



He Rautaki mo te Akoranga Kairangi

1. The nature of doctoral supervision

One bit of advice an experienced colleague gave me which is very valuable: ‘Be friendly but not familiar.’ Even though the Māori version of friendly is probably more familiar than the Pākehā version of friendly. (Māori supervisor)

There’s much more reciprocity. There’s much more of a kind of flat learning experience rather than a pupil–teacher one because you should be both learning from the process. (Non-Māori supervisor)

My supervisor’s absolutely amazing. He’s got this ability to look at something and just listen to you and then draw out the key points. He just cuts away all the stuff and says, ‘That’s what you’re doing.’ Putting up plans and models and structures, he’s in a league of his own. (Student)

Introduction

Formal academic supervision is an essential ingredient of doctoral study in our country. At this highest level of education, the underlying model is something like an apprenticeship in which a novice researcher (the student or candidate) learns through a close, almost “hands-on” working relationship with one or more experienced researchers. Most institutions have some kind of guidelines for supervision that spell out the responsibilities of supervisors and student—it’s worth looking at these and discussing them with your supervisors. Generally, most people argue that having good supervision makes a big difference to students’ experience of undertaking doctoral research. Our research supports this, but it also shows that “good supervision” means different things to different students and supervisors.

When Joan Metge wrote of traditional *ako* that “learning is a very personal process in which the affection, respect, awe, maybe even a love–hate relationship, between learner and ‘teacher’ play a key part” (1983, p. 14), she could have been writing about doctoral supervision. It, too, is a very personal process in which emotional, sometimes even conflictual, elements can play a part. This does not necessarily mean the supervision is failing, although you need to find ways to cope with these emotions and still keep going. Here are some of the experiences and insights shared with us by students and supervisors, along with some guidelines for you as a doctoral student.

Doctoral students are more like colleagues

Doctoral students are kind of like colleagues. Colleagues that are still learning—and I'm always still learning heaps anyway, so it's not a straightforward teacher–learner relationship. (Māori supervisor)

I was very slow to take up an active role. It was an interesting sort of fencing around between us for a year or more—I didn't want to kind of impose or direct too much but the student was somewhat floundering. (Non-Māori supervisor)

I'd come into contact with my supervisor regularly. I've worked in this area all my life and he's well known in it as well, so we'd meet at conferences, we'd meet quite regularly. He'd be down here for various meetings and so there would be a lot of formal but also informal meetings and gatherings. (Student)

When we asked supervisors to describe the kinds of teaching and learning processes they used in supervision, many responded by emphasising the ways in which their students were their colleagues. Certainly they hoped this would be the case towards the end of the supervision. By then they expected the student to know more than them about the research topic. One implication of this viewpoint is that often supervisors can be quite hands-off, expecting you (the student) to take the lead in getting the supervision you need. As the second quote above shows, this is not always successful, and that supervisor later changed the way she was going about supervision to be more directive in the early stages of the student's research.

Different supervisors have different styles

I don't see it as supervision, I see it as training. And so we're training people to have what they need to be able to become researchers. (Māori supervisor)

I'm not too pushy. I never would confront my student in the corridor and say 'Hey, how's it going?' I treat them as adults. I don't see it as my role to be mother to them and nag them and remind them. But I'm always available. When they say, 'Oh, could I have an appointment?', I say, 'Yes, let's have it on Friday.' (Non-Māori supervisor)

Early on the supervision was about how we're going to do this research: What is consultation gonna look like? How involved are you gonna be in the process as my supervisor? And I became aware that while my supervisor was alright supporting me, he wasn't so good at supporting the whole idea of kaupapa-Māori-style research. The second supervisor was very much interested in looking after me as a person. So her understanding of the relationship was that while my first supervisor would look after the research, she was gonna look after me progressing through the research. You know, emotionally, socially, with my sanity intact. (Student)

The supervisors in our research varied in their basic stance towards doctoral supervision. For example, some emphasised the independence of the student while others emphasised the need to direct the student quite strongly at times to save them going off on time-wasting digressions. Such different points of view usually have good reasons (and experience) behind them, and a supervisor might be quite reluctant to diverge too much from what feels best to them. Most supervisors believe they need to adjust their practice to suit different students—sometimes the difficulty is working out what the student needs. Having supervisors with different styles can be a strength in your supervision.

Supervisors will take a range of roles

I think Māori students need and want to feel safe and trusted and trusting and that you're not going to give them a hard time, that you're gonna help them when they need help. But there has to be a tension between the friendship and the supervision: those two can't fall into each other. Because when push comes to shove, I've got to say 'no', 'yes'. You know? One of my students calls me 'Nanny Dragon' because I honestly get really heavy with her about her academic work. (Non-Māori supervisor)

Mostly my role is in supervising the process of doing a PhD, and ensuring they have the right support. That includes content supervisors on their panel if they need that, and I certainly can't provide it always. Almost without exception our PhDs are supported through scholarships or through research grants, so I see it as my role to ensure they've got the money to do their research. (Māori supervisor)

The supervisors talked about many possible roles as being legitimate, depending on their preferred supervision style, but also on what they think they have to offer any particular supervision. Sometimes they were only too aware that they did not have much content or cultural expertise and that the student would need to look elsewhere for this kind of advice. Some of the various roles that were mentioned by our research participants (students and supervisors) were guide, coach, mentor, model, critic, supporter, friend, research star, financier. Not all supervisors wanted or were able to take all these roles. Some tried to maintain boundaries around their role, like the supervisor above who talks about being “friendly but not familiar”. Most supervisors in our study emphasised that their practice changed in response to different students as well as different stages in the process. Many also described having to make quite tricky judgements at times about how to assist their student most effectively and getting better at this through experience.

