'BEYOND COMPARE'[1]: SUPERVISING POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

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> I always remember my supervisor's smile and encouragement, 'Happy writing!' At that time, I wondered how people could be happy and writing at the same time![2]

Until the advent of the PBRF[3], it is probably true to say that postgraduate supervision has generally been the Cinderella of Linguistics teaching in New Zealand universities. The inescapable demands of scheduled classes from 100-level through to MA course teaching has typically shunted postgraduate teaching to the back burner, to be fitted in where it will least disrupt other activities. Though lip service has often been paid to the thesis student's right to 'regular' meetings with their (primary) supervisor, the regularity has often been more honoured in the breach than the observance, disrupted by intense teaching schedules, statutory holidays, vacation periods, and staff conference and study leave. And while regular meetings with their supervisor are certainly desirable in principle from the students' perspective, the need to earn in order to supplement their income, and the natural reluctance to expose oneself to criticism for not having achieved one's objectives, further contribute to eroding the frequency of meetings.

In this context, it is worth asking what can be done to counter such subversive forces? What are the crucial components of good postgraduate supervision? And how can we ensure they are incorporated into the experience of our Linguistics and Applied Linguistics postgraduates. In addition to my own personal experience and reflections, this short paper draws on three

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sources of information to address these questions: (i) general research on the quality of postgraduate supervision (eg. Harper 2005, Neale 2000, Morrow 2000, Dinham and Scott 1999); (ii) feedback collected from Linguistics and Applied Linguistics students at Victoria University (iii) discussions with a wide range of academics and linguistics scholars about these issues over the last three decades. I have organised the discussion into four main sections: I first consider three areas which are generally identified as problems for postgraduate supervision: workload, choosing a topic, and giving and getting feedback; and then I take a more constructive tack and outline one possible model for doing it well.

1. Workload

Workload is clearly one issue in relation to the quality of postgraduate supervision individual academics can provide. The number of postgraduate students any individual academic is expected to supervise varies enormously from one institution to another. Workload formulae which take systematic account of the number of students, their status as part-time or full-time, distance or on campus students, and the proportion of supervision responsibility taken at different times by different supervisors are rare to say the least. Colleagues in the USA tend to teach mainly at (post)graduate level; the undergraduate teaching is largely undertaken by their students acting as teaching assistants. The picture in the UK, Australia and NZ is very different. Most academics are expected to make a substantial contribution to undergraduate teaching, and the extent to which a systematic workload allowance is allocated for postgraduate supervision is very variable indeed. In some cases, colleagues whose research is in popular areas for postgraduate thesis topics report concurrent supervision of up to 12 students (albeit some part time), a total which could be regarded as constituting a full time workload, and yet this is shouldered in addition to a substantial undergraduate teaching load.

It is not surprising then to find comments such as the following in postgraduate student surveys identifying aspects of the supervision process with which students were dissatisfied:

> 'Supervisors who read three pages of a chapter and then after half an hour's discussion say 'send me the next chapter when it's ready and come and see me the week after'. (Harper 2005: 15)

> 'My emails would go unanswered for some time. I was expected to understand their home life (childcare) and worklife commitments and fit in around them'. (Harper 2005: 15)
>
> 'Supervisor is busy — therefore there is never enough time' (Neale 2000: 7).

Those readers who are supervisors will no doubt feel sympathy with the staff members identified in these quotes, while nonetheless recognising that the students' dissatisfaction is reasonable.

It seems clear that if we are to ensure high quality supervision for our postgraduate students, an agreed workload allowance must be allocated systematically throughout the period of supervision. Postgraduate students cannot continue to be regarded as an absorbable 'extra' as they have often been in the past, an attitude that encourages staff to squash them into the interstices of other work, rather than to devote quality intellectual time to developing a postgraduate's scholarly abilities and assisting them to produce the very best research of which they are capable.

2. Choosing a topic

New Zealand Linguistics and Applied Linguistics Departments offer students a remarkably broad array of potential PhD topics given the small number of permanent staff available as supervisors, from language policy and language attitudes through all aspects of language learning and teaching, to the phonetics and syntactic analysis of the structure of the languages of Vanuatu using the most specialised current syntactic frameworks. In a previous, halcyon, non-competitive era of guaranteed university funding, academics would advise prospective postgraduate students to apply to the university with the highest level of academic expertise in their area of research interest. Those days have long gone, and staff at each university have been forced to develop expertise in a wider range of topics. Now students are rarely sent elsewhere on the basis of inability to supervise their preferred topic alone (but see below for an alternative approach). Academic staff are often required to supervise in areas which stretch their expertise to its limits, a matter of concern on the basis of survey results of postgraduate students in other areas (Neale 2000, Harper 2005: 14).

