

Supervising Dissertation Projects – Expectations of Supervisor and Student.

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SUMMARY

This case study describes, and reflects on, an action research project looking at the relationship between a supervisor and a dissertation student on an in-service Master's course for teachers. The focus of the article is on the initial expectations of both the supervisor and student about their one to one relationship. Both the supervisor and student analyse interview data for similarities and differences in expectations.

Comparisons are made with the work of others who have also studied 'expectations'. The article concludes by summarising how the supervisor changed her practice as a result of analysing the interview data and being part of the action research project.

INTRODUCTION

The action research reported here focuses on the experiences of one supervisor and one student who was undertaking a dissertation at Master's level. This was one aspect of a larger research enquiry into teaching and learning on a continuing professional development programme for serving teachers. As part of the research enquiry a small group of colleagues in a University Department of Education decided to investigate the processes of their supervision of dissertation students. This group met regularly, providing a forum for discussing concerns and difficulties in supervision and also for the sharing of practice in a mutually supportive atmosphere. This investigation took place over one academic year, although the aspects of the study reported here took place during the early part of the academic year. The focus

was on the initial expectations of the student and the supervisor regarding the supervision process.

As Exley and O'Malley (1999) have pointed out, it is clear that there is no 'right way' to supervise but, at the heart of the action research study was a shared desire to improve the supervision process. This was not in response to a perceived problem but developed from a concern to engage in professional development that would enhance student learning on the dissertation programme. Much of what happens between tutors and students is 'semi-public' in that colleagues are often present during each other's lectures and are able to give feedback. With the supervision of research students the one to one relationship between a tutor and a student makes evaluation more difficult.

As supervisors we rely on a "gut" reaction that we "get on well" with the student, or that we give constructive feedback, for example. However, when a student does well is it because that is capable anyway or has the supervisor's input made a difference? Research students always appear grateful for time spent with them and suggestions made by their supervisors. The only feedback comes from the students and, if they complete the dissertation and it is of a pass standard, they are pleased. Who is to say whether they could have done better if they had experienced different supervision? These were the thoughts which were explored within the action research group and which prompted me to focus on the expectations which both student and supervisor bring to the supervision process.

Initially there was a concern that some of the students under my supervision were

already known to me while others were not. How did my knowledge of them as students and people affect the supervisor / student relationship? There was concern that knowing students and judging capability or ability before the first dissertation tutorial would affect expectations of their standard of work. The student who was being supervised as part of this project was unknown to me until the time that she began her dissertation. While it was interesting to speculate on this aspect, the major focus came to be the expectations which the supervisor and student have of each other in their relationship and the process of supervision. As the students on this in-service programme for teachers are mature people, often with much experience themselves, the relationship between supervisor and student is not that of a traditional student / teacher relationship. It is easy to assume that we share expectations as they are fellow professionals and there is a “collegial” dimension to the relationship. This may inhibit the aspect of the teaching / learning process where the teacher and the student “get to know each other” as we assume a shared understanding.

Exley and O’Malley (1999) identify a number of aspects of “successful supervision” (p48) the first of which is “clarifying expectations”. Phillips and Pugh (2000) emphasise the link between effective supervision and the clear understanding of the students’ expectations: “For supervisors to improve their performance, they must understand what their students expect of them.” (p161)

Within the programme where this research study took place students are, as the final part of MA course, required to research a topic which is of interest and relevance to them professionally, and will serve as a basis for writing a dissertation. This is facilitated by a one-to-one relationship between an individual student and a

supervisor. The supervisor and student in this study had similar professional backgrounds in post-compulsory education and training.

The action research process was facilitated by a research assistant who interviewed five students and their supervisors three or four times during the year, giving feedback to the supervisors following the interviews, with the agreement of the students. What is reported in this article is based on the first of those interviews which took place at the very early stage of the development of the student/supervisor relationship, and had a focus on 'expectations'. The responses are reported below.

WHAT ARE THE EXPECTATIONS?

This section is based on analysis of the transcripts of the first interviews of the supervisor and the student which related to expectations. It is followed by some examples of what other researchers have found about the expectations of supervisors and students.

a) Data from the interview transcripts

In the first interviews both student and supervisor were asked questions directly related to expectations in the early stages of the supervision process:

Questions to the student:

- What are your expectations of your supervisor?
- What do you think is expected of you?

