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Learning in contexts. Four cases in higher education.

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2. THE MA THESIS AS MASTERPIECE: ON THE SOCIAL EMBEDDING OF ACADEMIC WRITTEN DISCOURSE

2.1 Introduction

Almost all students in Dutch universities round off their studies by means of a 'doctoraalscriptie', which is roughly equivalent to an MA thesis. In quite a number of cases writing such a paper is a troublesome process and this has given rise to much research interest. These research projects focus, on the one hand, on problems the students face while writing the paper (Hakkenberg 1980; Sonneveld 1980; Gelens 1982; Lubbers & Nevenzeel 1984; Fukkink 1994) and, on the other hand, on difficulties university staff members encounter in supervising and assessing the theses (Heintje 1978; Buis 1979; Geerligs 1982). There are even a number of 'self-help' books which offer students a sort of guide to complete the assignment successfully and give tips to avoid any pitfalls that might present themselves during the process (Mirande & Wardenaar [1983]1988; Eco 1985; Padmos 1995). Problems may occur during all stages of the process. They provoked Hakkenberg to state in a review of the book by Mirande & Wardenaar:

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1 The data which will be analysed in this chapter derive from a pilot study for a PhD project on thesis writing and supervision which I planned to undertake in the 1990s in collaboration with Manon van der Laaken. They were meant to focus the analysis of the written student products and to yield observation categories for the analysis of the tutorials. Unfortunately, circumstances forced Manon to change careers and the project had to be abandoned. I feel, however, that the data we had collected are interesting and important enough to present in this chapter. Further research, however, needs be done on the basis of transcripts of actual interactions between supervisor and student.
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Reading this book made me wonder: do we fully realize what we are doing to our students when we make them write an MA thesis?

(Hakkenberg 1986: 20; translation by author)

The investigations and comments mentioned raise the question why writing and supervising a thesis often cause so much hardship to both students and supervisors. In an extensive paper which attempts to summarize and synthesize research into students' writing skills, Nightingale points the finger to the way students are prepared for the task (1988). Other studies suggest that the discrepancies between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing could be one of the causes of problems (Lea & Street 1998). And, finally, Miranda and Wardenaar point to lack of pedagogical skills or plain interest of the supervisor as a possible cause of troubles during the thesis writing process ([1983]1988). These are without any doubt very important issues to consider when investigating the thesis writing task, but this study will not address these aspects.

This study will focus on the context in which the process is embedded. It will be argued that, although the importance of proper training and preparation of the student and pedagogical skills of the supervisor is evident, at least some part of the problems for both student and supervisor is caused by the socio-cultural context in which the thesis is nested. The sources of interactional dilemmas ensuing will be investigated and it will be proposed that the participant structure of the speech events involved in the thesis writing task has been underanalyzed: apart from the student and the supervisor, other people are involved in the assessment stage in the role of overhearers (Goffman 1979), which results in a laminated situation. Therefore, supervising and assessing a thesis is a complicated affair, which involves a number of double binds (Watzlawick et al. 1967, Bateson 1972) for all those involved: these are intrinsic to the task.

2.2 Theoretical background

The theoretical framework used in this study is based on the research tradition of the ethnography of schooling which attempts to describe and analyse the socio-cultural embedding of teaching and learning. Lave & Wenger's process approach to learning ('situative learning') fits into this framework. Situated learning takes as its focus the relationship between learning and the social roles and situations in which it occurs. Rather than defining learning as the acquisition and internalization of propositional knowledge, it situates learning in certain forms of social co-participation (Lave & Wenger 1991). In the situative framework, therefore, learning is not seen as an individual cognitive process, but as a process which takes place within a 'participation framework', as ever growing participation in communities of practice.
This entails that it is important to find out what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to occur. Lave & Wenger propose legitimate peripheral participation as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that has learning as an integral constituent. Legitimate peripheral participation is about being located in the social world, it is about changing perspectives which are part of the learner’s trajectory, about developing identities and forms of membership. Through legitimate peripheral participation, the learner participates in the community practice of the expert, which in the end will lead to full participation in the ongoing practices. Learning, therefore involves the whole person: ‘it implies a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person … it involves the construction of identities.’ (Lave & Wenger 1991: 53) In this way the student who is in the process of writing her thesis can be said to participate in the practice of the supervisor. The thesis-writing process may be seen as an apprenticeship, in which the student as ‘novice’, as ‘aspiring academic’ goes through all the stages of the production of an academic text under the guidance of an experienced academic, an ‘old-timer’: from formulating a research question, via designing the project within the framework of a particular theoretical paradigm and research methodology, whereby it is also embedded within existing research traditions, to reporting results according to the academic conventions. By fulfilling the thesis-writing task the student is afforded academic literacy, an understanding of both the conventions and the conversations of the discourse community (Berkenkotter et al. 1988).

