

Thinking outside the box

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Abstract: Theoretically, the legislation provides clear directions, through which the relationship between the mentee and the mentor is defined, in the context of a doctoral research project. In practice, interpersonal relationships involve nuances, variables and peculiarities that are difficult to anticipate. In this context, the question arises: should the coordinator be a mentor or a coach? An (apparently) simple question that can help both to cover the route from admission to the defense of the thesis, and to clarify the place of each participant, because the team will include (at least) two plus three members; basically, the role of the “Guidance Committee” must be an active/proactive one. Even if the relationship is established on the basis of a contract, with legislative delimitations (in full change) that – both the PhD student and the coordinator – must respect, the assumption does not only involve a formal and mechanical application of some standards, but aims at two other components resulting from the definition, at an international level, of the concept of artistic research: creating a new product (for the benefit of humanity) and triggering one's own growth. Thus, it is necessary to look for alternative coordination techniques, which respect the spirit of the law, without getting stuck in the “letter”, but which require a creative approach not only to the content, but (especially) to the “journey”, the use of a system of support, necessary for the research process and building an ethical, dynamic and creative relationship.

Keywords: PhD, leadership, coordinator.

1. Introduction

In theory, the legislation provides clear directions for defining the relationship between the student and the supervisor, in the context of a doctoral research project; in practice, interpersonal relationships involve shades, variables and peculiarities that are difficult to anticipate. In this context, controversies are natural, inevitable; within them, the question creeps in: should the supervisor be a mentor or a coach? An (apparently) simple question that can help both cover the route from admission to the defense of the thesis, and to clarify the place of each participant, because the team will include (at least) two plus three members; basically, the role of the

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“Guidance Committee” must be an active one (why not, proactive). Even if the relationship is established based on a contract, with legislative delimitations (in full change) that both the PhD student and the supervisor must observe, the assumption does not involve only a formal and mechanical application of some standards, but concerns two other resulting components from the definition, at an international level, of the concept of *artistic research*: creating a novelty product (for the benefit of humanity) and triggering one's own growth. Thus, it is necessary to look for alternative coordination techniques, which observe the spirit of the law, without getting stuck in the “letter”, but which require a creative approach not only to the content, but (especially) to the “journey”, the use of a system of support – necessary for the research process and building an ethical, dynamic and creative relationship.

2. Looking for alternative...

All this implies, however, thinking outside the box, looking for alternative, flexible solutions, adaptable to each specific situation. In this sense, we bring to attention the work strategy that includes elements of *coaching* and *scientific camp*, applied over time, but always changing.

In fact, the use of the phrase *scientific camp* implies the acceptance of the intersection of methods in the process of supervising a doctoral research, based on three distinct concepts:

- leadership,
- coaching,
- artistic research.

Leadership determines the replacement of the “positional rapport” with ... a formula based on trust and collaboration; In this sense, we can use three questions to check the type of relationship:

- Would you assist me?
- Can you assist me?
- Do you care about me and this research?

If there are signs of doubt over a single answer, then the supervisor must reassess his/her position. Theoretically, requesting and accepting to supervise is based on mutual trust, generated by the competence/knowledge of the advisor, their skills as a researcher, their ability to formulate research strategies, through which they will be able to “help” the PhD student. The involvement, however, is determined by the connection, by the way the two will be able to establish an interpersonal relationship, which will foster creativity.

The first stage of verification can take place in the preparation of the entrance exam and of the Project; the level of honesty and demand in evaluation/self-evaluation, of reflection on the fundamental principles specific to artistic research can create the premises of a healthy collaboration; each compromise will be paid for during the journey. Applying these principles, however, can trigger the risk of

abandonment, but identifying incompatibilities from the start is worth seeing as an invaluable gift that will help us “not send the ducks to the vultures’ school”.

