

**Amanda's diary:
Team supervision in practice**

Correspondence November 2003

Episode I

In July the Postgraduate Admissions tutor in my department, Peter, sent me an e-mail saying that he had received an application from an overseas student to do a Ph.D. in the department. The student appeared to be very promising, and I was being asked to co-supervise with a colleague. This colleague, Charles, was a clinical specialist in the substantive topic of the Ph.D. (about which I knew nothing) and my role would be as methodological advisor. I had myself undertaken research on sensitive issues that presented challenging methodological problems, and, as the teacher of methods courses in the department, I was thought to be a suitable member of the student's supervisory team.

A few days later I was sent a copy of the student's proposal via e mail and could see that she was very knowledgeable about the area and had put together an impressive proposal that demonstrated a wide range of reading and a good grasp of theory. However, the methodology consisted only of her declaration that she would both interview and act as a therapist for the target population – women who had undergone violent sexual assault. In addition she required that the women should also have been treated with a particular therapeutic approach.

Q1 Discuss application and selection procedures in your departments

Q2 How should Amanda respond in this case?

Episode 2

Clearly such ambitious and potentially unrealistic expectations in accessing participants caused me some concern, which I voiced. However, Peter told me that my co-supervisor – a clinical specialist in the therapy in question – would be able to negotiate access on her behalf.

On this basis I agreed to act as co-supervisor.

Q1 Discuss Amanda's decision

Q2 What should she do now?

Episode 3

The University then sent her a letter of acceptance.

However, a week before the student was due to arrive from South America, I received an e-mail from Peter saying that Charles had had to withdraw from his promise to co-supervise owing to pressure of work and family commitments.

This left me concerned that I could find myself the sole supervisor of an overseas Ph.D. student about whose substantive area I knew nothing and whose methodology was extremely problematic. I indicated this to Peter who said he would try and find another co-supervisor.

Carry out a brief risk assessment of this doctorate and list the key points on the acetate provided

Q What options has Peter in these circumstances?

Episode 4

At the end of this week the student, Rosa, arrived with high – and reasonable - expectations that experts in the field would supervise and support her.

By this stage Peter had persuaded Charles to contribute ‘unofficially’ to the student’s supervision, but it became clear that before he had pulled out, the efforts he had made on her behalf to gain access had failed. Rosa, while qualified as a therapist in Brazil, would not be allowed to practise in the UK, and additionally Charles had failed to negotiate access even for interviewing purposes.

Q1 Discuss this turn of events

Q2 What should Amanda do now?

Episode 5

A meeting was called by Peter. It was attended by Peter, Charles, Eileen (a part time Research Associate), Robert (a senior clinical colleague) and me. At this meeting it was agreed that the best person to act as mentor would be Eileen who had both academic and clinical expertise adjacent to the topic. Charles still declined to be an 'official' supervisor.

The outcome was that Robert and I would be the named co-supervisors for official purposes; Charles would advise on an unofficial basis and Eileen would be the student's first port of call, mentor and if possible, named joint supervisor.

Q1 Discuss the arrangements now agreed

Q2 What should Amanda do now?

Episode 6

We called a further meeting for the following week to include all of us but with Rosa too.

The meeting went well, and Rosa seemed impressed by the array of academics lined up to support her research. The fact that her two co-supervisors knew nothing about her substantive area, the one expert attending was unwilling to supervise 'officially' and had failed to gain access, and her mentor was a part time RA appeared to be lost on her.

At this meeting I warned Rosa that she would find access problematic and she might have to consider alternative strategies that shifted the focus and precluded the need to act as therapist. She indicated forcefully her determination to carry out the research as planned and not be deflected from her original purpose.

We agreed at this meeting that the four of us would act as a supervisory panel and that Rosa should consult any/all of us as necessary, but with Eileen as her main contact.

Q1 Discuss this outcome

Q2 What needs to be done now?

Episode 7

At this point, Peter sought approval from the Dean to appoint Eileen as joint supervisor on this basis.

Unfortunately the Dean immediately refused to sanction this, on the grounds that Eileen's contract was due to terminate in less than 6 months. He was unwilling to employ Eileen on either a contract or a fees basis to continue supervision after this period. In the interim, however, Peter agreed that Eileen could act in this capacity - though what will happen if she does not secure another research contract is left unclear.

This is the situation at the beginning of November. I wait with some trepidation the coming months as Rosa realises that even in combination this 'impressive' array of academics might let her down.

Q1 Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of team supervision

Q2 Suggest a plan of action for Amanda in these circumstances?

Update October 2004

Episode 8

Rosa's supervisory team arranged, with her agreement, that she would meet us individually by arrangement as and when she felt necessary and with all of us as a panel (or as many as could be there) on a monthly basis. However, after the first couple of panel supervisions it became clear that Rosa found the process intimidating despite our best efforts to be friendly, informal and encouraging. The supervisor she seemed to have most empathy with was Eileen (who had fortunately been offered a year's research contract by a new member of staff and was thus still available to act as a supervisor) and Rosa took to popping into Eileen's office on a frequent basis.

