Research Supervision - promoting research achievements by connecting with students and creating a relational experience

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Introduction

The requirement to undertake research and dissertation writing can sometimes be seen by students as a 'duty'; something removed from their chosen work (unless they aim for academic careers), and therefore, something they dread doing. Unfortunately this view also seems to echo how some supervisors perceive that requirement and too often, dissertations are regarded by them as just another set of marking to be completed. However, this situation can be improved by:

• promoting student motivation – by developing a meaning- and relevance-focus for the work

• demonstrating trust in the students potential

• alleviating anxieties – by building an authentic relationship

Whilst suggestions for improvements within higher education settings have to be seen within the restricted frame of the institution, the approach advocated here may be applied by those who are willing to review their own attitudes to learning and teaching. More specifically, to assist students in achieving their potential, research supervisors are encouraged to focus and explore in greater depth with their students:-

• the theme of the research/ dissertation
• the relevance of the theme to the student academically and ***personally***
• the nature of the(ir) student-supervisor relationship
• the applicability and relevance of the research

Back to basics – a few definitions

What is the entire 'exercise' (supposed to be) about, and: "who is really involved in what?". Here are a few reminders about the roots of the endeavour:

• Research – French: seek out, search closely; Latin: circare – go about, traverse

- Dissertation – Laint: dissertatio – discussion; dis – apart; servere – to arrange words
- Student – Latin: studere – doing with passion
- Supervisor – Latin: looking, above, over, beyond
- Education – Latin: educere – bring out, let grow; thesaurus suggests: nurture, enlightenment, cultivation, development

Applying those definitions, the process could be (re)defined as a process of:

Nurturing students in a passion for seeking-out. By taking a different perspective, supervisors support research and enable students to discuss, take apart and arrange words into their dissertation in order to convey a particular message. In this way, students are supported by their supervisors who are able to especially see things from above and beyond, and who educate, bring out and nurture the student and nurture their enlightenment, - even contributing to the enlightenment of others if publication and sharing with others follows.

In other words research is not simply:

- Grade-centred
- Ability-centred
- Time/Resource-centred
- Department-centred
- Supervisor-centred
- Theme—centred

But also:

- Student-centred and purpose-centred

From this perspective, supervising research becomes more of a process; a journey rather than a goal.

Researching and questions of education

An understanding of 'researching' as a process of existential - not New Age - enlightenment, will move the student and supervisor beyond restricted and stifled tasks. Indeed, it begins to touch on the question of why we are really being educated and what education is intended to be.

Indian philosopher Krishnamurti (2002) describes a silent awareness, which goes beyond the conditioned mind-set of growth:

"… brain produces thought, thought being the response of memory, memory being experience, knowledge, the past.… (p71)… So, can that brain respond new, afresh [?] (p73)…

It is important to think logically, [but] see that thought has to be silent when facing this extraordinary human problem of living. You know, love is the only thing that is silent. […] And a mind like that is a really religious mind. Such a mind needn't go to a temple or a mosque or a church. Such a mind knows, is aware, observes, not as an observer observing. Truth is that extraordinary state which is timeless, measureless, absolute, whatever name you like to give to it . (p74f)

Relevance of research

The *academically* perceived relevance and thus *extrinsic* relevance which is situation-centred - for student as well as supervisor - may differ greatly for each of them from the *personally* perceived relevance and thus *intrinsic* relevance which is a person-centred motivation (Table 2).

Table 2 Relevance of research – different motivations of student and supervisor

	Student motivation (e.g.)	**Supervisor motivation** (e.g.)
Academic [extrinsic, situation]	- grades - career - employability - parents	- benchmarks - funding - duty - profession
Personal [intrinsic, person]	- relation to Self - fun - what I am (would like to be) good at - proving oneself - impact	- own publication - own life - insights gained from research - relation to student

Research supervisors' views of academic relevance are usually correlated with those of the institution, however this does not provide experience of relating personally, something which fosters meaning, and improves student experience. The sequence then runs:- a student who is not interested in their own work is less likely to achieve meaningful results and thus less likely to be contributing to society. Supervisors in such a situation would be less likely to gain any learning for themselves – which could improve their teaching and supervision and further student success. In this way, the institution is less likely to receive recognition and funding, or interest from more students.

In organizations where leaders [in this context: supervisors] *do not practice what they preach, there are terrible disabling consequences. (Wheatley, 1999:130)*

However, if supervisors are able to embody passion for researching and educating in the spirit as outlined earlier, then possibilities arise, for institutional requirements to be experienced as opportunities.

Moving towards the centre of research

Different personal and academic perceptions from student and supervisor about the relevance of research (*Table 2*) highlights a key issue: 'what is at the centre or heart of the research process?'.

