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IMPORTANCE OF SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIPS WITH POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AND STUDENT AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The paper is reflection on development of supervisor-supervisee relationships while supervising postgraduate students. Role of autonomy is even greater at postgraduate level and must not be assumed but rather developed during the studies, so that an independent and critical thinker are produced by the end of the postgraduate course. The paper also presents some examples of feedback from students and analyses the role of supervisor in the research undertaken by students during the course.

KEYWORDS

Autonomy, supervisor, supervisee, feedback, sympathy, independence, self-regulation.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of student autonomy, or the ability of students to make independent decisions about their learning, has its roots in educational philosophies dating back centuries. While the term itself may be more recent, the underlying principles of self-directed learning can be traced to thinkers such as John Dewey, who advocated for a more active and experiential approach to education. [10]

The 20th century saw a resurgence of interest in student autonomy, particularly in response to the industrialization of education and the need for learners to adapt to rapidly changing societal demands. The student-centered movement, which gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century, emphasized the importance of empowering students to take ownership of their learning. This shift was

influenced by factors such as the rise of progressive education, advancements in technology, and a growing recognition of the diverse needs and learning styles of individual students.

However, the path toward greater student autonomy has not been without its challenges. Traditional educational structures, with their emphasis on teacher-centered instruction and standardized assessments, have often hindered the development of self-directed learning. Additionally, societal factors such as economic inequality and cultural expectations can influence the extent to which students are able to exercise autonomy in their education.

Despite these obstacles, the concept of student autonomy continues to evolve and gain traction in educational settings worldwide.

As we move into the 21st century, the ability to think critically, problem-solve, and collaborate effectively are essential skills for success in a rapidly changing world. These skills are often fostered through autonomous learning experiences, which empower students to become active participants in their own education.

As postgraduate students embark on their academic journeys, cultivating autonomy becomes paramount. This independence allows them to delve deeper into their research, explore uncharted territories, and develop critical thinking skills. By taking ownership of their learning, postgraduate students can foster a sense of purpose and motivation, driving them to achieve their academic goals. Moreover, autonomy empowers them to collaborate effectively with peers and mentors, fostering a supportive and intellectually stimulating research environment. In a world that

demands adaptability and innovation, the ability to think independently and make informed decisions is a valuable asset for postgraduate students. By nurturing their autonomy, they are better equipped to contribute meaningfully to their field and shape the future.

While completing this paper I came across an interesting research paper “The PhD and the Autonomous Self: gender, rationality and postgraduate pedagogy” by Lesley Johnson, Alison Lee & Bill Green. They start with a story from Andrew Riemer, who did his PhD in the 1950s. He describes the process in which he was isolated and expected to be autonomous. His supervisor had no interest in him or his work, and that was a norm, as becoming a doctor 'would be equal to entering the society of elitists. The authors of the paper define supervision relationship as “often fraught and unsatisfactory as much marked by neglect, abandonment and indifference”, and generally supervisors would expect doctorate students to be ““always-already independent” [4]. The paper made me realise that even 70 years later we still have the same debate in education and many supervisors still have principles of ready autonomous doctoral students to be going through the ‘dangers’ of research process neglected and they assume that this is a part of pedagogy. Research might have been something elite and limited in the past assuming only big innovations are praised, but in today’s world research is an inevitable part of any job, and pursuing doctoral studies must be a rewarding and enjoyable experience to any student. 'Researchers' independence is, therefore, not a pre-requisite for undertaking research studies but rather an outcome achieved with the support of an institution and a supervisor in particular.

