

Supervising Josephine

1.

Dear John,

Thank you for running a thought-provoking and thorough session last Thursday. I enjoyed the day very much, and I think I got a lot out of it.

I talked to you about my own experience of being a supervisor, and although that episode is now over, I would value your thoughts - you are also welcome to consider this as a story you might use in future if it is helpful.

My name is April and my story starts as a new lecturer. I was one year post-PhD, and lucky to get a lectureship so early on. I was keen and eager, as you might guess. I was also rather naive.

When I started my role, I was offered the opportunity to second supervise a PhD student who had already been accepted in the department. Her first supervisor was an eminent Professor, and someone whose work had some crossover with my own.

Before continuing to the next episode discuss what April should do this stage.

2.

I was flattered to be asked and said yes. I did not think to ask to look at her CV, or consider her work so far.

This student (I will call her Josephine) was working on a self-funded PhD. She seemed to have a plan for work developed with her first supervisor (I will call him Tom). For the first year, I was not really involved in their meetings, which was ok for me, I had limited expertise in her subject area, and my own experience of a second supervisor was rather 'hands off'. I assumed that all was going well, and I'd be asked to meetings or to advise when it was necessary.

Before continuing to the next episode discuss the situation and anything should do now.

3.

At the end of the first year, Tom retired. This meant that I was now, technically, responsible for this student. Tom still remained very much involved, but I felt that the responsibility for this student to complete was on me. There was no formal recognition of this from the department or the graduate school, it was more that I became primary supervisor by name only.

We started to work more as a team, and I noticed that things were not, perhaps, going so well. Josephine's writing was still rather patchy in quality, and things that should have been completed were still on-going.

She passed her upgrade, but I had strong reservations about this, and talked to the Head of PG studies in my department about them. She conceded that the upgrade report was not excellent, but was judged to have passed so there was little that could be done.

Discuss the situation. Have you any suggestions for April?

4.

Josephine was a difficult student to supervise. She had a strong personality (not a negative point!), but often fought against advice that we were giving. I had not experienced supervisions that turned into arguments; and I often felt like we were battling with Josephine, especially when we were discussing aspects about her work that needed considerable development.

There were a few occasions that I suspected that Josephine's work was not quite her own - the style of writing changed (it became more fluent), and it was not difficult to find some sections had been pasted in from Wikipedia.

I was furious - what a waste of my time! I talked with Tom about this, and to the Head of PG studies in my department. We had a long conversation with Josephine, showing her that we had found sections that were clearly plagiarised.

No-one seemed entirely sure what to do about plagiarism discovered at the draft stage, and no formal action was taken. Josephine denied ever having plagiarised - saying that it was more likely that the Wikipedia page had used the same source material as her.

Before continuing to the next episode discuss what April should do now.

5.

Josephine worked as well as studying, and there was a rather long period where she did not come to meetings or get in touch. At this time, she was required to give a second year presentation of her work to her peers.

It was terrible; no theory, lots of very descriptive data - nothing that would have taken much time to throw together. I was embarrassed. She was also late to the session, and was rude to the administrative staff who called her to see when she would be arriving.

There were several supervision sessions that felt like we were going round in circles. We would ask for changes and these would not happen. We covered the same ground over and over again.

It was clear to me that she was falling behind, and when we did finally meet with her again, I pushed to put her on probation. I did this as much to protect Tom and me, as to make it clear to Josephine that her work was not up to standard. We made it clear that moving to probation status was not any punishment, but a clear way of tracking our responsibilities as supervisors, and hers as a student. We set out very clear goals that were agreed by all of us. We agreed submission dates for chapters, and dates when we would provide feedback.

Discuss how to respond to a student's poor performance.

6.

Work was pretty much kept to schedule, with drafts being submitted at the very last moment on each of the deadline days. Tom and I were able to stick to our own feedback deadlines.

