

Suzette's Story

I Arrival

As an undergraduate at Ambridge University I had been lucky with my tutors. They had encouraged me to question the basic premises of the discipline I was studying, and were supportive without being invasive. They had made me feel that they cared about me, as well as about the quality of the work I produced.

So when I came to start my doctorate at Camford, I was hopeful that I would land up with a supervisor who would be, like them, friendly but professional. I expected him or her to give me guidance as to what to read and how to improve my grasp of the period I was examining, and the occasional morale-boosting words when confidence was ebbing. However, I have been largely disappointed in my supervisor, to the extent that I have considered changing, then thought of transferring to another university, and eventually ended up living in a different city. This is the story so far.

I arrived in Camford two weeks before term began, and immediately went about orienting myself.

I remember feeling a lot of excitement as well as some apprehension at this point. So finding my way round and attempting to familiarise myself with the place that was, as I then thought, to be my base for the next three years, with no guide but the rather sketchy maps of libraries and faculty centres issued by my faculty, didn't worry me too much.

I collected my library card at the earliest opportunity, and started reading some general theory that I felt I'd missed out on in my previous course. A few days before term, I began to wonder whether my supervisor, as yet unidentified, was going to make contact with me, or whether I was supposed to search him or her out.

Q1 Comment on Suzette's experience so far, and the postgraduate reception practices at Camford.

Q2 What should she do now?

2 Reception

Finally, I decided to call the faculty secretary and asked whether she had a record of my supervisor's name and department, and then wrote to him suggesting that we meet.

Arriving at an academic establishment is always difficult, but particularly so if you feel that you don't conform to the average student profile. Camford and Ambridge are well known to be hostile environments. The institutional style at both universities is one of aggressive and competitive sparring, and derogation of students' work, especially in seminar situations, is common. I had felt initially very out of place at Ambridge. I never had any doubts about my intellectual ability, but as a woman from a non-educated family and a state school background, I felt very lonely.

I knew that I would have to rely on my own inner strength as a post graduate student at Camford. This was one lesson I had carried away with me from my experiences at Ambridge. Although there was evidence of some effort being made to introduce students to the institution, to academics in the faculty and to fellow students, in the form of a 'reception' at the faculty building, the kind of event it turned out to be confirmed my fears of alienation and oddity. It consisted of a series of speeches by librarians and faculty officials, followed by a sherry reception at which the mandatory uniform appeared to be tweed suits and corduroy trousers - fine garments in themselves, but I felt I had stupidly and of my own volition cast myself into a submerging sea of them. It was the occasion of my first suspicion that I had come to the wrong place if I wanted to feel part of an academic community.

However, I still had at the time of a reasonable amount of confidence that I was approaching the whole enterprise with increased maturity and more profound personal resources. I could probably have got over the sense of alienation that remained had my supervisor been able to relate to me as a human being. As a postgraduate student on a non-taught course the supervisor becomes even more important than s/he is for the undergraduate. She or he is regarded with some anxiety by the graduate student, since he/she is the only point of contact with what seems a hostile or at best indifferent institution. Thus the gratitude felt by the student for the smallest gesture of supervisory benevolence is quite disproportionate to the scale of the act. I'm talking about such things as cups of tea or coffee!

My relationship with Graham started on a bad footing - I felt embarrassed that I had had to take the initiative, especially since as a supervisee you have to play a delicate power game with some supervisors - and continued badly. Never, in all the time I've known him, has he set me at ease with the offer of a hot beverage, not even a glass of water, except for once when I was having a coughing fit. This may seem a small matter, but the symbolic weight of such small acts of friendliness counts for a lot to students under stress.

Q1 Comment on Suzette's expectations of the role of postgraduate student and supervisor.

Q2 What should she do now?

3 Getting Started

As I write this I am now reflecting that part of the reason my supervisor assumed such importance in my feelings about my work is that the faculty has given me a fairly rough ride. Both of my transfers of status, from probationary masters to full masters to doctorate, have been contested. Some of the problem is that my thesis tends more toward history of ideas than to conventional literary criticism, although the thought it addresses does impinge quite significantly on the very creation of the idea of literature in the second half of the nineteenth century.

I did have considerable difficulty getting started, and Graham found this hard to accept. In part this had to do with my own perfectionist methods of working. I have always had to get an idea developed clearly and decisively in my mind before committing it to paper, and the sheer enormity of the idea I was trying to form obstructed my thinking. It wasn't till the end of my first year that Graham perceived that this attempt to see the whole project in my mind was at the root of my writing block, and when he finally explained that a thesis should be thought of as a series of essays on related subjects bound *retrospectively* into a unified argument, my anxiety about getting it straight before writing anything was somewhat allayed. But the preceding months had also been taken up by the compulsory scholarly skills course (consisting of learning to read ancient handwriting and how books are printed and collated, together with a more interesting excursion into the meaning and effect of textual reproduction); and this had constantly competed with efforts to gain a full picture of my research topic, leaving me very frustrated.

