

## Researching online supervision

The need for a “torn” methodology

**Søren S.E. Bengtsen**

*is assistant professor at the Centre for Teaching Development and Digital Media, Aarhus University. His main fields of research include higher education research, educational philosophy, and qualitative research methods.*

**Helle Mathiasen**

*is professor at the Department of Science Education, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her research covers media and net-based supported teaching and education, educational sociology, and quantitative and qualitative research methods.*

### Abstract

Online supervision and the use of digital media in supervisory dialogues is a fast increasing practice in higher education today. However, the concepts in our pedagogical repertoire often reflect the digital tools used for supervision purposes as either a prolongation of the face-to-face contact, or a poor substitution of such. This one-sidedness on the conceptual level makes it challenging to empirically study the deeper implications digital tools have for the supervisory dialogue. Drawing on phenomenology and systems theory we argue that we need new concepts in qualitative methodology that allow us to research the digital tools on their own premises as autonomous things in themselves, possessing an ontological creativity of their own. In order for qualitative research to match the ontological nature of digital tools we conclude the article by formulating three criteria of a ‘torn’ methodology that makes room for new approaches to researching online supervision at the university.

**Keywords** Qualitative research methods, phenomenology, systems theory, educational philosophy, creativity, higher education

### **Digital tools researched as things in themselves**

In higher education today there is a heavy increase in the use of online supervision on student assignments. We argue that we need a new and more creative qualitative research methodology that enables us to get a better grasp on the conditions for supervisory dialogues taking place through digital software, which do not abide the same laws as face-to-face supervision. In online communication supervisors use digital software such as Skype, Google Hangout, Google Docs and Email correspondence often by a review track in attached Word documents. As pointed out in the literature on online counseling the digital platforms or tools used to a large extent determine the conditions and boundaries for the supervisory dialogue (Evans 2009; Goss & Anthony 2003; Jones & Stokes 2009; Suler 2004; Suler 2008). As Suler points out the different modalities of communication related to the particular digital tool “differ in sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle ways that makes each a unique psychological environment.” (Suler 2004: 19). As pointed out by Max van Manen and Catherine Adams (2009) and Norm Friesen (2011; 2002) the digital tools applied not only co-define the conditions for the communication between supervisor and student, they also, so to speak, assume a life of their own and play back at the people using them.

When researching this interplay between persons and digital tools in supervision and counseling contexts there is a strong tradition for using the term “online presence” since what is good etiquette differs in face-to-face and online communication. Online, the presence of the participants, often defined as tone and style of the communication (Evans 2009; Jones & Stokes 2009; Friesen 2011), may be experienced as more frank or even aggressive due to “miscommunication accentuated by the lack of verbal tone and visual clues” (Bellafiore et al 2004: 210). However, in the notion of online presence, the focus is set on how supervisors and students present themselves vicariously through the digital tools applied, and the digital tools themselves can in this way be said to be reduced to handmaids or hired hands for the persons involved in the dialogue. We argue that the digital tools should be researched as things in themselves in order for us to understand more fully the ways online supervisory dialogues make up a pedagogical phenomenon different to face-to-face supervision.

To that purpose we argue that the American philosopher and phenomenologist Graham Harman's concept of "tool-being" (Harman 2002) is useful in this endeavor. Harman's object oriented phenomenology, which studies the intentionality of things, and his notion of a "weird" philosophy (Harman 2010; Harman 2005) can help qualitative method getting a new footing in the study of the conditions for the online supervisory dialogue. Together with Harman we draw on Niklas Luhmann's understanding of autopoiesis (Luhmann 1992; Luhmann; 1995) in systems, which mark out digital tools as autonomous communicative "beings" compared to their human counterparts. Finally, we link Harman and Luhmann's perspectives to the meaning of creativity in qualitative research. Creativity can in this way be understood as the research method's weird or "torn" element; its paradoxical strain to embrace in digital software what it itself does not understand, and to give words to what is essentially otherwise than (human) being (Levinas 2000) and otherwise than face-to-face contact. Hence, in this article we use online supervision as a case of a phenomenon that demands, or calls for, a certain form of creativity in order to be further explored and understood on its own terms. Creativity will conclusively be shown to affect and inform qualitative research methods not because of its aesthetical qualities, but because of its *ontological* qualities. Creativity on an ontological level means that we should take serious the independent being of software programs and their power, as autonomous systems, to surprise us, fascinate us, but also to disturb our own form of being. This form of ontological creativity has central implications for future qualitative research methods.

