

# **Exploring Different Ways of Supervising: A reflective interview task for supervisors, with briefing and debriefing workshops**

## **Introduction**

This resource contains a reflective interview task for supervisors and briefing and debriefing notes for workshop facilitators. The task was designed for participants to do between workshops in a supervisor development program. Participants interview an experienced supervisor and then reflect on the interview in relation to both their own experiences and an article on the 'delicate balance' in supervision (Delamont, Parry & Atkinson, 1998). They then come to a workshop where the task is debriefed in pairs and with a whole group.

## **Intended learning outcomes**

The activity intends to enhance supervisors' awareness of variation in supervisory approaches, so that they can choose from a wider range of approaches those which are most relevant for their students, stages of supervision and supervisory contexts.

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## **Exploring different ways of supervising: Workshop plan**

### **Who, when and why?**

This program may be conducted with either experienced or inexperienced supervisors. Because it is based on the premise that sharing experiences and views is extremely valuable, a group with mixed disciplinary backgrounds and composed of people at different stages of their careers should work well. However, the mixture is not necessary as the interview task allows participants to access supervisors whose experience is different to their own.

New supervisors tend to see supervision in relation to their experiences as research students, repeating their own supervisor's approaches or reacting against them. The program will be helpful to new supervisors, but it will also offer an opportunity for reflection and (we hope) rejuvenation for experienced supervisors. It does not matter what time of the academic year it is offered.

Doing the interview task and participating in a structured debriefing about it encourages supervisors to break free of patterns of behaviour that were adopted either in imitation of a supervisor whose style worked well or in reaction against a less satisfactory experience. One of the things stressed in the literature on supervision is that students vary in their needs while supervisors vary in their styles and sometimes they have to reach accommodations to continue to work together productively.

## **Suggested timetable**

### **Session 1**

(Length of session will vary depending on your choice of introductory activities. You need about 15 minutes to brief participants on the interview task.) You could conduct any of a number of introductory activities during this session.

Set the task. Distribute the instructions for conducting the interview. If you have time in a briefing workshop, you might like to role-play some of the interview, taking the part of the interviewer and having a colleague, or a participant who has done some supervision, play the part of the interviewee.

### **Between sessions: the supervisor interview**

Allow 2 - 4 weeks for participants to conduct their interviews.

### **Session 2**

(At least one hour) Conduct the debriefing discussion.

## **Preparation**

There are no special physical requirements for a room for these meetings.

### **Session 1**

Print and copy the instructions for conducting the interview. Locate a copy of the article by Delamont, Perry & Atkinson (1998) and print or photocopy it.

### **Session 2**

Make an overhead of the debriefing questions.

## **Detailed advice for facilitators**

The interview task can be done between two workshops in a supervisor development program, so participants can be briefed beforehand and debriefed afterwards. Allow at least two weeks for participants to complete the task (Jo McKenzie allows four). It's not a bad idea to email a reminder after a week.

### **Session 1**

#### **Introductory activities**

At UTS, where the task was developed, the first workshop session was three hours and included:

- briefing on the overall program and participant introductions
- participant small group discussion about their experiences of supervision as research students and the supervisory practices they experienced as helpful or unhelpful for their successful completion (10 minutes)
- debriefing the small group discussion to yield lists of helpful and unhelpful practices from the student perspective – acknowledging that some practices occurred on both lists i.e., were helpful for some and unhelpful for others
- an invited panel of three experienced supervisors describing the practices they use in supervising research students through different stages of their candidature
- small group discussion

#### *Alternatives*

You could run a pyramid discussion on any supervision issue likely to be of interest to your participants (resources are available on the [FIRST](#) web-site):

- Building productive working relationships workshop plan

You could use an expectations questionnaire as a prompt for discussion:

- Questionnaire: Opinions about research supervision
- Student perceptions of research supervision (SPORS) form

You could use a case study from this site or one of your own:

- Case studies introduction
- An Academic Minefield: Identifying potential problems and recommending solutions

#### **Briefing participants before the interview**

Regardless of what else you do during the first session, you will need to brief the participants about the interview task and distribute the instructions and the supporting article.

