



COSUPERVISION

Relevant Literature

Co-supervision (also known as joint supervision, Lahenious & Ikavalko, 2012 or team supervision, Manathunga, 2012); the practice of two or more supervisors sharing supervisory responsibility; is an increasingly common form of supervision for PhD (Guerin & Green, 2013) and other dissertation students. Research on co-supervision of dissertation students is limited, and primarily focussed on doctoral supervision.

Advantages of co-supervision may include:

- Supervision coverage when one supervisor is away (Guerin & Green, 2013);
- Division of supervisory roles (Spooner-Lane, Henderson, Price, & Hill, 2007);
- Additional expertise (Guerin & Green, 2013; Lahenious & Ikavalko, 2012; Spooner-Lane et al, 2007);
- Training and mentoring of new supervisors (Guerin & Green, 2013; Spooner-Lane et al, 2007);
- Exposure to diverse views and stimulating academic debate (Guerin & Green, 2013; Spooner-Lane et al, 2007);
- Additional sources of support (Lahenious & Ikavalko, 2012); and
- Increased supervisory self and peer regulation reducing pressure on students (Manathunga, 2012).

Potential problems with co-supervision may include:

- Differing opinions and feedback from supervisors resulting in disagreements, leaving the student trying to satisfy multiple, conflicting demands (Guerin & Green, 2013; Taylor & Beasley, 2005);
- Misunderstanding and miscommunication arising from difficulties in ascertaining to whom comments are addressed (the student or co-supervisor?; Manathunga, 2012);
- Alignment between supervisors 'against' the student (Manathunga, 2012).





Problems may be compounded by gender, personality and status differences (Manathunga, 2012; Pole, 1998).

Based on interviews with 11 PhD students, Guerin and Green (2013), cognisant of the institutional authority of supervisors, noted the need for supervisors to be able to express their views, but then to be able to reach consensus on the way forward for the student. They argue that supervisors should welcome student feedback on this area as a sign of increasing academic agency and autonomy.

References:

- Guerin, C., & Green, I. (2013, iFirst). 'They're the bosses': feedback in team supervision. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1-16. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2013.831039
- Lahenious, K. & Ikavalko, H. (2012, iFirst). Joint supervision practices in doctoral education – A student experience, 1-20. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2012.706805
- Manathunga, C. (2012). Supervisors watching supervisors: The deconstructive possibilities and tensions of team supervision. *Australian Universities' Review*, 54, 29–37. Retrieved from <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=424318263696740;res=IELHSS>
- Pole, C. (1998). Joint supervision and the PhD: Safety net or panacea? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23, 259–71. doi:10.1080/0260293980230303
- Spooner-Lane, R.S., Henderson, D.J., Price, R.A. & Hill, G. W. (2007). Practice to theory: Co-supervision stories. *International Journal of Research Supervision*, 1, 39–51. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/12898/>
- Taylor, T. & Beasley, N. (2005). *A handbook for doctoral supervisors*. London: Routledge
- Watts, J. H. (2010). Team supervision of the doctorate: Managing roles, relationships and contradictions. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15, 335-339. doi:10.1080/13562511003740908





COSUPERVISION

Best Practice Suggestions for Supervisors

- Supervisors need to recognise that differing opinions and feedback may be threatening to the student (Guerin & Green, 2013)
- At commencement of the supervisory relationship, all parties should reach agreement on the approach for handling differing opinions and feedback (Guerin & Green, 2013)
- Students should be encouraged to engage in academic debates with supervisors (Guerin & Green, 2013)
- Supervisors could meet briefly with each other before each meeting with the student to decide on approach to delivering feedback (Spooner-Lane et al., 2007; Watts, 2010)
- Set ground rule that supervisors who do not attend a meeting support the feedback provided at the meetings (Watts, 2010).





COSUPERVISION

Best Practice Suggestions for Students

- Contact independent third party to seek advice on strategies that might be tried to resolve situation (Watts, 2010).
- Raise issues with supervisor

It will be important to discuss with your supervisors the effect their behaviour is having on your progress. This is best achieved through assertive communication.

Assertive communication is characterised by expressing your own thoughts/feelings/opinions directly while respecting the thoughts/feelings/opinions of those with whom you are communicating (in this case your supervisors).

DESC scripts (Bower & Bower, 1991) are one commonly used method of structuring assertive communication, focusing on the use of I statements. DESC stands for Describe, Express, Specify, Consequences

- DESCRIBE: describe the situation
- EXPRESS: express how this makes you feel
- SPECIFY: what you would like
- CONSEQUENCES: consequences if this doesn't happen

You don't need to follow the DESC formulation slavishly, but use it as a starting point in working out what you want to say.

Below is an example of a variation on a DESC script (with the addition of EMPATHISE and the reordering of SPECIFY and CONSEQUENCES) that could be used in assertively communicating to your supervisors the effect their disagreements are having on your progress. This is adapted from a blog





post by the thesis whisperer (Dr Inger Mewburn) on what to do when supervisors argue. Note the use of 'I' statements throughout.

- DESCRIBE: “When you two disagree I go back to my desk confused about what to do next”
- EXPRESS: “When I am confused I get stressed I find it difficult to write anything”
- EMPATHISE: “I realise you both have strong views and want to give me your best advice”
- CONSEQUENCES: “But if I stay this stressed and confused I am going to get behind in my work”
- SPECIFY: “It would be very helpful if you could agree in advance on the options which are possible and then explain their advantages and disadvantages in a way that helps us all make a collective decision on what to do”

(Adapted from <http://thesiswhisperer.com/2014/01/29/mum-and-dad-are-fighting-what-should-i-do/>)

If you continue to experience difficulties, or do not feel you can broach this with your supervisors, please contact your dissertation coordinator for advice and assistance.

