

Antoine's dream

I

I first met Antoine at a “Welcome to the PhD program” event more than a year ago. He asked me then if I knew anyone renting out a room. I actually had a room free in my house; so, I offered it to him. He seemed eager to start his new degree and new life in a new country. We frequently share dinners as we chat about our lives. His PhD problems have dominated many conversations, especially as the program progressed in the first year. He is currently in the second year of his PhD. I asked him if he would like to share his story with others through John's program. He is very afraid that his supervisor, Tom, would find out, though he is eager to get the story out there to help other students.

Antoine is a native French speaker in his late 40s and recently quit his 6-figure salary job in internet marketing to pursue his dream of doing a PhD on learning in French schools. He was a Sales Manager at his old job, so is very aware of characteristics of a good supervisor. Though his Bachelor's degree was in business, he says he was most inspired by the psychology classes he took, especially the ones pertaining to children and learning. He recognized that he would be switching to a new field, but felt ready for any situation. He had saved up £30,000 to do a full-time PhD (probably not enough he thinks in hindsight).

Q1 What questions should Antoine be asking before applying for a place to pursue his dreams?

Q2 What criteria should he employ in selecting an institution?

2

He applies to Wessex Uni and likes his interviewer so much that he asks her to be the PhD supervisor when he is accepted. However, this lecturer is also the course administrator, so she is rather busy. She encourages him to find someone else as primary supervisor so that she could be the secondary supervisor.

When Antoine asks her whom she would recommend, she recommends Young Supervisor Tom, who is very experienced in the methods of Antoine's proposed study, though he does not really know much about the study's theoretical arguments.

Q1 List the critical issues that should be covered in the PhD admissions process?

Q2 What factors should be taken into account in appointing supervisors?

3

Young Supervisor has had 6 other students (as primary or secondary supervisor) who have all had some complaint with his supervision (inattentiveness, unclear guidance, arrogance). But, Antoine doesn't know about these students at first and takes his second supervisor's advice and chooses Tom as primary supervisor.

Antoine soon discovers for himself Young Supervisor's arrogance and inattentiveness at each meeting. But, he doesn't think much of it because Tom was recommended by his second supervisor. Antoine continues his bi-weekly meetings at the slotted hour. Though he takes notes at the meetings, Antoine finds that Tom's comments become more terse, condescending, or irrelevant. I remember once Antoine telling me that he was very confused when Tom blamed Antoine's poor academic ability on his being French.

Q1 List the issues that have now arisen and discuss how they should be addressed

Q2 What should Antoine do now?

4

Tom feeds Antoine articles more relevant to Tom's work than to Antoine's and changes the PhD study to fit Tom's line of research. Antoine spends months preparing for this revised study while reading these articles. He says he is a slow reader because English is not his first language. Antoine says he is also a more visual learner; so he signs up for a few talks on children's learning. He networks a little bit at these workshops, and starts gathering connections with external experts.

Q1 Discuss the question of responsibility of student and supervisor

Q2 Have you any suggestions for Antoine at this point?

5

As Antoine starts talking to colleagues and external experts about his project, they all ask him why he didn't run his original study, which makes more methodological sense.

When he brings these issues to Tom, Tom starts criticizing Antoine's academic ability. Eventually, Tom's inattention to the project, multiple missed meetings, misguidance, and criticisms become intolerable.

Q **What should Antoine do now?**

6

Antoine talks to his second supervisor, and she suggests that she become his primary supervisor.

Antoine feels he is more on track with his project now after a year of confusion. However, he feels like he has wasted an entire year of time, effort, and money. He is also angry that his second supervisor recommended Tom even though she knew about his poor track record.

Antoine now reflects on what he could have done better, but he cannot figure out an answer. He feels like he (rightfully) relied heavily on the second supervisor's recommendation.

Now, Antoine will start the second version of his first experiment (his supervisor has asked him to run four experiments – 2 versions each – for his PhD). The progress is slow, and he says he needs to catch up, but at least he feels that he is on the right track.

Trying not to look a gift horse in the mouth, he can't help but wonder how he had passed all of his evaluations thus far with virtually no empirical data. He had hardly started gathering data by the end of the first year. Though he had read a lot of material, he hadn't written much of his thesis. He thinks that the committee may have passed him because they find his project interesting. Whatever the case, he thinks he is on the right track now sprinting a lap or two behind the rest.

One student has survived Tom's supervision, however. From the beginning, she did not tolerate any misguidance. She double- and triple-checked every suggestion he made from the beginning with colleagues and external experts. Though this requires much strength and effort on the student's part, sometimes it is necessary when working with not-so-good supervisors but excellent academics.

Team task

What lessons are there here for

1. Postgraduate research students
2. Supervisors
3. Departments/schools/institutions?

List your suggestions on the acetate provided
