On doctoral education

How to supervise a PhD, 1985–2011

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It's more than 25 years ago now since I wrote that piece on postgraduate supervision for *Vestes* (Connell, 1985)[1]. I wrote it about 15 years after I'd finished my own PhD. I believe I was the first person to be awarded a PhD in my department at the end of the 1960s. So I came into the system at the time Australian universities were just building up a research capability, and particularly a higher degree capability.

Prior to the late 1940s, Australian universities, which had first been founded in the Gold Rush days of the 1850s, had basically been undergraduate institutions and finishing schools for the children of the local bourgeoisie, training places for lawyers and doctors, and some teachers. They'd set up the Australian National University at the end of the 1940s in order to have a graduate element in the Australian university system. That arrangement didn't last long because other Australian universities introduced graduate education as well. Because Australian universities were basically a colonial outpost for the British universities, they took the model of higher degree study from Britain, not from Germany or the United States.

Therefore, the PhD was an independent piece of research, with a supervisor who was supposed to be a learned scholar in the field giving you guidance. No one really thought very much about what this involved as a form of education. And the result was a lot of very poor supervision, a lot of really badly planned PhD projects, and a very high dropout rate. You had departments that enrolled quite significant numbers of PhD students and

basically gave them nothing, just expected them to get on with it and a few years later produce this magnificent thesis. So there was a lot of really bad practice because departments got kudos for having graduate students and invested very little in return. They didn't count PhD supervision as any part of an academic's workload either. It was as if you did this by a kind of divine aura around you as a scholar, and the student would stand close and get warmed by this.

This approach was all very well if the student already knew how to do it, which a few did. I was lucky in that respect because I did know how to do it more or less. I had a good honours undergraduate programme and I had role models within my family and so forth. My relationship with my supervisor was very benign, and he was very supportive, but it was largely me kicking on and doing it, without any interaction with the other students in the department about our theses. Also, when I was a doctoral student, I was involved in the student protest movement of the 1960s, which had a pretty sharp critique of universities, and quite rightly so, as degree factories and tired bureaucratic institutions.

When I wrote the paper in 1985, I'd become a head of department. I was the professor of sociology at Macquarie at the time. I was supervising a number of graduate students, so I'd had to work this out from the other side. I also had a commitment to a democratic notion of education, an interactive notion of how you did education at this level, rather than a top-down one. And that certainly

was one of the things that stimulated me to think about supervision as important and as a quite difficult piece of educational work.

So I sat down one day and thought about my discussions with my PhD students. They seemed to like my practice reasonably well; and here's this whole university system that's now putting through increasing numbers of PhD students, but doesn't actually have a thought-out way of doing it. It wasn't a piece of research; it was really just a reflection on practice. As an active unionist, I thought that *Vestes* (now the *Australian Universities' Review*) would be a good forum for this piece.

In the article, I was trying to think about supervision as a human relationship, not as a technical exercise. There's a tendency now to talk about supervision as if it's a technical process you need to learn the rules of. I was really urging my academic colleagues to think about this as a human educational relationship, which has all the ups and downs that any human relationship does. There are times when you get cross with your student, there are times when you have to be incredibly patient, and there are times when it's very upsetting. I mean I've had some harrowing stories told to me by my students. (One of the nastiest was the doctoral student who'd been working for several years, split up with her husband, and the husband sneaked in one day when she was out of the house and destroyed her drafts and her notes, the whole works, as an act of revenge. She very impressively did it again, got the PhD and went on to establish an academic career.)

In the essay I used slightly jokey, humorous language, even quoting from Shakespeare ('lending an ear'), to try to get people to think in a rounded way about supervision. It's not just a technical matter. I wanted people to be reflective about what they were doing in supervision. I also wanted graduate students to be thinking about the nature of this relationship, to see the supervisor not just as the authority figure or the bureaucratic figure, but as someone who is engaged in an educational interchange.

