

CHAPTER 13

My Supervisor and I

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How it Began

The reality was that I wasted almost two years of my PhD journey looking for a PhD supervisor willing to take me under their wing. At the time, I was a PhD candidate taking a mixed-mode programme- I enjoyed going to classes, doing assignments, conducting research with my peers, and publishing a few articles in academic journals. That was in 2013. I was always looking forward to having intellectual discourse in classes with professors who always challenged our intelligence to the point I just wanted to argue, scream, or walk out of the door because my views and opinions were never good enough. It is funny to think about that now, but those experiences taught me to compartmentalise my opinions and feelings, separating emotion from thoughts. Endless discussions in the library or the resource centre of the *kulliyyah* with my classmates made me feel intellectually alive. It was invigorating to speak my mind with like-minded peers and sometimes not-so-like-minded peers, too. This might sound insane to some people, but we never know how much the mind longs to be activated with sparks of new knowledge and wisdom that we can only get through discussions and arguments with others in a classroom setting.

Once the courses were completed, I was expected to start my research. When most of my PhD colleagues knew what they wanted to do with their thesis, I had a very vague idea of what I wanted to do. Most of my coursemates expanded their master's thesis to a PhD. As for me, I was aware of my own research interest as I had researched it. My earlier research area focused on dyslexia and the use of a narrative research approach. I thought

studying in greater depth about dyslexia would help me understand my dyslexic child better. I had read many books and academic articles on dyslexia and conducted research on the acceptance and perceptions of teachers teaching dyslexic children in government schools, so I thought I was ready to bring the proposal to a lecturer who would take me under their wing as a supervisee. But then, no one was willing. The reason was that there was only one lecturer who specialised in the field, and to make things worse, she was about to retire. I was in a limbo. My only thoughts were to quit or move to another university with the proposal. It was a frustrating and dark period for me. I started blaming myself and others. My PhD plan was not working; I took a break from the research topic too long, and I lost focus.

The turning point in my PhD life started in March 2014 when I joined the Department of Language and Literacy for a seminar at the University of Leicester, the United Kingdom. A discussion on the flight there with a lecturer made me realise that I should explore new ideas and be open to the prospect of new topics. The conversation started with my experience taking courses in the department and the assignments I did for the courses. I told her my concern about my unfinished postgraduate degree. I told her that I had furthered my studies out of my interest and passion for life-long learning and not so much for my career development. I believed she saw my potential, so the exchange continued. She shared with me her PhD experience and her area of study, which was culturally responsive teaching (CRT). I have always been intrigued by the concept of "culture", but I never thought about culture as being an integral part of teaching and learning, too. My understanding of the concept of culture was limited to arts, crafts, architecture, history, anthropology and music. As an English teacher, I love teaching a class full of international students from many countries. I adore diversity, and I love listening to my students share their cultures, beliefs, and practices. Then I asked myself, "Why don't I check this topic out?" The next thing I knew, I was searching for academic articles using Google Scholar on the train trip from Nottingham to London. I was travelling alone, and I found solace in my quick research. I found three articles and started to read the first one while occasionally stealing a look at the autumn view from the coach

windows. It was noisy on the train as college students were travelling in groups, but I was not disturbed at all. I was so immersed in my reading. The whole experience was calming-reading the articles and alternately looking out the window-capturing the sights of winter rabbits running around the leafless trees. By the time I reached the second article, I knew that that was my topic. At the time, I did not ask myself why I had not come across this topic earlier and why I did not know anything about it. I did not ask because I knew it would be futile. Instead, I asked myself, "When can I discuss this topic with the lecturer who introduced me to it and propose to her to be my supervisor?" Reading the third article, I told myself, "This topic is so me!". That was the topic I was destined to discuss, study, and write on. The topic of culture and teaching and learning really piqued my interest.

The Jump-Start Moment

It was my plan to complete my PhD before I hit 40, so I had no time to waste. Right away, on the flight back to Malaysia, I told her about the articles that I had found and read. I had a rough understanding of CRT. I talked to her about the enlightenment I had. The 16-hour flight back to Kuala Lumpur was filled with chatting more about her PhD experience.

I met her at her office and expressed my intention to work on my PhD with her as the supervisor who will help me to start my research on this newly discovered topic. In my own time, I was already reading 20 articles on CRT. From the articles, I found common themes and recommendations for future research, and it was clear to me that I was on the right track when my heart was at peace. I have been working at the language centre, where international students gather to study language skills. I saw the potential of culturally related research to be conducted at the language centre because of access to rich information from diverse backgrounds there. I also realised that studying the students and teachers at the language centre may not be enough. So, I contacted other universities that housed international students, and one university responded. I got acquainted with an academic staff there and I planned the visit to Kuching, Sarawak.