Erving Goffman’s work on participation structures will be used to analyse the participation framework of the thesis writing process. Goffman argues that participants in speech events (Hymes 1964) may fulfil multiple roles and identities. In ‘Footing’ Goffman shows that the notions of ‘speaker’ and ‘hearer’ are underanalyzed in the conversational paradigm and that refinement of the definitions of these roles is necessary (1979). He draws a distinction between the ratified participants of a social occasion and ‘overhearers’ and also distinguishes three speaker roles: animator – ‘the talking machine, a body engaged in acoustic activity’; principal – ‘someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken … a person active in some particular social identity or role’; and author – ‘someone who has selected the sentiments which are expressed and the words in which they are encoded’ (1979: 17). In the same way, the idea that the thesis is always the product of the student alone needs refining: sometimes the paper is co-authored by student and supervisor.

The notion of face plays an important part in the analysis of the process. Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987) state that power, social distance and a mutual concern for the preservation of face form the basis of all human interactions. ‘Positive’ and ‘negative’ face by definition play an important role in all educational encounters.
because they involve assessment of the performance of one or more of the participants. Moreover, it will be argued that towards the end of the writing process, at the assessment stage, student and supervisor are not the only participants in the event: there are overhearers, the ‘peers’ of the tutor in their roles of second reader, colleagues or members of ‘visitatie’ committees.² The presence of these overhearers may be a threat to the face of the supervisor: after all, the result of the supervision process should be a paper that meets the standards for academic writing.

2.3 The data

The data to be analyzed in this study were gathered in interviews conducted with fifteen university lecturers sharing the academic role of supervisor. They are all members of staff of the Department of English of the University of Amsterdam. In the department two different specializations are taught, linguistics and literature, and this diversity is reflected by the theses that are produced in the department. Students are prepared for the thesis writing task by means of several writing courses and by the fact that almost every MA course requires them to write reports or essays.

Fifteen members of staff who all regularly supervise MA theses were interviewed. Both fields of specialization that are taught at the department were represented. In semi-structured interviews, conducted on the basis of a set of open questions, which were ticked off as the interaction proceeded, they were asked about their beliefs and practices as to what constitutes a good thesis, what requirements a thesis has to fulfil to merit a ‘pass’, what supervision entails in their practice, and what problems they encounter in their role of supervisor. These interviews, which took between twenty and thirty minutes each, were taped on audio-cassette and transcribed.

The data in this study are one step removed from the actual activity of supervising a thesis: they are meta-data, in the sense that they consist of what members of one university department, who share an academic role, consider to be ‘mentionables’ (cf. Schegloff & Sacks 1973), i.e. what, in their opinion, is worth saying about their experiences in that role. They provide an insiders’ perspective and could therefore be compared to field-notes in ethnographic research. In this sense the data address the practices and beliefs of one ‘academic tribe’ or ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991), whose members share an institutional ‘discourse system’ (Scollon & Wong-Scollon 1995). They can be seen as case studies which point to important general issues, questions and connections in supervising academic papers that might remain hidden in studies with a broader, quantative design.

² ‘Visitatie’ committees are committees of experts in a given field of study who, by government order, investigate the quality of university research and study.
I do realize that the data cannot be considered ecologically valid in the strict ethnographic sense. The fact that I approached my colleagues and asked them if they were willing to talk to me about their beliefs and practices concerning thesis supervision and, moreover, asked their permission to tape our exchange, prevents this: they were well aware that one day their comments could pop up in a paper on the matter. This might have induced people to employ face-saving strategies and hold back what they consider ‘unsayable’. Besides, there might very well be a difference between what the colleagues whom I interviewed say they do and what they actually do. Quite a number of the interviewees, however, told me that they welcomed the opportunity to unburden their soul about their experiences in a dimension of their job they said they often found difficult and time-consuming. Besides, even if the tutors ‘censored’ their findings, I strongly believe the data are still worth analysing, since the material shows how the tutors involved experience and formulate their own role in the activities. Finally, the dilemmas they encounter in their role of supervisor, which this paper addresses, emerge in the data as a salient dimension of the task and are corroborated by my own experiences with the job. The data then could be said to be ‘reconstructed logic’ (cf. Bailey 1996), i.e. through them the supervisors articulate, reconstruct and recreate the operative principles they use in their daily practice of supervisors. This chapter therefore could be said to be etically triggered emic analyses – or emically prompted emic analyses (van Lier, cited in Bailey 1996).

