The Supervisor/Student Alignment Tool Kit

Introduction

Supervisors and their students may assume that they are 'on the same wavelength' when, in fact, at times they have very different perceptions of the same events.

This tool allows student and supervisor to independently indicate their view of current student needs and supervisor style.

Each one places an 'X' on a two-dimensional graph indicating where the student is on a continuum from 'dependent' to 'competently autonomous' and where the supervisor's style is on a continuum from 'hands on' to 'hands off'.

Comparison of the two responses prompts supervisor and student to discuss current student needs and whether the supervisor is addressing them. When perceptions differ, there is an opportunity to clarify misunderstandings.

This kit includes:

- instructions for use of the alignment tool

- a copy of the tool template

- a form for recording meeting outcomes and agreements

- a discussion paper

Instructions for use of the supervisor/student alignment tool

Agree to try using this tool

Either a supervisor or a student may initiate use of this tool. Have a preliminary conversation about it and make sure that neither party feels threatened by the suggestion.

Points to note include:
- This tool is simply a prompt for a chat about needs and styles. It is not for evaluation of either student or supervisor.
- Suggesting its use is not an indication that a problem already exists.
- It has helped users to early diagnosis of problems which may otherwise emerge over the course of candidature.
- If there is a co-supervisor or a supervisory panel, it is probably best that the first use involves only the principal supervisor and the student.

Provide a copy of this kit to each participant. We have provided a short discussion paper about the use of this tool and recommend that both parties take time to read it prior to the meeting.
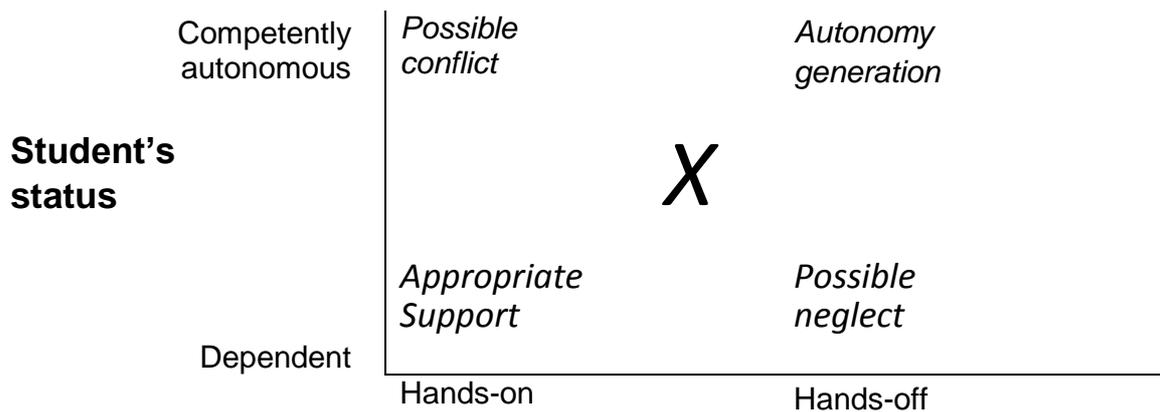
Arrange a meeting

Set aside an hour. Agree that you will <u>not</u> discuss the progress of the project. This time is for discussion of your working relationship and mutual expectations.

Independently mark your 'X'

Prior to the meeting each of you should place an X on the two-dimensional template. The vertical scale indicates the student's current stage of development. The horizontal scale indicates the supervisory style used recently.

It is important that each of you is honest with yourself and frank with the other. You are not judging each other, just trying to see whether current needs are being met by the current style of supervision and whether there is potential for conflict or frustration.

In the example, one of the pair has indicated that the student is neither dependent nor autonomous at this stage, and the supervisor is neither very hands-on nor very hands-off. With the X comfortably in the middle of the chart, at least one of the pair is feeling that needs and style match quite well.

Competently autonomous

Student's status

Dependent

Hands-on   Hands-off

	Hands-on	Hands-off
Competently autonomous	*Possible conflict*	*Autonomy generation*
Dependent	*Appropriate Support*	*Possible neglect*

X

Supervisor's recent style

The meeting

Each party takes a turn to explain their rationale for the position of their X. The speaker should not be interrupted. Each should try to describe frankly their feelings about the supervisory relationship. Each should try to make positive comments as well as flag any issues of concern.

