Rescue Supervision

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Introduction

This paper addresses the newly named phenomenon of 'rescue supervision'. The phenomenon itself is unfortunately not new. Not every candidate is blessed with adequate doctoral supervision. This paper looks at some of the reasons why supervision may not be adequate, only one of which is that the supervisor is incompetent. Whatever the reasons for the inadequacy of the supervision, it is desirable that the situation be faced and action taken. Sometimes it is enough to change the supervision team, but in other cases damage may have been done to the progress of the research and to the candidate, and in such cases change is not enough. In this latter case the situation must be rescued by a 'rescue supervisor'. Such a supervisor has to bring together two aspects: the ordinary competencies of supervising a project, and the extra-ordinary requirement to take on a damaged candidate and project and deal with the consequences.

A rescue supervisor is appointed to a failing PhD. The appointment is different from the normal process of changing supervision owing to staff turnover, etc. It is a process that is forced upon the institution, or the candidate who has become the victim of circumstances. I have been appointed as a rescue supervisor four times, and this paper is based on my experiences of that process compared to my experiences of normal doctoral supervision and examination.

Context

In most universities in the UK there are several possible outcomes of the PhD examination. It is not a foregone conclusion that the thesis will pass simply because it has reached the stage where it has been submitted for examination. The stages that lead up to submission do not have the character of pre-examination as they do, for example, in Sweden. Neither is it the case that examination must lead either to an unconditional pass or to a fail that may or may not be recoverable as is the case, for example, in Brazil. As a result, British PhDs are usually submitted in a soft-bound format so that corrections can be made to them prior to final printing and binding for the archives. The range of possible outcomes at University of Hertfordshire is typical of other universities in UK and includes the following:

Pass

This is the unconditional approval of the thesis following a *viva voce* examination, at which the examiners are satisfied both of the quality of the research and of its presentation in the thesis. Practice-based PhDs may have included submitted artefacts,

perhaps through the medium of an exhibition. The approval of the thesis or other documentation implies that the examiners are satisfied that the archival documentation is of sufficient quality to represent the content of the research and communicate its argument and findings to subsequent researchers.

Pass subject to minor amendments

This outcome normally allows the candidate one month to attend to minor corrections to the thesis that have been recommended by the examiners. The kind of amendments that are identified usually include typographical or presentational errors, lapses in the use of conventions such as the Harvard system of references, missing captions to tables or figures, mistakes in references, etc. It might include the insertion or deletion of a couple of pages of text to clarify some point that emerged during the *viva voce* examination, that has not been adequately expressed in the thesis. Such amendments are tailored to be possible in the time available.

Pass subject to major amendments

This outcome allows the candidate up to three months to address more major omissions or lack of clarity. Under this option it is likely that the candidate will have to revise a chapter or add some additional material to substantiate some point or argument. It is not normally used if the candidate needs to revise any fieldwork or to make physical objects. Once again, the amendments are tailored to suit the time that is available. In all cases in which the examiners require more work to be undertaken, then they must be quite explicit about what must be done. The expression in both of the outcomes above has been 'pass subject to…'. This implies that if the candidate does what is required then the award will be made.

Re-examination

This outcome can be made with or without the requirement for a further *viva voce* examination. Re-examination usually allows the candidate 12 months to completely revise the thesis. This option is taken by the examiners of they think that the candidate has undertaken useful work that can be turned into a PhD, but that the submission did not meet the criteria[1]. In such cases there are serious errors or omissions in the thesis that need to be addressed. These will be specified by the examiners, but care should be taken by the candidate and the supervisors because the first submission was inadequate despite, presumably, being previously judged as adequate and submitted. In the judgement of the examiners it can be corrected.

