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## Chapter 11

### Supervising doctoral students and managing the supervisor-supervisee relationship<sup>1</sup>

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**Highlights:** Trust and mutual respect; encouraging scientific creativity; PhD as transformative process; physical, social and emotional balance; pride and humility, the right attitude at conferences and in papers; handling expectations; getting over “Kleenex” moments; dealing with critical comments; approaching a potential supervisor, maintaining a good relationship; the role of third parties; the post-PhD relationship.

Philip Glass, aged 25, was a graduate from the prestigious Juilliard School in New York and decided to move to Paris thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship to study composition with the eminent teacher Nadia Boulanger. Although he had composed music by that time, he had not yet found his own style. Nadia Boulanger held her students to the highest standards and was unrelenting. Between 1964 and 1966, he spent many 8-hour days composing under her intense supervision. She would throw him out if there were mistakes. He also collaborated with Ravi Shankar and discovered the Indian music tradition. He combined the training with Boulanger with his new-found knowledge about the harmonic movements of Indian music and thus developed his own unique style

(<http://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/lectures/philip-glass-lecture>). The parallelisms with supervision in the academic world are striking – despite some differences. PhD supervisors don't spend that much time with their students but they do often develop intense academic relationships. They also nurture their students' knowledge and skills in order for them to develop their own original projects. Writing a thesis is a creative act, like the writing of a piece of music for voice or for instruments. Advice can be given on the quality of the writing, the structure, the argumentation but the creative element is entirely in the student's hands. A student may thus incorporate ideas and methods from neighboring disciplines into a research design. In a healthy relationship, the supervisor will provide constructive comments to the student. There is obviously always tension between what the student wants to do and what the supervisor thinks is feasible or advisable. Challenging the student is important until the thesis starts to take shape and the narrative becomes clear. At that point the supervisor needs to point to aspects that could be further polished rather than radically reshaped. By 1967 Philip Glass had decided that he would not compose music in the style that Nadia Boulanger had taught him but he acknowledged her huge influence on his composing skills and blended this with his insights in Indian classical music. Just as a freshly graduated PhD student, he had become highly skilled, he gained independence and he carved his own way to success.

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Having been first supervisor of 26 students (23 females) who obtained their PhD at Birkbeck, second supervisor of 4 students outside the UK since 2002, and currently supervising another 6 PhD students at Birkbeck and 3 PhD students outside the UK makes me a bit of an expert on the topic of supervision. Thinking about it, I'm struck by the uniqueness of the relationships with students despite behaving in much the same way with them all. I have always been interested in individual differences and it's amazing to see how every relationship is not only different but also dynamic. In other words, how collaboration, trust and friendship grow over time in a non-linear fashion. In this contribution, I will meander around a number of themes and mention specific episodes in my career that might resonate with colleagues and students.

I would like to start by highlighting the themes picked up in the research literature on Master supervision by Harwood and Petrić (2017). As I also supervise Bachelor's and Master students, I can reflect on communalities and differences. The crucial difference is that of the length of time of the relationship – a couple of months compared to a couple of years. The longer the relationship, the more intense and profound they can become. Another difference is the amount of investment on the student's part. PhD students need to be fully committed and passionate about their research in order to reach the finishing line. It's very much like the difference between running a relatively short distance, say 1 kilometer, and running a marathon. The running metaphor is only partly correct, though, because students who start a PhD in applied linguistics have generally already obtained a MA. In other words, they have run the single kilometer in a good time, but that doesn't prepare them for the much longer distance. It means inevitably that not everybody who did a really good MA necessarily excels in the PhD study. Runners like Mo Farah who obtained gold in both the 5k and the 10k in the Olympic games of London and Rio are exceptional, yet even he did not participate in the marathon. The PhD student at the starting line may thus have good chances on paper to make it to completion but there is no guarantee.

