

International master's students' experiences of freedom and control in their dissertation journeys (0213)

Bojana Petric¹, Nigel Harwood²

¹Birkbeck, University of London, UK,

²University of Sheffield, UK

Longer abstract

This talk will focus on international master's students' experiences of freedom and control within the supervisory relationship during their dissertation journeys. Previous research on supervision has identified a variety of roles supervisors and supervisees adopt in the course of supervision, many of which directly evoke issues of freedom and control. For instance, in Brown and Atkins' (1988) comprehensive list of possible supervisor/supervisee roles, the master/servant and the guru/disciple pairs reflect relationships marked by a large degree of control, with the supervisee closely following the instructions of the supervisor, while the guide/explorer and the colleague/colleague pairs represent roles in a relationship where control is expected to be minimal, with the supervisee being given a large amount of freedom to explore his/her subject, in consultation with the supervisor. However, research also shows that at different stages of dissertation supervision, supervisors and supervisees play different roles, depending on the needs of the student and the nature of the project (e.g., Barnes & Austin 2009; Benmore in press; Grant 2008; de Kleijn et al 2012; Vilkinas 2005). As the supervisors' and supervisees' roles change in the course of the supervision, tensions between freedom and control in the supervisory relationship are bound to emerge.

Our interest lies precisely in identifying and analysing how supervisors' and supervisees' roles change throughout the supervision process and the extent to which supervisees perceive these roles as constraining, with supervisors exerting too much control over their projects, or flexible, allowing them the freedom to shape their dissertation projects in ways they wish. Our focus is also on supervisees' changing needs for both freedom and control at different stages of dissertation supervision. We therefore use the term 'dissertation journey' to emphasise that creating a dissertation is a long and non-linear process, filled with ups and downs, spurts of progress and delays, and moments of inspiration and discovery as well as frustration and confusion. To capture the nuances of supervision, we used a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2003) to investigate students' and supervisors' experiences of master's dissertation supervision at a university in the UK (Authors, forthcoming) over a period of roughly six months, from the students' choice of their dissertation topics to the final dissertation report by dissertation markers. We collected a range of data for the study, including repeated interviews with students during the dissertation writing period, chapter drafts with the supervisor's feedback, dissertation diaries the students were asked to write while working on their dissertations and 'think-alouds', i.e., audio recorded sessions of their thinking aloud while writing their drafts, interviews with the students' supervisors, and dissertation markers' reports. By using multiple qualitative methods and a longitudinal research design, case studies such as ours yield richness of data, providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation in all its complexity. The multiple case

study design is therefore particularly suited to the study of tensions between freedom and control in master's students' supervisory relationships during their dissertation journeys.

In this presentation, we focus on two contrasting cases of international master's students writing their dissertations in two different departments, whose analysis will provide the foundation for our discussion of students' experiences of freedom and control in their dissertation journeys. The two cases are fundamentally different. Laura, a humanities student, is working on a dissertation consisting of a film project and an accompanying text, on a topic of her own choice. Her supervisor provides a supportive space for her to explore ideas that inspire her, and subtly guides her through the process of shaping them into a creative project. Laura is given a large amount of freedom from start to finish: from choosing her own topic to making her own aesthetic decisions in making the film. Yet our data show that although she valued the opportunity to make her own choices regarding her project, this freedom was often daunting for Laura, provoking anxiety and moments of crises.

In contrast, Victoria, a social science student, receives an off-the-shelf project from her supervisor, together with research questions and instruments, which she is required to follow. Her supervisor also models analytical procedures for her, requiring her to take notes so that she can follow the same procedure later on when independently analysing the data for her project. While it would seem that there was little scope for Victoria to experience freedom in her dissertation journey, our data indicate that initially this was precisely what she wished for and even requested that her supervisor tell her exactly what to do.

However, in the case of both students, issues of freedom and control do not remain static in the course of the supervision. Laura, working in a field where freedom to develop one's creative ideas is not only desirable but also expected and highly valued, is easily swayed by many possible paths at various points of her dissertation journey, and grapples to remain focused. Paradoxically, the freedom she is given to shape her project makes it difficult for her to take control over it. Victoria, in contrast, starts off by not wanting any freedom in her dissertation work, preferring to follow step-by-step instructions from her supervisor. However, once she gained sufficient knowledge of her topic and mastered the analytical skills needed for independent work, she discovered that, to her surprise, she began to wish for more freedom to develop the project following her understanding of the research problem, which considerably differed from her supervisor's. The case study approach allows us to analyse how the two students' need for, and experiences of, freedom and control change during their dissertation journeys, and to investigate the extent to which these changes are impacted upon by the supervisor and her supervisory style, the students' social networks, their personalities, as well as departmental and disciplinary factors. We then discuss how freedom and control in students' dissertation journeys intersect with growth, learning, independence and achievement. We conclude by addressing the implications of the findings for supervision of master's dissertations and by pointing to directions for future research in this area.

[997 words]

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