At the centre of research is purpose. In order to be inclusive and incorporating of the different aspects, this purpose is flowing, it is not static; not prescribed or pre-determined by rules which would fail to truly connect with the student. A powerful metaphor is the centre of a flower, with the petals symbolising the aspects which shape the flower:

Figure 1   Relevance-flower of research – its centre: purpose and flow
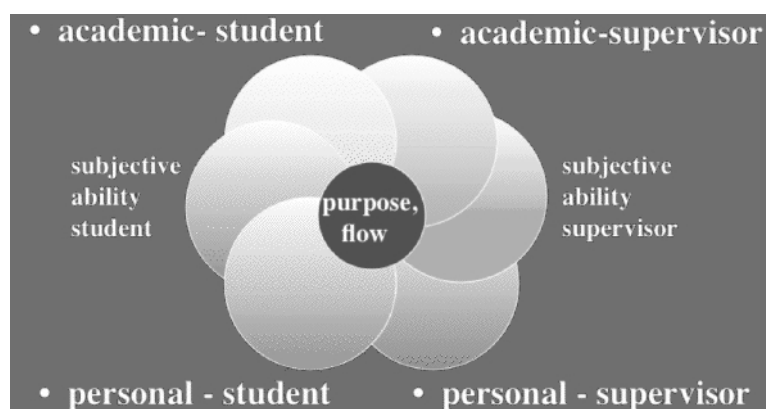
Relational purpose and relating with depth

As illustrated in Figure 1, the different elements between student-supervisor-research are rooted in a relational purpose – without it the 'flower' would fall apart. This relational purpose can aim to reach achievement highs – through relational depth.

> *"… if I can form a helping relationship to myself - if I can be sensitively aware of and acceptant toward my own feelings - then the likelihood is great that I can form a helping relationship toward another… to realize that this* is *my task has been most rewarding because it has helped me to find what has gone wrong with interpersonal relationships … and to put them on a constructive track again…"* (Rogers, 1996, p51*)*

Relating meaningfully to the student, and assisting them to relate to and connect with the purpose of their research, requires – from the kind of humanistic viewpoint declared by Rogers – the supervisor needs to have a helping relationship with

themselves. The qualities required of the person echo humanistic thinking (Table 3) and thus embrace authenticity of the supervisor.

Table 3   Qualities required of the supervisor

- Maturity
- Trust ('faith')
- Fearlessness
- Innocence/openness
- Patience
- Peacefulness, Silence
- Creativity
- Stamina
- Focus, Determination
- Honesty
- SELF-appreciation (Love?)
- SELF-awareness
- Awakening?!
- ... etc.

Myths about supervising research

Supervisors may at times believe certain myths about supervising:

- the student doesn't really want to do it
- I have to know everything about the subject
- the more I am available for proof-reading drafts the better results I get

These myths constitute a diversion from the real purpose elaborated earlier. That is, that research is about growth, meaning, enlightenment and done with humanistic attitude - not imposed. Neither is it about creating authoritarian processes, which would demonstrate not trusting the student to have the potential to succeed.

Anxiety reduction

If students don't feel trusted, their anxieties may increase: 'if my supervisor is over-protective, not trusting me, not giving me hope, then I really need to worry, as I may have nothing substantial to offer and my supervisor knows this.' It should be noted that anxiety and fear also often increase, when something is very important to us. and research of all kinds including dissertations are often very important to the student, not least because they often mark the end of studies and transition to finding work in the field.

Anxiety can be reduced by:

- establishing a relationship with reality (Baylis, 2005)
- exploration, clarification
- information: - applicability, - requirements
- relating material to student
- good student-supervisor relationship (Rogers, 1996)

Key functions of supervision

The functions and processes of student research supervision could be seen as being akin to the processes of supervision experienced by therapists - processes which include, for example, the supervisor:

- being supportive
- be informative
- be normative
- be restorative
- be challenging

(Richter, 2007, p193f)

Whereas ways of supervising research in an education setting are more likely to be:

- authority-orientated (teacher-student)
- content-orientated
- process-orientated

But while the relational foundation of research is too often undervalued:

> *"We believe that fostering more interesting research means that researchers should pay more attention to, and spend more time learning about, effective relational practice. By relational practice we mean the skilled ways of interrelating that create connections between people..".* (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006, p21)

So the approach proposed in this paper is to RIDE the journey of research together: to encourage a process which is:

- **R** elational
- **I** nspirational(motivational)
- **D** evelopmental
- **E** nlightening

Conclusion

Research supervision offers the opportunity to make researching meaningful – for all involved. Especially in higher education settings are goals AND meaning sought by students, for their own growth and development.

This is supported by a research study undertaken by the author, in which it was discovered that:-

- meaning through having 'goals' in life, is named less often by older people - age>45 - than by younger people - age<30 - (correlation significant at $p = .0021$)
- more younger people – age<39 years - than older people – age >45 years, name personal growth as giving them meaning in life (significant at $p = .0114$)

- more people with higher education compared with others, regard personal development as giving meaning (significant at p = .0225)

- people who rate themselves as more fulfilled with meaning in life, name having religious/spiritual goals more often than those who rate themselves as being less fulfilled - very significant correlation coefficient of .067

- people who rate themselves as more fulfilled with meaning in life, are emotionally more stable than people who rate themselves as little fulfilled with meaning FPI-R test Scale N, Fisher PLSD .89, significant at p = .0025

(From Richter, 1994)

Through focusing upon the process of the RIDE (Relational; Inspirational(motivational); Developmental; Enlightening), we not only promote better results in academic terms, but we can, through real connection with the individual in front of us, make a difference to their experience, to our own experience, at times even to each others lives, and maybe, just maybe, we can set in motion a tiny shift, towards a greater psychological well-being within our society. We can start by encouraging students, through relating with us and the meaning of their project, to relate to themselves on a deep and essential level:

> *If he [the teacher, in this context: the supervisor] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.* (Gibran, 1994, p50)

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Biographical note

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