The Supervisor-Student Relationship: 
The Problem of Conflicting ‘Mixed Metaphors’

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Abstract  
Richard Baskerville and Nancy Russo have shown how particular supervisor-student relationships can be seen as one of a number of metaphors, for example, a journey, a marriage, apprenticeship and servitude. In this paper we develop this idea further by suggesting problems associated with situations where students and supervisors might be proceeding on the basis of different metaphors, which we refer to as ‘mixed metaphors’. We use ‘playlets’ to illustrate these situations. These and the discussions that follow are devised from individual interviews with supervisors and research students, a focus group consisting of research students, and our own experiences as research students and supervisors. Suggestions are provided as to how the student and supervisor might avoid relationships where conflicting mixed metaphors are apparent that cause problems in the relationship and potentially hinder the progress of the student.

Keywords: Supervisor, Doctoral student, Supervisor-student relationship, Conflict, Metaphors, Mixed metaphors, Playlets
1 Metaphors

Metaphors provide us with ways to perceive phenomena. They are frequently used to describe business situations. Competition in business might be likened to a ‘game of poker’ or a ‘game of chess’, the internal politics of a business likened to a ‘circus’ or a ‘well-oiled machine’, an efficient company as ‘fit and lean’ but an inefficient one as ‘ill and bleeding’, working in them ‘a prison sentence’, and so on. Morgan (1986) identifies eight metaphors for organizations: machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination. Such metaphors might help us understand complex situations. However, as Goldman (1994, p622) argues, when summarizing Morgan’s comments, “the standard for these metaphors is utility and focus, not comprehensive explanation”.

In information systems, researchers have also used metaphors to understand issues of concern. Just to give three examples, Hirschheim & Newman (1991) look at information systems development in terms of ‘myth, metaphor and magic’; Walsham (1991) draws on the work of Morgan (1986) and argues that IS researchers should pay less emphasis on the mechanistic and organismic metaphors of organizations; and Kendall & Kendall (1993) identify nine metaphors – journey, war, game, organism, society, machine, family, zoo and jungle – to denote aspects of information systems practice.

In the context of the relationship between supervisors and their doctoral students in information systems, Baskerville & Russo (2005) propose eleven metaphors to describe the relationship:

- **Project**, where the student plans the process towards producing a satisfactory dissertation on time for the supervisor (or perhaps the examining board) acting as the customer.
- **Process**, where the supervisor is seen as a coach training the student into being a good researcher and then able to supervise research students themselves.
- **Magic**, where the student is shown by the supervisor how to do the ‘trick’ of producing a successful dissertation.
- **Journey**, where the supervisor guides the researcher across a ‘mountain range’ of difficulties towards producing a dissertation which is seen as the final destination.
- **Adventure**, where the student and supervisor together avoid the traps that they face on the way towards achieving the goal of a successful dissertation.
- **Child-Parent**, where the student and supervisor do not have the similar status found in the adventure metaphor but the student learns from the supervisor to eventually become an adult, demonstrated through his successful dissertation defence.
- **Marriage**, where the student and supervisor are very close in their relationship, indeed extending beyond an academic one and often beyond the dissertation period, referred to as an ‘intellectual romance’ by Baskerville & Russo (2005).
- **Pupil-Teacher**, like the child-parent relationship, the two protagonists have an unequal status, but here they are more distant than in the child-parent relationship.
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- **Survival Test**, where the student is largely left on his own by the supervisor who discovers from the outside, unlike the journey, whether the student passes the series of tests.
- **Apprenticeship**, where the student learns ‘on the job’ from the supervisor who is on hand at most times to correct mistakes, so that eventually the student can produce his ‘masterpiece’, a successful dissertation.
- **Servitude**, where the student is expected to do much of the tedious work of the supervisor and almost as a side issue complete his dissertation.

Each of these metaphors is well described in the text, so it is not our purpose to describe further these approaches to seeing the supervisor-research student relationship. Each can work well in the appropriate situation (and each can go wrong). It is our purpose here to discuss what happens when supervisor and student perceive different metaphors for the relationship, situations displaying the phenomena that we call ‘mixed metaphors’.

2 Research Approach

The authors include both supervisors and research students. In our pilot study, we interviewed five supervisors and research students, we also held one focus group meeting with fourteen research students plus four of the authors to lead and record the discussions, and we have also drawn on our own experience and reflections. We have used this material to produce four brief scenarios which illustrate student-supervisor situations where mixed metaphors are apparent.

