Supervisor as Mentor: Lines in the Sand?  
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Abstract  

Concern about poor PhD completion rates has led to a close scrutiny of the quality of research supervision. Such supervision involves a multi-faceted role relationship and there is a resonance here with the concept of mentoring. This paper is a work in progress and starts with a brief overview of elements of mentoring, including the functions of effective mentors and how this links to a supervision role. It then moves on to consider potential problems and issues, by considering a number of vignettes and comparing these with the literature and findings from two semi-structured interviews; one with an experienced research degree supervisor and the other with a current research student. Consideration is given to whether there is a clear distinction between the various aspects or just a series of temporary ‘lines drawn in the sand’ which, as the tide of the supervision ebbs and flows, are washed away and erased and then redrawn as appropriate to developments in the relationship between the supervisor and the student. In conclusion a number of tentative suggestions for further development of mentoring as part of research student supervision are given.  

Introduction  

Over the last decade or so, the higher education community in the United Kingdom has devoted time and energy to discussions about poor PhD completion rates, particularly amongst social science students. From this discussion the quality of supervision has been identified as an area of prime importance (Burgess, 1994; Hockey, 1994; United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education, 1996).  

In relation to supervision quality, a number of factors have been elucidated. These include professional aspects such as evidence that the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor(s) are clear; a regularity of meetings; goal setting and monitoring and interpersonal aspects such as evidence of the awareness of issues related to the changing relationship between student and supervisors as the research programme progresses (UKCGE, 1996 QAA, 2004).  

Such a list of factors indicates that research supervision is essentially a multi-faceted role relationship. Hockey (1994) states that the PhD supervisory role can be depicted as containing two principal dimensions. First in the provision of intellectual expertise to students and secondly their involvement in counselling practices. Erdem and Ozen (2003) regard such an intellectual and emotional relationship as the basic characteristic of university life. This relationship can be a ‘precious thing’ (Cryer, 2006) and is crucial in helping research students to find their work more stimulating and rewarding (Blaxter et al., 1996). Even more significantly, Phillips and Pugh (1994) advise research students that the supervisor-student relationship ‘is one of the closest that you will ever be involved in’. They also note that ‘once the personal
relationship has been well established, all else falls into place’ and ‘if interpersonal compatibility is missing everything else to do with being a postgraduate is perceived negatively’.

The centrality of the relationship is well-illustrated in a series of interviews with social and natural scientists in British universities and former polytechnics, carried out between 1990 and 1993 by Delamont, Parry and Atkinson (1998). These supervisors of doctoral research talk about delicate balancing acts between tight control and non-interventionist supervision, often using contrastive rhetoric to compare their own past experiences of being supervised and their own present practices, particularly in relation to levels of support.

In reading these accounts and others like them, there is a resonance between supervision, personal tutoring and the concept of mentoring. Jacob (1997) has described mentoring as ‘the forgotten fourth leg of the academic stool’ with teaching, research and service comprising the first three legs. Wisker et al. (2008) note that ‘supervising resembles coaching and mentoring insofar as it aims to enable and support students…to develop their skills and achieve tasks’. Erdem and Ozen (2003) argue that the relationship between a research student (young academic) and their supervisor (senior academic) is the basic characteristic of university life and a strong example of mentoring. In addition, Ellis (1992) states that excellent mentoring represents one of the most important features of graduate education.

These comments raise questions about the nature of the student-supervisor mentoring relationship and in order to examine it, the next section gives a brief overview of key elements and types of mentoring. The paper then outlines the functions of effective mentors and how this links to a supervision role. It then moves on to discuss potential problems and issues, by considering a number of vignettes and comparing these with the literature and findings from two semi-structured interviews; one with an experienced research degree supervisor and the other with a current research student. Consideration is given to the development of the supervisory relationship and whether there is a clear distinction between the various aspects or just a series of temporary ‘lines drawn in the sand’ which, as the tide of the supervision ebbs and flows, are washed away and erased and then redrawn as appropriate to developments in the relationship between the supervisor and the student. In conclusion a number of tentative suggestions for further development of mentoring as part of research student supervision are given.

