ual:

Vol 6 / Issue 1 (2023) pp. 23–26

Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

# I Supervise and I am Supervised

**Paul Jackson, Course Leader in MA Graphic Branding and Identity, London College of Communication**

**Abstract**
This article explores the roles of power in creative exchange. In it I reflect on my dual role of being both supervisor and supervisee. Written during the early-2021 COVID lockdown, I relate Foucault's interpretation of Bentham's panopticon to both academic supervision and to my commercial illustration practice. When working for art-directors and creative teams, a distant powerbroker (and their approval) offered certainty and security; in a PhD, that might not necessarily be the case. At that stage in my PhD, I felt uncertain of the hierarchies at work: was I working *for* my supervisors, or *with* them?

**Keywords**
supervision; PhD; supervisor; supervisee; art direction; power

I use the phrase *supervision* to describe the sessions we conduct with postgraduate participants on MA Graphic Branding and Identity. Prior to this, I used the word *tutorial* or *seminar* to describe this exchange. I have concerns that the word *supervision* (as well as the word *tutorial*) connotes a power structure: it might lead to dependency, high expectations and diminished autonomy, especially in our field of creative education and practice where we tend to encourage self-actualization. The absence of a power-holder (a creative director, client or 'lead' tutor for example) almost certainly leads to uncertainty. On our course, we find that students become reliant on supervisors' sign-off, be it implicit or explicit, despite our emphasis on their developing autonomy as learners. As the Scottish Quality Assurance Agency's guide to Mastersness suggests, '[students'] knowledge should not be bounded by yours' (Scottish QAA, 2013, p.5). Copeland talks of the shift from supervision models which 'exercise considerable power and influence' to a social constructionist viewpoint where interdependent roles, knowledge and methodology can be co-constructed and critiqued by both supervisor and supervisee (Copeland *et al*, 2011, p.27-28). I like to claim, as supervisor, that I give power away, but in practice I am never so sure.

Writing about Michel Foucault's interpretation of Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon*, Bart Simon states that 'it is the *sign* of presence of the supervisor and not his *actual* material presence that matters' (Simon, 2005, p.6, *my emph*.). Authoritative voices, hovering in the periphery; a presence *felt* rather than seen? My practice as an illustrator is still guided by the critique of my BA and MA tutors, imaginary voices I hear when I am making the same mistakes I made 20 years ago. Eyes watching when I take shortcuts. As a course leader, I am aware that my involvement in projects (and the perception that I occupy a role of seniority as head of a course) influences students' decision-making, even when I am not present - more so, perhaps. With our shift to increased online learning, I can exercise my power to supervise students in all manner of ways: I use Workflow to observe the dates of their most recent activity; I am able to track their attendance of online sessions through screen-grabbing participant lists; UAL's online assessment tool informs me when a student has read their published feedback. Turnitin tells me from which sources they have extracted their information. I can request a 'read receipt' from emails I send. A double-tick tells us when our messages have been read on Teams chats. We are told when our correspondent is *typing* a reply. And also when they decide

*not* to send that reply. On more than one occasion, I have had to intervene in students' private chats on Blackboard Collaborate - Moodle's teaching platform - to inform them that I can read their communications. 'So many small theaters, in which each actor is alone', says Foucault, 'perfectly individualized and constantly visible' (1977, p.200). I might argue that, by informing students of my all-seeing power, I surrender some of that supervisory power... But how could a student, in the online arena, perceive the power of the moderator as anything other than panoptical?

As well as being an academic supervisor, I am also a part-time PhD candidate. Being a PhD supervisee has changed my approach to the role of course leader, research facilitator, supervisor, and lecturer. Much of this is a direct reflection on the work I do with - and, as I will discuss, *for* - my own supervisors.

To date I have had seven PhD supervision sessions. The second was notably difficult. I came out in tatters; they had cut through my bluster and rhetoric to isolate what my research focus was. From my submitted record of supervision, I diplomatically stated that they 'can see the outlines of a good number of different attempts', whereas my Director of Studies even more diplomatically argued that 'you might not think so right now [but] you are making good progress'. Our third supervision provided two of the most enjoyable, collaborative hours of my academic life, as we collectively focused on my application to register the inquiry. This might encapsulate Copeland *et al's dialogical* approach to tackling problems in my own practice in an open and constructivist encounter (Copeland *et al*, 2011).

