APPROACHES TO LEARNING IN THE
HONOURS YEAR SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP:
A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT
This study considers the role and intervention strategies used throughout the
honours year supervisory process from the student perspective. Using an
adaptation of the presage-process-product model for the supervisory setting,
we report two key findings from a sample of eight honours students in
Economics and Commerce faculties at two major Australian universities.
First, the largest supervisory gaps observed related predominantly to
academic roles, specifically, students required greater mentoring and
intervention roles to be taken by their supervisors. Second, the students
surveyed preferred more facilitative interventions rather than authoritative
interventions. The study concludes with a discussion of implications of the
research for stakeholders in the supervisory process.

Key Words: Honours, Supervision, Student Perspective.
JEL Classification: A20, A22

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focus of the study. All errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.
1. INTRODUCTION

Recent reform of the Australian Higher Education sector has added pressure on universities to improve research performance, as research outcomes become increasingly critical for funding and for a university’s standing.\(^1\) The path to postgraduate research studies (Masters and PhD) in economics and commerce is usually via an honours degree where an undergraduate student undertakes a fourth year of study during which he/she is taught research methods as part of a structured coursework program. Another requirement is to conduct a supervised dissertation. The quality of learning experienced by students enrolled in the honours year thus has important implications for their research outcomes as well as for attracting and retaining honours graduates in higher degree studies. Previous research has suggested that there is considerable variance in the completion rates of honours across different disciplines and that only a relatively small proportion of students continue with postgraduate research studies (Moses, 1992).\(^2\) One of the possible determinants of poor retention rates relates to the supervisory quality. Moses (1992: p9) argues that “it is obvious that many students are not enthused to the extent that they want to commit themselves to research studies. A contributing factor may be inadequate supervision”. Good supervisory practice is essential for honours’ students because the honours candidature is not only a culmination of the undergraduate study but the students are also expected to transcend to a higher level of analytical reasoning in a chosen research area. The guidance provided by a good supervisor, no doubt, becomes an important determinant of a student’s learning. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of empirical evidence on the supervisory practices and student experience of learning in the honours’ year. In an effort to provide greater insight into approaches to learning in the supervisory relationship, this paper considers the following three questions: First, what are honours’ students’ expectations of supervision? What supervisory roles are important to students? and, finally, which intervention strategies used in the supervisory relationship are most helpful? In considering these questions,

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\(^2\) Hockey (1991, 1995, 1996) observes that the completion rate of research projects in the United Kingdom has been traditionally lower for students in the social sciences than for those in the physical sciences. Moses (1992) provides corroborating evidence of higher completion rates for honours projects in the physical sciences domestically. While the reasons for this disparity remain unclear, the trend raises concerns over the quality of supervisory practices. Moreover, empirical findings at the postgraduate level by Whittle (1992) indicate that students from the Arts faculty are less satisfied with supervisory practices and tend to more frequently change to part-time status than Science faculty students.
we commence our discussion with an analysis of the received theoretical framework for understanding teaching and learning – the presage-process-product model. It is hoped that this Note will invite further, more detailed research on the issue.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The presage-process-product (3P) model of student learning is an interactive system that describes learning-related factors through various points in time. The model proposed by Biggs (1979), Prosser, Trigwell, Hazel and Gallagher (1994) and Prosser and Trigwell (1997, 1999) is premised on the notion that students’ perceptions of the learning and teaching context are a complex interaction of prior experiences of learning and teaching, and the learning and teaching context itself. This study interprets the 3P model using a constitutionalist approach to understanding teaching and learning. Prosser and Trigwell (1999) explain that the essence of this view is that meaning is constituted through an internal relationship between the individual and the world. In this context, learning is about experiencing the object of study in a different way, where the experience is a relationship between the person experiencing and the object experienced.3 Central to the constitutionalist conception of student learning is the role of perceptions. Variation in students’ perceptions of their learning situation is well documented in the literature.4 Research by Ramsden (1979, 1991, 1992) and Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) have linked student perceptions with learning outcomes across five scales: good teaching, clear goals; appropriate workload; appropriate assessment; and, emphasis on independence.5 Biggs (1999) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999) summarise that students adopt approaches to learning consistent with their perceptions, resulting in variation in the quality of their learning. The framework for this study requires an adaptation of the received 3P model. Whilst the common goal is still learning, the immediate system has changed from the tertiary classroom (Biggs, 1999), to the supervision relationship. Figure 2 outlines the model, as adapted by the authors.6 Appendices 1 and 2 offer a

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3 Prosser and Trigwell (1999) note that the constitutionalist approach is fundamentally different from other perspectives of learning, such as cognitivist, individual constructivist and social constructivist perspective.

