

Coach, Consultant or Mother: Supervisors' views on quality in the supervision of bachelor theses

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ABSTRACT *This study is about what supervisors perceive as crucial aspects of quality in supervising students writing their bachelor theses. The questions on quality are related to a scientific perspective, a learning perspective, a societal perspective and a social perspective. The study demonstrates that the criteria on science varied considerably, despite the supervisors being in a single discipline area. There is also marked variation in views of the relation between science and practice and different supervisors expressed variations in their conception of competence. Furthermore, supervisors perceive their own role as senior researchers or senior consultants, and sometimes also in the supporting role of 'deputy mother'. The conclusion is that the supervisors seem to have a marked lack of understanding of the differences between them in undertaking their role. A main reason for this seems to be the lack of a common theoretical frame of reference. Due to a lack of communication, possible problems related to different perceptions of understanding the task may remain hidden or at least be neglected and underestimated.*

Keywords: competence; quality assurance; teachers; constructionism; undergraduate education

Introduction

The supervision of students writing their bachelor theses may be done in different ways depending on the supervisor's knowledge and personal traits. It also depends on the supervisor's understanding of the supervisory process. Some supervisors regard their role as that of coaches, whereas others act like consultants working within strict limits. Some other supervisors take responsibility for the total situation in a way similar to parenthood (i.e. a surrogate mother). Such differences concerning the role might indicate further differences in goals and priorities. Earlier studies of supervisors' perceptions of their task have shown marked differences between different supervisors (Goodlad *et al.*, 1990; Yager, 1996). A somewhat similar study, although focusing especially on supervisors' perceptions of the

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notion of research, has recently been conducted by Kiley and Mullins (2005) with the purpose of identifying different views as to what may characterize good research.

The purpose of this study is not primarily to find different views of what may characterize good research but to identify variations between different supervisors' understanding of their task when supervising students writing their bachelor theses. The study, of supervisors in a department of business administration, is based on questions about what they perceive as crucial aspects of quality in the supervisory situation.

Quality is a word with varying meanings depending on the user and the situation. In the supervision of bachelor theses Andersson and Persson (2002) suggested the use of several dimensions to describe it. One dimension of quality in supervision may be related to a scientific perspective, for example, familiarity with the academic demands on theory and method. Another dimension may be related to a learning perspective, referring to the pedagogic purpose of the task. Yet another dimension may be related to a societal perspective, mainly referring to students' employability. From the students' point of view there may also be a dimension related to a social perspective, related to the degree of service and consideration for different students' needs.

The task may be understood in different ways and different supervisors judge quality differently depending on their perception of the task. From a theoretical point of view this means that individual understanding is based on an interpretative, phenomenological perspective (Schütz, 1976). An understanding of the task is then regarded as a basic pattern that develops through experience-based personal learning processes in which dialogue with others is an important element (Marton *et al.*, 1977; Sandberg, 2000).

In this report the notion of quality has been linked to an understanding of the task and the focus is on examining different ways of perceiving the task of supervising students. This means that a supervisor's view of scientific ideals and knowledge, together with experiences of earlier events, are interpreted in an individual sense-making process. Sandberg (2000) used the word competence to denote this combined understanding and sense-making of knowledge, skills, experiences and situational adaptations. Competence may, however, be understood in three different ways. The first concerns the ability to handle separate details where the main task is to optimize individual qualities. The second is the attempt to handle the combined functions of the separate details and the task is to optimize the combined quality. The third is an attempt to handle the combined function from a certain external or moral perspective. This perspective may, for example, mean optimization of the combined functions from an employer's perspective (i.e. customer value). Sandberg maintained that quality may be developed within each view but they may simultaneously be regarded as a hierarchical order of competencies.

There are, however, obstacles to development because competence to handle separate details might, for example, lead to a disregard of other more complex combinations or the adoption of external perspectives; what Argyris (1990) defined as 'skilled incompetence'. Changes are also difficult to introduce because then the underlying assumptions have to be acknowledged and critically examined (see, for example, Cochrane, 1972; Freire, 1972).

Collective competence emerges when several persons have to cooperate because cooperation demands some common perception of the task at large. A way to accomplish such a common perception may be through socialization. Therefore, collective competence may primarily be developed through continuous communication and through a social climate where communication takes place, i.e. the local work climate (Hansson, 2003).