### What is "torn" methodology?

Based on Harman's object-oriented phenomenology it can be argued that each digital platform assumes a life of its own, and that the supervisory dialogue in this way becomes a pedagogical world in itself encapsulated within the communication by means of the specific digital tool. Based on Harman the digital tools used for supervision should be researched not as "the triumph either of practical activity over theoretical abstraction, or of the network of signs over the ever unpopular 'things in themselves'" (Harman 2002: 1), on the contrary the "tool-analysis (...) gives birth to an ontology of *objects themselves*." (ibid.). According to Harman, a digital tool, or an object

as he also would call it, can be described as “a box of surprises, never fully catalogued by the other objects of the world.” (Harman 2005: 78-79), and Harman points out that “What lies behind all events are inscrutable tool-beings or substances lying in some sort of still-undetermined vacuum.” (ibid.). Withdrawing partly into their own dark corridors of existence, tool-beings attain a “weird” character as they always to some degree slip our grasp and comprehension. In Harman’s sense this slipping and sliding away is exactly what gives an object its particular character, which pulls our attention towards it and draws us in. Because digital tools used for communication are not merely a prolongation of the human mind and body, but operate within logic particular to their own forms of being, they stick out and strike back at us. Harman defines this feature as “charm”. Charm, however, is “not some sort of people-pleasing faculty in things, but a sort of magic charm or elixir that we sense in each thing (...). The charm of objects is their innocent absorption in being just what they are, which in each case is something that we ourselves can never be.” (Harman 2005: 137).

We argue that Harman’s notion of ‘charm’ supports our point that all things are ontologically creative: there is always more of the world, and more of the individual thing or form of being, than we as human beings can perceive and unlock about them. Because digital tools and platforms are substituted with new ones ever so often, we are lead to think they are less irreplaceable and substantial in themselves. That could explain the amount of relatively surface-like studies of digital tools in use, and the few longitudinal deep-probing studies – as these studies often are completed after the software has been trashed a long time ago. This, we argue, blocks a necessary deep understanding of specific digital tools, a bad habit we should reverse in future qualitative studies of digital software.

Methodologically speaking this has the following consequences. Firstly, if the digital software is understood as otherwise than (merely) human being it is impossible to frame a study beforehand applying only one, or one primarily underlying method. During a singular study of a particular digital tool or platform, the method becomes “torn” (our term), meaning that it is used up and worn down as the study progresses. In this way the digital tools which in Harman’s terms can be described as objects or substances, can in Luhmann’s terms be understood as autopoietic systems, when for instance so-

cial media as facebook facilitate the communication by framing the communication in its own specific way. We may understand psychic and social systems as systems that are operationally closed, self-referential, autonomous, analytically indeterminable, unpredictable and dependent on their previous operations and the concrete context. As a result, the characteristics of trivial systems cannot be applied to the analysis of either students' learning or to approaches to the different social systems, which are offered in an educational setting. In other words every person, every psychic system, observes its environment, e.g. net-based forum, with its unique observation lens; hence every person constructs his or her unique environment.

