

Walking Alongside: Personal Reflections on Supervising Online Graduate Students

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Abstract

Supervising graduate (postgraduate) students online brings several unique challenges, along with the normal routine of graduate supervision. In this article, I draw upon my own experiences at residential universities and for the past decade and a half, as an online supervisor. I begin with my time at the University of Durham, where I sat at the feet of Professor Kingsley Barrett, and where I witnessed several valuable practices related to writing and supervising theses. In this article, I avoid, where possible, the standard aspects of thesis writing, available in books for new supervisors. Instead, I deal here with topics like affirmation, encouragement, the faith of the student, the path of scholarship, and guiding students in their quest for that illusive original topic. In addition, I offer some simple guidelines to questions students often ask, such as “how many references per page?” and “how long should a quotation be?” My hope is that the ideas found here may promote good supervision and the highest standards of scholarship.

Keywords

doctoral supervision, postgraduate research, online education

About the Author

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1. Introduction

While masters and doctoral students (postgraduate students)¹ often walk a lonely path, that of the online student can be even more challenging. In this article, I look at the role of the supervisor (promoter) who is tasked with guiding, directing, and encouraging the student and all of this by means of emails and occasional online conversations. With often minimal interaction, and the difficulties of speaking across cultures and even continents, I ask how does one take a student from the initial glimmerings of an idea into a full-blown doctoral or master's thesis, that makes a genuine contribution to academic knowledge? Reflecting on my own journey as a doctoral student with one of the greatest New Testament scholars, C Kingsley Barrett, through my supervision of a number of graduate students over more than thirty years, I have learnt much from both my successes and failures. My intention here is not to duplicate books and studies for training supervisors, or the guides to research (like Smith 2008), but rather to deal with issues which are peculiar to working in the context of faith, as well as the more general issues specific to online studies. In sharing these ideas, my hope is that new supervisors will be able to discover such ideas as are compatible with their existing methodologies to the success of their students and in the promotion of the highest standards of scholarship.

2. Some Reflections

In the late seventies and early eighties, I sat at the feet of the late Kingsley Barrett, New Testament Professor at the University of Durham, in the north-east of England (see Hooker and Wilson, 1982). Since I did my master's degree at the Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg, Durham was a challenge—especially in the winter; but the joy of a theological library that surpassed my wildest expectations, was due compensation. Barrett followed a simple practice of listening and encouraging. He was the quintessence of patience as I grappled with the all-important task of finding an original topic. It took almost a year to realize that my original aim of studying the Christology of the Fourth Gospel, might be satisfied by a focused study of John 6:69 —The Holy One of God (Domeris 1983).

Barrett encouraged me to write as much as possible. He was not worried if it was only tangential to the topic, so long as I was writing it down for him to read. Little of what I wrote in that first year found its way into my thesis, but I passed an important test— I was able to write down my thoughts for Barrett to consider. Because of his encouragement, and his gentle guidance, I was empowered in the four years of my study to complete my thesis.

Barrett would go through my work, making abundant pencil comments in the margins, in his careful and precise handwriting, correcting grammar and curbing my more ridiculous ideas. Sitting in his office, I would receive his multiple corrections and suggestions, but never failed to leave feeling affirmed and encouraged. Such, I believe, is the basis of good supervision and a practice to be emulated. Even more so, this is true with online students. We all need affirmation, but it needs to be anchored in reality. Too much affirmation may lead to unreal expectations and at some point, in the process, to a shattering of dreams.

¹ One may be more familiar with the American term "graduate student" to render the British and South African term "postgraduate." Both terms denote students working at the level of master's and doctoral levels.

3. Finding the Path of Scholarship

As supervisors, one seldom discusses the path of scholarship, perhaps assuming that students will naturally discover what it means to be a scholar, by some form of osmosis. In a residential university, one might encounter the quintessential scholar with piles of books in their crowded offices, and that slightly absent-minded look; such scholars have devoted their lives to academic study and so serve as an example to dewy-eyed students fresh from their first degrees. For online supervisors, whose students are scattered across the world, it is vital to impress on students what it means to be an academic of substance and to encourage them in that direction.

In residential universities, in company with senior students, one might discourse at length and far into the night, but on one's own, as the way of online study lies, there may not be fellow students or academics to meet. A colleague sums up the situation as follows,

During my master's and doctoral degrees, I had had no moral support whatsoever from my family and church, probably because they could not relate to my situation. It was a very lonely five years. All I had was email correspondence with my supervisors once in a while. (pers. comm.)²

This comment is a critical reminder of the supportive role of the online supervisor.

