13. “No Two are the Same”: A Narrative Account of Supervising Two Students Through a Doctor of Musical Arts Program

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Abstract
This chapter reflects upon some of the issues arising from the author’s experience of undertaking and supervising practice-centred research in relation to music performance. My research in this emerging field provides the background against which some of the diverse challenges that have arisen through the process of supervision are illuminated. In particular, this chapter will contrast two cases of students within the Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA), a program that has practice-based research at its core and which the author convened for its first few years since its introduction in 2005. The chapter is written in the form of personal reflections in conjunction with a form of narrative enquiry whereby issues that have arisen through personal experience are presented through fictionalised cases and situations. In particular the chapter contrasts the cases of two fictionalised students in the DMA whose personalities, backgrounds, musical experience and academic abilities present different challenges within an academic context. The emotional vulnerability of both student and supervisor is explored together with the challenges of negotiating both the professional and personal relationships when working with highly creative musicians within this context. This paper gives a fictionalised narrative account of my experience of supervising two students through the Doctor of Musical Arts program. The context is that of my own work environment at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University in Brisbane, where I have been supervising postgraduate research for over a decade. I was convenor of both the Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts when they were established as Higher Degree Research programs at our institution, and have supervised students through to completion in these as well as in the Ph.D program. The student cases discussed in this narrative are fictionalised. Though some aspects of them may reflect interactions with specific students I have known, the two central characters of Christina and Michael have been developed to reflect contrasting responses to various factors that arise through doctoral candidature. I hope that these fictionalised cases can shed some light on the nature of the experience for many research students as well as some of the significant differences in the way a supervisor may work with individual students at this level. Many factors have a significant bearing upon the supervisory relationship, including a candidate’s research background, research topic, age, personality, ability to deal with criticism, as well as their personal circumstances and motivations. Of course different supervisors will approach the challenges of supervision differently and I do not intend to suggest that my approach to the task is in any sense exemplary. Nonetheless it is hoped that it may provide some insight into the complexity of the issues involved, the very real challenges that arise throughout the process, as well as the deeply satisfying sense of achievement that can come from the experience.

Keywords
NarrativeSupervisionStudent perspectives

It was deeply gratifying to see them both recognised at the graduation last night. Christina had not wanted to attend the ceremony but I had insisted and I hope she was pleased that I had. ‘You owe me that’ I’d told her, but in fact, I sensed that it was important for her to receive that formal public acknowledgment. It has been such a long journey for her, one so much tougher than either of us had anticipated. The applause she received was merely polite and her moment in the spotlight passed by quickly but, for me, the moment was one of intense satisfaction. She did look genuinely happy, in fact considerably more so than I had seen her for a long time. So few of the people there really had much
sense of what had been involved. I suppose that is the case with every individual awarded at any graduation but, of course, some journeys are more difficult and more rewarding than others. On one level, I feel greatly relieved that she has made it through to the end, but the over-riding sense for me was one of pride in being a not-inconsiderable part of what she had achieved. Seven years is a long time to work together on a project.

Also among the group of candidates whose doctoral degrees from our Conservatorium were conferred that evening was Michael, who I had also supervised. As he was called up, he could see that he was trying not to smile but couldn’t help it especially when the chancellor read out that rather longwinded – some might say, pretentious – title of his thesis. He had brought along his own support group, which helped enthusiastically as his name was called. Already he had found a way of wearing the Tudor bonnet that looked imperious. At least he wasn’t wearing shorts and sandals as I’d feared he would but the bonnet and his bright flowery shirt under the academic gown made me smile. Like all the doctoral candidates I’ve supervised through to completion, I feel a special bond with each of them and genuine affection. There are some mixed feelings in there to be sure but, at this end, the celebration of their achievement is lying somewhere very deep inside. I was pleased to be with Michael, Christina and their families for a celebratory drink after the ceremony, though I was sorry to see that the sincerity of Christina’s smile did not seem to last.