Questions to the supervisor

- What are your expectations of a student whose dissertation you supervise?
- What would you expect a dissertation student to learn?
- What would you expect of a dissertation student in the initial phase of dissertation study?

They were also asked questions about strategies for supervision / responses to the first tutorial which are related to expectations.

The supervisor, in analysing the data, divided the responses into three categories:

- similarities
- differences
- aspects mentioned by only one party

Insert Table 1 about here

As a supervisor I would hope that my expectations would also be those of the student. From a personal viewpoint it was good to see that there were five items which I classed as similarities (although there was a difference in interpretation about time scale, where I thought I was making sure she was clear about the time frame but she thought I was concerned about this) with only one difference and one each which was only mentioned by one party.

Analysis and interpretation of data from interviews can be affected by the researcher seeing what she wants to see. In an attempt to give greater validity to the data the student was asked to look at the transcripts and do her own analysis of them. The research assistant had asked if she would be willing to do this and, as she agreed, a telephone call, followed by a letter outlined what I was asking her to do. This was kept deliberately vague as I did not wish to influence how she might interpret the interview transcripts.

“What I would like you to do is to look at the transcripts (enclosed) of the first interviews we each did with [the research assistant] and interpret what we both said with a focus on expectations, which was the main content of those first interviews.” (extract of letter sent to student along with interview transcripts)

The student saw more similarities than differences:

Looking at the interview notes of both interviews, it is clear that there were some similarities differences were few. (Student’s written comment)

Rather than look at the similarities and differences overall, she chose to focus on various categories and look at the expectations of the supervisor and student. Her categories, along with supervisor and student expectations, are summarised in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

In her conclusion the student picks up on the difference, which appears a number of times in table 2, of the student wanting / needing direct instruction from the supervisor while the supervisor “thought she should be helping the student to come up with her own answers, enabling her to clarify her thoughts and focus on the aim of the research”. The student does, however, acknowledge that this was at a very early stage in the tutorial process and she wonders whether later interviews would show any development in the need to receive direct instruction.

The student concludes by saying that although the two parties saw things from their own perspective “nevertheless [they] appeared to have many similarities in their expectations of the dissertation tutorial and each other”. Reviewing the student’s interpretation of our expectations, my perception is that there are more differences than similarities. This is interesting as the analysis which I did focused on the similarities, indicating that I had initially interpreted the transcript in a way that emphasised the similarities.

COMPARISONS WITH THE FINDINGS OF OTHERS

In the view of Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (1997) “successful, pleasurable higher degree supervision is based on making explicit to yourself, and to the students, what the processes and issues are.” (p1) They state that “many of the problems that arise stem from supervisors thinking that students know things they do not know and vice versa, or both.” (p1) Phillips and Pugh (2000) focus on supervising the PhD student and, while there are obvious differences between most PhD students and the part time, in-service student in this study, there are similarities in the importance of expectations. Phillips and Pugh have focused on what supervisors expect from their

students and what students expect from their supervisors. There is no indication of the methodology used to arrive at these findings but they claim they were the same “regardless of discipline” (p161).

Insert Table 3 about here

I have tried to match the expectations of supervisors and students into similar categories as in table 1. Some of the expectations would not be relevant to the situation being studied here. For example, all the students in our programme are already working so the last student expectation would not be relevant, although many students reported in interviews that they saw gaining a Masters Degree as improving their career prospects. Also the students on our programme are often very vague in their research proposals (or change their focus) so it is not always the case that the supervisor will have an in-depth knowledge of the subject area being studied as would be expected and necessary with a PhD student.

Students in both studies expect the supervisor to be constructively critical and to give guidance on what to read or put information in the student’s path. Also from the students’ viewpoint, the student in this current research “wanted to receive guidance on what to read” while those in Phillips and Pugh’s (2000) study want their supervisor to have “sufficient interest in research to put more information in the student’s path”. (p171). Supervisors in Phillips and Pugh’s (2000) work want students to be “excited about their work” (p105) while the student in this research said she felt “enthusiastic” about it - feelings which could be deemed to be similar.

With regard to written work, we find that both sets of students have the same expectations while both sets of supervisors have similar expectations - see table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Hetrick and Trafford (1995) carried out “quantitative and quasi qualitative research” (p37) with students on a Masters programme for managers. While their methodology was very different from that used in this research their students were similar in that they were studying at the same level and they were employed, undertaking a dissertation as the culmination of a programme of study. Hetrick and Trafford’s students and supervisors were surveyed about their expectation before the dissertation process began. As they used questionnaires (100 - 75 students / 25 supervisors), Hetrick and Trafford could subject the responses to numerical analysis.