The first task of a supervisor is to ensure the student has a solid grasp of what is in front of him or her. One cannot hit the target, unless one can see it. Until a student has paged through a thesis, they may have little understanding of what is involved, especially the length, the number of references, the books in the bibliography, and the stylistic elements needed. Nowadays, most theses completed at international universities are available online, supplying a wealth of information, especially bibliographical sources to be mined.

Prior to arriving in Durham, Barrett's only remark to me was, "I presume that you are familiar with the New Testament in Greek." As I matured as an academic, I blessed the fact that I had labored diligently over my Greek and Hebrew. I made use of essential tools like Greek and Hebrew lexicons, Theological dictionaries, and Greek-text commentaries, and these not just in English. German and French dictionaries soon became my constant companions. Today, there are multiple electronic platforms³ which offer these tools online, and the supervisor should advise the acquisition of such, early in the shared journey. Without these hard-won keys, the doors into the international world of scholarship for me would have remained firmly closed.⁴

For my first year in Durham, I spent my time filling up the blanks in my undergraduate studies, reading not just about the Gospel of John, but also essential background, like the Mishna, parts of the Talmud, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Philo, Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Barrett had, in fact, published a useful book on documents related to New Testament background (Barrett, 1987), which proved to be a useful starting point in my journey of discovery. Over the decades, I have come to appreciate the enduring quality of Barrett's published works, a tribute to his scholarship and a model for his students.

As a residential full-time student, I could afford the luxury of extended reading and reflection. Barrett insisted on going back to the original sources, and this paid dividends when I discovered that the English translation of Bultmann's renowned commentary on John, had

² This article was originally entitled "The loneliness of the long-distance student."

³ Such as Logos, Bible Works, and Greek or Hebrew fonts.

⁴ I applaud the fact that tertiary institutions are once more insisting on the study of biblical languages for graduate study for biblical studies and related disciplines.

mistranslated a sentence from the original German. A reading knowledge of French, German, and Dutch is possible—with a dictionary and lots of perseverance—and is preferable to the use of an online translator. Where possible consult the original version.

Today, most students arrive at an understanding of the formative thinkers of their discipline by means of secondary sources rather than the original sources. In the age of online learning, it is possible to present oneself as an expert on a subject and yet having never read anything other than popular summaries in secondary sources. Imagine posing as an expert on the work of N K Gottwald (1979) having only read the critical comments in the work of other scholars?

4. That Illusive Original Topic

The key to a good thesis is to find an original topic. However, one needs to ensure that no one else has been there first. I can vividly remember the look on some fellow student's face when they suddenly discovered an article, or worse still a book, on their chosen topic. For some of my fellow students that marked the end of their years in Durham. Today, a few minutes on the internet might have answered the question, or better still invoking the skills of a trained research librarian to do an extended search. The alternative of having to begin the thesis from page one, more than justifies such effort in the initial stages.

While information technology has far outpaced that of the 1980s, one thing has not changed, namely, the need to find both a topic and a title. In reference to the doctoral degree, this means a topic which is original, or in the case of a master's degree, one that makes a clear contribution to knowledge. This point cannot be over-emphasized. Indeed, the standards of tertiary education departments may be judged by the quality of their doctoral theses against the criterion of making an original contribution to their academic field. Without this essential component, a thesis may not be considered as meriting the doctoral degree, especially a PhD.

As more and more theses, books, and articles are written, it becomes increasingly more difficult to find that original and interesting topic. The supervisor needs to promote original thinking, but it should be the student's own original thinking that determines the final product. However, one might point the student towards an area or a methodology which might promise an original outcome. I sometimes offer the student a list of possible directions for their chosen topic, for them to choose from, using my own knowledge of the subject area.

Once the supervisor has been appointed, and the proposal has been approved, he or she has a critical role to play, namely, helping the student to refine their thinking. Too often students confuse their thesis topic with their life's work (*magnum opus*). The thesis is not one's ultimate life-project. It is a long essay which one needs to write to get a degree. That is the primary goal, and the supervisor should remind the student of that fact. From the first draft to the final submitted proposal, one needs to guide the student to focus, focus, and focus again. Early on, one needs to ask the question, modified according to the level of PhD or MTh, and to keep on asking until there is a satisfactory answer, namely, "What will you add to the existing knowledge of your subject? What will you bring to the table?" This brings us to a vital skill needed by a successful student, namely, the ability to argue convincingly and logically for a single solution to the research problem, from page one of the thesis.