**Mentors and mentoring**

Varied definitions of what a mentor is have been argued in a range of literature (e.g. Phillips-Jones, 1982; Reece and Brandt, 1993; Smith, 1998; Walton, 1999) and what is clear from these is that the concept of mentor is very broad. However, inherent in many definitions is the notion of a more experienced, possibly older person empowering a less experienced one and enabling them to develop necessary skills so that they can be effective as a learner and employee (depending on context) and enhance their own personal coping strategies, sense of self-worth and success (Wisker et al., 2008).
A review of mentoring definitions across the fields of management, education and psychology by Jacobi (1991) gives further detail of mentoring components through the identification of five elements common to most conceptualizations. First, mentoring relationships are designed to help and assist the protégé in achieving long-term, broad goals. Second, mentoring involves components of career and professional development as well as psychological and emotional support. Third, both the mentor and the protégé benefit and fourth mentor relationships are personal. Fifth, it is the mentor who has greater professional experience, influence and achievement. Taking these elements into account then, a useful working definition used in this paper is provided by Anderson and Lucasse-Shannon (1995) who state that mentoring involves the nurturing of a less skilled and experienced person by one who is more skilled and experienced, who acts as a role model and teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels, befriends and promotes the former’s professional development within the context of a caring relationship.

Furthermore, in an examination of the types of mentoring and personal tutoring (taken here to be synonymous) relationship that exist, Rapoport et al. (1989) note that essentially, three patterns can be distinguished. Firstly there is ‘informal’ tutoring/mentoring where the arrangement made between both parties is of a voluntary nature and is predicated on trust. An accountable framework of reciprocal obligations and tasks is established, which constitutes the contractual element. Secondly there is ‘comradeship’ tutoring/mentoring in which personal trust flourishes, but contractual elements are neglected. Thirdly there is ‘professional’ tutoring/mentoring in which contract is emphasised and trust is in the background. Cronan-Hillix et al. (1986) note that informal mentoring has long been a practice among scholars. However, in Hockey’s (1996) study the great majority of supervisors interviewed depicted their supervisory relationships with students as falling within the category of comradeship tutoring/mentoring.

These definitions, along with the various conceptualizations put forward identify major aspects of the personal and professional aspects of the role of the mentor and indicate the significance of the effective incorporation and balance of these in a mentoring relationship, whether this is of a formal or informal nature. In the case of mentoring research students, success here is likely to enhance their knowledge, skills, personal growth, access to networks, satisfaction and success (Clark et al., 2000; Matthews, 2003). There are also personal and professional rewards for the mentor such as satisfaction in facilitating the student’s accomplishments, increased research productivity, professional recognition, enhanced communication and leadership skills and improved enthusiasm (Cronan-Hillix et al., 1986, Matthews, 2003).

**What do effective mentors provide and how does this link to a supervision role?**

There are several distinct, yet interwoven functions, which can be provided by mentors to their protégés and a range of models and conceptualizations of effective mentoring are present in the literature. Kram (1985) postulated that such functions cluster within two primary domains: the career (instrumental) and the psychosocial. Career functions are typically focused on career development and include aspects of the mentorship that enhance ‘learning the ropes’ and preparing for advancement. Career functions include sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection,
provision of challenging assignments, and transmission of applied professional ethics (Kitchener, 1992; Kram, 1985). Psychosocial functions enhance the protégés sense of competence, identity, and work-role effectiveness. They include role modelling, acceptance and confirmation, counselling, and friendship (mutuality). This distinction in mentor functions has received considerable theoretical and empirical support (Levinson et al., 1978; Swerdlick and Bardon, 1988; Wilde and Schau, 1991), and skilful mentors seamlessly blend these functions in work with protégés (Kram, 1985; Clark et al., 2000).