We followed an abductive approach in our pilot study as we went back and forth between theoretical ideas and empirical features (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Since our research focus (the study of supervisor-student relationship) is socially constructed by the personal perceptions of students and supervisors (Berger & Luckman, 1967), we locate this research within the interpretive paradigm (Walsham, 1995).

To illustrate student-supervisor relationships displaying mixed metaphors, we have been influenced by several authors. In his article, Latour (2004) describes the potential of actor-network theory through a conflation of several real conversations between a supervisor and his students into a single imaginary conversation: a (somewhat) Socratic dialogue. Willemyns, Gallois, & Callan (2006) perform a conversation analysis on several real conversations between supervisors and students. They detect themes of dominance, status, mentoring, academic and professional identity, and postgraduate students’ independence in these conversations. We have also enjoyed the comic-strips found in Cham (2013) which highlight a number of dilemmas generally from the PhD student’s point of view. Finally, Austin, Nolan, & O’Donnell (2009) develop a story about a CIO based on their consultancy experiences but reflect on the trials and tribulations of the CIO in the novel in academic terms.

Our purpose is somewhat different in this paper from these authors as here we illustrate different types of student-supervisor relationships through four short imaginary conversations (which we refer to as playlets) but using extracts from real conversations taken from interviews, one focus group session and also our own experience to comment on the playlet. Of course four out of the many possible combinations of metaphor can only indicate the potential difficulty of situations with mixed metaphors.
3 Conflicting Mixed Metaphors

3.1 Playlet 1: Apprenticeship and Survival Test Metaphors

| Student: | Hi. I just dropped in to ask you if you have read my draft paper. |
| Supervisor: | Sure it is fine. |
| Student: | Have you any detailed comments or criticisms to make? |
| Supervisor: | As I said, it is fine. Submit it to the conference as it is. |

In follow-up conversations in playlet 1, the student might say to his student friend “My supervisor has not even read my paper – he is hopeless” whereas the supervisor might say to his colleague “My student has no confidence and needs reassurance all the time – he is hopeless.”

Here we might regard the student as seeing his ideal student-supervisor relationship as an apprenticeship where he expects comment and criticism on his developing masterpiece whereas the supervisor sees his ideal relationship as a survival test where the student sinks or swims in various tests, including the acceptance or rejection of his conference paper. The mixed metaphors seen in the relationship are likely to hinder the progress of the student because they are not only mixed but they are also conflicting. Some compromise needs to be reached through the student becoming more independent and/or the supervisor providing more guidance. Perhaps such a compromise might take the form of an agreed style more akin to a process or journey metaphor.

Although the metaphors were not made explicit in our interviews, our example students did not feel comfortable with the ‘survival test’ metaphor. Our focus group suggested that a ‘laissez-faire’ approach was unacceptable and that students should expect detailed criticism of a draft paper if the supervisor is given a reasonable amount of time. On the other hand, one student interviewee said:

Sometimes my professor has other agenda, has to do teaching, administration, and he may not be able to give the feedback at the right time, and you should understand this is normal.

This student seemed understanding but some students complain of an experienced and well-known supervisor that he is so busy that he never gets time for them. Thus choosing a supervisor because he is well-known may not be the best strategy. On the other hand, one student commented that:

My professor is very young and he doesn't have the experience of working with research students.

This latter relationship might be seen as a version of the apprenticeship metaphor, where both parties were apprentices! It might be best handled by appointing a more experienced professor as co-supervisor.

The traditional approach in the UK is more akin to a ‘survival test’ where a student is often expected to work independently and might get little feedback until it is time to look at the draft thesis. One ex-research student ‘gave up’ after several years’ part-time research:

It was probably the worst decision of my life to do a PhD. It was clear to me that my supervisor was not much interested in me and my research. But to be honest, I was not that much interested either. Other things in my life at that time were much more important to me. The truth is I enjoy teaching, not researching. It was a relief when I gave up.

This particular student might have been expecting a relationship akin to the apprentice metaphor but did not survive the supervisor’s survival test.
For the supervisor, first supervisory experiences might also fit the survival test metaphor. A very experienced supervisor in information systems, Gordon Davis (2005, p1) admits that:

“When I had my first doctoral student, I realized very quickly that I didn’t know how to be a good supervisor … I had casual, incomplete, unorganized observations of other supervisors. But there were no models of supervision that I knew about. Advice was anecdotal and incomplete. As with many knowledge work processes, there was an implied assumption that completing a doctoral program and doctoral thesis qualified a professor to be a good supervisor. In fact, as I learned over time, some professors have good instincts and naturally do good supervising. However, most seem to learn through a trial and error process. Indeed, some never seem to learn to be good at it.”

