

Supporting thesis students' writing: feedback on feedback



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Student Learning *Te Taiako*
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... or 'Keeping the balance'



Ako Aotearoa project

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Invitation sent to accredited supervisors & doctoral students at University of Auckland

Anonymous online questionnaire:

- Supervisor responses [n226]
- doctoral student responses [n80]

Findings



Supervisors

- Time-consuming nature
- Failure to deliver, writer's block, students' missing in action
- Inability to write clearly & succinctly
- Poor evidence of critical thinking/ use of theory
- Failure to respond to feedback

Students

- Overload
- Criticism versus encouragement
- Unclear expectations
- (In)consistency
- Details v 'big picture'
- (Lack of) timeliness

“It would be good if my supervisors asked me how I was finding their feedback, and then I could give them feedback on how to give feedback!”



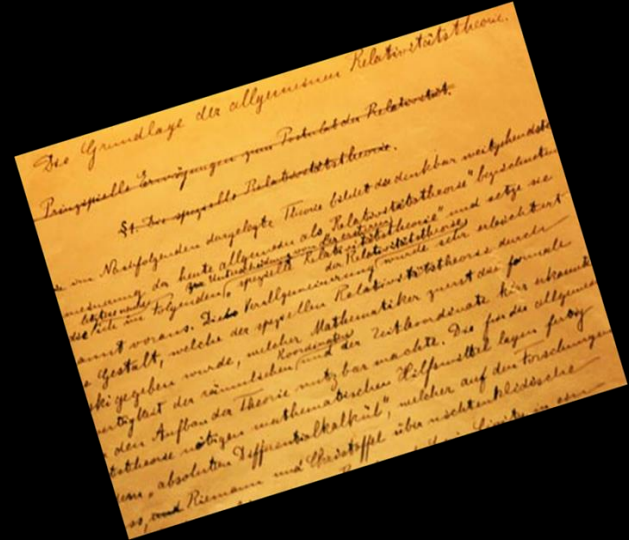
Supervisors' views: words v ideas

“Although I warn all students that I do not see grammatical proofreading as part of my supervisory brief, I do mark all slips and typos that I see in their draft submissions, simply as a matter of course.”

“I’ve been in the position of constantly editing a student’s work. Colleagues have said I shouldn’t do this (in terms of the workload) but the ideas were great, and in order to make them clear, editing was needed.”



Students' views



“[My supervisor] gets caught up in the logic and progression of an individual sentence, two adjoining sentences, from one paragraph to next, polishing the English & academic writing —possibly losing the overview in the process?”

“Focusing on details without shared understanding of the bigger picture goals [...] feels like walking blindfolded because they can't tell me what I'm aiming for.”

Co-supervisory dynamics

“Although I know there is a certain degree of subjectivity in making comments, when my supervisor’s and my co-supervisor’s feedback contradicts each other, I feel very confused.”

“My main supervisor is very good at making me focus on the context of the subject, and my second supervisor is very good at extracting areas that are unclear or confusing to the reader.”



Supervisor-student 'communication':

What's your experience?



Getting the message across

“There was no feedback, only a cryptic comment to the effect of ‘re-do everything’.”



“I was a bit taken aback with the amount of feedback [...] that was framed as ‘*your ideas are bad*’ as opposed to ‘*here's how to make your ideas better*’.”

Supervisors' views

“Sometimes you need to say something isn't working at exactly the point when the student least wants to hear it.”

“[There's] tension between giving honest feedback and not wanting to be too discouraging.”

“I have students who defer to supervisory comments rather than engaging with them. I find this quite frustrating: I want debate, especially as the thesis is being refined.”



Maintaining momentum

“Getting a candidate to start writing in the first year or so (rather than just doing research) has been challenging sometimes.”

“A student disappears inside her head and loses touch with everyone, and it’s hard to communicate with her when she’s like this.”

“One [issue] is perfectionism: not wanting to submit anything till they think it is really good; the other is procrastination – persuading themselves they have to read more material before they can start writing.”



