Sita my Sita

Students come and students go in our lives as an academician. No matter how mundane each may be, they will always leave an impression in our heart and in our mind. This often takes you back on a road of reminiscence and reflections. I often wonder how these supervisees of mind are doing so far in life. Have they migrated? Are they doing better in life? Have they progressed as a person? One or two sent me post cards but most foreign students hardly write a note to say Thank you or to ask how you are. It is out of sight and out of mind, no matter how much you helped.

I have been in UM for more than 15 years and my supervisees who have completed and graduated are less than 30. This is a very small number compared to others who have managed to serve many supervisees but I am not here to compete for numbers but I am happy to have been involved I part of their journey, for good or for bad.

Of these supervisees, Sita was one personal experience that stressed me out the most in my initial stage as a supervisor who was given no training. Much of my supervisory skill in the first eight years of my career was based on my own experience as well as what I would have wanted my supervisors to do for me as a supervisee.

Sita was also a pretty young woman with long silky black hair, big hazel eyes and a rather sweet voice. An average student who had taken one of my masters classes, Sita was a good person: kind, polite, gentle, sweet, and respectful but she was not good in her work or assignment discipline, often not doing what she ought to have done in class participation and assessments. She also had difficulties with expressing herself through written English. When I highlighted this to her for her own development, she was humbled and explained that it was her dream to become a master’s graduate. She had a fulltime job as a PA with a company and she also had to run a family that comprised an invalid father-in-law and a mother-in-law whose mobility was restricted to her bedroom only. Sita also had a mischievous daughter who often got into trouble at school and a 10 month old baby to care for. He was helped by a maid. She had a husband who was many years her senior who supported her pursuit financially and it stopped there. Sita’s dream was to become someone with confidence so that she can hold her head high after having left her wealthy family behind. She was estranged from her own family because of her impulsiveness when young. Sita wanted a better job and to be able to make more money.

When she decided she wanted to do research in my area of interest, she came to see me and asked if I could supervise her. I agreed because I like Sita as a person. I also reckoned that it was my duty to help one who lacks the skill rather than one who already has the skills and knowledge. So I agreed. At first Sita was good. She would see me almost on a weekly basis and we would discuss a few matters like research problem,
research gap, research questions and some other aspects of methodology which she was ready to endure to collect data. However when it came to working on theoretical framework and literature review she was thrown off. First she had no idea what a theoretical framework is. Next she did not know where to locate past studies or whose models she could emulate to formulate some theories and discussions for analysis. This made my life miserable because I literally had to find my own books and lent them to her to read. I would highlight to her which parts she could focus on and how she should comment on the before writing them out as summaries. She could not manage more than three. When we discussed matters on past studies, she broke down and cried. She didn’t know how to locate articles or even how to google. She had excuses, she had no internet services, her computer broke down, her mother-in-law was hospitalised, her husband went to China and so on. As she sits in my office, I had to show her how to type in key words on Google and inform her how she can distinguish these articles which are relevant to her study. In fact, I printed all out for her, free of charge, because the tears were terribly uncomfortable for me and I did not know what else to do as a supervisor. My job to support her or so I thought.

After she had done her transcription, which I had to double check to confirm that she was doing what she said, Sita was again caught in a dilemma. She didn’t know how to analyse her data and I was pretty upset with her. “You are the expert, Sita, because this is your research. You need to know exactly why you are doing this research and what answers you are looking for. Go back to the aim of your research, Sita and ask yourself exactly what it is you hope to find from this research”. With that statement episode, Sita disappeared for a whole semester until it was time for her progress report. When she saw me again, nothing had been done; her mother-in-law passed away, and she was stuck without a maid. I understood the pains of a growing family and a desire of a young woman to want to look successful and be successful and yet there are hurdles in her way. So I signed her progress report and became a sucker for compassion and pity again. Sita applied for a semester off and so for two more semesters I did not get to see Sita’s drafts. When I pushed for it because I felt that Sita needed that ‘drive’ from me, I was given drafts where the language made no sense.

I wanted Sita to complete as soon as possible because if she doesn’t I would have forgotten what her research was about and she would need to cite more people’s works. Thus, I wrote a sample Chapter 1 for her to show her how it should look like, I also wrote a sample chapter 3 for her to help her with putting down her thoughts for her methodology. I provided headings and diagrams so that she knows what to do. For her chapter four I wrote a sample one to illustrate to her how the introduction of the chapter should look like, how her analysis should progress and be organized as and for me this was very tiring and unnecessary but I did these as a model for Sita.
When the chapters were almost done, I had another problem, her language was too bad. Not just the writing style but also the grammar and spelling. Again I almost jumped out of frustration but before I got into that frenzy I said to her quite harshly that it is time she helped herself already. I advised her to get some help with editing her language before she submits her drafts to me. She did and paid the person quite a huge sum but it was no better than Sita’s own writing style. On reflecting, now I know that academic writing is not every English teacher’s competence because it is a skill one picks up from constant reading and writing. For another semester, Sita struggled. Just a semester before her candidature ends, I called her and asked for some progress updates. She didn’t answer my call. A week later, Sita called me and tole me she wanted to give up.

“I cannot cope, Dr Kuang, I am going crazy already. Everyday I sit on the table looking at my own work and my writing and thesis and I feel very depressed. No one can help me and I don’t know how to help myself.” She cried further. What would you do as a supervisor?

In 2008 Sita graduated and she came to my office with her children and husband to take photos with me, give me a hug and to say thank you. “I couldn’t have done this without you, Dr Kuang.”

(Names and years have been changed.)