Another difficulty was the sense that I was on my own with the project. I was shocked to find that Graham had no apparent intention of establishing a friendly relationship with me, and that when I tentatively broached the subject of my feelings of depression and isolation, his response was a dismissive 'oh really?'. Despite this, I did make progress with the definition of my project, and easily passed the end of year exam in scholarly skills and the viva on piece of written work to do with my thesis topic - the latter with particularly good marks.

The next obstacle was the submission of a chapter breakdown to the faculty for their approval. Graham was happy with the thesis outline I had come up with in my third term, so it came as a shock when it was rejected by the faculty examiner. On this first occasion, Graham was very supportive of me, which came as a reassurance after the coolness he had displayed towards me in my first year. For the first time since we'd met, I felt that he really did like my work and that it therefore had some value. Words of praise or encouragement from him had hitherto been elusive. The report he wrote at the end of my debut term surprised me with its negativity. He had said he was worried about the lack of written work. Like most first year research students, I wasn't altogether certain of the exact boundaries of my research topic to begin with. In my second term, my work took off, which made it particularly disappointing when my supervisor again gave me a bad report.

Q1 Discuss Suzette's problems with writing and Graham's approach to supervision

Q2 What should Suzette do now?

4 Personal Difficulties and Advice Received

I was so upset by what I had had read out to me by the postgraduate tutor from this report that I decided to go and see Graham and confront him with the fact that I needed encouragement. He received this well, and I did notice that he was trying to say more positive things in our meetings. When the faculty created the difficulty over my transfer of status, Graham made it clear that he was surprised by their rejection, and suggested a few ways to defuse the disturbance that the political references in my chapter outline appeared to have aroused in the breast of the faculty examiner. In a telephone conversation he mentioned that he thought part of the reason for their rejection might be down to him, since I wasn't the only student of his to have been obstructed. This made me realise that my supervisor thinks of himself as a bit of an outsider. His own most recent work is shelved under historiography rather than literary criticism, and he took over the faculty post he occupies from a notorious bete noire in the department.

The alterations I had to make, following the suggestions of my supervisor, were slight, but I found that the obstruction placed before me affected me in a way I hadn't foreseen. On reflection, I realised that it had brought back to me the way I felt when I didn't get the double first I had worked towards and was expected to get at Ambridge. My finals papers had been contested, were re-read for a first, but I was eventually awarded one of the highest 2:1s. My then supervisor, who had been on the board, had told me about all the wrangles there had been over my papers, and I therefore know that at least one of them had been marked down at the second reading on political grounds. It's a common story, but at the time it wounded my self-confidence quite badly.

To return to the summer between my first and second years: the rhythm I had built up as my work gained direction was broken by the recurrence of this dejection, and things didn't really get better until they got worse, in the February of my second year.

I went through a very difficult patch up to then. I started off my second year living in a house where I did between 5 and 10 hours of work in a week in lieu of rent. The house belonged to an American woman who lived in the next street, was planning to return to America, and wanted her second property to become a women's therapy centre which would continue after she left. I was to decorate part of the house, generally maintain the property, and undertake research work for the group of women who were planning to get the centre up and running.

To cut a long story short, the group didn't gel because of clashes of will and temperament and the apparent unwillingness of any of them to set aside time to put practical work into the venture, and I ended up moving out. I had agreed to do the work because it seemed an ideal opportunity to use my mind and skills for something outside the thesis, and anything which helps you to keep a grip on reality when doing a doctorate seems attractive.

Unfortunately, it sapped my morale even more, and to make things worse, I was going through a troubled period in my personal life at the same time. Misfortune arrived hot on the heels of misfortune: my grandmother died. Supervisors can't help in the case of personal upheavals, and I didn't expect mine to provide any answers. But then how you're feeling does impinge on your work, and when I faced up to how unproductive I

had been in the eight months previous, I had a massive crisis of frustration and lowness of spirits.

I went to see my supervisor, and told him frankly how bad I had been feeling, that I was considering giving up, and that my accommodation hadn't worked out, so that on top of the emotional turmoil and a looming faculty deadline, I was having to find a new place to live (not easy in a town of high private rents). He was sympathetic, but he made a suggestion which temporarily threw me into a much worse state of confusion. He said, "Don't take this the wrong way, but since you're moving anyway, have you thought of transferring to London?"

Q1 Comment on Graham's behaviour at this stage

Q2 What should Suzette do now?