In our most recent meeting, I believe I might have surprised them with my preparedness; a possible turning point in the project and in our work together. This came after a period of intense practical exploration, working alone, efficiently and in a focused manner. I often look at the "to do" list we agree at the end of supervision and offset that against the time I have until the next session, a deadline of sorts. I cannot help but work to other people's expectations; it's a part of my working practice. It's why I hear the ghostly voices of absent tutors and art directors, invisibly guiding the agency I have in my own work. It's why I occasionally set out intentionally to try and impress my supervisors.

Gatfield lays out a range of models of supervision[1], from low-support modes of structure and support through to a highly structured hand-holding approach (Gatfield 2005 in Wisker, 2012, p.50). As supervisee, I find I am often caught between Gatfield's *laissez-faire* and *directional* supervision models. In the first, the supervisors have a 'minimal role' (ibid) in the organization of the candidate's activities. This works because my research is primarily practice-based, focusing on illustration and drawing, which has long been my commercial practice. For me, illustration is an isolating and individualistic practice, which makes it a relatively *easy* practice to maintain independently. Lesley Duxbury cites Joram ten Brink, who compares research practice to marathon running in that it is 'absolutely lonely', that there are 'no mates... No other people who do the same thing' (Brink, 2008 in Duxbury, 2012, p.18). She goes on to describe the supervisee's periods of intensive practice as opportunities for a practice-based researcher to 'regain... independence, collect her thoughts and test out ideas *without* someone overseeing' (Duxbury 2012, p.21, *my emph.)* after key moments in the PhD process. At UAL, these might include significant events in the PhD process such as registration

[1] Two-dimensional Conceptual Model based on Blake and Moulton's (1964) managerial grid:

> Four Supervision Management Styles were identified i.e.
> 1) *Laissez-faire*: low structure low support
> 2) *Pastoral*: low structure high support
> 3) *Directorial*: high structure low support
> 4) *Contractual*: high structure high support"
>
> (Gatfield 2005 in Saleem and Rana, 2019, p.95)

and confirmation, which are much more *contractual* (Gatfield 2005 in Saleem and Rana, 2019, p.95). A principal commercial imperative of illustration is that it responds to a brief and is usually overseen by creative- or art direction. It *is* a hierarchy, even if it consists of only one other point of contact. At its best, art direction *can* be dialogical, but it differs from Copeland's approach to 'constructionist' supervision which features 'an emphasis on meaning that is co-constructed through dialogue, and a view of the supervisory relationship as collaborative rather than hierarchical' (Copeland et al, 2011, p.28). Gatfield's *directional* approach positions a highly structured relationship, where more control over process rests with the supervisor (Wisker, 2012, p.50), which arguably aligns more closely with the role of art director. That said, Gatfield isn't referring to creative practice-as-research or commercial creative direction in his managerial approach to supervision.

I recently raised the issue of art direction with my supervisors, as I felt I was targeting my practice *toward* them. In the reflective writing sent ahead of that session, I asked 'am I treating [you] as *judges* of the practice; and indeed, do [you] see [your]selves in this capacity?' (Jackson, 2020). During the supervision, we discussed the risks of my tendency to position them *as* art directors; one said that they did not see themselves as having the same amount of power as an art director. I quote them from my notes; 'they [art directors] have more power [over your commercial practice] than I perceive myself as having [over your research practice]' (Jackson, 2020). One stated their preference for the word "interrogator" to describe their role as supervisor, which comes with its own set of connotations. Nevertheless, I am aware that I *tilt* my work to suit their sensibilities as arts academics whose mutual interests lie in a specific branch of commercial art and design.

