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CYCLE 3: SUPERVISING RESEARCH STUDENTS

My third cycle applies to a lesser written-about subject than undergraduate teaching, as well as MA teaching, which is supervising students taking a research degree. This, however, is something that I thought was important to ruminate on because it is one particular aspect of my post that is newest to me, having only actually properly beginning 'first' supervision of two PhD students from September 2006 onwards. (I had previously, from September 2005, begun to gain some experience through acting as a second supervisor.) In the following I will outline the actual experience that I had relevant to doctorate supervision; the main issues that I faced on first encountering supervision; and then document some of the issues that arose through the year that I started this.

Previous Experience
I have mentioned that I had already been a 'second supervisor' for a year prior to taking on my current first supervision duties. Nevertheless, relevant experience that I could use to inform my current situation stretched further back than this. The first relevant experience that I could draw upon in order to inform this duty was the fact that I myself had been a doctoral student, completing my PhD in 2001, which wasn't too far in the distant past. I could, therefore, envisage what my own personal situation as a doctoral student was like: what, to me, were the main challenges and how did I deal with them? Further, there was my relationship with my own supervisor: what were the difficulties with this relationship and how were they dealt with? Finally, I could think about the role that my own supervisor played and what I thought about his respective strengths and weaknesses. Through speculating on all of these aspects, I already had a list of things that I could draw upon in terms of supervising research students. Of course, I do not want to claim that this is itself sufficient. My experiences, for example, are far from universal, so if I only drew upon these experiences I may subsequently disregard any other potential problems that individual doctoral students may undergo. They do, however, provide a starting point. In line with this, as a student and also as a lecturer, I have had many conversations with other PhD students about their particular experiences and progress: these have sometimes led me to realise that some of my personal problems as a doctoral student were hardly unique; but they have also thrown up different types of problems (particularly relating
to dissatisfaction with supervisors – I was relatively lucky in this regard. In combination with my own personal recollections, these conversations can also form an initial sketch of problems and other issues that are important to PhD research.

I have also had more concrete experience of actual supervision, though this is not at PhD level. Nevertheless, whilst there are certainly differences between undergraduate and MA dissertation supervision, certain issues have arisen and can be drawn upon in thinking about supervising doctoral students. I have, through such work, engaged in the following tasks which are also useful for PhD supervision: the facilitation of an independent research project; asking students to explain their ideas and plans and offering feedback on such ideas in light of my general knowledge; reading drafts of their work and, once again, offering constructive feedback. These are the main issues, though of course there are also a number of relevant points that emerge within each of these main issues. For example, within the planning and explanation category, there are attached matters, such as setting up a schedule in terms of meeting the student and what they want out of the supervision; within the issue of offering feedback, there is the sensitive matter of giving feedback and criticism in a way that proves helpful to the student and does not actually deflate their confidence. All of these elements, at least, have been drawn upon in previous supervision experience.

Of course, there will also be some important differences. I can get a sense of some of these differences from personal experience, from reading relevant literature, and finally through the experience of actually undertaking PhD supervision, discussing certain issues with students, and reflecting upon them; this portfolio thus gives me a perfect opportunity to begin doing this.

The most obvious differences are those of length and standard: an undergraduate dissertation takes place over the course of a single semester; the Masters dissertation up to a year; the PhD is three to four years. Not only is the time spent on the work considerably longer, so is the length of the actual work. On top of this, it should be of a more 'advanced' academic standard and should constitute original research. On top of this, because a student is studying for such a long period on their own, the 'personal' issue is of even greater concern. Of course, when supervising other types of student (as well as teaching them on more general levels), one needs to be aware of
any personal problems that may interfere with research. However, when taking on a new PhD student there is a greater need to make sure that the student is settling in ok and to be aware of any problems that may arise upon the way. Frequent problems of PhD students are loneliness and problems with motivation; the latter is particularly pressing in the sense that, in the absence of ‘taught’ modules (with the exception of postgraduate training and optional modules that PhD students may decide to sit in on), the student is faced with a lot more time working on his or her own, which can prove difficult for some.