5 Feedback

I was completely taken aback, and although I think he meant well - we had both agreed that Camford was a dull and complacent town, and that we both preferred Longton - it was quite a desperate measure to suggest to an already desperate student. I said I would think about it, but after a few days of rushing about madly between Camford and London trying to find a place to live, I realised that I wasn't in a fit condition to make such a drastic change. I was lucky enough to happen upon a cheap room the other side of Camford as soon as I made my decision to stay in Camford and get through my crisis.

This I did, by an effort of will and the support of a close friend, and I began the third term with a solid chapter written and a new thesis outline, and with a resurgence of confidence in my ability to survive! I had looked forward to this moment, when I would hand my supervisor a fully fledged piece of written work that I felt genuinely pleased with and that would, I hoped, change his view of me. I imagined that he thought of me as a turbulent, difficult, and, above all, unproductive student, and I wanted him to approve of me for once.

I knew that the deadline was very close, and that he would have to read what I had written more or less as soon as he got it. (There was just over a week before the submission date). I wasn't immediately alarmed when I couldn't locate him, but after three days of leaving messages on his answer phone, and having no response, I called his secretary and asked whether he had gone away. She later rang me back to say that he had lent his keys to someone else, but hadn't left any indication of where he was. I had no option but to go off to do some book shop and typing work I'd arranged (to get me over one of the recurrent financial crises that are bound to happen to graduate students on meagre grants) with no assurance that he'd be able to mark the work before it was due to be handed in.

He finally rang me, six days after I'd left the work in his pigeon-hole, and said that he wasn't prepared to read the chapter. It would have to go in unread. I asked him to read the outline, which he did, coming back to me the following day with a very negative reaction: he was sure that they wouldn't pass it. I was disappointed, but there was no more time if I was to meet the deadline, so I submitted the outline with a few alterations, and the chapter as it stood.

6 Issues of Confidence

The people I spoke to about my supervisor's refusal to read my chapter advised me that, notwithstanding the tight schedule for marking that I had involuntarily imposed on my supervisor - and I was very aware of my own culpability in the matter - it was unprofessional of him to refuse to look at the chapter, and that I should look into the possibility of a new supervisor. One of my old Ambridge supervisors commented that I sounded very much as if he was bringing some personal difficulty into his attitude towards his professional duties, and this made me feel a good deal more philosophical about the situation. She put in a word for me with one of her friends, a professor in another department, and I went to see him with some of my work.

It was so refreshing. He treated me like a human being. He gave me a warm smile as I walked in, a cup of coffee, and he listened attentively to my explanation of what I was studying and why I was unhappy with my supervisor's treatment of me. He offered to read my recent chapter, and indicated that he would be happy to supervise me when I came to write one of the chapters which looks back to the 18th century - his specialist period. But he confirmed what I had already suspected - that Graham was the only choice of supervisor for me, particularly given the political and theoretical bent of the project. He did, however, throw some light on why I had had problems getting my project past the board: it was, he said, an Ambridge sort of thesis, not in the Camford literary critical tradition at all. This made me feel a lot better.

The following day, I met Graham to get his opinion of the chapter, which he had finally read. To my surprise and relief, his reaction was favourable, and the suggestions and criticisms he had made were helpful and positive. It was one of our better meetings. I wrote down everything he said, and followed up most of his criticisms when I partially rewrote the piece. I have always made detailed notes during supervisions, usually transferring my notes to a computer file for ready reference: this fixes what has been said in the mind, and I often get ideas from them for new directions in my argument.

The faculty came back with its decision a week later: they were rejecting my transfer application, and a letter would follow giving their reasons. They didn't indicate whether it was the chapter or the outline which they considered to be at fault. I was upset, but immediately began to analyse what I thought might be the problem, based my guesses on the criticisms my supervisor had made, and made a plan to rewrite. Fortunately my friendly professor had been alerted, and two days after I got the bad news, I had another very helpful meeting with him. He told me that he had read the chapter and liked it very much, and that the outline was almost certainly what needed to be reworked. He gave me a lot of ideas about what I might read to strengthen the earlier part of the thesis.

But most importantly, he gave me a clue as to why my relationship with Graham had been so troubled. In a telephone conversation with him, ostensibly to arrange to supervise my scene-setting chapter, he had tactfully steered the talk around to Graham's feelings about me. Graham had complained that I was dismissive of him. My initial reaction to this revelation was one of astonishment. I respect Graham intellectually, though if I disagree with something he says, I have always said so and given my reasons. Deep down I did suspect that part of the reason he made me feel so uncomfortable was that I threatened him in some way. This hadn't immediately occurred to me, because as a supervisee, and especially a female one with a male supervisor, you tend to assume that

they realise the sway they have over estimation of your work and, indeed, over your self-esteem. But I now realised that part of Graham's feeling that I was dismissive of him might have arisen because I have tried hard not to be overawed by him and have never gone in for the sort of subtle flattery that can ease the tension engendered in the graduate student/supervisor relationship. Graduates may be perceived as constituting a threat to the authority the supervisor enjoys in his or her relationship with undergraduates, and this mutual insecurity explains much of the frustration felt in this situation.

