

## Hazel: the diary of a new supervisor

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November

Dear John,

Thank you very much for such an engaging and very insightful session recently. I definitely enjoyed it more than I thought I would and gained a lot from personal reflections that were stimulated by the narratives.

The narrative at the end made me pause to reflect on my own position - I started this new position only recently and was immediately asked to supervise a couple of PhD students who are also work colleagues with whom I work with in a small team. Whilst I felt quite excited about supervising PhD students, I was very wary of the 'dual role' predicament I was being asked to engage in. However, I was new and was thrown these part-time PhD students very quickly and I didn't think I could say 'no'.

After having some time over the summer to think about this situation, I felt suddenly anxious about the multiple possibilities for a very messy relationship/situation to emerge. The students are very strong characters, which is great, but I wouldn't want to fall out with them. They are both very professional and I respect both of them as colleagues. I worry that because I look quite young that it will cause a problem if I have to tell them their work isn't good enough. I think this concern came about after one of them asked me what my age was - I'm not sure they'd do the same if I looked over 40 or if I was male.

So, after some thought, I constructed an email to my head of department expressing my concerns, my worries and the heavy responsibility I felt I was being given at such an early stage in my new role. We planned a meeting with the head and my line manager (with whom I am co-supervising one of these students).

We discussed my concerns and my line manager mentioned that she had concerns because she is their line manager as well. So this could potentially cause some additional problems. I said it felt a bit incestuous (if that was the right word!) and so some solutions were sought (e.g. Trying to avoid phd supervision days on the same days as meetings with the team which we have found out is going to be difficult).

. I requested an advisor outside the dept but we were given a professor from another department to help if needed. We met up with him and we laughed so much I nearly cried - it made me realise that perhaps I could enjoy this experience and to try and stop worrying about

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worst case scenarios. Whilst it's important to prepare for the worst, I must remember to hope for the best and enjoy it when it's going well.

I have met with my first phd supervisee with the co-supervisor - an academic in another department (she's lovely - same methodological/philosophical page) and a 3rd supervisor – a senior lecturer at another institution. (Not sure about him yet).

I do find the 3rd supervisor situation slightly odd, partly because he comes to some of our department meetings as well. He has already mentioned potential external examiners (they sound like his mates) and the candidate has got six years part time studying to complete yet. I just hope there's not too many people/layers involved now because I worry the student might get pulled in too many different directions with 3 supervisors!

One of my supervisees described her PhD as a 'military operation' and she's entered into this by giving us the agenda, setting supervisory dates and letting us know our roles. She seems to have taken control of this. She responds well to my written feedback so far.

I'm quite pleased that the phd students didn't not start exactly at the same time as I don't want either of them to be directly competing with each other. Also, I'm just thinking... because both are in the same team, I'm wary of giving one *more* attention than the other... I feel that I'm going to have to work quite hard to balance equal time/attention/guidance.

I do feel listened to and supported by the department so far... but I'm not sure quite what I sort of support we should get. The training, the mentor and hope I do have the time to do a good job. The supervisees both are independent, motivated, professional, organised and mature women with very interesting ideas, and they're pleased they've found someone who is suitable to supervise them with similar interests so fingers crossed there are only a few bumps in the road before completing.

That was far more than I was going to write (now I know why your narratives were so long!), but it's reminded me that perhaps a supervisory diary might be a good idea. I really hope I can balance the roles and my workload.

Thanks again for a very engaging workshop.

Best wishes,  
Hazel

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Dear Hazel,

Thanks for your comments on yesterday. I'm glad you found the workshop helpful. We were lucky that I had chosen that particular supervisor story to discuss.

On your general situation: I do admire how seriously you are taking this responsibility. I think you have played it very well so far. But just one or two comments from outside:

1. You are one of a team of supervisors. So involve all the team in all communications, meetings etc. as far as possible. It wasn't clear to me what the role is of the third supervisor?
2. I suggest all three of you agree with the candidate on procedures. It's good that the first candidate is organised. So perhaps you all relate to that. Think how agendas for meetings are drawn up, Expect the candidate to send you all her 'minutes' etc. Then, possibly end with 'let's return to this in x months' time'. And 'we can keep the contributions and membership of your supervisory panel under review'.
3. Remember to act only as advisor, along with other supervisors. Remind the candidate from time to time that you have no part in the examination. So phrase all comments and feedback as 'in my view...' etc.
4. Encourage the candidate to explore all ways of getting peer review from as wide a variety of groups as possible. This underlines that you are not the audience. Share with her my PowerPoint slide on 'how to ensure you pass'?
5. Point out that your relationship will develop over the six years. South African saying: 'You give your kids roots and wings'?

