

# Exploring Student Development Theory in Enhancing Learning through Supervision

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## Abstract

Learning takes time and patience and it is a process or a journey. In supervising students, the learning process is a challenging and a variety of different factors that need to be taken into account. Successful supervision for student requires that all parties must play their part. The objective in this article is to discuss the role of one such role player, that of the supervisor in the learning process, that views the learning process as a partnership between the student as the learner, and the supervisor as facilitator of the learning process towards the student development. The theoretical framework of the article is based on the Chickering's seven vectors of development theory. The review of selected student development theory aims to provide professionals with a foundation from which to work with students in varying degrees of development. Student development theory is useful for suggesting strategies to promote student learning and for understanding and managing change. Knowing the theory also helps us to better examine how we challenge, support and determine how we might do it more effectively. It is hoped that this article will contribute to a better and for some (renewed) understanding of the important role that supervisors fulfill in the learning process in supporting student development.

**Keywords:** Student Development, Theory, Education, Learning, Supervision

## Introduction

Learning is a process of internal change and can only be observed by others in the form of a change in behavior or performance. What one wants to learn, what is offered, and the ways in which one learns are determined to a large extent by the nature of the society at any particular time (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). Facilitating student learning is a two or three way communication process, where attempts are made to match the learning needs of students with their objectives, as well as the educational objectives and policies of the organization. The learning facilitator has to find ways and means of planning with the learners so that they do not control the content, pace, intensity, application and the

environment of the student's learning. The learning facilitator should be transitional, helping learners independently achieve their own educational objectives.

According to Knowles (1978), learning is a continuous process throughout one's life. The main principles of Knowles' theory of adult learning are that in adults: (1) the self-concept moves from dependence towards self-direction; (2) there is a reservoir of accumulated experience which becomes as increasing resource for learning; (3) readiness to learn is increasingly directed towards social roles; and (4) the orientation towards learning becomes less subject-centered and increasingly problem-centered. More traditional definitions of learning not only emphasize relatively permanent changes in behavior, but also stress that these changes occur as a result of experience or practice.

In the context of student supervision, agreeing to supervise a project means undertaking to work in close collaboration with someone who is embarking on a journey within themselves: a journey which may at times be profoundly exciting, but which will also certainly be difficult, risky and painful (Salmon 1992). A research degree is about research training as well as learning by contributing to knowledge and, although it is not impossible to find ways of training oneself, the whole process is designed to be guided by a supervisor (Cryer, 2000). Therefore, this article discusses student-supervisor relationship as a learning process and explores the Chickering's seven vectors of development theory to enhance learning towards student development.

### **Student-Supervisor Relationship as a Learning Process**

The supervisor performs a variety of tasks, many only remotely related to monitoring and improving performance. Many tasks of supervisors are related broadly to advice (Donald *et al.* 1995). Advice is given on direction, completeness, clarity, methodology, topic selection (Spear 2000) and feedback is given on progress of written work (Donald *et al.* 1995; Russell 1996). According to Spear (2000), feedback is normally given in relation to topic selection, methods of inquiry, writing style and layout, the clarity of the student's work and ideas, the completeness and direction of the work, and the student's general progress. Also, advice on the desirable amount of reading, experimentation and analysis will normally be expected (Holdaway *et al.*, 1995). Spear (2000) states that supervisors should read the student's written work thoroughly and provides constructive criticism, since this is an essential element in the student's intellectual development. Therefore, students may learn many aspects by observing their supervisor roles in supervision.

Both supervisors and students agreed that one role of the supervisor was to assist students in general. The amount of assistance that supervisors give to graduate students varies, depending upon the stage that the latter have reached (Moses 1992). Supervisors believed that they were contributing by organizing help with skills, developing English, writing, by collecting relevant literature and through networking or putting students in contact with others working in the area (Brown and Adkins 1988). Salmon (1992) also argues that students need substantial help in achieving an appropriate orientation for the final oral examination. The supervisor should also give the student time to think about the work and give students freedom to adopt a trial and error approach during early attempts to get started (Cryer, 2000; Phillips and Pugh, 2000) and also provide motivation (Donald *et al.*, 1995; Kam, 1997; Mangematin, 1999; Waitie, 1994). As the research progresses, supervisors become involved

in stimulating as much creative thinking as possible among students in an attempt to foster their development (Hockey 1996). Creative thinking is one of important values that one student should acquire during their candidature period.