Another important issue in relation to selecting a topic is the possibility of interdisciplinary collaboration between departments and supervisors. Really

clear communication is a genuine issue in this situation and it is crucial to establish who is primarily responsible for the student's progress. A related matter is cross-cultural research and also that of research with indigenous groups and in areas of concern to non-majority group members. The ethical issues raised by research questions which venture into these areas require careful preparation which needs to begin well before a student is accepted for enrolment in many cases (see, for example, Smith 1999).

3. Feedback

The research literature provides abundant evidence that the topic that most pre-occupies postgraduates is the amount, frequency, and quality of feedback that they receive from their supervisors. Comments from exit questionnaires (Neale 2000), student surveys (Harper 2005), and constructive suggestions made by Linguistics and Applied Linguistics students in a survey I undertook, tend to tell a similar tale. Most students want frequent, full and focussed feedback from their supervisors, and they want it promptly, i.e. as soon as possible after they have delivered their written material. (See Appendix for a summary of the points made by postgraduates who responded to my survey).

Critical comments in the survey responses identified a range of unsatisfactory supervisory behaviours, from supervisors who told students they did not want to see anything in writing till it was in final form, to supervisors who simply did not make time to discuss material with students.

> 'I've only been able to have one meeting with my secondary supervisor since he took over and that took well in excess of a month to arrange through cancellations, his failure to prepare and his constant losing of material. Since that meeting, he has answered only one email and there has been no faculty support to confronting this neglect' (Harper 2005: 15).

Hopefully this is an extreme, and I hasten to add that this supervisor was not in Linguistics or Applied Linguistics.

On a more positive note, Linguistics or Applied Linguistics students commented on the following helpful behaviours from their supervisors.

> 'I think the most important thing for me was positive feedback by the supervisors. Whether it was about the subject matter itself or writing ability, positive feedback gave me encouragement to keep writing.

> On the flip side, criticism, as opposed to constructive criticism, can be a downer. Research students spend a lot of time and energy in their studies and to have someone criticize their work without substantial reasoning or giving suggestions is very discouraging.'

Another student said 'it helped when you gave such lovely positive feedback on any of my written stuff and set a new goal', and another noted that what helped most was 'quick feedback — keeps up the motivation...'

Some students noted unhelpful supervisory behaviours:

> 'the most unhelpful thing my supervisor did was to make comments about grammatical/stylistic details in early drafts when all I really wanted to know was whether my ideas/logic/argument made sense,'

Others commented that they found it depressing when their supervisors wrote all over their drafts in red pen. This underlines the importance of focusing on the big picture from the beginning. The students' comments indicate awareness that the supervisor's role is to help them make an original and significant contribution to knowledge, the basic requirements of a PhD, and to assist them in locating their contribution in the scholarly field to which they are contributing. Stylistic issues should always be secondary, and are generally not an appropriate focus at the crucial early stages of a PhD.

One student enrolled in a PhD while working overseas commented on the motivating effect of their supervisor's requirements that they submit a written report every Friday stating what they had accomplished that week, however little: 'This means I always do just a bit more as I feel bad if I have nothing to report come Friday!'

It is also important, of course to bear in mind that not all students are the same. In my survey of 25 postgraduate Linguistics and Applied Linguistics students, two expressed a rather different perspective on what they expected of their supervisors. They saw themselves as mature researchers who took responsibility for their own progress, and in their view the appropriate role of the supervisor was as guide and mentor to be called on when they judged appropriate, rather than someone who was constantly setting them demanding writing deadlines which involved unwelcome and unhelpful pressure.

> 'I was always aware that I was expected to call the meetings, I set my own realistic short-term objectives and I took responsibility for my actions and inactions.'

> 'My positive reflections on the research process to date can to a large degree be attributed to my retention of ownership of my work.'

Ideally, one could consider this as the goal of all research students: i.e. to attain independence, taking responsibility for their own progress, and using their supervisor as a guide and advisor.