If you are willing I would very much appreciate it if you kept me posted - possibly every three months? and I could even post it as a live diary??

Keep in touch.

Best wishes

John

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Dear John,

Thanks for getting back to me and for your very helpful advice. That South African saying is interesting... we tend to forget about roots – I've always been told to 'spread my wings' like Jonathan Livingstone Seagull but not worked on growing roots although I have learnt to do that myself thankfully!

It's not clear to me what the role of the 3<sup>rd</sup> supervisor is for me either... I'll speak about this, but it's good to be part of a team.

I tend to take a stance on developing a student's independence so I will ensure to remind them that I am just an advisor – and it's helpful to say 'in my view...' That's a really useful suggestion and has helped me to understand why my supervisor never came to my conferences or my talks. I guessed she was only being encouraging, but now it makes sense. I will use that questioning technique as well – it's good to have the reminder, as it's easy to fall into the trap of giving all the answers (wanting to help, but it doesn't help in the long term).

Anyway, I'm happy to contribute to a diary and appreciate the reflection this will offer me.

Best wishes,

Hazel

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December

Dear John

To bring you up to date with regards to PhD supervision supervisions have not started yet with the second supervisee. With the other one, we have had a couple of supervisions and she's progressing well.

One supervision fell on a strike day, which was slightly awkward, as she didn't want to strike. In the end, I came in as there seems to be a slight ignorance in our department about UCU issues and I didn't want to be the 'black sheep'! Actually, in the supervisory meeting she said she might join and we were both very encouraging. Anyway, we're waiting to hear about the decision on her ethics approval, but going through the process gave me the opportunity to say, 'in my

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opinion...' and for it to be a piece of writing for an external audience - the reviewers (not me or her other supervisors) which shifts that responsibility.

I think the third supervisor will act more as a mentor to this student – we have to have a third as none of us have had a completion and this was a way round it. I think it will work this way on both supervisory teams. We'll have to see. They're both external so this makes it more difficult to be involved anyway so I think in the long term, they will be a useful sounding board from a distance.

The process of submitting her ethics went quite well and she values my detailed feedback. She is a very confident character and as a working colleague I've noticed that she does more talking than listening (and doesn't always 'listen actively' as she likes to come across as very competent). I worry about her not listening to feedback, but she responds well to written feedback.

There's a saying, 'we have two ears and one mouth for a reason', but then we have two eyes too so I will rely on this written feedback more seeing as this seems to be how she responds better. I do tend to find that, generally, the majority of people don't listen carefully or sincerely anyway – especially in academia where there are competing egos and most people want to talk about themselves (which obviously can be great for research purposes!)

On another note, I have a feeling that the department might be putting this first supervisee forward to be head of the qualification (like a programme leader). This would mean another dynamic, as I think she would then be my line manager. (I could be wrong and I would prefer it to be wrong as this would further complicate our relationship.)

We had a departmental meeting yesterday and I get the impression that my supervisees also think it slightly embarrassing to speak openly about their progress. One even said 'Well it's difficult because she's sat right there!' So then, everyone looks at me and I have to look like it doesn't matter.

I find this quite a problem, as I don't like that much attention in that way. It just feels so incestuous and I do feel like I'm going to have to work hard to negotiate all the various roles.

Best wishes  
Hazel

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March

Dear John,

I've got lots to add regarding supervision. I've been allocated another PhD student (who is not a colleague) so now I have three internal PhD students (two of whom are colleagues) and one external (four in total in the space of my first year supervising). I'm finding the feedback on drafts very time consuming and it's amazing how quickly meetings come round. It feels like I'm always having meetings and perhaps I didn't realize the amount of workload involved-phewy!

I've taken on board your advice when providing feedback to some of my PhD students... saying things like 'In my opinion... ' and have tried to provide students with a platform where their work is presented to other audiences (not just me). I managed to find the opportunity to remind one supervisee/colleague that it's not me who gives them their PhD, it's their external.