In common with my approach to analysing the interview data they divided their analysis into “mutually similar expectations” (p38) and “differing expectations” (p39) plus “findings from open ended questions”(p39).

Insert Table 5 about here

Comparing my own findings with those of Hetrick and Trafford (1995) gives further insight into what are the most important aspects to consider regarding expectations. Critical review of students’ work is mentioned by their students and supervisors and by the student in this research. Hetrick and Trafford’s students and supervisors expect supervisors to “set strict timetables for the completion of dissertation” (p39) while in

this research, the time scale is mentioned by both parties but with some difference in interpretation as mentioned above.

Lastly Hetrick and Trafford's students and supervisors believe that supervisors would have a "working knowledge of research methodologies" (p39) which is also mentioned by both parties in this research. In the present study the student expects the supervisor "would have experience and give guidance on methodology" while the supervisor expects the "student to learn how to do research".

Hetrick and Trafford (1995) identified a difference in student/supervisor expectations as to how much preparatory work should have been done by the student before the first meeting. Their finding was that supervisors expected students "should possess a research statement before first meeting" (p39) while their students generally expected the first tutorial to focus on developing a research statement. In contrast, in my study the supervisor expects the student to "think about it before tutorial ... have thought about what they want to know" but the student in this study said she "actually did some work (before the first tutorial)" showing this as a similarity rather than a difference in expectation.

CONSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SUPERVISORY PROCESS

Action research is about adapting practice in response to analysis and critical reflection. It is about "attempting to have new thoughts about familiar experiences" (Winter, 1996, p14). My reflection on the analysis of the data from the interviews and their interpretations, in addition to looking at what others have discovered about

expectations, improved my understanding of this aspect of the supervision process. Rowland (2000) stresses the link between effective teaching and understanding “what and how students are learning.” (p8). He views the process of enquiring into one’s own practice as one which leads ‘directly’ to improvements in the quality of teaching (p8). I feel strongly that my practice has changed as a result of my involvement in this process. Specifically, it has led me to formulate the following targets for developing and improving my practice for the initial tutorial with dissertation students:

i) Discuss expectations with students at the beginning of the relationship

I now ask students to come to their first tutorial not only with a clear idea for the focus of their study but also to have thought about what they expect from me as their supervisor. I ensure that there is time in the first tutorial for discussion about our expectations of each other.

ii) Do not focus on time scale so early on

From the beginning of the tutorial process I have been at pains to point out to students that they have a very short time scale for the completion of their dissertation. I have found this to be particularly important when I am supervising students of whom I have no prior knowledge. Although I always thought that I was being helpful in emphasising the shortness of time and, therefore the urgency for getting on with the work, my study has shown that such a strong emphasis on time management early in the development of the supervisor-student relationship can be off-putting. In response to this I have developed a more flexible approach. I no longer focus on this element from the beginning but, instead, ask the student to provide me with an outline

of their working practices in relation to the research they are undertaking.

iii) Emphasise the importance of the research improving professional practice

This aspect was not something I have emphasised in the past but it now has an enhanced role in the dissertation process as a whole and was of obvious importance to the student in this study. It is now my practice to emphasise from the beginning that the chosen focus should be related to the development/improvement of the student's professional practice.

iv) Develop more structured tutorials

My style of supervision has been that of allowing the students to shape the tutorials according to their own concerns. In the light of the findings of my study I have begun to structure tutorials more firmly whilst taking account of the needs of the students by asking them, prior to each tutorial, to identify aspects they wish to include. This allows me to prepare for each tutorial and also encourages the students to think about what they want to gain from each tutorial.

v) Introduce strategies for encouraging more independence

I see it as part of our job as supervisors to guide the students through the experience. We have the expertise and the experience so, inevitably, there will almost always be some degree of dependence. The key professional judgement for supervisors is in knowing how much pressure to give and how much freedom to encourage. I am aiming to strike a balance between encouraging independent thinking and creativity and ensuring that students understand expectations regarding conformity, for example

regarding presentation. I now make it clear to students at the outset that I expect them to become progressively more independent and that they should be developing and presenting their own ideas through their dissertation. I try to ensure that a part of some tutorials is devoted to discussing ideas rather than the technical aspects of the dissertation.