The ethnographic description in this chapter provides a wide sense of context. It includes the supervisors’ reflections on what is happening and what should happen during the supervision process. It attempts to analyse the institutional constraints and affordances which shape the activities in the tutorials. Beside a conversational and an institutional context, a third level of context is suggested which concerns the wider social structures within which the supervision process is embedded.

The central data base for this study is a small core of four of the interviews. The transcripts of these interviews are rendered in the appendix to provide an in-depth profile of the supervisors involved. Two of the interviews were conducted with members of the linguistics section (data 1 and 3); they were randomly selected from the entire collection of data from members of the linguistics section. Data 2 and 4 were randomly selected from the interviews with the members of the literature section. Data from the interviews with the other tutors, each given a number from 5 to 15, will be used to support the points made.
2.4 The institutionalized thesis writing procedure

The Department has formally laid down the procedure which ought to be followed when a student writes her MA thesis. The student has to present a proposal to the ‘thesis committee’, which consists of all staff-members of either the ‘language’ or the ‘literature’ sections. If the student has not selected a supervisor at this stage, the committee will assign to the student one of its members to supervise the thesis. The supervisor is supposed to spend thirty-five hours in total on the job – including five contact-hours – for a student taking the ‘general’ or the ‘teacher-training’ program, and forty-five hours – including seven contact-hours – for a student enrolled in the ‘research’ program. The student is allowed to work on the paper for six months. If she has not finished the work in time, the supervisor will have to decide whether she will be allowed to continue. The committee also appoints a second reader, who will read the final version of the thesis and will confer with the supervisor on the appropriate mark.

In the procedure, therefore, two main episodes can be distinguished, which are chronologically ordered: the writing of the proposal and the writing of the thesis proper. The first episode can be seen as a short version of the latter, in the sense that the proposal is evaluated in terms of the set of conditions that constrain the final thesis. As one of the supervisors puts it:

\[(4) \text{Often I sort of help them write the proposal -- for the sake of the committee just -- not only to get it through but also to give them a sense of what the question is and what you should go back to when you get stuck somewhere -- what is the main point of what you're doing -- so proposal, outline, rough drafts and the final version.}\]

Talk is an integral part of the thesis writing process: there is the interaction between the supervisor and the student involved in writing the paper (the tutorials) and there is the interaction between the supervisor and the thesis committee and the second reader involved in assessing the products which come into being at various stages in the process (evaluation sessions). All these interactions have a fixed number of participants with their own conceptual resources and distinctive roles, a fixed time and place, and a task to be performed, the termination of which forms a boundary with the next stage. This series of tutorials and the evaluation sessions are ‘speech events’ (Hymes 1964). The speech event ‘tutorial’ can be defined as an asymmetric, task-oriented interaction which typically has two participants, a supervisor and a student, with as business at hand discussing the work the student has done and the development of the paper she is in the process of writing. The role of the student can be characterized as providing input, either in oral or in written form, for the tutorials; the role of the supervisor is to ‘scaffold’ (cf. van Lier 1988) the thesis-writing.
process for the student. At various stages sub-tasks will be embedded in these events: discussing the proposal, the outline, chapter six, etc. The speech event ‘product evaluation session’ has two or more participants, all of whom are members of staff of the department. Their task is to assess the products and so they can be said to fulfil the role of gatekeepers.

2.4.1 Routine procedures in the pre-thesis stage: formulating the proposal

When a student arrives at the point in her university career that it becomes necessary to write a thesis, she will have to decide what subject the paper is going to address. She will often toss around various possibilities for subjects and topics and talk about these with fellow-students, friends and relatives or academic staff members. In almost all cases, however, a specific lecturer will have to help the student to turn her ideas into a clear, researchable topic. Some students first select their supervisor. In those cases the priorities of the students lie with the selection of a supervisor. She has grounds to believe that there is a common interest for a specific topic and she trusts, on the basis of previous experiences, that the lecturer will fulfil the role of supervisor to her satisfaction. Most students, however, prioritize the selection of the topic: they prefer to develop their own ideas on the subject, either geared to the interests of a particular member of staff or not. In this case the student will present her plans to the lecturer whose field of expertise lies closest to her choice.

