Making the most of the relationship with your dissertation supervisor

Students who undertake a dissertation will be allocated a supervisor, ideally according to shared areas of interest. Relationships between students and supervisors will, to some extent, be determined by how they understand roles and expectations, so it is important to clarify these from the outset. Another important facet of the relationship is to ensure that while students receive adequate support, it fosters independence and does not produce dependency. If the relationship is conducted properly, both parties can benefit from it; students will maximise their chances of success and achieving the best possible grade, while supervisors will use their students’ work to enhance their own understanding of the subject matter.

This article explores how to make the best of the supervisory relationship.

Defining supervision

Although it has a long tradition in psychology, guidance, counselling and education (Agu and Odimegwu, 2014), there is no clear definition of supervision. According to Kimani (2014), the role of supervisor is multi-faceted and can be described as that of a foreperson, overseer, coach, facilitator and coordinator. Supervisors therefore need a range of personal and professional qualities. They also need to provide emotional support, which Strandler et al (2009) consider to be intrinsic to the role.

Harrison and Grant (2015) claim that hierarchy in the relationship remains the default position. Their view is echoed by Kimani (2014), who considers the relationship between student and supervisor on a hierarchical basis. However, this is not necessarily helpful. It may be better to see the supervisor-student relationship as a mature and symbiotic one in which each has responsibilities to the other, rather than one being entirely dependent on the other – which may be unhealthy.

The role of supervisor is certainly far more than just being a sounding board for ideas. A more encompassing definition could be: someone who works with individual students throughout their dissertation to provide emotional, academic and personal management support.

Nurturing but challenging

It would be unfair to expect supervisors to be experts in all subjects or areas. Rather, their level of knowledge and interest

In this article...

- Complexity of the dissertation supervisor role and supervisory process
- Potential issues between student and supervisor
- Guidance for students on how to handle the relationship with their supervisor

Key points

Dissertation supervisors provide emotional, academic and personal management support to their students

Students and supervisors should agree from the outset what they can expect from each other

Students should endeavour to attend meetings, submit work on time and reflect on the process and learning

Supervisors should be supportive and nurturing but also challenging, and avoid creating dependency

There is emotional labour involved for both sides, and this should be acknowledged as part of the process

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Abstract Writing a dissertation can be stressful; one of the keys to success is for students to have a positive, fruitful relationship with their dissertation supervisor, whose guidance can be a great asset. Making the most of this important relationship starts with meeting the supervisor early in the process to agree on roles and expectations. This article, part of an occasional series on study skills, gives an overview of how students and supervisors should handle the process, what each party’s responsibilities are, and how to resolve potential conflict.

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should be such that they develop a deeper understanding of the subjects their students are writing about as dissertations progress. Supervisors should have an inherent interest in learning through systematic enquiry, be student-focused and have a personality that enables them to be both nurturing and challenging. They should not be an unquestioning emotional prop with a need to demonstrate superior knowledge in all things: that simply encourages an unhealthy dependency.

Supervising a student’s dissertation is by any measure a sophisticated role, the relationship with the student being at its core. For both student and supervisor, it is paramount to invest in that relationship. The first step is to meet as early as possible to agree on principles for their shared journey.

Who provides the knowledge?

Todd et al (2004) investigated students’ perceptions of the experience of undertaking a dissertation and found that “a strong consensus existed among respondents that the role of the supervisor is to give academic guidance on managing the dissertation, to motivate and encourage and to possess (and communicate) academic expertise in the area of the dissertation”. However, the idea that the supervisor should provide academic expertise in the topic area is at odds with the idea that a dissertation is mostly about process. It is important to establish this principle at the outset to ensure the student does not consider academic expertise from the supervisor as a prerequisite.

Ensuring students understand their supervisor’s role will avoid the risk of disproportionate demands made on particular staff and the expectation that supervisors will be able to ‘fill in gaps’ in a student’s knowledge. If the idea of a student-led dissertation is followed through, then students will provide the knowledge as part of a dialogue with their supervisor. Interestingly, supervisors who informed Todd et al’s study (2004) pointed to a mismatch between their views and their students’ expectations of responsibility and autonomy. An early meeting is needed to discuss roles, clarify expectations and agree on markers of progress so that each party is aware of what they can expect of the other. Some supervisors insist on a written learning contract, which is revised after each supervision meeting.

One-to-one, group or remote?

One question to address during these early negotiations – and they should be negotiations rather than unilateral decisions – is whether to engage in one-to-one or group supervision. Both have their merits.

