

PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH EDUCATION

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The questions I will address here today are:

1. How does supervision differ from other forms of teaching?
2. What might the pedagogical issues in postgraduate education be?

How does supervision differ from other forms of teaching?

I want to begin by showing you the kinds of questions that Masters and PhD students ask again and again when they attend a workshop, *Negotiating Supervision*, I offer at the University of Auckland.

- Exactly what is supervision, assisting or directing?
- What should I expect from my supervisor and what does s/he expect from me?
- How often should I meet with my supervisor?
- How should I make sure the relationship is a good one?
- How should I deal with difficulties that arise?

Now I have framed these questions in general terms—the actual questions I get asked are a lot more poignant:

- How can I maintain my supervisor's interest?
- Are there special tactics or techniques to keep a good relation between us?
- How can I maintain professional boundaries between us? What is OK, safe?
- How do I work out a disagreement between my supervisors?

As well as the repetitiveness and naïvety of some of their questions, what concerns me is that many of the students who are asking them are well into supervision. Students do not know enough about what to expect of supervision and will not ask—and such ignorance and diffidence combined is problematic for them and their supervisors.

I am even more concerned when I consider the diversity of the students who are asking the questions: shy and disorientated overseas students, young women dealing with professorial males, etc. In the everyday run of supervision, what voice do such students have with which to ask the questions they need to of their supervisors? I'll come back to this.

So, how does supervision differ from other forms of university teaching? In my view, there are several ways but first I want to talk briefly about one way in which it is the same.

I usually like to talk about pedagogy rather than teaching and learning. This idea, as it is used by certain education theorists, puts *relations* into focus. In this view, pedagogy refers to the field of productive power relations between teacher, student and knowledge, relations which are to some extent peculiar to the education tradition in which they occur.

In the context of the university, the teacher's work is to be the authoritative carrier, producer and disseminator of worthwhile knowledge; in contrast, the student's work is to obediently absorb this worthwhile knowledge through learning to be critical but in a disciplined sort of way, and maybe one day—as a PhD candidate—to contribute some fragment to it. The relations of pedagogy appear very top down. (I say 'appear' advisedly because I think they are more complex than that.) In this sense, supervision is a particular form of pedagogy in a larger scene of higher education pedagogies. What marks supervision is its role in transforming the student from reproducer of knowledge to producer, a transition that is challenging at many levels.

Now to the differences. First, supervision is a pedagogical context of unusual intimacy and intensity between two (or more) unequally positioned people. In many cases supervision is conducted in privacy and sometimes the student does not have access to anyone else for guidance with their research. At my University often the supervisor will also be the examiner. Even when they are not, they will usually be seen by the student to have influence beyond the context of the supervision itself. Two questions arising for the student out of this characteristic of supervision are, on the one hand, what counts as dependence and, on the other, how much ignorance to show the supervisor. Students are unused to showing a teacher their work-in-progress; many fear that any sign of incompetence or dependence will be used against them in the final examination. This fear springs from the very different institutional locations of supervisor and student – a difference with potentially far-reaching consequences. It is not always unwarranted fear either as Suzie O'Brien pointed out in a paper entitled "*I'll see you'll never work in this field*": *The student feedback you didn't receive in the quality audits*, which she presented at this conference four years ago (O'Brien, 1996).

Second, the power relations in supervision are not simply the top-down ones usually found between teacher and relatively anonymous student in university classrooms. Because of the face-to-face quality of supervision, they are also those between members of different social groups that structure our society. These kind of power relations enter the intimate context of supervision in a very direct way: gender and cultural differences in communication affect the way meetings and other interactions go. Body language, as well as talk and written feedback, have greater significance when the supervisor and student work together over time and through a process during which the student usually experiences many ups and downs, surges and losses of hope and belief in herself. This may be complicated (as I know from my own experience as a new supervisor) by similar shifts and surges for the supervisor. These then are some of the tangled threads of supervision.

