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Supervision for independence?

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Introduction

In this report, I reflect upon my UP project concerning supervision of two master thesis students. The aim of my UP project was to supervise the students with a specific purpose on allowing them to build independence. To do so, I informed my supervision practice by insights from research literature about higher education supervision. After the students' exams, I conducted an interview study to investigate their perception of building independence in relation to their thesis work, and the role of them as students and me as supervisor in that process.

The term independence plays an important role in the shared study regulation for MSc and BSc theses at Department of Science, University of Copenhagen. Here, the purpose reads that the MSc thesis should "allow students to demonstrate their ability to work *independently* with an academic topic which is key to the academic profile of the individual MSc programme"[1] (emphasis added). Research literature on supervision in higher education points out that independence often is considered to be a specific trait that students develop during their work with the master thesis (Andersen & Jensen, Reinecker et al. 2019;Manathunga and Goozée, 2007). To support students in living up to this purpose of the master thesis, it is important that we, as supervisors, have an understanding of what independence means, and what it looks like to be independent. Does independence

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[1] https://science.ku.dk/studerende/studieordninger/faelles_sto/faelles-del-eng.pdf p. 20.

mean not needing help at all? If not, what kind of help is legitimate to provide? How can we as supervisors avoid depriving students the opportunity to develop independence when providing them help?

In the Oxford Dictionary, independence is defined as "the freedom to organize your own life, make you own decisions, etc. *without needing help from other people*" (emphasis added). The Danish term for independence is "selvstændighed", which in literal terms translates into something like "self-standing". The Danish lexicon defines selvstændighed as "the property of being able to think, feel and act in accordance with one's own wishes, beliefs and assessments in *relative independence* of governing factors, persons and role demands in the outside world[2]"(emphasis added). As indicated, the two definitions differ regarding their view on the role of external help in independence. The view on external help is of particular relevance from a university pedagogy perspective, since this is exactly what we as supervisors are to provide. The shared study regulation is, however, of little help in terms of providing guidance on how supervisors are to think of and practice their role in relation to students' independence. It specifies that supervision can be given in groups or individually, that information about good scientific practice and plagiarism must be provided[3]. Also, it states that a thesis contract must be developed, which should include agreements on "how often and how supervision is to be carried out, what is expected of the supervisor and the student(s) at supervision meetings, conditions concerning the collection of primary data/experimental work, and general mutual expectations for the working relationship"[4]. The guidance provided for thesis supervisors thus for the most part concern practical matters (e.g. when and how often) and only address university pedagogy matters (e.g. expectations for the working relationship) in highly generic and unspecified terms. In my project, I sought to address the issue of supporting students' in building independence by several means; by asking questions rather than answering questions, by making this role clear in a supervision letter and via meta-communication throughout the students' master thesis process. In these efforts, I drew on insight from the literature on higher education supervision. In what follows, I describe this foundation on which my practice

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[2] https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/selvst%C3%A6ndighed

[3] https://science.ku.dk/studerende/studieordninger/faelles_sto/faelles-del-eng.pdf

[4] https://science.ku.dk/studerende/studieordninger/faelles_sto/faelles-del-eng.pdf p. 20.

was informed followed by a description of the concrete interventions I implemented in my supervision.

Higher education supervision in the research literature

The guidelines for higher education supervision in research literature often describe the role of the supervisor as one whose primary role is to ask questions rather than provide answers (e.g. Andersen and Jensen, 2007; Manathunga and Goozée, 2007; Molly and Kobayashi, 2014; Rienecker et al., 2019; Wichmann-Hansen and Wirenfeldt Jensen, 2015). Wichmann-Hansen and Jensen (2019) distinguish between four main types of questions that supervisors can ask, and which may be helpful at different phases of supervision sessions and for different purposes in thesis supervision. These questions are clarifying, examining, challenging, and evaluating questions. *Clarifying* question inquire students' needs and expectations and are particularly relevant for the supervisor to ask in the beginning of a supervision session. They may help both student and supervisor in developing shared insights into the students' situation. *Examining* questions are questions that inquire students' motivations and argumentations for making specific choices, and enable the supervisor to understanding the students' knowledge and understanding. *Challenging* questions are somewhat critical in nature, in that they seek to prompt students to challenge their own assumptions and to consider alternative actions. *Evaluating* questions are often posed at the end of a supervision session and seeks to make the most important take-away points from a conversation. In my supervision of the two master students, these different questions provided a source of inspiration in terms of how I could maintain the role of primarily asking questions throughout the different phases in a supervision meeting.

Supervising by asking questions can be an effective way of ensuring that choices in relation to the master thesis are made by students, and not by the supervisor. There are however different objects on which to supervise in a master thesis, and Reinecker et al. (2019) distinguish between supervision of students in relation to product, process and form. Supervision in relation to *product* concerns argumentation, choice of problem, choice of methods and data in the written thesis, *form* concerns formalities and language and handling of reference, whereas *process* concerns issues related project management of the thesis. Reinecker et al. (2019) argue that while it is legitimate for supervisors to give advice in relation to *form*, concrete ad-

vice in relation to *product* and *process* are not legitimate, and risk depriving students the opportunity of developing independence.

