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## **Adaptive master's dissertation supervision: a longitudinal case study**

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### **Abstract**

*Drawing on supervisor and supervisee interviews, analysis of supervisor feedback on the supervisee's draft chapters, and departmental supervisory guidelines, this study focuses on the roles a master's dissertation supervisor plays during the course of supervision. These roles are discussed referring to models of supervisory pedagogy, the teaching, partnership, apprenticeship, contractual, pastoral, and non-interfering models. Supervisee and supervisor agreed that the supervisor aligned with different roles at different times for different purposes, showing this was a case of adaptive supervision. Nonetheless, the supervisor's feedback indicated supervision was more directive than his interview data suggested, illustrating the need to collect data from multiple sources to capture the complexities of the supervisory dynamic. We conclude that the dangers of departments attempting to formulate homogenized supervisory practices are highlighted by our case*

## **Introduction**

What roles do master's supervisors adopt? To what extent do these roles change? When? Why? How? We address these questions against the backdrop of a rise of master's programmes worldwide, many of which feature a supervised dissertation component, exploring the supervision of a master's social science international student at a UK university.

We focus on supervisory roles at master's level for several reasons. While there is much research looking at doctoral level supervision, there has been less focus on master's contexts generally and on elucidating supervisory roles specifically. Furthermore, there is uncertainty about the appropriacy of various roles the supervisor/supervisee can adopt (Grant 2010). This uncertainty may partly stem from the range of roles available (e.g., Barnes & Austin 2009; Brown & Atkins 1988; Dysthe 2002; Gatfield 2005; Grant 2008; Hockey 1994, 1997; Lee 2012; Vilkinas 2005)—supervisors can intervene in different ways at various stages of the dissertation journey, and different parties (i.e., supervisors, supervisees, university policy makers) can have different ideas about which roles are legitimate. Indeed, some accounts of supervisory roles are striking in their contrasts: consider the difference in emphasis between Salmon's (1992) belief that the supervisor should grant supervisees the freedom to take charge of and discover the meaning of their research for themselves and Vilkinas' (2005) characterisation of the PhD supervisor as a business manager ensuring speedy completion.

To complicate matters further, the literature suggests supervisees may require different pedagogic approaches, also requiring their supervisor to occupy different roles at different times. For instance, Brown & Atkins (1988) and Gatfield (2005) describe scenarios where supervisors start supervision in a hands-off or directive style, adjusting as appropriate. Thus, ‘adaptivity’ (de Kleijn et al 2015) and ‘principled responsiveness’ (Anderson et al 2006) are necessary supervisory qualities, supervisors being required to maintain the ‘delicate balance’ between taking too much/too little control of their supervisees’ work (Delamont et al 2000; also Ginn 2014; Rowarth & Cornforth 2005).

A seminal study describing the repertoire of supervisory roles via ‘models’ of supervision is Dysthe (2002), particularly interesting for us because it focuses on the master’s context, being an interview-based study of 10 supervisees and eight supervisors in three different fields. Dysthe identifies three models of supervisory relationship: the *teaching*, *partnership*, and *apprenticeship* models. The *teaching* model emphasizes ‘asymmetry, status difference, and dependency’ (p.518). The supervisee ‘sees the supervisor as the authority and the expert whose primary job is to correct the text’ (p.519). Supervision tends to be directive.

In contrast to the top-down teaching model, the *partnership* model

...is more symmetrical: the student’s thesis is seen as a joint project. [...]

Feedback is presented in dialogue, and exploratory texts form a basis for discussion. ...the supervisor aims at fostering independent thinking. (p.519)

Dysthe reports partnership supervisors permitted students to take charge of their dissertations, supervisors providing support as/when appropriate; thus supervisees

retained a sense of ownership of their work. Nonetheless, these supervisors experienced difficulties ‘with students who prefer a teacher who tells them what to do with their text’ (p.522).

Lastly, the *apprenticeship* model

...is characterized by the student’s learning by observing and performing tasks in the company of the supervisor. [...] It is distinguished from the teaching model by its cooperative nature, often as part of a larger research team. [...] Tacit learning by being immersed in a culture and by observing and copying a more experienced person is central.... (pp.519, 523)

Dysthe claims the three models are not mutually exclusive: a hybrid supervisory style is possible, sometimes depending on the stage of the dissertation, although one model tended to dominate. Supervisees differed regarding their preferred models, some requiring freedom to shape their project, others favouring a directive style. Additional reasons for different supervisory approaches included disciplinary traditions, departmental/institutional expectations (e.g., whether supervisees’ texts should be grammatically flawless or not), and supervisors’ own preferences and beliefs about appropriate supervisory pedagogy.