5. Encouraging Critical Engagement

A piece of advice given by Barrett was contained in the simple statement, “At the end of the day, we have the biblical text and we need to interpret it as it stands.” Barrett would have meant this, in terms of its original language and from the best critical editions of the Greek text. Conjectural readings of the text should always take second place to what the text actually says. Failure to take seriously the text, in its literary and historical contexts, is not excusable as far as solid biblical scholarship is concerned. The same would be true of any of the theological disciplines, whether Systematic theology, Pastoral theology, Church history, or related fields. In all these fields, there are primary readings which need to be considered and properly handled, before launching out into the realm of secondary sources.

Two common problems are often found in graduate theses, namely, the failure to be critical of one’s secondary sources and the reluctance to mention those sources with which one may disagree. One needs, firstly, to be firmly in control of one’s sources, which means using them critically, to argue coherently for one’s conclusion and not to be caught up in the maelstrom of their different and disparate views. In some theses, I have found a plethora of citations and references, listed one after the other, but not organized into a coherent argument. Secondly, there is the simplistic argument, in which only sources which agree with one’s conclusions, or one’s theology, are cited. To some extent, we are all guilty of the latter, but what sets good scholarship apart is the courage to engage with such divergent voices. Some theses dismiss contrary voices in a cursory way and simply label them liberal or atheistic. In a gentle and yet academic way, we need to help our students to engage with their sources, seeking out the weaknesses and strengths, and demonstrating why one argument may be either logical or illogical, convincing or not. This is one of the greatest gifts we can offer our students—the sharpening of scholarly acumen.

As a student, in later life, in a department of Archaeology, I came across the work of a philosopher of science by the name of Wylie (2002), who introduced me to the notions of chains of logic and tightness of fit. In essence, what he describes is the process of writing an academic study. Inevitably, there will be different answers to the questions posed by the thesis, with each answer making use of similar evidence. Wylie poses two questions, namely, the question of using evidence (tightness of fit) and secondly, of the actual process of argument (chains of logic). The article helped to crystallize my thinking regarding formulating a solid argument and has served as a valuable tool for helping my own students.⁵ Let me elaborate by beginning with the use of evidence. We may ask, “how am I going to make the choice between the different solutions to the problem posed?” The answer Wylie gives is the one which fits best. Like a solver of a jigsaw puzzle, there will be different pieces which might fit, but only one will fit tightly. So, in the construction of an argument, the writer should show both why this specific answer fits the question and why other answers do not. The second aspect of Wylie’s work relates to chains of argument. A good thesis is one where each part of the thesis builds on the previous part and leads logically to the next step, paragraph by paragraph, like bricks in a wall. Moreover, the path needs proper signposting. One important detail, to which external examiners will often refer, is to provide a proper introduction to each chapter, signifying the way forward, and a proper conclusion, summarizing the main points briefly and succinctly and pointing forward to the next step.

Barrett made two points to me as we journeyed together. He began by saying, “You know a great deal about your topic, but along the way, you need to think about your readers. You need to

⁵ See my further discussion in Domeris (2013).

make it easy for them to follow your argument.” Then he quoted from the old actor’s adage, with an appropriate accent, “Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.”

6. Sensitivity to Faith

In the realm of Theology (including Biblical studies, Pastoral and Systematic theology, and other subdisciplines),⁶ it is inevitable that the faith of the student plays a role. Barrett, as he once explained to me, was unwilling to push students to be overly critical, especially where he believed it might impact negatively on their personal faith. This meant that he censored or moderated some of his criticisms and comments, even if he realized that the external examiners might not feel the same way. This level of sensitivity about the spirituality of the individual student was a mark of the man and his own faith. At the same time, Barrett urged his students to be in dialogue with those scholars who thought differently from them, which meant not just listing their works in passing or adding their writings to the bibliography. There is a critical balance of open engagement and creating safeguards for one’s own faith. As supervisors our hope is that our students, across the subdisciplines, like Paul’s young man Timothy, will become proficient in their exposition of Scripture and the teaching of sound doctrine (2 Tim 2:15).

7. Using Quotations and Citations

All theses stand or fall in their use of primary and secondary sources, and external examiners are asked to consider the way in which the thesis has used academic sources and demonstrated knowledge and familiarity with the available sources. As an external examiner, I spend a good deal of time reading through the student’s bibliography and noting dates of publications, the balance of books and academic articles, and thinking about what may be missing from the list.

When marshalling evidence for one’s conclusion, quotations and citations are critical. This goes without saying. I sometimes remind the students that more than three words taken consecutively from a source must be in inverted commas and properly referenced with page numbers. I explain the value of either quoting or reworking sources into one’s own language. Even if there is no clear evidence of plagiarism, I might comment, “This sounds like a quotation—please check.”

