Well-Being in the Doctoral Thesis Process

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What Is Well-Being Made of?

Work

Play

Love

Health
WORK

• Achievement, sense of competence
• Meaningful work
• Meaningful clear role in the group
• Clear goals and expectations
• Balance between resources and demands
LOVE
Human relationships

• Contact with other people
• Sense of belonging
• Safety
• Safe resolution of conflicts and differences
• Relationships in private life
PLAY

• Meaningful interests outside of work
• Engaging, demanding things
• Relaxing, restful activities
• Fun
HEALTH

• Eating
• Sleeping
• Physical exercise
• Illness
• Functional variety
• Medications
• Alcohol, illegal drugs
Research Education and Challenges to Well-Being

• Unsure nature of research work
• A learning process, tough on one’s sense of competence
• Academic writing
• A variety of socio-economic situations among doctoral students
• Long-term supervisory relationship
Challenges Inherent in Doctoral Supervision

• Novice vs. Expert
  - A challenge for understanding and communication
• Learning the tricks of the trade vs. autonomy and emancipation
• Micromanagement vs. laissez-faire

• A relationship with a power differential:
  - Does the student dare to say what she/he really thinks? To ask questions? Show uncertainty? Take initiative?
  - “I thought I understood, but...”
  - Everyone wants to look smart!

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Safety Is Key

• Threat Reactions: Fight and Flight, Freeze
• Safety helps in cognitive, creative tasks
Watch Out for Avoidance!

• Avoidance of discomfort is a deeply human experience

• Avoidance of uncomfortable discussions may lead to problems in supervision

• Clear, open and brave communication creates safety
  – Clarity and safety are not mutually exclusive!
Setting the Stage: Initial discussions

• Important to talk about expectations and goals early on
  - To calibrate expectations and prevent misunderstandings
  - To create a common vision, mutual goals
  - To concretise what is being committed to
How Do You Discuss

• The nature of the project?
• Expectations for supervision?
• The motivation for and purpose of the doctorate?
• Uncomfortable aspects of the work?
  – for example: working hours, administrative tasks, amount of lab work, balance between clinical work and research, teaching duties...
The Skill of Asking Good Questions

• Open questions invite more engagement
  – Supervisor gets information on the student’s understanding
  – The student’s thinking is activated -> deeper learning
  – Invites autonomous motivation

• Ask first, tell later

• Asking good questions is easy in theory, difficult in practice
Asking is Always Better Than Assuming

• Write down three open questions you might ask your student at the beginning of the supervisory process

• KI’s Dialogue Facilitator can be a helpful tool:
  • https://ki.se/sites/default/files/successful_supervision_-_a_dialogouge_facilitiator_0.pdf

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Experiences of International Doctoral Students

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwNcTmtRs54&feature=emb_logo

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4vH5UCTTd&t=6s

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZrp9y7V4GY&t=15s
Common Intercultural Differences In Supervision

• How do people in different hierarchical positions communicate with each other?

• How does one express yes and no?

• What is expected of a student vs. a supervisor?
  • Is a student expected to criticise, come up with suggestions, think critically and innovatively?
  • Who does what? What is expected of a student in terms of loyalty and service?

• What is intended as a recommendation and what is intended as a ”must”?
Engaging With Difference

• We engage with difference in all communication and all supervision

• Many of the same practices that are good in an intercultural setting, are useful in all supervision
  - Assuming that my assumptions may be wrong
  - Asking before explaining oneself
  - Asking open questions to elicit explanations
  - Creating a safe, open space for exploration
  - Being curious

Intercultural communication calls for communication to be particularly explicit! Even more dialogue. Not avoidance of differences.
(Some) Qualities of a good supervisor
(Manathunga, 2007:105, 109)

• In intercultural supervision, supervisors need to
  • Allow students to experiment with their independence and freedom
  • Provide scaffolding and support within which students can practice their independence
  • Include students in a supportive research culture
  • Encourage international students to develop agency
  • Schedule regular formal and informal contact
  • Value cultural difference as a dynamic for growth for supervisors and students
  • Deal with personal issues if they arise
”I’ve Always Been a Good Writer, Why is This so Difficult?