Some of the people who had influenced my thinking about supervision are listed in my acknowledgements. Meredith Burgmann and Carol O'Donnell were doctoral students of mine at the time. I was fairly up front about my thoughts about supervision with my students, and talked about these issues, and in effect got their advice from a

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student point of view. I can't now remember but I might have shown them the 1998 paper and asked for their reaction to the paper.

Bill Connell, my father, also influenced my thinking about supervision a great deal. Bill had been a school teacher and then became an academic and a professor of education. He was a very good teacher, a gentle person, who was really interested in students as people, not just as bums on seats or figures on a printout. I never had a supervision relationship with him of course, but I did give him drafts to look at, and he did the same for me, so we exchanged papers and he could always be counted on for thoughtful and constructive comments. I guess that was something I needed to learn about: how as a supervisor, you need to read your student's work closely, and not just say 'this bit is wrong', but give them constructive comments showing how they could make it right.

Sheila Shaver was a colleague of mine – in fact the first person appointed in sociology at Macquarie. I had also talked with her about supervision, not that I ever supervised her work, but she was completing her PhD at the time and talked with me about the experience of being supervised. Later we talked about her beginning to be a supervisor, so seeing it from both sides. Sheila is still a good friend of mine, and I learnt a lot from her conversations. So those are the people that I acknowledged. And I also acknowledged the typists, Hilary Lewis and Val Bennett – how things have changed! Those jobs have practically all gone.

I think that my article generated conversations about supervision, which was very much what I wanted to happen. The initial reaction wasn't critical and it wasn't agreeing or disagreeing particularly with my line. It was more a reaction of surprise and recognition that supervision was something people could have a conversation about.

Quite soon after that, something else happened that really did surprise me. People began using my article in graduate induction programmes. And graduate student groups began reprinting it in the handbooks that they produced for new graduate students. So the students picked it up, not just my academic colleagues. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised as there were a lot of disgruntled graduate students around. I think some picked it up as a statement about the attitudes or practices of a supervisor

that they would like to see in their departments. So my article became a statement about a standard of supervision that you might want to see in Australian universities.

Although Bill Green and Alison Lee (1995, p. 40) called my piece a 'call to action', that's not quite the way I thought of it. I wanted it to be a call to conversation. I certainly wasn't proposing an organisational agenda about supervision. I was calling for a more thoughtful and more supportive use of the resources we had. I even suggested a few ways supervisors could help students after they'd finished their PhDs – such as stealing some paper from the departmental stationery cupboard or sneaking a bit of clerical support so that they could disseminate their work.

By 1995, when the special issue on doctoral education was published, things hadn't shifted yet very far. Indeed, you might say that the ethos of universities was beginning to change away from the direction in which I encouraged people to move. It was becoming more difficult to invest a lot of time and human energy in a supervisory relationship because everyone was becoming more pressured, more scrutinised and surveilled. In 1995, as it happened, I was teaching in the United States so I wasn't actually here in Australia.

I wrote the article in a somewhat informal style, trying to put my money where my mouth was, because I was suggesting this was a human relationship and you don't want to treat it as a technical thing. So I didn't want to use education jargon, like 'pedagogy'. In any case, many people in universities didn't like thinking about themselves as educators, because that meant being a school teacher. I'm very happy to compare myself to a school teacher! I work a lot with school teachers and admire them and learn from them. But many people in universities do draw a fairly sharp distinction.

There's also a mystique about research. It was prevalent then and I think it is still prevalent, and may even be encouraged by all the bullshit about 'excellence' in research. The researcher is portrayed as a great mind, greater than other mortals, and you are privileged to have anything to do with him [it is usually a him]. And so what you do as an academic is carry on with your great thoughts and do your great laboratory work, or your marvellous field work, or your deep literary thinking; and any graduate students in the neighbourhood will just be inspired by your example, and go on and do it themselves. So you don't do anything that would distract yourself from your own marvellous research. Now I'm caricaturing of course, but I think this easily provides a rationale for not committing real resources and time and thought to supervising graduate students.