Individual supervision may enable less confident students to reveal what they perceive as weaknesses to their supervisor, which would find more difficult in a group. Similarly, if students experience personal difficulties, they may be more inclined to talk to their supervisor about them and their supervisor may find it easier to address them.

Some students may feel that one-to-one supervision is better, but this is not necessarily the case. According to Akister et al (2009), studying in a group kept students engaged with their topic, whereas students who had one-to-one supervision were, midway through the process, less enthusiastic about their topic and less interested in developing skills.

Highlighting the merits of group supervision, Akister et al (2009) note that if students plan to work with others after graduating, then undertaking group work during their studies is invaluable. In that scenario, the supervisor plays a maintenance and overseeing role while students organise themselves, help each other choose and understand research methods, share resources and discuss literature on common areas of interest. Sharing ideas with other students can be useful (Biggins, 2015) and constitutes an informal element of supervision and peer support. When supervision is on an individual basis, introducing some group-based supervision can have advantages, particularly when students share methodological interests, when it can save time and foster peer support.

If face-to-face contact is not possible an online learning format can be agreed, but it must be noted that academic learning is essentially a human endeavour and arguably benefits from human contact to be successful. The student and supervisor need to be able to discuss issues as they arise and examine what works best to move forward. To do this via electronic means only is likely to lead to misunderstandings or missed opportunities, as the subtleties of face-to-face communication will be lost.

Rules and behaviours

Regardless of whether supervision is one-to-one, group or remote, the principles of relationship management remain broadly the same. Students need to assume some responsibility for reflecting on their needs and communicating them to their supervisor, to clarify what is reasonable and achievable (Harrison and Grant, 2015).

Supervision without rules can create problems. Both parties need to be clear what is expected of them and what they can expect of each other, and there should be freedom on both parts to challenge something that is unclear or contradictory. Unless student and supervisor feel comfortable with that, there is a risk of skimming over issues that could weaken the dissertation.

Students must learn to recognise and avoid unhealthy dependency. They may at times feel lost, confused or out of their depth, but they should not rely on their supervisor for a solution. Sometimes students will need to express these feelings so their supervisor can help them to work through them. The relationship can become quite intense and involved: both parties should recognise this and work towards detachment when the end of the work is in sight.

Organisational skills

If students are disorganised, it is likely to reflect in the end result. Akister et al (2009) found that students with one-to-one supervision were worried about ‘time management’ (67%) and ‘ability to structure the dissertation’ (90%). Considering the competing demands of course work, student life and making ends meet, many students find time management difficult. If they run out of time, they may come up with excuses for not meeting agreed deadlines. An effective supervisor will recognise this and should challenge excuses, and agree actions.

Difficulties around the structure of the dissertation are easier to solve because there is often a template to follow that is...
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provided by the university; if no template is provided students may consider following the guidance offered by Lowry (2017).

Good supervision will thrive on throwing in some elements of challenge to the mix, developing insights, and enabling students to manage themselves as learners. Organisational skills must be refined, and will bring tangible learning benefits – about the topic and about oneself.

Focus of the dissertation

Determining and refining the focus of the dissertation is essential and will be useful for the supervisor. Refining the topic of a dissertation is often the most difficult part of the process; once this is done, the dissertation should unroll relatively easily (Lowry, 2017).

Even after the topic has been determined and agreed, it may be necessary to refine it and re-discuss feasibility, resources and relevance. This aspect of the relationship may be described as using an intellectual knife to pare down the work to something feasible. As this is partly a reflective process, students might find it helpful to use a model for reflection (Lowry, 2016).

After the focus has been determined, students need to consider how to actually conduct their research. In simple terms, method is what you use to achieve a goal, and methodology is your understanding of that method. Students will also need to think about the tools and resources that they and their supervisor may need. This needs to be discussed early in the process, and students must be prepared to be flexible if there are resource constraints.

During and after meetings

Supervisors usually allocate a finite amount of time to each student, but these allocations are generous compared with time teachers can afford to spend with students on other course work, so students should take full advantage. Students should endeavour to never miss a meeting unless they have good reason, as this will only annoy their supervisor, who will have many other students to consider.

Good supervisors will plan each meeting so there is time at the end to summarise what has been discussed and agree on actions for the next stage; they will also ask students to submit a written summary of each meeting with action points; this may seem like unnecessary additional work but is worth the effort. Post-meeting notes help both parties keep track and provide an audit trail of the work process and of issues that arise; they also allow students to crystallise their understandings and provide a record of what needs to be done, which will form the basis of the next meeting.