Students may not realize how writing for publication differs from
– home assignments
– examination papers or
– lab reports

The practice of iterative (process) writing may itself be knew

(Maher et al., 2014)
Academic Writing
Not Merely a Cognitive Skill

• Academic writing be emotionally challenging (Maher et al., 2014; Aitchinson et al., 2012;)

• Linked to the development of academic thinking and identity (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2014; Maher et al., 2014; Aitchinson et al., 2012; Danvis et al. 2018)
Academic Writing
What is There to Learn?

• The reviewing process, new to many (Maher et al., 2014)
• Writing in a second language, often the case
• Good writing habits; Managing thoughts, emotions and behaviour (Kearns & Gardiner, 2011)
Process Writing

• That texts need to be revised several times is often new to doctoral students

• The three-stage model:
  – First write for yourself; Second, write for an audience; Third, edit.

• Writing as a tool for thinking

• Notes, mind-maps, concept maps, diagrams, brainstorming sessions may help in getting started and organizing thoughts
Write Early and Often!

- Reading and writing should alternate from the very beginning
- Writing is useful even before reading:
  - What am I looking for
  - What do I know now, what do I need to read more about?
- Taking useful notes while reading, perhaps with several subheadings
The First Version

• Can be written in very simple language
  – The goal is to explain the idea to oneself (or as if to a colleague, if that helps)
• Important to get ideas on paper first
  – Anything can be edited later
  – More precise words can be added
  – Especially useful for second-language speakers!
• Places for references can be marked and finalized later (ref)
Harmful Postponing

• Procrastination is a real problem with writing
  – A loosely defined, demanding task that arouses anxiety gets easily postponed
  – A demonstration: https://youtu.be/ItMFWpKofSg
Procrastination

- The needless (and harmful) delay of things one intends to do” (Klingsieck, 2013)
- Experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 1996) of unpleasant thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations may lead to behavioral avoidance of the actual task
Examples of Unpleasant Experiences in Procrastination

• Thoughts: “I am too stupid to do this”, “In this stage of my studies, this should feel easier
• Emotions: Anxiety, shame
• Physical sensations: Tiredness, “knot in the stomach”

Strategies to avoid these unpleasant reactions:
• Postponing: “I’ll do this tomorrow”, “I can’t do this before I will have done X”
• Doing other things: Other useful things or work, Exploring the Internet, ....
How to Turn a Vicious Cycle of Avoidance into Approach?

• Contact with actual work is key
• Even a small step is a step
• Normalizing anxiety and uncertainty: ”This is part of the process of academic writing”
• Learning helpful behavioral strategies
Snacking Freely

• Writing in small bits (”snack writing”, Murray, 2012)
  – Even just for 10 minutes in the middle of an otherwise busy day
  – May help with overcoming emotional barriers, time-management, and thus also procrastination
Tips and Tricks for Productivity

• Five minute free writing exercise may help to get thoughts unstuck and process going
• How do you use your best two hours?
  – Should be used for the most demanding writing!
• Other Tips?
The Best Two Hours of the Day

• Writing new text is cognitively (and often emotionally) demanding: when are you at your best?

• Best done at less optimal times:
  – Editing
  – Checking for grammar and proofreading,
  – Correcting references
  – Reading articles
  – Answering emails!

See, for example: Kearns and Gardiner, 2011
Writing Groups and Retreats

- Time for focussed writing, feedback, and goal setting
- Support and feedback from peers and supervisors
  - ”Peers were more useful than supervisors” A comment from a participant in a writing group

Structured sessions on
- Skills of academic writing
  - E.g. text structure, argumentation, appropriate language, referencing, flow of the text, etc.
- Process skills
  - Tools, tricks and helpful habits
  - Awareness and normalization of psychological barriers

Murray & Newton, 2009; Kumar & Aitchinson, 2017
Collective Support for Writing

• Times set aside for focussed work
• Rules about disturbing others
• Signs that will protect writing time
• Writing retreats
• Agreed upon practices in supervision
Tools and Charts to Map Progress

- Visualizing concrete steps taken and those ahead can be very useful for academic work.
- How to divide academic work into small concrete ”baby steps”?

Some examples can be found

- Making a timeline backwards from a deadline can be very helpful.
References

- Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2014
- Lee & Murray, 2015