Student of Fr. Hacker Replies

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I think that it is distinctly unfair that my Supervisor gets all the glory for his wisdom on PhD Supervision techniques. If it hadn't been for my many years of applying behaviourist training to him, he would never have gotten to where he is.

So that other supervisees can also achieve the same success, I summarise here some of the many useful insights gained over my 12 years as a PhD student.

1 Topic Selection

- Never show any interest in a PhD topic suggested by a supervisor. If s/he has thought of the topic, it can hardly be original.
- If your supervisor shows any interest in a topic that you propose, and especially if s/he suggests any relevant literature, then you can be sure there is nothing further to explore on he topic, as s/he is undoubtedly years out of date.
- The best policy is to find a topic on which your supervisor knows nothing, since it will then be impossible for him/her to interfere with your project.
- If you were taken on under the agreement that you would undertake research in a particular area, it is important that you break this agreement early. Otherwise, it will be impossible to let your true genius be exposed. Worse, your supervisor will actually show interest in your topic and expect you to make progress with it. This is especially important if the studentship is linked to a research grant (e.g. CASE). Your supervisor's need to produce results for the grant will lead to incessant nagging about why you haven't done some trivial item that his/her RAs should do anyway. Renegotiating the agreement will not be easy, so you will have to apply many delaying tactics until such time as the supervisor's grant is finished, after which the nagging should stop.

- Never show your supervisor your results. Otherwise, s/he might comment on them, criticise them, point out flaws, suggest improvements or even get ideas for future projects. Your best defence is to not include them in your thesis/paper until the last moment, and then submit it. At this point you will be safe from his/her expertise.

2 Supervisor Relations

- Be sure to not show up for supervisions periodically. Not often enough that s/he can conclude you are a deadbeat, and hence develop a casual attitude towards these meetings. However, leaving him/her sitting there occasionally will re-enforce the message about who is serving whom.

- When you do show up, be sure to show up at some unpredictably late interval, so that s/he will be unable to know when you might not show up at all; if you were always 10 minutes late then s/he might learn to compensate by also being late, or to work a few minutes longer. It's better to ensure that their time is maximally wasted.

- Avoid going to your supervisor's office - make him/her search for you for your agreed meetings. This allows you a few extra minutes of hacking. It's especially helpful to have some supervision sessions in the terminal room, because you can then continue to hack at the same time. The public forum also ensures that your supervisor will not say anything contentious, thus maintaining the important fiction that all is ok. Of course, no supervisor would willingly consent to such a public supervision, so the best technique is to draw him/her into an unrelated conversation and then gradually work around to your topic. After some minutes of content free conversation, you can then suggest that it is unnecessary to meet this week as you've covered the topic already.

- When meeting with your supervisor, it is especially important to not brush your teeth, shower or change your clothes in the previous fortnight. If you make your personal appearances sufficiently offensive, then s/he will prefer email supervisions, which will allow you to conveniently ignore the junk mail.

- Never give your supervisor any positive feedback. If s/he arranges to get any data or equipment for you, well, that's just part of his/her job. Ask him/her to explain why it wasn't available sooner. If s/he gets a new piece of computing equipment, explain that it's still too slow. If s/he points out a bug, explain either that you know about it already, claim loudly that s/he's wrong or, when cornered, state that it's obviously a bug, but the conversation has drifted from the real issues. If s/he does stay up until late to read your paper/thesis proposal/thesis draft that you gave to him/her the day before you needed it, explain that that's his/her job.

3 Group Relations

- It is especially important to establish your position in the group, so I recommend never doing anything that others would find helpful, such as reading their papers, looking at their results, attending their seminars, helping them with problems, etc. Most of their work is rubbish or muddled, so you shouldn't waste any time with it. If it is impossible to avoid this, like proofreading, be sure to not add any substantive comments; correcting grammar and spelling is sufficient. The others certainly would not acknowledge your help, so why bother.

  On the other hand, they can be very helpful with proofreading and catching trivial errors in your results, so you should take advantage of any opportunities to use their help. There is also no reason to acknowledge fellow students contributions to your work, as no one will be impressed if you acknowledge an unknown. The same applies to your supervisor, as this is his/her job anyway. Ensure that they support you, not vice-versa.

- Always log on to the best workstation, especially if it's a colour workstation, even if you are just text-editing or reading the net news. Or better, just to play "hack". How else is anyone else to know that you are important if you use modest equipment for trivial activities?

- Spend as much time as possible playing computer games, especially multi-user games where you will need to invite your colleagues to join you. This technique is very effective at shaming all those grinds who work all night into some fun activity. Besides, three years is a long time and you're clever enough that to be able to do it all at the last minute anyway.

- Be sure to patronise the new students. They don't know anything yet, so they should be reminded of the fact often. Otherwise they might actually do something.

- Never go to any group meetings. Your time is more important than having to educate the others about your thoughts; more importantly, the rest of those drags haven't had an original thought for months, so there's no reason to go over it all again. That's the supervisor's problem.

- If you have a problem with another student, demand that the supervisor sort him/her out. After all, that's the supervisor's job.

- If anyone else in the group promotes a new idea, be sure to trash it immediately, before it can develop into something. At the start is the best. If you happen to actually have thought of it yourself, be sure to loudly state your prior claim. However, we all work in a group context. Hence, it is especially important to promote the ideas of the group. So be sure to include all the best ideas of the group in your papers. It isn't necessary to actually acknowledge anyone by name as the ideas are group property anyway. However, be careful that no-one plagiarises your ideas and writings. The best defence is to not say anything useful in public until after it has been published.

- Contribute no software to the group, as otherwise people might ask you to fix bugs, or update the graphics or file interface. Especially do not document the programs, as this is the job of the supervisor's RAs. Avoid using any of the group software as you might then be asked to advise on it or fix bugs etc. Loudly criticise any shared resources; most certainly do not improve any of them.

4 Writing

- Never use the spelling checker except for your final draft, to catch errors that your supervisor has missed. We all know how faulty "spell" is.

- In fact, never make any effort to clean up your text before your supervisor sees it. The whole point is for him/her to plow through the dross and refine it, so as to not waste your time. If s/he's so clever, surely s/he can see what you mean.

- Never show a draft to a fellow student before your supervisor has seen it. Your fellows don't know as much, their time is too important and besides, the supervisor is paid to do this anyway.

- Your supervisor may ask you to do these things. The best policy is to agree that next time you'll do it, but for now you need it in a hurry.

- Timing is especially important. If you don't give enough notice of a request for comments, the supervisor will find it too easy to refuse. If you give too much time, you will waste your own time. Hence a trade-off is required. I recommend 1 day for documents of up to 20 pages, a week-end for longer documents (up to 100 pages) and a week for theses. You will have to assert your rights if it is a very busy time of year, such as when MSc dissertations are due. Point out that this is your supervisor's job and that s/he should plan better.