

Making supervision relationships accountable: graduate student logs

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Introduction

Generally speaking, in the humanities and social sciences, the graduate student supervision relationship has been left to a traditional apprenticeship model, where the established 'master' inducts the new apprentice into the 'mysteries' of the craft. The academic apprentice has been left to learn by two methods: observing how the master *does* research, and, more broadly, being an academic; and, learning from his own beginner's experience of doing sustained academic research, where the master is expected to give feedback to the apprentice's ideas as these are delivered in both oral and written form. This is a highly personalised relationship. The transmission of the craft occurs through the apprentice producing work which gives witness to how he has been inducted into the craft by the master. The quality of this witness depends on what is an ineffable and fundamentally religious conception of the apprentice's insight into how the supervisor exemplifies the academic craft of scholarship and research. It is the *genius* of the apprentice which is responsible for how he takes up into his own creative powers the exemplary virtues and skills of the master.

The traditional mode of graduate student supervision has been governed by what Weber (1948, 295-297) terms "charismatic authority":

'Charismatic authority'...shall refer to a rule over men, whether predominantly external or predominantly internal, to which the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person... The legitimacy of their rule rests on the belief in and the devotion to the extraordinary, which is valued because it goes beyond the normal human qualities... The legitimacy of charismatic rule thus rests upon the belief in magical powers, revelations and hero worship. The source of these beliefs is the 'proving' of the charismatic quality through... victories and other successes, that is, through the welfare of the governed... Charismatic rule is not managed according to general norms, either traditional or rational, but, in principle, according to concrete revelations and inspirations, and in this sense, charismatic authority is 'irrational' (Weber, 1948, pp 295-296).

The supervisee selects the supervisor on the basis of his *charisma*—that is, his extraordinary qualities as a scholar-researcher. In this case, the nature of the relationship if it is to be a successful one requires that the belief in the charismatic quality of the individual works in both directions. In order for the charisma of the supervisor to prove to be worth believing in, the work of the supervisee has to be of a quality as to testify to the value of the supervisor's influence. In short, if the relationship is to be counted a success, the supervisee has to demonstrate by his own charismatic scholarly quality that he is worthy to be supervised by this supervisor. In this sense, his is a scholarly discipleship. The heroic quality of the supervisor is echoed in and attested to by the heroic quality of the supervisee, especially once the latter has passed the final test, the submission and—in university systems influenced by the German model—the public defence of his thesis in a way that is found to be acceptable by his examiners.

I have used the masculine personal pronoun to characterise both terms of this relationship because it has been one that fitted universities in their elite and masculinist phases of history when PhD candidates were a tiny few and represented a select élite of aspirant academics.

The charismatic authority of the research apprenticeship was expressed further in a paternalistic personalism whereby the supervisor extended the hospitality of his home (and the domestic services of his wife) to his chosen disciples. They in turn were tacitly expected to be a living testimony to the scholarly genius of the supervisor in how they went about developing as academics: his model and style were to be theirs¹.

I have suggested also that this has been the traditional model of supervision in the humanities and social sciences, and, no doubt, in the natural sciences. 'Traditional' here has two connotations. Firstly, the model which has prevailed until now, and which has been accepted custom and practice. Secondly, as Weber points out, charismatic authority is never adequate to itself. It always requires to be supplemented by, or contextualised within, a traditionalism, that is, a customary set of norms accepted *because* they represent the way things always have been done. When charisma subsides, customary routine takes over. In either case, charismatic or traditional authority, the norms by which the relationship is governed are, from the standpoint of rational modes of accountability, *implicit* rather than explicit.

In a context of the development of a mass higher education system where PhD candidature has become much more frequent, and, in addition, an increasing requirement of a number of professions (not just the academic one), the traditional model of graduate student supervision can no longer work. It is simply inadequate to the demands of a situation where many supervisees are barely socialised into the demands and rigours of an academic scholarly and research culture. It is especially inadequate to the needs of many new PhD aspirants who, by historical-cultural positioning, have not been invited to imagine themselves as subjects of *genius*. These include all those who are marginalised by the dominant academic scholarly culture: women, and men or women who come from non-dominant class, ethnic or race positions. When PhD candidature was infrequent, the rare ones of these could distinguish themselves as an exception to the rule of their particular gender, class, ethnic or class category, and show that by their highly exceptional qualities, they deserved to be admitted as a disciple. Even then, it was rare that their minority status did not continue to qualify their own belief as the belief of others in their *genius*. Now, however, there is a high proportion of PhD candidates who do not fit the old mould, and whose numbers belie any exceptionalist approach to them.