While Dysthe was interested in identifying dominant supervisory models across departments and disciplines, our study focuses on the dynamics of a supervisory relationship over time. We therefore adopt a longitudinal research design which captures pedagogic changes at different stages of the journey. Our case study approach draws on multiple data sources: hence, in addition to interviews, we analyse the supervisor’s feedback and supervisory guidelines issued by his department. We

seek to describe supervisor and supervisee experiences *in toto*, our focus here of role relationships being an important aspect of these experiences.

## **Methodology and Methods**

### ***Overview: A qualitative longitudinal case study approach***

The data reported here is part of a larger dataset of case studies documenting the supervisory journeys of international students and their supervisors at a UK university (Harwood & Petrić 2017). Here we focus on the supervisory roles associated with one of our richest cases involving ‘Billy’ (supervisor) and ‘Jay’ (supervisee, pseudonyms). There are various interesting characteristics of the Jay/Billy case relating to supervisory pedagogy in general and supervisory models in particular. Billy had ‘sixteen or seventeen’ years’ supervision experience at the time of data collection. He had tried various supervisory approaches and is now confident in his own practices, having strong views on appropriate pedagogy. Billy had just taken up post at a new institution, and talked about its supervisory systems and the somewhat contrasting expectations in his previous jobs. All of this added clarity and detail to his narrative. Billy was also supervising outside his area of expertise, speaking of how he knew little about Jay’s dissertation topic, a situation not uncommon in our experience of UK dissertation supervision. Finally, in contrast to much of the literature focusing on problematic cases of supervision, particularly where international students are concerned, this case was particularly interesting because it illuminates how adaptive supervision functions within a successful supervisory dyad, i.e., an experienced supervisor and an academically strong student working in harmony.

Jay was studying a one-year master's programme, spending five-six months on his dissertation. We conducted regular semi-structured interviews with Jay, from the initial stages of developing his research proposal to his final submission (see Table 1). Qualitative semi-structured interviews can solicit in-depth accounts of participants' 'knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions' (Mason 2002, p.63). Regular interviews meant the experiences Jay narrated to us were more likely to be relatively fresh in his mind. Additionally, we examined Billy's feedback on Jay's draft dissertation chapters, identifying the roles enacted. Further, we also interviewed Billy, seeking the perspectives of both parties for a more valid account. We also analysed departmental supervisory guidelines, asking Jay and Billy whether their experiences aligned with the department's regulations.

### ***Supervisee interviews with Jay***

Given the semi-structured interview format, data about roles emerged even when Jay was not asked about this directly. We also elicited responses by asking about supervisory arrangements: Were these arrangements in line with his own expectations and wishes? What responsibilities were shouldered by Billy and Jay? What happened in supervisory meetings? What would/wouldn't Billy help with? Which areas was Billy willing/unwilling to comment on in feedback on drafts? We additionally designed an interview prompt card focusing on different conceptualizations of the supervisory role. It featured Dysthe's (2002) *teaching, partnership, and apprenticeship* supervisory models; and Gatfield's (2005) *contractual, pastoral, and laissez-faire* models<sup>1</sup>, Jay being asked which model(s) most closely resembled the

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<sup>1</sup> We preferred the term *non-interfering* rather than *laissez-faire* model as we felt its meaning would be more transparent to interviewees. We added models from Gatfield to Dysthe's descriptions in an attempt to expose participants to a fuller range of potential supervisory models.

supervision he received and would have preferred. Our prompt cards are reproduced in Harwood & Petrić (2017); our model definitions are below.

### ***Supervisor interview with Billy***

Billy's interview included similar questions about roles and responsibilities. We asked about departmental supervisory regulations (e.g., permitted number of contact hours, whether/how he was allowed to read/comment on draft chapters), and explored whether Billy's practices aligned with these regulations.

We used similar prompt cards to Jay's to ask about model(s) of supervision adopted, and pros/cons of alternative pedagogies. We also asked Billy to explain/justify the kinds of feedback provided on draft chapters with his feedback in front of us at interview, enabling Billy to refer to specific parts of it.

### ***Ethical issues***

In the light of the sensitive information we uncovered, we were particularly conscious of the need for anonymization. Hence we withhold information about participants' discipline and department.

### ***Data***

Table 1 provides an overview of the data.



**[INSERT Table 1 HERE]**

We interviewed Jay four times, collecting his drafts and Billy's feedback, and departmental supervisory guidelines Jay was given. We referred to these drafts/documents during interview to help make our questions specific.