Harwood and Petrić (2017) report that the phenomenon of supervision is opaque and poorly understood and argue that it is crucial then "to demystify supervision to understand what makes it effective, to understand its processes and outcomes" (p. 4). The authors point out that there are plenty of stories in the literature on "dysfunctional supervisor-supervisee relationships, miscommunication and unhappy experiences" (p. 4). A recurrent theme is the uncertainty that both students and supervisors have about supervisory roles and expectations. Supervisors can be faced with unexpected ethical dilemmas about supervisory boundaries, notably the responsibility to ensure that the work meets certain academic standards and the students' responsibility to reach those standards. Another question is that of the multiple roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and student and the inevitable lack of consensus regarding their appropriacy. Do supervisors assume the role of a parent or a guru or a friend? Do they treat their students as children or disciples or friends? Harwood and Petrić (2017) add that "different supervisees need supervisors to occupy different roles at different times" (p. 9). Supervisors might evolve from being more directive at the beginning to granting more freedom and flexibility later on. Problems can also arise from different expectations of supervisor and supervisees. This can be confounded with miscommunication, sometimes linked to cultural differences or insufficient language proficiency. Finally, the student's relationship with the supervisor can also be affected by social relationships with peers, other lecturers, which "play an important

role in aiding socialization in and enculturation into their departments and their disciplines” (p. 16).

Producing a PhD is a transformative process. It means that the student must embrace change at many levels in order to succeed. The role of the supervisor is to guide students in their transformation into independent PhD researchers. For some the change comes early, for others it takes a long time to partially or fully materialize. Moreover, interruptions in the study—or in one’s life outside their academic work—can have consequences in the student’s transformation. Sometimes it can imply regression to a previous state – which is discouraging for both student and supervisor and can have a negative effect on the relationship. After an interruption, the student suddenly finds him/herself having to rejoin the race towards the PhD at full speed having lost the stamina, sometimes the enthusiasm and the flexibility, which weakens the self-confidence. The hiatus and absence means the supervisor needs some time to remember the student’s project, rekindle the enthusiasm for the student and his/her research project, and help get it back up to speed. Interruptions have thus both academic and relational consequences. It might be a bit strong but a PhD student that comes back after a long absence is a bit like a former boyfriend or girlfriend walking through the door – you still like them but they’re no longer at the forefront of your thoughts. The relationship has gone a bit cold and needs to be restarted. This has happened to me with students who were pregnant, had their child and then returned to study. I sympathized with them because the months and the first years with a baby or a very young child is exhausting. The tiredness means it is unlikely that creative ideas will flow. It is harder to remember papers and books – also because it’s hard to remember what the point was. So in the end, the only sensible thing to do in that period is sticking to relatively straightforward mechanical tasks like working on the bibliography, doing formatting, re-reading and reworking parts that have already been written in order to reacquaint oneself with the topic and its direction. There is an advantage to this, namely that the absence means rereading one’s own work as if it had been written by a stranger. It can cause reactions like a proud “did I write this?” and just a bit later “how could I claim this?” and “oops, this is a bit embarrassing”.

One particularly difficult issue, highlighted in Harwood and Petrić (2017), is how closely a supervisor can get involved in the non-academic life of his/her PhD students. Since the work on a PhD requires a certain degree of isolation over a prolonged period, some tensions can arise in the students’ social and professional lives (especially because many of my Birkbeck students are all in full-time employment). Some may seek guidance or advice on how to handle this. This is a sensitive domain because supervisors are not trained as psychotherapists but we need to offer a sympathetic ear and offer common sense advice. My own choice is to be very open and supportive but still keep some distance. It means that I’m happy to befriend my PhD students on Facebook (something I don’t do with BA or MA students), and occasionally go to lunch or dinner with them, or have a drink with a group of students after a seminar or a lecture. However, I do not invite them to my home. In this respect I follow the practice of my colleagues.