Before I realised it, I had my concept paper written with my supervisor's guidance, and it was ready to be presented to my two co-supervisors. At the same time, I had the semi-structured interview and focus group discussion protocols ready to be piloted. The procedure to appoint a supervisor and two co-supervisors for my supervisory committee was completed. I had a good feeling that it was going to be a smooth PhD thesis writing journey without giving much thought to what her supervisory styles would be.

I was then appointed to be my supervisor's research assistant. The task was to collect data for her FRGS from selected schools in Sabah and Sarawak. Her research at that time was similar to my thesis, but the focus was on high school students and teachers in the culturally and ethnically diverse cultures of Borneo. I had the opportunity to prepare myself to sharpen my data collection skills, conducting semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers and focus group discussions and surveys with almost 300 high schoolers. I took the opportunity while in Borneo to collect data for my PhD research, too. This helped me save time and money for my own data collection as I got paid to be a research assistant.

First Consultation – From the Office to the Café

This case study is narrated using the events from my first official supervision meeting with my supervisor at her office. I was nervous thinking of the questions I would be asked. I was starting the thesis journey with no theoretical framework to refer to. These were the questions she asked (written in my notebook). What about CRT that I wanted to focus on? What theoretical framework would I refer to? What research method will I adopt? Was I comfortable with qualitative approaches? What about a mixed-method approach? What have I learned from the articles I read? What would be my timeline? I thought I had the answers, but I did not. All the questions baffled me as if I had not read anything about CRT. Her comfortable and cosy office suddenly felt confining and suffocating. I started to sweat, thinking of the answers I did not have then. We continued discussing her questions at a café over coffee and cake. As we walked to the

nearest café on campus, I could breathe again. I felt less stressed and could think better. I guessed the caffeine and sugar helped me to recover. For most of the other consultation time I had with my supervisor, we did it at coffee shops on and off campus.

To summarise my first consultation experience, I believe it did not make any difference even if we knew the supervisory style we would adopt. To me, it was a "humanising process" when we moved to the café to continue our discussion. The conversation went beyond the thesis. We got to know more about each other, and by then, I had more of an idea of what she would expect from me. She gave me time to work on the responses, and it took me a few months to complete the task. Since then, we have met more often for discussions at cafés than in the office. I believe that she noticed that I was more comfortable and relaxed when the venue was less formal.

As for the questions she posed, I began to work on the proposal, finding the answers on my own, referring to notes from courses I had taken two years before and going to her for guidance from time to time. She was accessible to me at any time.

Was There a Style?

To write this chapter, I read literature on supervisory styles that I never knew existed. I studied which supervisory style or supervisor-supervisee relationship led to my PhD's success. For the journey unfolded never been told, it is a waste not to share the experience for future reference to be used by others who want to venture into this journey.

After reading some articles on supervisory styles, I came across different types of supervision approaches and related these approaches to my own experience. According to Saleem et al. (2020), there are four styles: functional, enculturation, critical thinking, and emancipation. Functional style refers to giving priority to project management while enculturation is about encouraging students to be involved in the community of the field of his or her studies, critical thinking is about encouraging students to question and analyse their own work, and the last one, emancipation is about encouraging students to ask questions and

develop their minds. If I were to point out which of the styles I had, it would be emancipation.

In addition to that, a study by Shamsi and Mohammadi (2020) highlighted that flexible and smart supervisory styles support students to be more successful. They emphasised that a critical consideration for both students and supervisors was the alignment between the subject of the student's thesis and the research area of the supervisor, as well as the supervisor's personality traits and interests. Although my thesis was similar to her research field, she did not dictate what I had to do with mine. Instead, she encouraged me to ask the right questions and motivated me to find the answers to the questions. She always said that I was the expert in my own area, which gave me the sense of autonomy to master the thesis topic.

A study by Hemer (2012) can be applicable to the narrative of this case study. Hemer (2012), in her qualitative study, listed two types of supervisory styles: problem-oriented and process-oriented. The former focuses on the task that the PhD students must do, and the latter gears towards interpersonal processes in the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. In light of these styles mentioned by Hemer, I must say that the process-oriented style was applied. As reiterated earlier, my supervisor allowed me to grow and become more independent in working on my thesis personally and professionally. There was not a second that I felt I was "pushed" to meet deadlines. She allowed me to set my own deadlines, which gave me the space to reflect on and correct the mistakes that I made. For instance, there was this one time when I had analysed the findings of my pilot study wrongly, and she asked me where it went wrong and gave me time to process, accept, and correct the errors at my own pace and space.