Application
As I mentioned at the beginning of this cycle, my introduction to primary supervision was somewhat unusual in that both of the students had been studying for their PhD for a year already. I was previously a second supervisor of one of the students, so I was already acquainted with him and his work to some degree (though not in detail); the second student I knew about but had not previously supervised in any capacity. Nevertheless, despite this fact, I still needed to establish basic issues with the students, such as discussing their relevant expectations (and, in turn, telling them what my expectations would be), as well as making sure they knew what was required of them in terms of the final PhD (Delamarre et al. 1997: 21-2). On top of this, there were certain differences between these students and those who would have been starting anew: on the plus side, they were more likely to have settled in to the life of a PhD student (though, of course, this was not certain and I would have to make sure that I did ask about personal experiences at various moments); on the negative side, they would have been used to having supervision from someone completely different and it may be the case that they would take a little time adapting to a new supervisor. I would have attempt, then, to make sure that they did not experience a significant disruption to their progress.

The first thing that I did as a supervisor was to arrange an initial meeting with the students. In these sessions I discussed in general what their work involved, the methods that they were using in order to undertake the research, the aims of the work (involving traditions they were drawing from and what new types of knowledge they were hoping to establish). I also discussed the stage they were at (in terms of research and writing completed) and where they hoped to go next. I then asked to see the
written work that they had thus far completed, so that I gained a more concrete impression of their work, with an arrangement to meet and discuss this work as soon as I had read it thoroughly and made notes.

The two situations were very different and therefore required contrasting approaches. I felt that one of the students was very highly motivated, had a very clear and thought-out methodological approach (and awareness of methodological issues related to this approach), a clear plan of what he wanted to do in the near future, and had written work of a high standard. The second student, however, was a little more problematic: he did have a firm idea of what he wanted to research, as well as many of the archival institutions that he needed to visit; however, he seemed lack structure and, hence, his written work was slightly messy. There was certainly lacking a clear idea of the methodologies and theoretical issues that were going to underpin this work. Both of these students had been supervised by the same person before I became their primary supervisors, and I felt that the second student had been left to drift too much. In terms of the personalities, however, I felt that structure was the main thing that this student needed, as well as regular checks to gauge his progress and his work. Nevertheless, I had to avoid making the mistake of thinking that the first student was fine and therefore did not need much supervision. Clearly, though he was certainly in a better situation at this point, he would still need to be competently supervised. I therefore had to draw up a very broad plan of what were the main things that I needed to address and do with these students for the next year (and then, of course, continue to address such issues in light of what would transpire).

For both students, then, I agreed a very broad plan that we would attempt to meet, at least in the first few months of my supervision, regularly in order to discuss progress. The first thing I did was to give feedback on their written work, which addressed specific points but also broader points (i.e. points that needed to be thought about in their general research and writing). This work gave me a good idea of the main issues that I needed to address in the respective meetings following this reading. The first student had a clear idea of methodological issues and the theoretical issues that he wanted to address in the forthcoming months. He also seemed clear about the archival centres that he needed to visit, as well as the work that needed to be done with such archival material. I did think, however, that he lacked a broad structure for the PhD as
a whole. I discussed this with him and we agreed that it would be helpful to think about the actual structure in more concrete detail: this would help with orientation of the project, aiding to connect current work with the way that the work would fit coherently into a larger whole. It would also encourage thought about issues of word length for each chapter: of course, these need not be rigidly adhered to, but they once again aid work by giving an idea of what needs to be done within a demarcated section of time and space. Focusing the research within space and time limitations, I believe, would help to avoid being over-ambitious. (I had found in discussions with other research students that difficulties regarding the realistic scope of the project had been a frequent problem in differing ways.) At the end of the session, I also asked the student about other things that he expected from me, any particular problems that he was having, and if there were any courses that he thought that he needed to attend. (One course on Access, to help with databasing materials, was identified.) We also discussed issues of teaching and conference presentations/visits. Here, I wanted to encourage experience in seminar teaching and lecturing, as well as conference presentation, but I also wanted to stress that the student should not overdo these at the expense of neglecting his thesis. We therefore came to an agreed plan that would strike a balance between teaching experience, broader research activities, and PhD work. We also arranged to meet once every two months to discuss research for the first six months with a view to revising in light of activity at the six-month point.