We only interviewed Billy once, at the end of supervision, but during a lengthy interview covered a lot of ground, asking about his feedback, his department's supervisory guidelines, and his views on our supervisory model prompt cards.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Coding and analysis of interview data***

Both of us read and independently summarized Jay's interview transcripts. We then engaged in 'collaborative coding' (Smagorinsky 2008), comparing and contrasting our summaries to create a code start list (see Miles & Huberman 1994). After refining this start list by independently coding three other supervisee interviews, we independently coded Jay and Billy's interviews using NVivo, before conducting an inter-rater reliability check using the Kappa coefficient test, which resulted in an agreement rate of  $k=0.79$  ( $p<0.0001$ ) for Jay's interview and  $k=0.76$  for Billy's, considered a good level of agreement. We discussed remaining disagreements, made further refinements, and finalized our list of codes. The repeated inter-reliability check after these refinements showed an excellent agreement rate of  $k=0.97$  for Jay's interview and  $k=0.95$  for Billy's.

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<sup>2</sup> Ideally, we would have interviewed Billy repeatedly like we interviewed Jay, thereby obtaining more detailed accounts of the supervisory journey from the perspective of both. However, most supervisors invited to participate in our study either declined or did not reply to our invitations to be interviewed, suggesting we would have recruited even fewer supervisors had we insisted on multiple interviews.

Because of space limitations, we cannot reproduce the codebooks here, but both are in Harwood & Petrić (2017). Nevertheless, we highlight some pertinent codes. The SUP ROLE and STU ROLE codes focus on how Billy and Jay see their own and each other's roles; and the MODEL code emerged from prompt card responses as Billy and Jay related Dysthe and Gatfield's conceptualizations of supervision to their own experiences and beliefs.

## **Results**

### ***Billy's supervisory pedagogy***

We compare Jay and Billy's views about which supervisory models were prominent in Billy's pedagogy, as well as analysing Billy's feedback in relation to the models. We include prompt card definitions of each model below.

#### *Teaching Model*

- *Teaching Model*: In this model, there is a traditional teacher—student relationship: the supervisor is more powerful and in control, and the student is more dependent on his/her supervisor. Feedback consists of the supervisor correcting the student's work.

Billy stated that the teaching model typifies the kind of supervision style 'I try to avoid', but concedes that total avoidance is unrealistic:

...the idea that in any supervisory relationship there isn't a relationship of power, of course there is. [...] and I think the student at master's level is in many instances dependent on the supervisor. But I try to avoid it as much as possible.

How far Billy can deviate from this model depends on the student's capacity to take

charge of his/her research. Billy decided early on that Jay was the ‘strongest’ of his supervisees, and therefore allowed Jay the space to develop his own project. However, with less able students, Billy is more directive—at least initially. Consider his description of supervising one of Jay’s ‘very weak’ peers:

...the closest to a teaching model that I’ve had for a long time, which was saying, ‘You can’t do this. This is not academic research.... This proposal is unacceptable.’ And almost...formulating a research proposal for them, which is something I usually resist doing.

Nonetheless, Billy ultimately expects even less able supervisees to produce ‘an independent piece of work’.

Although Billy’s comments suggest that the teaching model was largely eschewed, Jay associated this model with Billy’s feedback on his drafts, confirmed by our textual analysis, as illustrated below.

### ***Billy’s feedback.***

Below we examine Billy’s feedback on the chapters he commented on most extensively—Jay’s literature review and methodology.

*Billy’s feedback on Jay’s literature review chapter.* Billy provides teaching model-style feedback in both literature review and methodology chapters. Recall that Jay’s dissertation topic was outside Billy’s research expertise; nevertheless, the teaching model predominated in Billy’s feedback. For the literature review, where Billy was

unfamiliar with previous research, he focuses mainly on language, structure, and argumentation rather than engaging at a deeper level of content and ideas.

Sometimes the power differences characteristic of the teaching model are manifest: Billy uses imperative verbs ('Cut this') and exclamatives ('Not an appropriate sub-heading!') stipulating changes Jay should make. Although other feedback is ostensibly less directive, Billy nonetheless identifies weaknesses and signals Jay should fix them ('I'm not sure this reads well—it is not clear how one [phenomenon] demonstrates the other'; 'Okay I get this point, but I am not sure what you are arguing overall. Is [this] a good or a bad thing?'). And where Billy leaves other decisions about changes to Jay, Billy nonetheless stipulates what is needed. Hence in response to Jay's question in the draft: 'Should I keep this statement?', Billy writes: 'If you [do], you need to develop it', the feedback being directive, evaluative.