I really enjoy informal encounters with my PhD students because it is important to talk with them about non-academic matters. I like to remind them that to be academically productive and successful, they need to be able to switch off (see discussions on work-life balance in

Larsson, Loewen, Oliver, Sasaki, Tracy-Ventura, & Plonsky, this volume). They need to maintain their social and romantic relationships. I encourage them to do sports and I probably talk too much about my own karate experience and how it keeps me sane and healthy. We need to be able to empty our mind of our preoccupations and need to activate different parts of our brain and body regularly. Karate does it for me: the stretching, the basics in different brain-stimulating variations, the various kata, the kumite where we fight opponents in a friendly but determined way, the social relations with people from outside the academic world... It has helped me control mind and body and lower stress levels. It took me 10 years to get my black belt, which, in a way, was longer than getting my PhD. Getting a black belt, I realized, has quite a lot of similarities with getting a PhD. In both cases you have to prove independence and sufficient knowledge, an ability to put things in practice, a stubborn determination to reach objectives no matter what obstacles have to be overcome along the way (which in my case was a frozen shoulder that delayed me for almost two years and was extremely painful) and take the occasional painful hit without losing control.

Reaching the coveted black belt or the PhD award makes a person realize what distance has been traveled and how far the way ahead still is. There is no room for arrogance. Humility is an attribute that we should all strive for. Pride in one's achievement is natural but it should not come across as boasting. There are always people who know more and do some things better. These are values that I try to instill in the karate dojo and among my PhD students. I tell them that reviewers don't care whether the author has a PhD or not, that audiences at conferences will judge the presentation on its merit, not depending on the rank of the presenter. Because presenters and authors of higher rank typically have more knowledge and more experience, there is a probability that they will be more successful in convincing the readers and spectators of the value of their contribution. However, there are sufficient examples of well-known authors and keynote presenters at conferences who make a hash of it or fail to connect with their readers or audience (see De Costa, this volume). So I remind my PhD students that they have every chance of making a good impression at conferences, and that with a little guidance they are perfectly able to publish their findings in good journals. I also tell them that it is always good to announce at the start of a talk that their presentation is part of a PhD project and who the supervisor is. It allows the audience to situate them within a social network. The other benefit is that if members of the audience have very critical comments they will hopefully voice them in private during the tea break rather than in public – which can be quite traumatic.

Talking about conference presentations reminds me of an episode at a Trilingualism conference in Switzerland where an older Eastern European professor, LD, displayed the opposite attitude of the humble and enthusiastic researcher. She started her Powerpoint presentation – in which she had activated all the possible visual and sound effects – with her CV. The members of the audience, including many MA and PhD students, looked at each other in surprise – this is not done. The only mention of a CV happens when the session chair introduces a plenary speaker. LD pointed out that she had a very important PhD and that she was head of a very important lab which was unknown to the audience. We realized that she was going to hide behind the argument of authority, which boils down to the command: "Believe me because I'm important and powerful". The next slide summarized the "previous research" on the topic, with all the big names in psycholinguistics that

everybody knew. She declared that they were all wrong without bothering to specify why. I had an inkling about what slide would follow: “current research”: her own publications of course, published in Russian in local departmental journals. A PhD student sitting next to me shot me a surprised look, was this acceptable behavior at conferences? LD listed her many achievements but presented no evidence for her outrageous claim. She was also running over her allotted time and I wondered whether she intended to fill the entire 30 minutes, leaving no room for critical questions and having therefore gotten away with a brazen act of unprofessional behavior. I started gesturing at the chair of the session to cut LD off. I’m not usually aggressive at conferences but this seemed to me to be a bad example for the students and young researchers in the room. So I pointed out to LD that she could not just claim that everybody was wrong and that she was right without a shred of evidence. Audiences are there to weigh and judge the evidence and then make up their mind about the presenter’s claims. She was clearly taken aback by this comment. “You have misunderstood me!” she bellowed. “I don’t think so”, I answered, “where is your evidence?”. The session ended in a bit of chaos and everybody ran off discussing this most peculiar presentation. I realized that maybe I had been a bit harsh and that a cultural issue might be involved. In some cultures, it is simply not done to criticize senior researchers openly, which means that once a person has presented evidence of their status, they do not expect to be contradicted and they do not expect to present actual evidence in support of their claims.