It is also worth noting that, not unreasonably, students do not welcome surprises at a late stage in the research process. One student commented, for instance on how distressed they were to receive feedback 'about significant theoretical issues … in the final year which should have been received in the first year' (Neale 2000: 5). And another commented in response to my informal survey:

> 'I was very surprised when very late in the process my supervisor read over chapters and expressed concern with their content.'

These comments suggest misunderstandings of various sorts about what kind of feedback was being provided at different stages. Clear communication is crucial at every stage of the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

Finally while prompt, constructive and challenging feedback is essential to help correct misconceptions as well as to promote critical thinking and develop intellectual independence, it is also worth bearing in mind that the main supervisor is not the only source of useful feedback to a postgraduate student, a point developed in the next section.

4. One model for good supervision: support en route

Traditionally, like most students in the area of Humanities and Arts, Linguistics/Applied Linguistics thesis students have a lonely row to hoe. For long periods at different points, they may be working virtually on their own — reading for their literature survey, collecting data, analysing data, or writing up. They often work at home, sometimes from choice but frequently due to lack of desk space in crowded university departments. Rarely are there other students working in the same area of research. This is the model which still pertains in many Humanities departments, namely, infrequent contact for postgraduate thesis students with others, whether students or staff.

But it is not the only model and increasingly an alternative is developing, influenced partly by the fact that some sources of external funding encourage

team work, but also by the perception by some supervisors of the advantages to their postgraduates of developing a community of researchers with which they can identify.

I will use Victoria's School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies as an illustrative example here because it is obviously the School that I know best, but developments in Linguistics Departments in other New Zealand Universities have, I know, taken the same general direction. We have not yet got everything right, but on the basis of the last decade's experience, we have a better idea of what we are aiming for.

4.1 Accepting students for postgraduate study

On the basis of sometimes rather painful experience, we have learned to be selective about who we accept as postgraduate research students. Those who have been enthused by the New Zealand undergraduate courses of inspired teachers like Scott Allan, and who, ideally, have been actively encouraged to enrol in an Honours degree, easily make the transition to become excellent postgraduate thesis students. They are well prepared, and they often have a good idea of the topic area they want to work in. More challenging for our evaluation systems are applications from overseas, especially from universities whose grading systems are unfamiliar. Our current practice is to accept only those with excellent grades, but just as importantly, we also accept only those who are willing to work on a topic that fits within the research priorities of our School. In some cases, this means negotiating with good students to agree on a topic acceptable both to them and to their potential supervisors. Ideally this results in satisfactory identification for each student of at least two supervisors, as well as preferably an existing active research group to which they can be attached once they arrive.[4]

4.2 Developing a research proposal

While applicants provide a short research proposal with their application, the real work on their research questions begins when they commence work with their supervisor(s). In an ideal world, both supervisors will work with the student at the early stages, providing reading, and assisting them to narrow their focus to something manageable which relates to the supervisors' areas of research, with obvious on-going benefits for all. Developing a research proposal for presentation to the School's Research Committee may take anything from three to six months, depending on a very wide range of factors. During this process, students may of course make use of a number of sources

of feedback in addition to their supervisors, including other staff members, and importantly other students.

4.3 Regular meetings

Apart from providing feedback on written work (as discussed above), regular meetings between postgraduate students and their supervisors are important to plan and monitor progress. One useful strategy recommended by experts in this area is to require the student to take the 'minutes' of meetings and to provide these in written form to the supervisor after the meeting. In this way, agreements and deadlines are documented, and any misconceptions can be quickly identified and cleared up. An initial timeframe documenting the stages of the research is required as part of the research proposal in most departments, and many students find it valuable to begin and/or end each session by referring to the stage that has been reached.

Another point made by some Linguistics/Applied Linguistics PhD students in their survey responses is the importance of making it clear that *they* are the supervisor's priority during their consultation time: 'divert the phone, shut the door and put a note on it saying you are busy — this is *my* time*!'* wrote one student. Postgraduate students are paying hefty fees and they do not like to be marginalised or treated as interruptible.

