Approaches on PhD Supervision. [1]

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Introduction

The relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee during the PHD research and writing is very crucial one. The poor relationship between a PhD student and a PhD supervisor affects the rate of completion (Taylor and Beasley, 2005) as well as other output. There are number of approaches to the supervisory relationship. Lee (2007) has summarised various methods and approaches of the supervision. Other literatures including Chen et al (1996), Hockey (2006), Lee (2004), Sambrook et al (2008), Malfroy (2007), Green (2005), Pearson (2007), Evans et al (2007), Gatfield (2005), Sinclair (2004) and Lee(2010) have also analysed numbers of models and approaches to the PHD supervision. It is not possible to discuss all of those approaches within the limitation of this work. Moreover, this piece of work focuses only to the PHD research in social sciences where there is no labbased work and experiments. When the subject matter falls within the discipline of natural science, many of the approaches becomes pre-determined (Sinclair 2004). Nevertheless, social science is completely a different perspective. Traditionally, PHD research in social science has been independent research, where supervisors' contribution is limited to steer the process within the regulatory framework (Hockey 2006). This approach can be called "hands off" approach. However, Hockey (2006) further argues that it is changing due to various factors. We are now moving towards more structured approach of the research supervision (Park et al 2007). This approach can be called "hands on" approach. Therefore, two major approaches i.e. "Hands off" approach and "Hands on" approach of the doctoral supervision are selected to be discussed in this narrative. The discussion on "hands off" approach will be limited to making the comparison and distinction with the "hands on" approach so as to focus into the advantages and risks of the "hands on" approach. This narrative will analyse the risk factors of the "hands on" approach of the doctoral

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[1] This paper was produced as a catalyst for discussion on different aspect of PhD supervision in research supervision training for research supervisors.

supervision and will present some recommendations in order to tread the fine balance. Before going into these, it is essential to outline what PHD supervision entails.

<u>PHD Supervision</u>

Sambrook et al (2008) defines PHD supervision as steering, guiding and supporting a student in the process of achieving a doctorate. This definition of the term supervision does cover the aspect of the regulatory, technical and emotional support for a PHD candidate during the process of the doctorate degree. Lee (2007), summarising previous research by Pearson and Kayrooz (2004), has noted that supervision entails series of task and responsibilities including expert coaching, facilitating, mentoring and reflective practices (Lee 2007). Sambrook et al (2008) has noted some other approaches of defining the PHD supervision such as personal relationship, professional-client relationship etc. Nonetheless, it is important for this narrative to outline the main features of the PHD supervision rather than trying to define it. Whilst, Lee (2007) has noted numbers of models of the PHD supervision, following characteristics can be outlined as the most important features, which also determines the relationship between a PHD supervisor and a PHD student.

a) Expert coaching – guiding the candidate to the literatures, resources and experts
b) Monitoring – making sure that the regulation of the institution as well as the expectation of the academic community is satisfied.
c) First examination – testing the arguments and providing the feedback
d) Support – providing personal, emotional and academic support for the career development of the candidate

These characteristics of the PHD supervision or the role of the supervisor as above rightly defines the relationship between a PhD candidate and a Supervisor. Now we can turn to the two main approaches that this narrative is going to discuss. Before going that, we want you to read a narrative of someone who recently completed a PhD and think what lessons we could learn for a successful PhD supervision. Also think about the role of the intuitional administrators i.e head of the school.

> I started my PhD as an international student, who is a non-native speaker of English and started working in an area that requires very good command of English. During my PhD, I had experience of working with 4 different supervisors although I was lucky to have one particular supervisor helping me to the end despite he left the University I was enrolled at. Let me name this supervisor as supervisor A.
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> My relationship with supervisor A was a very special one for me. I would have happily called my "academic father" if I like to make him older than he really is. He took all my problems away from me that ranged from emotional to administrative and even financial. I felt that he was constantly worried about me. I also found him quite protective. Although it was a joint supervision with supervisor B, who was an established professor, it was agreed that supervisor A would be my main contact (I guess supervisor B was the director of studies in paper, I never knew that for sure as they were always a team).