The knowledge construction remains inside the addressee. Within the theoretical framework of systems theory, utterer and addressee are conceptualized as "black boxes" (Luhmann, 1986). They can observe each other, but do not have access to each other's thoughts. Because of the system's theoretical approach, it is reasonable to conclude that communication might be regarded as impossible in principle. But the specific expectations of specific contexts, help to construct a horizon of expectations over time (Luhmann, 1995). This insight has consequences for the relation between teaching (supervision) and learning (Mathiasen, 2008).

The special form of communication that works to change psychic systems (mental constructions) is conceptualized as teaching, hence supervision. While both social systems and psychic systems are, as mentioned above, operationally closed, they can be coupled structurally through communication and a specific theme for the communication. If the students observe the communication in a conference forum and furthermore participate by contributing, we have a social system: as we see in net-based forums that include the supervisor, students and maybe other active factors in a context such as for instance a weblog, Twitter or Facebook (Mathiasen, 2010). Given that the two types of systems operate in their own distinct modes (mental activities and communication, respectively), psychic systems and social systems are operationally closed in respect to each other. They are, however, structurally coupled, and thus the systems can "disturb" each other, the concept of perturbation (Luhmann, 1995:172). They can focus on each other, so to speak, and let the disturbance affect their system-internal operations.

This means that qualitative method is not about choosing a specific methodology and to stick with it to the bitter end, slowly assimilating the research object more and more into the mindset and vocabulary of the underlying philosophical framework. Nor is it about mindlessly selecting whatever bits and pieces from different methodologies that seem of relevance and merge them into a doubtful, and often highly incongruent, eclectic and contradictory conceptual framework. Instead, we argue that methodologies must be seen as congruent and consistent frameworks that give all they possibly can until they do not seem relevant to the study any longer. Not because they age or become troublesome, but because they are used up, has emptied out all they could give in that particular case. That is what can be called a torn methodology as it is torn apart during the research process. This is the first important meaning of creativity in this context: that the qualitative researcher must think and apply qualitative methods creatively in order to adapt to the changed research environment that is a result of his method(s) of first choice becoming torn or used up.

### **Researching digital tools from within**

The need for a torn methodology becomes especially clear when researching online supervision at the university. In this example we have chosen Skype (communication by video) to illustrate our point. Contrary to the traditional view, we are not interested in how supervisors and students are present through Skype, but how Skype is present through *them*, and what challenges this poses for qualitative methodology.

When researching the use of videoconferences in online counseling and supervision there is a general acknowledgement of the potentials of using video in supplement to face-to-face meetings. Studies mentioned by Suler (2008) and Goss and Anthony (2003) suggest that that use of video can help making the meeting with the counselor or supervisor less intense and intimate, thus giving the supervisee a more free and homely feeling when interacting (Suler 2008: 105; Suler 2004: 28; Simpson 2003: 113). Also, studies point to difficulties when using video in supervision settings. The “screen” interplaying between supervisor and student and the often “dis-membered” (our term) body language, when usually only the head is visible, may cause difficulties in catching on to the subtleties and

nuances in the communication with the other person (Suler 2004: 26; Anthony & Nagel 2010: 49; Friesen 2011: 113ff.). This less tangible and corporeal form of contact is by Suler described as a “black hole experience” (Suler 2004: 26) in which the supervisor and student experience the digital tool absorbing important aspects of the communication, which disappear and are lost. Simpson accentuates studies which describe supervision by video as “dehumanizing” and “unsettling” (Simpson 2003: 114) because of the lack of intimacy otherwise found in face-to-face supervision. Communication through the use of digital tools as Skype may cause “higher levels of fatigue” (Simpson 2003: 116) due to the disappearance of vital elements of the interpersonal dialogue, distorted or “disjoined” by the digital tool in play (Simpson 2003: 117). Contrary to the traditional opinion, we find that the interesting thing is the *drama* and trouble these tools arouse.

