# Supervisors' utterances in online supervision of first-year students' dissertations

*Gunnar Augustsson and Jimmy Jaldemark*

*Department of Education, Mid-Sweden University, gunnar.augustsson@miun.se, jimmy.jaldemark@miun.se*

## Abstract

While offline supervision is comprised of physical social clues, verbal communication, and drafts of texts, online supervision mainly focuses on written communication and electronic drafts. Participating in online supervision probably sets other requirements regarding clarity in the utterances of the supervisor. In online student supervision, it helps if supervisors are aware of differences in how their utterances of drafts are interpreted by students. Earlier research of supervision in online education has overlooked these differences in qualities of utterances. A problem that arises out of this omission is a deemphasizing of the quality in the social interplay between students and teachers in online supervision. A study of differences in written utterances of supervisors pays attention to this overlooking.

As part of a greater research project of online supervision, the current study expands on earlier studies of the practice of online supervision by focusing on written utterances of supervisors and identifying and analysing differences in their comments on drafts of students' dissertations. To fulfil this purpose online utterances' of supervisors were analysed. Theoretical ideas of communication and online participation were used to interpret the empirical data. Overall we identify four categories of utterances: comments, points of view, instructions, and questions.

The preliminary results of the research project implicate the importance of awareness among supervisors in online supervision, particularly on the nature of the utterances they make use of when supervising students' academic writing. Such awareness makes it possible for supervisors to strategically emphasise students 'independence'. That could guide students through their writing by applying a balanced mix of comments, point of views, instructions, and questions. Reaching a balance in online supervisions may be very valuable in the process of supervising dissertation work.

The preliminary results of the research project of online supervision suggest scrutinising how students perceive supervisor's utterances of their drafts. That task will, together with an analysis of how supervisors perceive their own utterances, be examined more closely in further studies. Those studies could focus on how the dialogue between students and supervisors intersects in drafts of student's dissertation.

## Higher education went online

This paper focuses on supervisors' written communication on drafts of students' dissertations. However, the conditions of communication are different in exchanges between participants that are physically co-located than exchanges between physically separated participants. During the recent decades the practice of teaching in higher education has changed to a greater emphasis on the latter. This movement within higher education has been supported by developments within the field of educational technology as well as a growing emphasis on life-long learning (cf., Jaldemark, 2012).

A move towards enhancing higher educational settings with the help of computerized tools has been documented at least since the 1970s (Bates, 2005). Back then the Open University UK located computers at local study-centres. Bates (1986) discussed the approach of these early teaching experiments in terms of the computer being a 'black box'. That approach aimed at replacing the teacher with a computer. In other words, as much as possible of the practice of teaching should be integrated within the hardware or software of the

computer. This approach encountered the practice of teaching as a one-way process, from the teacher to the student, or from the computer to the student.

In the 1980s another approach to use computers to enhance teaching emerged: 'computers as networks'. This process built on using the computer to facilitate communicative aspects of teaching. The computers should in this approach connect people, in other words provide opportunities to enhance the social dimension of the practice of teaching. This approach embraced application of tools that emphasise teaching as a two-way process. In other words the approach depended on aspects of computer-mediated communication. From this network-approach, online education developed (Bates, 2005; Harasim, 1989, 2000). Examples of technologies applied in the practice of teaching in online education include chat, computer conferences, e-mail, or more recently developed technologies such as blogs or wikis (e.g., Augustsson, 2010).

In Swedish higher education, the recent decade has showed an increase in the provision of courses offered online. More students than ever participate in higher education through computer-mediated communication. In the academic year 2008/2009, close to thirty percent, 116,000 of 401,000 students in the Swedish higher educational system were enrolled in courses or programmes labelled online education (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education & Statistics Sweden, 2010). In the fall term of 2009 the US higher educational system had 5.6 million online students, an increase of nearly a million students from the previous year (Allen & Seamen, 2010). The numbers from the Swedish and US systems shows the growing influence of online education in higher educational systems.

Nevertheless, computer-mediated communication, a key component of online education, also is an aspect of courses and programmes mainly performed on campus. Teaching practices have evolved that embrace computer applications as well as physical meetings at campus. These practices are sometimes discussed in terms of blended learning (e.g., Rovai & Jordan, 2004; So & Brush, 2008). Garrison and Vaughn (2008, pp. 4-5) "argue that the time has come to reject the dualistic thinking that seems to demand choosing between conventional face-to-face and online learning, a dualism that is no longer tenable, theoretically or practically". While the emphasis on computer-mediated communication has increased in higher education it also influences how teaching is performed. Therefore, conditions for both students and teachers for participating in higher education have changed.