Acknowledging the whole person

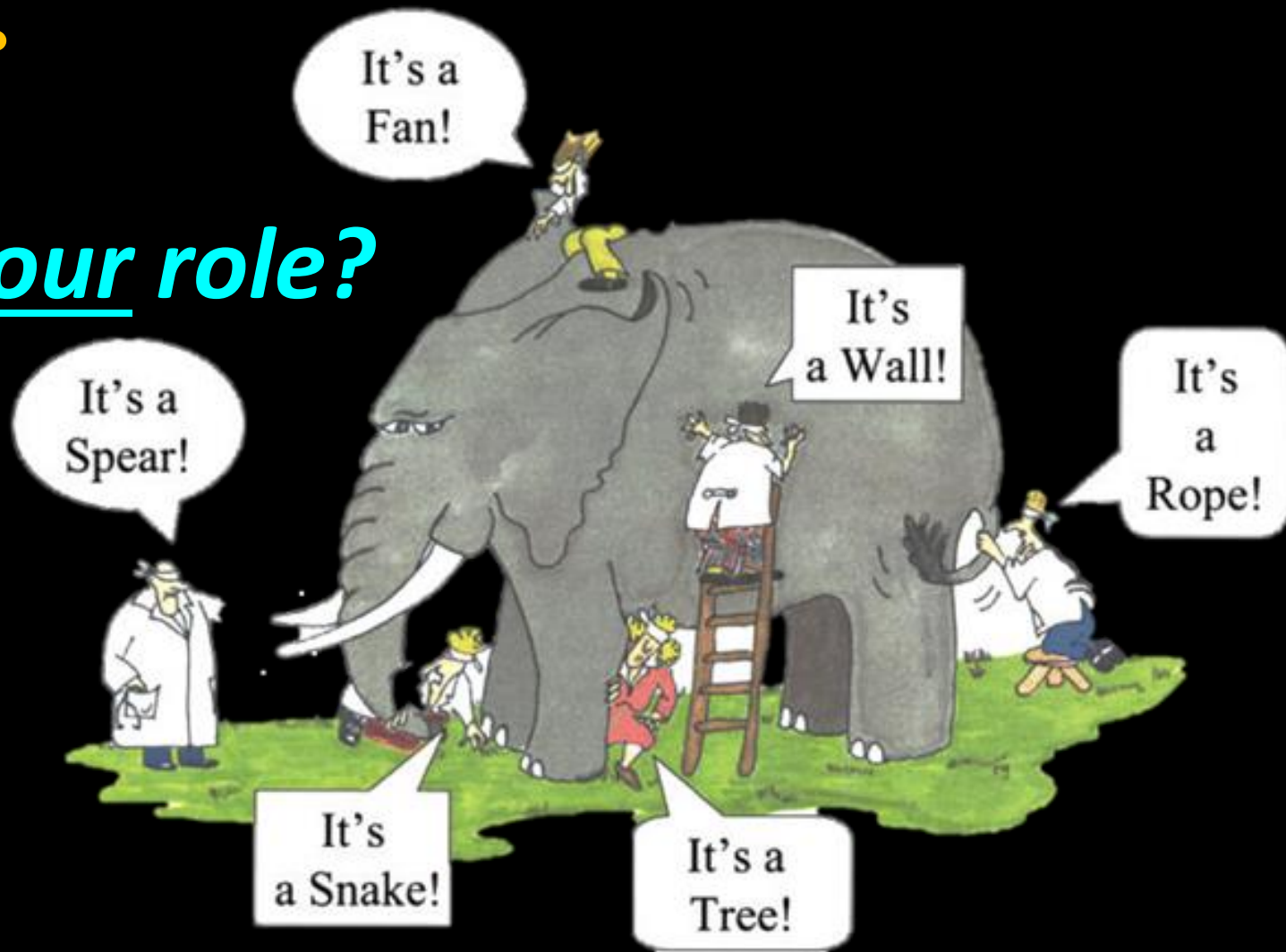
“Every relationship between the student and supervisor is different and unique — the world view, personality, communication-style of the individuals involved will dictate what works best for them.”

Va	Mohiotanga	Manaakitanga	Ako
relational space	knowledge & experience	mutual respect	learning from each other



Coach/counsellor/cheerleader/ critic...

What is our role?



Spillett, M.A. & Moisiewicz, K.A. (2004). Cheerleader, coach, counsellor, critic: Support and challenge roles of the dissertation advisor. *College Student Journal*, 38(2): 246–256.

What if...

The supervisor says...

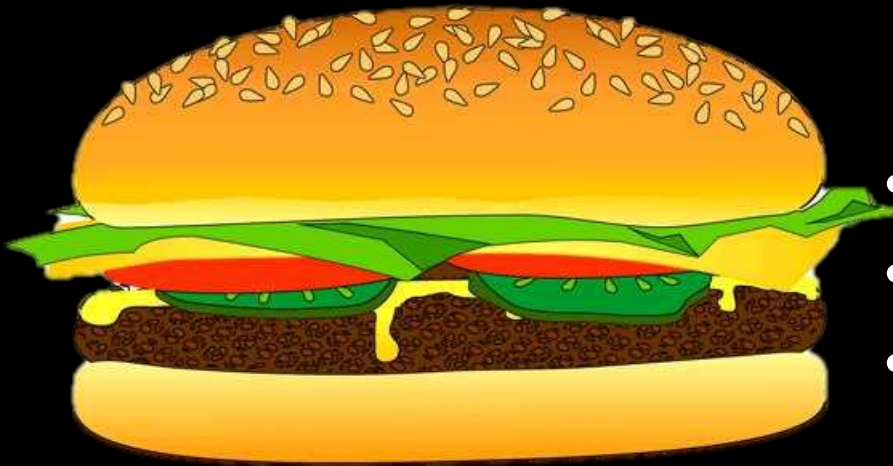
- “?? — meaning unclear!”
- “Write a lit review.”
- “Re-organise this section.”
- “Your writing needs to be more analytical.”