During and after each meeting, students should make notes of what they have learned about themselves, the process and the topic. Accumulated insights can be useful to include in the summary, conclusion or post-dissertation narrative. A post-dissertation narrative may be appended to the work, and details how the student’s learning has developed. It will not normally be examined as part of the dissertation, but will be a useful appendix in the case of doubts over marks awarded, especially where examiners conflict in their assessment, so is well worth including. Notes and reflections are never wasted, and will provide a stable focus for student and supervisor.

Notes should include details of agreed action points, and a measure of how these are to be demonstrated at a following meeting. It is easy to forget details of what has been discussed in a meeting, and something that has been misinterpreted can easily start a chain reaction of mistakes, so at the end of a meeting students should check their notes with their supervisor.

Situations of conflict

For undergraduate dissertations, the allocation of a supervisor is often loosely based on the supervisor’s topic interests, not necessarily on elements such as personal qualities or personality. In an ideal world with unlimited resources, qualities and personality would play a role, but in many academic environments, staff are already extremely busy, so supervisor allocation may be driven by more pragmatic factors.

Given the complexity of the supervisory process, and students’ potential anxieties about completing a dissertation, situations of conflict may arise. If students feel that their assigned supervisor is not suitable, they should talk to them to identify and discuss possible issues, and how to work together. If either party feels this is not achievable, they should speak to a more senior staff member to negotiate a mutually satisfactory way forward.

Conflict must never be used as a stick with which to beat someone you dislike personally, or to deflect from your own anxieties. Supervisors are there to support students, not to be used as scapegoats for their shortcomings. If conflict arises, students should spend time in reflection (Lowry, 2016) and consider sharing those reflections with their supervisor.

Emotional labour

The work students undertake with supervisors can be defined as emotional labour – that is, how people deal with feelings and how feelings are controlled and displayed (Johansson et al, 2014). Strandler et al (2009) also consider supervision to be an emotional process. Johansson et al (2014) focus on doctoral students, but all students may have emotional concerns over their work.

It is not uncommon for students to feel stressed while working on a dissertation, and they sometimes blame their supervisor when things go wrong. It may be tempting to do so, but before you start blaming someone else, take a step back and reflect on your feelings and what may have caused them. Problems in the relationship might be due to poor guidance or conflicting expectations, which underpin the importance of establishing early on what both sides can expect from the relationship.

The student’s experience includes both ontological (identity and being within the process) and epistemological (knowledge and meaning) elements that inform learning. Students would benefit from incorporating reflective elements of their experience and emotional responses in the conclusions to their work. This should be discussed with the supervisor to check what is expected and what is acceptable.

Supervisors’ concerns

Supervisors may have concerns of their own; many report that students are unable to synthesise information, think conceptually, structure their writing or write at an appropriate language level (Lee and Murray, 2015). Some may find that students keep coming back to them apparently having learned nothing from a previous set of corrections or comments. Supervisors may also encounter students who repeatedly fail to submit work on time (which may indicate that there are problems with writing it up). These problems may be compounded in some disciplines; in healthcare for example, students may be trying to juggle priorities between clinical practice and the academic arena.

The best way to manage tensions is to be open and honest with each other and, if there is no way forward, to agree to bring in a third party. This might be a manager or senior academic, who should listen impartially to the concerns of both parties and, if there is an irretrievable breakdown in the relationship, seek a replacement supervisor. However, this should be a last resort, as it will inevitably delay the student’s progress. Ways of dealing with difficulties should be negotiated at the outset.
Summary
Supervision is a complex process that makes demands of supervisors and students alike. You can do much to ease the process by agreeing roles and responsibilities with your supervisor from the outset, and sticking to your side of the agreement. Make sure you do the work required after each meeting and do it on time. Try not to make excuses – if you do, excuses are probably all you will get out of the process. Use your supervisor consistently. Make notes of points to discuss, and specify ideas that need to be explored at future meetings; what Wisker (2012) calls the creation and contestation of knowledge. Box 1 lists recommendations for students.

A good supervisor is a great asset: trust their judgement as they will have experienced what you are going through and will generally have supervised a number of other dissertations. It is unwise to sidestep your supervisor’s guidance. While it may be possible to independently achieve a dissertation that passes the standard, quality of learning will fall short of what could otherwise be achieved. Go it alone if you will, but far better to nurture the supervisory process, and learn from it things that you may well need in the future, such as working with others.

Box 1. Recommendations for students
- Accept that finding a focus for your study may be more challenging than expected
- Ensure that you and your supervisor agree on what you can expect of each other
- Take your supervisor’s advice and act on it
- Be prepared to question
- Do not make excuses, as these can breed problems
- Keep notes on each meeting and share issues arising with your supervisor
- Be organised and stick to agreed timelines

References

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