Nonetheless, it was particularly pleasing to see Christina and Michael celebrating their graduation together. He is much younger and less mature in so many ways. On the surface she would seem to have so little in common with this young, rather awkward yet cocky guy from North Queensland. However over the last couple of years they have built an unlikely but surprisingly close friendship. She had taken up his offer to proof-read her thesis and his somewhat pedantic yet pragmatic approach had been most useful. Having just finished his own exegesis quite recently, he was well attuned to the task and made some eminently practical suggestions including finding a significant number of mistakes in the formatting of the Reference List. Christina was not strong at attending to such details. But beyond that, in recent years he had provided invaluable emotional support to her on more than one occasion, most notably through what had been a traumatic examination process.

One of the examiner’s reports on her thesis had distressed her deeply. There had been some grudging acknowledgement of what seem to me to be its undeniable strengths but also some criticisms that seemed to me to be distinctly mean-spirited and unreasonable. Unexpectedly, the examiner turned out to be ideologically opposed to the underlying qualitative research paradigm that had been adopted. Christina could take no comfort from the other examiner’s report that was abounding in praise (a report, I might add, that would have pleased anyone else) and a host of deep insecurities and vulnerabilities evidently could no longer be suppressed. This was not the first emotional collapse I had witnessed during her candidature but it was the most distressing. As usual, her husband hadn’t been much help or support.¹

I had thought it strange that, of all people in her midst, it had been Michael who had been able to provide most tangible support to her at that point of crisis. The examination reports on his thesis had come through a few weeks earlier with both endorsing his work, in fact more enthusiastically than I had expected. He was only required to make a handful of minor corrections. I had imagined that this, in itself, might have made it awkward for her to face him, let alone confide in him at such a time. But then you never really know what unsuspected sides of a person will come to the fore when called upon. One needs the support of more than a couple of supervisors to get through a doctorate.

Christina has been for many years widely recognised as one of the finest professional clarinetists in the country. The quality of her musicianship – a total involvement and strong sense of personal authenticity – is immediately evident when one sees or hears her play. She has had a long and successful career as freelance performer and teacher within her university’s music department in New South Wales, but had confided in me that she had always felt apart from the ‘academic’ staff there. Whether they did look down on her I couldn’t say – personally I doubt it – but she certainly perceived that to be the case. She had told me that the desire for academic recognition was one of the driving reasons for her undertaking a doctorate from the start. She said to me recently ‘Even now, they will still probably look down to me as it’s only a professional doctorate rather than the real thing.’ Of course I responded along the lines of:

DMAs and practice-based doctorates may have been established in this country quite recently, but I expect that they will become to be respected equally with Ph.D.s sooner than you think. And moreover, excellent examples such as yours will be great models of what practice-based research² can be at its best.

¹Not everyone agrees with that judgement of my work’, she added wryly. (Damn that examiner!) Actually for an established professional to put herself (or himself) up for judgement and criticism at the highest academic level does take a considerable degree of courage. And moreover one is particularly vulnerable when undertaking an open and honest examination of one’s artistic practice. I recall Ruth Behar writing about how making one’s self vulnerable to your reader can invite a sympathetic response (1250).
But, as the examination reports of Christina’s practice-based research reminds me, that is not always the case. In my experience, performing musicians have a paradoxical combination of deep insecurities together with self-belief and, in dealing with them, one needs to be sensitive to both sides of that equation. The challenges of providing support balanced with sensitive yet clear criticism in such cases should not be underestimated.

I find Christina’s research deeply engaging to read. Certainly it shows a clear and open mind, even if one that is somewhat idiosyncratic. The clarity of thought is evident more when she writes than when she speaks and that is not always the case with doctoral candidates! In fact all too often that is the other way around. Her research examined the psychological strategies of high-level performers and she embraced the ambiguities and complexities of the topic in a uniquely personal way. I admire that distinctive aspect of her work very much. It is not the way I would have tackled such a topic — and certainly it was not the way one of the examiners wanted it to have been done — but her approach was original and, ultimately, I believe was able to offer some valuable insights. I have only ever wanted to encourage her to find her own voice as a researcher as distinctive and authoritative as that which shines through when she plays her instrument. For her topic she read widely and interviewed some of Australia’s leading musicians, analysing their views through the prism of her own extensive experience. In particular she had documented and interrogated the strategies she herself employed in preparing for two recital programmes, the recordings of which were included in the research submission. Though evidence of high-level professional practice was provided through these recordings, the intellectual engagement with the topic had been her primary concern and motivation throughout. It had resulted in a thesis considerably longer than that required, in fact well over twice the length of Michael’s. She had done an extensive amount of background work on all sorts of related cross-disciplinary areas, again much more than was ultimately required (a great deal more than Michael ever contemplated I might add!). But at the core, the thesis represents a very personal journey that provides a unique insight into the world of a highly sophisticated performer. The journey resonated with me and, I expect, would do so with most musicians. But in that I could be wrong.

