Introduction

The process of earning a doctorate is complex, and a critical success factor is the supervisory relationship. The aim of this article is to share experiences of doctoral supervision from three different perspectives, offering a view from above, below and the middle. The view from above is provided by Professor Jim Stewart, who supervised Sally’s doctorate at Nottingham Business School. The view from below is provided by Clair Roberts, whose doctorate is supervised by Dr Sally Sambrook at the University of Wales Bangor. Sandwiched in the middle, therefore, is Sally, who provides an account of her own supervision by Jim and her experiences of supervising Clair. The article was inspired by the activities leading up to, during and immediately after the UFHRD conference on HRD Research and Practice across Europe, hosted by the University of Limerick in May 2004.

This article presents reflections from three researchers at different stages of their research careers. We each reflect on the following three aspects of research training and supervision:

- The transition from undergraduate to postgraduate
- The process of supervision – giving and receiving feedback
- The emerging relationship between supervisee and supervisor

Before sharing our own experiences, it is helpful to consider what is already known about doctoral supervision.

What is PhD supervision?

There are many models of doctoral supervision (Price & Money 2002, Enders 2004), and it is acknowledged that PhD supervision might differ from DBA supervision, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these in detail. However, whatever the model or route, as Wisker (2001:29) notes, ‘Managing your supervisor(s) well and developing and maintaining a supportive, positive, constructively critical relationship over time is essential to help you produce a good quality thesis.’

The purpose of supervision is to steer, guide and support students through the process of conducting a doctorate. This is a long and complex process, in which Phillips and Pugh (1994) identify seven main stages: enthusiasm, isolation, increased interest, increasing independence, boredom, frustration, and a job to be finished (plus final euphoria). However, undertaking a PhD is also a very personal process, so it is problematic to suggest that students encounter each of these distinct stages, or in this order, although it is possible to suggest that the process is a
complex and dynamic one, with seemingly erratic highs and lows – for both supervisor and supervisee. Wisker (2001) more simplistically identifies three stages: the beginning; ongoing (middle stages); and final stages; in which the supervisor’s role changes to adapt to emerging students’ needs.

The supervisor’s main task is to provide both technical and emotional support (Easterby-Smith et al 2002:14). Exploring these two ‘domains’ of the supervisory relationship, technical expertise may be easier (more objective) to quantify, but emotional expertise (or intelligence) is somewhat harder to determine due to the subjective nature of the human relationship. Therefore, the supervisor (or supervisory team) must have sufficient social and technical skills to deal with the emotional and cognitive aspects of doctoral research.

Easterby-Smith et al (2002:15) suggest the characteristics of a successful supervisor include:

- Technical expertise, although general knowledge of the research topic and relevant methods may be more useful than a deep knowledge of the subject area and narrow specialism in particular methods
- Personally active as a researcher, belonging to international networks which (a) influence journals and conferences, (b) can provide a source of external examiners and (c) act as gateways into academic careers
- Set regular, realistic deadlines, but avoid interfering with the detail of the work
- A responsive style to encourage the student to become autonomous and independent, and responding rapidly to any immediate problems
- Receive, read and return work (eg draft chapters) in a week or two
- ‘Availability is very important, and for this reason the guru with a string of brilliant publications, but who is never available for consultations, may not necessarily be the best supervisor,’ (2002:15).

Wisker (2001:37) reinforces many of these, including highlighting the need ‘to be available when needed … to be friendly, open and supportive … and to be constructively critical.’ These three aspects provide key threads through this intimate analysis of supervisory relationships.

Who? The supervisory relationship

Having suggested there are numerous, different, stages the student experiences, the supervisory relationship needs to be able to ‘cope’ with all of these, which is demanding of the supervisor! Wisker (ibid) explains, ‘the relationship between you and your supervisor or supervisors is a very important one and it is essential that you can get on with them personally, without necessarily becoming the best of friends, and can respect them in terms of scholarship, academic credibility and their practices.’ Phillips and Pugh (1994:8) state that selecting your supervisor, ‘is probably the most important step you will have to take.’

Commitment to this long process is required by both parties, and the appropriate ‘selection’ of supervisor and supervisee is crucial to sustain this (see Wisker 2001:29-31)! If the selection is achieved through individual choice and negotiation, the relationship may be stronger than that achieved from simple allocation – whether by subject or method, or even capacity (too many/too few students per supervisor). Choice and negotiation may be easier to achieve when the student has been an undergraduate in the same academic institution where she undertakes her doctorate – she will have encountered many academic staff and may have been successfully supervised for
her dissertation by the academic she would ‘prefer’ to work with during her doctorate. Even if the student has not studied in the institution, they may be aware of certain prominent academics and seek these out! However, supporting the earlier comment made by Easterby-Smith and colleagues, Wisker highlights the fact that ‘sometimes the most eminent person is the busiest and can afford the least time for supervision,’ (2001:30).

Phillips and Pugh (1994:9) note that, ‘another important aspect that you should be considering when selecting your supervisor is: how close a relationship do you want? The supervisor-student relationship is one of the closest that you will ever be involved in. Even marriage partners do not spend long hours every day in close contact with each other.’ So being able to get on with each other is crucial, but there are degrees of closeness. Phillips and Pugh also note that, ‘it seems ‘rapport’ and good communication between students and their supervisors are the most important elements of supervision. Once the personal relationship has been well established, all else falls into place. If interpersonal compatibility is missing, everything else to do with being a postgraduate is perceived negatively’ (1994:10). However, once the supervisor has been selected, and particularly if you are in/seek a close relationship, ‘you need to ensure that you have clear working relations with your supervisor, do not intrude on their personal lives, and manage to keep the balance between friendship and a professional working relationship so that neither of you relax too much and forget to concentrate on the timing and management of each aspect of the research,’ (Wisker 2001:62). The key point here seems to be the balance between the professional (technical) and social (emotional) aspects of the relationship.

