

Chris
A PhD student struggling to finish because “life gets in the way”

I

April 2008
Email from Bren

I attended your supervisor workshop last week and I would like to take you up on your offer to advise on a problem where I can't see a clear way forward.

I 'inherited' my PhD student, Chris, in her second year from a colleague who left the department, as I was the only member of staff left with experience in qualitative research. I had previously done fieldwork in the area of her PhD. Her previous supervisor seemed to have not given the best guidance or start, and was herself off sick for a few months. Chris had an 'odd' supervisory set up – she was an ESRC CASE student with an industrial supervisor. Another colleague in my department was the joint supervisor from a more 'technical' background. The industrial supervisor is for the most part too busy to get involved with her PhD. She e-mails him and most of the time gets no response. In a way, she seems to find this quite convenient as it often justifies not doing anything. I tell her to ring him instead, but she often finds reasons not to – that he is just back from leave, or she is going to visit the office soon. The other supervisor in my Centre is not from the same disciplinary background as me, and has often asked if she will “get a PhD out of this”. I bring him in when his technical perspective is needed, or when I need to try and exert a bit more pressure about progress. The involvement in progress hasn't worked and the supervisory set up doesn't work either.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

Chris is currently a few months into her fourth, write up, year. I'm at the level of being 'quite concerned' that she won't finish, but I've been at that level since taking her on in her second year. She generally has problems completing work for deadlines – there are often attempts to negotiate deadlines, or if I am remaining firm as I know she will try and negotiate which only results in more slippage for her, I receive work in very draft form or incomplete.

I have tried a number of strategies to stop the slippage. At the outset of taking over her supervision, I made it clear that slippage in a PhD beyond being funded would make life very difficult – with the need for a part-time job or even the temptation of funding a full-time job that would then make finishing tricky. She has employed someone else, using her research fund, to do much of the transcription work associated with her fieldwork. Our head of Centre also gave her some more money to employ the transcriber for longer, as her pot of money was used up before the transcription was finished. This does not appear to have speeded things up that much, and most PhD students would have transcribed their own material in the period.

I have often set deadlines for particular essays which are intended as the basis for thesis chapters, but they are never finished – they remain with sections to do or authors to look at, put on the long term list of things to do. I try to make sure she has unmoveable deadlines to work to which can't be negotiated – such as presenting material to peers and other people. Another colleague in the Centre gives her a date to present her material, and refuses to move it. These can produce some good material, but often the scope has been negotiated down.

I have previously (3rd year) sat down with Chris and filled in a big Waterstones wall planner to stop the slippage. This did not work the first time – things took much longer than planned, including finding the participants for the study. After Christmas 2007, into the write up year, we tried the wall planner again. She took it more seriously this time as funding had run out. However, it is now crunch time as to whether she'll stick to it.

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Two weeks ago I was expecting a draft methodology chapter. She said it would be “very rough”. She had been house sitting for her mum that week, and described it as quite “unproductive”, which is worrying. The chapter was very rough, really just a cut and paste job on bits of other documents she had produced before. Lots of relevant literature was missing, and it was mainly a chapter about ‘what she had done’. It didn’t have any kind of flow. I’ve given her the methodology chapter of my other PhD student who has just submitted, so she knows what standard is expected and how it should be argued. She has looked at other people’s PhDs from the library, which I suggested a long time ago. I said that the chapter from the other student was too much focused on literature and not enough on ‘what she had done’, so that hopefully Chris could find a middle way. I am expecting to see improved drafts, but I don’t know how much help I can give. It took ages (4 hours) constructively criticising and marking the ‘very rough’ methodology chapter because it was in such a ‘draft’ state. Yet if I do not request to regularly see the progress of chapters, I fear there will be more slippage. There is a problem with how much time I can give vs. Chris’s self motivation to get on with things herself.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

There is a bit of a 'culture' of PhD slippage in our Centre. Chris is friends with another PhD student in our Centre who is still finishing writing up in his 5th year, having gone part-time for a year to take a full-time job, and just returned. One colleague has been doing her PhD practically full-time for 6 years. That culture doesn't help progress.