I have been supervising students on undergraduate and postgraduate levels for over 10 years now. At the beginning I had little understanding of the pedagogy of supervision. Neither did I realize that the role of a supervisor was different from the role I usually performed in the classroom setting. For the last 2 years I have been approached by PhD students from local universities, where English is not a medium of instruction and students do not go through the contemporary research skills development module. Universities have their Research Councils which approve defenses, but there is a lot of bureaucratic document submissions with the thesis itself before the approval of the degree. I believe the system must be explained as this is one of the factors which drives the development of autonomy, as Universities in the country have no complete autonomy in awarding degrees. Being a lecturer at the international institution I have an opportunity to compare students from my institution and local ones. To further elaborate on the system, I must mention that public education is also very didactic, with narrow aim to develop student autonomy, only in the last 5 years there have been steps towards changing the system to produce self-efficient graduates who possess critical thinking skills. I can observe that the whole system is not encouraging autonomy starting from the school level, and to expect independent researchers at the doctoral level seems inappropriate. Nevertheless, while being a supervisee during my PhD and DSc studies I was expected to demonstrate a great degree of independence, but a limited decision making skill. Having an experience of two completely different educational systems I can enter a debate on the role of the supervisor, our expectations as supervisors and whether we have to develop student's autonomy or expect that it already exists.

It is commonly accepted by supervisors and higher education in general that there is a high level of self-regulation in Doctoral students during their studies. However, being autonomous or independent does not assume that a student will work absolutely unaided by the supervisor. [7] Becoming an autonomous learner is one of the components of graduate attributes at all levels, and Doctoral students are not an exception. An autonomous learner, and specifically an autonomous researcher, is more an outcome of the PhD programme, and this feature of a learner is probably more critical at this level of education. As Doctoral students are those who at the end of their thesis possess something that totally belongs to them, thus supporting their independence and self-regulation is a part of the process where supervisor plays one of the key roles. There are different ways and techniques to support autonomy, some offer it in the form of encouragement and support, others in setting deadlines and goals and handling feedback.[5,6]

As a PhD student I developed very respectful and fruitful relationship with my supervisors and for 15 years now I feel grateful for that experience and support I received. On the contrary my DSc work with supervisor cannot be described in the same words. I was neglected, my questions were left unanswered, but at the end he very much took praise for himself for doing a great job, although now 3 years after I prefer not to cross my professional paths with my last supervisor. According to Barnes and Austin (2009, p. 297), "the doctoral advisor is said to be one of the most important persons - if not the single most critical person - with whom doctoral students will develop a relationship during their doctoral degree programme" [1]. The question of what this relationship should be and how it should be formed has always been a

question for debate, and critical one in the process of the doctoral supervision, which can become of the factors for success or failure. I believe there is no one formula to use to define this relationship. In my practice I had very independent supervisees, who would need facilitation in the process, confirmation of whether they are on the right path rather than direction and close supervision. But no student is the same, and different factors contribute towards how much support is required and at what stage they become fully independent researchers. Those factors include experience in research, educational background, sometimes even personal characteristics and circumstances. Teaching in the classroom seems to be more direct and the role is more or less clear and my metaphor for my role was always a lighthouse, which shows and facilitates learning of students swimming in the sea of educational journey. For the supervision part it is not that easy, as this is rather a tactful support, involving empathy, direction in terms of structures and regulations, some administrative pushes, and being there if needed to support THEIR research journey.

One of my supervisees at the moment is also a colleague, I have known him for the last 10 years, and last year he decided to take Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching, and Dissertation is one of core modules in the course structure. My previous knowledge of him was as a peer colleague, but I was never either his teacher or supervisor. I was quite “laid back” with this student as he was long enough in the system of international education and he knew all the administrative processes and rules. The fact that he is an Academic English teacher is also a relief in terms of his writing skills, I knew that he would rather need more facilitation than management from my side. Our

relationship is open and quite comfortable for both of us.

“I had no difficulty contacting the supervisor and received duly feedback, guidance and support throughout the whole semester.

The progress meetings were normally held on Mondays, but if asked to organize one on some other day, my supervisor was always flexible. Lobar has a genuinely professional approach to supervising students’ thesis writing and aims to incite one’s understanding of what goes wrong through questioning. Such facilitating strategy works perfectly well in my situation wherein realizing the peculiarities of the processes involved in research practices are crucial for developing autonomy in further elaboration of the dissertation and helps me to construct the clearer picture of what aspects are worth considering. As a wrap-up of each meeting we would define the scope of work to be completed by the time of the next meeting and I felt accountable to fulfill tasks set forth.

Unfortunately, due to being extremely overloaded with job-related duties in the second half of the semester, I could hardly find time to work on my thesis and there was little progress made. In this situation, it was my supervisor who contacted me to find out about the reasons for irregular attendance of progress meeting sessions which I had been trying not to skip. In this light, supervisor’s expression of concern and active participation in forming research-related skills are the key indicators for why I find the supervision process highly valuable.”