In the UK we encourage students and researchers to be critical and to reject dogma. When I read a PhD dissertation, I expect a critical commentary of the literature where the student shows awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies and suggests ways to overcome the weaknesses without sacrificing too many strengths. We all know that there is no such thing as a perfect research design, or perfect a dataset or argument. It is inevitably a compromise between academic daydreaming and the harsh and messy reality of data collection. PhD supervisors and examiners know this, and they want to see whether the student has shown the necessary flexibility, courage and insight to pull it off.

Another aspect that influences the relationship is what the student thinks the supervisor expects from him/her (Harwood and Petrić, 2017). This relates as much to the process of supervision as to the production of the thesis. Having a large load of PhD students, I do not pursue them with fixed timetables for meetings. I expect them be highly motivated and to take the initiative, send me something they have written, contact me to get feedback or request a meeting (for an alternate perspective, see Bitchener, this volume). I know that some colleagues (and students) prefer a more formal approach. My view is that students need different things at different times and that in order to be efficient, it’s better not to be bound by too many rules about frequency of meeting and I don’t want to chase them. Face-to-face meetings are crucial at critical junctures, when decisions have to be made about the research questions, the design, the analysis, and the interpretation. Brain-storming sessions can be really productive. However, for more routine matters, email communication is often more efficient. For example, an abstract or a draft chapter can be commented on in a couple of minutes or an hour.

I tell my students to find the right point on the perfectionism continuum. What they send me does not need to be perfect but it needs to be good enough that I can read and

understand it, even if some parts may be missing. Of course, perfectionist students tend to wait too long before sending me their writings and those who score too low on that dimension send me things that are too rough. A common concern of PhD students is that their work might lack in quantity and/or quality. I tell them that the quality needs to be high but that the expectation of quantity is variable. In other words, more is not necessarily better, in fact the opposite is true: “less is more”! Most students start with overambitious projects and along the way they realize that by abandoning this or that side-track they could focus more on what is emerging as the main track. It is impossible for supervisor and student to know at the start what exactly the main track is going to be. It is an emerging property of the project. A difficult question can occur when the student has been pursuing a track only to discover that somebody else has just published a book or a paper on the topic. This leads to the so-called “Kleenex moment”. I always have a box of tissues in my office for this special occasion. A tearful student tells me that somebody else had exactly the same idea and fears that his/her research is suddenly no longer “original”. I try to convince the student that this is in fact a good thing. At this point I prepare a cup of tea – a universal British remedy for disaster relief. I explain that plenty of researchers are interested in this great topic. It’s been in the air, there have conference presentations on the topic, so inevitably different people work separately on similar topics. However, no studies are ever completely alike. They differ in epistemology, in methodology, in sample size and composition, in findings and interpretations, in implications and suggestions for further research. In other words, the originality of the student’s thesis is not at stake, and the new source should be critically appraised, the similarities and differences highlighted, weaknesses and strengths underlined. Moreover, if the author of that new work came to similar conclusions, it is really great because it provides independent verification that what the student has found in her/his own work might be part of a something universal. By the time I reach the conclusion, the tears have dried and an uncertain smile is reappearing on the student’s face.

To relieve the pressure on PhD students about unrealistic expectations about the thesis, I remind them that they are not expected to produce a glittering work of art but rather a functional, plain but unique “masterpiece”. Just as the journeyman in the Middle Ages had to produce a master piece in order to become a master craftsman and join a Guild, a PhD student needs to produce a thesis that proves that s/he has reached the required level to join the international community of scholars. I use the metaphor of a table, telling my students I expect them to produce a simple table. I don’t care how many legs it has, as long as it can stand without external support. Size doesn’t matter. It could be a dinner table or a bedside table. It could be metal, wood or stone. It will not be judged on fancy decorations but on functionality, which means: does it serve its purpose? It is solid enough? Examiners will test this by focusing on its stability, they might shake it to see whether it comes apart, slam it with their fists, they might sit or stand on it, in the end they might just use it to sign the report where they express satisfaction with the student’s work. Of course, if the work is both solid and sleek, natural but polished, the examiners will be doubly happy.