Understanding and reflection are often created and transformed in discussions between organization members in their daily work in what may be defined as 'complex responsive

processes' (Stacey, 2001). The exchange of views between people usually takes the form of narratives, often distributed as gossip and small talk (Czarniawska, 1998). Such narratives are part of the sense-making processes. Those processes, however, depend on the kind of work climate that the organization offers (Tsoukas, 1997). The work climate is formed by the more general organizational culture, i.e. the set of norms and values that are developed within an organization. A part of the cultural pattern is also how people within the organization treat each other and how they reorganise themselves into different groups that may lead to the development of subcultures (Martin, 2002; Corvellec & Holmberg, 2004).

Method

The study was conducted within a department for business administration. The intention was that all 11 supervisors of bachelor theses in the department should be included in the survey but unfortunately two did not take part. The questions were based on a number of dimensions of quality taken from Andersson and Persson (2002) and related to science, learning, social and societal quality. The questions on scientific quality were about the supervisors' views on contemporary research and scientific stance, whereas learning quality concerned views on the purpose of the students' learning process, i.e. what they were supposed to have learned from their work. Questions on social quality concerned the supervisors' view on their relations with students, while societal quality concerned their views on the expectations of future employers of the students.

The interviews were edited from tape recordings as narratives that were subject to text analysis in order to separate variations in the views of the different supervisors. Using this method, relatively small differences in nuances might become somewhat over-emphasized and thereby be regarded as more significant than they actually are. To guard against substantial deviation from the interviewed persons' own views they had the opportunity to make corrections.

Supervisors' Views on Quality

In the following the questions related to scientific, learning, societal and social quality are dealt with separately. For each question an account of the supervisors' answers followed by some comments about the implications of their perceptions is presented. To differentiate the different supervisors they have been given pseudonyms referring to what seemed to be their most salient characteristic. They are named Problemist, Rhetorist, Theorist, Methodist, Holist, Practician, Separator, Activator and Consultant.

Scientific Quality

Most of the supervisors maintained that the students' theses must indicate insight and knowledge of scientific methods. There were, however, some differences about the kind of knowledge that should be demonstrated. At least one of the supervisors (Methodist) regarded familiarity with statistics and quantitative methods as a requirement. Other supervisors held the view that the students must have some general methodological knowledge. For instance, Consultant argued that the assessment of theses should be made in relation to handiwork, because most of the students would, in their future work, be occupied with practical investigations and report writing. Therefore, some more general methodological knowledge would be important. Separatist advocated the view that the students ought to be

separated into two groups depending on whether their aim was to become involved in research or whether they were planning to be engaged in more practical problem-solving. Of the two remaining supervisors who primarily mentioned the importance of method, Activist also emphasized the students' capability to actively search for knowledge and to develop an inquisitive mind. However, Problemist emphasized the importance of the students' ability to define and analyse problems, besides a knowledge of methodology.

Three of the supervisors regarded a knowledge of methodology to be their top priority. However, they maintained that the ability to use theory would be the prime criterion of scientific quality. To Theorist scientific quality implied a fundamentally theoretical ability together with an ability for reflection and critical evaluation of empirical findings and analysis. A similar view was held by Rhetorist, although he also emphasized the need for the students' theses to show convincing argumentation based on theory and also to be interesting and creative. Practician was less hopeful about the students' ability to produce thought-provoking results, but he maintained that the students would need some understanding of the phenomena studied and what lies behind them. Finally, one of the supervisors, Holist, strongly emphasized wholeness and pointed out that all the parts of a thesis are equally important to generate an operational totality. Some emphasis was also put on the necessity to be critical and reflective.

All the supervisors teach the same type of scientific method. The difference between supervisors is mainly that one group perceives method to be the very core of an academic education while the other group teaches the same method mainly because they perceive that it is expected of them, although it is in conflict with their view of what students ought to be taught. That so many supervisors perceive method to be synonymous with scientific quality probably has to do with the expressed idea that in a thesis it is the method chapter that transforms a student's paper into something academic or scientific.