My participation in the supervisors' action research group helped to ensure that my research into aspects of my supervision was 'kept alive' through regular meetings which provided support and encouragement from colleagues, and engagement in a continuing, structured debate and discourse on the subject. However, in order to maintain my own focus on the strategies I have developed I have produced a checklist with key points to remind me of aspects to discuss with students during the initial contact and first tutorials. I have also decided to keep a diary/log of meetings with at least one dissertation student in relation to these strategies. I may tape-record meetings and ask colleagues from the action research group to observe one of my tutorials. I have yet to explore effective ways of evaluating the impact of my new supervision strategies on my students.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Marian Woolhouse is a Senior Lecturer within the Department of Education at the University of Hertfordshire. She is involved in teaching on and managing Post-16 and Secondary Education courses as well as supervising students undertaking dissertations as part of both degree and postgraduate work. She was part of an action research group conducting research into the supervision of dissertation students.

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Table 1 - Expectations as analysed by the supervisor

i) Similarities of expectations / strategies, responses

Supervisor	Student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to enhance knowledge of the topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to learn more about the topic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> student to think about it before tutorial student to show some commitment - have thought about what they want to know 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> actually do some work (before first tutorial)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to ensure the student knows time frame 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tutor concerned about time scale
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to act as general advisor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tutor to give guidance on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> time scale feasibility what to read correct structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to act as facilitator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to give constructive criticism

ii) Difference in Expectations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have clear focus –the supervisor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> not clear about what to do (tutor helped focus and recognise limitations) –the student
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iii) Mentioned by only one party

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> student learns how to do research to make sure students are clear about what they are doing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improve own practice
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Table 2 - Expectations as analysed by the student

Category	Supervisor expectation	Student expectation
Literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She wants me to think about what literature to look at 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wanted to receive guidance on what to read
Aims of research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She tries to get me to think about aim 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had area of work but wanted help to focus
Carrying out research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She wants the me to learn how to research and apply it to chosen topic 	<p>I expect supervisor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • would have experience • to give guidance on methodology and time scale as I am uncertain what is feasible
Role of supervisor	<p>She tries to be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supportive • sounding board, • facilitator • general advisor 	<p>I expect supervisor would have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening skills • empathy • professional skills and background • knowledge of research subject in order to offer guidance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope supervisor would have sense of humour
Written work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She like to see some early on in process of supervision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I expect supervisor to give constructive criticism
Focus	<p>She expects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • commitment from me • some thought about what I want to do • me to have a clear focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I expected help to focus and recognise my limitations
Organisation of tutorial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She wants to explore what has been done since last tutorial • She is reactive rather than proactive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I found first tutorial helpful • Supervisor kept me on track, suggested ways of opening up research. • We agreed what to do before next tutorial
Early stages	<p>She thought the tasks were to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure outline completed • get me to be clear about aim • be realistic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt supervisor concerned about my ability to get things done in time scale • I felt enthusiastic but a bit daunted

Table 3 - Expectations. Adapted from Phillips and Pugh, (2000),

What supervisors expect from their students	What students expect from their supervisors.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to be independent even though some aspects demand conformity • follow advice given when at the request of a student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to be supervised
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • produce written work this is not just a first draft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read their work well in advance of tutorial
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have regular meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be available when needed • structured tutorial leading to relatively easy exchange of ideas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be honest when reporting progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be constructively critical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be excited about their work, be fun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be friendly open and supportive
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good knowledge of research area • sufficient interest in research to put more information in students' path
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sufficiently involved in their success to help get a good job at the end

Table 4 Students' and Supervisors' expectations of written work

	Expectations of supervisors with regard to written work	Expectations of students with regard to written work
This study	like to see some written work early on in the process	have constructive criticism (or written work)
Phillips and Pugh's study	produce written work which is not just a first draft (p102)	be constructively critical (p167)

Table 5 - Expectations. Adapted from Hetrick and Trafford (1995)

Mutually similar expectations - of the six aspects identified three are relevant to the current study:

- supervisor to review the student's work in a critical way
- supervisor to set strict timetables for the completion of dissertation
- supervisors to have working knowledge of research methodologies

Differing expectations - of the four aspects identified only one is identified in the current research

	Supervisor	Student
• students should possess a research statement before first meeting	72.7%	43.2%