Consider the question: "*is there significant lack of agreement between the position of the supervisor's X and that of the student?*"

The diagrams should be overlaid and the positions of your respective Xs compared. If the answer to this question is 'yes', the following discussion will need to explore why your views differ. As explained in the background paper, it may be that one party is focusing on a particular area (such as writing skills and feedback) rather than on the 'big picture'. Together you may decide to explore the various components of autonomy in your discipline, but the model is designed to work by staying at the holistic level of overall performance.

Consider the question: "*are our respective views of the relationship's position in an appropriate place for the stage of candidature?*"

A supervisory relationship in its first year will most likely be within or close to the 'appropriate support' quadrant of the template, though some departure towards the 'autonomy generating' quadrant may be apparent and desirable, especially in instances where the student started with a relatively high degree of autonomy. If the relationship is viewed to be tending towards the 'possible conflict' or 'possible neglect' quadrants, an emerging problem has been diagnosed and subsequent discussion will need to explore its nature and appropriate responses.

Having been through the review process above and identified the current status of the relationship, you should discuss actions to be taken in order for the relationship to move in an appropriate direction. Over the course of candidature, movement will tend to the top right of the diagram but may move towards the bottom left when new phases of work (such as thesis preparation) are commencing. Actions may include addressing a specific academic development need on the part of the student, but the primary aim of the tool is to assure that the supervisory style being used is

appropriate for the agreed stage of student progression towards competent autonomy. This may demand a change in practice for the supervisor so, if you are the student, recognise that your supervisor may find it difficult to do this. Similarly, if you are the supervisor, be ever conscious of the power relationship and make the student feel at ease in being frank about their views.

A Recording Form is included in this kit to encourage documentation of, and reflection on, each meeting. It is suggested that during each meeting the supervisor briefly records on a blank copy of this form the negotiated action to be taken by him/herself and by the student. The student takes this form with them at the end of the meeting and records his/her reflections on the supervisor's notes. A copy of the completed form is then given to the supervisor and it serves as a framework for the development of the relationship over the period until the tool is next used.

At the end of the meeting you should agree on a time to use the tool again. It is suggested that 6-month intervals are appropriate for full-time candidature.

Further meetings

In the lead-up to the time of the next use of the tool, both supervisor and student use a fresh copy of the template diagram to consider and mark their current view of the relationship. The views are compared and discussed in the following meeting, and the same procedure as suggested above is followed.
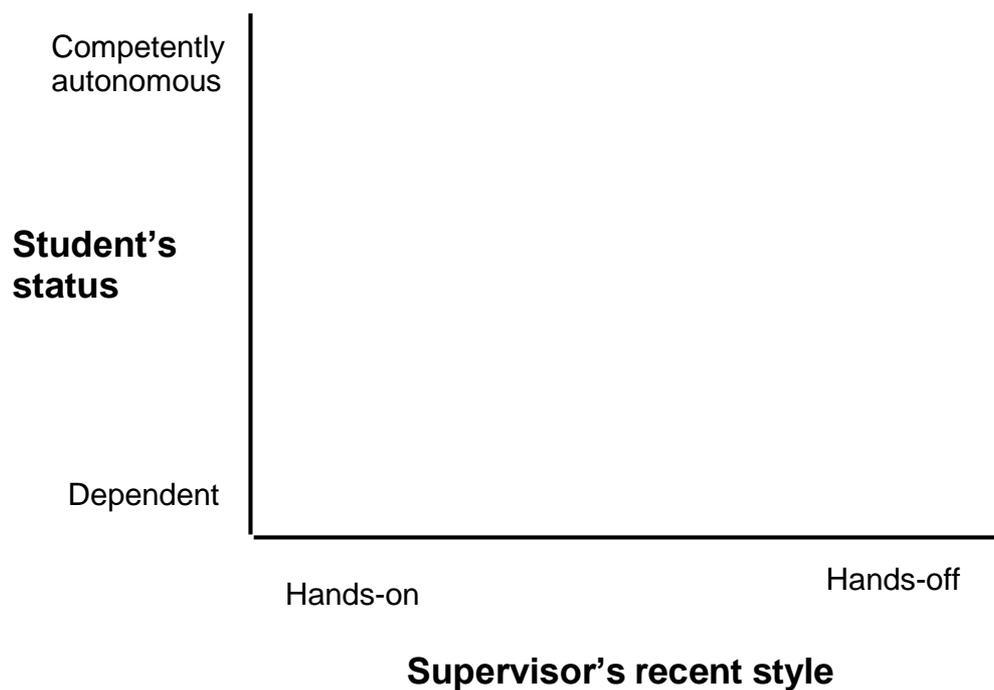
One of the most powerful aspects of this tool is the ability to monitor change over time. For this reason the template diagrams you work on together should be kept so as to be available the next time you repeat the exercise. This will allow discussion in subsequent meetings of the questions: "how has the relationship progressed since it was last discussed?"; "has change been in the desired direction?"