*Billy's feedback on Jay's methodology chapter.* Jay's project was qualitative, and Billy's own qualitative interests meant he could help with methodological issues. Again, his interventions were closest to the teaching model. Early in the supervision, Billy highlighted the parts of Jay's previous research methods essay Jay could use for his dissertation method chapter. Billy provided additional oral feedback at a follow-up meeting, addressing Jay's queries about his comments, and asked Jay to add more sections to the chapter (e.g., about difficulties with data collection). Billy also identified redundant content in Jay's draft to help him reduce the chapter's length.

Also characteristic of a teaching model is Billy's identification of conceptual errors, such as Jay's failure to properly distinguish between positivism and interpretivism; and erroneous description of his interviews as unstructured rather than semi-structured. As in Billy's literature review feedback, even more indirect comments are instructing Jay what to do and on where he has gone wrong ('This is important stuff, but raises the question why is this the chosen ontological position'; 'Okay, this is fine but it is really just a series of quotes. Why is it important and what questions does it force you to ask?').

Finally, there were also language-oriented comments (e.g., 'Clarify! Do you mean 'research design'?'; 'Re-write'). Again the feedback is directive and closest to the teaching model. It focuses on problems, flaws, and/or omissions, either providing Jay with solutions or highlighting them for Jay to remedy.

We now examine the extent to which the other supervisory models were evident in Billy's pedagogy.

### *Partnership Model*

- *Partnership Model*: In this model, the power/control differences between student and supervisor are less than in the Teaching Model. The dissertation is seen as the joint responsibility of the student and the supervisor: they both work together on it. Feedback is more about discussion than correction: the supervisor listens to the student, and the supervisor doesn't necessarily insist his/her ideas are the right ones.

There are lots of face-to-face meetings and/or emails which are genuine discussion, not correction. The supervisor is aiming to make the student an independent thinker.

Jay recognised the partnership model in his supervision because of phases which lacked top-down control by Billy. Jay described a model which was more collegial initially, as Jay developed his project ('we first discussed things when I was coming up with outlines of the research'), which moved closer to the teaching model when Jay was submitting draft chapters for comment ('it was mostly about [Billy] correcting'), before becoming less directive again, with Billy expecting Jay to direct the research himself:

...once [Billy] had corrected it and once I had finished the majority of my work then we had actually the discussion on how the research and what my research question is and how the chapters are related to it..., but prior to that it was mostly about correcting. ...I chose the partnership model...because there wasn't too much power from his side in terms of him saying 'I want this and this'. He was flexible and he was working along with me on that rather than just saying that 'I want it by this time', etc.

Billy also primarily identified with the partnership model, although he did not entirely equate his practices with our prompt card description—he took issue with the description of the dissertation as a 'joint' responsibility, arguing most responsibility should fall on the supervisee. Similarly, he disputed partnership model feedback being 'more about discussion than correction' because, although this was so 'most of the time', 'there are times when you have to correct and you have to say, 'This is factually inaccurate or logically incoherent...'. (Indeed, we saw evidence of this directive element in Billy's feedback above.) However, Billy wholeheartedly shares

the partnership model aim ‘to make the student an independent thinker’, preferring the supervisee to come to their own conclusions after face-to-face discussion:

In social science, like [my discipline], every statement of fact is a statement of interpretation, a statement of belief. [...] It’s about evolution of ideas and our understanding so it wouldn’t make sense for me to insist my ideas are the right ones.

Hence Jay must shape his work, develop his own arguments, not take Billy’s views as gospel. Billy seeks to build supervisees’ ‘critical capacity’ according to each student’s abilities, and may hand over other decisions: Billy doesn’t insist on a set dissertation structure, and previous supervisees have opted for an unconventional organization which suited their needs. So the degree to which partnership aspects of the supervision predominate depends on the supervisee’s aptitude and wishes.

### *Contractual Model*

- *Contractual Model*: In this model, the supervisor asks the student at the beginning of the supervision process how much/little help the student needs. The supervisor adjusts his/her style to fit in with the needs of the student, and offers different amounts and kinds of help depending on what his/her students want.

Jay said there was ‘a bit’ of this model in Billy’s approach, inasmuch as Billy adjusted to some extent to how Jay was most comfortable working. Billy allowed Jay brief, frequent meetings at short notice, which Jay claimed enabled him to quickly resolve a question or problem, rather than having to make appointments for longer, less frequent meetings well in advance (the departmental norm). Billy’s views on this model initially appeared at odds with Jay’s as he disputed some of its tenets, such as how the supervisor supposedly ‘asks the student at the beginning of the supervision

process how much/little help the student needs'. Billy questioned whether the supervisee is able to make this judgement ('often the student doesn't know how much help they need at the beginning'). Billy also claimed that the supervisor's power is always greater than the supervisee's, sitting uncomfortably with this model's evocation of two autonomous parties drawing up an agreement. Nonetheless, Billy claimed to vary the control he exerts and the amount of help he provides, sometimes in response to the student's wishes. So Jay and Billy agreed there were a few aspects of this model in Jay's supervision.