Supervisor A gave me quite an academic freedom in terms of my research. In addition to signposting, me to the issues I should perhaps look into, he also encouraged me to contact and discuss my thesis with other members of staff. I went to professor C, professor D and professor E, who happily helped me in shaping the structure of my arguments. Supervisor A and supervisor B also provided me with an opportunity to work in few of their externally funded research project in order to take off my financial problems, which in turn, helped me in academic matters. Both supervisor A and B made their network of researchers available for me, which is crucial in the professional development of a PhD student.

While this was all going happily, the supervisor B informed me that he was leaving the University but assured me that he will still help when I need help from me. As I had supervisor A still with me, I perhaps had less to worry about but I had a big blow when the supervisor A told me that he is also leaving to another institution in a different country. Although, I had six months left before supervisor A leaves and at least the first draft was doable before he leaves, I was not able to write a meaningful page because I was so down and worried. As an international student, I had few administrative difficulties to follow him to another country. I feel, supervisor A spotted my emotional worries very well and started being more caring when he was counting his days to move to another country but I failed to produce a final draft before he left. Once he moved, I had many sleepless nights as I was put with supervisor F, who knew very less about the area of my research whereas the institution could have tied me with professor C, D or E.

Supervisor F was very nice as a person and we got along extremely well but because she was very far from my research. She suggested that I get back to supervisor A or supervisor B to get some help. I felt even more down because I knew that they do not have any duty to help me. Whilst I was not expecting, I got a message from supervisor A and supervisor B separately to check how I am doing giving me some hope. Not surprisingly, I got a lot more academic help from supervisor A in my thesis and I was able to produce a workable draft sooner than I expected. Now, supervisor F retires and I got supervisor G, who knew a lot about the area of my research but quite possessive on what I should do, which was quite daunting and damaging in my experience although I still believe that she wanted me to do better. Although I was getting a lot of help from supervisor A and occasional advice from supervisor B, supervisor G was my named supervisor and the supervisory relationship was not constructive.

At this point, I was almost depressed and started nagging supervisor A using all sorts of technology, including telephone, skype and email. When I look back now, I feel so bad for doing that, particularly when he was spending time with his family at home. On the other hand, I quite appreciate his approach and role in fixing my supervisory relationship with supervisor G whilst providing me feedback, telling me what I should and should not do, setting a date and task etc, which is quite a hands-on approach to work with a student. The end of the journey to my PhD is, in fact, a beginning of a supervisory relationship with all of those academics.

PLEASE THINK WHAT LESSON WE COULD LEARN FROM THIS EXPREIENCE ? DO YOU THINK IF THERE IS ANY BEST PRACTICE, WE COULD EXTRACT?

Hands off approach

PhD work is certainly an independent work. Therefore, a PHD researcher is expected to be an independent researcher. This concept of academic freedom is crucial in a PHD research. Therefore, many of the supervisors, particularly in social science, leave their PHD candidate to their own devices. The contact between the supervisor and the candidate is extremely minimum, which could be limited to the administrative and regulatory formality in many cases. This is "hands off" approach. "You do whatever you like; I am quite busy with my other responsibilities". This approach can work where the candidate is knowledgeable, selfconfident and professionally independent. Hockey (1996) outlines three main characteristics of a PHD student—autonomy, enthusiasm and development. The "hands off" approach assumes that these characteristics are fully developed in a candidate before s/he can start PHD study.

Nonetheless, Hockey (1996) acknowledges the fact that it is not possible to have all that ideal qualities in all PHD candidates. Where a PHD candidate is inexperienced researcher, s/he needs more academic support from the supervisor. That means more contact and structured intervention. Therefore, this approach is blamed for low and slow completion (Sinclair 2004). Due to minimum contact between a supervisor and the candidate as well as the daunting nature of writing relatively longer work as a coherent piece, it is quite evident that the student might be tempted to drop out in the middle of the process, let alone the possibility of slowing down the research and writing. The whole idea of personal and emotional support during research supervision does not exist in this approach. Therefore, it is quite evident that slow and low completion of the PHD study can be attributed to this approach.