The possible accuracy of this speculation was brought home to me when I went to see Graham to find out what the faculty had said in their letter, and to plan what I could do to make the work acceptable. His habit is to invite the next supervisee in while he is still finishing with the previous one. I am sure that he is mostly unaware of how insignificant this makes you feel. His undergraduate student was flattering him madly, and Graham was loving it, beaming at her and so on. I was quite apprehensive, thinking of all the rewriting I might have to do in a very short time, and my discomfiture at the demonstration of how friendly my supervisor could be if you knew how to get on his right side was increased when Graham handed me the letter to read and went on exchanging pleasantries with his previous student.

The funniest thing was that the letter started out being very complimentary, and then degenerated into a kind of denunciation. My project, summarised in the outline, was described as "coherent" and as showing "considerable originality", and the chapter was "interesting and forceful", but then the examiner complained that the outline contained sweeping assertions which weren't substantiated. This didn't take into account that you can't substantiate your claims at any length when you are setting out a plan of what you think may or may not prove... At first sight, I simply didn't understand the letter, and then when I did, it was such a relief to find that I wouldn't have to rewrite the chapter that I was quite overwhelmed with emotion. To my shame, I couldn't help bursting into tears, but once I had recovered myself, the meeting ended up being very helpful, with lots of suggestions for improvements which proved very effective.

I re-wrote the beginning of the chapter, incorporating the criticisms that Graham, the professor and my old Ambridge supervisor had made, and completely rehashed the chapter outline, coming up with a much more defined and forceful formula which I felt very happy with. My application for transfer was duly passed, and having got through the last of my faculty barriers, I made my move to Longton. I'm still registered at Camford, but I attend seminars at Longton University, and only return to Camford to change library books, and occasionally to see Graham.

Following the June meeting at the end of my second year, I didn't see Graham for six months. We exchanged brief notes about my progress - or lack of it, because I still feel that I have been a singularly unproductive student. I have been very blocked, and know that this stems not only from my peculiar way of working, in which I build up an argument mentally until it's ready to assume a paper life, but is also the result of Graham's failure to see that above all I needed to feel supported as a person, and that the supervisory relationship can constitute a defence against or even, at its best, preempt the isolation and erosion of confidence felt by research students.

7 Epilogue

I am now in the summer of my third term of my third year of my PhD. I've had to revise the schedule for completion that I agreed with Graham when we last met in January, because of my continuing struggle with feelings of depression and self-doubt. However, I now feel that I could write a first draft by early next year. The arguments I've planned for the three central chapters are much clearer, and I am finally on the verge of writing the chapter I've all along thought would be the most challenging to formulate. Recently Graham wrote to me in answer to the synopsis of the current piece that I sent him, asserting that I am the most blocked graduate student he's ever had, that the discouragement and depression I have felt over the last three years ought to be solved with counselling, but that the synopsis is very promising, and he looks forward to seeing the chapter itself as soon as possible. The letter epitomises his attitude to me: "Don't approach me for help, just work and hand over the results".

I know I could have done so much better with more encouragement right from the start. Recently, I have done some teaching myself, and find it satisfying and stimulating, confirming my growing conviction that my forte may well lie in that direction rather than in solitary research. At the moment of writing, I am in the running for a part time job tutoring adult learners, which would fund my fourth and, I hope, final year of PhD work.

Writing this I have realised that I do approach my studies as if they are an indicator of personal value, and that this is unhelpful when the doldrums strike, as they are bound to when you're trying to write something that's original but also backed up to the hilt with accredited authorities. It isn't an easy task, especially when you want to do it well - and I'm aware that I habitually set my sights very high. I will also say that I recognise the difficulty male supervisors may experience in their efforts to strike the right balance with female students. This is especially so when they are graduates, and so need support to deal with the erosion of self confidence that happens when you work on your own, never in a team, not in a dialogue, but crouched over books in a sea of tweed jackets. But my friendly professor seemed able to manage it, and I think I was just unlucky to end up with someone as edgy and ambivalent as Graham.

Team task

On the acetate provided list the main lessons here for

- 1. Doctoral candidates**
 - 2. Their supervisors**
 - 3. Institutions**
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