Given such a wide-ranging set of functions, it is clear that in order to carry out the role effectively, supervisor-mentors need a wide range of personal knowledge, skills and qualities, conceptualized as an operational ‘craft’ by Hockey (1997). In order to assess these, a triangular model of competence to mentor in academic settings has been offered by Johnson (2003). This includes firstly, a consideration of character virtues (integrity, caring and prudence); secondly, cognitive, emotional and interpersonal abilities and thirdly, micro skills such as having an understanding of student development, a sensitivity to cross-race and cross-gender issues, a commitment to ethical standards bearing on relationships and an ability to structure mentoring, diagnose and address relationship dysfunction and manage boundaries (Allen and Poteet, 1999; Johnson 2002, 2003, Schrodt et al., 2003).

Further examination of these functions indicates that within any mentoring relationship, including that of doctoral supervision, there is an interrelationship of inherent functional, relational and personal factors. Within a functional domain, the supervisor-mentor can teach and coach by offering subject expertise and by setting challenging tasks with accompanying feedback to allow future refinement. They can also act as a counsellor, advisor and guide, listening to the student and offering a sounding board for their ideas to help facilitate self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses. In connection with relational roles, the supervisor-mentor can introduce the student to the values, ethos and customs of the university and particular department that they are working in. They can help students to make contacts (network) and try to remove any constraints by negotiating on their behalf with other staff, researchers and administrators, thereby assisting with the socialisation of the student into the research culture. Additionally, the promotion of student creativity, risk-taking and self-development as part of confidence building and fulfilment of potential are part of the personal functions of the role (Morton-Cooper and Palmer, 1993).

Reading of research student expectations of their supervisor regardless of discipline, such as those expressed in the studies carried out by Phillips (1987) and Wisker (2005), shows that they align with these personal, functional and relational aspects of the mentoring role. Thus, in the functional domain of mentoring students expected supervisors to have a good knowledge of the research area and to be a good role model with an appropriate level of qualifications and a reasonable publication record. In this respect, they can provide an observable image for imitation, demonstrating a range of research and study methodologies. They have ‘been through the ropes’ and can talk from experience (Matthews, 2003).

Also within a functional mentoring domain and in connection with students’ expectations of availability, organisation of tutorial contact and constructive critical
discussion, supervisors need a range of mentoring skills and lists of these can be found for example in Edwards and Collison (1996), Stephens (1996) and Campbell and Kane (1998). These skills include planning, liaising, facilitating, assessing and guiding and can be categorised as interpersonal, communication, organisational and analytical skills.

The interpersonal mentoring skills of counselling, negotiation, conflict solving, team working and being able to offer constructive criticism as part of feedback are recognised by students as essential. Organisational skills such as good time management, careful planning and prioritising, also aid the smooth running of a relationship. Listening and questioning are vital communication skills and the analytical skills of interpretation and evaluation are critical factors for success. This involves being able to help the student recognize, use and build on their strengths, in order to achieve their potential. It also involves the mentor role of collaboration to scaffold the student’s learning through shared critical analysis and improvement of practice and by recognition of their needs through negotiating with them their learning goals. Sometimes it involves holding back and giving the student freedom to work out their own solution (Terrell, 1990). In addition, mentors need to be able to analyse and discuss their own practice (Edwards and Collison, 1996).

Notwithstanding this knowledge and these skills, it is in relation to the expectation of support that students identify the most important mentoring qualities in their supervisors and those who work with students in a sympathetic way and who are prepared to listen to their problems and understand their needs are appreciated. These qualities lie in the personal domain of mentoring and are those that help students to develop and build their confidence by valuing their opinions and encouraging them to put forward and try their ideas.