One teaching practice that is relevant for almost every student and teacher is supervision. As discussed below, a feature of so-called online supervision (Crossouard, 2008; de Beer & Mason, 2009; D. C. Price & Money, 2002; Sussex, 2008), is the mediation of communication between students and teachers by computers. Online supervision is the focus of this paper, particularly first-year students that are novices in writing a dissertation. Nevertheless, studies of online supervision in novice dissertation work are rarely found. This is an area in need of research (Heinze & Heinze, 2009). Therefore, to give a background on the practice of online supervision, other higher education studies are included in the discussion below.

## Participation in online supervision

In the design of courses that include online supervision, teachers make choices. They have to choose how to participate in the practice of supervision. Their choices embrace suitable technologies that afford computer-mediated communication and how to use these technologies. Sussex (2008) discussed three specific problems in online supervision. First, the degree to which supervisors and students know each other: effective online supervision needs to compensate for the lack of social clues. This problem embraces issues of age, culture, ethnicity, gender, and personality. Second, there is an issue of information exchange. Supervision includes communicating over argumentative, conceptual, factual, personal, procedural, rhetorical, and stylistic issues. Nevertheless, the same technology is not suitable for all these issues. Third, online supervision includes issues relating to the information exchange channel. In such supervision there is a need to choose a proper technology for communication (Sussex, 2008).

Price and Money (2002) discussed the relationship between technologies and participation in supervision. In their study they discussed links between students and supervisors and their locations. They identified three types of links: remote, traditional, and semi-remote. Participation in remote supervision embraces a physical separation between students and supervisors. Supervision includes at least two different geographical locations. Overall, in remote supervision, communication depends on technologies. In traditional supervision students and supervisors are geographically co-located. This means that participation takes place at campus, usually a one-to-

one meeting (de Beer & Mason, 2009). Semi-remote supervision is a typical blended learning idea. This type of supervision is a combination of remote and traditional supervision.

Crossouard (2008) discussed a doctoral programme that had a blended learning character. Supervision included the use of computer conferences, e-mail, and face-to-face workshops. Drafts of the students work were commented upon by both students and supervisors. In the blended learning design the model of face-to-face supervision and online dialogues were found to enhance "each other and took pressure of the student-supervisor relationship, making its personal chemistry less critical" (Crossouard, 2008, p. 62). Similar results were found in the Dysthe, Samara, and Westrheim (2006) study of master students.

A few studies of undergraduate students dissertation work have focused on the link between the involved agents and technologies included in the practice of supervision (e.g., Heinze & Heinze, 2009; Källkvist, Gomez, Andersson, & Lush, 2009). The motivation behind the study by Källkvist et al. (2009) was to support undergraduate students writing a research report. They introduced electronic portfolios into the design of the course. The supervisors emphasised that the tools incorporated into the design of the course facilitated remote and efficient guidance for individual students as well as a collective level of supervision. Heinze and Heinze's (2009) study of improvement of formative assessment in undergraduate students dissertation work suggested the use of electronic comments and tracking changes. Moreover, the practice of supervision also could benefit from applying technologies that facilitate social aspects of supervision, for example computer conferences, chat, and social network sites.

## Theoretical framework

The studies mentioned above mainly comprised online supervision in terms of written utterances, for example through chat, computer conference, or e-mail (e.g., Crossouard, 2008; Heinze & Heinze, 2009; Källkvist, et al., 2009). Theoretically, exchanges through these technologies could be discussed in terms of being part of a communicative process between students and supervisors, a dialogue. The research project that this study belongs to builds on the dialogical ideas of Bakhtin. Therefore, understanding and response of the students and supervisors are discussed as being "diametrically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (Bakhtin, 1935/1981, p. 282). An understanding of communication from such a perspective needs a unit that reflects this inseparable character of the communicative exchange. According to Bakhtin, the utterance is such a unit of communication. This unit also has the character of having a relation to preceding and subsequent utterances. Thus in online supervision the communicative exchange of utterances between students and supervisors could be understood as a search for a shared meaning. Expressed in other words, the dialogue that emerges between the students and the supervisors is a meaning-making process focused on the learning of writing a dissertation.