On the contrary I had another student who came from a local university and was never exposed to UK education. She required a lot of input from me at the

beginning. But at the same time, she was interested and enthusiastic, never hesitant to ask questions, sent me about ten drafts of her proposal before submission. At times I would be frustrated to receive the same question from one student again and again, but I realized that she needed more support and direction from my side compared to my other abovementioned supervisee, because of her background. Looking back at the process my primary goal was to encourage critical thinking of this student, to ask right questions and navigate her through the process. I am glad that in her reflection she mentions that clearly. I believe I was able to establish a comfortable and productive relationship with these students, which in turn supports development of their autonomy. [3]

“At the beginning of the Dissertation course, I had many confusions in my mind about my research topic and the whole writing process. One of the reasons was that I decided changing my previous coursework topic ‘Vlogging improves reflective learning’, a research proposal, from the Developing Educational Research Proposal course. I wanted to link my interest to the currently most demanding aspects of language teaching. I also had an idea to develop a project proposal, then we discussed a lot with Lobar. For our first meeting with her, I had no idea but only a chance to conduct my research in Lobar gave questions about possibilities and my ideas in this field and how to identify resources. She motivated me to experience the training there. I started to find other possible ways of professional development for secondary school English language teachers. At that time, I become critical of the learning environment there. In our other meeting, Lobar showed me the path the researchers should take in every situation, it was staying balanced and trying not to include my subjective views in my

research. I changed my whole understanding that I should not be blaming the trainers or teachers, rather staying balanced and analyzing the different views of the two sides. From another meeting about interview questions, and resources I learned how to contact another researcher whose work is on the same or similar topics. Receiving the catalog of 50 countries' teacher development courses from Lobar made me more confident in my research. I felt like she is also interested in my work.”

Obviously not all my relationships with supervisees are easy and smooth as aforesaid ones. Usually I my supervisees plan the meeting, making sure I am available when they need me, but last year I had a student who rarely approached me. So, by the end of the term it became clear that the student could not produce a research proposal, thus I had to take control into my own hands. We had an open discussion with her and she confessed that she had reservations about approaching me, as she assumed that she might be producing something that I would approve of and the strategy of hiding herself seem appropriate to her. It took me a while explaining that she should own the work and I am there to support and facilitate, and she should not think of how to please me. I realized that she was rather stressed and not prepared to take risks and make mistakes. It might be that I produced that impression, obviously non-verbally and not intentionally. But that student was not ready to be independent, coming from a local university, there academic staff are perceived as a revered group of knowledge holders. I had to change my approach by being more directive, setting deadlines and asking for drafts. With time she was able to adjust to the idea that this is the process which she must own and by small steps she is now moving towards being more

independent. I am still worried about this student, as she has a thesis to complete by the end of this academic year, and I have not heard from her for a while. Gurr points out that the role of the supervision is when “the successful student will typically develop from a state of relative dependency to competent autonomy over the period of candidature” [2]. I am afraid we did not establish even the stage of “relative dependency” yet.

Research students want to find a way and the support we offer them should gradually decrease, so that towards their completion of studies they become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and can manage their own learning process, thus we strive to achieve “ultimately about teaching the student to be their own supervisor” [8]. We, as supervisors, provide framework, students should not and cannot become independent/autonomous at the beginning, this is the end point and for that we are to encourage them and challenge their opinions, ask right questions and introduce to a broader community of the research. Obviously, all academics/supervisors in turn are different too, believing in different approaches towards managing their supervisees, and those who prefer to control and directive ones also succeed, and they have all the rights to employ different approaches as we all do in the classroom. I believe here the role of an institution and strategies and principles of the culture in it matter. In my experience of working in different institutions and in academia for more than 20 years now, culture of how academics treat and approach their students matters a lot. Empathy, support, being interested in student’s ideas cannot be written in policies and procedure, but top down culture of respect and development of critical thinkers and, those who are not afraid to ask any questions can lead

to rewarding achievement of our students becoming autonomous lifelong learners.

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