I have been giving Chris 2-3 hours supervision every 2 weeks since taking over her supervision – offering critical perspectives on her work, showing how to do qualitative analysis, checking on progress etc. This is far more contact time than I ever received as a PhD student. In a way, I feel there is not enough input or ideas from Chris, too much from me, and a bit of a culture of dependency. I have two other PhD students who are making good progress, and one part-time student has just submitted her thesis in just over three years. They are very self-motivated and know exactly what they want to do in their thesis, and just require critical guidance. There is the added complication with Chris that she suspended her study for 3 months during her second year. This she put down to health issues – she does suffer from migraines but I also think there are issues about anxiety and depression, which I thoroughly empathise with.

She is now also seeing a counsellor at the University. She has admitted that she is better working as an employee for someone else, rather than doing a PhD for herself. I can only think there are some deep rooted self esteem issues involved in that. But the suspension and anxiety/depression issues make it difficult to strongly enforce deadlines. There is always the option for Chris to say that she will give up if things get too tough, and she has previously said she might give up. I also don't want to stress her out too much and push her back into her anxiety/depression cycle.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

I get on very well with Chris on a personal and professional level. It perhaps makes the supervisory relationship harder. I am 32 and she is 30, and while I try to be authoritative, it is difficult to be with the age gap. She respects my research experience and academic knowledge, but often ignores advice about research management and avoiding pitfalls. Her PhD student friend has often remarked that she will choose the most difficult way to do anything. I often make her aware of consequences of her decisions – which seem to involve putting things off until a more convenient time or not inviting enough people to make the dissemination workshops that she has as part of her thesis write up worthwhile. However, she is a master at offering justifications about why her way is best, or why there are other circumstances which prevent doing it that way. As one of my other PhD students says, for Chris, “life gets in the way”. Her work output is highly variable, which she puts down to not feeling well or having a cold, or some crisis at home, or computer problems. She often seems prone to prevarication – doing things which do not show in terms of the thesis progress - such as checking the small details of transcripts, but taking forever to do it.

It seems like fiddling while Rome burns. From one week to the next there is little progress. She tends to do the easier things and put off the harder ones until later. However, later is coming quickly now. If she cannot complete an essay and hand in, I do not know what will happen when handing in an entire thesis. We are breaking it down into chapters and making it all seem ‘do-able’, but this is resulting in a ‘cut and paste’ approach.

I don’t know how to help her complete the thesis in the write up year. Other people have said it’s her thesis and it’s up to her. I’ve been worried about progress since the second year, and during the last supervisory Board meeting, she received a ‘disappointing’ for progress. She said she was disappointed with her progress too, and that it was fair comment.

I’ve presented this case study to other supervisors, and they said they would have stopped the PhD for lack of progress. I know from her Masters thesis that she is very capable of getting a PhD from an academic perspective, but I am not so sure from the perspective of self-motivation. I feel very much alone in her supervision and am out of ideas on how to get more progress. With my other two students, we have a policy of joint supervision – two supervisors present at most meetings. I think at supervisory boards with the Head of Centre and the other supervisors, there is ‘surprise’ at the slowness of progress. When Chris is out of the room they ask why progress is so slow, and I don’t have a single answer to give. I would like someone else to also be involved in supervision to give another perspective, but none of the other supervisors have the time or experience to get more involved. There is one other senior person in the Centre who could help me, but he has many of his own students.

I’d be very grateful for any advice about how to proceed from this point, as I don’t know who to ask for independent advice. My inclination is to ask the other senior member of the department I mention above to sit in on some supervision meetings.

Team task

On the acetate provided list the main suggestions you would make to Bren

John's response:

Dear Bren,

I've been thinking about this and now share my thoughts with you, many of which will already have occurred to you.

First, from your account I read that you have allowed Chris to define you as the person responsible for her PhD. It sounds as if you are taking most of the initiatives, setting deadlines, requesting chapters, etc etc? this allows her to behave as a child towards a parent, taking very little responsibility for the quality and amount of work, and avoiding making her own decisions. I'll bet she says to herself and family 'Bren's given me a couple more weeks' etc etc...