Michael’s doctoral submission had also been a combination of practice and exegesis but had resulted in a very different type of research submission. He is a composer and his practice was presented in the traditional form of a portfolio of scores accompanied by a thesis of around 20,000 words. Throughout the writing of this exegesis he had been determined to keep what he perceived to be objectivity to the fore. In fact his writing style is somewhat stiff, lacking Christina’s fluency and imaginative sense of style. For anyone who knows him, his personal idiosyncrasies come through this document in all sorts of ways, but these were largely unintentional. ‘You are allowed to write in the first person’, I would tell him. He had sat through the classes on qualitative research and particularly autoethnography in the coursework within the first year of the program, but he resisted such approaches. I think he thought that acknowledging any form of subjectivity was a sign of weakness or of fuzziness — ‘too New Age’ as he expressed it to me once. That did not match the self-image he wished to promote as composer and academic — one markedly at odds with other aspects of his personality. But, given that he was writing about his own compositions, it seemed to me that some insights into how his personal world intersects with his creative work would not have been out of place nor lacking in relevance or interest. There was of course no inkling of that sense of humour that is part of every personal interaction with him. But actually, in the long run, the safer, more traditional analysis of his own music couched in quasi-objective terms, all neatly dissected and organised, got him the result he was after. The approach was in line with certain established traditions within musicology and composition. His examiners did not comment on the lack of a personal dimension. The presentation of both portfolio and exegesis was highly polished and with close attention to detail. Michael is undoubtedly a talented composer but my impression is that he still has a long way to go until something aesthetically coherent, let alone emotionally engaging, emerges in his music. I’ll be very interested to see where our Dr. Michael ends up in 10 years’ time and, more to the point, what his music sounds like then.

Michael was just starting his undergraduate degree when Christina embarked on her doctorate. She had originally applied to do a Ph.D but, after some persuasion, we convinced her that she would be better suited to the Doctor of Musical Arts program that had recently been instigated at our Conservatorium. Moreover the emphasis on Artistic Practice as Research was one of the focus areas of the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre that had also been recently established. Keen to break down the traditional distinctions — some might say, barriers — between musicologists/researchers and music performers, the institution’s research agenda welcomed the reflections of experienced practitioners. This was in tune with developments in the United Kingdom and Europe, most explicitly perhaps at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, Belgium, whose manifesto The artistic turn (2009) articulates the desirable shift towards valuing the performing artist’s voice and the special insights that an ‘insider’ can provide. Such priorities were in tune with various developments across the diverse fields within qualitative research but, as one of Christina’s examiners reminds me, it remains a paradigm shift that is not embraced or even welcomed by all.
Christina had the sort of profile we sought for candidates in the DMA program: a mature established professional, keen to contribute from the perspective of an experienced performer and, through the documentation of and reflection upon her professional practice, we hoped would be in a position to offer valuable insights from an insider’s perspective. Though from that point of view she seemed a most appropriate candidate for the program, her undergraduate training had occurred some decades earlier and she had no research experience at an honours or postgraduate level. Beyond her extensive professional experience in tertiary education, it was clear that she had a keen mind and a wide range of intellectual interests within and beyond music. Her breadth of cultural knowledge and awareness way extends beyond Michael’s. In recent years she had taken some undergraduate courses in psychology and European cinema. (That we could discuss the films of Ingmar Bergman sealed it for me.) In any case, I strongly supported her application into the DMA program and was happy to take on the role as her principal supervisor. Moreover she seemed to have strong motivation to pursue doctoral studies though the reasons behind that only became fully apparent at a later stage. When she began, I had anticipated that her candidature would be straightforward.

I recall that I had been much less enthusiastic about accepting Michael into the DMA program. We normally required 5 years of high-level professional experience after completion of an undergraduate degree, but Michael had been proactive arranging performances of his music for some years so that was taken into account. His Honours dissertation had been very solid – if not particularly imaginative – and, surprising for his age, he had published a number of articles in various journals concerned with contemporary music. And so the case was made and he was accepted into the DMA at an unusually young age. As it turned out, my initial concerns proved to be unfounded. It was Christina’s candidature that proved to be far more difficult.