Although there are many doctoral training programs and doctoral consortia, there are fewer training programs for supervisors and supervisors’ consortia. This present special interest track at the Bled Conference (Vogel & Dreher, 2013) is a rare and welcome exception and may help to avoid the supervisor experiencing (and perhaps failing) the survival test metaphor.

The laissez-faire style of supervision is much less evident now and there are some, albeit few, training programs as evidenced above. However, as respective governments (for example, UK) have perceived waste in this approach in terms of non-completion, research institutions have demanded a supervisory style more akin to the process or project metaphors with a shorter time frame and supervision which is more directed and one having clear and agreed intermediary targets.

### 3.2 Playlet 2: Pupil-Teacher and Adventure Metaphors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student:</th>
<th>Hi. I have read the two papers you sent me, what should I do next?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor:</td>
<td>What do you think you should do next?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student:</td>
<td>I don’t know, that is why I ask you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor:</td>
<td>If I was in your place, I would look for other papers using the same research approach.</td>
</tr>
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In follow-up conversations, the student in playlet 2 might say to his student friend “in my earlier studies I was told what to do, I did it and I did it well, but for this PhD I just don’t know what is expected of me” whereas the supervisor might reflect that his student needs to ‘grow up and be more independent’.

Here we might regard the student as seeing his ideal student-supervisor relationship as pupil-teacher where he expects clear instructions on what to do whereas the supervisor sees his ideal relationship as an adventure where both parties make decisions on what to do next together. Again the conflicting mixed metaphors seen in the relationship are likely to hinder progress but a compromise might be struck around the journey metaphor where the student might expect some guidance but not to the extent expected of the ‘pupil’ in the teacher-pupil metaphor. Of course this change in the relationship towards a journey metaphor might develop naturally as the two parties learn to work with each other. The original contradictory mixed metaphor has changed to become more compatible, even if there is still some disparity. The relationship need not deteriorate but develop and progress if there is a willingness to adapt.

One final year PhD student interviewed argued that:

*The student and supervisor should be interested to work together from the outset ... they should be able to write together and publish together ... but you need flexibility on both sides ... [student independence is positive] but at some points you really need support [for example] for admin stuff and help with writing.*
This statement seems in line with the journey metaphor. Again, another more experienced student argues that he sees his ideal supervisor as a guide:

A supervisor should act as a guide but not be prescriptive. A supervisor can guide on the literature review, writing and data analysis, support the student, but not impose his will.

This would suggest a guide and explorer in the journey metaphor, but later in the same interview he states:

It is not easy task because the supervisor’s background might influence your style of working. The quantitative and qualitative aspect is important as well; theoretical background of supervisor effects as well.

This would seem to imply that the role of supervisor might be more like a mentor or coach in the process metaphor. Even if the supervisor does not impose his will on the student, his experience might make some decisions of the student de-facto those that the supervisor would make. This seems to be confirmed when his final remarks are that “you cannot go against the supervisor”.

In some situations the supervisor sees the relationship as pupil-teacher and is disappointed when his student does not do as he is told. Sometimes this leads the student to use avoidance tactics and does not keep his appointment as he has not done the allocated job on time.

### 3.3 Playlet 3: Process and Adventure Metaphors

**Student:** Action research seems to be an appropriate approach to address my research question. Can you tell me how I might do this, which firm can I do it with and keep to my schedule?

**Supervisor:** I don’t know anything about action research but I wanted to find out about it in any case. I’ll read up on it before our next meeting. We will work all the details out together. I will enjoy learning new things as we work together.

**Student:** Maybe I should get another supervisor.

**Supervisor:** What?

The question of whether the supervisor needs to be an expert in the topic area, research methodology, as well as an experienced PhD supervisor to inform about the organizational aspects of doing a PhD was discussed in all our interviews and in the focus group session. The focus group, consisting of research students in the early stages of their PhD research, were consistent in expecting all this expertise:

A good supervisor should have expertise in topic, methodology, theory ... they should also have a good network.

Another said that:

Supervisor and student should have some common ground in terms of the theories and ideas [and therefore that these] should be decided before selecting a supervisor.

However, an experienced supervisor interviewed suggested that:

A superior level of expertise on the student’s topic might be short lived as the student goes in depth ... and in the long term guidance might be more important.