From the interview data it becomes evident that there is a relatively large variation between the supervisors' views on the core of science. Four of the supervisors' answers indicate that they primarily associate scientific quality with theory and reflection. However, most of the supervisors stressed a knowledge of methodology, by which they mainly seemed to mean quantitative methods. With quantitative methods especially, analysis is simplified, because it is mainly a result of statistical calculations. Clear criteria on what is right and wrong diminish any uncertainty in the evaluation of the work and also facilitate the pedagogic mission. This means that for most parts of the students' work process there are fairly unambiguous rules to teach and it is relatively simple to find out if the rules have been followed.

With qualitative methods there may be pedagogic problems, both in supervision and in judging the results. This is because qualitative methods do not have the same strict rule systems as quantitative methods and this makes them more problematic to teach. Especially, the way to conduct the analysis may be uncertain because there are no unambiguous rules for processing empirical material or for judging the results. This might lead to uncertainty and to large variations between different judges. In the absence of a common theoretical frame of reference, different supervisors may perceive different aspects of the work as important.

Learning Quality

There turned out to be three different views on the purpose of the students' learning process. One group of four supervisors (Problemist, Methodist, Holist and Theorist) considered the purpose to be the realization of a preparatory research education as the foundation for a master's degree. Another group of two supervisors (Practician and Consultant)

stressed the need to provide solid base knowledge in practical investigation activities of the kind most students will be occupied with in their future work. They felt that in the student's future work situation it would be important to reflect on how the phenomena studied will affect society at large and to be able to show some practical use or application; 'otherwise it will just be an academic product for the sake of the academy'.

A third group of supervisors (Rhetorist, Activator and Separator) regarded the main purpose to be that the students learn to investigate problems in an independent way and that they have some opportunity to try out the different stages of an investigation or a research project. Experience through 'learning by doing' was considered an important factor. However, they felt that this experience could be met through both theoretical and practical types of work. It is important for students who are to be engaged in research in the future to be familiar with the rules and traditions of science. For students who will be occupied in business firms in the future it is important to have some knowledge of the work process of general investigations.

The perception of learning quality is related to the purpose of thesis work. The supervisors' views on the purpose may be divided into three different groups. There is one group of supervisors who regard the purpose to be the teaching of research, another group who maintain that the purpose ought to be the teaching of general and practical investigative work and a third group who maintain that it ought to be possible to cover both purposes. There seems to be some kind of ideological difference regarding this issue which was, for example, demonstrated by some who mentioned 'practically oriented investigations' with distinct contempt in their voices. It was mentioned as a warning example of what might happen if the academic requirements were not upheld. Some implicit perception of what is meant by 'research' seems to be behind the different opinions and that perception seems to be incompatible with an equally implicit view of what characterizes a 'practically oriented investigation'.

The implicitly conflicting views may emanate from the different ways of conceiving the discipline of economics. Economics is both a science and a practice, as are, for example, the disciplines of medicine and didactics. The difference is that the purpose of a science is to generate some general knowledge, whereas the purpose of a practice is to bring about something morally commendable, such as, for example, improving health, learning or the ability to economize with limited resources (Scudder & Bishop, 1990). The double roles mean that a supervisor may focus on either of them.

Societal Quality

All the supervisors thought that most of the likely employers would have certain expectations regarding the students' knowledge and skills. Some supervisors (Problemist, Consultant and Separator) maintained that for some potential employers, for example, chartered accountants, a preparatory research education would be adequate as it takes an ability in theoretical thinking to make a career as an accountant. For other lines of economic education these supervisors thought that the distance between education and practical work was far too great. However, Separator stated that most of the likely employers would probably have gone through the same process themselves and therefore might be tolerant of the academic jargon.

The other supervisors did not find any correspondence between an education aimed at research and employers' expectations. Theorist, Practician and Rhetorist held the view that both future employers and the students probably expected much more practice in

investigative techniques than in research work. Therefore, it is important to give the thesis at least some practical connection. Activator, Methodist and Holist pointed out that in most business firms research was generally regarded as something difficult, inaccessible and very strange. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary to let the students write two different reports, one academic and the other with business people in mind. Holist expressed his view that 'the companies often just want a quick report without so much of what they regard as academic drivel'.

Perceptions of societal quality mainly concern the relations between future employers and the students. All the supervisors seemed to be convinced that the knowledge imparted to the students through their thesis work was, in general, not regarded as relevant for the students in their future occupations. Some supervisors suggested that the thesis work was probably not regarded as totally negative, at least not by those employers who had once gone through the same ritual themselves, because they knew that the purpose was to legitimize the academic degree. That the special academic demands are regarded by some employers as 'academic drivel' is not something directly conveyed to the students. However, the message is unintentionally conveyed through the recommendation to sometimes write two versions, one with and the other without the 'academic drivel'.