4.4 PhD support groups

One useful way of obtaining unthreatening assistance during the various stressful stages of completing a thesis has proved to be the informal PhD support groups which have developed within the School. They come and go, and they take different forms at different times — sometimes predominantly social, grizzle and whinge groups, other times focussed on the need to discuss tricky issues such as which will be the most appropriate way of collecting data, or what alternative interpretations are possible of some complex material. One such group is largely self-organised in terms of how often it meets, and the students voluntarily opt for turns to raise issues they want to discuss or bring along material for others to consider. Another model used at other universities is a schedule organised by a staff member where a different student presents a progress report at each meeting. In our experience, such meetings are always fruitful, even if the students' topics are very disparate. However, there are even greater benefits if the students' areas of research overlap, even if minimally. The sharing of insights and materials in this situation is immensely beneficial. This is another reason for attempting to limit the range of topic areas that staff

are expected to supervise. The benefits of concentrating on areas of research strength are apparent in a myriad of ways.

A related initiative is the Round Tables organised from time to time, usually in response to a visit from a researcher from elsewhere, where a group of students in the relevant area provide a brief snapshot of their research, and benefit from comments and feedback from the visitor.

4.5 Seminars and conferences

While focussing on a limited range of areas of research has many internal benefits in relation to the intellectual vigour of supervision, there are also benefits to be gained from broadening students' linguistic horizons. Again this is an ideal prescription, which we do not always live up to, but in principle we encourage all research students (and staff) to attend our weekly seminars, as well as any additional seminars offered by visitors, with the goal of exposing them to alternative theoretical approaches and methodologies, and educating them about the diversity and breadth of work in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. It is doubtless a counsel of perfection, but ideally students should emerge from postgraduate study not only as experts in their particular area of research but also well-informed about topics from a wide spectrum in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics.

Conferences obviously offer similar benefits on a larger scale. There has been some debate over the years amongst members of our School about the wisdom of encouraging students to attend conferences. Given the number of conferences currently being organised in areas of relevance to Linguistics and Applied Linguistics students, it would be possible to do a David Lodge (*Changing Places, Small World, Nice Work*) continuous circuit. And some argue that too many conferences can distract students from getting on with their writing. Realistically, however, money is generally a practical constraint, and in my observation, students quickly learn for themselves to assess the benefits and disadvantages of conference attendance. Provided they are offering a paper, Victoria students can obtain Faculty funding to assist with conference expenses, and most staff encourage their postgraduates to attend at least one local conference per year. Writing the paper ideally moves their research along, while the presentation exposes them to a wider range of opinions. (A practice run with their research group or PhD support group is common and beneficial to all). In addition, postgraduates get the opportunity to meet others working in their research areas, and get a feel for the breadth of the issues currently exercising (applied) linguists elsewhere. In my view,

where funding can be obtained (eg through scholarships or research grants), there are also considerable benefits in students attending overseas conferences in relevant areas. The exposure to an even wider academic community is very valuable, as well as an opportunity to appreciate where their research fits into the bigger picture within (applied) linguistics and in some cases they return with a greater appreciation of their own situation and support structures, which is always welcome!

4.6 Location, location

Again the counsel of perfection is to attempt to locate postgraduate students working in related areas in shared and adjacent rooms, and ideally close to staff with similar interests. The benefits are incalculable since it is the conversations which take place in the corridor, at the sink, or in the door jambs that many subsequently report helped them over a hump or re-inspired their flagging energies. Because of intense space restrictions, we do not have a postgraduate social room, but we are in no doubt of the benefits such a place to socialise would offer. Even the limited opportunities for discussion provided to postgraduates by our morning tea room (where many turn up on different days) testify to the benefits of fostering community spirit among staff and postgraduates.

4.7 Life after the thesis

Once the thesis is submitted, it is tempting as a supervisor to heave a sigh of relief and move on to the next student needing support. But, of course, from the student's perspective a great deal more is required. Providing some (part time) research work which makes use of the skills they have developed is always much appreciated if it is possible, while they wait the interminable time it generally takes for a thesis to be examined and for the reports to be processed. Again this is more likely to be possible in a department which has research projects underway, and research teams to which a student can contribute. Encouraging seminar and conference presentations to give some publicity and exposure to the student's findings is important, as well as providing opportunities to start drafting material for publication.

Co-writing as a first step is an attractive option for many students who lack confidence in submitting to international journals, and this can provide a very valuable bridge to subsequent independent writing. Supervisors can also help by advising on how to select appropriate publishing outlets, and modelling how to respond to reviewers' critical comments with energy and

enthusiasm, rather than collapsing in a deflated heap and burying the article in a bottom drawer. If the students' thesis will make a good book, the supervisor can advise on how to prepare a book proposal, making use of the examiners' comments in this task.