At the time, I had felt somewhat bull-dozed into supervising Michael. In fact, I’d only agreed to be the associate supervisor when Joe Green, the composition lecturer here, had initially been so keen to accept him into the program. But when those two fell out after 18 months, I was obliged to step in and take over principal supervision as well. I’m not a composer myself but by this stage his compositional folio was largely complete and my task was primarily to work with him on the exegesis. Unfortunately, even before their relationship soured, Joe had no interest in that aspect of the research and saw his role exclusively in guiding the compositional portfolio. As I understand it, they had had a major disagreement over one of the compositions that Joe felt was too long and convoluted. Michael however was very happy with the piece and insisted that its length was justified – he had planned the proportions of the piece very carefully and was loath to change it. ‘It’s my piece and that’s the way I want it to be’, he said to me. But Joe did not like his authority to be challenged and so an unfortunate standoff resulted in a breakdown of their relationship.

I was willing to take on the role of principal supervisor as I felt that Michael had come too far to give up the program at this stage. The days when one only supervised in areas of specialist expertise seem long gone, as do the days when one supervised only one or two dissertations at any one time. In those years, at any one time I am involved with the supervision of around ten of them and these would range across a broad range of topic areas. Some of these topics extend significantly beyond my own areas of research – areas of interest even – ranging from issues of musician’s health through to repertoire for brass bands.

I do at times feel quite vulnerable in supervising those outside areas where I am familiar with the literature but they do give me the opportunity to expand my awareness of other fields that I would otherwise not encounter or explore in any depth. For example, I recall supervising some years ago a Swedish student, called Marianne, who was examining the role of number symbolism in certain choral works of Isak Borg, an obscure nineteenth-century Scandinavian composer. I realised that there were probably not many supervisors in Australia with the specialist knowledge needed for that one. I learnt much through the process and she got her piece of paper and seemed happy enough with that.

It saddens me that the certificate Christina received last night has probably not given her comparable satisfaction – at least not yet. The report from the third examiner – required when the recommendations of the original two examiners are irreconcilable – had been positive enough and actually had made a number of valid points, but some criticisms remained that had stung her nonetheless. I don’t think he had listened to the recordings of her playing – he made no reference to them in his report – and the focus of his assessment was entirely upon the written words. Moreover he had recommended some changes to the thesis and, as a result, it was deemed by the Chairperson of Examiners that some sections needed to be cut, one chapter needed to be extensively rewritten and, elsewhere, some relatively minor changes and re-writing were required. In fact the changes were not particularly onerous nor was the extent of the changes required unusual. I could tell she was bitterly disappointed but it took a while to realise how devastated in fact she was by the criticism from two of her examiners. Having agonised over every sentence of that submission to get it just the way she wanted it, being forced to change it – to ‘mutilate’ it as she put it – in order to please someone else was something she resented. She did not feel that many of the required changes were a genuine improvement and,
having put so much of herself into this work over many years, the criticisms were taken very personally. Of course I tried to persuade her not to do that: ‘The nature of academic life...’ or indeed ‘Anyone who wants his/her work to be published will tell you that...’ et cetera. But, given her nature, I suppose it was inevitable that the criticisms would shake her self-confidence. Of course the arts of both giving and receiving criticism are subtle and demanding ones over which few of us have any real sense of mastery. I hope I am getting better at it but it remains a challenge that I feel keenly.

The effort she had made over the preceding 18 months to finish the thesis had taken a significant toll on her health. Bouts of anxiety had contributed to her difficulty in sleeping that, in turn, led to various breakdowns and her seeking various treatments. The details don’t need to be set out here but it was very clear to me that her fluctuations in health were tied to the stresses and anxieties emanating from her research. It would be all too easy to be hard-headed about this and say that criticism, including that which one perceives to be unjust, is a part of academic life – just as it is in music performance – and she just needed to learn to accept it and deal with it. But that would be to dismiss a genuine issue and what appears to me to be a crucial aspect of the process.