This was confirmed by a final year student who argued, however, that it is critical that as the student does gain expertise in the topic, theory and methodology perhaps above that of the supervisor that:
You should be able to convince your supervisor about your research ... so that he is confident about your work [even if you are ‘the expert’ now].

This suggests that the agreed metaphor might change over time. In our pilot study we did not evidence cases where a positive agreed metaphor was replaced by a conflicting mixed metaphor, but our experience suggests that they exist. For example, a successful teacher-pupil relationship would need to change as the ‘pupil’ becomes the expert in the above situation. The ‘teacher’ might resent his apparent authority, based on his previous superior expertise, being usurped by the pupil with resulting conflict.

At the focus group meeting, students were asked to consider what the supervisor gets out of the relationship and the question seemed to surprise the group. This led to a discussion of the ethics of co-authorship amongst other ethical questions. On this topic, the AIS Code of Research Conduct (Davison, Beath, & Clarke, 2013) is an excellent guide for both research students and supervisors.

### 3.4 Playlet 4: Magic and Servitude Metaphors

| Student: Can you tell me all the necessaries for me to produce a Nobel-prize winning thesis? | Supervisor: Yes but grade these 250 students first. |

In this contrived conversation, the student, now accepted into the ‘club’, seems to be expecting to be told all the secrets so that he can produce his dissertation quickly and without much effort. He might see his famous supervisor as a hero and now he has become his PhD student the path to success is guaranteed. His supervisor, on the other hand, might be busy with his own funded research (or sometimes his own business) and sees the new PhD student as an opportunity to rid himself of a boring and time-consuming task. The explanation for the different metaphors might lie in the different goals of the student and supervisor. It might seem that the student now realizes what the supervisor gets out of accepting the supervisory role!

Cham (2013) gives many examples of situations where the student is fulfilling the servant role, including running laboratory sessions or tutorials for the supervisor’s undergraduate students, grading examination scripts and other assessed work, and giving presentations in place of the supervisor. The supervisor may successfully ‘bribe’ the student by offering financial recompense for the work from his research funds. But does this compensate for the opportunity cost of not working on his research? The supervisor may even use his power or make threats to ensure the work is done. This would of course not conform to the ethical guidelines discussed in Davison et al. (2013).

But the supervisor may have many pressures to contend with and the PhD student may not be as high on the supervisor’s agenda as the student would like. Most academics who supervise PhD students will be working under the ‘publish or perish’ rule and it might be natural (if somewhat questionable) to see a student as an enabler through giving him time to work on papers. Producing joint publications is clearly a way that supervisor and student might move from mixed metaphors towards a common metaphor. The papers might be seen as intermediary targets in a project metaphor. However, the project customer, that is the supervisor, needs to contribute significantly, perhaps as an aid to the analysis, design, production and testing of the paper as an end-product. Otherwise, again, this would not meet ethical standards.

At ESSEC we have Research Apprenticeship Modules (RAMs) which are designed to fulfil this purpose, amongst others, where the student is expected to work on a project, ideally towards a joint paper in each of these, and is also expected to carry out several RAMs with different members of academic staff. We also have pedagogical apprenticeship modules (PAMs) where the student is expected to contribute towards some of the duties of the faculty
and thereby learn about his chosen profession. Through this system where the expected contribution is discussed, agreed, ‘contracted’ and assessed, it is hoped that RAMs and PAMs will not be abused by faculty and the student be more experienced, produce a better dissertation and more generally be better fitted for his first job as a result. Both RAMs and PAMs encompass a spirit of working together and might make common metaphors more likely as a result.

4 Reflections and Conclusion

In the paper we have suggested that research student-supervisor relationships can be seen in terms of metaphors. Of course, in discussing desired and actual relationships with students and supervisors, it is apparent that no relationship exactly fits one of the metaphors described by Baskerville & Russo (2005) in their paper. The relationship has a tendency towards one of these but may display elements of more than one and it is never an ‘exact fit’. Further, there are different versions of the same metaphor, for example Davis (2005, pp10-11) discusses a ‘strong’ and a ‘collegial’ master-apprentice style. However, using these descriptions helps us to understand the relationship and where their metaphors are mixed and conflicting, the reasons why problems might arise.