In a study by Cronan-Hillix et al. (1986) of graduate students in psychology at one American state university, the most frequently mentioned mentoring characteristics of good supervisors was that they were interested and therefore supportive. In the same study, personality characteristics such as honesty, empathy, compassion, flexibility and loyalty were also put forward as important. These findings are echoed in other studies. The recently graduated PhD students in the study by Clark et al. (2000), favoured the approachable mentor who was supportive, helpful, encouraging, honest, open and was receptive to their needs. In a study of graduate students at the University of California, Tenenbaum et al. (2001) found that the more psychosocial help they received, the more satisfaction students expressed with their supervisors and with their graduate experience. Further survey work reported by Johnson and Zlotnik (2005) indicates that satisfied students report that their mentors demonstrate respect, consistent support and willingness to allow a helpful degree of mutuality and reciprocity.

Some problems and issues: lines in the sand?

A range of previous experiences of supervising and mentoring and therefore implicit and explicit views about these is not necessarily detrimental, in fact it can conceivably add to the diversity and richness of a programme. However, PhD supervision, due to its mainly dyadic nature, lengthy duration and intense intellectual and potentially
emotional demands, constitutes a process in which there is significant potential for supervisors to fail to manage the various dimensions of their complex role. As Wisker et al. (2008) note, ‘every student is an individual with his or her own learning needs, every…PhD research project is somewhat different, and every supervisory relationship is a human, one-to-one interaction, so there are always issues, strategies, processes and relationships to take into account in the equation of successful supervisory practice’. Thus, a single supervisor may experience considerable difficulty with their student in a number of areas, categorized by Wisker (2005) as personality factors (personality clashes, neglect and barriers to communication arising from differences such as age, class, race and gender), organizational factors (time issues, inadequate support services and resources, social and intellectual isolation) and professional factors (lack of supervisor knowledge or interest, unreasonable work demands of supervisor or unreasonable expectations of student, students ignoring advice and having difficulties with the research process). These can occur simultaneously or protractedly (Hockey, 1996) and in relation to problems in these areas, there is evidence that many supervisors fail to develop supervisory relationships with students (e.g. Cronan- Hillix et al., 1986; Clark et al., 2000).

Vignettes and interviews

To look at some of the problems and issues, identified as lines in the sand, this paper now uses a number of composite supervision vignettes produced from the literature by the author which are compared in the ensuing discussion with this literature and the findings from two semi-structured interviews; firstly with an experienced research degree supervisor in relation to their own problems, and secondly, with a current research student and their unsuccessful PhD supervision.

Vignette 1

‘So I mean I was a counsellor…I was faced with the problems of helping her with a divorce, her health organized… asking about her kids…simply so she could work on her PhD…I got sucked into her personal life and this invaded our professional relationship.’

Some research students and their supervisors establish close collaborative relationships and personal friendships (Delamont et al., 1997). Cryer (1997) adds that where a supervisory relationship is good, it is second nature for supervisors to adopt a sympathetic and helpful stance towards students airing their personal problems. This clearly equates to a counselling, advising and guiding mentoring role. For supervisors holding this view, the dilemma is not whether to get involved, but when and how much, as the experienced supervisor interviewed in this study expresses here:

‘…a PhD student is for life…so it is a close relationship in that respect. Would…a social dimension add to that relationship or not? That’s where you are entering the murky water.’

‘…the pastoral role can cross the border into a counselling role. You have to be careful, there have to be boundaries’
‘…you have to be careful about the relationship…some students can be psychologically very needy.’

Other supervisors and students get on with each other professionally and personally, without necessarily being the best of friends. For instance, in Hockey’s (1994) study, a degree of social and emotional distance was seen by many supervisors as vital to the establishment of a ‘professional’ supervisory relationship, necessary to maximise the chances of successful PhD completion. This distance is echoed in the comments from firstly the supervisor and then the student interviewed:

‘If you are a PhD student do you expect to meet your supervisor in the pub?’

‘I’ve always had this thing that your personal relationships and your friendships are going to be separate to some extent from your professional relationships, because if someone sees you drunk at the weekend you can’t go in and supervise them.’