Though progression of the student towards competent autonomy may not be constant and linear - a student may legitimately move into a more dependent state at times such as thesis preparation - the position of the X should tend towards the top right quadrant of the diagram over time.

In second and subsequent meetings any additional supervisors may be invited to participate.

Charting Alignment of Student Needs and Supervisor Style

Alignment template

Competently
autonomous ┤

**Student's
status**

Dependent ┤

            Hands-on   Hands-off

Supervisor's recent style

Instructions

Place an X on the chart to show how you currently perceive your own (your student's) status – from dependent to autonomous – and your supervisor's (your) recent supervisory style. Bring this to the meeting with your supervisor (student).

Charting Alignment of Student Needs and Supervisor Style

Recording Form

Student's Name: Supervisor's Name:

SUPERVISOR'S NOTES (to be made during meeting).

Signed: *Date:*

STUDENT'S REFLECTIONS (to be noted shortly after meeting)

Signed: *Date:*

Discussion paper

The Supervisor/Student Alignment Model: a New Tool in the Supervisory Toolbox

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Introduction - The Need for a New Tool

The supervisor-research student apprenticeship has been described as "the most important channel of intellectual inheritance between one generation and the next" (FAUSA, 1979). Despite its importance, surveys of completion rates and levels of student satisfaction indicate a less than ideal situation. Grant & Graham (1994) have commented on the level of 'wastage' in the system that results from students receiving a less than ideal experience in postgraduate research. Powles (1989) found that one-quarter of the postgraduate research students she surveyed were either "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with their experience. Of this group, 31 percent cited problems with the supervisory relationship. This was also reflected in the findings of her survey of University of Melbourne postgraduates, in which concerns relating to meetings with their supervisors were the most commonly reported problem (Powles, 1988). Phillips and Pugh (1994) indicate that this phenomenon is not isolated to Australia, commenting that communication breakdown was "rampant" between the students and supervisors in UK.

Denicolo & Pope (1994) suggested that tools are required to aid conversations in the supervisory relationship. An example of such a tool is the series of "diametrically opposed statements" regarding various aspects of postgraduate research student supervision. Using this tool with my PhD students has provided a snapshot of respective views say, at the start of candidature, and prompted discussion of our thoughts about aspects of supervision. However, this tool does not appear to be designed for repeated use by the supervisor and student as a means of explicitly monitoring change over time within the relationship. In 1997 I developed and tested a very basic tool that attempted to reflect the dynamism of the supervisory relationship. It explored whether individual students felt that the supervisory style I was adopting at a given time felt 'right' to them given their current stage of candidature. Feedback from students on this was favourable. For example, it identified a student who desired a less hands-on style of supervision, something which, given their third year of research, was appropriate but had not previously been recognised by myself.

The award of a Small Teaching Development Grant in 1998 by the Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Sydney allowed me to refine this tool by exploring the literature on supervision, and to develop a simple model to underpin the tool. The aim of this paper is to argue the need for such tools as a way of promoting dialogue between student and supervisor, and to explain the chief features of the supervisor/student alignment model-driven tool.

Some Existing Models

Models in general can represent aspects of the real world, including the inter-relatedness of defined key factors. There is, however, a trade-off between the extent to which a model is complete and accurate and its utility as a concise, readily understandable instrument for non-specialists. The model of Ellis and Dell (1986) exemplifies the former extreme in possessing three dimensions and nine "stimuli" (specialised terms, each of which required definition). Closer to the opposite extreme is the much simpler "Continuum Model" (Anderson, 1988). This considers clinical supervision in the context of speech-language pathology and audiology but Anderson is silent on the extent to which she feels her model has wider applicability, e.g., to PhD supervision. Further, this model, like others in existence, is at least ten years old. I therefore felt the time was ripe to propose a tool based on a model that, whilst being simple, was designed explicitly for academic supervision and reflected contemporary views on best practice in academic supervision across the wide range of disciplines in which it is now pursued.