### *Non-interfering Model*

- *Non-interfering Model*: In this model, the supervisor assumes the student is able to do his/her research and write his/her dissertation independently. The supervisor only helps if asked to do so.

Jay felt this model didn't align with Billy's supervisory style. Although at times the supervisory reins were quite loose, never did Jay feel Billy was laissez-faire:

It wasn't exactly that case. He did let me work at my own pace and of course if it was getting too late he would flag it up, "Okay this needs done quicker"....

Billy agreed with Jay that this model didn't feature. However, he acknowledged that some students prefer to work without close supervision:

Non-interfering model... if a student disappears, I will chase them. If they don't reply, then I back off and let them get on with it and if they come back and produce a piece of poor work, then I make the point that I offered to help them. I arranged meetings. I would never see that as a model. I would see that as a worst case fallback position.

Billy takes a dim view of supervisors who customarily adopt the non-interfering



model, seeing this as driven by laziness rather than sensible beliefs about effective pedagogy; these are the kind of supervisors he has argued with in the past for refusing to read supervisees' drafts:

[The supervisor had] refused to look at a draft chapter. And his line...was, 'I'm not going to mark my own bloody work. If he hands that to me and I make corrections, then it becomes my piece of work'. I said, 'That's absolute nonsense. What do you do when you get the draft? Say, "Forget it"? You're going to contribute somewhere along the process.'

### *Apprenticeship Model*

- *Apprenticeship Model*: This model is often associated with laboratory or team project work, where lots of students work with and learn from the supervisor and from more experienced students. The student learns by observing and performing tasks in the company of their supervisor. S/he may also give feedback to other students. Although students and supervisor cooperate, the supervisor is in charge and in control.

Like the non-interfering model, Jay says this approach 'wasn't in play'. Similarly, Billy felt the apprenticeship model 'isn't very relevant to what we do' because his students don't work in a lab in teams or learn things from the supervisor or from more experienced students in that setting.

### *Pastoral Model*

- *Pastoral Model*: In this model, the supervisor offers help with non-academic matters, like personal matters. S/he offers less help with academic matters unless asked to do so.

Billy didn't see this model 'as a working model for a dissertation supervisor': 'academic matters' are his primary concern. Nonetheless, if a supervisee wanted to

talk about non-academic issues, Billy would listen and try to ‘advise...in terms of where to go for help’. And although initially Jay claimed there was nothing about Billy’s supervision style reminiscent of this model, he backtracked because of an admission to Billy about his personal problems, concluding there was a small element of the pastoral model in his supervision:

...the pastoral model...wasn’t there, although I did go and tell him that I was having a bit of a problem and he said, ‘Okay, take your time...’.

However, Jay never volunteered the exact nature of the problem to Billy, and Billy never asked; so the pastoral element of the supervision was minimal—limited to Billy explaining Jay could apply for a submission deadline extension.

We also asked Jay and Billy their preferred approaches to supervision, thereby eliciting more details about how supervision worked in general, and about Billy’s supervisory pedagogy in particular. Below we describe their perspectives separately.

### ***Jay and Billy’s preferred supervisory approaches***

#### *Jay’s preferred supervisory approach: a flexible teaching/partnership hybrid model*

Some of Jay’s friends experienced more top-down, inflexible forms of supervision than he did, their supervisors demanding strict adherence to timetables of work for submitting draft chapters. Jay felt this approach was unhelpful because the supervisees resorted to submitting drafts simply to meet deadlines:

...so they were under more pressure and they had to do things quicker.... In my case...I took a longer period doing [my literature review], but once I was

done...I covered what I had wanted to cover and I had covered what I told Billy that I'd cover, so eventually I knew that I wouldn't have to add more to it; it would be about reducing it.... But for others who were working under extremely tight deadlines sometimes...they were finishing it then they were asked that 'You have to go to your literature review again' and so they were doing it again or spending a considerable amount of time going through it and making changes. I didn't have to do that.

Overall, then, Jay felt Billy got the balance right between too much/too little control. He appreciated Billy's 'flexibility' which allowed him to submit work when he was ready, and request meetings to discuss problems as they arose:

...overall [Billy] was very flexible and he let me do my work. ...and...it wasn't 'Let me know two weeks in advance when you want to come', etc. If I emailed him today and if I said 'Will you be available on Tuesday?', if he was busy he'd say, 'Why don't you come the next day or the day before' or alternatively if he was he'd just say 'Drop by'.