Thus I think the time has come for you to gently but firmly and finally turn the tables. Probably by arranging a special meeting, possibly with a supportive and sympathetic colleague, with the following agenda:

- Q1 Do you want a PhD?
- Q2 When are you going to submit it?
- Q3 Working back from there: when will I see your final draft? First draft? Draft chapters?
- Q4 Suggest she goes away and works out her own project plan and lets you have it as soon as it is ready so that you can put key dates in your diary and reserve time to read and comment on her work by agreed dates
- Q5 Say that, since it her PhD, not yours, from now on she must take the lead. You will not chase her or even contact her if she misses her own deadlines etc.
- Q6 She should propose a date for your next meeting
- Q7 For each meeting she should propose an agenda and record outcomes, and email you her record of what was agreed so that you know what is in her mind
- Q8 If you have not already done so, you might like to give her copies of one or two of the time management case studies I handed out at the seminar.
- Q9 Throughout, do this in a friendly and committed way, pointing out that you want her to succeed and will provide support, but the ball is in her court. But then hold back and let her take over if she is willing to do so. If she doesn't deliver, then no PhD.

Overall you should be much more laid back: clearly implying that it is her life, but that you will try and fit in with her plan. They do not chase her any more. If this means she gives up, hands in nothing etc, then so be it. Do not take on responsibility for what is hers...

What do you think?

Best

John

Dear John,

Thanks very much for taking the time to offer such good advice. I agree with your analysis of child-parent. I'm seeing the student again next Tuesday, and will try the things you suggest. I will keep you posted as to how they work, and ultimately hope this case could provide guidance for other PhD supervisors in the same situation.

Best wishes and thanks,

Bren

Great, Bren. If you follow this path, it is guaranteed to 'work'. If you firmly transfer the responsibility to her and get on with other things, either she will take charge or she will give up now, saving you months, maybe years, of angst...

Let me know

Best

John

Before turning the page, discuss John's response

August 2009

You asked what is currently happening with Chris? Well, her completion year is up at the beginning of Jan. We are looking to convince the Dean to get a further completion year.

Chris is self funding at the moment, and has indicated she will need to get a job in the next few months. It has recently become apparent that she has problems at home which are the root cause of most of her delay, which she has only just confided in me about. She is not getting on very well with her partner since moving in with him in her second year, and is thinking about whether she should find a place of her own, although finance is prohibitive. She is determined to finish the PhD, and thinks this would be easier if she lived elsewhere. But it appears she is constantly distracted by the situation at home, and emotionally upset by it.

She has improved her progress since the last Board and received a 'good' this time. She is still getting lost in coding her data however, and is now hitting the stage of writing her results chapters. She produced a very good methodology chapter which was a great improvement, and seemed to have taken on board my comments about argument and flow. We are getting on much better since I made it clear that she was in charge of her progress, that I am around to facilitate whenever she wants, and that I am not going to be her PhD policeman. So your advice has worked. She has slipped from her timetable again, but she has decided that we should rewrite it together shortly. I am advising her to stop getting obsessed by the coding.

Q Discuss this situation now and suggest any further strategies Bren should adopt in assisting Chris at this stage

October 09

My last entry about Chris seemed quite hopeful, and I was obviously optimistic after the good methodology chapter. Shortly after my last update we heard our Centre would be closed early the following year. It was a shock for everybody. Nothing was clear and it was a horrible time of uncertainty for all the staff in the Centre and not least the students. Students were eventually told they would be found alternative supervisors if necessary. Meetings took place with Chris as normal, but she was obviously worried by the situation, and I couldn't tell her that I would carry on when applying for jobs elsewhere and going for interviews. I just said we would carry on as long as possible, and tried to keep things going.

During this time, Chris decided to split from her long-term partner, and move into a flat. This decision was to send out ripples of consequences which practically stopped the PhD in its tracks. She asked for some time out while she moved belongings into a smaller flat, which seemed to take a long time as she always found it difficult to cope with moving, rearranging and getting rid of her things. She got a temporary job which was actually several hours a week, in order for her to keep her quite expensive flat. I was surprised she'd taken on so many hours, as it would definitely interfere with the PhD write up. Things moved slowly and I was concerned, as I'd agreed to give her some space, but not for her to do no work.

Very little if any progress was made towards the Christmas period, and I took the decision that if Chris was going to survive into her second completion year that we would need to suspend her studies retrospectively for the autumn term. I thought she deserved a chance, not least because the Centre's impending closure was difficult for the students.