In terms of the number of citations one might expect in a thesis, I have invented my own rule of ten. I suggest to students that there should be at least ten citations per page, from at least three different sources. Some students attach the citation to the end of a paragraph, but to my mind, it is better to attach the citation to a specific sentence or point made. So, there might be three or four citations in one paragraph, sometimes from the same source. My rule is that each point made, if it is from someone other than yourself, needs its own citation. I frequently insert the comment “Needs support” when a point is made which lacks evidence for substantiation. In my mind, I picture a bridge across a river, and liken the citations to the supporting columns which carry that bridge. Too few citations and the arguments begin to resemble a rickety bridge.

⁶ I follow the British system where Theology is the discipline, and the others (like Church history) are subdisciplines.

The use of block-quotations is a further area where a supervisor might need to interject some guidelines. At times, I come across a thesis which is composed of lengthy block-quotations⁷ seemingly randomly sprinkled, creating the effect of an overdressed Christmas tree. I ask myself, can the quotations be removed without any observable impact on the rest of the text? If so, there is a problem. As a rule of thumb, block-quotations should be used circumspectly (a maximum of about three times per chapter) and only when a shorter citation (of less than three lines) will not do justice to the thought needing to be expressed. Block-quotations are useful in introducing a theme, to signal the prevailing consensus or in summing up a chapter. In other words, they mark the beginning and end of a debate. In terms of the length of quotations, I suggest that no quotation should exceed five or six lines and should make a single point. If necessary, the quotation could be divided and treated as two or three quotations, or better still simply cite a few words, integrated into the paragraph.

A quotation should not simply be dropped like a stone in a pond. It needs proper introduction and conclusion and to be clearly linked to the primary argument. The student should make clear to the reader precisely how this quotation furthers their ongoing discussion. After the quotation, the student should resume the discussion by picking up some element of the quotation and using it as a springboard for the next point. The flow from one idea to another needs to be seamless, so that the quotations do not interrupt the flow, but rather serve to enhance the flow. Quotations are not rapids in the river, causing disturbance, but banks to guide the flow.

8. The Mind of the Examiner

When I play the role of an external examiner at the doctoral level for another university, the first place I begin is with the table of contents. That gives me a good understanding of the arrangement of the thesis, its contents, and importantly something of the quality. The next thing I do is to read the abstract, the introductory chapter and the conclusion. By that stage, I already know whether I am looking for reasons to pass it or not. Only then do I read the thesis from the beginning to the end, either confirming my initial impression or not. For this reason, as a supervisor, I stress the importance of headings and the arrangement of chapters and those critical opening and closing paragraphs.

Normally about two thirds of a thesis is built on the work of other scholars laying out the problem. In fact, the initial literature review is really an analysis of the status quo. The remaining one third of the thesis should be one's own original contribution. In a doctoral thesis of about six to seven chapters, that means one or possibly two chapters plus the conclusion should ideally contain the core original elements, as opposed to the critical review of other people's views, and the necessary background discussion. What makes it original is that no one else has argued cogently for this specific conclusion. There needs to be a clear line drawn between where existing scholarship has arrived at the present time and what the student has added as her or his original work extending beyond that point. In addition, examiners are asked to comment on the use of sources, the familiarity of the student with the available sources, his or her style and presentation, and whether there is material worthy of publication.

⁷ A block-quotation is a quotation of at least three lines (depending on the publication), which is indented and separated from the preceding paragraph.

9. Conclusion

From the beginning of one's engagement, the student is often dependent upon the supervisor for encouragement. Whether in residential universities or by online-learning, I have been amazed, time and again, as I watched students grow in confidence and ability, sometimes well beyond anything that I had imagined was possible. One or two empowering words may have an impact for life. In Durham, I was one of about ten PhD students, from across the world. In the early days, I sometimes felt overwhelmed and confessed to Barrett that I was unsure whether I was good enough to do the doctorate. Barrett immediately responded, "Well we think so because we accepted you!"

Supervising at a distance, as in the online situation, will always be a challenge. The responsibility as a supervisor is considerable, since, in many ways, one holds the academic future of the student in one's hands. However, there are also moments of great joy, especially when one sends that email entitled "Congratulations." It was a mark of the man, that Barrett continued to keep in touch for several decades beyond my graduation and I have kept a file of his handwritten Christmas letters. Yes indeed, our role as supervisor and mentor continues well beyond the graduation of our students.⁸

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