I am wondering about one PhD student/colleague who seems to try to impress me quite a lot; she still hasn't had any supervisions yet despite registering as a candidate. I think she might need slightly more secure roots. Perhaps always passing off my responsibility to the external might not always be helpful... I remembered that she has already attempted to complete one PhD previously and she might be feeling insecure and need more reassurances. So I might try and balance that a bit more at this early stage in the supervision but again, it's tricky because this she likes to present herself at work as very competent.

Both student/colleagues have presented at conferences which seemed to have been valuable experiences for them. One seems highly motivated and comes to tutorials with an agenda. Despite being PT she acts like a FT student and is extremely organized. I'm very impressed with the progress she's made although I get the impression that in the future, if we disagree on anything she might be quite difficult and try to point a finger at me.

The additional PhD student I have been allocated has already failed his Viva, and has to resubmit in six months... So I've joined the supervisory team because I have a good understanding of his approach, which is what the external examiners criticized. I have just discovered that the examiner who failed him was my own PhD supervisor - it all just becomes more and more incestuous! \*sigh

I've had lots of thoughts about this particular responsibility; I am worried that he might resubmit and the external fail him again. This makes me apprehensive, given that it will be my first experience of preparing a student for their Viva. The current supervisory team includes someone I respect but who I have heard can be quite difficult. My impression is that the team did not have

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the time to provide him with sufficient supervision. But, fortunately, now I am on the team they have become more involved.

I've not had a completion and am new to supervision... so it's tricky navigating it all! I am just trying to do what's best for this student. He seems lovely, but busy, and I don't think is as committed to the PhD as he could be. There is a hell of a lot of work to do before resubmitting and I am trying to keep his motivation up. It must be tough to have to untangle what has been done and rewrite a lot of it. It feels stressful and intense, but am just trying to remain on task.

With regards to the role of third supervisor: sometimes they provide feedback on chapters/ethics and sometimes they don't. I thought we would all three share feedback but my PhD student/colleague seems to want additional input from me even if the others have given feedback. I don't think she realizes just how much work this is.

On another note, my additional mentor stepped down from his role as his workload was too great. I only had one meeting with him right at the beginning. They are looking to allocate someone else and they suggested someone who I wouldn't want to be mentored by. I'm not sure what's going on.

Sometimes I wonder if the PhD student/colleagues and other colleagues think I'm not pulling my weight on the team at work. My line manager had said I could be given less teaching. Again, I just keep trying to stay on task and not worry about things.

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The following February

Hello John,

Well, I guess nearly 12 months have passed since my last diary, and quite a bit has happened since I sent my last report.

One of my PhD students who had to resubmit finally submitted his draft last year and that was quite a relief. I guess what I am learning is that academia is a very small world and the external examiner was my old PhD supervisor which made my first PhD student Viva/completion even more nerve wracking!

But the Viva took place and it was much better than I'd expected; he was given substantial revisions but he still passed. Given what happened last time (he went off the radar a bit and didn't finish his corrections) I have been setting small stepping stones for him to get to and to get

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this finished once and for all. He has said how grateful he is to me and keeps thanking me... and I guess I feel a bit uncomfortable and just say, I'm doing my job. But really, I am quite chuffed and it does feel rewarding. We are so close to the finish line now so that feels really satisfying.

That's the update on one PhD student who has been on such a long slog. There's more success as well... another PhD student at another university has completed her conversion. This went really well, but I wasn't worried because she is an excellent student. Again, I did feel really chuffed so it's been working well so far over the last few months.

I have realised that I am a big worrier and worry about a lot of things that could go wrong... and whether this is a good approach or not, at least I anticipate problems arising even if they don't happen (although, perhaps I should have more faith in myself now). I guess my fear is not being able to help anyone or falling out with people... and I have really learned recently that even when these things happen it's not the end of the world and can be salvaged and patched up.

I do feel I am learning so much and growing as a supervisor now... I feel more confident at work as well although I am still a bit apprehensive about the other two PhD students as they are co-workers too and there is always a risk of tensioned relationships at work.

I feel I am building a good relationship with one of these PhD students - the very self-motivated one who refers to the PhD as a 'military operation' and I can see this going well.

But I am a bit nervous of the other PhD student – I view her as a bit of a high-risk student because she has dropped out of a PhD previously. This is something I am aware of and try to give her deadlines for things but she is much less driven, prone to excuses, misses supervision and doesn't seem as excited about her research.