The feedback and encouragement students receive from their supervisors affect the quality of their PhD. As for my supervisor, she gave me the autonomy to decide on most of my thesis matters. Other factors that could contribute to the choice of what seemingly falls under the emancipation approach could be because there is a power dynamic between my supervisor and me.

The Dynamics

A dynamic supervision style during the different stages of my research supervision could be explained by my needs. At the beginning of the research, I had issues with finding the right theoretical framework. I almost totally depended on her to understand the theory I was researching. Since CRT is also her area of expertise, I was guided to theories close to CRT. It took me a while to understand the Third Space Theory. Only after that did the research objectives and questions come into place. In brief, during the first hurdle of the research, my supervisor practically held my hand. I felt that I was not mature enough as an adult learner because I had to rely on her to make me understand the whole task. Most importantly, she never patronised me for my weakness. This made me develop the attitude to prove to her that I was capable of working independently.

A conversation over coffee with a friend who did his PhD in the United Kingdom made me realise that the autonomy given to PhD students by the supervisor might be the indication that they treat the students as independent adult learners who should have already possessed the skill sets to do a doctorate study. His first meeting with his supervisor was described as "someone who does not know how to swim and about to learn for the first time being pushed into the pool without a life jacket." The cultural differences could also be the factor for the "not so pleasant" two to three first meetings he had. It was impersonal, and he felt like his supervisor had not helped him much. Basically, the supervisor did not deliver what he expected. The supervisor did not give him expectations or clear guidelines as he thought he should get. Unlike my experience, he never had his supervisory consultation with his supervisor over coffee. It was always in his supervisor's office. The meetings were usually formal. However, outside the consultation time, she was friendly and concerned about his and his family's well-being. Then, we concluded that the situation could happen as such because the supervisors treated us as mature adults who took a serious intellectual path, so we should not be guided by detailed instructions and such because we should have been equipped with the skills already when it comes to work, and expectations were not expressed vividly. Expectations came

subtly as we progressed in our own work. We were given the flexibility to work in our work on our own space and time.

With the presence of flexibility in my learning process, it taught me to be tougher. I learned to fight the negative routines I used to have, and one of them was procrastination. I used to delay my work and be easily satisfied with the little progress that I made. I knew then those habits would not drive me to success. I always kept in mind that there was someone who had expectations of me, although she never really mentioned it. However, I knew the expectation was there. The hope that I would succeed was there, too. I knew she expected me to do my best. In other words, I should never let her expectations down as she respected my pace and space to grow.

One important point to highlight is that the informal and collegial relationship helped build trust between my supervisor and me. With the absence of a power relationship, we developed a close relationship. She did not control me in terms of time, content, and growth. Another friend who did her PhD overseas described her relationship with her supervisor as collegial. In her words, the supervisor was "sporting" and never put pressure on her to finish her studies. Her supervisor expressed concern over her well-being and family. They still communicated even after she completed her studies and visited her in Malaysia.

From my experience and the experience of others mentioned here, I could say that the supervisory relationship can be complicated and simple at the same time. If there is chemistry between the students and the supervisors, a lot of conflict can be avoided. Issues related to power can be prevented if the supervisor gives supervisees freedom to explore and make mistakes. As the emancipation style of the supervisor demonstrates, supervisors who encourage students to ask questions will lead the development of the mind.

The Process and Progress – The Ups and Downs

One should not feel that a PhD is one lonely journey. Of course, it has its ups and downs, and some would agree there are more downs than ups. Therefore, the community support is crucial. An in-depth analysis was conducted to find out personal interest and

supervisory and research community support determining the success of PhD candidates. In one instance, I had a mental block when writing my findings and discussion. My supervisor suggested that I accompany her when she presented papers. The change in environment helped me to write better. I took the opportunity to travel with her to different countries to present papers and accompany her. These trips strengthened the relationship. While travelling, we had our usual consultancy wherever possible. Later, on these trips, I made sure that I would complete a task (finishing and editing chapters) by the end of the trip. In other words, each journey was utilised meaningfully.



Figure 13.1
During one of the supervision meetings, we had.