"Hands on" approach

Unlike hands off approach, "hands on" approach is more personal where a supervisor and a PHD student establish an "intimate academic relationship". Such a relationship enables both of the parties to understand each other's strength and weakness so as to develop an appropriate supervisory relationship. The candidate and the supervisor work very closely based on consistent and viable relationship they have established (Sinclair 2004). This approach uses an "open door consultation policy combined with supervisors initiating regular contact with the candidate" (Sinclair 2004, p vii). This approach entails every responsibilities of the supervision — expert coaching, facilitating and mentoring based on very close relationship between the supervisor and the PHD candidate. The supervisor and the candidate develop more a personal and informal relationship whereas the supervisor normally acknowledges the "unequal power …. and use their superior position to mentor candidates' personal development with a view to candidate establishing him or herself as a peer" (Sinclair 2004, p vii). Due to the nature of the close and informal relationship, the candidate has more chance to receive formal and informal feedback in their work.

Advantages of the Hands on approach

Sinclair (2004) argues that faster and higher completion rate can be attributed to the "hands on" approach of the supervision. Hockey (1996) has also acknowledged the fact that the structured and close relationship between the supervisor and candidate is crucial in faster and higher completion rate in PHD studies. Hockey (1996) has presented the examples of the ESRC funded doctoral research in which the research and methods are fully controlled by the supervisor. Although Hokcey (1996) refrains from using the phrase "hands on" approach, the approach can be classified as "hands on" approach.

One of the major advantages of the "hands on" approach is that the supervisor having understood the strength and weakness of the candidate can easily detect where the candidate is experiencing difficulties and can make timely intervention (Sinclair 2004).

Gatfield (2005) describes a model called "contractual" and another model called "directional", both of which resembles the characteristics of the "hands on" approach acknowledges that the supervisor's wider network could help the candidate in their career development although these approaches demands more time of the supervisor.

The "hands on" approach also works as an intensive training for the candidate as the supervisor closely monitors most of the progress. This approach also ensures right direction of the research and timely completion as it allows the supervisor to make timely intervention when something is likely to go wrong (Sinclair 2004). This aspect of intensive academic training is certainly beneficial for the candidate during and after their PHD journey.

Risk factors

As the research is fully controlled by the supervisor in "hands on" approach (Sinclair 2004; Hockey 2007), the major risk is that the whole research could be completely dictated by the supervisor, which kills the main characteristics of the PHD study. A PHD research should encourage the development of students' idea and knowledge in order to develop them as an independent and skilled researcher. A PHD thesis should contain the candidates' own idea, research and writing. Therefore, the idea of control by supervisor also kills the idea of academic freedom in which the student does have opportunity to develop his or her own perception on the issues. The result of the research and analysis can also have negative effect when a supervisor using unequal power dictates the research. Green (2005) discusses couple of stories of the PHD students in his "Unfinished business: subjectivity and supervision", where some doctoral students gave up their PHD research due to the relationship with their supervisor. Therefore, there is a risk of non-completion in the "hands on" approach as well. An informal account of a Chinese PHD candidate from University of Durham shared informally with the some participants of the Art and Humanity Research Council (AHRC) doctoral training program at the University of Nottingham in July 2007 was quite interesting that her supervisor completely rewrote every piece of work she sent for comment. Doing so, they managed to publish some joint papers, which is beneficial for the students' academic career but the question whether it is the supervisor or the student, who is supposed to be writing the part of the thesis? Perhaps remained unanswered. If it is supervisor who is going to write the words using the students' ideas, then should the doctoral degree be awarded jointly? This could be an interesting question to answer.

Despite the fact that the "hands on" approach of the research supervision is good for timely completion as well as higher rate of completion, there are issues of the academic independence, academic freedom and self-confidence of a PHD candidate while a supervisor adopts "hands on" approach. One of the major achievements of the doctoral study is to develop the capacity of an independent researcher. In an ideal world, the PHD thesis submitted for an examination should represent candidates' own ideas, research and writing. That is why many of the institutions within and outside United Kingdom prefer students' work not to be proofread by any professional proofreader. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a huge risk of dictating the research, result and the writing in "hands on" approach whereas there is bigger risk of non-completion or slow completion in "hands off" approach of research supervision. Having said that, such risk of non-completion exist even in the "hands on" approach as well but Sinclair (2004) has suggested that risk of noncompletion is relatively low when a supervisor is "hands on". Therefore, these two different approaches can be summarised as "no supervision" approach and "intensive supervision" or

"interference" approach. Both of these approaches are bad for the purpose of a PHD study if a fine balance is not treaded.