Rosa appeared to be unaware that the panel might communicate with each other outside of the supervisory meetings and sometimes it seemed that she was playing us off against each other. When one of us said something she didn't like, she would go round the panel canvassing support for her preferred position. Eileen and I realised early on what she was doing and agreed to keep in touch with each other so that we could present a united front and consistent position upon which we were in any case agreed.

Q1 Discuss this turn of events

Q2 Suggest any principles for good communication between student and supervisors

Episode 9

This situation continued throughout the academic year during which time the two main problems – and main topic of the supervisions - were the standard of her writing and her (predictable) lack of success in gaining access to the target population of women undergoing therapy.

Some coaching from the support service provided by the University helped the writing issue. The problems with access to data continued to be a concern, but Rosa did manage to carry out a pilot study with a group of practitioners rather than the women she hoped to interview eventually.

Rosa's write up of her pilot study was surprisingly good and we all felt encouraged and praised the standard of her analysis. She had by now seemed to settle into the university culture, had almost got used to the climate and was producing a great deal of writing (literature reviews etc) though none of it was what she really wanted to be doing which was interviewing the women in therapy.

The university's regulations required that in July we must hold an annual review that should include all the supervisors, an internal examiner from the department and an external examiner from another department. Rosa appeared to be very anxious about this review and I went to some pains to reassure her that it was more for her benefit than ours to ensure that she was on target for a Ph.D. and being properly supervised by us.

Q1 What are the purposes of progress reviews, how should they be conducted and by whom?

Q2 How should a student be prepared for such reviews?

Episode 10

However, the review turned out to be more like an upgrade or - even a viva - as the external examiner challenged Rosa on almost every aspect of her work to date. Rosa acquitted herself well and defended both her theoretical approach and methodology convincingly. At the end of the review it was made clear to Rosa that she could continue with her study and that an official report would be prepared by the panel and submitted to the Post Graduate Studies Office to that effect.

We had been due to have a supervisory panel meeting with Rosa the following week to debrief, but she e mailed us all to say that she needed some time to think about what had occurred at the review and would like to cancel the meeting. I thought this was a pity as we could have reassured her about how well she had done at the review.

Rosa then went to see Eileen and told her that she was unwilling to see us as a panel any more but would see us separately as and when she needed to.

Q1 What guidelines should there be for the conduct of progress reviews?

Q2 How should the supervisors react to Rosa's decision?

Episode 11

I e-mailed her to tell her I was always available for an appointment when she felt it necessary.

Several weeks passed and Rosa did not contact me, I assumed she was seeing other panel members, and as I was snowed under with MA marking did not check to see if things were going well for her.

At the beginning of September I had an email from Peter, the Post Graduate Admissions tutor in the department, to say that Rosa did not want to have any of the panel as her supervisors any longer but wanted Peter to act as sole supervisor.

Q1 What are the procedures at your institution for changing members of the supervisory team?

Q2 How should Amanda respond to Peter?

Episode 12

This came as something of a shock as I could not understand in what way she believed we had failed her needs. Nevertheless, I e mailed Peter and said that if that was what he and Rosa had agreed I hoped the arrangement would go well and asked if he would tell Rosa that if ever she wanted any informal help or advice from me she would be very welcome.

About a week later I heard (on the grapevine) that Rosa intended to return to Brazil to attempt to collect her fieldwork there. She had run out of money and of hope that she could gain access in this country. In Brazil she could live more cheaply with her family, practice as a therapist and she also hoped gain access to the population so elusive to her in this country. She intended to return to Brazil for a year and come back to England to write up under Peter's supervision.

A few days after I heard that she was leaving the country Rosa sent me an e-mail asking if she could come and see me. I of course agreed and a couple of days later she arrived at my office with a 'thank you' card and a present so there appeared to be no ill feeling on her part.

However, I still do not understand what happened or why and did not feel able to pursue the matter with her lest she think I was being critical or I was offended. It seemed that the best hope for her completion was for her to leave for Brazil with relationships at the university as cordial as possible so that she would feel able to return and seek support from the original panel if necessary.

Messages from Amanda

Nov 2005

Rosa has returned with a wheelbarrow full of data gathered while back in her home country... She has paid me a visit and brought me a gift handcrafted by her sister - so it seems no hard feelings.

July 2008

Rosa got her PhD awarded successfully after the viva with no amendments

Q Have you any comments on Amanda's strategy in this case?

Q2 Are there any procedures that should be put in place in this department to deal with any aspects of this case?

Team task:

On the acetate provided list the main features of a code of practice for team supervision.