The verb “to care” can materialize starting with the selection of the guidance team/committee; the selection criteria of the members can sometimes take the doctoral supervisor out of the comfort zone, if the priority is the competence of those targeted (in the field of research) and not the “peace” that could accompany the collaboration with them. Basically, this stage of organization represents a form of action; in leadership it can be identified by what is called “The Law of Navigation” – each member of the team will have a well-established role, will contribute to completing the doctoral path, especially in crisis situations. Obviously, the PhD student must take advantage of the chance to be placed in the position of “captain”; the generosity of the guidance team is one of the aspects in which ethics, competence and character constitute a blank check offered to the PhD student – the way of usage is a personal one, with direct influences on the results.

The presence of coaching techniques imposes its axiomatic status through *questioning*. Over the years, I have come to understand that (regardless of the level of study, but especially within the “doctorate”) the questions, not the answers, are essential; by asking them, the supervisor has the possibility to trigger access to the internal solutions, specific to the doctoral student. It is true, this method is time-consuming and energy consuming, it forces the tutor to understand and experience the differences between coaching, mentoring, pedagogical counseling and – above all – the integrity criteria specific to artistic research. In this context, the lessons accessed (within the JMT Romania platform) provided me with a useful definition for the coordination of a doctoral research: coaching helps a person advance from the point where they are to the point where they are heading (consciously and assumed) and then overcome the obstacles that may arise along the way; in other words, “coaching is the thought-provoking conversation that equips you with the answers you need to face challenges, maximize opportunities, and grow to become a better version of you”; a “creative process” through which the doctoral student can also be “pushed to action”². Accessing the necessary answers and growth become two essential pillars that will allow him to realize the meaning he can attach to his endeavor, beyond administrative implications or social recognition. “Developing to become a better version of yourself” and contributing to the development of knowledge is a form of application of the principles contained in the concept of *artistic research*.

During my own coaching training I understood the importance of “unchaining” creativity, of untapped sources of imagination; thus, the following questions emerged: how can I spark the interest of students/doctoral students? How can I unlock imagination/creativity in the doctoral research process? Asking inspiring and powerful questions will get them out of the “box”, to stand up and see

² <https://johnmaxwellgroup.ro/traininguri/coaching/training-coaching>

the bigger picture, to unlock themselves. The “scientific camp” formula was born, however, from the identification of the four factors necessary to take over coaching techniques:

- the doctoral student's desire to grow (in the mentioned senses),
- the student's mental health,
- flexibility and openness to change,
- (last but not least) the mentor's vision, their desire to trigger growth, beyond the official tasks specific to the contract and the grant.

Under these circumstances, the need to create a context of growth - which can allow the personality of the PhD student to grow (as well as the thesis) - led me to what I call the *scientific camp* – that is, to the identification of a suitable space and a time interval in which the team PhD student – supervisor prepares for the achievement/completion of a well-established goal. Therefore, the two (the participation of the entire coordination team is still an ideal) must “isolate” themselves, for a period of time, to work exclusively on the doctoral research project. Organizational aspects involve:

- the existence of a full consensus between the two, regarding the period, place and rules of conduct;
- establishing the objective and tasks for each;
- clarifying the dialogue topics specific to each day,
- accepting to use certain creative research techniques (adapted to the topic).

We insist on consensus and establishing rules – two defining conditions in ensuring the smooth running of the training program. Since the current legislative system does not provide for the budgeting of such activities, the supervisor must assume everything related to providing the infrastructure and “management and protocol” expenses (thus protecting himself/herself from any suspicions regarding undisclosed interests or the violation of ethical norms) or to identify an alternative financing solution (for example, through a sponsor, an NGO). The PhD advisor becomes the “host”/sponsor of the camp, a fact that determines conditioning the application of this working method on the existence of material resources, a space for study and experimentation where he can invite the doctoral student, on the possibility of providing a private area with a decent level of comfort. This aspect, correlated with the concrete possibility of extraction from the daily schedule, makes the duration of deployment 3 to 5 days (without excluding extension or replication). The determining element for the specifics of this type of activity is represented by the OBJECTIVE, to which concrete items will be associated (quantitative or qualitative – number of pages, development of analyses, new case studies etc.). “While vision tells people where to go, their purpose shows why they should go

there.”³ A clear understanding of these aspects will determine the materialization of results, through which skills and knowledge become concrete.