Teaching and learning are reciprocal

That was very important growth for me because I learnt a lot about making connections, understanding whakapapa and understanding that this kind of work needed to be done in Māori space and with appropriate Māori support. (Māori supervisor)

God, I've learned huge amounts from my Māori students. It's one of the joys of working with them, actually, because I'm Pākehā and from down south. Ten years ago, I knew nothing. So I've learned an enormous amount. I've read relatively little, but I've learned it through them and they've been very generous. (Non-Māori supervisor)

So I chose a supervisor who is a guru in my field. And because he was from overseas, he had no idea really what a Māori was. He didn't come with all of that background, he was learning as I was kind of teaching him that stuff. (Student)

Both supervisors and students talked about how teaching and learning went both ways in doctoral supervision: the supervisor teaches the student but the student also teaches the supervisor. When supervising Māori doctoral students, supervisors not only learn more about new aspects of their academic field or some domain of professional practice, but also about Māori culture and politics. Non-Māori supervisors mentioned, in particular, the pleasure of being included in and learning about aspects of Māori life that were otherwise not easily accessible to them. Supervisors also talked about learning *how to supervise* from their students—some acknowledged that, apart from their own experience of having been supervised, this was the main source of their learning as supervisors.

Supervisors are sometimes at the edge of their knowledge

For me, just looking at my programme, and looking at where other Māori staff supervise, it's much less likely to be within whatever your specialised area is. Probably the most common way I get supervisions is requests from Pākehā academics asking if I would supervise one of their students, often in a secondary role. (Māori supervisor)

The student's work was not only the edges of my understanding, it was way beyond. I mean, I didn't know the theory. I could pick up issues to do with consistency and clarity of argument, the way things are referenced and authorities referred to, etcetera, but the content was way outside of my experience. (Non-Māori supervisor)

It's common in doctoral education, especially when the research topic comes from the student's own interests, that supervisors feel as if they are working on the edge of their academic knowledge and authority. This was even more complex when non-Māori supervisors were involved in supervising kaupapa

Māori research, or Māori supervisors were invited into projects outside their discipline in order to provide cultural expertise. Supervisors talked about the importance of including others who did have relevant expertise, either as formal supervisors or as informal advisers—and they expected students to take the initiative on the latter especially. Even where the student’s research falls outside of a supervisor’s own field of expertise, however, supervisors still have plenty of useful knowledge. For example: ways to survive the process of undertaking a piece of substantial independent research, insight into the writing process, experience with methodology, understanding of institutional requirements and so on. Many have wide collegial networks they can link their students with as well.

Supervision is more effective when the student has other forums for advice

I rely on other people to assist the student. I also rely on and encourage the students to be part of a Māori peer network, and the university’s been particularly good at organising that sort of thing. (Non-Māori supervisor)

The cultural adviser was way more demanding than the supervisor was. She expected to see things, she was prepared to go out of her way to take the student to hui, to introduce the student and then she didn’t want to be embarrassed. So she was very clear about her expectations. And when the student was saying things like they only wanted to read things written by their iwi, it was the community person who said ‘No, no, no, you’ll read everything ever written by anyone on that topic, ’cause we want to be sure you know what you’re talking about.’ She would say those things really frankly. I thought that was great. I thought those community advisers can say things that academic supervisors can’t. (Māori supervisor)

Both students and supervisors talked about the value of the student having a wider base of support for their research than just their formal supervisors. Students talked about learning from other students through workshops and conversations (for example, through participating in local cohort activities of the National Programme for Māori and Indigenous Doctoral Postgraduate Advancement), as well as from iwi or whānau-based advisers. “Going home” sometimes for support and encouragement came up as well, with some students doing a significant part of their writing away from the institution and other daily demands. Also, if your supervisor is unavailable for some reason (we heard about health issues as well as the more usual sabbatical leaves and so on), or your supervision is going through a tricky patch, other people can keep you going.

Some guidelines for dealing with supervision along the way

- There is no final definition of what good doctoral supervision looks like. Fundamentally, good supervision will both encourage and challenge you, although not always both at the same time! (Remember Metge’s love–hate relationship.)
- Your supervision is likely to change over time—as your supervisor gets to know you and as both your confidence and independence increase.
- Assume your supervisor wants to help you as best they can—let them know what kind of help might be most effective.
- Expect the unexpected in supervision—realise your experience won’t be the same as anyone else’s, but share what’s going on with others by way of reality checking, getting advice and letting off steam!
- Find other people—fellow students, cultural advisers, other academic colleagues—you can talk to about your work and who can give you advice and encouragement.

Reference:

Metge, J. (1983). *Learning and teaching: He tikanga Māori*. Wellington: Department of Education.