You can't predict the outcomes of research. So there is always a certain tension, uncertainty, risk in research. This cult of the great mind is perhaps one of the ways researchers deal with that uncertainty and likelihood of failure, given that most good research does fail one way or another, or gets imperfect results. The students can be innocent bystanders of the drama that happens among researchers who are meant to be their teachers, but who can become so caught up in the rest of their academic work.

My attitude is that higher degree supervision is teaching, but it's a very distinctive kind of teaching, and it's quite a complex and difficult kind of teaching.

It necessarily extends over a number of years before there are any results at all. It's got a high rate of effective failure, a lot of students drop out or the projects don't turn out well. It's highly individualised, extremely difficult to do in a team. It's high stakes for students because if the student's relationship with the supervisor goes sour, for any reason, then several years of the student's life are down the drain.

So it's a tricky, difficult kind of educational enterprise to bring off, and therefore it needs thought and attention. If supervisors as a group don't give supervision thought and attention, then what happens is that many of the students will fall by the wayside. The ones who will keep going are usually those who have some kind of privilege to start with. And that's not a good outcome. In my forty years as a university teacher I have witnessed plenty of bad practice, ranging from laziness, to sexual exploitation, to appropriation of students' work. My original article, however, was not intended to document the trouble; it was to show how to do better. Bad practice should be criticised, of course, and I have tried to prevent it when I could.

But the main enemy of bad practice is good practice. I don't mind codes of ethics but I don't think they have very much impact. What does have an impact, I think, is democratisation of the institution in which supervision occurs, so that people know what is happening around them, people in less powerful positions have organised encouragement to assert their own interests, and practices of respect and support become normative. Student organisations are important for this; so are staff unions. I worry that the drift towards managerialism, producing new forms of hierarchy in the university and new pressures for 'success' and output, has already reversed the limited democratisation that was achieved a generation ago.

By the time I returned from the US, the neoliberal shift in Australian universities was in full blast. Like everything else in the universities, higher degrees began to be treated as a market exercise, so fees for higher degrees went up

and, in the case of overseas students, to appalling levels. The only people who could come to Australia from overseas were students who were either rich people, children of rich people, or people who won scholarships where an organisation would pay for it. And that really did change the culture. It was no longer something that more or less anyone with a yearning to do research could come and do. It was now a major investment, and that necessarily produced a more calculative approach by many students, including those paying high fees, who wanted a guaranteed return for their money, and the return in minimum time.

However, there are many positive effects of increasing the numbers of international PhD students in Australia. There is great excitement in introducing a student from another culture to the research culture I know, and I'm willing to spend a lot of effort to do so. The result isn't always happy. My pedagogy sometimes fails, and not all students manage to understand what I'm asking them to do. But sometimes it works very well, and that is a great experience.

There are a lot of debates about where the boundaries are when providing feedback on students' writing for students whose first language is not English. When I am working with a student on a draft that they have written in my language, I am willing to correct their work in a lot of detail – at first. My limits are: (a) I am trying to help them express their ideas in good academic English, not my ideas, so I don't re-cast their argument, only their prose. I will separately point out problems in the argument, that's my job as supervisor, but I won't rewrite the text to solve the problems; (b) I will do this for some of their text, to show them how it is done; but not for all the text. They have to become autonomous writers at some stage, and this is when it should happen.

Unfortunately, universities and the Federal Government now focus on international higher degree students as fee-generating. One good part of this was that higher degree supervision was now treated as part of the teaching workload. I think that's an excellent move, and should have been the case all along. So there was a recognition that this took time and resources and should count for part of the teaching load. But because it happened within the corporate logic that the universities increasingly followed, higher degree work was subject to the same kind of rationalisation and managerial intervention as other areas of the university.