Add to this one more development, and we have to hand sufficient cause for dis-establishing the traditional model of supervision. This is the development of increased governmental pressure on universities to show that the costs spent on educating and training postgraduate research students are effectively and efficiently spent—that is, that when supervision resources are allocated to research students, these students normally proceed to successfully complete PhD theses within or close to the time allocated for the process. Thus, if increased numbers of PhD students, many of them from the wrong side of traditional academic tracks, are to be effectively supervised, universities are likely to find that reliance on the traditional model of graduate supervision involves a very 'hit-and-miss' method. Good supervisors, and their track records in bringing successfully through a large number of PhD candidates, are in this context no substitute for a more systematic and managed approach to graduate supervision pedagogy.

Any such approach will require the supervision relationship to become rationally accountable within explicitly stated norms, procedures and guidelines which specify the terms of PhD candidature. This type of accountability has been increasingly required by university higher degree committees over the last ten years, and, in the same measure, these committees have produced increasingly explicit statements of reciprocal expectations between supervisors and supervisees. These statements have their place, but as soon as they become at all specific, they threaten to bureaucratise the supervision relationship. This relationship can become rationally accountable, but the critical question is: to whom primarily should it become rationally accountable, and how?

Since the supervision relationship is and remains a relationship of professional supervision-induction, it has to be of a kind as to develop the hallmarks of professionalism: a capacity for autonomous judgment, and the ability to use discretion wisely and well in contexts of ongoing professional conversation between the professionals concerned. This being the case, it is not appropriate to bureaucratise the relationship. If it is to become rationally accountable, that accountability has to be reconcilable with professionalism. Historically, the collegium has managed reasonably well to mediate relationships between more and less senior/established professionals, but it has been singularly unsuccessful in managing relationships between professionals and non-professionals. In the case of graduate student supervision, the student remains a non-professional until he/she passes the PhD examination, even while she/he is in process of being inducted into the professional collegium. How then to structure the relationship of graduate supervision in ways which make it rationally accountable to the non-professional of this relationship but which do not simultaneously require it to contravene professionalism? The answer will lie in some kind of dialogical pragmatics where the communication mechanism concerned is that of 'mutual adjustment' (see Majone, 1991)².

Elsewhere (Yeatman, 1994 and Yeatman, n.d.), I have argued that new contractualist technologies of managing individualised relationships are of a kind as to provide the structure that is needed. These are infra-legal mechanisms of contractual relationship which, *within* the relationship concerned, embed ways of making both parties accountable to each other for their respective parts within a shared project. They do this through the combination of several devices: (1) making next steps or goals and timelines explicit for *both* parties; (2) providing a process whereby the explicit setting of next steps or goals and timelines has to be dialogued on each occasion of meeting together; (3) providing a paper trail of these decisions, which in turn; (4) allows for a process of explicit review as to whether goals and timelines have been met. These are not the only devices which such contractualist relationships make possible, but they are the ones to which I wish to draw attention in my example of graduate supervision logs.

An example of new contractualist management of the supervision relationship: graduate student logs

This technology was invented in a situation where I was co-supervising graduate students in the department I left in order to take up my current position. Co-supervision with a colleague was occurring frequently over the last six months of my being in this department because I was in process of transferring student supervision to this colleague. This was a Women's Studies department where a relatively large number of our small group of graduate students lacked an orientation to, or confidence within, a research culture. In a number of co-supervision settings, my colleague and I found ourselves experimenting with new technologies of supervision, of which one has become the supervision log (for further description, see Yeatman, 1994c).

With the corporatising of university effort, and the effects of devolution, graduate students come to represent a valuable resource for a department. In the New Zealand and Australian weighted student unit (WSU) calculus—a formula which ties proportions of govern-

ment funding to specific levels and areas of study—graduate students count for more than undergraduates. It is accordingly in a department's interest to work to attract as many graduate students as it can manage to service. It is also in a department's interest to provide good ('quality') service to its graduate students, both to hold onto them and to gain a reputation for good completion rates in a context where there is increasing scrutiny of this aspect of academic performance.