She agreed it was the only way forward. In the meantime, I was told another department would accept me, and that I would transfer early in the following year. Chris came back to university early the next term, and shortly after I joined the new department, I asked for another supervisor to help – something I had wanted for some years. Another female supervisor joined our meetings, and I explained to her the complex background to the student.

The second completion year Board soon loomed large again, and it was clear that Chris needed to get some draft chapters done and a thesis outline if she was to be allowed to continue. I worked together with the new supervisor to try and achieve this. It was agreed that the new supervisor would try and query what had gone wrong before, and take a fairly strict line. I said I felt that I was too close to Chris because of the number of years of supervision and all the things that had happened, and this made it harder for her to treat my deadlines seriously (so I thought). But she might take notice of a new supervisor. Realistic deadlines were set and it was made clear what chapter should be worked on.

A chapter came in as a response to our first deadline. But it was incomplete, with missing sections and in a kind of strange shorthand. It took hours to mark. The other supervisor only marked the intelligible bits. We then asked for a polished version of it for the Board, as well as a fairly detailed thesis plan, which would decide if Chris could continue to the second completion year. That was a few weeks away, and we were hopeful this was enough time for

her to get something good done. But I suspected there might be some mental health or other issues – she was often quite confused and kept thinking deadlines for work were actually meetings with us. She didn't pick up on some fairly obvious things.

At this time, I attended a session on coping with students with mental health difficulties which was newly offered by the university, as I had always suspected this may explain some of Chris's behaviour, and provide me with some coping strategies. I knew then that I could speak anonymously about students of concern to the staff who gave the training, and that if we described a certain situation which warranted intervention, that the University could ask us to reveal the name of the student. It was a relief that someone else could take that decision, particularly in a case of a student with anxiety/ depression issues.

A week before the Board, Chris e-mailed me and asked to see me, explaining in her e-mail that she did not feel able to complete a polished draft chapter for the Board. She arrived in my office in a terrible state – shaking, dishevelled, deathly pale. I was shocked by the change in her. She had clearly not been eating well, and had been chain smoking. She said she was having anxiety attacks about completing the chapter, and even cried at work about it. I asked her what she felt she could do, and she said only the detailed thesis plan. I said I did not think it would be enough to get her through the Board, but we would have to see. During the meeting I felt she was somehow blaming me for putting too much pressure on her, and was angry that I was causing her this stress. I thought from her wording that she was trying to use our friendship to manipulate what was to be expected at her Board. Part of me was scared that she might try and harm me, although I think this feeling was based on her obvious anger and not anything more tangible. I felt both sorry for her situation on the one hand, but deeply frustrated and manipulated on the other. I asked if she was still attending counselling and she said she was. I said I thought she should go to her GP and seek some help. She didn't think he could do anything and wouldn't be persuaded.

When she left, I drove home and felt quite upset about the meeting for days, and reflected on what I could do and if I was to blame, and whether she was just taking advantage of the friendship. I e-mailed the other supervisor about what had happened, and we agreed that she could do the detailed thesis plan as a minimum, but we would have to brief the Chair of the Board that this was not what we had asked for. I made an appointment to see the student mental health people.

Chris sent the detailed thesis plan for the Board, and we discussed it during the Board meeting. The Chair discussed with Chris why she had packaged her chapters in the way she had, and criticised certain parts of it constructively. Chris acted oddly during the Board, and when asked why something wasn't in the thesis plan, she defensively claimed it was in there, when it was not written down. She was asked to rethink aspects of the plan and engage more with the relevant literature. The Board felt slightly unpleasant because Chris was defensive and the Chair was surprised by her attitude. She was given an upgrade to the next completion year, but a strict timetable for compliance was written down, and she would only be upgraded a term at a time.

On visiting the student mental health people, I discussed the case anonymously in detail. They said that, if I was concerned that she would harm herself or others, I should get in touch straight away, and they would make a decision on whether I should reveal her name. I said I thought she should see them for advice on continuing with the PhD, beyond their counselling service. We also discussed if an official mental health statement on file would give her more time and ease her stress. They thought it would, but they needed her to approach them. I e-mailed Chris to say I was very concerned about her, after seeing the stress the PhD was putting her under. I said I had attended a training course, and that I thought she would benefit from seeing the relevant student support staff for more advice with how to cope, and hinted about 'statementing' (or an official mental health statement on her file) which would have to be recognised by all staff concerned in the decisions taken. Chris declined, but did not give a good reason for doing so. I talked to a colleague who was also her friend and knew her personally, to make sure as much as possible that she was not going to harm herself, and to let me know if he had concerns. The colleague mentioned Chris had been seen drinking alcohol at lunch times and going to the pub often in the afternoons, and suspected that she may have an alcohol problem. Chris had months ago told me about often needing to drink a bottle of wine when writing, and the fact that this may have been one of the factors going on behind the scenes to explain the lack of progress and personality changes rang true, but I had no real evidence.

