The Resources Of Good Supervision

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Abstract
   A doctoral thesis is a doctoral student's huge accomplishment, but hardly can be completed without a supervisor's help and guidance. It is a common fact that a doctoral thesis requires abundant work from the doctorate, but not all are aware of that the supervision of doctoral theses presents a world filled with concerns and doubt as well as effort and successes. A supervisor's joy consists of many other feelings too: relief, when a doctoral student hands his or her newly printed doctoral thesis with beautiful binding or when the auditorium doors are closed after a successful dissertation. In order to achieve the favoring review statements, a supervisor and a doctorate have to work hard for years. What kinds of resources are needed from a supervisor's point of view? What kinds of obstacles and accelerators does a supervisor confront during the process? What makes a supervisor supervise persistently and empathetically? What are the elements of good supervision? These questions are relevant in the process of supervising doctoral theses.

Introduction: The special features of supervising doctoral theses

   The supervision of doctoral theses differs from the supervision of other theses. In this relationship, the supervisor's and doctorate's positions are special due to the high expectations and workload they are going to face. When compared to teaching, supervising is merely considered as consulting.

   Yet, the supervision of doctoral theses does also include many similar roles which are adapted by a supervisor regardless of the grade of the theses he or she is supervising. A supervisor can be a guide, spokesperson, adviser, co-worker, tutor, supporter, protector, backup, referee, leader, manipulator, observer, comforter, feedback provider, critic, facilitator, planner, creator, organizer, manager, friend, and tentator. The supervision of doctoral theses is still little studied (see e.g. Mullins & Kiley, 2002), but the number of research is increasing all the time (Gardner, 2007; Knight, 2005). The

development of the supervision of doctoral theses, expectations, authority relations, the doctors' employment, the conceptions of good supervision and its problems are widely published from the doctorate's perspective both in Finland and abroad (Boud & Lee, 2009; Bolker, 1998; Booth, Clombs & Williams, 2003; Cryer, 2003; Cullen et al., 1994; Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000: Dunleavy, 2003; Evans & Kamler, 2005; Golde, 2007; Murray & Moore, 2006; Philips & Pugh, 2003; Taylor & Beasley, 2005).

In this article, we will discuss the resources needed in supervision based on our earlier research and practical experience (see e.g., Määttä, 2012; Määttä, 2015; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012; Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014; Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2013). What does the supervision of doctoral theses require from a supervisor? What are the key elements of good supervision?

A Good Supervisor

We have categorized the features required for supervision of doctoral theses into four resources. These resources are illustrated with the form of a cloudberry (see Figure 1). The elements of knowledge, proficiency, will, and actions are the four fundamental features of supervision—and corresponding characteristics explain the smoothness of a PhD-student's doctoral process as well. Here, the elements each form one seed of a cloudberry, and together, they constitute a whole berry, a functional supervision of doctoral theses.

As we know, the seeds of a berry are of different sizes and shapes in nature, and therefore, the cloudberries differ too. A supervisor can emphasize an element depending on his or her own style and on the doctorate's work habits and supervision needs. However, the supervision is not likely to succeed if one of the seeds, the elements of supervision, is totally missing.

First of all, will means the supervisor's commitment to the supervision. Knowledge refers to his or her substance knowledge or the mastery and ability to comprehend the overall structure. Actions are needed to ensure that the contents of research meet the scientific quality requirements. Proficiency includes positive and supportive supervision methods and the supervisor's personality.
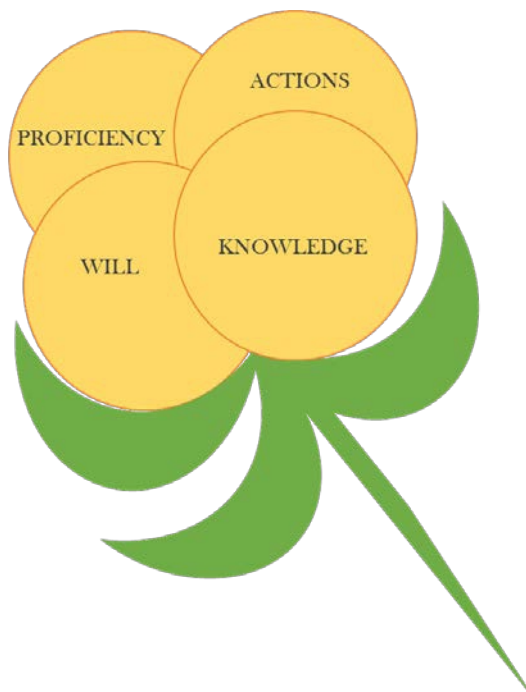
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Figure 1. The elements of supervision relationship