Figure 13.2

My supervisor, Prof. Dr. Faizah Idrus, Allahyarhamah Dr. Roziana Md Rosli, and I on the ferry from the Tangiers to Gibraltar on the 21 March 2016.



Figure 13.3
Supervisory meeting at the rest area on our way from Spain to Portugal.



Figure 13.4
The supervisory consultations were always stress-free.



According to Cornér et al. (2023), social support and personal interest are found to significantly shape the PhD candidate's trajectory. Personal interest refers to the student's feelings and values driven by the curiosity to explore and create new knowledge and to test their own intellectual potential and ability, as opposed to instrumental interest, which is focused more on professional development. In reference to this study, a supervisor who knows the driving force, whether personal or instrumental, of the supervisee would be able to identify a more suitable supervisory style to adopt. In my case, I was more driven by my personal interest, which was to test how far I could go intellectually and for self-gratification. The incentive to succeed was more personal than instrumental; it was not driven by the career advancement that I would get once my PhD was completed.

Other than the interest, the community support was another factor that I believe gave me the motivation to take on the PhD journey. I established new relationships with lecturers who had taught me courses before I began my thesis journey. My supervisory committee helped me with the different aspects of my thesis. They were also my toughest critics and were always assisting me whenever necessary. There was a network of PhD students in the *kulliyyah* who always supported each other academically and emotionally. This research community support that exists in the *kulliyyah* helped me get through difficult phases, such as data collection, transcription, and data analysis. Among my students, they were research assistants to different lecturers in their respective *kulliyyahs* who were trained to conduct qualitative research. My students helped me with the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. I found that this networking had a positive impact on my PhD.

Besides having strong research community support in the *kulliyyah*, I had personal support from my friends. It is good to have a "writing partner" or a buddy who shares your journey. I was blessed to have such social support who were there throughout my thesis work. Of course, the journey was not without its share of emotional roller coasters. It would not be a PhD thesis if it were easy.

Is There an Ending to a PhD Journey?

One might say that the PhD is over when one has attended the viva voce and made corrections to the thesis, which would be the end of one's PhD journey. Many would agree with this interpretation, but it might be different to others. Immediately after I submitted the corrected thesis, I found myself in an indescribable emptiness, as if something was missing from my life, and I did not like that. To fill up the emptiness, I continued to read articles and books related to my studies. Although my job does not require me to publish articles in academic journals and conduct research, I still do research with my colleagues. I focus on research related to my work as a teacher and explore new ideas and concepts. I also now study the importance of culture in teaching for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

A PhD in education lifted one's status in an educational setting. I had to adapt to people's expectations for those with a PhD. I shared my experiences with my students and friends, advising them that the stage when they choose their supervisor is the most crucial one. With a supervisor who treats you as a mature adult and respects your interests, space, and pace, anyone could have that challenging but meaningful journey that will eventually raise you to become an independent and knowledgeable person who shares and co-creates knowledge with others. A PhD journey could never end because it has become part of your life. The routines have shaped your way of thinking. A PhD does not make you higher or smarter than those who do not have it. Gaining a PhD is knowing that there is more that you do not know, and learning is never-ending.

The skills and knowledge of a PhD student must be shared with others. I do get colleagues and friends coming to me for advice on methodology, literature, data analysis, and other things. Not only that, but we also talk about time management and priorities. Most of us work while studying and juggling both matters is never an easy task. I used to allocate time after work every day to write my thesis. It does not matter how much time is spent on the thesis as long as one is consistent. In other words, consistency is the key to success. I do not think I would be the best PhD student from the Kulliyyah had I not been consistent in my

effort to write a good thesis. The support from one's family members is crucial as time spent on the thesis may demand one to be away from the family both physically and emotionally. It is very challenging if one does not get the support from his or her loved ones.

As a supervisee, not knowing there was a style did not make any difference, but it could help students to be aware of the different styles available. Having to document the details of my PhD journey helped me to remember the events that unfolded. One supervisory style might not suit everyone. As the saying says, no one size fits all. For some supervisees, more formal supervision might be more effective depending on the supervisee's interest and motive for doing the PhD. What suited me was the over coffee and cake supervisory sessions and travelling around the world with her for a change of environment that motivated me to write a better thesis. For me, what was important was that my supervisor allowed flexibility and authority. On top of that, keeping the relationship beyond supervisory is the best thing that one can do with his or her supervisor because both can never stop learning from each other. I pray everyone will be as lucky as I am to have her as my supervisor.

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