Whereas once Australian universities were very free floating about supervision and people could wander across disciplinary boundaries and do publishable work, now we have moved significantly towards the North American model of disciplinary silos. Students are increasingly scrutinised at the start as to whether they are properly in this discipline, or that discipline. There's now pressure on students to design their project practically before they begin their enrolment. They're certainly under pressure to get on with it quickly, because the government, having agreed that the higher degree work is part of what they're funding universities for, have put on the screws to try and make it more efficient.

So now they fund 3.5 years for a higher degree student, and if you're not done by then, the government doesn't fund the university for you anymore. So departments are under pressure to push everyone through in quick time, and supervisors in turn are under pressure, and put pressure on the students. Because students are being asked to commit to a research design very early, and are under pressure to finish in minimum time, under financial pressure as well as social pressure, there has to be an impact on the character and quality of PhD projects. What the new managerialist pressures on supervision amount to is an attempt to standardise and downgrade the PhD. The immediate effects are to de-skill the supervisors, institute fake accountability, and make the students' work more hasty and formulaic, in the name of faster 'completions', more control and greater output. It is much more difficult for someone to take the time and do the deep thinking and make mistakes, and work out new directions, and bring off a genuinely innovative project, under the current PhD regimen. I think this is, to be blunt, stupid policy, whose long-term effect is to undermine the quality of intellectual life in Australia. It is so stupid, its effect so predictable, that one wonders if this consequence is intended. Other attacks on universities suggest our government and corporate elite want a tamer, more predictable and more controllable intelligentsia

The main effect on my supervision practice, therefore, is to reinforce the idea that a supervisor's role is to protect the student from the institution, as far as one can, and encourage originality and radical thinking. I will help students to publish their work during their candidature but I will never pressure them to do so. As far as I can, I

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will support their taking the time they need to do a really good job of research, rather than cutting the project short to meet an organisational deadline. Of course this faces practical limits, especially those of cost, now that higher degrees cost so much.

So there are contradictory trends here. The fact that higher degree supervision takes time and energy and resources is now recognised. That has to be a good thing, as it creates a little institutional space for supervision. However, there is also a counter-tendency pushing academics to teach more students, get more grants, publish more papers. There is a performance/productivity drive in the neoliberal university, which very much worries me because I think it's fundamentally an anti-intellectual trend, something that must undermine the quality of education in universities. So where you've got two contradictory trends how do they balance out, or what new things will come out of them?

One result is an increasing tendency to organise higher degree supervision through formal programmes, to introduce training programmes for supervisors, and to convey the idea that there are best practices for doing this, which have to be discovered, and then implemented. There is an attempt to rationalise and routinise higher degree supervision. Again, there are pluses and minuses to this. The big plus is that supervision is getting attention now at a policy level and a programme level, where beforehand it could be incredibly slack. The downside is that when you implement programme rules and formalise things, you may get a routinised result that is not particularly exciting for anyone involved. You can create a lot of unnecessary work, and unnecessary anxiety among the students, by setting up formal 'accountability' mechanisms that don't do much for real accountability. Our contemporary 'ethics' procedures are a case in point, a classic example of badly designed bureaucracy.

Making space for creativity is a crucial problem, as we develop higher degree systems. The safest and quickest, but also the most deadening, form of PhD work is where students effectively reproduce the methods of their supervisor. Indeed students should learn their supervisor's attitudes and methods. But this should be critical learning, and the supervisor's methods should be a base for the students to be doing something genuinely their own. The more that students get support to do original and unconventional, unexpected work, the more exciting it will be for the academics involved too.

I still have terrific doctoral students and have really fascinating and interesting relationships with them. I get frustrated with them and cross with them, but I also learn from them and get excited by conversations with them. I think it's a great privilege to be involved in supervision. It is a tough form of teaching, but it's also a wonderfully inspiring teaching experience.

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Endnote

1. This piece is the edited product of a conversation between Raewyn Connell and Catherine Manathunga.

References

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