As well as being available and friendly/supportive, an important element of the relationship is how each party deals with critique, whether it is the student receiving, or the supervising giving, feedback. ‘There is a delicate balance required between providing feedback, which highlights weakness in a piece of work, and providing praise and encouragement to try harder,’ (Easterby-Smith et al 2002:15). Wisker (2001:36) advises, ‘try and get on with your supervisor without becoming too friendly, so that you can both be honestly (constructively) critical.’

The process of doctoral supervision is often described in an ideal, sanitised, rational and unproblematic way. Having reviewed the ‘ideal’ we now share our own personal, but partial, reflections on our experiences of doctoral supervision, which are real, messy, dynamic, negotiated and emergent. The focus is on one ‘critical incident,’ and particularly on the social dimension.

**Context**

The trigger for this article was by the activities leading up to, during and immediately after the UFHRD conference on HRD Research and Practice across Europe, wonderfully hosted by the University of Limerick in May 2004. Attending conferences is an important aspect of developing doctoral students. Wisker (2001:37) suggests that it is the supervisor’s role ‘to encourage you to attend appropriate conferences and introduce you to others in their field.’ As Easterby-Smith et al (2002:16) note,

‘By the second year of a doctoral thesis one should be submitting papers to conferences, possibly in conjunction with the supervisor initially… It is through presenting papers at such conferences that one can develop contacts with other collaborators and potential sponsors; and it forms an induction into the academic community which can be both reassuring and motivating for one’s own research.’
However, there is little mention of some of the anxieties of this activity – for both students and their supervisors.

The UFHRD conference brings together delegates from the diverse HRD community. Sally and Jim have presented both joint papers and independent papers before at this annual conference, and this year all three of us presented papers. Due to timetable constraints, Jim was unable to attend Sally’s presentation, and vice versa, but he did attend Sally and Clair’s. The catalyst for this article was the providing and receiving of feedback after Sally and Clair’s presentation, a key aspect of the supervisory relationship, as we have already identified.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this paper is autoethnography – a relatively recent qualitative approach to research whereby the researchers themselves are the ‘subjects’ of study (Ellis and Bochner 2003). This involved the three of us, as researchers in our distinct projects, considering our observations and experiences of the process of doctoral supervision as participants. The idea to explore the interactions between three researchers at different stages of their research careers within the culture of academia, and sub-culture of doctoral supervision, emerged when Clair and Sally encountered a problematic issue (giving and receiving feedback) and Sally turned to Jim for (emotional and technical) support/mentoring. After initial informal discussions of the potential to observe these interactions and reflect on them from three different perspectives, we decided to write a paper, focusing on three apparently important, and culturally influenced, aspects of the supervisory relationship:

- The transition from undergraduate to postgraduate
- The process of supervision – giving and receiving feedback
- The emerging relationship between supervisee and supervisor

We each wrote our own narratives, individually. These were then collated and analysed, using thematic analysis, to identify any patterns in the ‘data’ and any similarities and differences. All three researchers had the opportunity to read each others’ narrative and ‘edit’ these for this paper. An analysis of the ensuing three narratives provides insights into the complex, dynamic and, at times, difficult nature of the supervisory relationship.

Key themes to emerge from our narratives and subsequent discussions were:

- the problematic transition from being an undergraduate/postgraduate student on a taught programme (a star performer) to a doctoral candidate (novice researcher, and to some extent ‘peer’), with associated issues of developing independence
- the potentially problematic aspect of giving and receiving feedback, where genuine constructive critique can often be perceived as being ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ when it could be argued that all feedback is positive in its attempt to improve performance.
- The development of relationships from tutor/student to critical friends and beyond, for example into mentoring roles, although again there are issues of (in)dependence

However, before we explore these, first we present the ‘data.’
Clair’s view from below

I first met Sally during the second year of my undergraduate degree, at the School for Business at the University of Wales, Bangor, where she taught me for a management module. I found her style of teaching very different from that which I was used to. I found her approach in teaching and enthusiasm for the subject stirred up enthusiasm within me for the topics. The same was the case in my third year, when she taught me for a HRM module, and Sally became the natural choice for my dissertation supervisor. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I feel that the student/supervisor relationship I had with Sally worked well. Sally had always been keen on encouraging learning through self-reflection and was diplomatic yet supportive when offering criticism.

After graduating, I was offered a PhD studentship in Entrepreneurship from the School for Business. The PhD in entrepreneurship was one of the first of its kind (in the University of Wales, Bangor) and had been negotiated and organised by a professor, who had taught me for a third year module during my undergraduate degree. As the ‘founding father’ of the PhD, it was expected (by my department, him and myself) that he would supervise my PhD, but I had also hoped to get Sally on board in an official capacity. On starting the PhD, I was disappointed to learn that Sally had moved to pastures new – the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Studies at the University of Wales, Bangor. So I continued my PhD with my professor as my sole supervisor. I had not had the opportunity to develop the same familiar relationship with him as I had with Sally during my undergraduate degree. This did not bother me though. My professor was much younger than most of the senior academics within the school, and along with his friendly down-to-earth attitude I had experienced from him as an undergraduate, I felt comfortable having him as a supervisor for my PhD.

A close friend of mine from my undergraduate degree, Charlotte, had also won a studentship for a PhD in Entrepreneurship at the same time as me. So, as the first few months passed, mine and Charlotte’s relationship strengthened as we increasingly supported and encouraged each other through the initial months of bewilderment, angst, confusion and literature reviewing! On reflection, this relationship may not have been as beneficial for my progress as I initially thought, as we both neglected to contact our professor for supervisory support, feeling adequately supported on an emotional level from each other. So we kept ourselves somewhat isolated-yet-united within the complicated world of postgraduate research.

