

“ASK THE PROFESSOR” about ... MEETINGS WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR(S)

Patai: (Question)

Sometimes I feel that the supervision meetings I have are not that helpful. What can I do to make the most of them?

Dr Barbara Grant replies:

Meetings with your supervisor(s) are the backbone of supervision. They should be times when you really get to focus on your research project and how it's going with someone who has expertise to help you. Although you may find it 'natural' to defer to your supervisor, you can still influence how your supervision meetings go by how you approach them.

A good way to think about supervision meetings is as 'friendly work meetings'. The friendly bit is important (if you can get it) because it helps you both to work well together. But the work part is *essential*. Here are some pointers towards how to go about making supervision meetings work-like:

Before the meeting

Set an agenda by sending your supervisor(s) a reminder email a couple of days ahead with a list of things you'd like to talk about (they may have things to add too). That simple step helps both of you get ready for the meeting. Your agenda might include things like: getting feedback on writing (preferably sent to your supervisor(s) well in advance); raising a problem with your data-gathering (whether empirical or textual) for discussion; discussing problems associated with drafting something like an ethics application or a conference abstract; something that you don't understand in your reading; something to celebrate (conference abstract accepted, good feedback on an article sent out for review, etc...).

During the meeting

Take the agenda with you on paper and make notes on it as you talk through the items. This can help keep the meeting focused. (Students sometimes complain about supervisors going off on their own tangents; likewise, supervisors sometimes complain about students not being well prepared.)

After the meeting

Type up summary notes of what you discussed and agreed together and send them (again on an email) back to your supervisor (and to any other supervisors). This can help avoid any misunderstanding about what was agreed – which can easily happen.

At the next meeting

Report back against the previous meeting's notes along with bringing forward new items for discussion.

Some students want to audio-tape supervision meetings because the dynamics of the meeting mean they find it hard to remember interesting things that get discussed. If you want to do this seek your supervisor's consent because while some will be quite happy to be audio-taped, others may not be, for all sorts of reasons. In any case, work on improving your listening and

note-taking skills. Academic life, as well as other kinds of work requires such skills – so they will not be wasted!

One thing that commonly happens when students are having difficulties with their projects (and this happens to nearly everyone during doctoral work) is that they start to avoid meetings. If you do this, often your supervisor will not chase you up: they are busy and many believe that it is up to you to organize meetings as part of showing your independence. So the weeks fly by and you stay stuck. Yet, this is one of the most important times to keep the meetings going because contact with your supervisor can help solve problems and renew enthusiasm. A way to prevent ‘meeting avoidance’ is to always have the next meeting booked into you and your supervisor’s schedules; and a simple way to do this is to confirm it as the last item on the agenda of each meeting.

In practice, meeting frequency usually varies. A University typically expects that supervisors and students should meet at least once a month; however sometimes meeting weekly is appropriate. For example, see the *Senate Guidelines on Thesis Supervision*, paragraph 4, under ‘Policies and Guidelines’. (Retrieve from: <http://www.postgrad.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/for/postgradstudents/>).

A common pattern is to meet more frequently in the early stages while you are getting underway, then maybe less frequently in the middle when you are deep into your own work (gathering data in the field, or buried in the library, archives or the lab), then again more frequently towards the end as you are working intensively to get finished. Mostly though the pattern of meetings should be something that works for you, and that keeps you steadily making progress. At the same time it has to feel acceptable to your supervisor who wants to see you developing independence (for example, trying to sort out problems before you present them) and becoming good at managing your own doctoral workload.

Most doctoral students have more than one supervisor, and the regularity of meetings relates to their roles. If your respective supervisors have similar roles or level of input, it is probably best to meet as a group. If their roles are somewhat distinct, then arrange meetings to make the most sensible use of their different expertise.

As part of a research project on the supervision of Māori doctoral students (McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin & Williams, 2007; <http://www.mai.ac.nz/news/supervisionproject.html>), we have interviewed almost 40 students. During the interviews, we asked them to describe the kinds of teaching and learning experiences they have found most useful. Many of these experiences took place in the context of their supervision meetings and the following is some advice based on their responses:

1. *Have protected and substantial time for meetings where you and your supervisor can get deeply into the work together. This is especially important for infrequent meetings such as in distance supervision*
2. *Share food as a time to be together to talk in a more informal way*
3. *Plan milestones and goals robustly – stretch yourself*
4. *Brainstorm together, maybe using a whiteboard*
5. *Meet face-to-face (kitea kanohi) because this is important for trust and particularly where there is disagreement*
6. *Keep email trails/records*
7. *Learn to say what you want*
8. *Learn to theorize through being willing to have challenging discussions with your supervisor. One interviewee described how her supervisor’s “so what?” question pushed her to take the difficult step into theorising traditional knowledge*
9. *Learn not to be over-confident and to question any impulsive responses that will (naturally) occur in meetings*

10. *Discuss invitations to do other things with your supervisor who can help you fend off flattering and enticing offers that will distract you from getting finished*
11. *Talk to your supervisor about who else to send your work out to for peer review and get your supervisor's assistance in addressing the critical feedback that you will inevitably get*
12. *Ask your supervisor to help you prepare for presenting at national and international conferences.*

Learning to get the most out of your supervision meetings is a really good skill to take with you beyond your doctoral work. Lots of work environments, including academic and research institutions, require that we work with others who are often more senior than us (especially early in our careers). Having some skills to respectfully shape those interactions so they are fruitful and productive will be to everyone's advantage.

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