

Julie's supervisors

I My Background

I had not had much success at school, failed my 'A' levels and ended up in several dead end jobs. However, I had ambition. I was active in local politics, read widely and wondered if I could ever make it back into education.

At the age of 27 I moved into a new area and an unhappy relationship. I called into a local polytechnic information shop by accident and enrolled on a social science degree – part-time as my partner was refusing to allow me to become a full-time student, and I was not confident anyway that I had the ability to pass.

However, after one semester I converted to full-time, graduated with an upper second, found a new partner and applied to Barchester University to read part-time for a PhD.

- Q1 Discuss Julie's decision to apply to register for a PhD. What supervision should she expect from the University?**
- Q2 If you were dealing with her application, what questions would you ask at interview?**

2 The Barchester Experience

Accepted, I paid my £600 fee and took a full-time job as Employment Adviser in the local Unemployment Benefit Office.

However, I soon found that my relationship with my supervisor was very unsatisfactory. We clearly had unrealistic expectations of each other. From the outset she strongly advised that the research question ought to be re-framed, set me several near impossible targets (including attending seminars when I had to be at work, arranging appointments at short notice and expecting a completed first chapter three months after registration).

Finally, by the end of the session she declared that I was not meeting the work output that was expected of a research student, nor had an adequate research question. She advised that my registration should cease.

- Q1 Discuss Julie's experience at Barchester. How should she respond to her supervisor's advice?**
- Q2 What should Barchester's Postgraduate Tutor do on receipt of the supervisor's recommendation?**

3 The Middlemarch Offer

I decided to transfer to another institution. I heard that a new Professor at Middlemarch Metropolitan University was seeking new research students, and, since it was not far away, I got details, applied, was accepted and transferred my registration.

Six months after starting I heard of a funded full-time studentship offered by Middlemarch. I applied and was offered it. Even though it meant leaving full-time (stable/pensionable) employment, my new partner was delighted and supported my decision to accept it.

Q1 What should Julie do now?

Q2 What arrangements should be made for her supervision?

4 The New Supervisor

My new supervisor was a clever chap who made me feel completely inadequate at the start. But after 18 months my reading and understanding of the subject went beyond his knowledge.

However, from the outset we had rows about our relationship – only tolerable as we both knew each other outside the academic environment.

We had an informal relationship but, although this was beneficial in some respects, it also meant that some issues were not addressed seriously. This led to the rows which centred on the time and support I could expect from a supervisor, my expectations of his knowledge of the subject area and the extent to which his other commitments made him unreliable.

Q1 What are the best conditions for an effective supervisory relationship?

Q2 What should Julie do now?

5 Supervisory Meetings

Supervisions normally took the following pattern:

- i. Supervisor arrives late, often not having read my stuff; I'm asked/told to go away whilst he reads stuff.
- ii. Turn up hour later to find a) he has another meeting that he had forgotten about, b) someone had popped in for a gossip, c) the phone hadn't stopped
- iii. Make further appointment
- iv. Return to Stage I, or, if he had read stuff, I couldn't read his comments, as handwriting was so bad.
- v. Talk about material. Supervisor can't understand what I had written as I hadn't sorted out my own ideas sufficiently
- vi. Eventually I talk about my ideas for 5 minutes, then phone rings. After several similar interruptions try to insist that the phone is turned off. (After three years of nagging supervisor did remember to do this at the start of our meetings).
- vii. Similar comments about other interruptions. After three years a note was put on door that meeting was in progress and could not have interruptions. (Interestingly, several colleagues in the Faculty appeared to believe that supervisory sessions were not very important and could be interrupted).
- viii. Talk about my work for five minutes and then get side tracked on to: a) interesting gossip about colleagues in faculty, Labour Party, local council politics or whatever b) Supervisor wants to talk about problems with his kids, neighbours or whatever, c) Supervisor really wants to use the time to sound out his own research which is interesting but totally irrelevant to my own work.

Q1 List the main characteristics of a good supervisory meeting.

Q2 What should Julie do about improving the situation?

6 Supervisory Relationship

Basically I had four kinds of problem during my postgraduate registration.

- i. I did not fully understand my research almost until the end. My main difficulty involved relating the theoretical to the practical. On reflection, I tried to cover too much at a too early stage in my research career.
- ii. I had too many other commitments distracting me from the research: mainly partner, family obligations and work.
- iii. I could not believe that the very clever and able people who were working in my field had not come to similar conclusions. I therefore concluded that I had misunderstood the debate.
- iv. Life trials, especially illness. (I was investigated for breast cancer and diabetes while writing up the second half of my thesis. The diagnosis was confirmed as the thesis was completed. So I spent the time between submitting and having the viva receiving and recovering from radio therapy). But illness made me even more determined to complete.

My supervisor was brilliant at the following:

- i. understanding of the subject
- ii. making me feel that I had something worthwhile to say and that some of my ideas were the most stunning insights ever, and
- iii. mopping up tears when I felt that I couldn't cope. (On one occasion, supervisor spent one hour with me drying tears. This meant that he only had 40 minutes to pack car, sort out children and catch ferry for holiday in France.)

Q1 How could the supervisor have helped Julie to gain confidence in herself and her work?

Q2 How could Julie resolve the conflicts with other commitments?

7 Submission and Viva

I submitted my draft thesis to my supervisor the day the general election was called. Despite being a candidate he did manage to read the completed work. Overall it was read thoroughly three times before I submitted it. Each time significant amendments were needed. Most were stylistic rather than the main argument, although there were some areas where the argument changed emphasis, was strengthened or clarified.

Two months after finally submitting the thesis, I read it once again to try to identify potential problems and to rehearse my defence in the viva.

I had a 'mock viva' with an external advisor – useful but terrifying. He made a number of very useful suggestions and gave me the opportunity to argue for my ideas with a person other than my supervisor.

Q1 What are the purposes of a viva?

Q2 How would you expect a good viva to be conducted?

8 Epilogue

Three months later came the viva itself. It was disappointing. As so much preparatory work had been done before the event, most of the testing questions had already been asked. This left the external examiner very little to ask. The internal examiner played hardly any part at all. And less than 30 minutes was spent discussing the thesis.

The external said he loved the thesis, claiming it was 'exemplary'. He then spent considerable time advising me on how I could develop my work, what bits to have published and how to find a job.

I am now a Post Doctoral Research Fellow at Middlemarch, with my own student to supervise.

Team/Syndicate Tasks:

On the acetate provided, list the main features of:

- 1 A good supervisory relationship**
- 2 An effective supervisory session**