In Jo's experience the participant notes contain a fairly detailed description of the task, which makes it clear what's expected and why it's likely to be useful for participants. But she has found the following points are useful in addressing participant questions:

### **Choosing a supervisor to interview**

Some participants worry about selecting an appropriate person and taking up their time. In Jo's experience, many academics enjoy talking about what they do and are quite happy to be interviewed. It's very unlikely that anyone will be offended by being asked! If the first choice person is too busy, the worst thing that will happen is that they'll say no, so a participant might have to choose someone else.

Points to emphasise to participants in choosing an interviewee include:

- one aim of the task is for them to experience **differences** in supervisory approaches and practices, so it's not a good idea for this task for them to interview their own supervisor (a temptation if they've just finished a research degree and had good supervision)
- it's best to choose an experienced supervisor, someone who has supervised at least a few students through to completion, so that they can compare their experiences with different students
- the supervisor doesn't have to be from participants' own research specialisation. As the task focuses on general supervisory processes, it can be interesting to interview someone from a different discipline area

The task seems to work successfully if two participants interview the same supervisor together, provided they reflect and debrief separately as advised by the instruction sheet.

If participants are having trouble thinking of someone they can ask, suggest that they ask the research degrees coordinator (or equivalent) in their Faculty to suggest some possible supervisors. (You may help participants if you inform Faculty research degrees coordinators in advance that participants will be doing the task.)

## **Doing the interview**

While participants from social sciences disciplines may have experience with interviews, most participants from science-based disciplines will not have done one themselves. Some may have a perception of interviews as confrontational, based on their observation of the kind commonly shown on TV current affairs programs. Emphasise that in this interview what they're really doing is having a conversation where the other person is doing most of the talking. It is likely to be an interesting experience for both the interviewer and interviewee.

If you have time in a briefing workshop, you might like to role-play some of the interview, taking the part of the interviewer and having a colleague, or a participant who has done some supervision, play the part of the interviewee. Include the initial briefing about the nature of the task and asking permission to tape record the interview as part of the role-play.

Some participants may also need help in finding (or using!) a tape recorder so it helps if you know where they might find one to borrow in your university. Jo has 2-3 fairly cheap but serviceable tape recorders that she lends to participants.

## **Session 2**

### **Debriefing participants**

The aim of the debrief is to further extend participants' awareness of different approaches and practices and then draw out points for discussion. In a workshop situation, having an initial debriefing in pairs works well.

Allow at least an hour for the following debriefing process.

Ask participants to form a pair with someone from a different discipline, making sure they haven't interviewed the same supervisor! Any participants who have not done the interview (an inevitability) can join in as an observer with a pair. The pairs' discussion allows each participant an opportunity to tell the story of their interview and compare with someone else. This usually works better and is much less time consuming than having everyone in a larger group tell their story.

A suggested set of questions/issues for the pairs to discuss is provided. Allow at least 20 minutes for the pairs' discussion: 5-7 minutes for each person to talk initially and a further 5-10 minutes for comparison and exploration of interesting points and issues.

Following the pairs' discussion, it's useful to focus the whole-group debriefing on the

interesting or revealing points that were identified and the issues that emerged.

Whole group discussion typically reveals a range of themes. For example:

- that there are different approaches to being a good (or poor) supervisor – an approach which is good for one student may be experienced as unhelpful by another, or even by the same student at a different stage of candidature
- it is helpful for supervisors to be aware of their own preferred approaches and how these differ from others, especially so that they can negotiate roles and expectations with students
- the extent to which supervisors can adapt their supervisory approaches for different students in different contexts. Is it realistic for a supervisor to think they can be all things to all students?
- issues in working with group or panel supervision where the members of the group have very different approaches, and ways of making this more rather than less productive for the student
- the balance between guidance and autonomy typically changes during the process of supervision. A common pattern is for there to be more guidance at the beginning and when the final versions of the thesis are being prepared for submission.

