

Brenda's Co-supervision

I was e-mailed in September by Moira, the post graduate admissions tutor in my department, to say that Brenda had been admitted to do a PhD. One supervisor, Veronica, had already been appointed, and I was invited to act as co-supervisor. I was sent Brenda's application form and research proposal for information, but, as these had already been processed and agreed, I had no input into any decisions either on her admission or the shaping of the research question. As Brenda already had an MPhil, hers was a direct entry to doctoral studies.

My initial response was that I had a heavy teaching load, pressing research problems, one Ph.D. student already (who was proving to be very difficult and problematic) and little spare time. But Moira responded that Brenda was extremely bright and able and would be joy to teach. She would be my 'compensation' for previously having taken on the problem student.

Q1 Have you any comment on the admission procedures and supervision allocation system here?

Q2 How would you respond in these circumstances?

Episode 2

Brenda, in her late 40s and a full time health care worker, had for two years apparently been running courses for nurses using drama techniques and role-play to encourage them to empathise with the patient experience. With full support and continuing salary from her employer she was to undertake an evaluation of her work and at the same time writing it up as a Ph.D.

Reading her research proposal I realised that this was a specialist area that I knew almost nothing about, but, feeling under some pressure from Moira who had presented her as a reward, I agreed to act as co supervisor. However, I remained concerned at my lack of knowledge of an area in which Brenda is clearly an expert. It also emerged that I would be acting a joint supervisor with equal responsibility rather than second supervisor.

I had another vague concern. The co-supervisor, Veronica, is a colleague with whom I have already carried out joint research. However, this had not proved to be a productive experience as far as I was concerned. She had not honoured an informal agreement to carry out her part of the work. A joint paper based on our research, on which I had done a great deal of work, had therefore remained unsubmitted and therefore unpublished. At the time I had made a mental note not to work with her again as I felt I could not rely on her.

Q1 How far does a co-supervisor have to be an expert in the area of the PhD?

Q2 Do the duties of a co-supervisor differ from those of the first supervisor in your institution?

Q3 Discuss what you would do in this situation?

Episode 3

Despite my reservations, I reasoned that taking part in joint supervision of a student is less of a risk than collaborative research or writing a joint article. So I agreed anticipating a positive and stimulating experience.

So, when in the first few days of term, Brenda e-mailed me to ask to meet me as she was coming to campus for an induction course, I looked forward to meeting her. No mention was made of including Veronica (whom I gathered she had already met).

Brenda arrived at my office looking (unlike most post graduate students of my experience) very smart, wearing a formal suit and carrying a black brief case.

During our hour and a half together we had a amicable conversation, but I did feel as though her agenda was to interview me to see if I was up to standard. She talked with great authority about her work and it was clear that she was an able and determined person. By the end of the discussion she seemed to have satisfied herself that I would be a suitable supervisor and e-mailed me the following day to say how much she had enjoyed our meeting.

However, I was left feeling at something of a disadvantage, not knowing quite what I could contribute to this formidable woman's endeavour. She had after all spent a considerable amount of time at our meeting instructing me rather than vice versa.

I have as yet had not attempted to contact Veronica to discuss the joint supervision arrangements though I believe that we should meet to discuss our approach before we suggest that Brenda see us both together. And I remain slightly concerned about whether I can rely on Veronica and whether Brenda is going to be satisfied with the standard of support I can offer given my relative ignorance of her professional practice.

Q Carry out a brief risk assessment of this PhD.

Team task

1. Draw up an agenda for the first meeting between a supervisor and a new PhD student
2. Suggest the main elements of a Code of Practice for joint supervision