Third, while the pedagogy of supervision is strange and unknown to the student, it is often familiar and thus invisible to the supervisor. Indeed many supervisors do not think of supervision as pedagogy or teaching—they list it in their annual reports under research. The student, often either grateful to, or overawed by, their supervisor finds it hard to ask the most basic questions such as "how often should we meet?" let alone express an opinion on the matter, or feel able to address more complex matters such as feedback they don't understand, unsatisfactory meetings, lateness of feedback—all of which are the normal ups and downs of supervision.

Fourth, there is a great imbalance between supervisor and student in what is at stake. For the student, her sense of self as a capable researcher or scholar is at stake. As a

supervisor, I often feel quite confident in the outcome of a student's research work (especially if they have a good academic track record), but as a student my sense of myself as a competent scholar goes up and down frighteningly. Nowadays, graduate research work involves a substantial financial as well as emotional and intellectual commitment, and to the student her very future may well appear to be at stake. Yet for the supervisor, the supervision of this student and her project is one of many tasks undertaken in any academic year – and the load of such tasks is growing annually.

Fifth, just how the people who take up the positions of supervisor and student enact those positions, the hopes and desires they have of themselves and of the other—these are complex matters which make more tangled threads for supervision. I think we have the makings of some pretty difficult knots here!

This is not an exhaustive list of the differences between supervision and other forms of university teaching but sufficient, I hope, to open up the landscape and to make it clear that we would be wise to prepare supervisors and students for engaging in supervision.

What might the pedagogical issues in postgraduate training be?

Terry Threadgold (1995) has made a trenchant critique of the commodification of postgraduate pedagogy and the kinds of managerialist practices produced as a result. While I generally endorse this criticism, I am aware that in practice there are many bureaucratic issues that supervisors and students need to know about that they often don't (indeed sometimes the institution doesn't know): institutional expectations and regulations, mutual obligations, grievance procedures etc. Managerialist responses to postgraduate education have often meant that these matters are clarified. That has been the trend in my own university. Yet ironically the effect of making these matters explicit is often to more strongly cast the student as an obedient subject—a position which I think is one of the problems in supervision.

But, importantly, these bureaucratic revisions and clarifications miss the heart of supervision as pedagogy. Supervision is not a bureaucratic contract, but is what Bill Readings has called “a network of obligation” (1995, p. 158) of the educative and transformative kind. What student and supervisor need to learn is how to act in ways other to the ones which their institutional experience and position predispose them towards. This is not an easy task as we do not simply *choose* such subject positions. Rather we are enticed or coerced into them by the social context we are in, by our broader values and understandings about what is appropriate and *normal* for people in this kind of position, and by our own sometimes unknown desires and anxieties.

Acknowledging that we are not free, I still want to argue that we can be different. The question is in what ways? The answers to this question are not going to be good for all time, but here are some thoughts for now.

I think students need to reposition themselves from dependence and passive gratitude. This repositioning has often been understood as the fruit of the bitter experience, but I think we could do more to assist and support students in this work of self-transformation through academic development interventions early on. They need to reposition themselves as active players in supervision, as negotiators of the terms—this is a voice which would serve them better than the diffident voice of the obedient subject.

Supervisors, on the other hand, would do well to reposition themselves from speaking knowers to good listeners and probing questioners. This is not easy—there are pleasures in knowing. But likewise I think a lot could be done to assist this by way of academic development—maybe not only the usual form of seminars and knowledge-disseminating workshops (where more knowing speakers strut their stuff) but maybe more in the form of body work such as role-plays and so on—learning which requires active participation in different forms of communication.

These kinds of transformations of the self cannot be legislated for, or guaranteed, but I think this is a more fruitful way to talk about preparation for the pedagogy of supervision than the regulating and codifying of supervision as a bureaucratic product or practice which is the response that so many universities are making in the present time.

Finally, I would like to suggest that changes in institutional practice would do better to *support* the pedagogy of supervision rather than attempt to increasingly regulate it. For instance, the promotion of supervision for supervisors has possibilities. Such an explicit cultural shift would recognise that supervision requires flexibility, skill and problem solving, that it is *always* possible that it will not proceed smoothly. It would also reframe supervision from being a private practice to a shared pedagogy, the success of which we all have a vested interest in.

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