Some supervisors had been thinking about separating the thesis work into different groups depending on the students' future choice of occupation. Separatist, especially, had a firm view on the subject and he argued for two different lines of thesis work. Moreover, several supervisors also expressed a general desire to play down 'the scientific' bit and instead emphasize that the main issue is 'to develop such knowledge and change processes as comply with what is common everywhere in working life'. However, this view was clearly put in as wishful thinking and not even the speaker seemed to regard it as a serious proposal.

Social Quality

Regarding the responsibility of handling social relations in the supervisory situation, there were also marked differences between supervisors in this area. Some thought that they had a wide responsibility for what happened within a group of students, whereas other supervisors emphasized that an essential part of the examination was that the students demonstrate an ability to work independently. One group of supervisors (Problemist, Methodist, Practitioner and Consultant) argued that in the supervisory situation social relations are something that the supervisor should not bother with or be expected to handle. They maintained that the students should be able to demonstrate that they can take responsibility for their own situation. Consultant maintained that the students have a certain number of hours at their disposal for supervision and it is their responsibility to use this resource wisely. 'The supervisor is to be regarded as a resource and the students have to learn that the resource is not endless. When the students start their working life, there is no mother to run to.'

Other supervisors seemed to have a more moderate view of the distribution of responsibility, regarding it as a joint commitment. Rhetoric, Separatist and Holist emphasized that in the actual supervisory situation it is important to have mutual confidence in the discussions and that it may be up to the supervisor to intervene if a group does not function in the way that it should. However, they underlined the need to be restrained in their involvement, to avoid taking over the students' work and responsibility. Some supervisors (Activator and Theorist) seemed to take on substantial responsibility. They both found that the supervisory situation promoted social relations. They considered themselves to be responsible both for

helping the students to move on and for helping with any social problems that emerged between group members.

Perceptions of social quality in the supervisory process mainly concerns the relations between participants. There are in principle three different views. One group of supervisors regard themselves as consultants, i.e. a resource that the students may use if they want to. These supervisors also believe that there is no actual need for social relations between the students and their supervisor because 'they are supposed to be adults and able to sort out their own problems'. It may, in some cases, also be a conscious strategy to get the students accustomed to independent working because 'when they get a job there will be no mother to come running to'. Another group of supervisors primarily regard thesis work as a joint responsibility and the supervisor as a trainer or coach, responsible for even the work climate. They maintain that a component in the supervisors' responsibility is to keep the students going and also to help out when the students experience difficulties in their relations with each other. Finally, there is a group of supervisors who regard supervising as more of a personal challenge and become very actively involved in the work process. They take on the main responsibility for the accomplishment of good quality theses and offer a great deal of help and support.

All the supervisors emphasized, however, that they demanded that the students demonstrate an ability to work independently. At least some of the supervisors were aware that the demands for independence together with the rather diffuse demands of a 'scientific approach' tended to be frustrating and possibly lead to exaggerated docility. The pronounced demand for independence seemed, however, to have some definite limits because several supervisors mentioned, as a matter of course, that students should be given enough help to obtain a pass. However, they should not be given enough help to obtain a pass with distinction in their theses.

Summary of the Interviews

The summary of the interviews discussed above has focused on key words and sentences interpreted as significant. This course of action means that in reality what may be minor differences in nuance may come out as substantial divergences in the text. Some caution in interpretation is therefore recommended, especially regarding the summary in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Summary of the supervisors' principal viewpoints

Supervisor	Scientific quality	Learning quality	Societal quality	Social quality
Methodist	Method	Research	Mismatch	Students
Consultant	Method	Practice	Match for some	Students
Separator	Method	Research/practice	Match for some	Mutual
Activator	Active search, method	Research/practice	Mismatch	Supervisor
Problemist	Problematizing, method	Research	Match for some	Students
Theorist	Theory, reflection	Research	Mismatch	Supervisor
Rhetorist	Theory, argumentation	Research/practice	Mismatch	Mutual
Practician	Theory, understanding	Practice	Mismatch	Students
Holist	Wholeness, reflection	Research	Mismatch	Mutual

General Implications

Science Versus Practice in Undergraduate Studies

According to the university statutes the aim of the undergraduate degree is to foster independent and critical judgement and to develop the students' ability for information exchange at a scientific level. These statutes are in very general terms. As pointed out by Högberg and Eriksson (1998), there are no direct demands for science education or research training, only an ability for information exchange. The law allows interpretations that may lead to substantial differences and to uncertainty for both supervisors and students.