4 One of the preliminary studies contributed in the field was by Fransson (1977). Fransson’ (1977) research found wide variation in students’ perceptions to various approaches to learning and teaching contexts.

5 See Ramsden’s scales of the Course Experience Questionnaire (1991) for examples of each item.

6 We commence with the presage factors, noting that student based factors are normally well specified at the honours’ level. Students have met the various undergraduate coursework and grade point average requirements to enter the
more detailed description of the supervisory roles, and interventions used in supervision.\(^7\)

According to Shuell (1986: p.429), “if students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher’s fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes”. This quote forms the theme of the current study. We will show that in an effort to develop a student as an independent researcher, both the role of the supervisor and the intervention strategies used in the supervisory relationship, can greatly impact firstly, whether supervision is effective, and secondly, whether the desired learning outcomes are achieved. If this is to be achieved the alignment of all factors in the 3P model is essential.

honours’ year program. As a result, pre-determined student factors are generated upon completion of the undergraduate program, and used by academic coordinators and potential supervisors to screen likely honours’ students. The current study argues that as a result of this screening process, a homogenous group of honours’ students (for instance, homogeneity in high GPA scores) is created prior to engaging in supervision. However, it is the HOW of supervision (Process) that ultimately predicts the desired learning outcomes (Product). Factors that are included in this Process phase, will be discussed. Similar to the student factors outlined above, the second presage factor is also characterised by certainty. Information is given to students that outlines objectives, assessment practices, supervisory requirements and institutional procedures for the dissertation unit. The current study argues that these two presage factors, working together, generate certain expectations by the student, about supervision, prior to engaging in the supervisory relationship. If the supervisor matches these expectations, then it is likely that the effectiveness of supervision is improved and the desired learning outcomes, achieved. The Process Phase of the adapted 3P model includes the actual supervisory relationship, and the learning that is achieved as a result of the interaction between the supervisor and student. The model shows key learning focused activities (e.g. identification of a topic, writing a literature review etc), targeted at the honours’ level, and the influence that supervisory roles and interventions have on the students’ learning.

\(^7\) Heron’s (1986) six-category intervention analysis was used because it deals with six basic kinds of intention a supervisor can have in working with his / her student. According to Biggs (1999), students’ learning outcomes are represented by quantitative (e.g. facts, skills), qualitative (e.g. structure), and affective (e.g. involvement) qualities. Whilst we agree that these qualities are important, the current researchers have defined the students’ learning outcomes within the context of this paper, as that where the student is recognised as an independent researcher.
FIGURE 1
3P MODEL OF TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR HONOURS’ SUPERVISION

Pre-Determined Student Factors
Characteristics of the student that are known by the institution and supervisor, prior to engaging in supervision. E.g. student’s academic performance.

Supervision Learning Context
Characteristics of supervision that are outlined by the institution, and are known by the supervisor and student prior to engaging in supervision.

Process

Presage
Learning Focused Activities
Topic Identification
Literature Review
Research Question
Hypothesis Development
Data Collection
Data Analysis
Final Write Up

Intervention Strategies
Authoritative Facilitative

Product
Students’ Learning Outcomes
Desired learning outcomes for the student as a result of supervision.
3. METHODOLOGY

A total of eight honours’ students participated in the study, within the Economics and Commerce Faculties at two major universities in Australia. All students were in the Dissertation stage of the program, which included elements of the research project that dealt with, for example, formulation of the research question, data collection, analysis, and write-up. Whilst we acknowledge that a contrasting approach to this work would be to survey students post the completion of their dissertation, we were motivated in this study to attempt to ‘get inside’ immediate concerns of the supervisee.8

- **Self-Report Measures**: In an effort to determine some measure of students’ perceptions of their supervisor’s approach to learning in supervision, two self-report measures were used within the current study.