I recall I had about three meetings with my professor before Charlotte decided to leave her PhD. I found him very enthusiastic and approachable in all of these meetings, but still felt overwhelmed by the vast and mountainous task that lay before me. I note that it was difficult to get appointments with him! Being one of the most senior professor’s within our school, director of an innovative centre and responsible for setting-up and rolling out many groundbreaking and innovative projects within the University, it seemed that this man’s time was more valuable than gold!

Before Charlotte left her PhD, she had approached both Sally and our professor about the feasibility of getting Sally on board as a co-supervisor. This was approved, but amounted to nothing as Charlotte left soon after to set-up her own business. Charlotte’s leaving sent me through a roller-coaster of emotions; Shock, panic, isolation, self-doubt, determination and motivation were to name a few! Now I was out on my own, I tried to see my professor more
often, but this proved to be difficult, as the initial trend seemed set, and the number of projects and PhD students he was responsible for was on the increase.

Throughout the first year, Charlotte and I met up with Sally for coffee/ lunch and always a gossip! Patiently waiting for what seemed like an eternity for my professor to give me feedback on my first draft of my literature review, Sally offered to have an informal look at it for me. After a couple of weeks Sally came over to see me during both our lunch breaks (I was doing some part-time work for the department). I was temporarily based in her old office, which I remember being strange, yet comforting familiar, when she came over to give me feedback – just like the good old days! The meeting flew by, and although I appreciated the time she had given up for this (the meeting lasted for over three hours) I felt distraught when she left. This was not because of Sally as an informal supervisor/friend per se. It was because the meeting demonstrated to me how much I needed regular and easy access to a supervisor, and how Sally’s style of supervision supported and motivated me. So why did I feel distraught? I feel this is because Sally had confirmed what I already knew (but was quite happily in denial about) which was that I needed to develop my literature review considerably for it to hold up to academic rigour. So why did I feel so distraught? Because my meeting with Sally actually rekindled what had been a diminishing desire in me to do this PhD, and climb this postgraduate mountain to get to the summit, and to do that I realised just how much work I needed to do, how behind I was, and how I needed more frequent and appropriate supervisory support.

The outcome of this meeting was that I requested to have Sally as a co-supervisor for my research project. My professor was happy with this. This proved to be a very timely decision, as shortly afterwards, he left the School for Business in Bangor to take up another prominent post within another university. Sally’s supervision style is similar to that of Jim’s, which she describes later in this paper. She does not make any strict targets or require tutorials. I can meet up with her when I need to see her, at short notice, and we have daily contact through e-mail. My relationship with her has developed since my dissertation, and I feel the role has evolved into a more informal friendship. I think having the gap in between Sally as my undergraduate supervisor, and Sally as my doctoral supervisor, when we did actually meet up for no purpose other than coffee and chats as friends helped to shape this. Would this have happened so quickly, or at all if I had not had this gap in supervision?

The Limerick Conference provided me with an excellent opportunity to explain my doctoral research to date, and to generate some feedback. As an undergraduate I had always been a confident speaker and so the preparatory meetings I had with Sally focused on content rather than delivery. The final meeting I had with Sally took place during the week before the conference. Sally offered me an opportunity to practise the presentation, which I declined. At the time I was quite surprised by my discomfort at the prospect of practising the presentation. Looking back, I really do believe that I was feeling shy and not very self-confident. This has surprised me, because during the course of my undergraduate degree, I was an extremely confident outgoing person and public speaker. Since starting my PhD I have found that I am increasingly becoming isolated from social interactions. I often work from home and can go for several days without talking to people. I do feel this has had repercussions on my confidence in dialogue both on a one-to-one and public level. Sally actually persuaded me to have a practice run, which we did have, and which was successful apart from overrunning slightly.

When we started on our journey to Limerick, I didn’t really know much about Sally on an informal, social level. By the time we arrived at Limerick I think we both knew much more
about each other, what our career history was, why had we decided to go down certain paths and
our specific research areas. I was a little nervous before going to the conference, particularly
since the only conference I had been to prior to this had been rather intimidating in parts. But I
did feel confident that Sally would support me throughout, which was the case.

As the conference moved on, then so did our relationship. My friendship with Sally developed
further, and she introduced me to many of her friends, former colleagues and of course her
former supervisors. I was very surprised about how friendly and welcoming everyone was, and
how quickly they accepted me into their informal groups.

Our presentation was in the last section of the last day. That morning I felt the nervous for the
first time. My nervousness steadily increased throughout the day, and after a technical
breakdown, and having our allocated speaking times reduced by the Session Chair, I felt the
presentation went from bad to worse. I hurried and muddled through it in an attempt to complete
it with in the reduced time. After the presentation, I asked Sally how she thought I had done.
Sally was disappointed with the presentation and suggested that more practice could have helped
both with the timings and my confidence in speaking.

Unfortunately, as Sally and I were having this discussion some other delegates interrupted and
greeted Sally for a long chat with her. I excused myself and went to my room, where I reflected
on what she had said. Why did I feel so upset about what Sally had said? I always feel initial
disappointment when I receive criticism, until I have had time to think it through and draw out
any positive learning experiences. Thinking about it, I knew that she was right in what she had
said, I knew that I could have done with more practice. Previous indicators should have
signalled that I needed to practice more; I had become quite a shy person, I had not presented for
over two years, I had only ever presented to my peers as a ‘star performer’ and this was my first
experience presenting at a conference, as a ‘novice.’

So I became upset and cross with myself for not having seen the signs (or choosing to ignore
them). I was also distressed because I felt that I had let both myself and Sally down and I wonder
if this would have been different if mine and Sally’s relationship was more distanced and
professional? Would I have cared about letting her down, or just myself down? I also
appreciated the difficult position Sally was in, Sally had become a friend, as well as my
supervisor, and it was her job to support my postgraduate development through constructive
criticism, if the situation required. It was not until the next day when Sally and I managed to
discuss this. It was quite painful discussing this initially, but we were soon analysing the more
tender emotions surrounding this experience and making our plans to write a paper about it! It
was quite ironic really; Sally was feeling really awkward about having had to make the criticisms,
and I was feeling really awkward about the position I had put Sally in having to make them!