However, where the boundary to the supervisor’s counselling function was not established or maintained satisfactorily, (where, as Hockey, 1994, puts it, ‘contamination’ occurs) difficulties could arise. A great majority of supervisors adopted an implicit form of communication and failed to make clear and explicit certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the supervisory relationship, which they assumed their students also held – this was a fertile ground for misconceptions.

Thus, in both these types of supervisory relationships, supervisors, like the one interviewed could find it difficult to be neutral and could be ‘sucked’ into a range of personal issues in the student’s life:

‘Most of the difficulties…are to do with students organizing themselves, coming regularly to meetings, getting divorced, having their child in hospital. It is pastoral and I think people underestimate the need for pastoral care for doctoral students.’

The level of personal involvement then is a first line in the sand.

Vignette 2

‘I feel the student wants to be spoon-fed…they have got programme guidance… I don’t want them knocking on my door every day, I’m too busy. They should be doing it themselves- why do we need all these meetings? I shouldn’t have to go through it with a tooth-comb. If their work is not good enough or they can’t hack it they should be allowed to drop out or even fail’

This issue relates to the arrangements for supervision and the time that is allocated. There is clearly some tension here as the supervisor describes:

‘All they get is a meeting every three months for an hour in an office with a supervisor and this is supposed to be the highest form of university education there is.’
Here, Cryer (2006) also notes that on the one hand supervisors want to do what they can to be supportive within the limits of time allowed by their other work roles, but on the other hand they do not want to interfere on the grounds that independent research students ought to take the initiative when they need to discuss work which is, after all, their own.

Further, the detail of a supervision programme, including the amount of contact time needs to be outlined and discussed for individual supervision dyads and this is where organizational mentoring skills can play a key part. However, it is important that decisions are made as to whether a more structured situation is put in place or whether it is the responsibility of the student to be pro-active and take the initiative as in these instances:

‘We were told when we started that we should negotiate with our supervisors how often we should meet and what we should produce for each meeting and as a guideline we were told that it should be every two to four weeks.’

‘When I did my PhD I had to chase my supervisor, I had to constantly phone him.’

In a more-structured connection, Cryer describes some supervisory programmes that are departmentally determined and which distinguish between formal supervisions and informal meetings; which have specific policies about timings and durations of the former, often laying them out in advance for an entire programme of study. In such programmes specific documents have to be completed at each meeting as the interviewed supervisor describes:

‘...you keep a record of each supervisory meeting and you take notes during that meeting and when the student leaves you add to those notes...you send a copy to the student and I also expect the student to keep notes and return a copy to me.’

Clearly structured (and monitored) programmes would therefore help to avoid the situation described by the student interviewed:

‘I mean they must know that there are guidelines, but they clearly don’t read them and if they didn’t know something, rather than saying they didn’t know, they would just make it up.’

‘I would often go to supervision and they would say that they hadn’t read it (my work).’

Delamont et al. (1997) would concur with the more structured approach and suggest that it is necessary to establish clear, productive and mutually convenient arrangements for the supervision. Without a firm basis for everyday work, supervision, as described by the student in this study, is likely to become frustrating and difficult for all parties:

‘...it was fine when it was working. When it didn’t work there didn’t seem to be any clear guidance about what should be done to solve problems...’
Thus, the degree of formal structure and prescription in the supervision programme is a second line in the sand.

Vignette 3

‘At the start there you are with a blank desk and I spent the first six months deciding what I was going to do…I lost motivation because of lack of guidance…I didn’t really know where to start and my supervisor seemed to be waiting for me…I had difficulty understand the process of doing a PhD.’

A third issue concerns the amount of help that supervisors give to students. The delicate balances between prescription and independence in relation to managing the student rather than intervening too directly in the subject matter of their research is clearly evident in the study of the experiences of doctoral supervisors by Delamont et al. (1998) cited earlier. What they found is that good supervisors realise that they have to wean many students gradually into independence and will use their interpersonal mentoring skills to achieve this. As the student interviewed noted:

‘She gave very practical advice about reading a chapter and to try and look at it like this and try and break it down and look at how you use the theory…but some of the others were very vague and I’d come away from supervision thinking, I still don’t know what I am supposed to do.’