Moses (1992) argues that at each stage of the research progress, students are likely to need different forms of guidance. They need particular guidance on when to stop data collection and analysis, when to start drafting the thesis and how to structure it (Moses 1992). On the other hand, they should also be able to adopt flexible supervision strategies depending on the individual requirements, which are influenced by the attributes of the particular student (Brown and Krager, 1985; Hockey, 1996; Hill *et al.*, 1994; McQueeney, 1996). This is due to the fact that PhD students are not homogenous, but highly diverse in terms of academic ability, personality attributes, motivation and attitude. Hence, how supervisors respond to students will, in part, be conditioned by these different factors and applying the same rigid strategy for each student may not always work effectively (McQueeney, 1996). Burgess *et al.* (1994) also pick up the theme of changing research stages and the need for a supervisor to be flexible in an attempt to meet the needs of individual students. Supervisors who have this flexibility can be more helpful to their research students (Haksever and Manisali, 2000). Hockey (1996) agrees with this statement and suggests that supervisors initiate a tight structure of control solely with the students whom they consider to be weak. However, research has found that strong and highly motivated students also demand such a structure. Conversely, with this kind of student, supervisors might need considerable latitude in order to express themselves intellectually. In this case, a relatively unstructured strategy might develop with supervisors being primarily reactive to students' demands and might benefit students in their learning process.

The primary function of supervisions of all types is leadership, plus the encouragement and recognition of leadership in other people, either on the professional staff or among community participants (Burton and Brueckner, 1995). On the other hand, Phillips and Pugh (2000) and Zuber-Skerrit (1994) advised supervisors to act as role models. Frischer and Larsson (2000) describe three different patterns of leadership, which they call democratic, authoritarian and laissez-faire. The democratic leader is characterised by his encouragement of group discussions and group decisions in the choice of activities. He cares for the students by checking their achievements and commenting upon them. The authoritarian leader makes major decisions for the group all by himself and shows it what to do. The laissez-faire leader provides the students complete freedom of action, hands out materials but largely avoids participating in work and checking and does not evaluate and comment upon their work, except when asked. The authoritarian leader was found to achieve a greater quantity of work, the democratic a greater quality of work, while laissez-faire leadership resulted in both a low quantity and quality of work. The process of supervision is a learning process whereby students could learn many aspects from their supervisor as well as learning from their environment.

### **Student Development Theories**

Theory serves as a guide and framework and one could understand how student develop and as a research supervisor how to help them develop. Student development theories are most often based on psychological theories that have been applied to a traditional university age population (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Generally there are four types of

theories in student development: (1) Psychosocial Theories; (2) Cognitive-structural Theories; (3) Person-environment Interactive Theories; and (4) Humanistic Existential Theories.

Psychosocial Theories look at the personal and interpersonal aspects of students' lives as they accomplish various developmental tasks, or resolve the inevitable crises that arise. Psychosocial theories focus on how individuals grow and develop over their life span. Most theorists in this cluster look at individual development as going through a series of developmental tasks, stages or challenges. These tasks are generally, but not always, age related and chronological. Psychosocial theories can be divided into the two categories of overall development and identity formation, including gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The examples of theories under this cluster are: Chickering's Theory of Identity Development (1969, 1993) and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995).

Cognitive-structural Theories focus on the intellectual development of students, how they think, and make meaning of their lives. It addresses a sequence of meaning-making structures through which students perceive, organize and make sense of their experiences. The stages are hierarchical and each successive stage incorporates and builds on previous stages. Cognitive theories involve the reconstruction in feelings and thought that form beliefs, values, and assumptions (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The examples of cognitive-structural theories are: Perry's Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development (1970) and Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (1969).

Person-environment Interactive Theories address conceptualizations of the student, the educational environment and the degree of congruence that occurs when the student interacts with the educational environment. Behaviour is looked at as a function of the interaction between the person and the environment. Also address interaction between conceptualizations of the university student and the university environment, looking at behavior as a social function of the person and the environment. Person-environment theories are particularly common in career planning (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Among popular theories under this cluster are: Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Environments (1985, 1992) and Campus Ecology Theories by Banning and Kaiser (1974).