MPhil

This option may not be available in all universities. The main difference between a PhD and an MPhil is that the former requires the candidate to make an original contribution to knowledge or its interpretation. The originality of the contribution is substantiated by a rigorous literature search. The latter requires a rigorous survey of the current state of knowledge. If, therefore, the thesis is well done, but fails to make a new and substantiated contribution to knowledge, it may meet the criteria for the latter

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[1] example: http://perseus.herts.ac.uk/uhinfo/index.cfm?C9174933-D93F-3D88-5815-1E63C238E40D

but fail to meet the criteria for the former. In such cases the MPhil degree may be awarded.

Fail

This is clearly the least desirable outcome for all concerned. It represents a judgement not only that the thesis is inadequate, but that it cannot be corrected by the candidate. This outcome does not give the candidate a second chance, and is therefore very serious and should only be used in clear-cut cases. Universities will normally offer some recourse to appeal, but usually only against procedural rather than academic matters.

Other interim assessments

In many UK universities it is the practice to admit candidates onto a pathway that leads to an MPhil degree, and only if they pass an internal assessment called 'transfer' or 'progression' are they eligible to submit for PhD. This system was developed to offer an alternative award to candidates who failed to meet the PhD criteria, and expresses the possibility that a project may be faithfully worked on for some time before it is clear whether it will bear the fruit of new knowledge. The circumstances in which it might not include that in which a rigorous literature search reveals that the research has been done before. In such cases the 'transfer' or 'progression' exam will lead to a change of pathway and terminal degree. This avoids the result of the candidate failing the PhD. However, many candidates in this situation do regard an MPhil as a 'failed' PhD, and some overseas candidates may have been funded conditionally on gaining the PhD and may therefore have to repay their award.

The education system in the UK is increasingly affected by the requirements of explicit quality management systems. The national Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requires that

> Institutions will put in place and bring to the attention of candidates and relevant staff clearly defined mechanisms for formal reviews of candidate progress, including explicit review stages.
> (QAA 2004: precept 16)

As a result many universities are introducing annual progress assessments[2]. These may have two possible outcomes. They may be used formatively, to provide feedback and advice on remedial action required of the candidate to maintain the expected level of the research at that stage. On the other hand they may be used summatively: as barriers to progression if the required standard has not been reached. According to the implementation of the quality system this may or may not be a recoverable situation. For example, a candidate may have a certain maximum time or number of attempts by which to achieve the required standard before an alternative pathway or terminal degree is offered, e.g. MA(Res) after year one or MPhil after year two.

Human factors

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[2] example: http://perseus.herts.ac.uk/uhinfo/research/office/research-degrees/notes-of-guidance/n-of-g-monitoring.cfm

In addition to the structural considerations above, there are of course a great many human factors that can impinge on the progress of the research. The PhD is a long process, particularly when undertaken part-time, and has been compared to military 'arduous training' in which the successful person is the one still able to stand when it finsihes. The duration is long enough to include unemployment, bankruptcy, divorce, bereavement, and perhaps more likely: disillusionment, boredom, loss of motivation, etc. Nobody can predict what will happen in the next three to six years of their life, and some part-time candidates take eight or more years to complete their research. This latter situation brings an additional difficulty: that the object of study changes in that time.

Apart from personal factors affecting the candidate, which are often fatal to the project; supervisors might leave the institution, the interests or the perceived direction or opportunities of the project, or the interests of the institution might change leading to changes in human and physical resources. Even when there are no such changes there are sometimes problems with the candidate or the supervision team identifying clear goals. This is a particular problem in arts and humanities in the UK where the candidate is normally expected to take the lead in identifying the nature of the project rather than joining an existing project designed by the supervisor. There can be personal conflicts between the candidate and the supervisors resulting in irreconcilable difficulties, culminating not only in a need to change supervisors but also to change institutions. All of these possibilities are problems that force themselves on the individuals rather than being circumstances of normal planned change.