I had been optimistic about the work when it was finally submitted for assessment. It seemed to me that her professional stature as a musician was self-evident in the recordings and was complemented by a genuinely insightful and valuable exegesis. I had told her that I expected this to be recognised by the examiners. In truth, I was less concerned about sending this thesis off to be examined than some others I have supervised. Christina has a fluent command of the language and though her arguments can be somewhat idiosyncratic, a coherence emerges. Moreover at times some complex ideas are handled with disarming clarity. Certainly I have read Ph.D theses that were, to my mind at least, much less worthy. Certainly I have read doctoral theses that had involved much less work, certainly ones that were much less original and ambitious, not to mention much less sophisticated in grappling with difficult ideas. But her examiners had very different positions on these complex issues, different, I might add, not only from her position but also from each other’s.

In retrospect, I should have recommended that her work be sent to different examiners, ones that would have been concerned as much with the quality of the professional practice as with the intellectual content. Certainly ‘easier’ examiners could have been found. But Christina was not needing or wanting certification as a performer. She had undertaken the research to investigate some difficult issues that she and many other performers face. Given this emphasis, the work had been sent to highly regarded international figures in the field of music psychology...
The experiences of supervising Christina and Michael were very different of course – in retrospect neither was particularly unusual but, in reality, no two are really at all alike. With each candidate, one tries to find a way of working that matches the individual’s skills and needs, not to mention personality and circumstances. Some, such as Christina, have demanding professional commitments – within a professional doctorate that is to be expected – not to mention family obligations, health and other personal issues. I certainly don’t try to impose my way of researching or supervising and make them all fit in with that. Some doctoral students are more demanding of their supervisors than others – fortunately neither Christina nor Michael was at either extreme end of the spectrum there. Though Michael needed more chasing up in the early stages, both of them were in regular touch with me throughout their candidature. In fact I wish that all my doctoral students keep in touch so regularly.

The ways I communicate with my postgraduate research students can also vary greatly, as does the nature of the critical feedback I provide. I supervise some students who live outside Brisbane from a distance using a combination of email and Skype, which is clearly less than ideal but can work with some students. (Christina spent several years of her candidature living outside of Brisbane and, though we negotiated the supervision over that time pretty well, in fact it has been so much easier since she has lived here.) Some students want to talk and develop their ideas through verbal discussion, while with others that is less effective. With some of them, one can talk with them at length – they will nod their heads, take notes even, and seem to understand – but nothing one says seems to stick. Sometimes it’s only when writing comments on a written document – at times unsuitable ones – that certain points that seem to register. With some students, one builds a strong personal connection while with others one doesn’t. With some, the interaction is primarily an open discussion while others need more direct and firmer guidance. For example, Christina frequently needed to talk at length before having a sense of how to proceed. Michael on the other hand developed his own clear idea of what he wanted to do and how he would go about it largely independently. My role as supervisor was primarily to probe with questions firstly, to make him articulate and justify what he had in mind and, secondly, to convince myself that his concept and approach was viable. My task was largely to help him refine and focus his project/thesis/portfolio as it took shape but, in truth, he took charge and directed the process himself. I was happy for him to do so. For others, one is much more closely involved with the actual shaping of both the concept and methodology as well as, of course, the written research document.

In the case of Christina, the supervisory relationship was complex in so far as she was around my own age (shall we just say middle-aged) and, moreover, a highly respected colleague for whom I had known professionally for some years before her candidature. We had in fact performed chamber music together on a few occasions and, though I did not know her closely, we had many friends in the profession in common. That is not always easy, particularly in the inevitable giving and taking of criticism involved. In some ways I saw my role more as an advisor more than supervisor – someone who could recommend resources to explore, someone she could bounce ideas off, provide support and reassurance and, in general, to help keep her on track. She had a less comfortable relationship with her associate supervisor. She found his criticisms blunt and difficult to handle, and thus rarely sought his input. And unless it was sought, he did not seek to be involved any more than necessary. I am unsettled by the thought that with stricter supervision from me a less ambitious but perhaps better-focused thesis may have been completed sooner. However, my abiding impression throughout her candidature was that her work was unfolding organically at the optimal pace she could manage. I found her (and with some others I’ve supervised) that my attempts to accelerate that pace were not effective. For example, when I would try to set deadlines along the lines of: ‘I want you to get the full draft of this chapter to me by the end of next month’, almost always they were never met. It was not that the deadline was disregarded but a good reason why it had not been achieved was always provided.