Described simply, this log involves the graduate student (the supervisee) writing up in no more than two pages what was transacted in the supervision meeting. This writing is to be descriptive and in connected sentence/paragraph structure. It is to end with a response to 'where to from here?', namely a specification of the next task to be completed by the student, a timeline for this completion, and a date for the next meeting. The log is to be handed in to the supervisor—and a copy kept by the student—as soon as possible after the supervision meeting has been concluded. It is the supervisor's responsibility to contact the student, as soon as possible after receiving the log, to advise her/him of any inaccuracies or issues of interpretation that, if not corrected, are likely to negatively affect work towards the next product.

It is a deceptively simple instrument. Look at all the things it accomplishes and presupposes. What it accomplishes are the following: (1) a piece of focused writing by the student; (2) which accumulates as a series of such writings; (3) the provision of structure for the next task both by way of content and timeline in a way that has to be explicitly negotiated by both supervisee and supervisor; (4) a timeline for the next supervision meeting which in order to be determined has to realistically allow for the supervisor to read whatever piece of work the supervisee is completing as the task. In this way it binds in the supervisor, as well, to what has become effectively a reciprocal contract of services. One of the important things to insist upon, at the point of negotiating timelines for the completion of tasks as well as the next supervision meeting, is realism in assessing what it is possible to achieve in a certain amount of time. Each party can become more practised in such realistic assessment by making it a point of explicit discussion as to when it turns out that their expectations have exceeded their capacities³. Note also that the requirement of the supervisor that she/he respond as soon as possible with any correction of the log that may be of significance for the next stage of the student's work represents a strong expectation that she/he read the log as soon as she/he can manage after receiving it. Finally, (5) the technology of the log ensures that the timing of supervision meetings is organic to the process of the production of *this* thesis. Timelines for meetings are set in relation to task-outcomes rather than there being any mechanical, rule-bound assumption that they should follow a particular frequency.

As to what the log presupposes, there are several points worth emphasising. In order to get the log up as an agreed-upon technology at the outset, the supervisor firstly will have to invite the student to participate in an explicit discussion about reciprocal expectations of the supervision relationship. Secondly, the supervisor will have to formally propose the reciprocal adoption of this technology for the relationship, and thus explicitly ask the student whether she/he is willing to adopt, or perhaps just trial, this instrument with a view, down the track, to evaluating whether it seems to be something which usefully facilitates this as a good, working relationship. Thirdly, in order to specify a task for the next meeting, the supervisor will need to start making explicit the various stages and steps in the production of a research thesis. This converts what may be a rich terrain of tacit professional knowledge into explicit proposals and advice. It also begins to break down the formidable goal of a completed PhD thesis into a process of bite-size steps of arriving at the end goal.

So far, my experience is that this technology works, and that it works in ways which enable both parties to the relationship to feel that they are achieving something in an accumulative manner⁴. Of course the log is also laying a record or paper trail of the relationship which may be an important resource in the event of its breakdown. The log is invaluable in the early stages of a graduate research thesis project when a great deal of structure is needed to get the process going, and the topic focused.

This contractualist technology responsabilises both parties to the supervision relationship in a way that is quite different from the old patrimonial-liberal apprenticeship form of graduate supervision. In this older model, a more personalised and protective induction of the supervisee by the supervisor into the tacit culture of academic research and writing proceeds. Explicit feedback from the supervisor tends to be reserved for written comments on the student's work. This is fine once there are substantial written products (draft chapters) from the student, but is of little avail in the early stages of thesis production when most students have considerable difficulty in arriving at a reasonably tightly focused thesis topic. The contractualist model of supervision, in contrast to the older model, understates the personalised aspects of the relationship by keeping its task- and outcomes-focused. Since an outcome—the submission of a passable research thesis—is the *raison d'être* of the relationship, this seems appropriate.

Built into the supervision log is the requirement of any successful research thesis production: namely, that the *student* drive the process, with the facilitation and advice of the supervisor. It is the student who writes the log, and who therefore takes initiative in how this record gets written. This also means that, if she/he needs to, the student clarifies before a supervision meeting is concluded just what are the supervisor's expectations of the next task.

