The Pressures of Supervising Postgraduate Students

Stanley A Adendorff*
Faculty of Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

*Corresponding author:
Stanley A Adendorff, Faculty of Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

Received: August 26, 2019
Published: September 6, 2019
Volume: 01; Issue: 04

To Cite This Article:

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Introduction

Why is it imperative to become a reflective post-graduate supervisor? Supervising is a multifaceted enterprise that has many varied challenges and demands: Hamilton and Carson et al. [1] call supervision a “particularly complex form of pedagogical practice”. Consequently, it is essential to constantly reflect Olivier [2] on becoming better equipped mentally and academically. Manifold viewpoints and diverse perspectives have been expressed about supervision as a process Msimanga [3], as emancipatory Baum [4], as a “particularly challenging form of teaching Boughey, Van den Heuvel and Wels [5] in any research disciplines. Whatever is said on how to supervise in terms of theory and models for supervision, it remains a uniquely individual experience for both supervisor and student, an experience that no two supervisors experience in quite the same way.

Insights into My Supervision Journey

The perspectives that I express occur within the context of the Education Faculty of a young University of Technology in the Republic of South Africa. The student population is quite diverse and for most students. English is either students’ second language or third language, and not their mother-tongue with English as the medium of instruction. As supervisor one needs to be constantly aware of the needs and insecurities of your adult students. These students should not only be considered merely in a cognitive sense, but essentially as holistic beings with diverse needs. Their emotional, psychological and social make-up should be considered as well.

It is important to establish and maintain healthy educational relationships with adult students. Treating them as equals is essential. An educational trust relationship should be based on honesty, openness and acceptance. Critique from me as supervisor needs to be constructive and positive to initiate and maintain growth, not only academically, but also in other related ways. Post graduate students should have a realistic sense of their abilities, and if not, I as facilitator and teacher should be instrumental in developing this quality. Somehow students intuitively sense how high or low the supervisor rates them in terms of their ability. A sense of mistrust or doubt detected in terms of their abilities may adversely affect the supervisor–student trust relationship.

Adult students bring a certain degree of independence and self-directedness Knowles [6] which should be nurtured and used as the foundation from which to develop and build confidence to explore new or unknown territories academically.

The views and perspectives of students as individuals are important and should be considered at all times. Their self-directedness Knowles [6] should be used to facilitate and enhance working independently and increase confidence to self-explore. By being instrumental the supervisor(s) would help counter or minimise self-doubt and increase confidence within the post-graduate student.

How you interact with these adult students is crucial. The body-language that you radiate when having face-to-face or telephonic discussions should be positive, open and accepting. When listening to your students your body language should reflect attentiveness, should show a willingness to understand, and a willingness to want to know or learn more.

Ways of communication and alternatives in communication technology significantly help in the supervision process. Apart from physically meeting for face-to-face discussions, emails, WhatsApp messages, video calls and telephonic conversations are effectively used to clear up misunderstandings, forward information and reminders, and to simply help to maintain contact much more frequently. Track-changes as a means of feedback is quite helpful to communicate suggestions for change and general critique to students. It is my students’ responsibility to keep record of all communication with the supervisor as proof of when and what particular aspects were discussed. An extract of one of the students’ record is shown below.
Feedback from my students indicates that they generally place a high premium on certain supervisor qualities. Student A specifically mention aspects such as ‘available when required”, “rapid response to emails”, “appreciate his commitment”, “added value to my research”. Student B and C expressed satisfaction by saying the following:

a. He consulted with me on a regular basis and was always available when needed.

b. He allowed me to voice my opinion and encouraged me to work independently.

c. He gave constructive feedback and positive criticism to improve the quality of my work.

d. He made helpful and practical suggestions for me to investigate and implement.

e. He assisted with my search for specific research material.

f. I was able to publish two (2) DHET accredited articles through his supervision.

These aspects voiced by my students are clearly important positive feedback, but some of the most crucial ones certainly are that we as supervisors afford them many opportunities to voice their own opinions and empower them to work independently. Ultimately a ‘good working relationship’, timeous feedback, proper guidance to develop academically, support to obtain research funding, and ability to motivate the student to persevere will ultimately culminate in publishing research papers in scholarly journals such as this one.

References