I found a marvellous new book – 700 pages long – that’s just been published that opens up a great new way to approach this whole issue, so I had to rethink and rewrite all that material about ...

Or

As I was writing it occurred to me that this needs to consider the question of ... and so I had to go back to the literature on ... and found that ...

Or

This chapter is now over 16,000 words and I still haven’t covered the issue of ...

I am guilty of guilt’, she would say smiling, knowing that I would recognise the reference to Bergman. In fact I did find that, especially in the last 18 months before submission, the imposition of such deadlines resulted more or less directly in a breakdown of her health on more than
one occasion (and then yet more deferrals of her final submission date on medical grounds). Despite the timelines that the University would like doctoral programs to stick to, setting rigid deadlines is not always helpful and, in some cases, can be distinctly counterproductive. Michael, on the other hand, responded very well to deadlines. He completed his doctorate in 3 years. His composition portfolio was largely complete within the first two and the supporting exegesis was essentially written in the last year of candidature. In my experience, such an orderly candidature that completes a doctorate within 3 years is very rare, much rarer than the University would like. Most candidates take at least 4 years even when enrolled full-time. I would say that the challenge of completing within this timeframe is greater when the data is qualitative, the research is practice-based, and there is a personal dimension. These aspects can exert a range of pressures.

Fiona Candlin has written about the various forms of stress associated with practice-based research.

... Like any other Ph.D., practice-based Ph.D.s are also the focus of much anxiety but, significantly, those anxieties reach beyond personal doubt and are often shared by supervisors, examiners and senior academic management. (2000)

Such issues are inseparably part of the territory, and I believe need to be faced in any discussion of supervision and its challenges. Michael showed few signs of anxiety during his candidature but, from what I know of his personality, he would have considered any acknowledgment of them as a sign of weakness. Christina of course was so different in this regard, but again in fact was closer to what I would perceive to be the norm. It seems to me that for supervisors to be effective they need to be highly attuned to the individual personal needs of each candidate and to adjust the nature of their support and critical feedback accordingly.

The 6 months after that crisis turned out to be the decisive period for the writing of Christina’s thesis. There was a breakthrough that seemed as much in her attitude as in the nature of her work. Somehow things that had been disconnected and disparate seemed to come together with an unforesee coherence and clarity. It was a passage of her candidature when we were in regular contact – certainly I knew she was putting her head down, retreating into that private world known to people who have done intense creative work. She was still maintaining her teaching commitments but was now getting up at around 4.30 a.m. each morning and writing for a couple of hours before breakfast (that is, I might add, before dropping her teenage children at school.) Uncharacteristically, she did not want to show me any of what she was writing until the chapter was complete. It was evident to us both that this was the central and best chapter of the thesis. Moreover, once that had been written, it had become much clearer how the other chapters should be reworked and reshaped. It did seem to us both that the time had come when it was ready to come out and take its form.

Inevitably there are many ups and downs when doing research at a doctoral level – not only periods of more or less motivation and commitment but genuine breakthroughs when a new clarity can emerge. As supervisors we need to be patient and remind ourselves of this through those periods when progress is frustratingly slow. Of course, with some students one waits in vain for a clarity that never arrives. With some students, such as Michael, there is a straightforward correlation between the hours spent and the progress made. But, with qualitative research that is practice-based and personalised, I find this to be rarely the case.

Many students find it difficult for to let go of work on which they have spent considerable amounts of time. Michael fortunately was surprisingly willing to do this. If I suggested that a paragraph was not clear or that a point needed to be made more strongly, he was just as likely to just cut it as to work on it further. Anything that I identified as risky he seemed perfectly happy to discard immediately. (Can you back up that assertion with a reference? I would ask. ‘Okay, I’ll cut it’, he’d reply.) I found this disconcerting as opportunities to improve the work were thereby missed but, in retrospect, it was characteristically efficient and pragmatic.
Christina, on the other hand, found criticism much harder to deal with. It took me a while as her supervisor to realise the extent of how difficult – threatening even – she found it to be. (I'm sure her associate supervisor never realised it and his lack of tact in this regard contributed to their less-than-ideal relationship.) I recall that when preparing her confirmation document, she had been quite put out when I had crossed out sentences or passages or written comments like cut this or not necessary or had suggested alternative wordings. She did not want what she had written to be dismissed before she'd been given her the chance to defend her words and explain why she felt they had to be in there. On one occasion when I suggested changing a sentence she had 'worked on more than you could realise' she suddenly burst into tears. Until that I had not appreciated how much of herself she had invested in what she had written. I tried to explain to her as calmly as I could how important it is to be able to let go of passages that turn out not to be suitable to the purpose.