‘...the supervisor should have some training in how to manage a student and what to do when things go wrong.’

Phillips and Pugh (1994) note that research students are aware of their supervisor’s authority in the subject and therefore their associated power in the relationship. In this respect, Cryer (2006) adds that new students tend to expect supervisors to tell them what to do, but Delamont et al. (1997) have also found that many supervision problems stem from supervisors thinking that students know things they do not know, or vice versa, or both. This includes practical aspects such as:

‘...being sure that the student is on top of the relevant technology and is on good terms with using the library.’

In addition, the student might ignore their supervisors’ guidance and they might have difficulties with the research process due to lack of knowledge, skills, poor working habits or lack/loss of motivation, all leading to deadlines being missed and/or poorly presented work with a consequent lack of progress (Wisker, 2005). Alternatively, the determination and motivation of a student is a factor mentioned by supervisor and student in success:

‘...the other thing that contributes to the success of the student is their motivation and determination.’

‘I will keep going to the end, which is why I am still going with this.’
It is also interesting to find that supervisors are not the only persons who can offer help to the student. Peer support systems have developed alongside or as part of research development programmes and, as Wisker (2005) notes, such programmes encourage the development of autonomy, rather than dependence on the supervisor for all aspects of the research process. Such support was indicated as necessary (‘...you need to have some structure in which there is support outside the supervisor-student relationship’) and clearly valued by the student interviewed:

‘...we had a peer workshop where all the PhD students would get together and talk about their research, or it would be particularly around an area and we’d also talk about sorting your time line or what to do in your end of year panel.’

‘We worked really well together and we did a lot of sharing of each others’ chapters and talking through stuff...a lot of peer mentoring going on...I think the peer side of it is really important.’

Thus, the type, amount and duration of weaning is a third line in the sand.

Vignette 4

‘We found him in the men’s lavatory, ripping up his thesis draft and burning it in the hand basin, strip by strip. He had decided, after a supervision in which his supervisor had major criticisms of one of his chapters, and an ensuing blazing row about it, that he might as well destroy his work and pack it all in.’

Another issue relates to the composite role that supervisors have in managing component parts of the intellectual dimension, namely those of guide and critic (Hockey, 1994). There is a balance between guiding and encouraging a student’s writing and being analytically critical of it in order to develop their style as befits PhD level and the eventual thesis. This will demand a range of functional mentoring skills in order to avoid the destructive situations described by the student in this study:

‘When you have got clear feedback and you can see what you haven’t done and they explain what you haven’t done and why that’s a problem, you can accept it. It is when they turn around and say things like “you just haven’t worked hard enough on this”, that’s really upsetting, particularly when you have been working hard on something and it is when the criticism is personal...if it is constructive criticism...that’s fine. It is when they say that there is something wrong with it but can’t explain what they mean.’

‘...they made me feel like I didn’t know what I was talking about and that my opinion just wasn’t valid...it completely ruins your confidence.’

‘...you feel like no-one really gets what you are trying to do or how you are trying to do it...I think maybe they were trying to mould me in their own image and I wasn’t going to what they were interested in.’

In addition, since research means going beyond published work and developing something new, the relationship must accommodate the fact that the student will
eventually come to know more about their work than their supervisors. All parties will need to be comfortable with this.

Therefore, the level of acceptance of both a critically analytical dialogue and a changing expertise in relation to the research being undertaken is a fourth line in the sand.