**Jim’s view from above**

Where to start? The beginning might be a sensible place, but where and when is that? I will begin
here with supervising Sally’s undergraduate dissertation, although it is also important I think to
note that I had previously taught Sally on a previous module in her undergraduate degree. I can’t
remember how supervising her dissertation came about, except that it was not a case of simply
being ‘allocated’ to do so. The experience of acting in that role is important here for two reasons.
First, it was certainly the start of our researcher relationship, with Sally in the ‘subordinate’ role
as student and me in the ‘superior’ role as her supervisor. Many modes and norms of relating to
and interacting with each other will I am sure have been established then and continued into the PhD experience. What these modes and norms were, and perhaps still are, is harder to be sure about. But that relates to the second reason why the experience is relevant here; i.e. trying to recall what they were.

My memory is first that I was surprised to learn Sally’s age and background at around that point since I had assumed she was a ‘normal’ final year undergraduate. In fact, Sally was a mature student with training and work experience as a nurse before starting her undergraduate degree at NBS. Such biographical details are significant in influencing supervisory relationships. In addition, so too I think is knowledge of them. What I mean is that learning more about Sally's background had some impact on my perception, understanding and expectations of her. I think this is true of all interpersonal relationships; if so it will be true of supervisory relationships. In any case, I am sure it was true of the relationship Sally and I established at that time. One factor I recall is that I perhaps had higher expectations of Sally's ability to work independently than I would have for a 'normal' undergraduate. I always want to encourage independence in students but I think by the time I supervised her undergraduate dissertation, I expected Sally to work independently. And so I think that will have influenced my approach to her as a supervisor; I will have both expected and been more comfortable with Sally getting on with things, and making her own decisions without advice or guidance, than with other final year undergraduates.

The second memory though is that Sally experienced some personal crisis when she was doing her dissertation. I remember acting more in a pastoral mode rather than as an academic supervisor during a couple or more meetings with her during this period. By then I had come to like and admire Sally as a person as well as a student and so I was happy to adopt that mode. But, I recognised then and do so now that would not necessarily be the case for any or all students. So, Sally had by then become different and special as a person as well as a student. I mean by this that I had identified Sally as a potential ‘high flyer’ in academic terms because of her abilities, and because of her personal qualities. But, I admired and valued those same attributes in Sally as a person and so I was beginning to see her as friend as well as a student. I believe this is significant in our PhD supervisory relationship and will return to the point later.

The third and final memory is that Sally was less independent than I expected in doing her dissertation. It was an excellent piece of work and earned a clear and well deserved first. But, she seemed to need more reassurance, as opposed to direction or guidance, than I had anticipated. I guess this may be a matter of confidence rather than independence. Sally did I think work independently as I expected and encouraged but, according to my memory, was not always confident in the quality of the work and its results and sought more feedback than I expected. I think perhaps that this, and the counselling mode just referred to, are linked to a degree of dependency that I perceive to be a part, albeit small, of our relationship. This dependency is not though one way only and I will try to explain why that is the case before moving on to my experience of supervising Sally's PhD.

I often say to students of all levels and backgrounds that if they do well they give themselves credit, and if they do badly they blame their lecturers and so, that being the case and as a lecturer, I take the opposite view and give myself credit when my students do well and blame their shortcomings when they do badly. This is obviously said tongue in cheek but it has a grain of truth and a basis in respectable psychological theory; i.e. that of 'locus of control'. The point here is that, as previously stated, Sally produced an excellent dissertation and, as her supervisor, I felt some personal and individual satisfaction with her achievement. I was obviously pleased for and
proud of her. However, I was also pleased for myself and proud that I had played a role in that achievement. For me, the performance of students is an indicator and validation of my performance in the teaching element of an academic's role, and this has a more direct relationship in one to one supervisory contexts. So, there is I believe a link between lecturer and student performance. It is for this reason and in this sense that dependency works both ways. The shared experience of Sally and I is a clear example of this in that her reputation in NBS as a 'star' undergraduate reflected well on me as her dissertation supervisor and enhanced my internal reputation as well as hers. There is I think a distinction in the nature of the 'dependency' in both abstract and concrete terms, and the concepts of 'technical/professional' and 'social/emotional' may be useful dimensions in distinguishing the nature of dependency. In our case, I would suggest more of the former and less of the latter characterises my dependency on Sally, and the opposite for her dependency on me. That though is certainly an oversimplification which may or may not be of some conceptual utility. In any case, I want to say that Sally and I developed mutual dependence during her undergraduate dissertation and this characteristic of our relationship carried on in Sally's PhD.

I think it was well before I even met Sally that I decided that I wanted to become able to supervise PhD students as part of my personal and professional development as an academic. I also decided that the best way to do this was to learn from a 'master'. Consequently, I approached a senior colleague at NBS and asked for his help. He was I think a little surprised but very open to helping and agreed that I become 'second supervisor' to a full time PhD student for whom he was Director of Studies (DoS). It helped I think that I knew the student in question, who was also very willing to have a 'novice' supervisor learn his trade through working with a very experienced DoS. This proved to be an extremely wise decision on my part as I learned to understand the formal and official rules and regulations of PhD study and supervision, the informal and unofficial ‘rules’ and the possibility of variety in supervisory styles. This latter was helped by the student having a third supervisor and an advisor. I recall recognising the influence of different responsibilities of different roles on approaches to supervision but what struck me most was variety based on personality and personal preference. An example of this was what I perceived to be tight control and direction exercised by the DoS, which seemed to extend to the supervisory team as well as the student. It was at times to be a very 'telling' style (see Sambrook, 1998, 2000) in that the DoS was making decisions which to me seemed properly to rest with the everyone involved, or exclusively to the student. As an experienced undergraduate and master's level supervisor it seemed to me that this was particularly inappropriate at doctorate level. I resolved that my preference for a less directive and controlling style would be more developmental than the style displayed by this particular DoS. I have always taken the view at other levels of study that the student's work was the student's, not mine, and found no reason in this experience to change that view at doctorate level. That said I also learned the importance of providing guidance when required to try and ensure a successful outcome.

