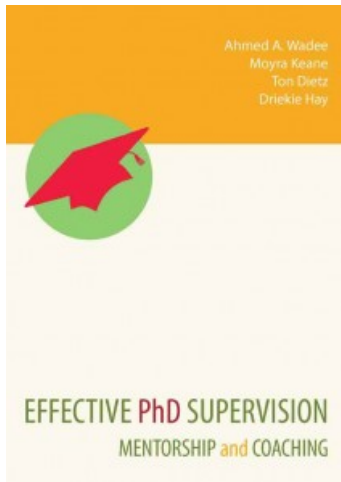


# Effective PhD Supervision - Chapter Six - A Holistic Approach to PhD Support



## **SUPERVISION, COACHING and MENTORING**

### **6.1 Mentoring and Coaching: Complementary Resources**

*'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'*

*'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.*

*'I don't much care where -' said Alice.*

*'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.*

### **6.2 Comparing Supervision, Coaching and Mentoring in Practice**

#### **6.2.1 Gaining competence**

Supervision of a PhD candidate has been described in terms of models, personality, formal institutional structures and contract agreements. Supervision is often learnt through experience: one's own - from having been supervised, from external examination of theses, from serving on post-graduate committees, from participating in PhD student-presentation sessions, from sitting in on a PhD student's advisory committee, from serving on post-graduate committees, from co-supervision with a more experienced academic and from supervising different

students. Supervision skills are also developed from workshops on supervision and through reading 'how-to' books or research into PhD work. A supervisor also draws on a certain amount of pedagogic content knowledge as well as, of course, discipline content knowledge.

Coaching, we have tried to show, is a less common process as it involves specific training in skills that are not picked up through experience alone. Coaching is, however, consonant with current research into pedagogy in that it is strongly student-centred, holistic and trans-disciplinary. Coaching also promotes independence, reflection and self-directed action - all of which are essential for an emerging researcher. Coaching is usually short-term, formal and goal-oriented, and may involve two people from completely different fields or disciplines. Coaching skills need to be taught and then practiced.

Mentoring, we have claimed, is often long-term, informal and field- and personality-based. While a coaching relationship could be one of equal power, mentoring typically involves an older, more experienced mentor and a student. A good mentor has often himself been mentored well, and therefore understands both the value and process of passing on a lifetime of experience, sharing connections and possibly 'grooming a successor'.

### 6.3 Dialogues from Different Perspectives

In these dialogues we will show differences in the interactions between a student and a supervisor, and a mentor and a coach.

| Supervisor  | Student   | NOTE  |
|---|---|---|
| 'I see your chapter is only 4 pages. You need to send me the complete chapter before we can discuss it. I'll see you two weeks after I receive the draft.'  | 'I just wanted to show you how far I'd gotten, OK. I'll send it by Friday.'   | This is task focused, formal, time efficient, agreement oriented. Interaction is formal & requires formalised commitment.   |
| Mentor  | Student   |   |
| 'Now I see you only managed to send 4 pages. I suggest you block out one full day a week to write. I manage to keep writing by not answering emails for one day a week. Let me know if you need help in blocking out time.' | 'OK. Thanks but I may need to talk about this. It's not really so much the time factor. Maybe you can give me some advice on how to overcome writer's block.' | The mentee in this example talks more, offers advice. Approach is more holistic and takes into account the mentor's own experience and desire to see the student succeed. |
| 'Yes, don't worry. We all have this problem. I know someone at the writing centre who will help you. Come, I'll walk you over there and we can get some coffee.'  | 'Thanks so much.'   |   |