The summer continued with deadlines set for a revised thesis plan, and new draft chapters. The three of us met again several times. Chris had problems deciding what to put in each chapter. We tried to work through it, but she didn't seem to engage with the process much, and landed on a structure fairly arbitrarily. The chapters submitted were again disjointed, cut and paste and unintelligible. We commented on them at several stages of their development. Previous comments seem to have been ignored, and she seemed to make little headway, despite all kinds of comments and suggestions.

During this time, Chris decided her flat was too expensive, and she was running out of money. She had agreed a deadline with us which was several weeks off. Two weeks into the deadline, she requested a further extension because she was moving house, and suggested it would take several weeks for her to sort out her stuff and move properly. As supervisors, we decided this was the final straw, and that it was not realistic to move the deadlines that much in a second completion year. We knew that not much allowance was given for such things, as second completion year students often had to move, sometimes between countries, and often needed to have jobs which cut into their time. Chris put pressure on us, and her language was odd – if we were '*unwilling* to move the deadline then what would happen next?'

We decided to take it out of our own hands and write a comprehensive e-mail to the Dean, for her to decide what should happen. I didn't feel I could make an objective decision. Another term was approaching, and Chris had not met the strict timetable we had put in place for the completion year to continue to the next term. We wrote to Chris to say we would contact the Dean to decide if she could continue, given the failure to meet deadlines and what was required. The Dean got back to me in a few days. The other supervisor was on leave for a short while, and I decided to wait for her to come back and discuss the Dean's reply, before we reported back to Chris.

During the wait for the other supervisor to come back, Chris decided to withdraw from the PhD. It was what I had dreaded, but why now before the Dean had decided? She said she didn't want to give specific reasons why, but that she felt she couldn't continue. She separately thanked me by e-mail for all my efforts. I wrote to the other supervisor, asking if I should try and dissuade her. The Dean had said she could be allowed to continue for another term, as she was so near the end her maximum time limit anyway. The other supervisor thought she wouldn't complete in the remaining time as she had shown little effort in writing up, and that it was just prolonging her suffering and putting ourselves through pointless work. I was very sad for Chris, felt there was so much effort wasted on everyone's part, but thought trying to finish might just make the mental health problems worse and push her over the edge. If it was left to me on my own, I might have struggled on with her, but that would not have been a rational decision, just a belligerent one based on the thought that I could eventually get her through somehow. We decided not to tell her about the Dean's decision, as it might make her feel worse - and after all she had decided to quit before the Dean commented. I wished her well for the future in an e-mail. I missed her last day at the University as I was unwell and at home. But part of me didn't want to see her as I wasn't sure if this was still the Chris I used to know, and if there would be confrontation, anger and blame.

Few of my colleagues who knew of the situation in-depth were surprised at the outcome. However, one of her previous second supervisors (who had engaged little with her at the time of official supervision) from the days when we were in the old Centre sent an e-mail weeks later saying she was well thought of in the department he had currently moved to, and could she reregister with them. I said this would not get around the progress issues or the fact that there was so little time left to finish. I felt we were being blamed for not trying enough with her, which I also heard on the grapevine, which was so far from the truth as to make me deeply frustrated. I also later heard rumours that Chris was thinking about going back to her old university to try and finish the PhD. I was left bewildered by this turn of events, when I had tried so hard, and decided to remove the possibility of day-to-day contact with Chris through Facebook and Instant Messenger, as I felt we would both benefit from some distance and reflection. As far as I am aware from her friends, Chris is still temping and has not resumed the PhD. I have not had contact with her for some months.

As a team, list on the acetate provided the lessons are there here for

- 1. Supervisors**
- 2. PhD candidates**
- 3. Institutions**