Usually students start out with very global notions about what it is they want to research. In the thesis proposal the student is supposed to spell out the subject she wants to investigate, to zoom in on a particular angle and the relevant theoretical framework. The task at hand then is to formulate a proposal which makes clear not only what the student is going to research but also how she will go about it. This means that the research questions will have to be articulated and that the relevant literature and methodology will have to be decided upon. The proposal is, in fact, a blue-print for the thesis and, in most cases, is written in close collaboration with a tutor through a system of feedback and revision. There is at least one tutorial, where the proposal is handed in and deemed suitable by the tutor to be sent to the ‘thesis committee’. Usually more tutorials are necessary, in which the work the student has done is discussed, and in which the ideas and methodology are gradually refined.

When the lecturer decides that the proposal meets the requirements, it is submitted to the ‘thesis committee’, which consists of the colleagues of the tutor. As peer group of the tutor, this committee is responsible for safeguarding the feasibility of the project. Its members might also suggest additional literature or modifications to improve the plan. The committee either accepts the proposal or sends it back to the student for revision. In the latter case the student produces a next version, and the sequence is
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repeated. When the proposal gets a go-ahead, a supervisor – usually the staff member who has helped the student formulate the plan – and a second reader are assigned, and the process moves on to the second phase, the writing-of-the-thesis stage.

2.4.2 Routine procedures in the thesis stage: doing the research and producing the paper

When the proposal has been approved, the student gets down to work and actually carries out and writes up the research. Usually student and supervisor engage in a number of tutorials, during which the work-in-progress and successive drafts of (parts of) the thesis are discussed. The number of tutorials varies per student and per supervisor, but there is at least one, at which the student hands in the end product. When the thesis is finished, it is read by the second reader, a colleague of the supervisor, after which supervisor and second reader jointly decide on a mark. The course book of the English department states that the thesis will be assessed on the basis of: clarity of the hypothesis, argument, knowledge of the topic, readability, preciseness, presentation, and language.

2.5 Institutional and cultural roles

The role of supervisor in the thesis writing process is complicated: on the one hand, she has to ensure that the student improves the text at hand on the basis of the feedback given during the tutorial, to such an extent that finally it acquires the status of an academic thesis. On the other hand, however, her role is to support the student and encourage her to continue working on the project. In their book The counselor as gatekeeper: social interaction in interviews Erickson and Schultz discuss the complexity of the student counseling process as it is institutionalized at an American university. They note that the counselors fulfil a dual role: they give students advice and at the same time make decisions about their future career at the college:

[The counselor] ... is to be an objectively rational and impartial decision maker, a judge or actuary tending the gates of mobility within the institution, [and] on the other hand ... the sponsor and advocate of the student’s interest.

(Erickson & Schultz 1982: 19)

Erickson and Schultz characterize these counseling sessions as ‘gatekeeping events’. In the same way, the tutor supervising a thesis fulfils a dual role: she is sponsor as well as gatekeeper. On the one hand, as sponsor of the student, it is her job to ensure that the student finishes her thesis and graduates. On the other hand, as institutional
gatekeeper and academic supervisor, it is her job to ensure that academic standards are safeguarded, so that only those students graduate who, as one of the supervisors states, deserve ‘the seal of the University, of our department...’, which indicates a widening of the social context in which the thesis writing process is embedded, in that the ‘face’ of the department, the profession and the university as a whole are an issue in the decisions supervisors take during the supervision track. Supervisors, then, fulfil two roles simultaneously and will change hats, will ‘hop’ from one to the other during the process. One of the supervisors shows that he is indeed aware of both of these aspects of his role:

(5) I am aware of the fact that you have to find a certain balance between keeping up their morale and keeping up the tempo and on the other hand tightening the noose of the standards.

The role of the student is also complex. On the one hand, she is expected to be author of the academic text at hand, but on the other hand she is faced with the expectations of the supervisor who, in her role of expert, of old-timer, expects the student to heed and incorporate her comments and suggestions and to produce a text which she - the supervisor - considers to be an academic text. The institutional role relationship between student and supervisor is asymmetric and hierarchical, which entails that the student is not free to dismiss the comments of the supervisor. The data indicate that this would indeed be a ritual fault:

(4) It’s frustrating whenever they don’t seem to take your advice – those cases are discouraging.

(6) I once had a student who just didn’t want to listen to what I told him and kept on doing what he wanted to do, he just did not accept what I was telling him to do.

(7) I once had a student who was really stubborn to start with and I got the feeling that she constantly thought that I was wrong – well those talks were exhausting ... in those cases I have the feeling that I’m not taken seriously in my role of supervisor.