**Lines in the sand and supervisory relationships**

Entering into a doctoral supervisory relationship can be a very critical event in a person’s career. Cryer (1997) argues that the quality of the student-supervisor relationship is crucial for the success of a research programme. In a later piece of work (2006) she adds:

‘Only highly unusual students successfully complete their research degrees if relationships with their supervisors are poor’

(Cryer, 2006, p44)

It is perhaps no surprise then that there are close parallels between completion problems and ineffective supervisory relationships, particularly in relation to what could be categorized as aspects of mentoring. The lines in the sand discussed in the previous section relate to this mentoring and affect the quality of the relationship. Such relationships have to be worked at and take time to develop, in order to build a foundation of trust, which is an essential ingredient as it affects the degree of open communication between the parties involved, and thus the argument is about where the lines are drawn. They are likened to lines in the sand that can and should be washed away and redrawn as supervisory-mentoring relationships develop and not, I would suggest, carved in stone, making the redrawing of the lines difficult. However, they should not be so faint as to be indistinguishable by supervisors and student, but clear enough to indicate demarcations in the roles so that a successful outcome to the research and the relationship is the result.

Thus, as supervisory relationships develop, the lines can be re-drawn to reflect a greater or lesser relative amount of a particular compositional element. At the start of the research, personal involvement and levels of contact and intervention ‘weaning’ would be high, with accompanying deployment of mentoring skill to initiate the relationship, start to develop trust and establish key responsibilities and structure for the supervisory programme. At this stage, levels of criticality and student expertise and independence would probably be low.

If the supervision programme develops properly and the relationship becomes more trusting, levels of intervention could decrease as the student becomes more confident, self-directing and independent. Supervisors would deploy a range of functional mentoring skills by critically analysing and challenging the student’s ideas and work in order to help facilitate their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. In connection with their relational mentoring role, supervisors would help the students to network, thus assisting with their socialisation into the research culture of the department and wider university. Types and levels of personal involvement and contact would depend on the student’s circumstances and progress, including taking
account of the ‘constellation’ of domestic factors described by Hockey (1996) and the nature of the personal relationship between the student and their supervisors.

In the later stages of a successful programme, a high level of trust between supervisors and student would exist. Supervisors would act as critical friends and in this way would increasingly acknowledge the expertise of the student in relation to the research undertaken. They would negotiate levels of contact and intervention as appropriate, particularly in relation to completion and submission of the thesis and would mentor the student to help them prepare for the next stage of their career.

In order for relationships to develop as described, questions about consistency and composition of supervisory teams arise. In more ‘traditional’ circumstances supervision has been undertaken by one supervisor, chosen on the basis of academic expertise in the area of the research being done or perhaps by two supervisors, the main or first supervisor having the academic credentials, with the second supervisor contributing methodological knowledge and interest. This is fine where supervision proceeds without a hitch, but often leads to problems where it does not. One particular problem regarding changing of supervisors was highlighted by the unsuccessful supervision of the student interviewed in this study:

‘My problem was that they tended to seem to take sabbaticals at the same time, so then I had no-one and then they would get someone else in who wasn’t a specialist in either my theory or method, who could only give me vague advice.’

‘…the other supervisors got co-opted to supervise me because there was no-one else and they weren’t really interested in my subject and they actually tried talking me into doing it a different way and go off on tangents.’

‘It was when they both went on sabbatical and I had a third supervisor who contradicted everything they’d said in the first year and then they came back and I had changed it all…and they came back and said “no she was wrong, do it like this”…and that’s when it all fell apart, I then didn’t know what I was doing, who to listen to and just got completely lost.’

‘…what I think you need is consistency…supervisors who are going to be interested in what you are doing and will read things and will give you structured advice and feedback on where to go with it, but who will stick with you for the four or the six years, whether it is full or part-time. You know, keep changing it every six months is the worst thing that you can have.’

In order to try and tackle this continuity issue (as well as developmental training for new supervisors), some doctoral supervision programmes such as the one in my own institution have stipulated the composition of supervisory teams of three. In such situations, the effect of one of the supervisory team leaving or taking a sabbatical is buffered, but also there is the possibility of a greater spread of expertise, including that of mentoring.
Conclusions - some suggestions for development

In this article, I have drawn parallels between a supervisory and a mentoring role as part of research degree supervision and have discussed some issues, describing them as ‘lines in the sand’ which, are washed away and erased and then redrawn as the tide of the supervision ebbs and flows. In fact, it is clear from the literature reviewed, that many supervisors already use a range of mentoring skills to develop relationships when supervising research students, but often this is on an informal, serendipitous and sometimes even on a sub-conscious basis. What I now conclude tentatively, with the data to hand are the following suggestions, with a hope of developing these more fully on the gathering of more interview data.

