

Colin's supervision

1.

Hello John,

I hope you don't mind me mailing you but I am not sure where to turn or what to do. I am currently studying part time and paying for a PhD in Computer Graphics.

I went to my local university a few months ago to ask about the possibility of sitting an MSc in Computer Science, I was 7 years out but attained a good technical degree and have been working as an artist, so to branch into computer graphics seemed like a good move with earning potential. The Dr running the program was very complimentary of my background and asked if I had considered a PhD.

I was flattered and interested, but now I am 6 weeks in I find that he is getting me to work in a programming language he doesn't know. He is constantly contradicting himself, regularly criticises me and pushes hard for results (yet doesn't understand how I am getting them?!). So far he has taught me nothing.

He has a terrible reputation within the school and has had failures in the past (pulls in grants however!) but if I try to get anyone to say anything concrete they just close ranks and clam up. My head is screaming get out now before it goes further down the line but I am not happy about being duped like this, I do not want this against my name but I did not sign up to do a degree with an incompetent supervisor who is probably just fishing by getting me to do this.

I hope you can help me with some sound advice, I have always said that it is not about the PhD but about where and what it can get me. I see it being integral to my artistic practice but I can also see a lot of wasted money and a fail if I continue with this supervisor. What can I do?

I look forward to hearing from you and really hope for some sage advice.

All the best, Colin.

Q. Discuss the issues raised and suggest how would have replied

2.

John's reply

Hi Colin,

Sorry for delay. Just spent a few days training supervisors - but not a course your supervisor would likely attend...

First, for what I understand of your situation it is good that you have identified the problem relatively early when things are recoverable. But I think you should think about your immediate problem in a wider context (if you have not already done this).

Second, I think you need to review your current longer term plans. What is your objective? and what assistance, training or qualification will ensure you meet your objective?

Third, what are the realistic options for you? e.g. are there resources, courses, programmes available locally or nationally which would provide what you need at a cost you could afford? face to face or distance?

In the light of your answers I think you could address the current situation. From what you say you are only a few weeks into your registration? what fees have you paid already? what are you currently committed to doing alongside a part-time degree?

If you like to come back to me with your thoughts on the above, I'll respond.

Best wishes
John

Q. Discuss John's reply and the questions he raises

3.

Thanks so much for getting back to me, it is really good to talk to someone outside of my university! Everyone gets a little nervous when you question a supervisor's ability. He is flaky and insubstantial and that is the problem, so I have to decide if I am capable or willing to drag him along with me. On the plus side he is very good at getting grants and recognising the best places to get published. Much as I dislike that way of doing science, since I am now in it, I had better make the best of it.

I run my own arts business alongside my studies and the idea was to make myself more employable by gaining technical expertise in relevant areas. I am a victim of my own diversity though since I cannot reason a specific direction and was hoping that my studies would help to provide it. I am scared that the lack of a specific subject direction will lead to an insubstantial PhD or to a complete divergence of my interests and talents, which would be just as bad an outcome. I studied Mathematics and Physics out of pure interest and had to work hard to gain my 2:1 but I have a natural talent for creativity and particularly for sculpture and it is the only thing I can do quickly!

I do wish my supervisor would attend a course like yours. He could so do with it. He has asked me to program in a language he hardly knows and never uses. When I got stuck he merely had a go at me and asked me why I was doing this or that!

It came to a head when I rumbled his lack of knowledge and confronted him about it, he then spent 20 minutes defending himself and made me late for demonstrating to his students. Unfortunately I think he has been warned about his lack of input. He let my fellow demonstrator give two years of these particular practicals on his own and even had him marking the assignments but not this year. So I think he has much to lose if I do not do well. But he also has a poor track record and a reputation for getting students to do things that he does not know or even vaguely understand himself. Sorry if I am ranting, I hope it is all good information for you considering what you do.

For your information I put in a proposal to study impossible shadows and reflections as a cross disciplinary piece of research, but my official application said that the subject was to be decided. I presume because those who approve the PhD applications thought that this subject area did not offer enough possibilities for original research.

I am hoping to get a co-supervisor from the Psychology department on board, that would make me feel a lot safer and give me more scope, or perhaps someone from the art department.



Thanks for your time and your ear.

All the best, Colin

Q. before going on to the next episode, discuss the issues now raised by Colin

4.

Hi Colin,

If the main purpose of registering for a PhD is to gain expert help and collaboration, I am not sure you are at the right university. A PhD is an enormous project and requires a lot of input from supervisors, colleagues, fellow postgraduates etc as well as your enthusiasm and commitment. The environment is crucial.

For what you say I would imagine that there will be other possibilities? how much do you need to use university facilities? I see you are part-time and therefore do not need to be limited to your local university. I think a thorough search on the web to locate where there are established teams working in your area and which might have appropriate expertise and provide a better community to work in.

