

## **THE BALANCING ACT**

### **Three Case Stories**

#### **Supervisors' Experiences of Postgraduate Research**

**Ingrid: Novices learning together**

**Rahni: Coping with Bill – a man always out of time**

**Samantha: It's like a dance...**

#### **Ingrid: Novices Learning Together**

I would call myself a novice supervisor in the enterprise of student supervision at the postgraduate level. I believe this must impact upon the student supervisory relationship so I will start by telling you a little of my experience.

I had hoped that having completed a PhD I would be confident to accompany others in their research and study but this has not been the case. In fact I think it is quite the contrary. Instead of finishing my doctoral studies inflated with confidence and expertise I ended this journey feeling wounded and exhausted, somehow damaged by the lonely, isolating journey. This is not to say that I am not satisfied or proud of the outcomes or skills and knowledge acquired. What I am saying is that inevitably, given that my own student-supervisor relationships are still very recent, I bring to supervision my own experiences, both positive and negative, and must be constantly vigilant not to project this upon students. I expect this will diminish as more time passes and I accompany more students on their unique postgraduate research journeys.

Into the picture come postgraduate students, differing in age, class, gender, culture, life experience, communication, learning styles and study proposals. So far in my experience as a supervisor, they have either been enthusiastic, determined, confident and bursting to get on with what must be done, usually with a fixed idea of how it is to be done. Or, alternatively there are those who are nervous, apprehensive and not quite certain of how to proceed and wondering how it is they ended up this far down the road of higher education. However unless they have already had a previous supervisor, they appear at my office door with few expectations of the supervisor-student relationship. So here novice meets novice but one must appear, and indeed be knowledgeable about whether the project is within the supervisor's scope of expertise rather than ego, whether the proposed study is achievable within the time available and whether the methodology is appropriate- and so a process of clarification and negotiation begins.

To date, it has been the student with less confidence or gusto at the beginning who has been easier to supervise. This student is pleased you are interested in their project, they are receptive to ideas about how the study might proceed and are keen to test out their plans and ideas. They can however be hard to get going and seem to take a long time to make decisions and commit to a project or methodology. Procrastination haunts them and the supervisor as months go by with little to show for our efforts.

On the other hand, there is the student who is loaded like a starter's pistol, wanting to shoot ahead like a speeding bullet. This student may be highly competent in their professional area, have extensive experience in their field of research and may have been conceptualising the study for years. Having to explain everything to a supervisor who seems ever so slow to pick up the gist of the project and needs to hear every detail before

they can proceed, must be frustrating. As a supervisor in this situation this can feel like chasing a hat blowing away in the wind. You can see it just ahead but it keeps racing away from you just as you think you have caught up. What's more, once you do catch it, it doesn't want to stay on your head but keeps getting caught in the wind and blows away again often in the most unpredictable direction. The tendency here is to want to shove the hat firmly into a bag and stride on in my own preconceived direction. This course of action is likely to be most unpleasant and unhelpful for the student.

While all this early negotiation is going on, I am doing my best to practice all that I have read about effective supervision, try to listen carefully and use my academic judgement about the methodological soundness of the proposal, the logistics of completion and the ethics of the project. When disagreement occurs about any of these issues both novices become agitated. I try to centre myself, seek advice from more experienced supervisors and think of the best way of negotiating a change of plan. Either this works smoothly or all hell breaks loose. For one student, despair sets in, a crisis of confidence emerges and the time between supervision meetings gets very long. For the other student outrage emerges at my inability to accurately understand the methodology or procedure and many heated phone calls and meetings may occur urging me to simply allow the project to proceed without delay. I either return to my books on effective communication and student supervision or shuffle into a colleague's office with my own crisis in confidence or stomp about equally furious at the student's un-preparedness to consider what then becomes my well informed and scholarly advice. At the end of the day nobody is very happy. I lament where I went wrong. The student struggles on or seeks a new supervisor- relieved to be free of that ball and chain, nonetheless each having learnt a little more along the way.

I wonder what it will feel like not to be a novice any more, or if such a thing is possible. I have wished there was some formalised process of internship for supervisors. Not just an informal network of colleagues to turn to for support but a gradual and supervised induction for the supervisor. But perhaps others don't experience these difficulties? Perhaps there are some supervisors who start out clear and proficient in the delivery of postgraduate supervision? Who knows- these days most of us are too busy to see our students for long enough let alone each other about our development as competent supervisors. Meanwhile, when the next postgraduate student knocks on my door I will don my professional hat, ask the student to tell me about their study and take a deep breath to see if the wind is going to pick up or if we are in for a long sit.