## Method

The studied educational setting was a bachelor programme in Behavioural Science given at a Swedish university. Enrolled students chose either to study one of two specialisations: human science or computer science. In common are studies in the disciplines of Education and Psychology. The programme enrolled students either in a campus mode or in a distance-based blended learning mode. This study focuses on the students enrolled in the distance-based mode. These students meet at campus two or three times each semester. Otherwise the practice of teaching was based on the applications that were supported by the university, which embraced blogs, chat, computer conferences, e-mail, and desktop video conferences.

The dissertation course was performed in the second semester and students worked during a twenty-week period half-time with their undergraduate dissertations. The dissertation course included a structured working process comprising thirteen steps. Six of these steps included the submission of drafts of the students' dissertation work. These drafts were supposed to get written comments within two working days, comments that the supervisor would submit to a computer conference available to all students in the dissertation course. Three of these submissions were linked to a group dialogue with a supervisor. The working process started with an introductory three-day meeting at campus and ended with virtual seminars on students' dissertations. The working process included communication in four different forms, emergency dialogues, structured group dialogues, conference dialogues, and pair dialogues. A study guide comprising fourteen pages described the process (Jaldemark, 2012).

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The educational design of the working process built on two different but interrelated principles: group dialogues and open and public exchanges of information. In short, the idea of group dialogues applied through study groups should foster the development of learning communities (Carlén & Jobring, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1934/1987). These study groups should be a place for formative assessment processes (M. Price, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2007) and a major resource in students' learning of the research process. The study groups consisted of ten-to-twenty students that were led by a supervisor. Each group researched a particular theme related to the particular competence of the supervisor. The students wrote their dissertations in pairs.

The greater research project that this study belongs to aims at analysing online supervision. In the project the research design are influenced by the single-case study approach. The motive for such an approach was that it provided a possibility to get insights into the practice of online supervision. The project focused on one course and its online supervision was "looked at in depth, its context scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed" (Stake, 1994, p. 237). In this project this means that it was sensitive to specific condition of the online supervision. These conditions embraced descriptions of critical phases of the online supervision and sampling procedure that focused on the written utterances of the supervisors in the most suitable steps of the working process: three of the steps that included drafts of the dissertation. These steps were chosen since they could provide rich information about online supervision (Jones, 1999; Patton, 2002). The project included utterances taken from the drafts of the students, as well as interviews with students and supervisors. Other utterances that might be used included the study-guide and communication recorded within the learning management system. The research discussed in this paper focuses on empirical data taken from drafts of the dissertations.

The study included thirty-three dissertations; of these we analysed twenty-nine. The analysis scrutinised fifty-seven drafts and the supervisors' comments on them: approximately 606 utterances were observed. Four supervisors were included in the study: two females and two males. To secure the anonymity of the supervisors, the identity of supervisors and each utterance were given a code; the comments from supervisors S1-S4 and the drafts of the students as StuPap followed by a number. The share of the utterances was spread in the following way: S1 20%, S2 25%, S3 17% and S4 38%.

## Results

It is possible to identify four different categories of utterances that come from the supervisors: comments, points of view, instructions, and questions. A "comment" is a statement which certainly expresses a personal attitude, but is more reflective than instructive in nature. A "point of view" is intended to convey a particular idea or assessment on a specific issue. An "instruction" refers to an indication of the appropriate approach in a particular context. A question can be formulated for different reasons. The most common is to get an answer to anything. Overall, these four different categories of utterances convey distinctively different messages to the student being supervised. Both the "comment" and "point of view" clarify something, but they do not direct the student in one or the other direction. This means that students are offered some choice, which can be received with individual freedom or with uncertainty and ambivalence. In the third category, instructions, there is no doubt about what rules apply; here the supervisor decides for the student what should be done or how he or she should proceed. Finally, a question can be formulated in different contexts and can be perceived in different ways. It can be used and understood as an invitation, an instruction, or a questioning. The utterances below are reported in block quotes and were taken from all four supervisors.

### Comments from the supervisor

In supervisors' exchanges with the students, comments are frequently uttered. The purpose is to direct the student's attention to something without revealing too much of what the supervisor thinks. This gives the student the possibility to independently decide what may be an appropriate measure. A comment can be defined as a statement which expresses a personal attitude. Nevertheless, the nature of comments is more reflective than instructive. Below are three forms of comments. The first form can be perceived as "recommendations", to give an opinion in favour of something. In the below examples, supervisors advocated some form of additions to the text without actually specifying them.

