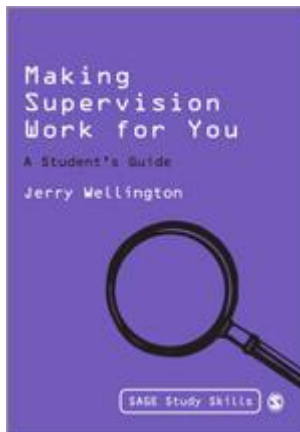


Book Review



Making Supervision Work for You: A Student's Guide

By Jerry Wellington

London: Sage Publications (2010).

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Reviewed by **Lynn P. Nygaard**

We all dream of getting a Dumbledore, a Yoda – a supervisor who with gentle humour and a firm hand will guide us through our doctoral journey, using a few well-chosen words to help us discover our inner geniuses. But, since real life is not like the cinema, we get real people not fictional characters, to help us navigate our way through this messy and frustrating process. Understanding what your supervisor can (and cannot) offer you is central to emerging victorious. And again, since this is not the cinema, we cannot rely on magic; we need proper advice. *Making Supervision Work for You* is a straightforward, practical guide for doctoral students that aims to help them get the most out of supervision.

I picked up this book because, as someone who teaches academic writing at doctoral level, I often hear complaints about supervisors and was hoping this book could give me some ideas about how I could advise these students. I am also just starting my second year of my own doctorate and thus very much represent the target audience for this book.

Wellington's aim with this book is to "take a close look at the supervision process from start to finish" (p. xi), and in some ways he goes further than this, and in others not quite far enough. The real strength of the book is in putting supervision into the larger context of what a doctoral programme is all about, and in this sense Wellington goes further than I would have expected. He not only covers the obvious ground of establishing good ground rules with your supervisor(s) and striking the right balance, but also goes beyond the immediate supervisor–student relationship by explaining the context of postgraduate study (including where professional doctorates like mine fit in), the writing process in general, choosing your examiners, submitting your dissertation, preparing for the viva, and publishing after the viva. As an American who lives and works in Norway, but is undertaking a doctoral programme in the UK, the chapters on the dissertation and the viva were particularly helpful to me because the systems in both the US and Norway are quite different than in the UK (for example, in Norway it is very common in the social sciences to produce article-based PhDs rather than a monograph, and the viva is very different).

But it is precisely my experience with these differences that makes me say that Wellington does not quite go far enough: He states in his introduction that the book is written for students "from every part of the world", but he probably should have added "...who are studying in the UK." This might seem like a small point, but it is quite telling. He talks about the practical issues of internationalism (like fewer face-to-face meetings), but skirts around

the more complex cultural differences in expectations, and limits his discussion to differences in the writing process (p. 100), not the supervision process. But this is where some of the biggest differences can lie. For example, in my courses on academic publishing, I often get asked whether a supervisor is supposed to be a co-author even though he or she has not written anything, and it is clear that there are different expectations about this throughout the world.

Questions like these are important because they address the elephant in the room: the asymmetrical power relationship between student and supervisor. While Wellington even has a section called “An unequal and complex relationship?” that specifically says the relationship is unbalanced, he does not follow up with what students should *do* if it really is not working. File a complaint? Build stronger peer networks? His suggestion is simply to negotiate and agree, but what if that does not help? Students often fear that complaining will cost them too much in the long run, and prefer to live with poor supervision rather than risk repercussions. It is annoying but survivable if your co-supervisors give conflicting advice (p.38), or your main supervisor is continually late in giving feedback (p. 66). But what if the problem is more serious? What if they take your ideas without giving you credit? Or what if they treat you like a personal slave and constantly ask you to, e.g., babysit their kids or wash their car? What if you feel that you are being sexually harassed? Are they allowed to tell you which conferences you can attend?

I wish he had addressed concerns like these not only because they are central to his topic, but also because the other advice that he does give is so sound – and grounded not only in his own experience, but also in the literature. He demonstrates this not only through deft and non-intrusive references to published works, but also provides quotations from real supervisors and students, which helps paint a picture of the variety of experiences. For example, he might have been peering into my soul when he wrote ‘Many postgraduate students are returning to higher education after a long break and, as one of my mature part-time students put it at our first meeting, “it’s a long time since I wrote 1000 words”’(p. 29).

In sum, this book should have been titled “Supervisor-in-Your-Pocket”: It is a fantastic supplement to good supervision – and a potential replacement for bad. It asks the reader all the good questions a supervisor should ask. He undersells its value to supervisors: since most of them seem to make it up as they go along, this could be a tremendous help, especially to first-time supervisors. Although it does not go quite far enough in addressing worst-case scenarios or the ways in which a culture clash can affect the student–supervisor relationship, it does a superb job of giving the basics of what is expected from a doctoral student and supervisors in a UK context.