The rescue project

As a result of these difficulties the work may be in a variety of conditions, none of which are desirable. The work will have started and it is *the* key feature of rescue supervision that as much as possible of this work should be preserved. I do not regard it as rescue supervision if the new supervisor simply believes that all the preceding work must be thrown away and the project started again. As a result of confusion about the direction of the project, the work may have unclear objectives, although this can be an asset because much useful work may have been done that can be retained. Conversely, in a clearly structured project, much work may have been done in terms of contextual research and data gathering that is inappropriate or not useful. For example, data may have been gathered without controls, activities of earlier researchers may have been repeated without taking into account the critical reception of that work in the meantime, the results may lack statistical significance or validity, inappropriate methods may have been used, assumptions may have been made about the communicative potential of visual work, etc. If the objectives of the project have changed during its lifetime, fundamental aspects may not have been adequately revised, including the scope of the literature and artefactual review, and changes in methodological culture of the subject. Changes may have occurred in an interdisciplinary context affecting changes inside subject-specific boundaries, or the interdisciplinary boundary itself may have shifted requiring new skills and information to be gathered.

Adequate contextual research and data-gathering might be marred by a poor or invalid argument leading to conclusions that cannot be justified on the basis of the work done

or the data gathered. Indeed in certain circumstances there may be little or no argument at all, resulting in a project full of assertions that do not persuade the sceptical reader. It is not enough that one *could* conclude something, but that one *should* conclude something, and thereby stake a claim to a contribution to knowledge. I claim that the failure to make an explicit argument leading to a valid claim to new knowledge is the principal cause of failure in PhDs because it undermines the principal criterion of the award.

The rescue candidate

For any of the above reasons, the state of the work is problematic and so the rescue candidate will be understandably upset! He may feel that a number of bodies have failed him. Amongst these may be the institution, the supervisors, or even the subject: that somehow the project was a bad choice. I believe that a research project can be made from any subject and it is the design of the project rather than the subject matter that determines whether it can be or is a success. Projects can also be derailed by difficulties with collaborators or where access to external resources such as artists' archives, etc., are not forthcoming. However these are not really problems of a failing project and so will not be considered here.

In addition to the candidate feeling upset, he will probably also be [very] angry and early phases of rescue supervision may seem more like therapy. It may be useful to note that the personal qualities required in a non-professional counsellor are

> warmth, acceptance, sympathy and concern for the well-being of the [candidate] (Lawrence, 1996).

Rescue supervisors will need to take on this role if they are to enable the candidate to regain their trust in academic advisors. Having once been let down by the process, candidates will naturally be worried about the future and that such a misfortune may happen again. They *should* also be very anxious about timescales and it is reassuring for all parties to agree milestones and indicators of progress. Reassuring the candidate that the bad aspects will not be repeated is not just a matter of reassuring words but of reassuring actions. For example, enabling the candidate to present a good paper at a conference resulting in positive feedback is an external validation of the process, and it is often a feature of inadequate previous supervision that such external validation has not been sought or heeded.

Problem analysis

It is essential, in order to complete the task successfully within the time available, that as much of the previous work as possible is retained. It is therefore important to undertake a proper analysis of the previous project. It is not always clear where the problem lies and it is quite likely that the whole project needs to be, or is going to be, reconceptualised. Therefore all aspects are up for renegotiation. It may be that changing the focus of the project will bring more of the data and argument into use. On the other hand, given the focus, it may be that different material should be reviewed or generated. This is a very fluid situation and requires a very creative and positive approach on both sides. The candidate will need reassurance that the newly configured project is significantly better than before. In my experience, once the

process begins, the candidate can see very clearly the inadequacies of the old project because they are usually structural in nature. The candidate should not therefore be regarded as a passive victim of this reconceptualisation but as someone who possesses useful experience of the unprofitable avenues that have already been explored. It may be useful to consider how many of the following key components of the project can be retained:

- Research questions
- Contextualisation or literature review
- Method
- Data or evidence
- Argument
- Conclusion or contribution
- Target audience/context of consumption

Every PhD must have these components although in some practice-based research it may be difficult to identify them. This is a difficulty that should be addressed and not ignored in practice-based research. Since every PhD must have these components it may be useful to approach this list, which is written in the order of consumption by the reader, from the point of view of production by the researcher. In that case it broadly operates in the opposite direction (cf. Biggs 2004), i.e. it starts by identifying the audience for the research.