What lies at the heart of a good relationship? I believe it is mutual trust, honesty and a shared passion for the topic. The trust implies that both sides know they can rely on the other, be it in producing a first draft for a joint paper, or a chapter for an edited book, and knowing that useful feedback will arrive soon after. Honesty means that the student can

agree or disagree with suggestions to go in a certain direction and that the supervisor can be critical without fearing to upset the student. This, I realize, is wishful thinking on my part. I try to be constructive and always start by highlighting the things I liked in a text before moving to the things that need to be improved. I guess I'm a bit too blunt sometimes. I feel sorry when the student tells me later that she cried all evening before getting back to work. However, I wouldn't do it differently. Honesty and trust are the foundation. Claiming satisfaction about something that is not good risks undermining the relationship and could lead to disaster in the future when external examiners or reviewers give their blunt opinion. In other words, it is much better to receive judicious criticism – even if it hurts – before it is too late. This is equally important in the role of author of academic texts as in the role of reviewer of them. As former editor of the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* and current editor of the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* I'm constantly begging colleagues in the field to agree to review papers that I feel are good enough to be sent out but that have room for improvement (and **all** can be improved – certainly my own when I submit to other journals). How grateful am I, when receiving an intelligent report full of good advice and references, where the author is encouraged and challenged, pushed to spell out assumptions, encouraged to cast off tangential concerns or weak analyses, with suggestions for strengthening the analyses and interpretations in order to bring out the best in the paper. And these are obviously also the things a good supervisor does.

I guess I'm an emotional reader of research proposals. If it makes my heart beat faster, if I feel a tickle of interest and my curiosity is awakened, I feel that there is potential for something interesting. A conversation with the applicant can shed light on the feasibility of the study, of the applicant's flexibility, knowledge and degree of preparedness. I tend to accept the proposals that interest me so much I'd be happy to develop them myself. These are exceptions however. I receive an average of one application a day from all parts of the world. Most of them are out of the blue, usually from applicants who send something generic and uninteresting in weak English. I have my standard reply that to convince someone of becoming their supervisor good knowledge of that person's work is required. Like in all burgeoning relationships there needs to be a foreplay, like a request for pdf versions of recent papers if they are not available in the applicant's library, a short request for advice on something technical linked to the potential supervisor's interest. It could also be a conversation over coffee at a conference on a topic of common interest. If a preliminary link has been established it will be easier to build on it. It could lead to specific input in the development of the research proposal and an application for supervision. Barging in too early, with a badly written email, showing little sign of originality and insufficient understanding of the field leads to a polite but negative reply. I'm surprised how many applicants want to address tired old research questions using boring outdated research designs in their unique location. They seem to think that because nobody has researched some dimension in their village school, they could do original and interesting research. They seem very surprised when I answer that unless they have compelling reasons to believe that their village school is so different from all other schools in the world and this could have dramatic effect on this particular dimension or variable, nobody will care. I try to explain that nobody is interested in yet more research on a question that might have been hot 10 or 20 years ago. The field is moving forward, and PhD students need to ride the wave of innovation in order to convince supervisors, reviewers, editors,

conference organizers and future employers. The PhD student who bets on something new and promising has more chances of getting accepted. In that sense, applied linguistics is not fundamentally different from fashion, music or car design.

What can students do to maintain a good relationship with their supervisor? I often joke with my students that getting a PhD requires much more than just academic ability. Social and emotional intelligence are necessary as students need to manage their relationship with their supervisor but also need to be able to convince reluctant potential participants to spend some time providing data for the research. I'm not expecting any presents from my students but a kind message, a word of thanks for reading through their drafts is always welcome. I appreciate it when they remind me during meetings of what they are doing and where they are in the research before asking a specific question. With a large cohort of PhD students (it peaked at 17 three years ago), I need a reminder of what they are all doing, and what recent turns their research has taken. I dislike being asked things in a rush in a crowd because time and reflection is needed before taking a decision that can have serious consequences for the research project. Sometimes I'm surprised to see that a student's thesis is evolving in an unexpected direction. When questioned, the student argues that I agreed with the change. I have no memory of it but by then it might be too late to change anyway.