Further, potential metaphors for the relationship are not limited to the eleven discussed in Baskerville & Russo (2005). Indeed one experienced research student interviewed discussed his experience as more like a ‘dance’ between student and supervisor where the two were normally in step (but sometimes one or the other stepped on their partner’s foot) with the dance being very energetic and exciting at times (somewhat like a tango) but at other times, disappointingly, more like a ‘slow waltz’. Another metaphor appropriate at times to some student and supervisor relationships is a ‘cold war’ where the protagonists are hardly speaking to each other. In these last two suggestions, the metaphor for the relationship seems to be shared, or at least perceived as shared by the outsider, but as seen by the cold war example, it is not necessarily a metaphor for progressing the student’s dissertation.

However, problems often arise where the ideal metaphor seen by the student is not the same as that for the supervisor. Indeed one final year student interviewed argued that he has seen: ...

... many relationships that didn’t work well ... and [although] the student was competent and the idea was good ... there was the matter of the mismatch.

By this mismatch he refers to what we refer to in this paper as conflicting mixed metaphors. Interestingly this student advises working with a potential supervisor together on “some sort of mutual projects before working on your main research” – rather like the ESSEC RAMs, described above.

As we have argued, we are of course not suggesting that success is guaranteed if the metaphors are in unison. Further, we are also not suggesting that one metaphor for the relationship is better or worse than another: there is no ‘one best’ metaphor. The extremes of a strong master-apprentice model can work for some and the hands-off survival test can work for others (and both can be inappropriate for yet others). The most appropriate metaphor might also depend on other factors, such as the problem to be researched, and the traditions of the particular doctoral program, research institution and the country of that institution.

In our pilot study we did not investigate all types of situation. In situations where a student is co-supervised, the problems of mixed metaphors could become much more complex as there might be as many additional metaphors as additional supervisors. This may make the situation especially difficult for the student to manage. On the other hand, co-supervision may help to fill in gaps in the knowledge or experience of the individual supervisors. One co-supervisor might be an industrial one – manager of a case study site for example – and his ‘world-view’
about the relationship can be very different than the traditional academic ones. This relationship (common in information systems studies taking place partly in organizations) is particularly prone to conflict. Similarly a supervisor may supervise several students, each having a different ideal metaphor. Tensions may become apparent as students see their colleagues getting treated differently by the same supervisor. Again, as we have discussed, the working metaphor might be a dynamic one where different aspects of a metaphor change in emphasis over time as the student gains experience and confidence. Alternatively, where the nature of the relationship changes more fundamentally, the working metaphor might be replaced with a new one.

In our pilot study the mixed metaphors that we identified were generally conflicting and caused some stress on the relationship. We did not see evidence of a mixed metaphor where the different views on the relationship by the two protagonists proved a positive influence, but our pilot study was by no means comprehensive and we are not arguing that such situations do not exist. It might be that some mixed metaphors are compatible, some conflicting and some deadly!

In our larger study to follow on from this pilot study we wish to investigate the metaphors represented in more complex situations such as co-supervision, larger research teams working on a single project, and the problems of supervisors having several students of different backgrounds, requirements, and expectations. We also wish to research student-supervisor relationships changing and developing over time and also study the particular impacts that might occur related to a change of supervisor, who might assume a different metaphor and, without meaning to, slow the student’s progress.

We would argue, however, that it is already evident through our pilot study, that prospective supervisor(s) and student should meet very early in the project phase to determine and agree the standards of the relationship: what is expected of the supervisor, what is expected of the student, a draft agenda for meetings, and including intermediary goals, such as journals and conferences to target and so on. As one student concluded in the focus group meeting at the first rendezvous between student and supervisor it is necessary to agree:

... the method of working. This includes interaction (e.g. how often you meet with your supervisor), the format of the meeting or discussion: should it be formal or informal ... Do you have to send an email before stating the topic or results that you have which will be discussed? Do you have to prepare slides? ... etc.

Although this will not of course be explicit, the student and supervisor are here agreeing their student-supervisor metaphor.

In conclusion, to avoid a ‘divorce’, following on from the marriage metaphor of Baskerville & Russo (2005), it is important to make explicit the implicit assumptions of the metaphor that supervisor and student wishes to assume and agree one that works for both parties. Further, the implicit metaphor should be reviewed during the course of the program to ensure that it is still appropriate and if not, make changes which might imply a different working metaphor. A discussion of the operational metaphor might explain, for example, a slow-down in progress.

As with real marriages, it is ‘good to talk’.

Acknowledgements
We wish to thank the five research students and members of faculty at three research institutions who agreed to be interviewed and the fourteen research students at ESSEC who agreed to take part in our focus group interview.
References