- **Supervisory Roles Inventory**: The first instrument was based on Bennett & Knibbs (1985) supervisory roles inventory, which identify 10 possible academic supervisor roles, grouped under four headings: Process roles (bureaucrat, initiator); Academic roles (expert, mentor, innovator); Interpersonal roles (friendly helper, motivator); and Validation roles (stern critic, judge).

- **Heron’s Six Category Intervention Analysis**: Heron’s Six Category Intervention Analysis (1986) was chosen to illuminate the supervisory role: Authoritative Interventions (prescriptive, informative, confronting); and Facilitative Interventions (catalytic, cathartic, supportive).

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8 A combination of both quantitative and qualitative measures was used within the current research. This included a survey made up of a number of self-report instruments used to measure student perceptions of supervisory practices and approaches to learning. A 90-minute interview that addressed issues associated with the following areas, was also carried out with each student: 1. General background of student, their stage of progress in the program and their interest in the research topic; 2. An open-ended assessment of their perceived strengths and weaknesses as Honours candidates; 3. Students’ ranking of the roles undertaken by their present supervisors and what they believe ought to be assumed by an ideal supervisor; and the students’ perceptions of the intervention strategies they see as being important and those seen as being undertaken by their supervisors; and, 4. Student perceptions of the efficiency of their candidature in terms of their level of satisfaction with their supervision, willingness to undertake a PhD, and the level of confidence they have in completing the project in time.
4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Student Perceptions of Supervisor Roles in Supervision

In an effort to determine whether student expectations of the supervisor matched the role of the supervisor played in the supervisory relationship, students were asked to provide information on their perceptions of both the ‘actual’ and ‘ideal’ roles of their supervisors. The largest supervisory gaps across the sample related to predominantly academic roles, specifically students perceived that their supervisor was not taking on mentoring and innovation roles. Comments from students suggested that they wanted their supervisor to guide them through their dissertation, such that “mutual respect” could be developed. Students also appeared to want their supervisor to be innovative in the supervisory relationship, anticipating an environment where new ideas could be discussed and explored. Table 1 provides a summary of these findings. What the findings also showed was that in an effort for students to fill in this gap, a strategy used was to become involved in peer interactions. This was evidenced by student comments like “the most useful discussions I have is with other honours’ students, we bounce ideas off each other in a more relaxed environment”.
TABLE 1
STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SUPERVISOR ROLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students Perceptions of what they Wanted from Supervision</th>
<th>Role of Supervisor as</th>
<th>Student Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Students Perceptions of what they Wanted from Supervision | Academic              | “... the discussions I have with my supervisor should be much broader, I want to better understand the meaning of my research and have the time to talk more about how the topic fits into the bigger picture”  
“The Mentor” | “... (my supervisor) needs to have more mutual respect, respect for my views, I want him/her to be less prescriptive and more willing to share and debate ideas . . .”  
“... It would be great if my supervisor could bring in some new ideas to the research, it seems to be all one-way traffic from me to him/her. ...”  
“The Innovator” | “... I think my research question is poor. We (my supervisor and I) did not discuss it enough, we didn’t look at the question in different ways, the data I have collected doesn’t seem to fit . . .”  

Students Perceptions of what they Experienced in Supervision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of Supervisor is</th>
<th>Student Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Unclear               | “... I just can’t handle how critical my supervisor is towards my work. This is the first time I have done this and he/she is always saying the drafts I give him/her are sub-standard. I will just keep chipping away on my own and try and get the thing (dissertation) done, but it would be good to get some positive feedback. ...”  
“(my supervisor) does not give clear direction on how to complete my dissertation. I am just going it alone as I just get confused and frustrated when I meet with him/her. I ask my supervisor what he/she would like me to do and I just don’t get a definite response . . .”  
“I don’t get a lot of feedback and I feel like I’m on my own most of the time . . .”  