Jay's preferred model was therefore close to what he experienced—a hybrid approach mainly featuring the teaching and partnership models, with Billy 'assuming control...but not too much'.

*Billy's preferred supervisory approach: a student-sensitive partnership model*

Billy's preferred approach 'whenever possible' was closest to the partnership model, reportedly predominant in the supervision of Jay. But Billy would vary his supervisory style depending on the student's 'capacities' and 'abilities'. As Billy memorably put it, 'I'm an anti-Taylorist', being resistant to a one-size-fits-all model:

There is no one best way to supervise dissertation students....

This flexible approach was apparent in Billy's views on the optimal number of supervisory meetings. After a few initial meetings to start the supervisee off, Billy then held meetings as often as needed—some more able students needing fewer meetings than less capable supervisees:

And then I will have meetings as and when I think it's appropriate. Some students can go off and you won't need to see them for three or four weeks; and they'll come back...with a methodology chapter, with access [to participants, data].... Some students, you know you're going to have to hold their hand through the process a little more, and so [I say], 'Okay, can I see you in ten days, with A, with B?' So flexibility is important.

In line with his flexible supervisory style, Billy doesn't give specific supervision guidelines to supervisees at the start, and doesn't 'really set down...hard and fast expectations'. However, early on, he requires a short (2,500-word) literature review and research questions for diagnostic purposes:

...I will always insist on them writing and presenting to me an initial literature review chapter, because I want to find out: A, whether they can write, if I haven't seen their work previously; B, that they have, at least, a basic grounding in the subject area in which they're doing their research.

This exercise enables Billy to adopt a suitably rigid or less prescriptive supervision pedagogy, depending upon his evaluation of supervisees' needs.

Billy let Jay suggest his own work schedule, only intervening where necessary, because there were parts of Jay's plan that were clearly naïve—for instance, he

anticipated finishing his dissertation in August, a month ahead of the deadline:

Int And at the beginning did Billy set the timetable? Did he say ‘By July you must have done...’?

Jay [...] He let me plan it but wherever he saw that there would be problems he highlighted it. ...I thought I’d do the interviews faster and he said ‘You’ll need more time for the interviews’. [...] he used to just tell me whenever I was taking too much time or taking too less time for anything....

Billy’s expectation that supervisees take charge of their supervision means he declines to specify a maximum number of meetings, or to dictate what gets done when:

I’ll say to them, ‘...ultimately, you direct the supervisory relationship in that you see me, within reason, as many times as you feel you need to.’

Billy’s practices are therefore driven by his belief that supervisees are different and want/require different degrees and types of supervision.

Billy was prepared to tighten or loosen supervision depending on changing circumstances. Jay broke off contact for a month because of personal problems and fell behind schedule; when he reestablished contact, Billy became more directive to ensure Jay completed on time:

I put some pressure on, in terms of, ‘This is not acceptable, you’ve got to do this, and I’m not going to be able to read as much now as I would have done, and this is going to knock things back.’

Although Billy requires students to ‘direct the supervisory relationship’, he recognises that students’ competence varies. So he allows better students to do their own thing and meet less regularly, but ‘very carefully’ monitors less able supervisees, setting

them regular deadlines, meetings, and tasks. Hence, although Billy strives to avoid the teaching model, he will use it where necessary with weaker students initially—but tries to wean them off supervisor dependence as early as possible as he sees this as an inappropriate role, believing the supervisee should work independently.

In sum, then, Billy's supervisory pedagogy depends on his 'assessment of [supervisees'] capacities, their abilities, their intellectual cultural capital, [and] whether I feel they can deal with the rigours of independent research'. With stronger students like Jay, Billy raises the bar. Jay told Billy he was considering applying for a PhD after his master's, and consequently Billy reported pushing him—to read literature 'beyond a particular level', 'to be writing regularly', 'to produce a sound methodological framework'. Billy describes how Jay's doctoral ambitions

...placed an onus on me to drive him..., to make sure that if that was his ambition, that he had to...understand what was required of him and the kind of grades he'd have to achieve.