The student says...

- Every time I submit a draft, I get more comments.”
- “My supervisor doesn’t want to see my draft until it’s finished.”
- “I just need help with the grammar.”
- “My supervisor won’t tell me what to do.”



Feedback models



- Praise
- Constructive criticism
- Praise

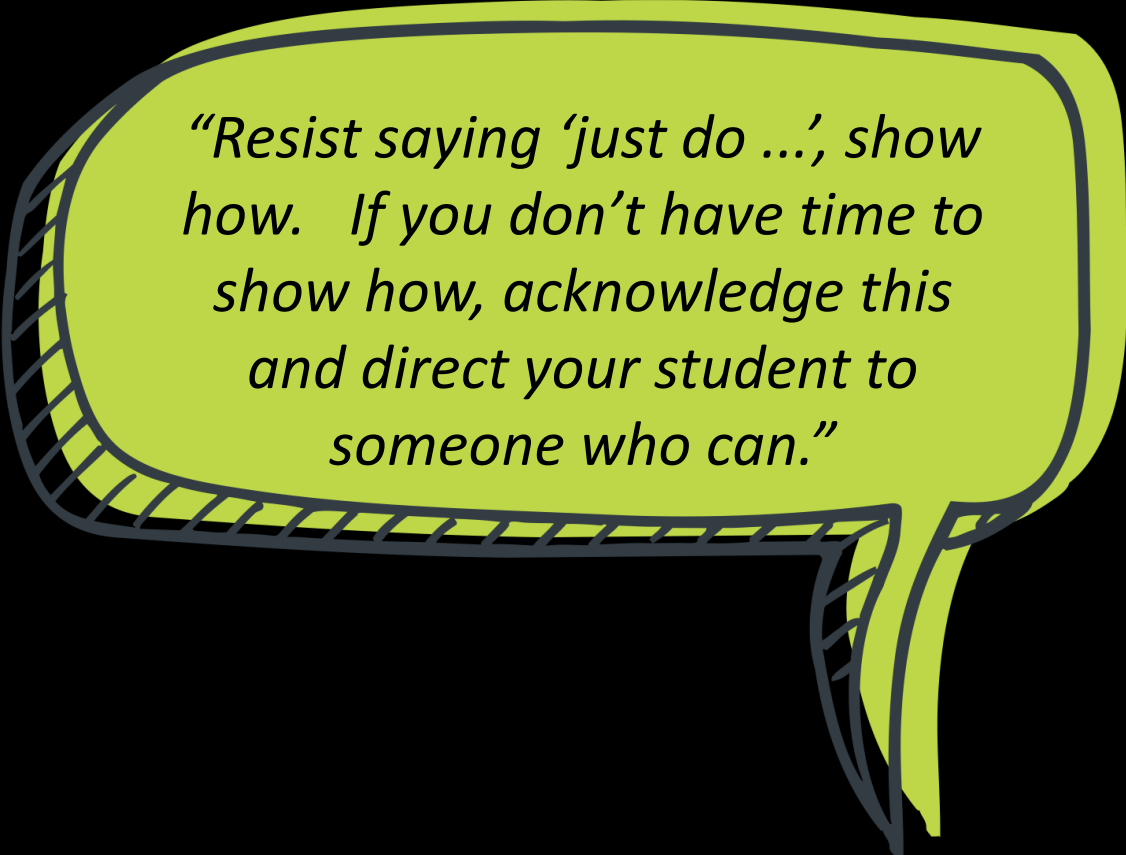


Getting the message across...

What do you do?

Self-help resources for students

- Pomodoro technique/[Shut Up & Write](#)
- [Grammarly](#)
- [Writefull](#)
- [The Thesis Whisperer](#)
- [Scrivener](#)



“Resist saying ‘just do ...’, show how. If you don’t have time to show how, acknowledge this and direct your student to someone who can.”

“The best feedback
predicts the ‘*what
about...?*’-type
statements an examiner
might raise.”



Watch for *Ako Aotearoa* Report

TO BE

CONTINUED...



Doctoral Writing Feedback: Guide for Supervisors & Advisors (Routledge, 2017)

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Final words (from student survey respondent):

“If, rather than just telling me what you think, you ask me:

- *What do you think of this piece of writing?*
- *What is the purpose/what were you trying to achieve?*
- *What is the writing doing here?*
- *What are its strengths?*
- *What do you think isn't working/needs improving?*
- *What do you need to do next to develop this further?*



...then I would probably come up with most of the feedback you wanted to give me by myself.”



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