

# 18

## Making Good Use of Your Supervisor

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Recognize the problems that can happen in supervision.
- Know what to expect from your supervisor.
- Know what your supervisor expects from you.

### 18.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, around twenty-five students have completed their PhDs under my supervision. I don't know the exact number because the hard disk on my PC crashed not long ago and I lost my CV (a lesson to all of us about the need to back up files!).

I am sure that some students have been happier than others about my supervision. Equally, the enjoyment I derived from the supervision experience varied. In the best cases, the student's work would so stimulate me that I seemed to come up with lots of bright ideas and sparks would fly. On other occasions, I felt quite stupid, bereft of good ideas, maybe, I have to admit, a little bored.

I like to think that the quality of my supervisions improved over the years as I became more experienced and also more selective about which students I chose to supervise. Towards the end of my career, I simply refused to take on anybody whom I had not supervised for their MA. That way, I could ensure that my new PhD students had already learned the way I liked (them) to work.

Now my supervisions are limited to one-off meetings during my PhD workshops, usually in Scandinavian universities with business, sociology and social policy students. The students simply send me a brief summary of their research and a few questions which I try to answer. I hope to stimulate them but, of course, a lot will depend on whether any new ideas will work (or even be appropriate) in their home university and discipline. In this chapter, I want to put my experience to work for you.

## MAKING GOOD USE OF YOUR SUPERVISOR

The chapter is organized in the following sections:

- supervision horror stories (it may be good to frighten you at the start!)
- student and supervisor expectations
- early stages of supervision
- later stages of supervision
- standards of good practice.

### 18.2 SUPERVISION HORROR STORIES

The British academic and novelist Malcolm Bradbury has written about ‘the three-meeting supervisor’ (Bradbury, 1988). The first meeting is when this character informs you about which topic you will study. Three years pass before the next meeting which happens when you deliver your dissertation. The third and final meeting takes place after a telephone call from your supervisor to tell you that he has lost your thesis!

Of course, this story has a farcical element. However, like all good farce, there is an element of truth in it. Back in the 1960s, PhD supervision in many British universities had something of this feel about it – as my own experience as a student demonstrates.

Unfortunately, even today, all is not sweetness and light in the supervision stakes. In Table 18.1, you will find a few recent horror stories adapted from the higher education section of the *Guardian*, a British newspaper, between 2000 and 2003.

I hope that these horror stories do not accord with even the slightest aspect of your own experience. If you are just starting out, let me reassure you that, at least at the present time, such happenings are exceptional, not least because supervisors are usually better trained and are monitored by their departments.

Such stories do, however, underline an important point: when writing a dissertation, a bad outcome usually indicates bad supervision.

Later we will consider standards of good practice. But first let us consider what students and supervisors expect of each other.

### 18.3 STUDENT AND SUPERVISOR EXPECTATIONS

Estelle Phillips chose as her PhD topic the PhD as a learning process. Some of her findings are reported in Phillips and Pugh (1994). Although her data was obtained in the UK, I have no reason to think that it does not, in general terms, apply elsewhere.

Table 18.2 sets out Phillips’ findings about the expectations of PhD students.

All the student expectations shown in Table 18.2 seem quite reasonable to me. If you do not feel that your supervisor is meeting such expectations, it is worth raising your concerns at an early stage.