Humanistic Existential Theories address the philosophy of the human condition. Humans including students are responsible, self-aware, potentially self-actualizing and capable of being fully functioning. The forces of growth within each person are facilitated by self-disclosure, followed by self-acceptance and self-awareness. Humanistic existential theories concentrate on certain philosophical concepts about human nature: freedom, responsibility, self-actualization and that education and personal growth is encouraged by self-disclosure, self-acceptance and self-awareness. These theories are used extensively in counseling (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Examples of humanistic existential theories are Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning (1984).

### **Chickering's Theory of Identity Development**

Chickering's Theory of Identity Development revolves around seven vectors of student development. According to Chickering & Reisser (1993), vectors symbolize the direction and magnitude of student development. The purpose of the seven vectors was to illustrate how

a student's development in the university setting can affect him or her emotionally, socially, physically and intellectually in a university environment, particularly in the formation of identity. Simply and unlike other theories that suggest that development occurs in a specific, step-by-step process, Chickering's theory isn't linear. Movement in one vector can be followed by movement in a previous vector or a vector symbolizing further development. Accordingly, movement from one vector to the next can also represent increased skills, strength, confidence, awareness, complexity and integration (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Chickering admits that everyone develops at different rates. Although his theory focuses on the development of university students, some people may take longer to move through the vectors than others. The theory is an addition to Erikson's identity and intimacy aspect, with great emphasis on the formation of identity throughout a student's years in university (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Changes that occur for a particular student do not necessarily occur for all students (Chickering, 1969). Thus, every student possesses his or her own distinct rate within each vector and vectors can correlate with one another (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

The Seven Vectors of student development, as theorized by Chickering, include Developing Competence, Managing Emotions, Moving through Autonomy towards Interdependence, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, Establishing Identity, Developing Purpose and Developing Integrity. Each vector builds on the previous one and consists of different characteristics and feelings, emotions and tasks that represent increased development along the continuum. Students move through these vectors at different rates, vectors can interact with each other and students often find themselves re-examining issues associated with vectors they had previously worked through. Although not rigidly sequential, vectors do build on each other, leading to greater complexity, stability and intellectual aspects of development (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

### **Discussion**

Students could learn and experience many things during the process of supervision. To understand the student-supervisor as a learning process, we should explore the related student development theories. Student development theories refer to the body of theories related to how students gain knowledge in post-secondary education environments. Supervisors that are educated in student developmental theories apply what they have learned from Chickering's theory to their involvement with students. The seven vectors of student development theory are well-known and often cited in research because they apply to emotional, social, physical and intellectual development of university students.

As mentioned by Chickering and Reisser (1993), developing competence is one of major vector in student development. Developing competence includes intellectual, physical and manual, and interpersonal qualities. An intellectual level of competence involves using one's mind to build skill using analytical and comprehensive thought and the development of forming points of view in dealing with experiences in life. The physical and manual aspect involves athletic and artistic achievement, respectively, as well as an increase in self-discipline, strength and fitness, competition and creation. Interpersonal characteristics encompass skills of listening, understanding and communicating and functioning in different relationships. All those mentioned aspects are important in student-supervisor relationship.

Student and supervisor must learn how to manage their emotions in their relationship. Besides managing emotions, student should learn to be independent and solved problems. Managing emotions is important so that feelings such as anxiety, anger, depression, desire, guilt, shame, and embarrassment do not become extreme to the point where they interfere with educational proceedings. Knowing and becoming aware of these emotions at their minimum and maximum levels and finding out ways to cope with them. Chickering suggests that students enter university "loaded with emotional baggage" and only enter this vector when they learn these appropriate channels for releasing irritations before they explode, dealing with fears before they immobilize, and healing emotional wounds before they infect other friendships. One must accept voluntarily to lose the support group to strive for one's goals in life and express their own opinions. A student achieves instrumental independence once he or she is able to organize activities and learn how to solve problems on their own. Thus, thinking up ideas and then putting those ideas into action is instrumental independence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