For many students, the principles for supervisors listed above may not be exactly what they expect. On the contrary, supervisors often are thought of as experts in the eyes of students and as someone who should be capable of providing solid answers to students' questions (Manatunga & Goozée, 2007). Following the principles for supervisions described above would therefore benefit by being accompanied by an alignment of expectations. One of the tools to align expectations between supervisors and students is meta-communicating about the form and style of supervision. This can be done in a formal supervisor letter and in more informal dialogues throughout the process (Reinecket et al. 2019). Below, I describe how I made use of the resources described above to support the two students in developing independence.

Intervention

I began my supervision of the two students by preparing and sending out a supervisor letter, in which I sought to communicate my expectations to students as being responsible for both product and process in the thesis. I also made it clear that I considered my role as to ask question that could help them in critically challenge and further their own thinking, rather than being an expert that provide the right answers (see appendix 1). I did not use the terminology product, process and form, but I emphasized that I would provide feedback on both their written work, the management of the thesis as a project, and in relation to formalities. In the letter, I also stated that we would discuss the information in the letter at our first meeting.

It was my goal that the students should be allowed to make their own decisions on all matters in relation to their thesis. It was their responsibility to define the problem statement, find and choose adequate theoretical frameworks, search for and identify relevant related literature, conduct the analysis and write up discussion and conclusion. Prior to supervision sessions, I took great care in considering what types of questions I could ask the students to help them build independence in relation to process and product. I expected that the two students would find it difficult to accept the premise that I would be asking questions they were to answer, and not the other way around. Therefore, I prepared strategies to revert specific student question by posing a counter-questions. E.g. when a students would

ask specific questions like "is my method section strong enough"?, I would respond with clarifying and challenging questions such as: "what do you think makes a method section "strong" "? "Do you believe that your methods section lives up to this criteria you just mentioned"? "Why/why not, and what do you think you could do to ensures that it does"?

Data collection

I documented my experiences from the intervention via reflection notes and student interviews conducted after their exam. In the notes, I documented my experience of how the supervised students approached me in the role of being their supervisor, e.g. through the questions they asked me, how I considered their level of independence and how I could support them in developing it. Moreover, I interviewed the two students online after they had defended their thesis. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into the students' awareness of the importance of building and showing independence in their master thesis, and their views on our roles as student and supervisor in relation building and demonstrating independence. To collect information about this, I for example asked the students about what ways of approaching and using their supervisor they considered to be appropriate, and what they expected from themselves and their supervisor during their master thesis. During the interview, I encouraged them to provide examples from our supervision sessions to illustrate their points.

After the interviews, I listened to the two audio files and transcribed the parts that were of relevance for this project. In what follows, I highlight the main insights from these interviews, which relate to the students' perception of independence and their description as the supervisor as someone who provides answers rather than asking questions. To conclude, I reflect upon how insights from this project will inform my future ways of practicing the role as a supervisor in higher education contexts.

Results from interviews

Both of the students were well aware of the requirement of building and showing independence, and they agreed that the responsibility for both process, product and form in the master thesis relies on the student. At their own initiative, the students distinguished between independence in relation

to the process, form and product of the master thesis. They also argued that the roles of student and supervisor differ slightly in these elements of the master thesis. In all elements, they emphasized that it was clear to them that independence was required, but that it was legitimate to expect clearer and more concrete guidance in relation to format issues (e.g. do we need to use a template front page? How many pages do we have at our disposal for the thesis?). Moreover, both of them mentioned that the master thesis genre, at least in the beginning, was not entirely clear to them, and that they needed guidance from me in getting to know what is expected from such a piece of work. This is exemplified in the quote below:

"*Although I am familiar with studying and already had knowledge of the topic of my master thesis before I began the project, it's the first time I write a project like this, and therefore I need guidance and supervision in learning the genre. I thought of you as important in demystifying that*".

In relation to the role of the supervisor concerning product and process, they referred to the supervisor's responsibility in overall terms as to "provide support" in these aspects of the thesis. During the interview, I asked the students whether my style of supervision had lived up to these expectations, and I invited them to provide examples of specific situations that did/did not meet these expectations. One such example is illustrated in the quote below:

"*I am responsible for defining the problem statement, which I did, but your job was to help me improve it, which we did by discussing weaknesses in it. Afterwards, it was my responsibility to figure out what methods to use to study it. So, I felt that it was me who had to make decisions about the study design*"

In this way, the students' views aligned with my intentions of ensuring that the responsibility of both process and product were theirs. Interestingly, the students however had different views on how I as a supervisor should help in them in living up to this responsibility than I intended. When I asked the students to provide examples of how their independence in relation to process and form came to show, one student for example uttered:

"*When I asked for help in finding literature, I did not expect that you would find the literature for me, but that you would help by suggesting key words to use and data bases to search in*".