Another responsibility of a good supervisor is keeping an eye open for Postdoctoral Fellowships (which seem to be rare as hen's teeth in Linguistics/ Applied Linguistics these days), as well as for possible academic jobs.

Finally, however, while all these aspects of support for postgraduate students (departmental culture, involvement with other students, academic satisfaction) contribute to the likelihood of prompt completion, the single most important factor is the quality of their relationship with their supervisor (Bair and Haworth 2004). Nothing can substitute for a trusting and intellectually stimulating relationship. Developing that takes time and goodwill, of course, and sometimes a lot of coffee and biscuits, but it is well worth it.

5. Conclusion

The advent of the PBRF, and more specifically the inclusion of PhD completions as a source of additional research revenue for tertiary institutions, means that we now have a very concrete financial incentive to improve the quality of postgraduate supervision. Ministry of Education figures for 2003 indicated that five years after enrolment more than 44% of Masters thesis and 40% of PhD students had not completed their degrees, and their estimate of long-term completion rates were no higher than 58%. This is in line with international figures which state that 40%-60% of students who begin doctorates do not complete (Bair and Haworth 2004). We do not have specific figures for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, but I suspect our completion rates in New Zealand are somewhat better than average. Nonetheless, many of our students do drop out as the going gets tough. This paper has identified some of the ways we can help reduce the attrition rate.

In 2006, Universities were allocated a substantial amount for each PhD completion, and this has doubled in 2007. This provides a good deal of leverage to those wishing to improve the standard of postgraduate supervision in their departments.

Just as important, however, are the academic benefits of excellent postgraduate supervision not only in terms of the intellectual development of the student and the enhancement of their career prospects, but also to the

supervisor who is always learning in a good supervision relationship, and whose own intellectual development and research skills cannot help but be enriched by such a relationship. In this, as in so many other areas, Scott Allan provided a model beyond compare.

Appendix

Notes distilled from feedback from current and recently completed Linguistics and Applied Linguistics PhD students at Victoria University of Wellington 2006.

A good supervisor

- sets up regular (weekly/fortnightly) meetings which should only be postponed if the student has a good reason (This is *much* better for most students than a system where the supervisor leaves it to the student to initiate meetings.)
- gives the student full attention during regular meetings (i.e. so they don't feel squashed in between other obligations)
- actively involves both supervisors during the development of the research proposal and, as appropriate, also others working in related areas
- checks time-line or progress sheet at the start or end of each meeting to provide a sense of continuity
- demonstrates genuine interest in the student's subject area
- extensive knowledge of general subject area (makes useful points, recommends relevant reading, shows insight, inspires confidence)
- requires the student to write something for every meeting. Draft chapters are a good goal from the beginning
- provides direction through student's summaries of each meeting and goal-setting for the next, i.e. requires student to record agreements, and e-mail them to supervisor
- ensures a sound research proposal is prepared within a reasonable initial period
- provides written feedback promptly on material student has written
- is available and reliable (responds swiftly to emails, etc)
- engages with student: provides constructive as well as challenging comments on student's work, shows interest in topic and also in student personally; positive and not patronising
- leaves enough rope to make mistakes, but not enough to hang with

- assists with student's professional development (advice on who to talk to, directs student to material relevant to topic, organises discussion sessions, provides opportunities for relevant tutoring, recommends and assists with preparation for conferences, supports and encourages publications, scholarship applications, faculty grant applications etc)
- shares opinions, ideas, contacts and 'inside' knowledge
- gets the right mix of pushing and leaving student to get on with it
- provides encouragement and direction when student is flagging
- available to provide prompt helpful feedback when pressure is on to complete
- helps student produce publications and conference presentations from thesis

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Notes

1 A satisfied postgraduate student's comment on their supervisor (Harper 2005: 14).
2 Comment from responses to a survey of 25 postgraduate students that I undertook in School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington. 2003.
3 For the benefit of non-New Zealanders, the PBRF is Performance Based Research Funding with PhD completions as one important source of such funding for tertiary institutions.
4 The VUW School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, like other NZ university Linguistics Departments, encourages staff and postgraduates to work together in groupings with overlapping research interests where possible. Such groups may simply share reading material and discuss each other's work, or in some cases they actually work together in research teams.

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