

- Chris
a PhD student struggling to finish because “life gets in the way”

1

April
Email from Bren

I attended your supervisor workshop last week and I would like to take you up on your offer to advise on a problem where I can't see a clear way forward.

I 'inherited' my PhD student, Chris, in her second year from a colleague who left the department, as I was the only member of staff left with experience in qualitative research. I had previously done fieldwork in the area of her PhD. Her previous supervisor seemed to have not given the best guidance or start, and was herself off sick for a few months. Chris had an 'odd' supervisory set up – she was an ESRC CASE student with an industrial supervisor. Another colleague in my department was the joint supervisor from a more 'technical' background. The industrial supervisor is for the most part too busy to get involved with her PhD. She e-mails him and most of the time gets no response. In a way, she seems to find this quite convenient as it often justifies not doing anything. I tell her to ring him instead, but she often finds reasons not to – that he is just back from leave, or she is going to visit the office soon. The other supervisor in my Centre is not from the same disciplinary background as me, and has often asked if she will “get a PhD out of this”. I bring him in when his technical perspective is needed, or when I need to try and exert a bit more pressure about progress. The involvement in progress hasn't worked and the supervisory set up doesn't work either.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

Chris is currently a few months into her fourth write up year. I'm at the level of being 'quite concerned' that she won't finish, but I've been at that level since taking her on in her second year. She generally has problems completing work for deadlines – there are often attempts to negotiate deadlines, or if I am remaining firm as I know she will try and negotiate which only results in more slippage for her, I receive work in very draft form or incomplete.

I have tried a number of strategies to stop the slippage. At the outset of taking over her supervision, I made it clear that slippage in a PhD beyond being funded would make life very difficult – with the need for a part-time job or even the temptation of funding a full-time job that would then make finishing tricky. She has employed someone else, using her research fund, to do much of the transcription work associated with her fieldwork. Our head of centre also gave her some more money to employ the transcriber for longer, as her pot of money was used up before the transcription was finished. This does not appear to have speeded things up that much, and most PhD students would have transcribed their own material in the period.

I have often set deadlines for particular essays which are intended as the basis for thesis chapters, but they are never finished – they remain with sections to do or authors to look at, put on the long term list of things to do. I try to make sure she has unmoveable deadlines to work to which can't be negotiated – such as presenting material to peers and other people. Another colleague in the Centre gives her a date to present her material, and refuses to move it. These can produce some good material, but often the scope has been negotiated down.

I have previously (3rd year) sat down with Chris and filled in a big Waterstones wall planner to stop the slippage. This did not work the first time – things took much longer than planned, including finding the participants for the study. After Christmas 2007, into the write up year, we tried the wall planner again. She took it more seriously this time as funding had run out. However, it is now crunch time as to whether she'll stick to it.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

2

Two weeks ago I was expecting a draft methodology chapter. She said it would be “very rough”. She had been house sitting for her mum that week, and described it as quite “unproductive”, which is worrying. The chapter was very rough, really just a cut and paste job on bits of other documents she had produced before. Lots of relevant literature was missing, and it was mainly a chapter about ‘what she had done’. It didn’t have any kind of flow. I’ve given her the methodology chapter of my other PhD student who has just submitted, so she knows what standard is expected and how it should be argued. She has looked at other people’s PhDs from the library, which I suggested a long time ago. I said that the chapter from the other student was too much focused on literature and not enough on ‘what she had done’, so that hopefully Chris could find a middle way. I am expecting to see improved drafts, but I don’t know how much help I can give. It took ages (4 hours) constructively criticising and marking the ‘very rough’ methodology chapter because it was in such a ‘draft’ state. Yet if I do not request to regularly see the progress of chapters, I fear there will be more slippage. There is a problem with how much time I can give vs. Chris’s self motivation to get on with things herself.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

3

There is a bit of a 'culture' of PhD slippage in our centre. Chris is friends with another PhD student in our centre who is still finishing writing up in his 5th year, having gone part-time for a year to take a full-time job, and just returned. One colleague has been doing her PhD practically full-time for 6 years. That culture doesn't help progress.

I have been giving Chris 2-3 hours supervision every 2 weeks since taking over her supervision – offering critical perspectives on her work, showing how to do qualitative analysis, checking on progress etc. This is far more contact time than I ever received as a PhD student. In a way, I feel there is not enough input or ideas from Chris, too much from me, and a bit of a culture of dependency. I have two other PhD students who are making good process, and one part-time student has just submitted her thesis in just over three years. They are very self-motivated and know exactly what they want to do in their thesis, and just require critical guidance. There is the added complication with Chris that she suspended her study for 3 months during her second year. This she put down to health issues – she does suffer from migraines but I also think there are issues about anxiety and depression, which I thoroughly empathise with.

She is now also seeing a counsellor at the University. She has admitted that she is better working as an employee for someone else, rather than doing a PhD for herself. I can only think there are some deep rooted self esteem issues involved in that. But the suspension and anxiety/ depression issues make it difficult to strongly enforce deadlines. There is always the option for Chris to say that she will give up if things get too tough, and she has previously said she might give up. I also don't want to stress her out too much and push her back into her anxiety/ depression cycle.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

I get on very well with Chris on a personal and professional level. It perhaps makes the supervisory relationship harder. I am 32 and she is 30, and while I try to be authoritative, it is difficult to be with the age gap. She respects my research experience and academic knowledge, but often ignores advice about research management and avoiding pitfalls. Her PhD student friend has often remarked that she will choose the most difficult way to do anything. I often make her aware of consequences of her decisions – which seem to involve putting things off until a more convenient time or not inviting enough people to make the dissemination workshops that she has as part of her thesis write up worthwhile. However, she is a master at offering justifications about why her way is best, or why there are other circumstances which prevent doing it that way. As one of my other PhD students says, for Chris, “life gets in the way”. Her work output is highly variable, which she puts down to not feeling well or having a cold, or some crisis at home, or computer problems. She often seems prone to prevarication – doing things which do not show in terms of the thesis progress - such as checking the small details of transcripts, but taking forever to do it.