Many of the points raised will provide good lead-ins for other workshop topics including:

- overall themes in good supervisory practices across a range of different styles or approaches
- ways of negotiating supervisory roles and expectations with students

A word of warning: as participants will often have interviewed a colleague, try to avoid being drawn into discussion of apparently poor practices reported by participants. In this situation I tend to remind participants that if they were doing their own research they would usually be cautious about making strong judgments based on limited evidence.

## Responses from previous participants

These results from an email survey of 10 participants who did the interview might be helpful to facilitators in debriefing and running the interview process. While this is a limited sample, it's fairly typical of other feedback on the exercise.

### What were the most valuable things that you learned from the interview?

1. That vastly different supervisory practices can be equally effective. Also that just because a supervisor feels that he/she is doing a great job, doesn't always mean that everyone else will agree. It all depends on how 'success' is measured.
2. The most valuable session was the discussion in the group which allowed me to see the different experiences of different interviewers/interviewees.
3. They made me think about my own practice and gave me a number of practical ways of dealing with issues and of helping my students.
4. My interviewee believed he was the worst supervisor in the school - which I don't necessarily agree with. But that view allowed him to elaborate on what he thought constituted good supervision and how he thought he'd failed. So that gave me an interesting perspective.
5. Unfortunately my previous experience with poor supervision was confirmed.
6. Valuable ideas that I consider well worth implementing, in particular:
  - (1) Organising a range of feedback from other supervisors so that the student would have different input about different aspects of their work. I consider this would provide both a reality check for my personal supervision and provide the student with a range of research perspectives.
  - (2) Encouraging student to join or form a group with others who were undertaking similar projects for mutual support and motivation. I consider this would provide all of the advantages associated with group dynamics, particularly a peer group.
  - (3) Organising a celebratory dinner. This brings closure to the process for both the student and the supervisor.
7. To be reflective.
8. How differently people experience the world.
9. One of the things that seemed to come across most strongly was the different interpretations that supervision could take. It seems to vary so much in the degree of direction that that supervisor gives. It seemed that the supervisor I interviewed took the approach that she was directing the study while my supervisor seemed to take the approach that she was there more or less to keep me from getting into trouble but that I would make my way through the research tasks. I'm unconvinced about either way, by that I mean it seems that the supervisor/supervised relationship is very dependent on the personality types of the student and supervisor and that a productive supervisor relationship is to quite a degree dependent on a 'fit' between supervisor and student. This seems to one of the reasons why X's group, for example, works well, she is very clear about the manner in which she prefers to work giving the student a clear route to 'out' if she/he suspects that will not be a productive way to work. I was interested in the amount of responsibility that supervisors potentially took for the final success of the work too. The person I interviewed had had a very different experience themselves in

being supervised than what she offered to her students. Her supervisor seemed to take no responsibility for the final outcome, or that was the impression he gave her, while she took the approach that she and the student were in this task together and while the work stayed that of the student its final success or failure was her responsibility as well.

**Please describe any important ways in which the supervisor you interviewed differed in their practices or views of supervision from the supervisor you had as a student.**