In this context, I have found it easy to experiment with other kinds of individualising contractualist technologies. I had already integrated into my practice of concluding supervision meetings something like the questions: Have you got what you came for? Is there anything else we need to discuss before we conclude the meeting?⁵ It was a relatively natural next step to ask students, as the first point of discussing a written piece of work they had given to me as supervisors: What do you think you achieved in this? What do you think you did not achieve so well? So far I have found students' own diagnosis of what they have achieved, as well as what they have *not* achieved, to match my own. However, there is a critical difference between using the student's, as distinct from the supervisor's, diagnosis as the point of departure for discussion and advice. The former technology develops the student's own capacities for judgment, and his/her strategic anticipation of an audience's responses to his/her rhetorics of argumentation. It does not misdirect the student's energies within an economy of adaptation to the supervisor's opinions, values and quirks.

Conclusion

The graduate supervision log is an example of using new contractualist technologies of management to make the supervision relationship rationally accountable in ways which are likely to facilitate successful graduate student completion of the task. These will need to be complemented by explicit skilling of graduate students in all the competencies and knowledges that go into the successful production of a PhD thesis.

The supervision log appears to have the virtue of explicitly tabling the supervision relationship itself for scrutiny as a component in the successful production of a PhD thesis. Since it is tabled, it becomes visible in such a way that it can be *managed* by both parties in this new contractualist manner. While the personalised aspects of the older form of apprenticeship relationship may continue to subsist, they become subordinated to and disciplined within the task-oriented contractualist form of the supervision relationship. Thus, there may well be a passionate attachment of reciprocal admiration and identification which inheres in this relationship, but it is left to run its private course alongside the publicly admissible and manageable components of the explicitly contractualised relationship. These allow both parties a safety of role and task specification which permits them time and space to determine whether, post-thesis completion, they want to make of this relationship a collegial and/or personal friendship.

This kind of infra-legal contractualism allows for structure and reciprocal accountability in the relationship, as well as laying a paper trail for its conduct. It is of particular importance in relationships which require complex forms of dialogue across unequal partners.

References

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Footnotes

1. Needless to say, the son of genius, in order to establish his own name, has to rebel against being subsumed under the authority of his supervisor-father. To some extent, this rebellion can be masked as long as the public scholarly reputation of the father is so considerable as to make it worth the son's while to continue to claim to have benefited from his supervisor's influence.
2. The professional collegium is often taken as the prototype of 'mutual adjustment', but is in fact only one kind of mutual adjustment. Mutual adjustment uses dialogical mechanisms of social coordination or organisation such as information sharing, consultation, persuasion, and what Majone (1992) calls partisan debate.
3. In my experience this regularly happens. The student tends to over-estimate what she/he can achieve within a given time interval, and then to over-estimate the availability of the supervisor to read something that comes in later than agreed, leaving little interval between its arrival and the meeting. Asking the student to diagnose why these mis-estimations have occurred—the second of course following fairly automatically upon the first—smokes out some important issues of the pragmatics of researching and writing a thesis. Without such planning and the strategy to which it conduces, especially but not only in the case of part-time candidature, it is very difficult to research and write a thesis. It can be left to a kind of 'drift' which demoralises both supervisee and supervisor. Thus, I regard the seemingly banal issue of realism around tasks and timelines as a critical issue in managing the pragmatics of advanced-level postgraduate research and writing.
4. I have little experience as yet of using logs in advanced stages of thesis production. I would not be surprised if their usefulness tends to diminish at these stages. It may, however, still be important to maintain the form of the log as a continuing record.
5. In my adoption of practices such as this, I have learnt a great deal from the democratically oriented psycho-therapies with which I have been associated both as client and colleague for some time. I am thinking especially but not only of the work of Michael White and David Epston. In his most recent book, White (1995) writes frequently about the new contractualist values of accountability, and transparency, in the relationship of therapist to client. For example, he states: "I also routinely encourage persons to evaluate the [therapeutic] interview to determine what parts of it were relevant to them, which parts were not so, and what they found helpful and what they didn't. As persons respond to this, those viable points of entry for re-authoring processes become abundantly clear. For example, I can enquire about why a particular comment was helpful, explore any realisations that might have accompanied this, and encourage persons to speculate about the possible real effects that might be associated with such a realisation—how this might contribute to the shape of their life, etc." (White, 1995, 69-70).