Billy's flexible philosophy means he sees a danger in prescriptive departmental guidelines such as those issued by his own department. Supervisors should be permitted to make supervisory choices on an ad hoc basis:

[Quoting from his department's supervisory guidelines] 'Supervisors are recommended to accept only one full draft...'. I have on occasions read two drafts. That sounds very generous, but...if...the student's presenting me with a draft that needs major work on it, then as long as I've got the time, then I feel I've got a duty of care if they then revise that, to look at that, even if it's only fairly superficially; to say, 'Well, you've done what needs to be done.' So I

think I would be worried a young or inexperienced academic member of staff would wave [the departmental guidelines] and say, 'I'm only looking at one [draft].' Well, actually, we have a bit of a duty of care with some students, to say, 'I've told you to do this; bring it back to me, I need to see that you've done it.'

Billy sees flexibility as important because 'students are different' and 'require different degrees of help and assistance'. Furthermore, 'academic freedom is important', and staff should be permitted to decide how best to teach and supervise on a case-by-case basis:

And if I want to see two drafts of a dissertation, then I think that's my right to do so, and I think overly prescriptive requirements...merely stifle good supervision most of the time. They very rarely produce good supervisors. They stifle the best and work to a lowest common denominator model.

Billy's flexible 'anti-Taylorist' supervision philosophy means that the best way to supervise is the style aligned with his supervisees' needs/preferences and his own pedagogical beliefs.

## **Discussion**

Our longitudinal approach, drawing on multiple sources of data and including the perspectives of both parties, enabled us to gain a detailed understanding of the roles Billy and Jay enacted and to describe an adaptive pedagogy. Four broad phases of the journey can be identified: (i) a relatively unconstrained period during which Jay explores his topic, closest to the partnership model; (ii) a more controlled period

associated with Billy's feedback, requiring Jay to make changes to his writing (and thinking), closest to the teaching model; (iii) a second less controlled period, when Jay and Billy discuss Jay's findings and how to frame the emergent story of the research, closest to the partnership model; and (iv) a final directive phase, closest to the teaching model, after Jay's lack of contact and failure to stay on schedule, enabling him to get his dissertation completed on time.

We now discuss the implications of our case for drawing up supervisory guidelines. We acknowledge HE contexts differ markedly both within the UK and internationally in terms of programmatic, institutional, and disciplinary expectations. As such, the issues below will require contextual sensitivity in the search for appropriate solutions.

#### *The case for a flexible supervisory pedagogy*

As an 'anti-Taylorist', Billy opposes regimented supervision policies, believing these stymie academic freedom and efforts to tailor supervision to best meet students' needs. Billy says he is intuitively aware of the best way to supervise different students, meaning he can play 'a little bit fast and loose' with rigid/unhelpful aspects of supervisory guidelines:

I've been doing this for 16, 17 years now.... My view is I know how to supervise...; and generally speaking, I get it right. [...] So perhaps I play a little fast and loose with [the departmental supervisory guidelines]. But I've never lost [a supervisee] yet...

Billy's descriptions tie in with the idea of supervision as a craft acquired and honed over time—he describes supervising 'lots of students and making mistakes and learning from them' (cf. also Hockey 1997)—and therefore as something tricky to



delimit and describe in formal rubrics. Indeed, Billy confessed he was not properly acquainted with his department's guidelines, being only 'vaguely aware' of them before we asked him to read/comment on them at interview, as a relative newcomer to his institution (but a highly experienced supervisor). And as he read the guidelines, Billy took issue with some of its recommendations, giving us to understand that he would have flouted them if he had deemed it necessary. He had evolved a supervisory pedagogy he saw as effective and didn't necessarily see the need to modify this to align with departmental recommendations.

We agree with Billy that supervisors should be free to enact flexible supervisee-responsive pedagogy, but recognize this runs counter to tendencies within higher education in many contexts to try to homogenize systems and workflows. Homogenized supervisory guidelines are often defended as equitable (e.g., they are supposed to ensure all supervisees will have a certain amount of contact time, and to minimize inconsistencies in supervision policies across a department, thus supposedly resulting in greater 'student satisfaction'). But our case also highlights the need to prioritize the *quality* of supervision. Homogenized supervisory policies may allot supervisees equal amounts of supervisory time; but where supervisees differ markedly in terms of their competences and drive, and where dissertation research projects differ in terms of their complexity, predictability, etc., the idea equal *time* spent supervising will ensure equity of supervisory *quality* seems naïve. This suggests the need for an anti-Taylorist approach.