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The very first Honours student I supervised was exceptional. But I didn't know that at the time. I thought all Honours students were like him. He was self-motivated, exceptionally hard working, always completed agreed tasks on time, and handed me his complete first draft six weeks before the deadline.

My next student was the antithesis. He was a charming chap, always had a ready smile and related well to everyone. He just never did things on time. The first inkling of what I was in for came when I asked him to produce a first draft of his proposal. I received the first two pages; the rest was to come. He knew what he wanted to say but he just hadn't written it yet. When asked to outline what he intended to write, sure enough he understood the issues, had a realistic timeframe and knew how he would go about data collection. In the flurry of activity to organise subjects and collect data those last few pages never did get written.

At mid year he had to give his first seminar. In our group it is expected that students will have a number of practice runs to get over nerves, time the talk, and practise answering possible questions. This helps to ensure that the student's experience is a positive one on the day. It also shows respect for members of the audience who have given up their valuable time to come and listen. Bill's script was fine, he just hadn't had time to make the overheads yet. He was strongly encouraged to practice with his overheads before the presentation. He said he would do them that night. They were finally made the night before they were needed. And his talk ran seven minutes over time. The whole program was subsequently over schedule. He was made aware that his inconsiderate behaviour had inconvenienced others. He promised it would not happen again.

A timetable was agreed upon whereby he would write different components of his thesis. We discussed time management, came up with strategies, and he agreed to implement them, all to no avail. I explained that he was compromising his potential First Class Honours result if he could not devote the time needed to produce a professional product. Getting smarter, I negotiated slippage time in his writing program: one whole month. And each week we lost a little more time until there was no spare time left. Finally, in exasperation, I asked what did he suggest I do if he failed to complete the task set for the following week. He laughed and said 'Confiscate my TV'.

The next week he entered my room with a very sheepish grin on his face. He was clutching his TV. The TV remained in my room for three weeks. What I later found out was he had moved a School TV into his shared office and was watching that one!!

His final seminar was a repeat of the first, only worse. He was still preparing the overheads the morning of his presentation.

As for writing his thesis I had to read it piecemeal, I never saw the completed document as one entity. I only read his first draft, made comments and re-read the final draft all in the last week before it was due. But to do this I had to work until after 2.00 am each night for the whole week. Everything else suffered but as his supervisor I felt obliged to give him my time despite his having created the emergency. And I kept asking myself how I could have avoided the situation. I still can't answer this.

I was due to leave for a conference at 6.00 pm on the Friday before his thesis was due for submission. He had known of this commitment for two months. I eventually left at 8.30 pm but I still had not seen the appendices, reference list, or acknowledgments. I learnt later that he had a whole workforce of fellow students entering data for him over the weekend to have it all completed by 9.00 am Monday morning.

He gained a second class, division one pass.

As a female academic I too often take on others problems to help them out. Women's sense of community and cooperation is exploited, and perhaps even worse, we allow it to happen. But no more for me. I now have a notice on my wall and I try to stick to it:

*Others' poor time management does not constitute an emergency for me.*

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I've had a number of experiences of supervising postgraduates who are also academics. Mostly the experiences can be told as positive stories and that's what I want to focus on here but that doesn't mean that the experiences are simple or that all the stories I could tell would be positive. The main problem that you are confronted with is that these people are often the same age as you, have academic or other status similar to your own, and usually some considerable experience in their own field, which may be very close to your own or may be related more generally through feminist theory or methodology. These people may be in the same institution, in the same faculty or even department or they may be at another institution. However, the complexity of the relationship is always there. Supervision, leadership and mentoring in this sort of situation raises issues around power, responsibility, intimacy and affect - just to name a few!

We have a joint supervision policy in the faculty where I work and that can add in other dimensions as well. The way it works is that both supervisors are actively involved together, which is a bit different to some institutions where only one supervisor deals with the student and the other is there as a back-up during leave and that sort of thing. To simplify things, I am using a situation in this story where both supervisors are feminists. We have been friends for a long time and get along well. We have also worked together in various situations before. There is a lot of discussion in the literature about the familiarity and emotionality of feminist approaches and both of us don't see maintaining distance as part of our way of operating. This means that the conditions are set for a relationship with the woman student who is like ourselves, that is like our friendship but with ambiguity with regards to power, expectations, knowing where the boundaries are at any particular time. And of course things are always changing too.