We suggest researching Skype meetings from within the tool itself, positioning the tool as an autonomous factor in itself, as a subject position. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega Y Gasset claims that to understand communication more fully, we should investigate “each thing as ‘I’” (Ortega 1975: 139), and that “everything, from a point of view within itself, is an ‘I.’” (Ortega 1975: 134), which gives us, as researchers, a challenge to view the digital tool “from the inside.” (ibid.). Ortega argues that phenomenology’s true aim should be not only to study a phenomenon from the observer’s subject point of view, but from the point of view of the phenomenon studied. This follows a logic which ideal is to speak from the *observed* point of view. As a consequence of this, we argue, that qualitative method should have the aim not merely of investigating digital tools in online supervision from the outside; from the perspective of supervisors and students. Qualitative research should, in line with Ortega, “not (...) tell us about things but (...) present them to us in the act of executing themselves.” (Ortega 1975: 138). Ortega underlines the importance of straining our empirical descriptions and ultimately to lodge our perspective within the particular phenomenon’s process of becoming. This opens up the understanding of digital tools as dynamic and transformative forms of being that cannot easily be pinned down ontologically.

As Ian Bogost (2012) describes we should let us be charmed by the digital tools themselves and try to draw out the weird realism

they project (Bogost 2012: 109), understanding communication differently than when dealing with inter-human communication only. The specific digital tool should be researched on its own premises, and this methodological approach calls for, what Bogost terms, an alien phenomenology, in which

Our job is to write the speculative fictions of their processes, of their unit operations. Our job is to get our hands dirty with grease, juice, gunpowder, and gypsum. Our job is to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger. I call this practice *alien phenomenology*. (Bogost 2012: 34)

Supervising online means that more factors than just supervisors and students are in play. The digital tool does not merely strike back, it also very much charms us and lures us in with its impressive powers for communicating across vast distances and abilities of recording and storing a great number of conversations with the option of revisiting them if needed. As Levi Bryant (2011) argues, Luhmann is vital in the endeavor of making visible the digital tool as a self-referential system. As Bryant states, what makes "Luhmann (...)" so vital to this project (...), is because he ontologizes autopoietic systems, treating them as real entities" (Bryant 2011: 137). In this light the Skype program should not merely be understood as a form of human presence and dialogical "post man" delivering a message from one person to another. Skype is in this sense, and should be researched as such, an autonomous form of being. This is the second important meaning of creativity that we wish to stress: That creativity should not only be understood as aesthetical features of the research phenomenon, but as an *ontological* dimension of the phenomenon in hand. This ontological dimension implies that the epistemological endeavor, which qualitative research can be seen as, must attain creative features in order to meet and to match the ontological dimension of the phenomenon studied.

In line with Bryant we see Harman, Ortega and Luhmann as having often overlooked shared interests in pointing out the 'real-ness' and autonomous character of for example the digitally mediated supervisory dialogue. All three thinkers would claim the importance of not reducing the dialogue to either the student's or the supervi-



sor's experience of it, but to foreground that the dialogue itself is of importance and should not be reduced to an intersubjective event. Traditionally Harman and Ortega would be more interested in things and substances than conversations, and Luhmann would pay little attention to non-human systems. However, we find contemporary philosophers like Bryant interesting because of their strive to argue the relevance of applying object-oriented phenomenology to communication studies and to apply systems theory to the study of 'things'. This article is itself a try to bring two often opposing theories to ally in the project of studying the being of digital software that is half communication and half thing.