However, the argument for permitting supervisors wide-ranging control over their practice is more easily made with reference to supervisors like Billy, highly

experienced supervisors happy to invest the time and effort required to supervise diligently, and who change their approach if their preferred supervisory model isn't working. Billy was willing to go above and beyond his department's expectations regarding how much time and effort he invested in the supervision of Jay, but unfortunately we found a very mixed picture across our wider dataset (Harwood & Petrić 2017). Some supervisors gave more of themselves than they were required to, but we encountered another case—in the same department as Billy—where the supervisor was frankly negligent. Hence the need for supervisory guidelines to give caring, diligent supervisors the freedom to supervise flexibly, but also to guard against supervisory neglect. While departments will likely wish to stipulate *minimum* requirements supervisors must fulfil regarding meetings, feedback on drafts, etc. to guard against this neglect, we argue that supervisors should not be *constrained* by such requirements and debarred from providing further help. Anti-Taylorism should be acceptable; negligence should not. We recognize permitting such flexibility probably makes it harder to formulate guidelines on what supervisors can/cannot do. We don't pretend writing supervisory guidelines is an easy job. But we believe our case illustrates the need to provide (caring, competent) supervisors some latitude to decide which role(s) they will perform during a supervision.

#### *Implications for supervisor development*

While Billy's rich supervisory experience allows him to skilfully draw on different styles at different stages of supervision, junior academics taking on the supervisory role for the first time are likely to lack confidence and skills for adaptive supervision (as illustrated by another case study in Harwood & Petrić 2017). Exposure to different supervisory models could usefully raise faculty awareness of good practices, as per

Lee's (2012) suggestion (see also Lee (2018) for how these models can be integrated into a supervisor training programme). Lecturers could consider the extent they subscribe to each model, at which stages of the supervisory journey, and with which supervisees. Our supervisory model prompt cards could engender pedagogical reflections by new and old supervisors alike (and their supervisees). As Murphy (2009) argues,

If supervisors (and candidates) were assisted to become explicitly aware of their own and others' orientations to supervision, practice might become more deliberative and change more open to self-control. (p.305)

Furthermore, research on supervisor models and adaptive supervision should inform departmental supervisory guidelines. Our results, together with previous work, could underpin guidelines which recognize there are different supervisory models which may be appropriate to deploy at different stages of supervision with different supervisees, and which can be usefully adapted to different disciplinary, institutional, and national contexts.

### **Coda: enhancing the quality of supervision research**

Both parties, but especially Billy, took issue with parts of the model prompt card descriptions. So were our prompt cards unfit for purpose? We think not; they provided a springboard for discussion, both Jay and Billy recognizing *aspects* of the model descriptions which applied in their case, supporting their reasoning with reference to specific supervisory events. Nonetheless, in future studies we could draw on other sources apart from Dysthe and Gatfield to redesign our model prompt cards, attempting to better describe the range of roles available. Alternatively or in addition,

rather than organizing the prompt cards around various proposed supervisory *models*, we could instead identify the various *actions* of supervisor and supervisee which are described in these models, or the *stages through which supervision passes*: it could be argued that the various models lack the detail and specificity this would provide, and that such a list of actions/stages would enhance the validity and depth of responses. For instance, this list could include a much more detailed specification of the type of feedback provided in terms of areas covered, and the role the supervisee is then required to play in improving their draft in response to the feedback (e.g., reading of additional sources, merely retyping the draft and inserting the supervisor's corrections, etc.). However, given the multiple roles and actions available to supervisors and supervisees, we suggest no prompt cards will ever neatly map onto participants' experiences. An alternative approach is participants defining their *own* models from scratch, thereby avoiding the requirement to map experiences onto pre-existing models which may fail to adequately describe participants' supervisory relationships. But requiring a description of the supervisory model from scratch is cognitively demanding, risking non-cooperation and non-completion of the task—or at least inadequate reflection when participants are writing their descriptions. On balance, we retain our preference for presenting supervisory models to participants over the blank canvas approach. By emphasizing interviewees should not necessarily choose a single model; that they justify their choices by referring to concrete experiences; that they can align with some aspects of each model while rejecting others; and/or that they may refine the model descriptions to better represent the supervisory pedagogies they implement or experience, the model prompt card approach seems to us the preferred methodological option.

We also acknowledge our different data sources shed light on various aspects of supervisory pedagogy. Billy claimed he strove to avoid the teaching model, but we found this model best described some of his feedback to Jay. In line with recommendations in the case study research methods literature (e.g., Duff 2008), we need to triangulate multiple sources of data to establish whether/to what extent these narratives are complete. Jay and Billy's accounts each tell us much, but do not fully describe all aspects of supervision; the complementary analysis of feedback samples helps provide a more nuanced picture of enacted supervisory pedagogy. Furthermore, our longitudinal research design, enabling us to collect Jay's draft chapters over time and examine Billy's feedback on each, avoids the weaknesses of one-shot data collection, helping obtain a rich, detailed understanding of dissertation supervision.

**6801 words**

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