In order to transform this situation into one where there are clear and realistic mentoring expectations of both the supervisor and the student, a common programme philosophy and structure needs to be articulated. However, as Matthews (2003) explains, developing a successful mentoring programme in the workplace can be a complex process that involves a considerable amount of research, planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

In addition, for mentoring to become part of a departmental and university research culture it must be valued and effectively rewarded. For instance, Johnson and Zlotnik (2005) suggest that supervisors should be required to provide evidence of successful mentoring before appointment as supervisors. Applicants could provide evidence of types of involvement with students at various levels and their recommendations and evaluations; evidence of leadership and management skills; evidence of related professional development and recommendations from colleagues. To support this, formal mentor training programmes could be offered to supervisors and prospective supervisors, perhaps as part of a post-graduate professional development framework.

This type of system would not only help to ensure that a steady pool of supervisor-mentors is available and that these mentors have the required level of proficiency to develop others, it would also hopefully ensure that students have access to supervisors with good mentoring skills.

Another clear message from studies done into research degree supervision is that ad-hoc or poorly designed programmes hinder progress and dampen enthusiasm. This is equally true of any mentoring element included. Thus, it is equally important to address a number of key issues such as role clarification, expectations, structure and measurement, evaluation and review of outcomes for the mentoring aspects of the programme as it is for the supervision programme in general.

As part of such a programme, there are a number of possibilities that might be incorporated. A measure of formality and structure could be introduced by adopting a form of ‘contract’ between student and supervisor in order to emphasise the obligatory nature of the agreement and to state as explicitly as possible what the supervisory and mentoring elements would include and what their extents would be.

However, as this paper suggests, the ebb and flow of the tide of supervision would mean that contractual lines in the sand are washed away and re-drawn and thus levels of programme elements would need to change as the support and development needs of each student may change over time. Consequently, supervisory and mentoring
requirements will also change and supervisor-mentors may not be able to perform all roles to the same level of success. Thus, as Matthews (2003) proposes, a programme designed to grow and develop with the student may involve the use of different mentors for different activities and at different times. However, in such a case, there needs to be a recognition of the potential difficulties in introducing new individuals with whom the student has no relationship and also the increased possibility of more widespread differences of opinion with a larger supervision team.

This principle of using a larger team of individuals to supervise and mentor a research student offers some interesting possibilities. For instance, there could be a supervisor on the team who has a mentoring role that is more biased towards attendance to the personal aspects of the supervisory relationship. Also, mentors could be drafted into a team if a student encounters personal or work issues, or they could be involved at other ‘critical’ phases of the PhD such as at the start and as completion looms. Such a system would also help to facilitate changes to a supervisory team by offering support, particularly where a relationship has broken down such that supervisor and student no longer trust one another and can no longer work together or where a supervisor changes role or institution and can no longer supervise the student.

A further option would be to have a faculty or university mentoring team that could be deployed to support all research students, with the possibility of a rotational system so that they draw the benefit of a wide range of advice and expertise to help them study and research effectively and complete on time. This team could form a mutually supportive group, much like the type of research supervision groups that exist in many universities and could be the body that undertakes the formal evaluation of the quality of the mentoring provided for students as an integral part of the PhD programme.

Added to this could be a formalized peer-mentoring component to provide critical friendship outside of any supervisory relationship, giving structured opportunities for students to discuss and present their work to peers, for joint development of research skills and to provide a forum for the consideration of issues that arise during the progress of their research, thus helping to build a community of practice with other research students.
References


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