The utterance above is a typical answer from both of the students in the sense that it defines the student/supervisor relation in terms of what *questions* students legitimately can ask, and what type of *responses* it is reasonable to expect from the supervisor. There was not a single example in the

interviews in which the students referred to the supervisor as someone who asks questions. This was surprising, given I had communicated this style of supervision early on via the supervisor letter and sought to mention it recurrently at our supervision meetings. Often, the students' questions at supervision meetings sought my approval or confirmation that they indeed were on the "right track". These ways of approaching me as a supervisor was not reflecting independence, and accepting their questions by merely answering them could have deprived them the opportunity to build independence. An important strategy in my supervision therefore became to detect such type of questions and reverting them by asking counter-questions. The students generally accepted this type of response, albeit initially with some frustration that I did not answer their otherwise clear question. While they did not change their style of asking questions, their skepticism and frustration towards my counter-questions slowly and over time became more seldom. None of the students however stopped asking questions and seeking for very specific expert advice.

Reflection of future supervision practices

Given that I had emphasized that I considered my role as a supervisor as to ask questions, it was highly surprising to me that the students continued to ask questions and that their ways of talking about the supervisor role in the interview assumed the supervisor to provide expert-like answers to their questions. As indicated in the reflection note in appendix 2, I over time got the impression that the students were developing independence. The experiences reported above indicates that the two students might have developed independence during their thesis. Paradoxically, this more likely happened in spite rather than because of their ways of approaching me as a supervisor. Had I accepted the role of an expert, it is likely that I could have made most of the decisions for the students. This however only became evident to me in the process of writing this report. My way of continuously meta-communicating with the students about the supervision was to end all supervision meetings with informal dialogue-based evaluations about the supervision. Now that I am more aware of the risks related to students' asking questions, I will be more attentive towards the types of questions asked by the students' in-situ, and engage in meta-communication when I see signs of students that approach me as an expert. I will also more openly communicate the importance of independence to students, and engage in a

discussion about how to support them in building independence. Throughout my UP project, I did not specifically communicate to the students that they were the "objects" of an intervention related to building their independence. In hindsight, I find that there could have been benefits of them knowing this. This could likely have made it more natural to have meta-discussions about what independence looks like, and whether our collaborations as students/supervisors in fact were supporting them in building independence.

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A Supervision letter

Dear student,

I the following text I describe how I consider the supervisor role, my expectations to you as a student, and practical matters such as how much time I expect to spend preparing for our meetings. At our first meeting, we will discuss the information below, so that we can agree on how to establish a supervision format that suits your needs.

The framework

As a rule, I plan to spend approximately one hour preparing for our supervision meetings. This time is typically spent reading written work sent by, which can be in the form of drafts for sections in the thesis, plans for data collection, or your current thoughts on where you are now in the process, and where you should go the next few weeks. The topic for supervision is up to you to decide, but I would like you to send me a maximum of 10 pages of text no later than 48 hours before our meeting. You can send it to my email andreas_tamborg@ind.ku.dk. In this email, I would also like you to include brief information about what you sent me and a suggestion for an agenda at our meeting. I would like to end all supervision meetings with a short evaluation of our collaboration, and whether we should change anything in relation to form or style.

As indicated above, I consider my role as a supervisor to provide support in relation to both the quality of arguments in your written work, handling the project management aspects of writing a thesis and issues related to formality. The more open you are about current challenges, the better I am able to provide support. Therefore, I highly recommend that we discuss progress (and lack thereof) in our supervision meetings.

Functions and relations

It is important for me stress that I do not consider the supervisor as an expert that provides concrete advice and actionable guidelines. An important part of writing a thesis is to build independence, and independence is not build by implementing advice given by others. Therefore, I consider my role as to help you in challenging your own thinking by asking you questions. This also means that I expect you to be prepared to communicate your current challenges and to reflect yourself on how you could go about tackling them. At our supervision meeting, I will help you critically assess you own current ideas, which will enable you to better understand and argue for you choices. In relation for formalities, I will however provide concrete advise to help you ensure that your thesis lives up to general formalities that apply to academic writing.

Text-feedback

As described above, I do not limit my supervision to concern the written product of the thesis, but offer supervision in relation to all aspects of the project (disposition, literature research, data collection, data analysis, and so forth). It is up to you to decide what aspects of the thesis that are the most important for you to discuss at our meetings.

I have no requirements of how complete your writing should be before we can discuss at a supervision meeting, and I am happy to discuss both early drafts and more complete text. Moreover, I am fine by reading the same part of the project more than one if you feel that this is needed.

I hope that the information gives you an idea of my style of supervision, and the expectations that I have for you as a student. I look very much forward to meeting you in person, where I will be happy to discuss the information in this letter in greater detail.

Yours sincerely,

Andreas L. Tamborg

B Example of reflection note

It has now been more than a months since I started supervising [name of student]. She received my supervision letter well, and at our first meeting it seemed that my description of the supervisor role and expectations to her was not far what she had experienced earlier. From the beginning, she however asked me very specific question, and often asked for my approval and confirmation that what she has written is "good enough" or "correct". As I planned for, my response to these questions was to as counter questions e.g.: what do you mean by good enough? What is good? And so on, which she in the beginning was not too fond of. Along the way, she seems to realize that she is capable of coming up with her own answers, and that the questions I ask her in fact help her to do so. It seems like things are going in the right direction in terms of independence with [name of student].