### **Creativity as “nested method”**

Because of the nature of digital tools as (partly) independent and, to paraphrase Lévinas (2000), wholly otherwise than human beings, we should not confine the study of online supervision to any one method. As digital tools hide in their own lairs, and reside in their own weird autonomous realms (Bengtsen, Mathiasen & Dalsgaard, 2014), any single method approaching them is exhausted after a given time period; the method becomes torn and used up, so to speak. We wish to link this understanding of creativity to the point about supervision as consisting of different interlocked and “nested contexts” as described by McAlpine and Norton (2006; see also McAlpine & Åkerlind 2010). McAlpine and Norton argue that learning experiences in supervision settings occur “within multiple nested contexts whereby the factors influencing attrition and retention are influenced by different stakeholders.” (McAlpine & Norton 2006: 5). Instead of isolating different institutional and educational contexts, McAlpine and Norton argue that they are intertwined and operate, with a Harmanian term, on the interior of each other as nested within each other's domain of being. This understanding of supervision at the university complies with both Luhmann and Harman, as McAlpine and Norton “remind us to consider contexts not presently in our focal area”, but also “consider contesting changes in contexts beyond our own that we believe will have deleterious effects.” (McAlpine & Norton 2006: 6). Converted to online supervision, we argue that digital tools represent nested contexts within the supervisory dialogue; perspectives operating on the interior of other

perspectives. Tool, supervisor, student, and institution are all contexts, or perspectives, nested on the interior of each other.

Because of the otherness of the digital tool, and the nested character of the perspective they unfold, we argue that to research nested contexts we should comprehend and carry out qualitative method as *nested methods*; different qualitative approaches lodged on the interior of other approaches, ready to engage when others are torn and used up. This demands a new way of conceptualizing creativity in qualitative methodology, where creativity means to lodge one's own perspective deep within, and on the interior of, other forms of communicative being. Nested methods make it possible to research different entangled, but separate, perspectives of the online supervisory dialogue with different methodological approaches. This is not an argument for uncontrolled eclectic anarchy and chaos in the research design, but on the contrary a strive for enhanced precision and relevance in the relation between the digitally mediated supervisory dialogue and research approach. Anything does not go, and on the contrary this form of methodological approach, in some ways, demands more transparency, clarity and management. The form of creativity must be defined in accordance to the following set of conceptual criteria. To be able to function as a nested method, the method should itself contain qualia being:

- Weird
- Torn
- Nested

That the method is weird, or "alien" in Bogost's sense and "otherwise" in Levinas' sense, means that the research applied must be bold and daring, able to match the "otherness" of the digital universe studied. Methodological weirdness does not mean to be performative and self-absorbed, but to warp, bend and stretch the design accordingly to the perspective from within the digital tool itself. That the method should be able to endure being torn during the research process means that the researcher must never see the method as an end in itself, but something which at any given time, when it is used up, can be abandoned. This does not mean that the researcher can allow himself to be careless about the methods he applies, but on the contrary to tailor every step in the research pro-

cess as precise as possible to the phenomenon studied. That the method should be nested within other methods, or methodological layers or strata, means that different methods can be applied at the same time. This is not to repeat the well known understanding of mixed methods, but to point to the fact, the different stages of the research process may be dislocated and happen in different dimensions at the same time, calling for more, maybe several, methodological foci operating on the same phenomenon but from different angles and perspectives.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the article we have shown how the case of online supervision at the university may function as a case to dislodge a new meaning of creativity in qualitative research methods. This has been done by showing that creativity in qualitative research not only should be occupied with aesthetical meanings of the term, but also should give attention to creativity as an ontological dimension of the research object in hand with certain epistemological implications for the qualitative researcher. These implications mean that the qualitative researcher should apply methodological criteria such as weirdness, torn-like qualia, and nested qualia in his research approach.

Creativity as a qualitative research strategy has been shown to mean firstly, that creativity in qualitative research does not connote to eclectic, mixed or otherwise randomly chosen approaches, but instead should be seen as a thorough, deep and scientifically valid phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Secondly, the ontological dimension of creativity implicates that qualitative approaches cannot simply be used, but may also be used up, break, fall apart, and must along the research process risk being wasted, abandoned, discarded and betrayed. Such conditions must be tolerated, and even embraced, in order to research phenomena such as online supervision with its at times utterly strange and alien features. Thirdly, and finally, we suggest that future qualitative research should apply a nested approach – a way of seeing different qualitative approaches, not as opposed to each other, but as possible allies and partners with the shared goal of probing ever more deeply into the world, and unlocking ever new doors of ontological abundance. And maybe also to unite, or at least to rally, many different and diverse research strategies that may seem weird to each

other, but together could wield this weirdness as a future flag to join under when their combined powers are unleashed upon the world.