I also remind my students never to submit anything with my name on it without my explicit agreement. I also intensely dislike receiving immediate revised versions of texts that I have just spent days reading and commenting on. While some comments might be on superficial things such as wording and organization, others require a little more time and reflection. Sometimes a little change somewhere can have larger implications further in the thesis, a little bit like a local butterfly effect. By reacting too quickly, a student misses the possible implications of a suggestion of change. Comments need to sink in and be digested in order to develop in bold revisions. Also, supervisors need a break from a particular piece of work to gain some perspective. Looking at the revision a couple of weeks later allows a fresh open mind to consider the text afresh. Getting a revision too soon just puts me in a bad mood and I tell the student that s/he have to wait a bit because many others are waiting for feedback. I also keep reminding students to make sure their name figures in the files they are sending me. There might be only one file on their computer named "chapter2final" but too many stack up in my download map.

I always respect independently-minded students. If they disagree with some suggestion I made and they come up with good enough arguments, I'm happy to be convinced. One way to test these arguments is to publish a paper in a respected journal. The opinions of good reviewers can solve some contentious issues in the thesis. They act like impartial referees and it helps when a student receives an independent confirmation or rejection of a particular idea. Many reviewers' comments on joint papers have found their way into theses. They can involve better definitions of key concepts, strengthening of the research design or new ways to analyze data. It has psychological benefits also for both students and supervisors. The student realizes that the supervisor is not omniscient. The supervisor accepts that some of the student's unusual ideas might work after all, or that a reviewer confirmed what the supervisor had been saying all along. I urge my students not to believe everything I tell them –with the exception of what I just stated. Receiving a rejection letter

for a joint paper or chapter is also an exercise in resilience. How the supervisor reacts is instructive for the student. I try to remain philosophical (though my wife might disagree with this statement), pointing out that the judgment is on the paper not on the authors. Obviously, reviewers are only human and their comments can sometimes come across as unjust or too harsh or misguided. I learned that authors should realize that they do not have to follow **all** the reviewers' recommendations if they disagree. The cover letter to the editor can offer an explanation about which suggestions were taken up and which were rejected and for what reason. It is the editor who will have to take the ultimate decision. Sometimes the paper or chapter can be improved by a change in perspective and can be submitted elsewhere. If it gets rejected again it's probably better to change it radically or to stop investing time in it and simply bin it. I remind my students that sometimes it's better to cut one's losses and move to something new, enriched by the previous (bad) experience. It means that a rejection letter from a journal with a good and clear justification might not be nice but it can prove immensely useful for further development of the paper or thesis. It is crucial to know what objections might be raised against a certain approach. It prepares the student for the final viva (oral defense) and for conference presentations.

The relationship between supervisor and supervisee does not end at the viva or at graduation. It evolves into a more balanced relationship of equals. To use another metaphor, the PhD is like a driver's license that allows the freshly graduated student to drive anywhere unsupervised. Of course fresh PhD holders need to build up experience and they have not miraculously turned into formula 1 or competitive rally drivers. My former students are welcome to ask me for strategic or technical advice, I'm happy to write letters of reference for them, support their applications for promotion. However, I explain to them that unless I figure as co-author on their papers, I can no longer provide extensive comments on their texts.

After all these wise words, I realise that I did not explicitly mention the importance of not taking oneself too seriously. We may be involved in serious academic business but that does not mean we cannot joke about it. Humor allows us to be creative, to release tension, to be slightly transgressive and to have fun in a professional way. A little humor, combined with obvious enthusiasm for the topic, can help captivate the audience at a conference and can help grab the attention of the reader.

## **References**

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