## PART FOUR ● KEEPING IN TOUCH

TABLE 18.1 SUPERVISION HORROR STORIES

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- Everything that could possibly have gone wrong, has gone wrong. My supervisor was a bully and I quarrelled with him. We eventually fell out over working arrangements: I was chastised for arriving late in the mornings, though I often worked till 9 pm. I began to suffer from anxiety and depression. I took time off which only made matters worse.
  - I was within sight of finishing my PhD when my supervisor changed universities. I was isolated and left to plough on alone with my research. Not that I now saw much less of my supervisor. We had not been on speaking terms for some time and I can't even remember the last time we had a supervision.
  - Our department has a very high staff turnover, with most professors leaving in a year or two. I went through three supervisors, each one worse than the last. After my second supervisor left, during my third year, I got someone who knew nothing about my research area. All three supervisors have tried to steer my research towards a topic that they were personally interested in. With each change, there were miscommunications and political manoeuvring to ensure they would not be blamed for lack of progress on my part.
  - My supervisor encouraged me to undertake teaching responsibilities, and I ended up leading some of his courses. Off the record, he was sympathetic to my heavy teaching load, but during progress committee meetings he would blame me for too much time spent preparing lectures when I should have been concentrating on research.
  - My worst experience, and the one that caused me to leave the university, was a personal one. I got engaged and my supervisor said I could return home to get married if I handed in a first draft of my thesis by April. But then my supervisor changed and my next one refused to give me a leave of absence. I was told the decision was 'in my best interests'.
  - I told my supervisor I wanted to complain about his supervision, only to be told: 'You can make a complaint but you won't have a future in science.'
  - The department's idea was, if you are not brilliant, get out.
  - My experience has taught me that most academics have forgotten what it is like to wonder if one would ever actually do research, or to wonder just how research is done, or not to appreciate how large a contribution needs to be so as to be judged original and how one may go about doing it.
  - My supervisor restricted his written comments to 'super', 'well done' and 'perhaps re-work this paragraph'.
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Source: adapted from the *Guardian* (Education Section), 25 September 2001, 23 October 2001 and 18 March 2003

However, you should also know that your supervisor will have certain expectations about you. A good guide to how the land lies in this area is found in Table 18.3.

I suspect that Table 18.3 will contain some items that you may never have thought about. But, yes, it is true that supervisors expect you to be fun to be with. Most want to be stimulated by and, indeed, to learn from their students. Such expectations may, of course, be quite different from your experience. I now consider how your expectations can be converted into (good) practice.

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**TABLE 18.2** STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS

- 
- to be supervised
  - to have their work read well in advance
  - supervisors to be available when needed
  - to be friendly, open and supportive
  - to be constructively critical
  - to have a good knowledge of your research area
  - to be interested/excited by your topic
  - to help you get a good job afterwards
- 

*Source:* adapted from Phillips and Pugh (1994: Chapter 11)

**TABLE 18.3** SUPERVISORS' EXPECTATIONS

- 
- the student will work independently
  - first drafts will not usually be submitted
  - the student will be available for 'regular' meetings
  - (s)he will be honest about their progress
  - (s)he will follow advice
  - (s)he will be excited about their work
  - the student will be able to surprise them
  - (s)he will be fun to be with
- 

*Source:* Phillips and Pugh (1994: Chapter 8)

### 18.4 THE EARLY STAGES

The first few months of working towards a PhD are crucial. If you fail to make a good start, it may be very difficult to retrieve the situation at a later point. Here are some points to think about:

- *Choosing a supervisor:* ideally, you should choose someone whose approach and interests gel with your own. This may be someone whose work you have read or, better still, whose courses you have taken. Alternatively, try to get a look at completed dissertations supervised by this person. Try to avoid simply being allocated a supervisor. Also try to establish beforehand whether your potential supervisor is planning any long trips abroad or other career moves.
- *Do you need joint supervision?:* where your work covers more than one area, it can make sense to have two supervisors. However, tread warily! Not infrequently, joint supervision means that each supervisor will assume that the other is taking care of you. So make sure that there is planning so that you don't fall between the cracks.
- *Combining the PhD with being an RA or TA:* sometimes you will be expected to do some research for your supervisor or teaching within your department.

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If so, again make sure that there is a clear agreement about the extent of this work and the support that you can expect.

- *Getting early direction:* in the early stages, you should expect a lot of support. You should not be fobbed off with a reading list and an appointment in three months' time! Instead, you might expect weekly meetings, based on small tasks, to build your confidence and give you a sense of direction.
- *Being informed:* right at the start of your studies, you should expect to be properly inducted with regard to your department's research training programme and to your rights and responsibilities as a student.