## References

- Anthony, K. & Nagel, D.M. (2010). *Therapy Online. A practical guide*. SAGE
- Bengtsen, S., Mathiasen, H. & Dalsgaard, C. (2014 – forthcoming). Net-based guerilla didactics. IN Fossland, T., Mathiasen, H., & Solberg, M (Eds.). *Academic Bildung in Net-based Higher Education*. New York & London: Routledge
- Bogost, I. (2012). *Alien Phenomenology. Or What It's Like To Be A Thing*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press
- Bryant, L.R. (2011). *The Democracy of Objects*. Open Humanities Press
- Evans, J. (2009). *Online Counselling and Guidance Skills. A Practical Resource for Trainees and Practitioners*. SAGE Publications
- Friesen, N. (2011). *The Place of the Classroom and the Space of the Screen. Relational Pedagogy and Internet Technology*. New York: Peter Lang
- Friesen, N. (2005). Technological Experiences. Is there a Body in this Class?. IN
- Goss, S. & Anthony, K. (Eds.) (2003). *Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy. A Practitioner's Guide*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Harman, G. (2010). *Towards Speculative Realism. Essays and Lectures*. Winchester (UK) and Washington (USA): Zero Books
- Harman, G. (2005). *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court
- Harman, G. (2002). *Tool-Being. Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court
- Jones, G. & Stokes, A. (2009). *Online Counselling. A Handbook for Practitioners*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan
- Levinas, E. (2000). *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press
- Luhmann N. (1986): Systeme Verstehen Systeme. In Luhmann og Schoor (red.) *Zwischen Intransparenz und Verstehen - fragen an die Pädagogik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag
- Luhmann, N. (1992): What is Communication? in *Forum, Communication Theory*, 2:3, p.251-258

- Luhmann N. (1995): *Social Systemes*. Stanford:Stanford University Presss
- Manen, M. v. (ed.). *Writing in the Dark. Phenomenological Studies in Interpretive Inquiry*. Ontario: The Althouse Press
- Manen, M.v. & Adams, C. (2009). The Phenomenology of Space in Writing Online. IN Dall'Alba, G. (ed.). *Exploring Education Through Phenomenology*. Wiley- Blackwell
- Mathiasen, H. (2008) Is there a Nexus between Learning and Teaching?: Communication as a Facilitator of Students' Knowledge Construction. IN Holtham, C. & Nygaard, C. (eds.). *Understanding Learning-Centred Higher Education*. Copenhagen Business School Press
- Mathiasen, H. (2010) Communication – Learning- Knowledge Construction and Premises. IN Stamm, J. & Larsen, S. (eds.). *COST Cooperation in Science and technology: Knowledge management in Contemporary Europe*. Brussels, COST research report
- McAlpine, L. & Åkerlind, G. (Eds.). *Becoming an Academic. International Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- McAlpine, L. & Norton, J. (2006). Reframing our approval to doctoral programs: an integrative framework for action and research. IN *Higher Education Research and Development*. Vol. 25, No. 1, February 2006, pp.3-17
- Simpson, S. (2003). Video counseling and psychotherapy in practice (pp.109-128). IN Goss, S. & Anthony, K. (Eds.). *Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy. A Practitioner's Guide*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Suler, J. (2008). Cybertherapeutic Theory and Techniques. IN Barak, A. (ed.). *Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace*. Cambridge University Press
- Suler, J. (2004). The Psychology of Text Relationships. In Kraus, R. Zack, J. & Stricker, G. (ed.). *Online Counselling. A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals*. London: Elsevier Academic Press