It seems like fiddling while Rome burns. From one week to the next there is little progress. She tends to do the easier things and put off the harder ones until later. However, later is coming quickly now. If she cannot complete an essay and hand in, I do not know what will happen when handing in an entire thesis. We are breaking it down into chapters and making it all seem ‘do-able’, but this is resulting in a ‘cut and paste’ approach.

I don’t know how to help her complete the thesis in the write up year. Other people have said it’s her thesis and it’s up to her. I’ve been worried about progress since the second year, and during the last supervisory board meeting, she received a ‘disappointing’ for progress. She said she was disappointed with her progress too, and that it was fair comment.

I’ve presented this case study to other supervisors, and they said they would have stopped the PhD for lack of progress. I know from her Masters thesis that she is very capable of getting a PhD from an academic perspective, but I am not so sure from the perspective of self-motivation. I feel very much alone in her supervision and am out of ideas on how to get more progress. With my other two students, we have a policy of joint supervision – two supervisors present at most meetings. I think at supervisory boards with the Head of Centre and the other supervisors, there is ‘surprise’ at the slowness of progress. When Chris is out of the room they ask why progress is so slow, and I don’t have a single answer to give. I would like someone else to also be involved in supervision to give another perspective, but none of the other supervisors have the time or experience to get more involved. There is one other senior person in the centre who could help me, but he has many of his own students.

I’d be very grateful for any advice about how to proceed from this point, as I don’t know who to ask for independent advice. My inclination is to ask the

other senior member of the department I mention above to sit in on some supervision meetings.

5

Team task

On the acetate provided list the main suggestions you would make to Bren

John's response:

Dear Bren,

I've been thinking about this and now share my thoughts with you, many of which will already have occurred to you.

First, from your account I read that you have allowed Chris to define you as the person responsible for her PhD. It sounds as if you are taking most of the initiatives, setting deadlines, requesting chapters, etc etc? this allows her to behave as a child towards a parent, taking very little responsibility for the quality and amount of work, and avoiding making her own decisions. I'll bet she says to herself and family 'Bren's given me a couple more weeks' etc etc...

Thus I think the time has come for you to gently but firmly and finally turn the tables. Probably by arranging a special meeting, possibly with a supportive and sympathetic colleague, with the following agenda:

Q1 Do you want a PhD?

Q2 When are you going to submit it?

Q3 Working back from there: when will I see your final draft? First draft? Draft chapters?

Q4 Suggest she goes away and works out her own project plan and lets you have it as soon as it is ready so that you can put key dates

in your diary and reserve time to read and comment on her work by agreed dates

Q5 Say that, since it her PhD, not yours, from now on she must take the lead. You will not chase her or even contact her if she misses her own deadlines etc.

Q6 She should propose a date for your next meeting

Q7 For each meeting she should propose an agenda and record

outcomes, and email you her record of what was agreed so that you know what is in her mind

Q8 If you have not already done so, you might like to give her copies of one or two of the time management case studies I handed out at the seminar.

Q9 Throughout, do this in a friendly and committed way, pointing out that you want her to succeed and will provide support, but the ball is in her court. But then hold back and let her take over if she is willing to do so. If she doesn't deliver, then no PhD.

Overall you should be much more laid back: clearly implying that it is her life, but that you will try and fit in with her plan. The do not chase her any more. If this means she gives up, hands in nothing etc, then so be it. Do not take on responsibility for what is hers...

What do you think?

Best
John

Dear John,

Thanks very much for taking the time to offer such good advice. I agree with your analysis of child-parent. I'm seeing the student again next Tuesday, and will try the things you suggest. I will keep you posted as to how they work, and ultimately hope this case could provide guidance for other PhD supervisors in the same situation.

Best wishes and thanks,

Bren

Great, Bren. If you follow this path, it is guaranteed to 'work'. If you firmly transfer the responsibility to her and get on with other things, either she will take charge or she will give up now, saving you months, maybe years, of angst...

Let me know
Best
John

Update August

You asked what is currently happening with Chris? Well, her completion year is up at the beginning of Jan. We are looking to convince the dean to get a further completion year.

Chris is self funding at the moment, and has indicated she will need to get a job in the next few months. It has recently become apparent that she has problems at home which are the route cause of most of her delay, which she has only just confided in me about. She is not getting on very well with her partner since moving in with him in her second year, and is thinking about whether she should find a place of her own, although finance is prohibitive. She is determined to finish the PhD, and thinks this would be easier if she lived elsewhere. But it appears she is constantly distracted by the situation at home, and emotionally upset by it.

She has improved her progress since the last board and received a 'good' this time. She is still getting lost in coding her data however, and is now hitting the stage of writing her results chapters. She produced a very good methodology chapter which was a great improvement, and seemed to have taken on board my comments about argument and flow. We are getting on much better since I made it clear that she was in charge of her progress, that I am around to facilitate whenever she wants, and that I am not going to be her PhD policeman. So your advice has worked. She has slipped from her timetable again, but she has decided that we should rewrite it together shortly. I am advising her to stop getting obsessed by the coding.

Team task

On the acetate provided list the lessons are there here for

1. Supervisors
2. PhD candidates
3. Institutions