Finishing the doctoral thesis requires the same resources from a doctoral student, too. From this point of view, will refers to the doctorate's commitment to complete the doctoral thesis and knowledge means the ability to make oneself conversant with the doctoral thesis' subject matter. Without proper actions, the thesis cannot be built according to the scientific quality requirements. The doctorate's proficiency concretely cover his or her ability to write a doctoral thesis, positive and appreciative working methods, and perseverance, persistency, and talent. By outlining the shape and area of one's own berry, every supervisor and doctoral student should recognize and assess their own resources and their possibilities to develop. The supervision relationship can be concretized if a supervisor and doctoral student compare each other's cloudberries. The berries are likely to differ from each other as do berries in nature, but if the supervisor and doctorate are ready to discuss their mutual resources, their discussion might turn into an interesting conversation that reveals the reciprocal expectations and gives a direction to the whole dissertation process. The conversation could be either informal or formal but it will form the basis to a supervision agreement between a supervisor and doctorate, which defines the rights and obligations for both of them or the basic conditions of a supervision relationship.

In this article, we will focus on the elements of supervision from the supervisor's perspective pursuing to define good supervision of doctoral theses. Next, the four elements will be introduced in detail.

Will

A dissertation process proceeds like a funnel of an hourglass. Getting started is often difficult, there are many options to choose from, and doctorates tend to feel uncertain at first. The emphases of supervision alter during the process. After having made the basic choices and definitions about the structure and contents, research work finally gets started, and the doctoral student will be able to put his or her heart into research theory, methodology, and practice with a new kind of certainty. At its best, working enthusiastic and engaged, encouraged by the supervisor.

During the research process, the supervisor will notice how the mutual relationship between a supervisor and doctoral student changes and varies. At the beginning, the relationship may include high levels of admiration and respect. However along with the process, it is not always possible to avoid disagreements. These disagreements and distress can be avoided or solved the best by being aware of the transformations in the supervision relationship during the dissertation process. The supervisor's commitment and professionalism becomes evident in not abandoning or neglecting the supervision easily—even when feeling that the value of supervision has been nullified. The more committed one is to supervision, the more satisfaction the completion of a thesis will give to the supervisor.

Along with putting his or her heart into the dissertation work, dealing with a doctoral student from phase to phase during the process, and learning to know the student, a supervisor develops into an attentive translator of a doctoral student's feelings. A committed supervisor has to deliberate constantly how to help a doctoral student discreetly with both constructive and respective tone. How to be critical but safe mirror to a doctorate who is struggling with his or her research?

As the substantial content of a doctoral thesis advances the ability to supervise and to be supervised constitutes continuous challenge. Both a supervisor and doctoral student individually and together have to constantly question the perspectives that arise. The thesis changes in the pendulum motion of constantly recurring choices, reflections, and options. The first thought of a research theme is probably already inadequate at an end of the work. The context of a completed doctoral thesis is just a glimpse of the idea from which the work started.

In the end, a doctoral student has the responsibility for the solutions and choices. What a supervisor says is not usually unquestionable but merely suggesting. Still, the supervisor's role is a very responsible one.

Knowledge

The supervisor needs not only the substance knowledge in the area of research but also knowledge of how to structure the research and organize a doctoral thesis as a whole. How to transmit this knowledge to the doctorate?

The ability to ask and suggest

It is important, that a supervisor has the ability to ask because good questions make a student realize the quintessence of the work. Furthermore, questions will be better concretized, if a supervisor is able to suggest alternatives giving a student the responsibility to make decisions.

Both a supervisor's and doctoral student's questions are important in a supervision process. The questions lead to answers, even if the answers were not the best or the most well-defined ones immediately. Already when asking a question, one gets some kind of answer or refines the questions. There are relatively abundantly source books about designing good questions and question types to help the supervisor (Klein, 1999; Koshik, 2002; Lea & Street, 2000; Martin, 2004; Vehviläinen, 2001).

The language used in supervision and the questions concerning a thesis change during a dissertation process. Thus, a supervisor may reflect and consider the nature of questions and how the questions will become more complicated during the process. What questions are the most crucial at the beginning and what kind of questions enhances the quality and advancement of the work?

The concreteness of supervision

Many times concretizing supervision and securing the dissertation process require not only verbal feedback but also written directions. Even so, a doctoral student's ability to accept or hear the feedback and a supervisor's skills to give feedback, do not always meet. Mutual misunderstandings are surprisingly common.