You know that Beethoven filled 650 pages of sketches for his Quartet opus 131 – over four times the length of the final work.22

And think of how much music Brahms discarded if it wasn't good enough ...

But from then on, I was particularly careful in the framing and articulating my criticisms and I felt guilty that it took a middle-aged woman burning into tears for me to fully realise how sensitive I should be. Of course one has to continue to be critical. But if a point I found to be questionable could be defended well enough, I was happy enough to let it stand for the time being. I recall one memorable encounter when she was defending the words she had written quite vigorously – I felt, defensively – and I backed away to dispel the sense of confrontation that was building. However this was not the only occasion when a point that she had defended strongly at the time either disappeared or came to be reworked – and ultimately argued much more convincingly – in the next version. But it was clearly important for her to feel that the judgement was her own and I came to respect that.

With Michael the criticisms could be much less subtle – in fact the more direct and specific they were, the better. But these and other cases remind me how carefully one moves back and forth along the spectrum between minor suggestions/advice/constructive criticism at one end and, at the other, where firmer recommendations/specified changes are less negotiable.

Undoubtedly some students need much more help than others (just as some are more or less forthcoming in requesting that time from you).22 In fact I found myself wondering at the recent graduation what would be the proportion between the number of hours of supervision I had spent each with Christina and Michael. Not only had hers taken over twelve as many years but, as I said earlier, she required much more intense discussion and regular interaction through the process. (This should not be surprising given that her topic dealt with much more demanding conceptual challenges.) Moreover she had written so many different versions of each chapter before we reached its final form. If I had to put a number on it, my estimate would be that I had spent would be at least four times the hours with her, not to mention the extra emotional energy involved. I don't resent or regret that at all. Undoubtedly there are rewards and satisfactions to be derived from working closely with such students and the sense of gratification achieved through observing the development of their work can be deeply rewarding. But once again it is striking how different individual cases can be.

I am very proud of how Christina's mind developed through the process. The summative assessment of research, with the submission sent off to external assessors, usually gives no sense of the personal growth that may or may not have been involved. For some students such as Michael that growth is significant but, for many – I suspect, most – it can be deeply transformative and life-changing. One learns not only about one's topic but also a great deal about one's self – how one's mind works, how to articulate ideas, to think critically and build arguments.

In essence, one learns not only how to write but how to think more clearly. Certainly these aspects are the most valuable things I gained from the experience of writing my own thesis. Statistically, of course most theses are only read by a small handful of people (often by no one else beyond the couple of examiners) but increasingly the work's external impact – its contribution to the field – seems to me to be much less important than the student's development. Of course it is gratifying for any individual to find that his or her work is of interest to others and makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of a field of knowledge. To have it publically validated through conferring the title of doctor is of course valuable. But for me, the individual's trajectory of personal growth is the far more important outcome and, as supervisor, I believe that that needs to be the priority. The full realisation of how far a doctoral candidate has travelled may only be recognised down the track. I think I can perceive the extraordinary distance that Christina has travelled much more clearly than she can at present, but I hope that she will come to appreciate that and eventually derive some appropriate satisfaction from it.

I had been very pleased to meet the parents of both Michael and Christina at the graduation last night. Michael's had come down from Mackay for the occasion and they were particularly warm and generous towards me. He's such an anxious boy and he found the process so stressful. But he was so grateful that you were there to support him throughout all the ups and downs. That's not what I'd expected to hear!
Christina had never mentioned her parents to me and I had not been expecting to meet them that night. Her mother said little but had a gentle manner and a genuine warmth to her smile. On the other hand her father, a tall and rather imposing man, greeted me quite formally, almost brusquely. He lost no time informing me that he had been a professor of Science at Melbourne University for many years. I am guessing that he would have been in his late 70s but was clearly still very sharp in mind and, evidently, rather impatient in manner.