Treading the fine balance

The above discussions bring to a conclusion that both of the approaches discussed do have risk factor, which could lead to non-completion of a PHD study. Moreover, "Hands on" approach risks the whole idea of PHD study due to unwanted and improper interference. Therefore, it is essential that the supervisor tread a fine balance between interfering and academic independence. Academic independence in a PHD study needs to be understood as a guided independence. There are numbers of balancing approaches that Lee (2007) has reviewed. However, a typology of a supervisory relationship presented by Sambrook et al (2008) nicely summarises some of the options in maintaining that balance between interfering and leaving the candidate in their own devices. Sambrook et al (2008) presents three types of supervisory relationships.

1. Distance professional/academic – a detached approach where little emotional intelligence is demonstrated as limited as it is required. This type of relationship could be a "hands off" approach but the relationship will be clearly defined.
2. Familiar professional / academic – It is a balanced involvement where the emotional support is balanced to the academic necessity of PHD research and career

development of the candidate. The closeness and friendship will be clearly defined as academic guidance to the candidates' development.

3. Familiar social/academic – This approach refers to an intensive academic involvement where much emotion is demonstrated, as it is required for the academic development of the candidate.

Sambrook et al (2008) has presented above typology from the experience of only three people involved in the PHD process. Therefore, there is enough room to question the credibility of their findings and development of those three typologies of relationship due to size of the research subject. Nonetheless, the typology they have discussed makes perfect sense from the perspective of rational interpretation of the process and the requirement of the PHD research. Where typology one discussed above refers to the traditional and "hands off" approach, typology two and three focuses more on "hands on" approach. However, all of the typologies they have discussed require a clearly defined relationship. Therefore, it is clear that none of the approach whether it is "hands off" or "hands on" is set in the stone. All approaches need reasonable amount of variation in order to achieve the required balance between interference and independence. Now the important question is how a supervisor and the candidate decide the relationship they need for the successful completion of a PHD process.

The literature reviewed above agrees on the fact that every PHD process is different and the supervisory relationship must be tailored according to the specific need of a particular case. Therefore, a hard and fast rule with regards to the supervisory approach will be a wrong concept in general. All of the literature discussed above comes to the similar conclusion that two major factors should determine the supervisory approach.

1. *The candidate profile*

If the candidate is experienced in research, independent and mature enough to cope with the pressure of the PHD research and writing process, a "hands off" approach may be suitable in order to further develop an independent researcher and professionalism within the candidate. Nonetheless, the supervisor cannot completely leave the candidates in their own devices only. There should be at least appropriate degree of guidance and steering. Where the candidate is relatively inexperienced and academically immature, "hands on" approach could be the best-suited option. Nevertheless, the supervisory relationship must refrain from interfering too much in the research and writing process.

2. Funding and other issues

Hockey (2006) argues that the whole paradigm of the research supervision model has changed due to the requirement of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in PHD research funded by them. It is particularly hard to adopt "hands off" approach, when a funding agency such as ESRC has funded a PHD research. This applies to the research funded by other research councils as well. Similarly, when a PHD research is a part of industry or other funding body funded research project, supervisors' involvement in the research is very important. This requires adoption of "hands on" approach whereas the team must be cautious on the issue of interference. This can be referred as teamwork with some distance in terms of research and writing that goes into a PHD thesis.

Conclusion

The supervisory relationship is very crucial for timely completion of a PHD research as well as for the career development prospect of the PHD candidate. Since, every PHD research is unique; none of the approaches discussed can fully address the problems of a PHD research. Therefore, approaches for the PHD supervision must be tailored according to the need of specific PHD project. The profile of the PHD candidate, expertise of the supervisor and funding issues plays most important role in deciding an appropriate approach.

Whilst we are moving more toward the "hands on" approach (Hockey 2006), it is essential for a supervisor not to dictate the ideas and content as it is quite easy to do so while adopting this approach. Therefore, the way to tread a fine balance between the approaches and between interfering and independence is to be a non-judgemental critique, what we commonly refer as constructive criticism.

Refernces

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