### 18.5 THE LATER STAGES

After the first crucial three to six months, your supervisor should gradually wean you from total dependence. As you become more confident and independent, your supervisor should encourage you to believe that you know more about your topic than they do. At these later stages, the following issues become important:

- *Shaping your writing in a professional manner:* your supervisor should help you move your style of writing to the kind expected in journals in your field. For instance, this may mean encouraging you to cut down the kind of tedious literature reviews you wrote as an undergraduate and to use concepts 'economically'. A few concepts (even just one) applied to your data are generally much more productive than data analysis that is all over the place.
- *Self-confidence:* to be economical in this way you need self-confidence and this is what your supervisor should provide. Where appropriate, you should also be told that your work is 'up to standard' for the degree you are seeking.
- *Setting deadlines:* deadlines and targets can be a source of neurosis for students. However, without them, I guarantee you will be lost. Therefore, at the end of each supervision, you should expect to set a reasonable target and agree a date by which it can be reached.
- *Working with other students:* you should not be confined to your relationship with your supervisor. Expect to be advised about relevant conferences and web sites. You will also meet other students during your research training. Find out which ones have similar topics to yours or are working with similar concepts and/or data. Then organize discussions with them. Even better, ask your supervisor to set up data sessions with other students that they are supervising.
- *Learning 'tricks':* based on a long career of supervision, the American ethnographer Howard Becker has suggested a number of useful 'tricks' that supervisors can employ for your benefit. As he puts it: 'a trick is a specific operation that shows a way around some common difficulty, suggests a procedure that solves relatively easily what would otherwise seem an intractable and persistent problem' (Becker, 1998: 4) (for some of these tricks, try Exercise 18.1).

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- *Advising on publications:* towards the later stages of your work, your supervisor should be a good source of advice about which journals are appropriate for submission of some of your work and about how to organize your presentation for such a setting (see Chapter 27).
- *Giving you a 'mock' viva:* finally, it is entirely reasonable to expect your supervisor to provide a practice dry run for your oral examination (see Chapter 25).

Much of the support that your supervisor can give you should be facilitated by an institutional structure within your department which encourages good practice. I conclude this chapter by discussing such practice.

### 18.6 STANDARDS OF GOOD PRACTICE

As a research student, you have a right to expect the following institutional structures. Although different formats will apply in different disciplines and countries, what follows seems to me to be a minimum requirement:

- An induction session when research training is explained and you get to meet new and existing research students.
- A graduate committee with an identified and accessible chairperson.
- A handbook of expected practice for the supervision and training of research students. This handbook should set out training requirements and the rights and responsibilities of research students. It should also explain what to do if you want to change supervisors or if you have a problem that you cannot sort out between you.
- Written memos to be agreed after each supervision.
- Annual reports agreed between supervisor and student. These to be submitted for review by the graduate committee of your department.

### 18.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The number of students registered for courses involving a research dissertation has increased hugely over the past few decades. One good consequence of this has been that supervision has increasingly become recognized as a professional skill which requires proper training and monitoring.

Of course, getting a PhD, or even an MA, should never be achieved via any methods resembling factory mass production. I hope that there will always be a place for inspiration and lateral thinking. But such features of intellectual achievement should not be a substitute for an institutional structure that offers proper student support and guidance. Let us hope that Bradbury's three-meeting supervisor is a thing of the past!

**PART FOUR ● KEEPING IN TOUCH****KEY POINTS**

- Some students have terrible experiences of supervision. By understanding what produced these 'horror stories', you can try to avoid them happening in your case.
- It is not unreasonable to have a set of clear expectations about the support and advice which your supervisor can offer (and to know what to do if these expectations are not met).
- Supervisors have a set of expectations about you too. Know what they are and try to meet them.
- Your department should have structures of training and of monitoring supervision which offer you the support you need.

**Further reading**

Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh's *How To Get a PhD* (2nd edn, Open University Press, 1994) is a goldmine of practical advice. For an American guide, see Kjell Rudestam and Rae Newton's *Surviving Your Dissertation* (Sage, 1992). Howard S. Becker's book *Tricks of the Trade* (University of Chicago Press, 1998) is a beautifully written account of a lifetime of helping research students to think critically.

**Exercise 18.1**

Here are a few activities which you might ask your supervisor to think about offering you:

- 1 Offering a snap characterization of your work which you can, if you wish, deny and thereby be helped to get a better understanding of what you *are* doing.
- 2 Challenging any generalization that you come up with by asking 'or else what?' You will then probably find that something you thought impossible (about your topic) happens all the time.
- 3 Cutting through purely theoretical characterizations of your work by giving you a limited task which asks you to begin from one situation or data and then to theorize through it. (adapted from Becker, 1998)