‘Well, she certainly took her time getting this, didn’t she. A waste of time if you ask me. She was never cut out for academic life.

Of course she wouldn’t be up to doing a real doctorate,’ he said.

I saw Christina blush at this point and avert her eyes. I had thought that over the years I had built a pretty good sense of Christina as a person but only then did my understanding of various things she had said and done over the years fall into place. There are many aspects of each candidate’s personal life that of course one never knows – or wants or needs to know – but one supervises not only the research project but the individual, and no two are the same, or even much alike.

References


Footnotes
1 He had never understood why she was doing this research in the first place. He is also a fine professional musician, but like most of them, he loses no opportunity to pour scorn on anything associated with research. He just ‘doesn’t get it’.

2 Throughout this paper I have used the term practice-based research rather than any of the other related terms – such as practice-led research, artistic research etc – because this is the terminology that he has built into our the components of our program at QCGU. Students enrol in courses titled practiced-based research.

3 Well, maybe that’s not just performing musicians! I tried to reflect on this once in a paper called – pretentiously perhaps – *The performer’s voice and his dualistic soul* (that was Hindemith’s term) but in that I only scratched the surface of the topic (Emmerson 2011).

4 During the first year of candidature the DMA students undertake two coursework modules in Research Methods and Research Design respectively. There they are introduced to a range of methodological approaches suitable for practice-based research. Among the qualitative approaches, many students are attracted to the possibilities of autoethnography. Contributors to a book on *Musical Autoethnographies* (Bartleet and Ellis 2009) were largely from our institution.

5 I should note that he’s such a striking contrast to Kelly, his former girlfriend, who was the other really talented composer in his year as an undergraduate. I found her music to be far more distinctive and compelling. I was so sorry she had dropped out of her Masters program. Her music was fresh and, moreover, she could offer many really
striking insights when she talked about it. But when she tried to write a coherent paragraph about it ... never mind. It’s pleasing to hear how well she’s doing nonetheless, even without the higher degree.

Having an on-going professional career, she undertook the degree part-time.

Understandably, the University was concerned about admitting into a doctoral-level research program a candidate who was untested in research and a case needed to be made in such circumstances.

At our university, students with a first-class honours degree – even Honours 2A sometimes – can proceed directly into a Ph.D programme if their research proposal is convincing enough and we have staff that can supervise the project. But entry into the DMA, as a professional doctorate, usually requires the requisite professional experience.

In our institution, doctoral candidates are assigned two supervisors from the faculty and, if required, a third from outside the Conservatorium may be appointed if an academic with suitable expertise is available and willing to take on the role.

I am a pianist and my postgraduate research was on the music of Béla Bartók.

Some students send you three emails a day and phone you at home at night or on the weekends while others you don’t hear from for months until they are nudged to report on what they’ve been up to. Some, who you may not have heard from for months, then expect that you will have nothing else to do when they want your full attention. I recall the case of a student who emailed me a document of around 20,000 words at 8 pm one night and then knocked on my office door the next morning at around 9 a.m. asking ‘What did you think of it? I’d like to get your feedback.’ I gave him some immediate feedback! I’m sure all supervisors have experienced students with expectations like that.

From *Wild Strawberries* (1957) written and directed by Ingmar Bergman.

It will give him the edge over Kelly. Certainly if he wants to teach in a tertiary institution it is most likely to be one of the required selection criteria.

Apparently the question ‘Why are you doing this?’ was frequently asked by her husband so she should have been well practiced in responding to it.

My own experience in writing my Ph.D had involved a deep sense of isolation which only in retrospect did I realise was not uncommon. Though in fact in some ways this had suited me, it was also deeply unsettling. Certainly I now recognise that I should have used my own supervisor better.


Usually supervision requires many more hours than are allocated on an academic’s workload calculations. Admittedly there are weeks when one doesn’t see the student or any of their work but then there are other periods when many hours a week are required to read their work and provide detailed and appropriate feedback. The theory of course is that it all evens out in the end, but ultimately I think most supervisors realise that they need to give much more than the time officially allocated but, from what I can tell, most are willing – if not happy as such – to do that. Similarly, I should add, the rewards for examining a thesis is in no way commensurate with the many often-difficult hours involved.