Students’ Strategies to Fill in the Gap of Supervision

“... the most useful discussions I have is with other honours’ students, we bounce ideas off each other in a more relaxed environment”
### TABLE 2

**STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF INTERVENTION STRATEGIES USED IN SUPERVISION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Students Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitative Interventions</td>
<td>“. . . (my supervisor) has given me the confidence to research independently, he/she is very supportive and I have learnt to tackle problems on my own. . . “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“. . . (the supervisor) is good at motivating students, after we discussed the framework for the literature review, I went about completing this myself. . . “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“. . . (the supervisor) must be helpful, but not spoon-feeding, I want to be pushed to think about how best to complete my dissertation. . . “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalytic</td>
<td>“. . . my supervisor is my coach. I am happy for him/her to tell me when I am going wrong and what I need to change. . . “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 3

**MATCHING SUPERVISORY ROLES AND INTERVENTIONS TO STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of Supervision and Students Comments</th>
<th>Student Characteristics and Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Learning Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early stages of supervision</td>
<td>Dependent on Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor uses instruction and interpretation to structure the learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“. . . (I expected) a supervisor to have superior technical knowledge and be able to give clear instruction.”</td>
<td>Lacks self awareness, minimal experience, limited conceptual understanding</td>
<td>Possible Supervisory Roles: The Bureaucrat, The Expert, The Initiator Possible Interventions: Prescriptive, Informative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“. . . (the supervisor) must be helpful, but not spoon feeding, I want to be pushed to think about how best to complete my dissertation.”

Increase of self-awareness, striving for independence, fluctuating motivation, becoming more self assertive, building confidence as an independent researcher

Possible Supervisory Roles: The Innovator, The Motivator, The Friendly Helper

Possible Interventions: Informative, Confronting

Conditional Autonomy

Identity as an independent researcher begins to develop, increased insight occurs, with more consistent motivation

Possible Supervisory Roles: The Stern Critic, The Evaluator, The Motivator

Possible Interventions: Confronting, Cathartic, Catalytic

“. . . My supervisor is my coach. I am happy for him/her to tell me when I am going wrong and what I need to change.”

Final stages of supervision

Independent Researcher

Adequate self awareness, insightful of own strengths and weaknesses, student can adequately function independently of the supervisor

Possible Supervisory Roles: The Mentor, The Innovator

Possible Interventions: Catalytic, Supportive

“. . . (my supervisor) has given me the confidence to research independently, he/she is very supportive and I have learnt to tackle problems on my own.”

Supervisor uses less instruction, and begins to challenge the student to think critically. Some motivation may also be required to build the student’s confidence at this time

Possible Interventions: Confronting, Cathartic, Catalytic

Supervisor begins to see the student as a colleague, and mutual respect begins to develop. More sharing and discussion of ideas begins to occur, where the supervisor challenges the students thinking on issues

Adapted from Stoltenberg (1981)
4.2 Students Perceptions of Intervention Strategies Used by their Supervisors

In an effort to obtain a more holistic picture of the supervisory relationship, and the student learning that occurs, students were also asked to comment on the type of intervention strategies used by their supervisors. Both ‘actual’ and ‘ideal’ ratings were recorded. The findings showed that students preferred more facilitative interventions, rather than authoritative interventions. Students sought supervisors who could provide an environment of “academic freedom” that supported the students’ desire to “express [my] views without recrimination”. Table 2 provides a summary of some of the key findings.

4.3 Matching Supervisory Roles and Interventions to Student Learning Outcomes

From this preliminary investigation, we suggest that students' learning outcomes are influenced by the roles played by their supervisors, and the type of intervention strategies used in the supervisory relationship. By comparing supervisory roles and interventions to student learning, we can develop a better understanding of how to make supervision more effective, and overcome some of the problems of supervision, as outlined by Rudd (1985) and Moses (1992). Table 3 offers a possible framework of student learning outcomes, and how supervisory roles and interventions can impact students’ learning. From the existing findings we can see that at the beginning of supervision, the student is quite inexperienced and lacks self-awareness and conceptual understanding. In an effort to improve student learning the supervisor can play a role of initiator and expert to encourage discussion and development of the dissertation. Intervention strategies such as informative and prescriptive, will also add value to the supervisory relationship and student learning. The framework shows the continuation of student learning throughout the duration of supervision, and illustrates the changes in supervisory roles and interventions. In an effort for the student to develop into an independent researcher, it is necessary for the supervisor to become more aware of how to better meet student needs.
5. IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Some of the implications that result as a consequence of this framework are considered below:

- **Implications for the Student**: To demonstrate a willingness to communicate individual needs to the supervisor throughout the duration of supervision.