> In this paragraph you can add what you're supposed to investigate. So the reader do not needs to wait until the purpose. Facilitates reading. (StuPap 18, S1, draft 4).
> Can't you write as you do not need the headlines ... Indicate in the first line what the paragraph is about. (StuPap 1, S2, draft 4).
> Do not forget the date you retrieved the information! (StuPap 11, S3, draft 3).

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Relate the content; weave it together with your own study. (StuPap 26, S4, draft 4).

The second form of comments concerns how supervisors point out problems in existing or requested information. The quotes below illustrate this type of comment. The supervisors point out that something is missing without exactly telling the student what it is.

Based on this study, it would be interesting to explore the pedagogical leadership. While the purpose is not telling anything about it you should consider whether you should write explicit about reading comprehension. An example, while the principals have such difficult task they do not have time for solving reading comprehension problems. (StuPap 20, S1, draft 4).
This seems to be a problem rather than an aim ... it is not possible to examine both things ... you should probably only look at the employees' perceptions. (StuPap 2, S2).
On theoretical courses, the responses of the students are not only yes or no ... That depends probably more on the exam data than on character of the education. You need to develop! You also need to include something about the constructions of assessments, because you can imagine that there is a correlation between grades and test construction. (StuPap 12, S3, draft 3).
The ethical section is written in a general style. But what means the rules for your study? How have you done to meet these requirements? (StuPap 26, S4, draft 4).

The third and final form found in the empirical data concerns a supervisor's request to the author to develop what has already been written.

Good and problematising introduction. What I would like you to think about is whether or not Wenger and Mylov should be included in the background. It appears that you have your theoretical departure in situated learning. Then you can use these two theories to analyse your results. (StuPap 16, S1, draft 3).
Method comes after the literature review ... needs to be expanded ... Look in Backman and you will see what should be ... Do not forget to include your theoretical perspective. (StuPap 6, S2, draft 3).
Develop the distinction between the different systems. (StuPap 7, S3, draft 3).
Are there references that support your argument? Purify the text. Selection related to itself and the related to the data collection method to itself. (StuPap 27, S4, draft 4).

The quotes above show the supervisor's demand for development and carry reflections while not specifying what should be added to the existing text.

*The supervisors' points of view*

The supervisors' points of view are important for the students while they provide students with help to choose appropriate ways instead of doing something that they cannot control.

Do not make so many questions because then you may lose your ability to compare and analyse the statements from your interviewee. (StuPap 15, S1, draft 3)
What is dealt with in the review seems relevant. (StuPap 3, S2, draft 3).
I think your questions are good in relation to the groups you should explore! (StuPap 8, S3, draft 4).
Well done, despite doing a restart you has come a long way. (StuPap 24, S4, draft 3).

The above recommendations show how the supervisors develop a point of view. Moreover, these utterances also show how they recommend students to hold back or continue with the ideas they have initiated.

I think you have too many questions, do you really need all of them to answer the aim. Are there crosscutting issues that can capture all minor questions, think. (StuPap 22, S1, draft 4).
Is it not enough with hermeneutics? How the two approaches do relates to each other? Explain ... Move to the Approach. (StuPap 4, S2, draft 3).
It is good that you started the development of the interview plan, but I thought you got further with what you would have done before, that is the background and methodology. This [the interview plan] need not be completed until April 12. Since you have not written more in the background, it becomes very difficult to comment on the plan now! (StuPap 8, S3, draft 3).

Here, the problem formulation needs to enter. What is the problem? Tell us! (StuPap 27, S4, draft 3).

The quotation above shows that supervisors combine constructive criticism and requests for expansions of ideas in progress but are somewhat non-specific. This provides the student with opportunity to reflect on the work before continuing to write.

Source! Check out the rest of the document so that it shows very clearly the source of the ideas discussed in your text. (StuPap 19, S1, draft 4).

The aim is ok ... but wouldn't it be interesting to also consider it in relation to policy documents ... then, you can discuss this in the Discussion. (StuPap 3, S2, draft 4).

You can develop, describe and argue about the preconceptions of hermeneutics. (StuPap 10, S3, draft 3).

Good that you are distinct about your perspective. Developing this further under a separate heading. See for example, "Approach". (StuPap 28, S4, draft 3).

In the above quotations the supervisors presented personal opinions and asked the students to further develop their texts. This forces the student to take a stand for or against the supervisor's point of view and develop their text in line with this position.

## *Instructions from the supervisor*

Instructions from the supervisors help students onto the right track. The supervisor with an aim to help the student with an overall perspective can use such utterances.

You have already lifted the key to Wenger's reasoning, delete the paragraph is my tip. (StuPap 16, S1, draft 3).