The Supervisor/Student Alignment Model

The Supervisor/Student Alignment Model proposes that the overall aim of the PhD, irrespective of its discipline area, is to lead the student to develop *competent autonomy*. This is defined as the ability of a researcher to, independently of any supervisor, be cognisant of the norms, expectations and standards within their discipline and to be able to assess their own plans and actions to ensure compliance with these. This concept is in general agreement with the remark that supervision is "ultimately about teaching the student to be their own supervisor" (Phillips, 1992). The *model* is built on the premise that development of this attribute over the course of candidature is profoundly (though not exclusively) influenced by the style adopted by the supervisor at various stages. There is, therefore, a need to seek an alignment between the student's stage of development and the style of supervision being applied at any given stage of candidature. Obviously the level of autonomy a student is able to cope with will tend to increase over candidature and the concept of alignment demands that there is an equivalent change in supervisory style over this time. This aspect of the model is an extension of the notion that there is a need for a balance to be achieved between giving adequate, timely help and not interfering (Parry and Hayden, 1996). The *tool* derived from the model provides a means of gauging the degree of alignment between student needs and the supervisory style employed at any time within a given student/supervisor relationship. In doing so, it seeks to promote a more active role for the student in diagnosing their needs and influencing the style of their supervisor.

The Supervisor/Student Alignment Model opts to use "hands-on" and "hands-off" as labels for the extremes of a spectrum; these labels should be immediately intelligible to students and supervisors from all disciplines. It should be stressed that a supervisor may simultaneously adopt both a hands-on and a hands-off approach (e.g., to demonstrate use of a new piece of apparatus, whilst prompting the student to consider its utility within their project respectively). It is the balance between the two styles used by a supervisor that is considered important. The value of the tool proposed herein is that it allows exploration and monitoring of the alignment between this balance and the student's level of overall development. In doing this, it offers scope for the supervisor to adopt a progressively more hands-off style over time - so affording the student scope to develop autonomy - whilst still providing a level of support (hands-on supervision) which discussion with the student indicates to be appropriate.

The Model as Tool

The tool represents the Supervisor/Student Alignment Model as a two-dimensional graph. A copy of the template is taken by both the supervisor and student and, independently of one another, used to chart their perception of both their own and the other party's needs/ style. These assessments provide the co-ordinates which position an X which estimates the degree of alignment of the student's development and the supervisor's style. They then meet, preferably face-to-face but a video conference could be used for off-campus students, and compare their assessments. If pronounced discrepancies are evident, discussion can explore the basis for this and some agreement can be sought. Possibly one party may have considered a particular component of autonomy, such as data analysis or writing skills, in isolation from overall development. In such instances, the pair may find it useful to dissect autonomy and discuss the discrete areas of competence that are appropriate in their discipline. Irrespective of whether the discussion adopts such a reductionist direction, it is important the discussion consider any differences between perceptions. This will allow joint strategies to be formulated to ensure that respective behaviours are in reasonable agreement, and that a supervisor/student alignment is achieved that is likely to lead to further development of competent autonomy. Re-use of the tool some months later will help gauge progress. The tool therefore operates to promote a plan-act-review learning cycle for the pair. In the increasingly common arrangement where associate supervisors, or supervisory panels, are involved, additional parties can be invited to join subsequent discussions.

As progress is made towards the student becoming a peer, with greater expertise within the specific research topic than that possessed by the supervisor, there is a need to adopt an increasingly hands-off approach. If this does not occur, then the academic development of the student is likely to be stifled and/or conflict to occur between student and supervisor. This is not to say that progress will be continuous or unilateral. Students are likely to progress in fits and spurts as they are bogged down in major tasks such as field work and are subsequently rewarded by achieving a milestone such as a significant set of results. Students are likely to move to a greater level of dependency when they enter a demanding new phase of experimentation, analysis or writing. Over the course of time, however, the student's overall development of competent autonomy should be paralleled by a change from hands-on to hands-off supervision such that the relationship progresses from the bottom left to top right quadrants of Figure One, avoiding the potential problems associated with the other two quadrants.

Two fictitious case studies are presented below as examples of how the model may help identify problems in supervisory relationships.