The interviews with the supervisors demonstrated that the criteria on science varied considerably, although all supervisors would have been forcefully indoctrinated in research education as part of their Ph.D. degree. There was also a marked variation in the views of the relation between science and practice, even if some of the supervisors seemed to apprehend an implicit demand for some (undefined) demand for science.

Although there may be a mixture of both practice and science in most disciplines, this mixture might cause more tensions in some disciplines because of the way they are organized. The study took place in a department of business administration where several different fields of knowledge are grouped together in a multidisciplinary mixture. Some fields, like leadership and organization theory, have their roots in sociology and are based on social concepts of rationality. Other fields, like accounting and finance, have their roots in economic calculation and are based on instrumental concepts of rationality. This meant that there might be a greater inbuilt tension between different concepts of rationality than in, for example, a department of pedagogy. From this point of view it seems that the framework based on four dimensions presupposes a certain degree of homogeneity based on some similar concept of rationality.

Different Conceptions of Social Roles

The interviews showed substantial variations between different supervisors regarding the relations between supervisors and students. Some supervisors showed a strict attitude, viewing themselves as consultants, whereas others viewed themselves as coaches or, even more directly, in what seemed to be some kind of parental role. The individual sense-making processes seem to polarize the supervisors' views of the prime task to be either to educate researchers or train consultants. Simultaneously, supervisors perceive their own role as either senior researchers or senior consultants, and sometimes in a supporting role of 'deputy mother'.

The supervisors mainly had a firm idea of their role in collaboration with students and, apart from the 'deputy mothers', they all tended to adopt a challenging attitude. This over-emphasis on the challenge was also noted as a common phenomenon by Spillett and Moisiejewicz (2004). In their study they conceptualized the supervisors' roles as support roles and challenge roles and they maintained that there must be a balance between them. Actually, McAlpine and Weiss (2000) maintain that the balance and quality of the collaboration process between supervisor and student is as important as the knowledge generation.

Communications, Social Work Climate and Organizational Competence

From the start it was expected that the study should demonstrate differences between supervisors, in agreement with other studies such as those of Yager (1996) and Goodlad

et al. (1990). However, what is more unexpected is that the supervisors seem to have a marked lack of understanding of their differences. A main reason for this seems to be the lack of a common theoretical frame of reference. However, a lack of understanding tends to result in polarization, where each person uses his/her own perception of competence to define other people's actions as tokens of lacking competence (Martin, 2002). Through such a polarization the combined organizational competence tends to be diminished.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the development of organizational competence puts certain demands on the social work climate. Primarily, there are two interacting factors influencing the work climate. One factor is the extent to which the work climate is based on attitudes towards dissidents, i.e. whether there is a general attitude of acceptance and permissiveness or whether there is an attitude of intolerance and condemnation. The other factor is the degree of spontaneous contact and communication between most of the members of the organization (Martin, 2002). Through a lack of communication, possible problems related to different perception of understanding the task may remain hidden or at least be neglected and underestimated. It is almost self-evident that conflicts arise in such situations and that these conflicts may successively worsen the social work climate and thereby impair organizational competence.

In an organization where there is homogeneity in the perception of rationality it may be advantageous to try to reduce the variation between supervisors, for example through joint seminars and the use of multiple supervisors at the same time. Both supervisors and students might learn about the differences and supervisors could learn from each other. However, even in homogeneous organizations there may be problems, at least for the students. For instance, a study by Bourner and Hughes (1991) indicated that having two or three supervisors tends to result in conflicting advice, fragmentation of supervisory responsibilities and a lack of overall perspective. In organizations with multiple rationalities these kinds of problems may be even more pronounced. To reduce the variation and to impose unity in a multiple rationality organization might disturb the foundations of its multiple rationalities. Furthermore, in order to develop quality and competence in any organization it seems more appropriate to provide for an understanding and possible acceptance of the differences, rather than trying to reduce them.

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