The challenge of *who* research is for – and the nature of that research – occupies me when I think of both being supervised and in the supervision I conduct. I want my work to be valuable, and to be valued. I know my MA participants feel the same and look toward supervisors to provide evaluation and positive encouragement. Looking towards a hierarchical model to approve the process is, arguably, the easiest way to move forward, and to meet agreed targets. Commercial work comes with deadlines and assets must be prepared in advance of deadlines. Academic deadlines similarly require content to be systematically made and delivered. The two continue to intertwine for me as I work through contextual reading, writing and making, and think about who might be watching as I conduct this work; it often helps me to think that someone *else* is taking stock of my day-to-day activities.

The real breakthrough in this recent discussion was to address the question of my practice *requiring* an audience. My supervisors never tire of asking "who is this research for?", a difficult question, since the fruits of the practice (so much drawing practice *and* the written reflection and methodological approaches *to* that practice!) can appeal symbiotically *and* separately. One who dislikes what I *make* but enjoys what I *write* could be contrasted against one who dislikes what I *write* but enjoys what I *make*. And equally, one could like the whole package… or absolutely none of it. My supervisors are there, whether through tangible presence or the imprint left over from previous meetings; they can be what Duxbury calls 'hands on' supervisor[s]' who help 'structure the candidate's journey and establish a peer relationship with the candidate using [their] 'superior' position to mentor and encourage trust' (Duxbury, 2012, p.21). Panoptical or not, their guidance offers focal points that both give me structure and the freedom to question that structure. The supervisor is necessarily superior, but that isn't something necessarily hierarchical. After all, the research is the true boss.

I've resolved to *stop* framing my practice as something to be *liked* by my supervisors. Their likes and dislikes aren't essential to the success of my research inquiry, and there is something rather sweet about how I position my drawing practice in much the same way I did as a teenager; as something to be liked by my art teachers. Or how I love to send in artwork to art directors, proud of what I've done, waiting for the double joys of "this is GREAT" and "where should we send the invoice?". Is it even possible to flatten a hierarchy indoctrinated over decades of being someone who draws pictures, talks pictures, and who now gets paid for talking **and** drawing pictures? Supervision, like many forms of

observation or expectation, is an unsettling but necessary call to action. It may unnerve me, but it also moves me on. It keeps me together. It stops me straying toward the distractions of social media, Outlook or Netflix. Who, as it happens, are *also* supervising my every move. The panopticon is real, and it comes at us from all sides.

**References**

Duxbury, L. (2012) 'OPENING THE DOOR: Portals to Good Supervision of Creative Practice-led Research', in Allpress, B., Barnacle, R., Duxbury, L. and Grierson, E. (eds.) (2012) *Supervising Practices for Postgraduate Research in Art, Architecture and Design.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp.15–23.

Copeland, P., Dean, R. G. and Wladkowski, S. P. (2011) 'The Power Dynamics of Supervision: Ethical Dilemmas', *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 81(1), pp.26–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377317.2011.543041

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* New York: Pantheon.

Jackson, P. (2020) 'Interface methodologies'. Reflective writing on *Once Upon a Spacetime in the West - Year 02.* Workflow site [link available upon request].

QAA Scotland (2013) 'What is mastersness. A discussion paper' from *'Learning from International Practice: The Postgraduate Taught Student Experience'*. UK: Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee. Available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/enhancement-and-development/what-is-mastersness.pdf?sfvrsn=3a47f581_12 [Accessed: 20 December 2022].

Saleem, T. and Rana, R. A. (2019) 'An Empirical Investigation of Supervisory Management Styles and Associated Factors for Postgraduate Level Research Supervision', *Pakistan Journal of Education*, 36(3), pp.93–117. http://dx.doi.org/10.30971/pje.v36i3.828

Simon, B. (2005) 'The Return of Panopticism: Supervision, Subjection and the New Surveillance', *Surveillance & Society*, 3(1), pp.1–20. Available at: https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/article/view/3317/3279 [Accessed: 20 December 2022].

Wisker, G. (2012) *The Good Supervisor: Supervising Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research for Doctoral Theses and Dissertations.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

**Biography**

*Paul Jackson* is a PhD candidate at UAL and Course Leader for MA Graphic Branding and Identity at London College of Communication. He is also an illustrator, working under the pseudonym Wesley Merritt.