| Coach   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 'How is the writing going?'   | 'I only managed to write 4 pages.'   | The coach makes no assumptions.<br>(Skills of intuition/listening & rephrasing the situation.)           |
| 'It sounds like you are discouraged.'   | 'I am so disappointed. I meant to finish the chapter.'   |  |
| 'What got in the way?'  | 'I seem to just have writer's block. I had plenty of time.'  | (Delving & not assuming)   |
| 'What kind of a block is it?'   | 'I feel paralysed. I know what to say ... but I can't begin. It's like someone is looking over my shoulder.' | (Using metaphor)   |
| 'What does this overseer look like?'  | 'Like my PhD committee, plus my external examiner, plus my supervisor a whole grandstand!'                   | (Use of humour!)   |
| 'A whole grandstand! What could you do to get away from centre court while writing?'  | 'I guess I could write on a practice court where there is no audience!'                                      | Solution comes from student.   |
| 'So: some quiet neglected side court where you are free to practice. Would this work to get you started? Before you present an exhibition match!' | 'Yes. I like that. I'll see it as a warm-up chapter and spend 3 hours "on court" every morning.'             | The interaction in this case is kept positive not moving into problematising any neurosis or difficulty. |

## 6.4 Integration

While there are many advantages to having a supervisor, separate mentor and a professional coach (for a set period), these roles can be integrated. It may seem logical that supervision, mentoring and coaching relationships are mutually exclusive, and that the approaches, assumptions and skills in supervision, mentoring and coaching are contradictory. However, without being thoroughly schizophrenic, a PhD supervisor could manage to include the three roles interchangeably, drawing on skills from all roles. In this case it is wise to sometimes advise the student: ‘Now I will leave the coaching approach and tell you what I would do in this situation.’ This situation is illustrated through dialogues between supervisor/coach/mentor/student below.

| Supervisor  | Student   | NOTE  |
|---|---|---|
| ‘Now that you have registered, we need to set up some structures and agreements. Did you manage to go through the contract – Supervisor-Student Agreement?’ | ‘Yes. It looks OK to me. But it says that I have to send you a whole chapter and then wait 2 weeks for feedback.’                           | Supervision focus<br>(Task oriented; Following a procedure) |
| ‘Should we go through this together and I can help you ...?’  | ‘Yes, thanks.’  | Mentoring: (Showing guidance)                               |
| ‘What about what is worrying you?’  | ‘I’m struggling a bit with writing. Could you look at some smaller piece of work in the beginning, just so I know I am on the right track?’ | Coaching approach<br>(Finding out more)                     |
| ‘That’s fine for now.’<br>‘In our supervision relationship I’ll be combining aspects of mentoring and coaching. So you need to say what will work for you.’ | ‘OK, I appreciate that. But what is coaching?’  | Integrating three roles                                     |
| --- (some explanation)  |   |   |
| ‘So, for example, what kind of feedback do you want on your writing right now?’   | ‘My English is fine, I think, but I’m not sure of the structure, I need to know that the approach and sequence is OK.’                      | Coaching approach   |
| ‘There are some excellent workshops on constructing an argument. Here is the leaflet.’  | ‘Oh, that will be helpful.’   | Mentoring focus   |
| ‘When can I have the first section of the proposal?’  | ‘I’ll send 6 pages by Friday.’  | Supervision & coaching                                      |
| ‘I see your enthusiasm. You have strong motivation.’  | ‘Uhhh? Thank you! Yes, I do.’   | Coaching  |

## 6.5 Epilogue

Writing a PhD thesis is not a linear process; there is no *'one size fits all'*. Pellucid pathways and preset templates may add to systemic efficiency but offer little in terms of intellectual exploration. Doctoral students should be questioning prevalent discourses, contributing controversial - or at least fresh ideas - and not simply complying with throughput requirements. So, of course, self-help/how-to books have their limitations. We have tried here to broaden the opportunities for finding one's own path creatively and reflectively, not for learning the *'rules of the game'* but for questioning the *'game'* and for becoming more of a person through the process and through connecting with others along the way.

We must also draw on our cultural resources, ensuring awareness of worldviews, and not be overly drawn in to dominant paradigms in the traditional supervision process. The more flexible model suggested here will provide a more nuanced relationship that will draw on the strengths of both individuals and the unique context in which this holistic approach is viewed.

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Next Chapter - Chapter Seven - <http://www.rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=1963>