Many universities, and not only the OU, would not require you to live nearby, and all universities have arrangements for using each others' libraries etc. Try searching the web and through some journals in your field and try and locate people who have ideas on your topic or relevant approaches. Look them up, email them and see what response you get. As a self-funded phd student you would be welcome in many universities. You might like to prepare a half page summary of your ideas to send to them.

When you find a possibility, visit, ask to meet other phd students in the department and diagnose whether they might provide a better situation. It is worth a lot of investment now to ensure your next six years is a positive, rewarding and exciting experience.

What do you think? If you are willing to let me know your location and the name of the university involved (in confidence), I might be able to make an additional comment if I happen to have visited or heard of the situation there.

Best wishes
John

Q. How do you feel about John's suggestion?

5.

Hello John,

Further to my previous mail; I have found a supervisor I would very much like to approach - but how? I don't want to sound like a griping flaky student who crumbles at the first sign of adversity and who is quick to criticise. Should I just be straight about everything? I would much rather this approach but am wary of breaking the unsaid academic rules.

Thanks again, Colin

Q. how would respond to this suggestion?

6.

Thanks ...

You have to decide what you want. You pay the fees and it's your doctorate. You are not your supervisor's (or supervisors') property. Go to new potential supervisor for a discussion and advice. If you then think s/he would perform the function you want, ask how they would feel being added to your supervisory team...

In haste

John

Q. discuss John's reply

7.

John asks how things are going...

Good to hear from you, and thank you for asking. I contacted the other potential supervisor but was not happy with his responses in the end. I have managed to gain a very competent co supervisor who is from Psychology and a solid direction for my thesis.

Things have changed somewhat though! I was given the heads up by a friend about a KTP placement at (a software company) doing Mathematical modelling, training and some programming, and I was successful in my application. I started working there today. The placement is for a year and I am hoping that by then I will have found a better supervisor and a neat way to sidestep the incompetent one and find one who is more suited to the job!

I hope all is well with you.

All the best, Colin

Hi Colin,
That sounds good news. Have you suspended PhD registration for the year?
Please keep me posted.
Best wishes
John

Hi John,

I was in two minds as to whether to suspend my registration or not. My not very good supervisor has suggested I do not suspend it, but I don't see any time being available to spend on it due to the workload on the placement. I think I will ask the advice of the excellent supervisor. I certainly won't stop thinking about my PhD and probably reading around it, but I doubt I'll be working on it very much.

All the best, Colin.

Q. any comments on Colin's situation now?

Team task:

What are the lessons here for

1. Research students
 2. Supervisors, and
 3. Institutions?
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Epilogue 2 years later

Hello John,

I thought I would email you as I had the delight today of watching a video which you featured in on how to complete your doctorate on time. How did I come to be watching this? Well, after a year on the KTP it was agreed that the company and the Faculty at the University would provide a joint scholarship to do a PhD looking at their manufacturing systems with a view to reducing variability in the supply chain as a whole. I worked at the company for six months and was successful in competing for the scholarship.

So, I have just started at the Faculty of Business with Prof X and Dr Y who are both excellent supervisors. As part of the new Doctoral Training Program I was given some videos to watch.....

A happy ending it would seem, although my PhD journey has only just begun and I am working at the company one day a week as well.

Thank you so much for being there when I really needed good advice, it was invaluable and I just wanted to tell you that. The difference between the supervisor I have now and the one I had before is incalculable. I would have complained about the other one but if it wasn't for him I wouldn't be here so I felt I couldn't. I carry a little guilt for that, but only a little. It would seem that the University is really pulling its socks up with regard to doctoral training and for that I am really glad, although the 7500 word lit review by Xmas is scaring me a bit!!

Hi Colin,

Really good to hear from you again and that things are working out well for you now.

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Two thoughts:

1. Would you allow me to edit your earlier emails into an anonymised account of your earlier problems to add to my folder of narratives? We could end with the good news.
2. I assume your previous experience was quite stressful. Our next video, working title 'how to survive a doctorate' is to focus on stress for the doctoral candidate....

Hi John,

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I would be happy for you to use my emails anonymously. When I read your article in The Guardian (2001, I realised today, found it originally through a net search) it inspired me to look deeply at what I was doing and question my supervisor. The case you used was similar, in some ways to mine, and that was what helped - I realised this could be very bad if I didn't do something pro-active.

I hope that my previous supervisor has sat in your courses and realised his mistakes, you cannot teach everything and some things cannot be done alone. My supervisor now is in his area with my PhD, the Math might get a little outside his scope on the way (unlikely) but if it does he will not batter my head for not understanding it or try to pretend that he does! He would point me in the right direction and to the right people, perhaps even find time to open it up a little himself. I was occasionally demanding during the KTP (he was my supervisor during that) after my previous experience I wanted to be sure he was as good as seemed.

It's good to keep in touch :)

All the best, Colin.