Scenario 1
Bill Brighton is just starting his third year of full-time research on drought resistance in wheat at the University of Victoria. He is supervised by Nancy Smith; an expert on drought resistance in sunflowers. For several months now he has had a growing sense of being stifled by well-meaning but rather over-enthusiastic supervision by Nancy. Bill has been in regular email correspondence with two US-based experts in wheat breeding. They have been applauding Bill's results and encouraging him to prepare a paper for a major conference to be held there later that year. They have also suggested a particular line of inquiry for his final round of experiments which, though quite different to the plan suggested by Nancy, they suggest may lead to a major breakthrough which could be followed-up in a postdoc with them. All this has boosted Bill's self-confidence and feeling that his project is really going somewhere.

However, he hasn't discussed this contact with Nancy. From her point of view, Bill seems reluctant to discuss his project with her, and what she has seen of his lab work suggests he has not progressed with the experiments she suggested he do next. She has interpreted this as meaning that he requires a gentle push and some guidance and support on what to do next.

This issue is inevitably brought up when they use the model and Bill's assessment of his level of competent autonomy is far greater than that which Nancy perceives. Both agree that Nancy has been adopting a pretty hands-on supervisory style of late but, whilst Nancy had seen this as falling within the 'appropriate support' quadrant (Fig. 1), Bill had seen this as a problem, with his estimation of the relationship falling into the 'possible conflict' quadrant. In the follow-up discussion it became clear to Nancy that Bill was now exhibiting a high degree of competent autonomy by networking beyond his supervisor and opening up possibilities for his professional life beyond the PhD. Since this meeting, Nancy has adopted a more hands-off approach to her supervision, and Bill now finds her a valuable sounding board as he undertakes the final experiments and conceptually incorporates them into his draft thesis. They agree that the tool helped diagnose an emerging problem and allowed their relationship to progress into the 'autonomy generation' quadrant. Now both Bill and Nancy correspond with the US-based experts and all four are collaborating on a book chapter on crop drought resistance.

Scenario 2
Zena Bortolini is in her second semester of part-time enrolment at the University of Alice Springs researching the gender roles of indigenous Australians. She is a distance education student who lives in Katherine and spends weeks at a time on field work in remote locations, so she has visited the University only twice. Whilst Zena's knowledge of Aboriginal anthropology is excellent, she feels in need of guidance on the design of data capture methods. The plan contained within her research proposal, which she worked out with much help from her supervisor, has proven unworkable in the field. She now has no idea about how the data she is collecting in an ad hoc fashion will be analysed, nor even if it will be useable. Despite this she feels she cannot turn to her supervisor, Nigel Hodgrass, for yet more help, but wishes he would be more inquiring of her progress and thereby recognise that she is struggling. For his part, Nigel, who has not heard from Zena for 10 weeks, has assumed that Zena is simply a very independent character who would call out for help should she require it. He is therefore using a relatively hands-off approach.

It is not until they use the model during a video conference session to mark the end of the first year that it becomes clear that Nigel's perception of Zena as a relatively autonomous student is not shared by Zena. Her perception is that she is still relatively dependent on Nigel, so his hands-off supervision places their relationship in the 'possible neglect' quadrant. Subsequent discussion explored this divergence in views and enabled Nigel to work much more closely with Zena. Together they have devised and field-tested a novel data capture method which, in its own right, has proven to be a significant advance.

The problems described in the above scenarios are relatively extreme and it is difficult to see how the problems in either case could have persisted for very much longer, even without the use of the model. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that some PhD students may discontinue rather than resolve problems. Use of the tool seeks to avoid this by providing a window of opportunity for such problems to be addressed in a non-threatening manner. By representing the relationship in an abstract graphical form which is, in the first instance, filled-out in privacy, it serves to dilute any intimidation felt by the student in a purely face-to-face discussion. Additionally, the model provides a way of diagnosing problems that have yet to develop to the point of being recognised by either party.

Conclusion
There is a danger in proposing such a simple model (no matter how successful the developer is in selecting the most important parameters for inclusion) because it may lead to an overly simplistic perception of postgraduate supervision. In practice it is a complex and dynamic relationship, and one which can differ markedly between disciplines. However, it is only with open communication between student and supervisor that important issues are addressed. Thus, the ultimate value of the model is its operationalisation as a tool to serve as a trigger for discussion that can then explore issues more widely.

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