Also, the other PhD supervisor is our line manager and I get the impression that they talk a lot without me so I do feel a bit excluded. I'm aware that I feel a bit excluded from the team at work anyway though – I'm not sure whether this is me or whether I am excluded because I am supervisor, chair of the research group etc. I feel that this 'at risk' PhD student has only decided to do a PhD student because of the other PhD student (colleague) who is ambitious and I don't think this is a very valuable or intrinsic motivation.

I hope this shifts soon but I have my doubts - which could mean things get difficult... I am just probing gently anyway and I guess there is no rush if she is working part-time here.

The third supervisor on both teams seems to have gone a bit quieter, which to be honest is a bit of a relief. Both are older white men and given the culture of science, can be domineering and entitled, which does make me roll my eyes a bit (a lot!).

Outside the PhD supervision, just generally, I have decided to take more of a break from work colleagues during lunchtimes. I find it a bit hard work at lunch – people tend to talk about themselves a lot and I find that being ignored is slightly demoralising and my energy gets sucked as opposed to restored. Instead, I bring my dog in and walk her during lunch – fresh air, good company and a walk. All part of my ‘slow movement’ revolution!

All good wishes,

Hazel

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September

Well, we last spoke a few months ago and I’m thinking back to what has happened. Two of my PhD students have passed their conversions and I’ve been put on another PhD team to help out with a PhD supervisor going off sick. I was told by the main supervisor that my input would not be needed and that I was literally just a fill in for paperwork’s sake. He seemed a bit controlling and put me in my place even though I was quite excited to be involved. Ah well, if that’s what he wants then I won’t do anything. They also said that I would probably be taken off once the other supervisor returns so I guess I do feel a bit used – more joys of the culture of academia which have started to grate at me.

I guess you have caught me during a time when I am really losing the motivation for everything that is academia. If you want me to be honest, then I am wondering what the point of all this is. I feel undervalued, underpaid and overworked in general. I go above and beyond all my colleagues at work; I have PhD students, I publish like a machine, I volunteer for things, I have innovative ideas, I go to conferences... and I am the lowest paid member of staff on my team. I am told that the PhD supervision isn’t counted for promotion because this is for professorship. I guess I feel despondent and demotivated – I get pissed off with people thinking that I am happy to do this because I enjoy it – I do (or did) enjoy it but I also think I should be rewarded for what I do. Nobody can have a carrot dangled in front of them for years without a reward. I am working 3 extra part time jobs on top of the full-time job which I am going above and beyond for because I see what others are doing in the department. Every week we have to record our whereabouts and what our new projects are etc. and I see that I am always doing stuff and nobody else is.

I am asking myself, am I enjoying this? Of course, I want a promotion, but will I feel any different if I get it? Then I will be dangled another carrot... which just brings me back to the meaningless ladder of success.

I've been thinking a lot about what I do and what any of it is worth. I've been thinking of taking a sabbatical. Then I worried that my PhD students might need me... I don't think they do or will. I think it would be easy to replace me and I don't think they are that bothered about me and that's OK. It means I don't have to worry about going on to do something else... outside academia.

I think I am missing some sense of value and meaning. I don't know what's happened to me but I am experiencing some sort of experiential crisis. I feel like I have come to the end of this journey. I am looking to open a new chapter – I look around at other academics and there is quite a lot of melancholy and people are not enjoying the change going on here. It's being filled with 'management' that just strips the joy from our academic experiences.

During my PhD I thought all I could do was to go into academia. Now, I look at articles where someone has left academia because of the toxicity and they have gone on to do something fun and exciting and they are happy! The toxicity isn't that bad where I am compared to other institutions, and I know that I am at the best place for me. I can work flexibly and don't have to travel much and that suited me because I was a single mum. I still am a single mum but my child is getting older and I am just wondering whether I want to sign myself up for this for life. I am facing a turning point which has hit me... but it has been something I have felt restless for years about.

I am wondering whether I am just missing some sort of challenge because I don't feel academia is very challenging – it is challenging in ways that are not enjoyable, like keeping up with the constant stream of emails that never ever stop coming in even when you have some time off, the paperwork that builds up and up, the deadlines that force you to work late... this isn't the challenge I want in life because I can do that easy!