University students' movement through autonomy toward interdependence consists of emotional and instrumental independence as well as the recognition and acceptance of interdependence. Emotional independence is characterized by a movement away from reassurance, affection and approval from parents, peers and other social groups. Students in this vector are willing to risk loss of friends or status in order to pursue strong interests or stand on convictions. Instrumental independence includes an increased ability to be self-sufficient and to leave one place and be successful in another. Students become improved critical thinkers and are better at putting these thoughts into action. Recognition and acceptance of interdependence occurs when students learn lessons about reciprocity, compromise and sacrifice. The need to be independent and the longing for inclusion become better balanced and hard lessons bring the acceptance of those things that cannot be changed (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), mature relationships are characterized by tolerance and appreciation of differences and capacity for intimacy. Both of these aspects of relationships require the student to accept individual for who they are, appreciate differences, bridge gaps and be objective. A heightened sense of appreciation for community and cultural diversity can also be observed in this vector. An increased sense of intimacy in relationships allows students to make lasting commitments grounded in honesty and responsiveness. A movement away from too much dependence or too much dominance toward an interdependence between equals becomes the norm in both dependence and dominance relationships.

The Establishing Identity vector is dependent on the experience in the vectors that come before it-the competencies, emotions, confidence in one's independence, and relationships all factor into identity development. Simply, identity development is like assembling a jigsaw puzzle or remodeling a house. There are several characteristics of Establishing Identity, which include comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, sense of self in social, historical and cultural contexts, clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style, sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration. Other aspects of development involved in establishing identity include an increased awareness of familial and religious



connections, as well as a sense of how one is evaluated by others and establishing roles at home and at work (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

After clarifying aspects of development like identity, students then attempt to determine who they want to be (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Although purpose can sometimes be confused with finding a good job or being financially successful after college, developing purpose really entails an increasing ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to persist despite obstacles and to make plans. Some of these plans include generating vocational plans and aspirations, personal interests and interpersonal and family commitments, while still being focused on the bigger picture. As the student continues to develop along the continuum, life-style and family considerations also become a factor in decisions and goal setting (Evans et al., 2010).

The final vector of Chickering's Theory of Identity Development is "Developing Integrity." Students tend to experience a change in their value system and develop their own set of values and interests. This vector consists of three different stages: humanizing values, personalizing values and developing congruence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Humanizing values incorporates students balancing self-interests with the interests of their fellow human beings. Personalizing these values involves confirming core values and beliefs through one's experience while respecting other opinions and points of view. Developing congruence occurs when students' behavior becomes consistent with the values and beliefs they hold. In essence, developing integrity surrounds students' recognition that their values and beliefs have implications in their actions (Evans et al., 2010). This vector also closely related to learning process through student-supervisor relationship.

All students develop a substantial amount of interpersonal competence, unless a student remains totally isolated from all social events. Developing interpersonal competence is due to the amount of people a student meets throughout his or her university life, whether in class or outside of class (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Chickering's Theory of Identity Development has its own strengths which include some experimental support has come up with evidence that Chickering's vectors are accurate evaluators of development in university students. Most support was found for the purpose, competence and mature interpersonal relationship vectors. This theory could provide foundation of student-supervisor relationship, issues and concerns that students may struggle during their time in the university. Administrators and educators (as well as supervisors) can use this information to create healthier university environments and promote student growth (Evans, Forney, Guido and Penn, 2010). The student development theory is useful for observing, describing and investigating student characteristics and identifying patterns of thinking, feeling, knowing and behaving.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, behaviour (learning) is a function of the person interacting with their environment. Why is it important that learning facilitator recognize that learning happens in so many varied places in the lives of students? It is because, appreciating and taking into consideration the prior knowledge and experience of student has become a basic assumption of a practice as learning facilitator, whether this knowledge was learned. Good learning facilitators (supervisor in this context) adopt a variety of strategies to present different

learning opportunities and keep learners interested. The central focus of supervision is the quality of practice. Supervision in general can be seen as having three aspects: administration (normative); education (formative) and support (restorative). These three aspects provide greater students learning experiences. Student development theory is a set or family of theories that attempt to describe the developmental process of students while at university. These theories help educators in what they do and how they do it. In general, student development theories develop human growth; environmental influences; what we can do to provide environments which promote student learning and development; and how to develop opportunities and activities that stimulate self-awareness, develop skills and build knowledge. The Chickering's Theory of Identity Development could be used as a framework to student-supervisor relationship in enhancing students' learning.

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