Despite being laborious, written feedback has its special benefits. A doctoral student can read the written advice, suggestions, and feedback in peace, is able to come back to those again and again, to reflect and dwell. However, discussing face to face and comparing notes together are invaluable. At its best, a supervising meeting ends with a following question: "What are you going to do next?" This kind of checking also guarantees the mutual understanding about the direction on which the work will proceed. It presents a way to gather up the supervision conversation and gives both to a doctoral student and a supervisor an opportunity to correct misreading.

Criticism without discouraging

Although a doctoral student knows that the evaluation is related to the scientific working, one might still be surprised by the criticism being so touching, even if it were given by the supervisor. After working at the limits, revision suggestions or demands can hurt, and one tends to defend oneself or underestimate these correction suggestions. The more concrete an evaluation is, the easier the criticism is to perceive as feedback that helps to improve the research. At its best, the corrective feedback makes one think: "why didn't I notice this at once". Surprisingly often a doctoral student had also thought of the problems that a supervisor has pointed out.

Both a supervisor and a doctoral student have to be ready to think of various new solutions in the different phases of a dissertation process. Creativity and openness to perspectives or procedures which are not ready immediately and which are changing all the time during the process. Supervising doctoral theses and studying mean constant learning and renewal as well as opening new doors. Often, the new solutions are not made until one masters the traditional and recognized basic solutions, but not just being satisfied with them.

Proficiency
Acknowledging good work

Writing a doctoral thesis is a challenging task. During the process, a doctoral student and supervisor learn to know each other as personalities with distinct characteristics and working methods. A doctoral student is willing to admit several limitations and improvement demands if he or she receives, along with criticism, also positive feedback and appreciation of the well-designed parts of thesis. It is important to realize this because the positive parts of a thesis may easily be ignored as if they were considered obvious. Yet, there is hardly ever too much positive reinforcement and acknowledgement of mastery.

In addition to the positive tone and atmosphere of the interaction, the structure of a supervision conversation should be clear. Students appreciate a professional supervisor who follows the topics through in a structured way, and interacts in a warm and emphatic manner.

It is important that also a doctoral student thinks of thanking the supervisor. If a doctoral student feels of getting help for example from comprehending comments, the time used within his or her thesis, and consultation moments or useful remarks, then the gratefulness would be good to show to a supervisor. The major reward is mutual thanking not only verbally but also in a way that they both feel of being appreciated. It does not guarantee the completion of a thesis but cherishes the special relationship between the supervisor and the doctorate.

The supervision of writing

It is important to emphasize writing when supervising a doctoral thesis. One learns to be a good writer by writing—that is the only way. And writing is the only way of reporting about one's research.

Often, an adequate advice for a doctoral student is the reassurance on how the text is always introductory at the beginning. Hardly anyone is capable of producing complete text at one sitting: the finished text results from several rewritings. If one has a fear of a white paper, one might want to try to ease it by talking about one's thoughts to oneself, recording it, and writing it down.

The phases and solutions related to the progress of the research have to be explained when writing. It is important that a supervisor takes a reader's role and estimates whether the text is understandable to outsiders. The point of the scientific writing is to prevent the text being open to various interpretations, but one should not overestimate a reader's ability to read between the lines either. After several modifications and choices, a writer might consider some things obvious and fails to write these matters. In addition, it would be important to introduce the research phases logically for a reader.

Thus, the interconnectedness of writing and thinking should not be underestimated. Brian Paltridge and Sue Starfield (2008, p. 47) remark this connection felicitously when pointing out how thinking clarifies writing ("How could I know what I am thinking before I see what I write?") and how writing clarifies thinking ("How could I improve my writing before clarifying my thinking?").

Practicing of writing skills never ends: one can always develop and train oneself with others' feedback. There are plentiful guides to write a doctoral thesis (e.g., Bolker, 1998; Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2003; Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Murray & Moore, 2006; Paltridge & Starfield, 2008; Vehviläinen, 2001).

Actions

A researcher might set too high a pressure for him or her. The demands and expectations set on a doctoral thesis may seem overwhelming. A supervisor might come up against mystified and unrealistic views that exaggerate the magnitude of the work.

A supervisor has a special responsibility in the supervision of doctoral theses. One has to consider the progress of a doctoral student's work in the light of the criteria set by the academic society. Sometimes, there seems to be a need to emphasize that a doctoral thesis is not made for a supervisor and a supervisor cannot bend the rules concerning the problems that might occur in a doctoral research. The quality of a doctoral thesis is not

determined by the supervisor's personal criteria, but the thesis has to meet the external criteria set by the academic society, outside the university.

A doctoral student has to be able to trust on a supervisor's opinions when assessing the quality of a thesis. Even when a thesis seems to be ready in a doctoral student's opinion, a supervisor should point out both the strengths and critical parts of the work. Being aware of the risk factors in one's work, it is likely to be easier for a doctorate to wait for the review statements and to tolerate and prepare to the corrections and changes recommended in the statements.