Tabulating the strengths and weaknesses of each of these elements will help to identify what can be retained. Whilst one is in the business of retaining as much as possible, one must also be prepared to throw away all those elements that are responsible for the failure. Fatal weaknesses mean that content must be thrown away. Less than fatal weaknesses can be addressed, possibly by learning and using techniques from previous researchers in the field.

Once the strongest elements have been identified a new focus must be created and the aims and objectives of the project restated. Because they are going to be unfamiliar, explicitly restating them ensures they are available for scrutiny and are not going to be subject to 'mission-drift'. Focus is determined by asking 'what can be argued on the basis of the data and information that survived the analysis?' In particular one is interested in potential conclusions that would be meaningful and consequential for an identifiable audience. Mission-drift sometimes occurs when the researcher becomes more interested in questions that interest themselves rather than questions that interest the audience. Identifying an audience means being able to explicitly identify them, whether by naming them or because the work contributes to the work of other named researchers, or implicitly by reference to groups such as 'environmental artists' or 'the concept of Mode 2 knowledge' etc.

Project management

One of the pressures on all parties is the institutional timescale within which the research must be competed. For a UK PhD the expected timescale is 3 years full-time and the maximum timescale is four years based on *per capita* funding for research candidates from central government. Institutional regulations might allow candidates to study for longer but there would be financial consequences. Externally funded or sponsored research may have different timescales and there may be opportunities to

suspend payment if one can demonstrate that some time was not just lost through ineffective research but that work was not being done, e.g. in the transition period of appointing the rescue supervisor. Even a few months can represent a significant help to a candidate in this situation. In addition the candidate may have lost time owing to changes in personal circumstances, including divorce, having children, etc., and unfortunately these life issues do not stop simply because the candidate is also having difficulties with the academic progress of the research. As a result of the reassessment of the remaining strengths of the earlier work it may be useful to construct an indicative analytical table of contents which gives not just sub-headings but also a brief argument that connects them together (e.g. Wittgenstein 1975: 9ff.), and to associate both duration and calendar dates to all of these elements.

Time will also be needed for feedback. Since many projects fail as a result of poor or insufficient feedback at the early stages, both the candidate and the supervisor will need reassurance that the work is on target both in terms of time and quality. It is important for the supervisor to recognise that this timescale has implications for her too, and strategies should be in place to allow other areas of the work to progress while sections are being assessed. Assessing research and giving good quality feedback is difficult and time-consuming, especially in the context of rescue supervision in which substantial revisions are being proposed and evaluated. If necessary it may also be useful to establish milestones and indicators of performance at the right level, such as having assessments by persons external to the supervision team.

The most time consuming aspect of research is fieldwork or studio work. It is therefore undesirable to generate a need for more of this. In general the project should be reconfigured around existing data. The process of rescue supervision should, as much as possible, be a desk process rather than a field process. It is likely that existing material will be used for purposes that are different from those for which they were originally gathered and this can transform unpromising material into something more useful. For example, in the courtroom, the prosecuting and defence counsels use exactly the same evidence to prove opposite hypotheses. This demonstrates that data *per se* is relatively argument-neutral and can be put to a number of different uses. The method of approaching the data must be appropriate for the audience, for example the notions of argument and proof vary between subjects and what is persuasive in one may not be persuasive in another. Having examined theses in a number of subject areas it is my belief that a rigorous argument can be identified by a non-subject specialist. As a consequence it is also my opinion that an ability to recognise and transform arguments is probably the most useful skill of the rescue supervisor. However, subject expertise is important and it may be one role of the rescue supervisor to identify if this is lacking and how such a shortfall might be addressed by the institution.