Sally then became my first PhD student in the sense that I was her DoS and so took the lead in her supervision. It is fair to say that I was at that time a 'novice' supervisor. However, I was never conscious of lacking confidence in the role. My work experience is such that the possibility of 'failure' in a chosen role never enters my head; I have been successful by any and all measures applied in every job I have had. None of this is meant to be arrogant or self-aggrandising. I am not as 'naturally' confident as people who know me generally perceive me to be, according to what they tell me at any rate. But, I do know my capabilities, and how and where they improve, and I embarked on supervising Sally's research with much more enthusiasm and excitement than trepidation. I recall two other feelings or factors at the outset. One was a determination not to in
any way 'take over' her research or even to steer it according to my preferences. I wanted to guard against that happening and I think that was a result of my 'apprenticeship'. The second feeling was an awareness of the responsibility I was taking on as DoS. That sense of responsibility was another lesson of my apprenticeship. It was also I think to do with two other separate but related factors. The first was that Sally was my first 'proper' PhD student. I had been and was second supervisor or advisor to others by now, but those students somehow 'belonged' to their DoS. Sally was the first to 'belong' to me. This factor would have been significant whoever the student had been and I would not have wanted any student to have been disadvantaged because they were my 'first'. However, because it was Sally and I liked and admired her as a person and aspiring academic, I am sure that I felt the responsibility more keenly than I would otherwise have done. This is an example I think of how our developing friendship played a part in the PhD supervisory relationship. So, what was it like supervising Sally?

In the early stages of her research I found Sally to be much the same at doctorate level as she had been during her undergraduate dissertation. What I mean is that her approach was responsive to my desire for her to be independent but that a need for reassurance was still present. Progress would be reported regularly for example and decisions would be brought to me to be 'checked' before being implemented. I do though remember that the need lessened as time went on and I guess Sally's confidence increased as she herself came to understand what this 'new' (to her) level of doctorate research meant in practice. I look back on supervising Sally with the experience of supervising five students to successful completion and I can say that getting to grips with the meaning of doctorate level is one of the biggest and most difficult learning curves for PhD students and so Sally was no different in that respect. I also recall many very stimulating conversations/debates/arguments about both the subject and methodology in which Sally more than held her own, and those meetings were certainly one of if not the most enjoyable and satisfying parts of the experience. In fact I have always and continue to enjoy the intellectual stimulation of discussing ideas with PhD students and I think this is another element of 'dependency'. This was particularly true with Sally and that remains an important part of our relationship.

Giving critical feedback on work done and planned is another common part of the supervisory experience. According to Sally, this hardly ever featured during her PhD, and my feedback was consistently positive. My memory is both similar and different but I think that is because we have different understandings of 'critical' or 'negative' feedback. If I judge something to be in need of improvement and express that view, my sense is that it is ‘positive’ since I am developing and improving the student’s understanding and ability. Because of that, I have no sense of guilt or hesitation in providing such feedback. My sense of Sally is that she is reluctant to critically or negatively judge or assess the work of others because of the possibility of hurt feelings and the potential harmful effects on the future relationship. These worries and concerns come through in the feedback and so Sally feels it is negative or critical feedback. In my case, I think, the lack of these concerns helps my feedback come across and be received as ‘positive’. This is I think a crucial factor in the critical incident which triggered and provides the focus for this article.

I attended the paper presented by Clair and Sally at Limerick. Although I didn’t attend to assess or judge the session I recall at the end being satisfied as a member of the audience and stimulated into wanting to know more about the project. I was a little surprised when Sally asked me shortly afterwards for a view on how the session had gone, but I was happy to share my thoughts with her about the content and the performance of both her and Clair in presenting the paper. My surprise did I think increase when Sally expressed reservations about the quality of the session
and concerns about raising her dissatisfaction with Clair. We talked through first the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation as we each saw them, and then the pros and cons of Sally discussing her concerns with Clair. I recall feeling a little uncomfortable with being asked for advice on the latter as I did not know Clair well and found it hard to predict her reaction to whatever Sally might say to her. I also felt that Sally was seeking reassurance on her supervisory approach. This in itself is fine in my view as new supervisors can and should seek to learn from those with more experience; that after all had been my approach to learning to be a PhD supervisor. In this case though I felt it was a manifestation of Sally’s dependence on me in that she seemed to be almost seeking validation or permission for a decision she had already made, and I was more than a little unwilling to be cast in that role. As with her undergraduate dissertation and PhD research, I wanted Sally to have the confidence to make her own decisions and not seek reassurance from me that they were ‘correct’ or ‘right’. I also thought that our relationship was beyond adopting those roles. But, it was clear that Sally wanted and needed some reassurance on what to do in the situation as it was and so, despite my reservations, I slipped into that mode of our relationship. I guess too that there was some satisfaction for me in being able to be of continuing significance in Sally’s continuing development; perhaps another example of mutual dependence? However, the example also raises the related notions of control and ownership. As stated earlier, my belief is that students’ work is theirs, not mine and so I don’t own and so do (should) not control it. I also used the notion of ‘ownership’ earlier in relation to DoS and PhD students, and that suggests again that we have to take care in the degree of ownership and control we either seek to or actually do exercise. Dependence can I think transfer ownership and control and that can be inappropriate and unhelpful to learning and development.

