable spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. I felt that everything would be straightforward but alas, I was so wrong in making these assumptions. I discovered that the whole PhD experience rests on a straw and that competent and professional supervision is essential.

I made several appointments to meet my first choice supervisor. She was an expert on children learning to read. She had a deep love for literature and was always able to make me feel excited about reading. At the start she was a very important influence on me and was a wonderful antidote to the dreadful, dry, sick approach to reading which the majority of psychologists seem to favour. So having a supervisor was a bit more important than I had first thought but I still felt I was on my journey. It was good to stop and talk occasionally but I was still in control here. I didn't need supporting.

I duly planned a pilot project and spent a great deal of time reading stories to very young children. But something started to go wrong. I don't know why. I can't pin it down, but I suddenly lost confidence in myself. I frequently felt so confused that I experienced difficulty in formulating questions to ask concerning the next step in my research. I longed for someone to tell me, or give me some sort of clue. I became haunted by the idea that there was a particular book or article that would be the golden answer to all my difficulties. I would frequently leaf great chunks of text when I felt I had nothing to say of any value. At this point I started to think well, maybe, my supervisor **can** help me.

However, she didn't seem to see my distress. My confusion and anger at not being able to do this thing which had seemed so easy at the start, and my frustration at not being able to do it by myself, built up until one day I had to leave abruptly from our supervisory session choking back the tears as I turned and fled. The woman who had seemed so supportive so inclusive of me as a colleague now seemed to be part of a club which I could not join. She was an expert in her field but seemed unable to commit to our relationship on a personal level. Where was the independent scholar who wondered why she needed the support of a supervisor?

Meanwhile, my second supervisor had remained in the background and had continued to quietly and unobtrusively try to support me by inviting me to join her seminar group. I had

gone along early on but though I had enjoyed it, I had felt rather distant. This independent scholar thing again. Fortunately as things started to go wrong with my relationship with my first supervisor, the second supervisor could see what was happening and finally it became too much for her and she wrote me a pretty straight letter. Basically, it said, why the hell did I think I could manage on my own and why didn't I come to see her for regular supervision, which in her experience students always needed.

Since that point I think I have gradually learnt how to use my supervisor to help me. It's not easy. I have to tell her what I need to do, like please remind me that at the end of the month I will write a summary of what I am going to do next. It is almost like using someone to be an extension of oneself. So all the emotions that I feel about my study such as guilt about the slow progress or fear of failure, or sudden loss of confidence, are shared. My second supervisor has never let me go away feeling destroyed, although I think we would both agree that I still have a very long way to go. The fact that my research is not a special area of expertise for her is of no importance.

If I had had only one supervisor, the first one, I would have packed it in by now. My second supervisor provided the straw for me to clutch on to so I didn't sink in a pool of self-doubt. I now know what supervisors are for.

Source: The above story was compiled from quotes of student experience in Salmon, P. (1992) *Achieving a PhD — ten students' experience*. Staffordshire: Trentham Books.

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Bobby Sue: I just never thought it would happen to me

I just never thought it would happen to me. To other women, who didn't attend to their relationships, yes it did happen. But not to me. Our relationship was strong. Randy was ready to support me even when at times I felt like abandoning my resolve to pursue my own higher education. When my determination faltered, Randy was there for me. Or so I thought.

I suppose I shouldn't have been so naive. The omens were there right from the beginning. Even from day one, well day minus one, things had not gone as expected. I had enrolled in Harvard to do my PhD, however, on my way to take up this incredible opportunity a close family member in the England was taken ill and so I changed directions and headed for the UK.

Transferring my studies to the UK wasn't as easy as changing the plane tickets had been. I found all my experience in the USA counted for nothing when it came to university enrolment. I had thought the work I had been doing with both gifted and difficult teenagers using creative arts therapeutic approaches had been pioneering work. My colleagues in the US certainly thought so. But in the UK it seemed to act as a block to my entry into university. So I had to establish my UK credentials.

By finding minute openings within the restrictions of my work permit I was able over a number of years to establish a national trainer training program for people working in continuing professional development. I also found a way into the university system but it wasn't easy and I had many pointless hurdles to jump along the way. As my US qualifications were not in the area in which I wished to pursue my postgraduate study I had to start virtually from scratch. What a frustration! The university administration seemed to be doing all it could to block my way. Fortunately, I did have some help along the way. The lecturer who was eventually to become my supervisor was instrumental in helping me over the hurdles and even managed to move a couple off the track to speed my progress. So it was after a long journey that I eventually began my personal quest for a PhD.