- **Implications for the Supervisor**: To incorporate reflection on professional practice as a supervisor in an effort to ensure student needs are being met. This would include analysis of supervisory roles and interventions used in supervision, both currently and in future supervision work.

- **Implications for the Student and Supervisor**: To demonstrate and implement discussion of a ‘psychological contract’ at the commencement of the supervisory relationship with clear expectations of the communication processes to adopt particularly the need for regular, open and frank discussions.

- **Implications for the School**: Introduction of workshops/seminars/information sessions for staff and students on how to make supervision more effective, and the role/s they can play in supervision. Possibly, coordinating a more informal gathering of student supervisor pairs may also aid in the communication process.

Our preliminary findings suggest that the quality of supervisor-student relationships have direct implications for student learning and teaching outcomes. In particular, it appears that greater clarity and mutual understanding of supervisory roles and intervention strategies between student and supervisor, are associated with more favourable student learning and teaching outcomes. It is our conjecture that the preliminary analysis in this paper opens some important areas for future consideration. One important direction may consider students being surveyed after they have completed their honours year, with more universities included in future work to provide further capture of other environmental effects on the supervisor relationship. Another avenue for future research is to consider whether variations in the nature of the Honours thesis, particularly in terms of the type of data collection and analysis may affect supervisor-supervisee relationships. For instance, building student skills to conduct case study and interviews versus dealing with large scale, capital market data may involve different communication and learning strategies. Further, a more systematic, large scale study investigating the impact of gender, age and
other demographic differences on the supervisor and supervisee relationship is likely to further improve our understanding of the effectiveness of the various intervention strategies available for the supervisory process.

APPENDIX 1

DESCRIPTION OF SUPERVISORY ROLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Group</th>
<th>Specific Roles and Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Roles</strong></td>
<td>Supervisor plays an important part in the development of the thesis, and checking of the students’ work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor must be able to provide insight and be knowledgeable in the field of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor must be able to guide and counsel the student across a wide range of issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor offers suggestions to the project, including new ideas and possible alternatives to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Stern Critic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor must be able to challenge the student and offer critical appraisal of the student’s work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Evaluator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor evaluates the work across the research project, outlining key issues that need to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor offers judgement on the type of work being produced by the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process Roles</strong></td>
<td>Supervisor plays an important part in the ‘process’ of the research project and monitors the project throughout its duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Bureaucrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor must be able to inform the student of relevant institutional procedures and policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>regarding how research work is carried out and submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Initiator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor have to be able to initiate key activities and decision making processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Roles</strong></td>
<td>Supervisor plays an important part in emotional and psychological support of the student, often the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘make or break’ of the student-supervisor relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Friendly Helper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor must be able to provide support when student experiences times of stress and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Motivator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor must be able to offer praise for work carried out by the student, and encourage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ongoing efforts in regards to the research work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Bennett & Knibbs (1986)
APPENDIX 2

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES USED BY SUPERVISORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Intervention Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative Interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A prescriptive intervention seeks to direct the behaviour of the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An informative intervention seeks to impart knowledge, information, and meaning to the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A confronting intervention seeks to raise the student’s consciousness about some limiting attitude or behaviour of which they are relatively unaware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitative Interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathartic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A cathartic intervention seeks to enable the student to speak out about certain frustrations, anger etc, that may be impacting on their work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalytic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A catalytic intervention seeks to elicit self-discovery, self-directed learning, and problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A supportive intervention seeks to affirm the worth and value of the student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Heron (1986)

REFERENCES