I want a challenge which is going to give me a buzz, a real buzz about being alive in the world. So, I've decided I'm going to have a horse riding lesson next week and see how that feels. Maybe, it's also a way of feeling connected to my Dad who also rode... I'm just going to try something different and see where it leads me. It might help ease my unsettlement and carry on with my job knowing I have some sense of adventure outside or it might help me to reflect on where I want to go instead. I don't know, but I can't just sit here feeling like this.

I don't feel that anything I do has been wasted, I have achieved a lot in a short space of time, but maybe this has been leading me to somewhere else, now I have the freedom to explore other options because my child is older. And maybe this is the opening of a new chapter.

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February

On reflection, I think that the intensity of working closely in a team whilst supervising them has taken its toll on me. I've struggled with the demands involved in the small team dynamics which is probably why I have found it has dampened my working environment. The small minded negative politics in the group has meant that I have felt pushed out of the team - I feel I have sacrificed my position in the team so that the team doesn't have a negative impact on my wellbeing and to the experiences of their PhD supervision. The amount of negative toxic competition has taken its toll and I'm not sure this has been addressed at all. I think because it is quite nuanced it's difficult for my line manager to notice - plus my line manager is not an experienced PhD supervisor either - or an experienced or trained line manager.

Basically, work has become more bearable because I have applied for two roles and been awarded them. One is as a PhD Mentor which involves working closely with a group of PhD students and their supervisors to ensure any issues that arise get addressed. I report to someone above me who sorts out any problems. The person I report to actually said to me that I was a "miracle worker" with one of the PhD students who finished last year, which I felt really chuffed about. I felt pleased that someone had noticed how hard I'd worked with that student. Anyway, I'm meeting them all this month so I'm really looking forward to working in this role as PhD supervision is one of the more rewarding jobs. It means that I can spend more time away from the intensity of the team which feels like a massive relief given my dual role as supervisor and colleague in such a small and competitive team.

The environment at work is, however, so depressing - which is why it feels even more important to go and do something outside work which is so fulfilling. There's talk of cutting modules, programs and making ALs redundant - no wonder it's become so depressing! There's the current strike as well. Although this university is included, of course nobody in my team are taking part, which whilst predictable, is demoralising because they all have partners to support them. Why is it always the ones who are well-off who are selfish? I've taken part this time but I definitely feel like the 'black sheep', and I do feel slightly resentful that others who can afford to strike, because they all have second incomes from their partners, don't.

The other job is Co-Chair of the research group which is also more in line with what I enjoy about my job. These moves have helped but there's a vibe that unless you are struggling and suffering like everyone else, you aren't working hard enough. Well, I want to enjoy my life - martyrdom is overrated.

In relation to PhD supervision, I'm just back to doing my job I guess. I've also been asked to examine a PhD externally which I'm looking forward to. It's hard to regain motivation after having such a dip at work and after realising that there is such a delayed sense of gratification that we are expected to accept. I'm finding it destroys a sense of meaning. There's a huge

amount involved when supervising PhD students - the extent of reviewing is hugely draining and there's no time out of teaching to help re-energise us after such extensive and deep work.

Yes, unfortunately I am still in academia, because I'm not in a position to just leave my job as I have so many financial obligations. However, I have started a new chapter outside academia... I really am learning to horse ride! It's incredible and it's helping me cope with the day job because I feel so much happier doing something that I love. I get a real buzz from it and it is definitely challenging. Also, I think about my Dad a lot which is nice. Riding is a real joy and is enriching my life which is just what I needed! I hope that one day, I'll be in a position to leave academia (perhaps only work PT) and do something I love instead. If I do, then I will let you know!

I'd highly recommend others to 'get out more', not to overinvest in work, treat it like a 9-5pm job as much as possible and find something rewarding outside academia to give you something to work for. Since 2015 I have published over 100 articles in academic journals, chapters and online opinion pieces. I do enjoy research but again, this eventually becomes something you do for promotion, and I feel it's losing its meaning particularly when nobody recognises you for it. Also, where has my long list of publications got me? I have no idea who reads them and no idea if it's making a difference.

Academia seems to be a culture whereby it's acceptable to work 24/7. Remember, it's a day job and there's only so much we can do. Why work if all you do is work? We work to live not live to work - cliché I know but when I thought about where I'll be in 5 years with the direction HE is going in... I thought, well it's not here I'm afraid, so I'm not going to sit here and get more depressed. If I enjoy research and writing then I can do that in any job actually - so maybe I will. In 5 years time, I aim not to be in academia full time.

Best wishes

Hazel