Guide, Companion, Midwife: The Writing Advisor, the Post/Graduate Student and Relational Pedagogy

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Introduction

Post/graduate students inhabit a complex social landscape, building relationships with people who inspire them, evaluate them, compete with them, and support them. This can be complicated—not just because these relationships are essential to academic success, but because there are no tidy distinctions between the “people” in question. Take the supervisor, an academic mentor who, in addition to helping the post/graduate student find her way, must assess her progress, and in addition to advocating for her must worry about how her performance reflects on his own.1 Nor are relationships with peers clear-cut. Other post/graduate students, fellow-travellers on a difficult and often uncertain path, are sometimes good listeners. But in a world of scarce funding and even scarcer job opportunities, they too are in an ambiguous position: as often competitors as confidantes, as often belittlers as boosters. Small wonder that many post/graduate students are reluctant to shed their mask of competence around people in their departments; instead of opening up about their uncertainties in ways that would help them to contend with academic hurdles, they tend to internalise them.

The consequences of keeping up these scholarly appearances are well-known. In addition to the disproportionate levels of anxiety and depression noted on North American campuses,2 simple, garden-variety unhappiness—the product, in part, of a hidden but sharply felt sense of fraudulence, of

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1 For useful reflections on the complexities of the supervisor-graduate student relationship (and their potential consequences, both positive and negative), see Spillett & Moisiewicz (2004) and Krase (2007). Arabacı and Ersözli (2010) provide a helpful reminder about the limitations of that relationship: students may be reluctant to “talk about … problems with their mentor,” which “affects the mentor–mentee process negatively” (p. 4238).
2 See in particular the report prepared for the University of Alberta by Robin Everall (2013).
 imposture—stalks many post/graduate students.\(^3\) And the writing process is its most reliable trigger. Composing prose is one of the most challenging and unsettling aspects of scholarly practice, partly because a great deal of one’s professional character is identified with the words one writes, and partly because the academic writer cannot write a sentence without anticipating how it might be critiqued. To concede that one struggles with this process is, in a sense, to concede *everything*. Of course, most post/graduate students do struggle with some aspect of the task, whether it is time management, rhetorical organisation, textual clarity, mechanics, or some combination of these. If there is ever a time when a student needs the kind of relationship in which she can take off her mask and honestly present her needs and concerns, it is when she writes.

At such moments, a post/graduate student approaches us as writing advisors for help. She invites us into her scholarly community, and we take on a role markedly different from that of other players. As editors and writing teachers, we can share years’ worth of practical and conceptual knowledge “about” the scholarly practice.\(^4\) But unlike her supervisor, we are not there to judge performance. As academic fellow-travellers, we have knowledge “of” the affective and experiential dimensions of the writing journey. But unlike her peers, we do not keep it hidden. Being impartial in certain ways, we can be fully engaged in others. We can provide criticism that is grounded in empathy and undiluted caring.

We *can* do all these things—sometimes. This is not, to be sure, to idealise the relationship between the post/graduate student and the writing advisor, which produces varying results. It is to suggest, however, that the relationship is valuable *precisely because* it is so anomalous within an academic culture that values instrumental and analytical knowledge at the expense of other kinds of “knowing”. This is evident in the relational terms students use to

\(^3\) For broader discussions of the various systemic and personal factors—including anxiety, isolation, and “self-efficacy beliefs”—that may influence students’ experiences of graduate school and the dissertation-writing process, see Lenz (1997); Katz (1997), esp. pp. 10–11; Kaminski (2001); Harsch (2008); and Fullick (2011).

\(^4\) The professional role described here does not precisely match that of the graduate writing tutor (the trained peer tutor) working in many U/S and Canadian writing centres. Our delivery model, which employs professional writing and learning advisors to provide expert cross-disciplinary support, is common in other universities (see Carter, 2011). We are confident, however, that while the professional setting is an important element contributing to the nature of our relationships, the meditations presented here will also be relevant to writing advisors working in other contexts.