In one of her emails, I noticed that she identified herself as a Director of an agency. I was interested, and clicked through. This agency offered academic writing for others - an essay writing service for students at all levels (including PhD).

I felt very uncomfortable about this. Although not illegal, I found it deeply unethical, and something that reflected badly on me, Tom and the University as a whole. Josephine did not advertise this agency on her University email, but she did identify herself as a PhD candidate and this Director on the same email address.

How should supervisors react to this kind of situation?

7.

I emailed the Graduate School, my Head of PG studies and Tom. No-one really knew what to do - there was nothing in the regulations that would mean this was an offence, and eventually, after some discussion, it was left alone. I felt disappointed, and rather unsupported. Here, we had a difficult student, not meeting academic requirements and involved in some dubious activity. We were going by the book, but I felt like things could still go wrong.

Josephine stuck to the requirements of the probation, and was removed from it after three months. The deadlines and seriousness of probation seemed to work well. I did not like the feeling of 'babying' students in this way, but it seemed to be effective.

There was a period where Josephine did not respond to emails or come to meetings, and told us only that she had some 'home issues'. Both Tom and I had an open door policy, and had time to think about any issues, including considering interruption or moving to part-time, but Josephine rejected both ideas.

What should be done now?

8.

Later that year, we discovered that she had submitted at least two papers to journals, and had not notified us, nor included us in the writing process, as co-authors, or even acknowledged our input. All of the work submitted had received considerable input from Tom and me, and we were confused as to why we would not have been included in the submission of the work.

We had previously dealt with a similar situation with Josephine; so she was entirely clear about expectations relating to the publication of her PhD work. We had previously told her that given she was on probation, her time would be better spent improving her thesis, than trying to get work published. We were of the opinion that her work was not of sufficient quality to be published.

Discuss the issues that arise here and the role of publication in the doctoral student's career.

9.

Tom decided to refer this matter on to the Postgraduate committee within our department. The Head of Research in the department suggested that this would be grounds for further probation, and so we pursued this option again.

Once again, we set out very firm expectations about when work would be submitted, and when it would be returned with feedback.

Josephine resisted being put on probation, and complained to the Graduate School. The Graduate School agreed that she should be on probation.

Tom and I spent two months working very hard commenting on drafts, and suggesting significant re-writes. We turned around drafts within days, and the thesis was submitted days before the four-year deadline. We had been under considerable pressure from the department not to let our students 'go over' this deadline, as it reflected badly on us, and we would be at risk of losing research council funding. For what it is worth, I agree with this - I would be very cross if a student like Josephine could ruin the efforts of the department to have a good completion record. It is my opinion that Josephine's work was never up to PhD standard, but that we were put in a position where we needed to make sure that her thesis would not fail outright.

Discuss the role of supervisors as the student nears completion.

10.

Josephine's thesis was examined, and she was given pass with corrections, which were completed. She obtained a PhD. The external examiner was selected from a shortlist suggested by Tom, and the academic who came was capable and respected. As far as I can tell, he gave a thorough viva and made extremely constructive comments for corrections.

Some months later, the police came to the department looking for her. She also contacted Tom to request that he act as a counter-signatory to her new passport, which contained her 'new name'. We passed this on to the University legal team. We never did find out exactly what was going on.

I learned some lessons from this. I am now much more careful about whom I accept as a PhD student; and I am very clear about my expectations about work and feedback provision.

I also realise that there are certainly two sides to every story - and I can't imagine that we were 100% correct in all of our decisions. We tried to be even-handed and go by the regulations, and the Graduate School supported us in this. However, working with such a difficult student was a huge workload for no reward. I do not feel like we advanced knowledge through her thesis, and I have had none of the tangible 'rewards' that being a supervisor might usually bring (e.g. publications, a new colleague to collaborate with).

I hope that it might be useful to you, and I would value your thoughts.

All best wishes,
April

Team task

What lessons are there here for

1. Doctoral students
 2. Supervisors, and
 3. Institutions?
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