Sometimes family and/or professional/contractual issues can make this method inapplicable, but it can be approached in a virtual or sequential version, both based on establishing a time frame, a schedule of daily meetings in a virtual or physical format and clear work assignments. If the first form proposed is based on “total cutting”, the last two are based on cutting and rhythmicity (in these cases the duration will be extended, to be able to balance the action of distress factors, generated by the environment and technological aspects with the eustress ones (generated by the declared application of coaching techniques and results, the technique of questions unlocking the inner answers and determining the achievement of objectives, including through awareness of aspects related to time management). And in these variants, the initiative will belong to the supervisor, a fact that will turn the method into an effective working formula, which will allow overcoming a moment of crisis and/or completing the thesis. The scientific camp – 1:1 – also allows to avoid situations of deviation from the norms of research ethics; the supervisor has the possibility of emphasizing the verification of the documentation method and (why not) can identify the possible temptation of the doctoral student to take over contents, without specifying the information source – a temptation that manifests itself especially in crisis situations (exceeding the established deadlines, personal problems etc.); the connection also determines approaching the personal style, since during the meetings the doctoral student (according to the agreed rules) will receive work assignments. As the use of AI becomes an accepted working technique, the risk of not noticing all the “similarities” may increase, an aspect that does not diminish the advantages of accessing new databases.

Declaring the objectives, principles and work techniques (specific to the advisor and the PhD student) allows the identification of common points and the definition of the strategy, based on the set of rules resulting from the summation of the legal provisions, with the axes of personal non-negotiable values of those involved. Academic ethics is more than a set of rules contained in the declaration of an official entity; it must adapt to changes in the world of research; clarifications are not only welcome, but required: “Ensure that the content generated by ChatGPT is original and doesn’t violate any copyright laws, and be sure to cite each source mentioned.

Be transparent about your use of ChatGPT in your research paper. Recognize the limitations of the tool and the extent to which it was used in the writing process.”⁴ Transparency can only be experienced within a context based on trust.

³ John C. Maxwell (2009), *The 360° Leader* [Lider la 360°], translated by Ana Maria Stanca, AMALTEA București, p. 279.

⁴ <https://mindthegraph.com/blog/ro/chatgpt-research-paper/> accessed on 30. 10. 2023.

3. Conclusions

Regardless of the work type applied, it is important to use an algorithm like: action – analysis of results – reflection – resuming – completion. Thus, you can set an efficient way of working, customized and adapted to the theme. The internalization of research techniques and of the related discipline and assuming responsibility for one's results can be triggered and reinforced within some training periods, but are conditioned by the awareness of the opportunity offered. Thus, thinking outside the box of formalism will be a natural consequence of planting the seeds of success and creativity, of the desire to create something significant, useful, representative not only for oneself, but also for the academic community to which one belongs. Even if the author of the thesis will rarely mention, in the volume published on its basis, the contribution of those who accompanied them on the doctoral journey, the doctoral supervisor applies the model of the unconditional gift of light. Building relationships is based on trust, systematic engagement (resulting from motivation), competence and enjoyment. If these pillars are not in harmony, the construction cannot have balance, it cannot “stand”. In fact, most of the time, interpersonal relationships are decisive for the development and completion of a project (be it doctoral); the character profile also outlines the journey profile and results; doing what you say and saying what you do becomes an integral part of the research activity, an aspect also reflected by the funded Project, presented in the “entrance” exam.

The formalization of certain methods such as the *research camp*, their correlation with internship or ERASMUS programs, the provision of an infrastructure adapted to the real needs of the doctoral students and the doctoral supervisor, but also the re-evaluation of the norming/financing method could represent viable solutions, which would allow increasing the percentage of works completed – a sensitive topic at national level. The reformulation of the specific program of the Doctoral School (including the way of financing) could constitute a “re-start” point, through which research can gain the status of “part of a way of life”. Accountability, discipline and time management need rewarding, recognition, respect; until then, the vitality of a Doctoral School will be generated by the passion of those involved. “If passion is not part of the picture, then your vision is not transferable; it's just a cute snapshot.”⁵ Thinking outside the box can counterbalance the action of... inertia.

Bibliography

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⁵ John, C Maxwell, *op. cit.*, p. 281.