Little did I know how this quest would really challenge and change me. Oh yes, I learned a great deal about other people's stories: about how their life and work experience shaped how they made sense of themselves as learners and learning in higher education. But what I could not have envisaged at the beginning was the extent to which I would learn so much about my own story. And having embarked on this journey, it was immensely difficult to turn back. The pressures that such a major undertaking places upon an already busy life in terms of time and space are considerable. But little did I know about the strain my own growth was to place on my marriage. Little significant learning is without pain or struggle. Also, as I came to understand better the critical influences upon my own identity

and started to work through their consequences, my own voice and strengths as a woman became clearer.

There were those who delighted in this development and in my growing courage to express who I was, rather than merely to facilitate others. Others did not find it so easy, including my husband. On the surface, he actively supported my progress. But, sensing his gradual withdrawal, I would often express my concern that he was holding back things that could only damage us in the long term. I used to plead with him to be open, and not to let us go under for the sake of 'just a PhD'. He continued to assert that no, everything was fine. He continued to take the greater share of household tasks. But as he said to a friend several months after we split up he realised how much responsibility I had taken previously for the 'real work' of our relationship. During those last two years of the PhD, I was suddenly not there in the same way. And instead of allowing us space to work through what we were both experiencing in terms of our relationship, and to make informed choices about our future if that was necessary, he chose to find another woman on whom to lean. Who was just starting on her career. Whom he could, once again, set upon the first steps of a journey. By the time I got the PhD, it was far too late. And the damage of so much unnecessary lying and denial, of so much confusion and guilt was immense.

My PhD cost me my marriage.

So was this whole undertaking worthwhile? For a long time, my successfully completed thesis came to symbolise nothing but pain and resentment. I felt that I had indeed compromised something about myself in getting the PhD. I blamed myself for 'throwing away' a relationship. I could not believe that I too had gone the way of so many women whose husbands feel threatened by their learning and go off to find someone young to mentor afresh. But now, at a greater distance, I know that the PhD allowed me to make a journey of which I was immensely proud. The pay-off now comes through how I can express the impact of so much personal and professional learning in my life now – far more fully than I could possibly have done if I had remained with my husband.

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Nerves? Yes.

Fear? Yes.

Excitement? Yes.

My stomach feels a bit peculiar! Maybe it's the different food? Maybe it's the heat? I feel like I can't breathe. Outside it feels like the piercing light would surely go right through me and show everyone what I'm feeling. I know I show my emotions too easily. As my mother always says, I'm a bit too excitable for a girl. But I could be excited this time, couldn't I? I had won a scholarship to do my Masters in Australia. This was my big chance!

It had been difficult to contain my emotions when Professor Kawahira called me in to his office to show me the letter from Monbusho telling me I had been the only person at my University selected for a scholarship. I had kept my eyes on my hands so I wouldn't seem too excited. At first I had thought it was a mistake.

'No, no mistake,' Professor Kawahira had said. 'This is a great honour for our University, and for your family.'

'And for you Sensei,' I said. 'It is your excellent guidance which has made it possible for me to win this scholarship'.

It had been the right thing to say, and Professor Kawahira inclined his head slightly to show that he was graciously accepting the compliment. Most of the time I was terrified of him. He was a good teacher who seemed to know everything that you could possibly want to know about the Romantic period of English Literature. He spoke about the English poets and their poetry as if this was the most important thing anyone could ever hope to learn about in their entire life. He'd also translated the complete works of Alfred Lord Tennyson into Japanese and was also so famous as an expert on Tennyson that he was asked to give papers at literary conferences all over Japan. I knew I had been lucky to have been in the Professor's classes. There was a lot of competition to get into them, especially the Romantic English Literature one.

Despite all this, I was still scared stiff whenever he asked me to come to his office, which luckily wasn't all that often. Once I had gone to collect my major essay. He'd wanted to hand it to me personally, because I'd taken the trouble to find one of the books on Tennyson he'd recommended, and read it all the way through, even though it was in English. When I was standing in front of his desk, even when he was praising my essay, I was still terrified that I'd say the wrong thing. Usually I just said something like 'Thank you Sensei, it is your inspiration which has made me an industrious scholar'. And if I didn't look at him it wasn't too terrifying. Now I was in Australia and tomorrow I would meet my

Australian supervisor, who would no doubt tell me what I was expected to do, and then I'd just do it, and that would be that. My thesis would be finished in no time.