1. This supervisor was much more prescriptive than my own. He viewed supervising research students in the same way that he viewed employees in the government sector when he was there, and took a very stringent management style attitude towards his supervising. Anything more than three years to complete a PhD was seen as unacceptable, and placed the future employment prospects of the student in serious doubt, as did anything less than 5 publications during candidature. Weekly meetings and updates from students were compulsory.  
In contrast, the supervision I have received places the responsibility for keeping up to date completely on me, and allows me, within limits, to determine my own success.
2. The supervisor I interviewed had a more interventionist policy as opposed to my student supervisor who left me to my own devices, providing copious feedback only when requested to do so by me.
3. Most differed markedly from my first supervisor, in that they were keen to guide the student while giving them plenty of ownership and latitude in what they were doing.
4. Not much different but one is looking at it from a different perspective, i.e. not what is happening to you but how you can make it happen with students.
5. He took on part-time students. My supervisor advised me never to do that.
6. My experiences of being supervised have generally been negative. Unfortunately the interview confirmed that reflection on the practice of supervision is not widespread. I did my interview by email as I couldn't tie down the person in question.  
Generally I was struck by the superficial nature of the responses. I should have followed the email with a telephone call at least but time was against me. I had chosen this particular person as I had always believed him to be a thoughtful teacher.
7. My view on what the supervisor I interviewed described is a flexible, adaptive, and student-orientated research process that provides the student with both guidance and space with the balance varying throughout the different stages of the research process and with each individual student. This process is entirely consistent with my view of effective research supervision.
8. the possibilities of group supervision
9. Emphasis on getting good research students to begin with. This is very difficult in our Faculty as there is so much push to have research students that I feel compelled to take on whoever seems suitable in the broadest sense of the word. I would like to be able to be more choosy.
10. I suspect that my supervisor left me to my own resources more than the supervisor I interviewed does. I did not feel unsupervised, mind you, I like working away on my own projects. I suspect though that a supervisor who is more in control shapes the project more than may be necessary, perhaps? I guess this really comes down to matters of ownership of the project.

## **Do you have any suggestions for improving the interview task?**

1. Not really. Perhaps assisting/encouraging participants to get in touch with senior supervisors in other faculties would be a good idea, in that it would possibly introduce the interviewer to even greater differences in approach than would be the case in their own discipline.
2. I dislike interviews and found the task confronting. Perhaps this is why a number of other participants did not do interviews. However the process still had benefits in terms of seeing how someone else worked. I interviewed someone in my own faculty/discipline. Thus the differences in supervision style were not really significant. This did not bear out in the discussion group where experiences did seem to be varied. Thus as an improvement, I would suggest the interviewer be strongly encouraged to interview someone outside of their discipline/faculty and possibly outside of UTS.
3. It may be useful to interview more than one, and also interview other research students, so that both perspectives are gathered.
4. Perhaps interview more than one with different views.
5. No.
6. I think that it would be more effective if participants were to interview at least two supervisors whom they believe to have very different styles. Or that they be encouraged (instructed) to follow up the interview with a dialogue of some sort. The results might be thought provoking.
7. No, I found it to be a very useful and appropriate knowledge broadening tool.
8. No.
9. No, good as is.
10. How well you know the person you interviewed would have a direct bearing on the information that they were willing to divulge. I knew this person quite well and I suspect that she was very open to me but also because we work in the same faculty wanted to keep her practices seen in a good light. It could be a requirement that the person interviewed was not known to you. This would of course make it more difficult to get someone to interview but you would access quite different information.

## **Exploring different ways of supervising**

### **Instructions for conducting the interview**

In between our two meetings, you are asked to interview one experienced colleague about their supervision of PhD students or, if it is of more interest to you, students doing research Masters or professional doctoral programs.

Supervision is often a private activity between supervisor(s) and student. This can make it difficult for new supervisors to become aware of different supervisory approaches. The aim of this interview is for you to try to find out about how one of your colleagues understands supervision, what they do in supervising students and why they do it that way. This will hopefully yield some insights for reflection on your own experience.

You will need to choose a colleague who is an experienced supervisor, preferably someone who has supervised several doctoral students through to completion, but not someone who has been your own supervisor.

You'll need to allow 45 minutes to one hour for the interview (although some interviews could be longer if your colleague is talkative). Let your colleague know this when you make a time to talk and also ask if it is OK to tape the conversation so that you can listen to it again later.