One question that might be asked at the outset is whether there is an argument at all, or whether the research makes too many assumptions and basically only makes assertions or unsubstantiated claims, or *non sequiturs*. In projects which do have arguments, the fundamental bases or assumptions or axioms should be identified so that the team can be confident that the audience will share them, for example, the status of experiential knowledge, etc. Not everything has to be proven in the thesis, or it would be an impossible task, but the basic assumptions must be shared even by

sceptical peers in the field. Indicators for the presence of an argument include the use of argument-words such as 'if, then, therefore, because'. Words such as 'ought', which is a moral rather than a logical imperative, should be treated with suspicion. 'Might' can just as easily be replaced by 'might not'. It is my experience that many arts researchers feel uncomfortable in making firm claims and seek to moderate this feeling by the use of conditionals, thereby weakening the force of the argument. Nearly all arguments must be placed in some kind of framework that provides conditions within which the claims are held to be valid. It is much better for the prosecution of the argument if these conditions are established in the initial contextualisation of the research so that, given these conditionals, the researcher can be as forceful as possible for the significance and contribution of the research. As was said earlier, an inability by the candidate or the examiner to identify a claim to new knowledge is fatal since it is a principal criterion of the award.

Summary

Rescue supervision is not synonymous with ordinary supervision, but it does entail it. Rescue supervision brings with it additional responsibilities, and institutions that make such an appointment, and individuals who accept it, need to be aware of what these additional responsibilities are. These additional responsibilities are broadly twofold: to rescue the damaged project and, where necessary, to rescue the damaged candidate.

This paper has not made many observations about the nature of the damaged candidate and how they might be rescued, other than observing that there is an aspect of this that requires the skills of a therapist. The problems of restoring someone's confidence, or dealing with the consequences of anger and feelings of betrayal, etc., lie somewhat beyond the scope of this paper. These are real feelings and consequences that cannot be overlooked in the process of rescue supervision. How they are dealt with will depend on the personal relationship between the rescue supervisor and the candidate. Being prepared to deal with this 'non-academic' aspect of the situation is a responsibility that the rescue supervisor must be prepared to accept. It has been observed that there are many external factors that can adversely affect the candidate or the original supervisor at a personal level, and it should not be concluded from the need for rescue supervision that either party was necessarily incompetent or lacking in personal management skills.

The work will have been started and the challenge is to keep as much of it as is possible, but the interpretation of what is useful and what is not useful depends on how the project is reconceptualised. Rescuing the project is something that has been analysed into three main parts: audience, argument, and creativity in identifying each so as to preserve as much as possible of the original work.

First the project must be reconceptualised. The recommendation about how to do this is based on the observation that projects tend to have a standard structure, but to also recognise that the order of its presentation in the thesis is not the order of conceptualising a project. Successful reconceptualisation is based on clarifying the target audience, because clarifying that will clarify what issues are meaningful and consequential for that audience. This will identify and fix a relevant research question, and the scope and direction of the project.

When the project has a particular direction it then becomes possible to compare that direction with what has already been achieved so that one can answer 'what can be argued on the basis if the data and information'. What remains will then need to take account of the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the earlier work. That might include the data, the argument, etc. Something to be avoided is any requirement to generate additional fieldwork, data collection, or artefact construction. In that sense it is reassuring that data is relatively argument neutral. It is important to recognise that data only becomes evidence when it is contextualised in an argument.

The creative contribution of the rescue supervisor is to first of all decide in this fluid situation how one might select a target audience and determine what is a research question that is consequential for them, that best suits the data and the argument that might be made form that data. The second is to be creative in the construction of that argument given that several different cases might be made from the same data. Finally, the argument needs to be made explicit not just in terms of content in which the supervisor and the candidate feel they are making a claim to new knowledge, but it must be explicitly reinforced by the language that is used to communicate that argument as indicated by the use of argument-words.

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