However, it is good to remind a doctorate of the work being never finished: there will be always something to improve. Knowing that after dissertation there will be new chances to research and write, might help making the decision about finishing the work.

The Protective and Supportive Factors

As Figure 1 showed, cloudberries have side leaves that protect and support the fruit to develop and flourish. The leaves are not drawn in the picture by accident but have a special role in the illustration of the supervision of doctoral theses. There are certain factors that shape the elements of supervision that can be seen as these protective leaves (see Figure 2).

First, *the curriculum of doctoral studies* forms the basic guidelines of what is expected from the student and to guarantee that the doctorates include all necessary studies and courses in their degrees so that they can develop as researchers. Fundamentally, the curriculum provides means to enhance will, proficiency, knowledge, and actions by offering a clear presentation of the study requirements in a doctoral degree. The curriculum is also a tool for the supervisor.

In addition, it is good to remember that the process of doctoral studies does not only consist of the supervisor and the doctorate, but happens in a wider communication with *the academic community*. Doctoral seminars held by the supervisor function as the safe and encouraging places to discuss and introduce one's research to other students. This provides a good foundation to attend conferences and seminars worldwide and to participate in scientific discourse with other researchers. At its best, the academic community enhances science by providing insightful criticism, innovative ideas and comments, and collegial support.

Finally, the university offers many kinds of support to doctoral students. *The university services* cover, for example, library services, information technology, methodological guidance etc. These form the necessary practical support that is crucial for successful study processes.
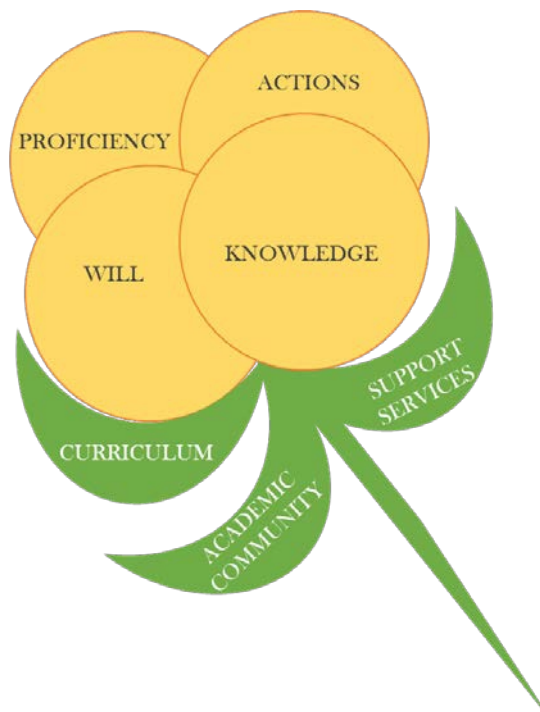
Figure 2. The supportive and protective factors of supervision

Discussion: Caring Supervision

Supervision of doctoral theses takes the supervisor to his or her limits. A supervisor's work contribution is different with every doctoral student. Although, there is not any universal and complete formula or model to supervise, many above-mentioned pedagogical principles are important. Evidently, supervision also means the supervisor's self-reflection, testing of one's limits, and being able to change even supervising methods that he or she has previously found good.

A caring supervisor has to constantly evaluate what he or she is capable of as a supervisor, how to inspire the student to toil and persevere, and to marvel their own abilities (Määttä, 2015). A committed supervisor can find the work the most satisfying and self-fulfilling when realizing the core of supervision relationship. Supervision of doctoral theses fulfills the core features of meaningful and appropriately challenging work allowing plenty of opportunities to develop personally and professionally (e.g., Flint, Kurumada, Fisher, & Zisook, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011).

To conclude, caring supervision can help address the challenges and opportunities the work entails today and in the future. Good supervision pays attention to the supervisor's strengths and weaknesses and those of the doctorate as well. How similar are their cloudberries or how well do they complement each other? Are all the covering leaves positively present and

well employed? Certainly, supervision practices will get new forms all the time, but the core is still the interaction between the supervisor and student, without forgetting the outer factors that contribute to the supervision relationship as described in this article. The illustration introduced in this article aspires to help analyzing the supervision practices and relationships and provide supervisors with concepts to reflect on the emphases in their own way of supervising. What elements are my strong areas as a supervisor and which ones need a little development? The point is also to show that there are many ways of being a good supervisor and that various supervision relationships require different levels of will, action, knowledge, and proficiency. Self-reflection and flexibility are features that help supervisors revise their supervision practices and develop as supervisors toward holistic, caring supervision that aims at quality outcomes without risking student's or supervisor's well-being.

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