Can be placed at the end of paragraph 3. (StuPap 4, S2, draft 3).

Describe what the new rules are! (StuPap 7, S3, draft 3).

Check in Backman how references to several different works are written. It should be (;) between the authors/works, not (,). (StuPap 26, S4, draft 3).

In the above quotations the supervisors point out a direction for the students.

Explain why you are going to generalise when you are doing a qualitative study. Explain how your random selection is done. (StuPap 20, S1, draft 4).

What do you mean by this ... try to clarify. (StuPap 2, S2, draft 4).

Defining already here learning disabilities! (StuPap 8, S3, draft 3).

What does this mean for implementation? Develop! How can it look like with a different approach? What decided your choice? (StuPap 24, S4, draft 4).

The above quotations deal with how supervisors instruct the students to do something. Nevertheless, they avoid telling them exactly how to do it.

Strengthen by using references. (StuPap 15, S1, draft 4).

Needs to be expanded a lot ... browse Backman what needs to be involved in reporting method. (StuPap 3, S2, draft 3).

Which 'them'? Please specify who you are referring to. (StuPap 9, S3, draft 3).

Clarify. What do you mean? (StuPap 27, S4, draft 3).

Here the supervisors point at a certain direction or aspect and tell the students to develop it.

## *Questions from the supervisors*

Questions can be formulated in different ways.

How did you do to select the informants? (StuPap 18, S1, draft 4).

Perhaps you should describe sex, age, education ... to get the significant factors. (StuPap 1, S2, draft 4).

Why do you call it a survey/cover letter when it is an interview guide? (StuPap 9, S3, draft 4).

Can it be moved? Do you have a reason for doing the study? (StuPap 26, S4, draft 4).

The above questions can be understood as recommendations. The first two are about an invitation to develop the text. The last two can be seen as instructions about how to handle an interview guide and an argumentation.

Do you false start with some previous research. Check out what I have underlined. (StuPap 19, S1, draft 4).
Why these samples? (StuPap 4, S2, draft 3).
What are the global objectives? (StuPap 12, S3, draft 3).
Is the text below, an outline? Here, you write short about what to expect in the different sections of the dissertation. On the other hand it maybe needs some explanations of a few of the concepts used in your dissertation. (StuPap 27, S4, draft 4).

In all four quotations above, the supervisor calls for more information without revealing how the students should do it. In addition to the earlier discussed forms (invitations and instructions), the first of the above quotations adds a third form of questions: what have the students done so far?

How is your method positivistic or rather, why should you include positivism? (StuPap 20, S1, draft 4).
"Why?? (StuPap 3, S2, draft 4).
What do you mean here? Which surroundings? (StuPap 10, S3, draft 4).
22 per group or six times with the same group comprising 22 people? (StuPap 28, S4, draft 4).

In all four of the above quotations the supervisor questioned the students' texts and asked for a development.

## Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to focus on supervisors' written online communication on drafts of students' dissertations. This purpose was investigated by identifying and analysing differences in supervisors' written utterances over drafts of students' dissertation work. The results show that the main substantive difference between the various utterances is between categories. Overall, the difference between points of view, instructions, and questions relates to their qualities. The results also show that supervisors use comments to increase students' responsibility of their work. Points of view or instructions have a diminishing character regarding the students' own responsibility. Both points of view and instructions direct students' thinking rather than increasing their responsibility. The former is more implicit than the latter. The results also show that questions can be used in different ways: as an invitation, an instruction, or a questioning. However, it is up to students to closely read between the lines to interpret the current message. This also means that supervisors can use questions to demand students take an independent action. Nevertheless, this depends heavily on the wording of questions. To sum up: comments increase demands on students' autonomy in their conduction of their research studies and in their writing of a dissertation.

The preliminary results of this study implicate the importance of awareness among supervisors in online supervision, particularly on the nature of the utterances they make use of when supervising students' academic writing. Such awareness makes it possible for supervisors to strategically emphasise students 'independence'. Supervisors should guide students through their writing by applying a balanced mix of comments, point of views, instructions and questions. Reaching such a balance in online supervisions may be very valuable in the process of supervising dissertation work.

The preliminary results of the research project of online supervision also suggest scrutinising how students perceive supervisor's utterances of their drafts. That task will, together with an analysis of how supervisors perceive their own utterances, be closer examined in further studies. Such studies could focus on how the dialogue between students and supervisors intersects in drafts of students' dissertations.

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