There are a couple of additional factors that are perhaps worth mentioning. Sally and I have continued our relationship beyond the PhD experience. We remain friends and active colleagues who continue to work together. However, this is not unique and it is true of me and other successful doctoral students. By means of illustration, I am currently editing books with three different ex-doctoral students, each of whom I consider to be a friend as well as a colleague. It may be significant that in each case the doctoral supervision followed on from previously supervising in these cases masters degree dissertations, although the transition was not immediate in either case. These friendships and working relationships were though continued and further developed through the doctoral research supervision experience. I take from this that friendship may be a factor in how this incident played itself out but I do not divorce that from PhD supervision and that relationship. A related factor, or concept, is that of mentoring. I think that is a useful concept for the PhD supervision process itself but it is certainly relevant to the continuing relationship I have with the three successful doctorate students just mentioned. I consider myself to be a mentor to each of them. Research and writing on mentoring addresses similar issues to those considered here; dependency and control for example. Perhaps there may be benefit in examining whether lessons can be learned from there for PhD supervision. It seems to me though that this ‘critical incident’ has many important lessons for those engaged in the process of PhD supervision.

**Sally’s view from the middle**

I found the transition from ‘star performer’ as an undergraduate to postgraduate difficult. I was appointed as a Research Officer to work on a large project, and thus became a ‘colleague,’ yet felt inadequate and lacked confidence in this new role. I developed quickly, thanks to the support and encouragement from the two Jims – McGoldrick and Stewart. It took around six
months to sort out registration for my doctorate, and appoint supervisors, of which there were three, but that is another story!

Jim had been a good supervisor for me during my dissertation – there were no strict targets or required tutorials, I was simply able to meet with him when I needed to, which didn’t seem that often, from memory (a responsive style). This informal, unstructured approach continued during my doctorate, although I was aware of the different approaches adopted by other supervisors with my doctoral peers. For me, having pre-defined weekly/monthly meetings with set targets would not have been attractive or effective, although I recognise that this can be entirely appropriate and necessary in other supervisory relationships.

Receiving feedback – from memory, it seems to have been mostly ‘positive’ and encouraging, although Jim’s eternal message would be ‘be more confident!’ I set myself high standards and am highly critical of my work. Perhaps Jim didn’t need to provide much ‘negative’ feedback as I would provide it myself.

I certainly cannot remember any particularly painful experiences caused by Jim’s comments. The three years flew past (uneventfully, from a student’s ‘pain’ perspective) and the relationship further developed once I had achieved my doctorate and was appointed as Senior Lecturer in the Business School. I was sad to leave NBS, and although our relationship has changed, I now consider Jim’s role to be a significant mentor and critical friend, someone I still turn to for discussion, advice and support.

Although I had been involved in doctoral supervision as a ‘junior’ member of a supervisory team at NBS, my transition to ‘first’ doctoral supervisor occurred when I joined SBARD and inherited an international student, studying part-time and at a distance. The supervisory process was conducted largely by electronic means, although we arranged several face-to-face meetings and attended a conference where we co-presented a paper on her methodology. The student was a senior HR practitioner, with excellent presentation and influencing/persuasive skills, although her ability to think and write as a doctoral student required considerable development. However, she was eager to learn as much as she could when we met, and I often felt I had been completely drained of my knowledge and skills as a researcher, such was her enthusiasm and sustained level of questions. This was my first experience of giving such intense feedback at the doctoral level, and, given her eagerness to learn as much and as quickly as possible, any ‘negative’ feedback was immediately acknowledged, agreed and action-planned. I never felt awkward and felt neither did she. It was a straightforward information exchange process (economic exchange) between two professionals. A very similar (unproblematic) relationship occurs with another of my current part-time doctoral students, a female, senior health professional.

My experience with Clair is different. First, I was her academic tutor on two undergraduate modules, then her dissertation supervisor. This relationship worked well and after she graduated we continued to meet socially now and then, more as friends than as tutor/student. I moved from the Business School to the School of Nursing, Midwifery & Health Studies and learned that Clair had won an entrepreneurship scholarship. Nine months into her doctorate, Clair asked if I would look at her literature review. We met (in my old office, which was odd!) and spent several hours discussing her progress to date. I provided lots of comments, raised several questions and made some suggestions about how Clair could improve her work. I felt comfortable with the feedback process, perhaps because I was giving this as more of a helpful friend (social) rather than her formal supervisor (technical?). Clair also seemed to accept it well,
but it is only recently that she explained how she felt. Clair then successfully negotiated that I be appointed to her supervisory team, given my interest (and technical expertise?) in organisational learning. The ‘formal’ supervisory relationship continued as before, with meetings arranged as necessary to address a particular problem Clair had encountered (a responsive style). This mirrored the arrangement of my own supervisory meetings with Jim. Of similar dispositions, the meetings between Clair and I are often very noisy, friendly, energetic and enjoyable!

Having had our paper accepted at Limerick, our attention turned to preparing the presentation. We had several meetings and I suggested we have a practice run. Clair said she felt confident and didn’t feel she needed this, but I managed to persuade her, from which we experience we realised we needed to eliminate a few more slides to concentrate on Clair’s conceptual framework. I suggested another practice, but Clair convinced me it was not necessary. She had always been a confident presenter. Everything OK so far, I thought.

We became more and more excited about the trip, making travel arrangements and discussing dress codes. I was conscious of my role in helping her through this potentially daunting experience. The journey to Limerick flew by, with the two of us chatting away as friends, sharing experiences and generally getting to know one another on a more social level. We jumped from social to doctoral discourse with ease and no (perceived) change in the process of interaction.

