

The importance of sulking

Many might think of sulking as angrily hiding in one's bedroom, somewhat childlike, and maybe even occasionally giving the furniture a hard kick or thump. I am not arguing for such practice in this blog, but I am arguing that sulking is an important skill to learn and should be encouraged and embraced by supervisors of Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs).

I started my 7-year part-time PhD in my 40s, having been a freelance writer before that. I was paid by various charities and the government to write articles, reports and policies. I was a professional writer. Imagine my horror, quite early into the PhD, when I discovered that I couldn't write academically. It really impacted my identity as a writer.

I am not sure what my supervisors actually said but I can pretty much guarantee they didn't tell me I couldn't write, or that all my work was rubbish, but that is what I *heard*. To be fair, six years on, when I get peer reviews back, I read the comments in the same way. And this is why sulking is so important.

It is rare for an academic or a student to take feedback neutrally (see my colleague Caroline Elbra-Ramsay's [work](#) on this); feedback is emotional and relational. The supervisory relationship is unlike other relationships with various complications and weird dynamics – for example, I supervise a colleague who shares my office. The PGR might have a very senior role elsewhere – I supervise several experienced professionals. Additionally, PGRs have a very complicated relationship with their thesis, and when supervisors talk about the thesis, it can feel even more complex.

As I progressed through my PhD, I learnt to navigate the emotions and the supervisory relationship through talking about sulking. I quickly learnt that my strong feelings on receiving feedback would subside and that I shouldn't question the feedback immediately but rather sit with it and my emotions for a couple of days before responding. A practice I still maintain for peer reviews.

I learnt to joke with my supervisors, "Ok thank you, I am going sulk for a few days and then I will deal with the feedback". This was really helpful. The first time, one supervisor looked at me with a raised eyebrow but quickly we learnt it was helpful to talk about this and build in sulk time. We learnt to talk about the emotions and requisite sulk times involved as we built up our relationship. I learnt to trust him and he learnt to trust me – I would go and sulk and come back and improve my work.

Now as a supervisor to eight PGRs, I encourage them to sulk, to process feedback but also importantly their emotions, and to build in 'sulk days' to do this. As I get to know them, it is easier to spot when they really need sulk days and to encourage them to regroup, before tackling the next bit of the thesis. It is vital to get to know our PGRs and build in strategies to deal with feedback.

A good starting place to talk about feedback strategies is sharing our experiences with peer reviews. A huge turning point for me was when my supervisor, a professor, shared his peer reviews with me and I understood that he didn't breathe out perfect writing and often got quite frustrated about feedback before getting on and grappling with it.

Such a generous practice helped me realise we could all benefit from being a little more honest about the art of dealing with feedback on our writing; learning to sulk well is part of the craft.