Supervision is a dynamic relationship and there is an expectation that the negotiation will be constantly going on because the candidate is changing and there are changing circumstances in their work and personal life that we recognise and empathise with. All this requires constant re-working of the expectations and roles and deepens the relationship between you. As more crises arise the relationship either breaks apart or just deepens. Being really empathetic is so hard too, when you know there are problems at work and you know what the situation is like... With a younger non-colleague student you would really make demands about having to stick to a time line and so on, but in this situation you don't feel that you can push and make demands, but at the same time you're sometimes thinking "I did it and why can't they?" We all have these problems and have to manage them somehow.

There is also an ambiguous power relationship too and so many roles. That is so with any student, but in this case with an academic who is a student, you have to be a counsellor and mentor but also an equal colleague while at the same time being accountable for the product - the thesis and its completion. In the process you have to

recognise different power flows in different directions and in different institutions and the politics of gender, and the political climate of your own and the other person's institution. There is also the institutional power thing of whether you choose or get students assigned to you or whether they choose you. Many of the women who are colleagues as well have more power in this respect than other students and know how to negotiate the choosing. That puts more pressure on you if you've been chosen to live up to the selection expectations and being feminist adds another complication in that you feel that your feminist pedagogy always has to be visible to the student in the relationship and the various exchanges.

Commenting on the person's writing, that can be a bit of crisis too. You have to be sensitive about how far to push and when. It's excruciating when the student thinks the last draft is done but 'a few more' things have to be changed and you know that they just want to finish. There is that really hard point earlier too where you have sort of let some things pass in order to get the bulk written and the process or the flow going and then when you start to question and criticise the person can feel a bit betrayed - or you can imagine that they do. Especially when you recognise yourself in this person as a mature and experienced worker having to write for the academic situation and knowing how that felt but as the supervisor responsible for the final product needing to give quite critical feedback to move the person to the potential that you know they are capable of and that they want, even if they don't like it when they first get it. There is a general difficulty of finding ways of telling some-one who is positioned as 'friend', that 'this is not good enough' without damaging the friendship and the whole relationship situation. Sometimes too, the friendship relationship is not perceived the same way by the student and the supervisors.

Expectations about friendship can become confusing when supervising another feminist student, because if you, as a feminist, fail to mentor or become a friend as expected then you are positioned as 'not being a good woman, or feminist or whatever'. You feel sometimes that they want everything of you, a general neediness - that can happen with any student, of course. You are the person they talk to and it is expected that talk will go beyond matters of supervision.

My co-supervisor and I are both fairly demanding we both write all over things with comments and questions. As far as theory is concerned, we enjoy making connections between different theoretical perspectives and just exploring ideas and applications of theories. We recognise that that can be quite daunting for those who are just beginning the exploration of those theories for themselves. But with a compatible co-supervisor who is also a colleague, supervision sessions can become exciting exchanges, mini seminars, where you bounce off each other's ideas around theories, methodology and everything. And a student who becomes comfortable with the way you operate becomes part of that as well. We realise when we reflect on things though, that we want to choose who is the friend, while the student might also be wanting to make the choice to make us a friend! It's so hard because our lives are so full and there are sometimes a few people who you are supervising who are in this category and with the general demands of the role and the job there is not enough space for additional relationships of a sometimes very intense and exhausting nature. Even though, at the same time you know there are probably positive professional aspects and something to gain from a close alliance with a particular person.

Of course, the other side of sometimes feeling inadequate for the expectations loaded onto you is that you get a lot back. Networks, knowledge, and these students are able to pursue a topic with energy and excitement which can enthuse you as well as inform you. One of the really good supervision situations we had was where the colleague (student) seemed to understand all this herself and could see our position as well as her own. She

was always sensitive to the demands and ups and downs that we were going through. She was constantly sending through copies of journal articles or anything that she thought was of interest to us and not just related to her own topic either. We sometimes met over lunch and where you get that more mutual reverse recognition of your own situation the demands are balanced out. She was always organised too, and so we could get through such a lot in a meeting because we all respected each other's time demands, but were generally interested in each other's work. One of the most profound moments for me was when I was doing some research near her home and she invited me to stay with her and her family. One of her children had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and to be there in that family and to sit on the couch and talk to that young person was very moving. I couldn't help but empathise with her as a mother, friend, colleague, student, worker, writer - the whole lot. I think that was a case where I just knew we were friends and I was grateful that the supervision role had made it possible.

If I had to choose a metaphor for the experience of supervision in these situations, it would be that it's like a dance. A swaying this way and that, dynamic, with both supervisor and student responsive, with no strong hierarchy, and lots of give and take. There is no one set approach, its got the creative element of dance too. No one person is always in control or leading and cooperation makes the whole thing happen. It's exciting and a bit anxiety provoking because you don't always know where you will be heading or taken, next.