Overall, supervision of the first student was quite stress-free: he had made good progress, we were on friendly terms, and we seemed to be able to talk through ideas and partial disagreements with ease; I will return, however, to some issues relating to this supervision at the conclusion. The second student was slightly different: from work that I had seen and from discussion with him on his general progress, I thought that a bit more needed to be done. Firstly, his work was not bad, but it needed to be both tidier and more rigorous; secondly, he needed to write more. Therefore, I had the invidious task of telling him that he needed to make better progress, and to think about the best way that I could motivate him to do so. I had realised, in a sense, that this student needed to 'take stock of his working habits' and to become aware of them (Delaware et al 1997: 91). Communicating this wasn't particularly easy: I had to make sure that I made it clear to the student that I did think that a lot of the work here was good, but that that more needed to be done; and I had to do so in a calm and
reasonable manner. Fortunately, the student seemed aware that he needed to do more and was, I think, actually looking for a bit more outside direction. We were therefore quite free, after the 'difficult beginning', to pursue what things needed to be done and to work out a plan for future direction. We went carefully through the work and I identified areas I thought the student needed to pay much closer attention to, and thus work upon (broadly in terms of detail and depth). We then discussed how to proceed. I suggested that I thought it would be fruitful to meet on a more regular basis, to set more deadlines for written work (in order to increase motivation) and to for the student to provide me with a broad structural outline for his thesis, as well as a plan of activities that he needed to do. The latter was important, I thought, in order to get the student to work out for himself the direction that he needed to go over the subsequent research period. It did not have to be rigid, but we could discuss possible written 'stages' that he would need to complete over the next two years (alongside research 'stages').

Overview

Overall, I have felt pleased with how the supervisions have gone thus far. This part of the portfolio has helped in a way by clarifying my own thoughts about how to proceed with the tasks. I feel in many ways that I have been quite fortunate with the students I have been able to supervise in that, whilst there have been occasional problems, these have certainly been on the minor scale. Both students seem keen on their topics and are willing to take on board any criticisms, as well as to discuss their ideas in an open, critical manner. There remains the potential, of course, for a much bigger problem to emerge. I need, therefore, to keep in mind all of the potential problems that I discussed at the beginning of this section. In addition, of course, I need to be aware of the specific problems that may arise with these particular students. I also need to remain aware my role and whether I am keeping on top of my duties. I do admit that, as I have had research leave for the past semester, that I am now feeling somewhat behind in this regard. I have continued to monitor the students and, though not to the extent that I was before. Whilst they seem to be undertaking a sufficient amount of research, I must remain vigilant. I have asked them if they feel ok with the supervisory situation at present, and they have said that they are. Thus, at present, things are going well. I am, however, just about to take on a new student in the capacity of second supervision, so my duties are expanding. I am well aware that if I
begin to take on more students still, that my time between research, supervision, administration and teaching will need to undergo a re-think. I hope that this portfolio will have helped me to continue to think critically about such matters, thus aiding my own work.
Plan for Continuing Professional Development

My main aim for the future is to make sure that I continually reflect upon the process of teaching and learning, which at times - especially during particularly busy periods - can become very difficult. I would like to keep making improvements in all aspects of teaching, in particular lecturing, seminar teaching, supervision, and course development, though there will likely be further changes within education that will call for new skills and challenges, which I hope the experience of reflection on practice will help cope with if unexpected developments occur. I would also like to develop some new courses of my own in the future, as this is something that presently I have not had that much experience of. Linked to this is a desire to try and link my research to my teaching in new and engaging ways, and to try and devise new strategies for involving students in active learning tasks to a greater extent. None of these challenges will be easy, and sometimes the sheer hectic nature of academic life can delay things somewhat, but I do hope to keep these objectives in mind at all times and to try and think of new, improved approaches to the teaching and learning experience.