We have suggested some questions which we will ask you to discuss during our next session, but feel free to ask additional questions about aspects of supervision which particularly interest you.

### **Interview process**

At the beginning, explain the purpose of the interview to your colleague and assure them that you will not reveal their name or the names of any of their students. Ask their permission again to tape record the interview and tell them that the tape is just for you and nobody else will listen to it.

For the first part of the interview, ask them to talk about their supervision of a particular student - one that they supervised through to completion recently - they don't have to mention the student's name. This will hopefully encourage them to talk specifically about what they do and why, rather than to describe supervision in more vague or impersonal terms.

Ask them to tell you a bit about the aspects of the student's background which are relevant - for example whether the student was from overseas, was working, had just completed Honours etc. Suggested questions then include:

- What did you do as a supervisor to help the student to do their PhD/research degree, and why did you do it that way:
  - ◊ at the beginning: choosing a topic, negotiating roles and expectations of the supervisor and student;
  - ◊ during the process: literature review, data collection and analysis;
  - ◊ making the most of supervisory meetings;
  - ◊ encouraging writing throughout the process;
  - ◊ in the final stages close to submission;
  - ◊ after submission?
- How did you balance giving the student direction or guidance with encouraging them to be independent?
- Does your role as a supervisor vary with different students? In what ways?
- What does it mean to do a PhD/research degree in your discipline?
- How does your supervision help students to come to an understanding of that?
- How do you monitor/evaluate the effectiveness of your supervision?
- What advice would you give to a new supervisor?

## **Interview hints**

Good interviews are friendly and open but they're different to most conversations as your colleague will hopefully be doing most of the talking. As an interviewer, your task is to listen to your colleague, encourage them to describe their experiences and views and try to understand their perspective. You don't need to ask the above questions exactly as they are worded and you might need to rephrase some of them. Most interviews are interesting and showing your genuine interest is likely to encourage a good interview.

If you're not sure what your colleague is saying in response to one of your questions, you might need to prompt them to go further. Some simple ways of doing this include:

- Can you tell me a bit more about that?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- I'm not sure what you mean by...(repeat their words back)

If you are an experienced interviewer, this task could be quite straightforward. If you have never interviewed anyone before, it may seem a little daunting. The main idea is for you to learn something different about supervision from the process, so if you achieve that then you can count your interview as a success. If you feel afterwards that you could have done it better, join the club. Even the most experienced interviewers often feel that way!

## **After the interview**

We suggest that you listen to the tape recording of the interview and make brief notes about useful practices and aspects you found particularly interesting.

Then write a paragraph or two of your reflections on:

- What was similar about your colleague's description of their supervision and your perceptions of the supervision you experienced as a student or your own experiences of being a supervisor?
- What was different?
- Was there anything that surprised you about what they said? Why was that?
- What were the most important things you learned from the interview?

Then, if you haven't yet done so, read the article by Delamont, Parry and Atkinson (1998). They focus on supervisors' views of the delicate balance between supervisor direction or guidance and student independence.

Now write your brief reflections on:

- What were your colleague's views on creating an appropriate balance at different stages of the research process - and perhaps with different students?
- How did they relate to what Delamont et al described?
- What were your views about what your colleague described?
- How does this relate to your own experience as either or both a research student and/or a supervisor?

**Please bring your notes and reflections to our next meeting.**

## Debriefing the interview

Form a pair with someone from a different discipline area, or who interviewed someone from a different discipline.

Take turns describing your interviews to each other then, as a pair, identify the points you found most interesting or revealing and any issues you'd like to discuss further.

Possible items to explore include:

- Describe your interviewee's supervision – e.g. what were they like as a supervisor, what did they see as important?
- What was similar about your interviewee's description of their supervision and your previous experiences as a student or a supervisor?
- What was different?
- Was there anything that surprised you? Why?
- What were your colleague's views on creating an appropriate balance?
- What were the most important things you learned from the interview?