At 2.30pm, right on time, I was waiting outside his office. The day had passed very quickly, with many lectures about what to do with all the enrolment forms, a tour of the library, maps of Canberra, where to get bus books, how to open a bank account, what clubs and sporting facilities there were at the University and so many other things that my head was spinning. I decided to read all the brochures later, my head just couldn't handle any more important information. All I wanted to do now was meet Professor Harding and make a good first impression.

I knocked on the door, and a surprisingly young voice said 'Come in'. What a shock. Professor Harding certainly looked different from Professor Kawahira. What bony, hairy, knees! I had been warned that Australian professors were very informal and dressed casually, but I was still shocked. I couldn't help staring. I tried to imagine Professor Kawahira dressed like Professor Harding. It was no use. Never in his entire life would Professor Kawahira come to university with his legs bare. Exposed for everyone to see!

'You must be Akiko Katsura?' he said.

I nodded, suddenly forgetting how to speak English.

'I'm Steve Harding' he said. 'Take the weight off your feet.'

'Take the weight off your feet', what did this mean? There were no weights on my feet, what should I take off? Suddenly I noticed Professor Harding was pointing to a chair. I sat down relieved. What had he meant? 'Thank you Professor Harding' I said, not knowing how else to reply.

'Steve, Steve,' he insisted. 'If I'm going to supervise your Masters thesis, we'd better be on first name terms.'

'Oh no, worries' I said, feeling proud that my English had returned and I could remember one idiom from the guidebook. I was still worrying about 'take the weight off your feet' though.

Professor Harding was looking as though he was trying not to laugh. I was beginning to think maybe I should have gone to England or America? Surely such a young person could not be a proper professor? And he certainly wasn't serious about his job – you could see that from his clothes and the way he laughed all the time. Professor Harding was still smiling. Did he know what I was thinking? Were my emotions showing again? How will I ever learn the proper way to address people?

Oh no, I must have been daydreaming again. Professor Harding was saying 'I noticed from your application that you're interested in drama?'

'Yes, I had several small parts in the plays we produced at my University in Japan.'

'There's a drama club here, Professor Harding said. "You should join.'

What could he be thinking of? Didn't he know that I was here for one reason only – to get excellent results in my Masters course. I won't have time to design sets for the drama club, or make costumes. I know what I have to do, even if he doesn't. I wanted to start work as soon as possible, not join the drama club. I wish he'd get around to telling me what I had to do. But no, what was he saying now, something about orientation week and

going to the coast for the weekend. I couldn't believe it. Didn't this man ever think about work! Australians certainly had strange ideas about which things were important!

'How about we arrange a meeting for next week?' he was saying, 'Tuesday, 2.30pm again OK with you?' I nodded. Any time was OK with me, and the sooner the better. I couldn't get started until I knew what I had to do. I couldn't afford to waste time.

'OK, we'll make it next Tuesday then, and we can take it from there.'

'But could you please recommend some books I could read before Tuesday'.

'You are keen,' commented the Professor.

I left his office not quite sure whether I had achieved anything or not.

However, to my surprise, I gradually grew to like and respect Steve. He was always ready to help with my thesis, and his casual appearance was very misleading. In fact, I soon discovered, he was a very intelligent, very well read and very well organised person. As he'd admitted in his letter, he wasn't a Tennyson specialist, but he was interested in the period, although not as much as his real passion, Australian drama. When he spoke about plays by people called Ray Lawler, or Alan Seymour, or David Williamson, he made you wish that you'd read them too, so that you could understand what he was so enthusiastic about.

Under Steve's guidance, the focus of my original thesis topic gradually changed. I was now doing a deconstructionist analysis of the role of the female in Tennyson's poetry, and comparing this to a similar analysis of the role of women in contemporary Japanese society. This new topic was fascinating and I looked forward to my fortnightly discussions with Steve, even though he had an aggravating habit of always saying 'Interesting opinion – what's your evidence?' and writing 'Relevance?' all over the chapters of my thesis. At first I had been completely confused at this strange obsession with getting me to think for myself. Then I realised that this was what was expected of Australian postgraduate students.

He wasn't a bit like my Professor in Japan. Steve expected you to think things out for yourself; expected you to argue in defence of what you'd written. He seemed to enjoy the game of arguing with his students, getting them to fight back with all the proper Australian academic weapons, like relevant research, data from the text, and re-interpretations of icons from a different cultural perspective.

It wasn't such a difficult game to play once you'd worked out the rules.

Source: The above story was compiled from the story Akiko's Book in Campbell, A. (1995) *Bridging Cultures*. Canberra: Faculty of Education, University of Canberra. pp.59-83.