This was the first conference where I felt I needed to ‘look after’ my student, with a personal responsibility to ensure her well-being (social and psychological). I wondered if Jim had ever felt like that? At the conference reception, I met with Jim and other HRD friends, and introduced Clair, who seemed relaxed. Jim invited us to have dinner with his him and others, which I appreciated. That evening, I often thought about the tension between ‘looking after’ Clair and being able to ‘do my own thing’ with HRD colleagues I hadn’t seen for a long time, and also encouraging Clair to do ‘her own thing’ too. What was my role in this context? However, Clair seemed to get on well so the balance seemed right. The next morning Clair and I met for breakfast, and planned the day ahead, attending some things together and separating for others. I seem to remember doing this to a limited extent with Jim, and it was never something I had thought about then – to what extent does a supervisor supervise the supervisee in this conference context, and particularly the social aspect? Jim seemed to have managed this well, accompanying me to formal dinners etc but leaving me decide which sessions to attend (and perhaps develop confidence to network on my own). The next evening, Jim invited me to sit with him at the conference dinner and I ensured Clair sat next to me. She got on well with everyone, and I felt I could relax a little more, and focus on what I hoped to achieve from this opportunity to ‘catch up’ and network.

The next day was busy: I had my own paper to present, then the UFHRD AGM to attend at lunchtime, a session to chair immediately afterwards and then our presentation. We met again for breakfast, and I tried to be encouraging and reassuring as Clair displayed the first signs of nervousness. I, too, was a little nervous for her/us. Clair attended my presentation, and although I identified some weaknesses, I chose not to ask her for feedback (I wonder why - embarrassment because I could have performed better, and especially in front of my student; the legitimacy of her feedback as my student, or how it might make her feel – would this request for exchange of information be fair in our supervisor-supervisee relationship?).
I felt a mixture of confidence and anxiety before our presentation, confident that I knew my bit and felt comfortable with presenting, yet anxious about Clair’s preparation and performance and how this might reflect on my role as her supervisor. I felt ‘responsible’ for her performance, and this was uncomfortable, and perhaps unrealistic. This refers back to the notion of locus of control that Jim mentioned earlier.

During the ‘aftermath’ of our presentation, I moved through several stages, similar to the bereavement process (Kubler & Ross 1969). Initially, I felt very sad and disappointed the presentation had not gone as well as I had hoped. Clair asked for feedback, and I felt very uncomfortable having to be ‘critical’ and discuss the weaknesses. I felt unable to manage my emotions. She, too, looked disappointed. I worked through feelings of denying it was my fault, and then believing it was all my fault, for not having managed the preparation more effectively. It took time to work through my emotions, and I turned to Jim for support - I felt the need to revisit our own (comfortable) supervisory relationship, to seek any advice that might help me deal with my new (emotional) experience. It wasn’t until the next day, during the journey home, that Clair and I faced our difficulties and talked through the experiences. At first, it felt awkward but then gradually became the more normal Clair - Sally interaction. We both needed that time and space to debrief, learn from our experiences and learn how to further improve our supervisory relationship.

Analysis

From Clair’s experience, we can see how having an eminent professor, but who had little time for her, was ineffective. Sally is more available and responsive (Easterby-Smith et al 2002) and more friendly and supportive (Wisker 2001). However, was their relationship too friendly, thus preventing constructive critique (ibid)? Perhaps, Sally and Clair need to balance their friendship and working relationship (ibid). Clair also identifies her lack of confidence during the transition from star undergraduate to novice researcher and her apprenticeship and socialisation into the academic culture.

From Jim’s experience, he, too, felt like a novice in his new supervisory role, but did not lack confidence in his transition and apprenticeship. He identifies his own preference for a responsive (Easterby-Smith et al 2002) rather than directive (telling) style. Jim suggests locus of control is a significant dimension in the relationship and its affect on notions of dependence.

From Sally’s experience as a student, she too lacked confidence and struggled with the transition from the undergraduate to doctoral culture. She perceived ‘critical’ feedback as ‘negative’ and relied more on Jim for emotional support (Wisker 2001). As a supervisor, she also struggled with her perception of critical feedback as ‘negative’ until the epiphany at Limerick. This experience has had a profound affect on her and has immensely helped her give critical feedback. She is also more aware of the student’s need to evaluate their own decisions and performance (independence) and not rely exclusively on the supervisor.

Discussion

From these three views, it is possible to identify one key influencing factor: emotional intelligence (the awareness of one’s own and others’ emotions and the ability to manage these). This seems crucial in managing the balance between friendship and the technical working relationship; this in turn influences an important process within doctoral supervision – giving
and receiving feedback; this is also influenced by confidence in the role (whether as supervisor or supervisee).

Emotional intelligence (EI), popularised by Goleman (1995), has been defined by Mayer and Salovey (1997:10) as ‘the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion: the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge: and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.’ With all these are important in this cultural context, the final element would seem a highly relevant social skill for supervisors to enhance the development of doctoral students.

Sally and Clair appear to show and express their emotions, and thus might have experienced some emotional dissonance immediately after their presentation. They were unable to effectively manage their emotions. Jim appears not to show his emotions but is able to express and articulate, and perhaps better manage, them.

In trying to analyse these different supervisory relationships, there are several characteristics (or variables) we might consider influential. Genetic characteristics include age (absolute and relative difference between supervisor and supervisee), gender, and personality (including propensity to demonstrate and manage emotion). Other important variables which might influence ‘confidence’ include undergraduate experience, previous work experience, and early academic relationship (Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1:** Potentially influential variables in the supervisory relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Personality/EI</th>
<th>Undergrad experience</th>
<th>Work experience</th>
<th>Early academic relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clair</td>
<td>Clair</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Extrovert, shows emotions</td>
<td>Mature, full-time</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Undergrad – doctoral within same institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15yrs younger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Extrovert, show emotions</td>
<td>Mature, full-time</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Undergrad – doctoral within same institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10yrs older</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introvert, shows less emotion/manages emotion</td>
<td>Mature, part-time</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this analysis, and drawing upon Phillips and Pugh’s (1994) need for ‘interpersonal compatibility,’ we could suggest that Clair and Sally are very alike in both their personal characteristics and prior orientation to academic study, whilst Sally and Jim are rather different in both these aspects (‘chalk and cheese’ personal relationship analogy?). We have said that it is easier to determine technical expertise, and both Sally and Jim appear to have appropriate knowledge and skill in this domain. However, it may be the emotional domain that distinguishes their approach to supervision. Perhaps Jim is more self-confident and able to manage his
emotions more effectively than Sally. Whilst the supervisee might almost naturally be less confident and more emotionally involved in their doctorate, perhaps an effective supervisory relationship requires the supervisor to be more emotionally intelligent and self-confident in this particular role. However, can two emotionally charged parties also make for an effective supervisory relationship? Moses (1989:10, cited in Wisker 2001:40) suggests, ‘becoming a supervisor is a two-way process. Openness in the initial discussion may prevent years of frustration for you and the student if your personality and learning styles are mismatched and no common style or ground is found.’ So, it could be argued that, in the case of Sally and Clair, they identified their common ground early in their undergraduate relationship, and these common personality traits and learning styles are closely matched (‘two peas in a pod’?). However, it is important to note Wisker’s (2001:36) caution about becoming too friendly. Perhaps, if there is potential role conflict, there is a need to separate the two roles – friend and supervisor. Jim gives an example of this: as a supervisor his feedback might induce a student to tears, but after the feedback has been accepted, he can then hug the student as a friend.

Considering the degree of emotion displayed, and the extent of emotional intelligence, it is possible to construct a typology of supervisory relationships (Figure 2 below). It is important to note that the technical dimension is not included here as this was not problematic in our experiences, although it is recognised that this is not always the case. Sally’s relationship with her part-time doctoral students could be classified as Distanced professional/academic. With Jim, it was perhaps initially Familiar professional/academic, although significant social aspects have now developed beyond this. With Clair it is more Familiar social/academic. Both Jim and Clair are friends to Sally, suggesting a ‘close’ and more personal relationship. Neither one is the ‘best’ type of relationship, as this depends on the two individuals involved, and the extent to which they may wish to demonstrate, and are able to manage, emotion. Also, the relationship may change over time, particularly if the two parties do not know each other at the onset, in which case it is more likely that the relationship is detached in the early stages, and could become more emotionally involved.

Figure 2: A typology of supervisory relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of relationship</th>
<th>Emotional domain</th>
<th>Roles and exchange process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distanced professional/academic</td>
<td>• Little demonstration of emotion • Limited need for emotional intelligence • Detached</td>
<td>• Clearly defined supervisor-supervisee roles • Economic exchange (eg of information/feedback) • Both supervisor and supervisee confident in role • No social relationship beyond appropriate professional interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar professional/academic</td>
<td>• Some demonstration of emotion • Careful management of</td>
<td>• Clear and stable roles • Some social aspects beyond professional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
emotion/ sophisticated emotional intelligence  
- Balanced involvement

- Much demonstration of emotion
- Requires the development of emotional intelligence
- Intense and involved

- Clear roles in purely academic context
- Become rather blurred in mixed social/academic context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familiar social/academic</th>
<th>interaction</th>
</tr>
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</table>

However, it is important to recognise that this analysis draws on the experiences of only three participants, although Jim and Sally have incorporated their wider perspectives from other supervisory relationships. It is also important to recognise that the relationships between Clair, Jim and Sally seem to follow what Price & Money (2002:131) refer to as the traditional research supervision model, where the supervisor and supervisee are located in the same institution. However, Jim and Sally also have experience of the semi-remote and remote models (ibid) with other PhD and DBA candidates. It might be interesting to explore to what extent the typology presented in Figure 2 ‘fits’ with these three research supervision models, and other models (Enders 2004).

Conclusions

Three key themes emerge from an analysis of our autoethnographic observations and narratives.

First, both Sally and Clair identified the problematic transition from being an undergraduate student (a star performer) to a doctoral candidate (novice researcher, and to some extent ‘peer’), with the associated issues of developing confidence and independence. Interestingly, Jim also experienced a similar transition in his supervisory career so the problem is not exclusive to supervisees. There are also issues we need to investigate further. Is this ‘finding’ a consequence of the two supervisees being supervised by a former undergraduate supervisor where relationships had already been formalised and now required adapting to take into account the need to develop further researcher independence. Yet, there is a tension as the supervisor recognises that dependence is satisfying. Or, are these relationships more established and so confidence and trust in each other are less problematic?

Second, the potentially problematic aspect of giving and receiving feedback assumes acute importance. Genuine constructive critique can often be perceived as being ‘negative’ (bad and painful) or ‘positive’ (nice and encouraging) when it could be argued that all feedback is positive in its attempt to improve performance. It is important to consider clarifying or socialising early in the relationship that ‘negative’ feedback is not negative but provides learning opportunities and is therefore positive. This requires a discursive shift in this aspect of the supervisory process.

This aspect also raises issues about locus of control and links back to the earlier concept of (in)dependence. Whatever the outcome, the work is the student’s, although it does ‘reflect’ on the supervisor, to some extent. The more a student relies on their supervisor to provide feedback, and the more the supervisor is inclined to give this, a dependent relationship is created. Or, perhaps, we can conceptualise this as an example of strategic exchange (Watson 1986) –
creating mutual dependence or possibly interdependence – where both parties extract something from the relationship, where the supervisor receives ego benefits, for example.

Also, this could be conceptualised as the social construction of knowledge, where knowledge is created in an environment of confidence and trust, and where feedback is given and accepted positively, to advance our understanding and theorising. Knowledge is related to intelligence; social intelligence incorporates emotional intelligence; so perhaps emotional intelligence is a significant factor in effective doctoral supervision and knowledge generation.

So, finally, we have identified emotional intelligence as a significant factor influencing all our experiences of doctoral supervision. We have explored the development of relationships from tutor/student to critical friends and beyond, where ex-supervisors continue to play a significant role, for example as mentor, although again there are issues of (in)dependence. And so the story continues …

References