These data point to the tensions between supervisors and students, between old-timers and newcomers in social practices. They address the issue of the conflict between continuity and displacement, which is part of all learning (Goody 1989). As Lave and Wenger argue:
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The different ways in which old-timers and newcomers establish and maintain identities conflict and generate competing viewpoints on the practice and its development. Newcomers are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they need to engage in existing practice, which has developed over time: to understand it, to participate in it, and to become full members of the community in which it exists. On the other hand, they have a stake in its development as they begin to establish their own identity in its future.

(Lave & Wenger 1991: 115)

These tensions may show in the tutorials where the tutors are expected to help students become accountable for their own work and, according to Thonus (1999), may lead to conflicts between comprehensibility (of tutor advice), politeness (bald on-record speech acts such as directives are highly comprehensible but infringe on the negative politeness expectations of the addressee; Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987)) and effectiveness (e.g. attending to the writer’s concerns). Below these tensions and conflicts will be spelled out.

2.6 The tutorials

During the tutorials supervisor and student discuss the progress of the project the student is working on. According to Agar (1985) the interactions produced during the tutorials should be seen as institutional discourse: ‘one person – a citizen of a modern nation/state - comes into contact with another – a representative of one of its institutions’ (1985: 147). As institutional discourse tutorials then follow the diagnosis, directive and report phases as proposed by Agar. The tutorial will start by the supervisor reacting to the input – in oral or in written form – provided by the student. There are no standard procedures: what happens during the meetings depends on the personal preferences of both students and supervisors, and on the quality and status of the work of the student. The goal of this diagnosis phase requires the tutor to fit the student’s product to the institution’s frame:

(3) From very early on I work as much as possible on the basis of what they have written.

(4) Once they actually start putting things down on paper it’s easier all the way round – one has at least a kind of anchor to go by ... the basic thing for me would be to work on paper with them as much as possible and to use the paper as a kind of objective lever to encourage them – to help them.
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(7) Then I say – well it works best – it is most fruitful if I have something to look at – because then I know which way you are going and then I know which way I should direct you.

The written products of the students are then used as input for the directive phase. During the tutorials the supervisor will assist the student in detecting trouble-spots and in improving the overall clarity and structure of the text she has produced and supply suggestions and references which will enable her to remedy problems. She may explicitly indicate trouble spots to the student:

(2) I think most often we don’t go through all that I’ve written – I pick out kind of typical problems and maybe talk about these and if it’s a real problem then – someone that is difficult to work with – then I might go through it point by point – more often I think I talk more about the kinds of problems the sort of approach – the general kind of approach that’s wrong – if there’s a certain kind of – say grammatical or problem something about punctuation that they do wrong – then I might talk about that just to make clear what it is they have to do and I think I try to to – maybe give them a chance to look the thing over for a little time before just to see if there’s any questions I mean they can just sit there and read through it and see if things are clear.

or may leave the initiative to the student to express her concerns:

(1) I let them take the lead as much as possible – I like doing that – I let them tell me what they’ve been doing – what they think of what they’ve done so far and – where they think they ought to go from there what they see as the problems and then I sort of react.

Sometimes supervisors employ a repertoire of strategies:

(3) [It] depends – I think that first I try to find out – well what I said before – my ideas about the status of the draft – do they correspond a bit with their ideas – I mean if they think they’ve written the end all version and that everything is fantastic and I’ve got the feeling they’re sort of halfway – then there’s a real problem – then you have to adjust your strategies – that’s often a real shock – then you have to be really careful – then I sort of gently break the news – with others it’s no problem at all – I let them read through my comments first.

(4) .. if they are having trouble – I often ask them how do you think it is going ... where are the problems.
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The success of a tutorial for the supervisors depends on whether the student, in the next version she produces, shows that she has been able to process the comments and suggestions:

(1) You see it [i.e. success] actually from the next time around or from the stuff that they send you.

(2) I think mostly it’s successful when the next time you meet you can see that it’s had an influence on the student ... if someone comes back a week later or two weeks or a month later – and it’s clear that they’ve really thought about what we talked about – or that they’ve been able to rewrite something on the basis of our discussion.

(3) [The tutorial] has been really good if the next version they hand in has been altered in that sense.

So a tutorial is considered successful if the student has been able to amend or rewrite the text at hand on the basis of the feedback given during the interaction. Supervision in this community of practice, then, may be characterized as a series of interventions by the supervisor which should lead to a next, improved draft of the text. Eventually, at the end of the process, the supervisor reads the most recent version the student has written and will map the generic conventions for academic writing onto this text: if these match, the thesis is ‘finished’.

Even during the first session, the supervisor will act on the basis of what she knows about the student and the impression the student makes during the meeting. During all tutorials that follow, the conditions, which have been inherited from the previous interaction, will be updated on the basis of what the student brings up or has produced. The feedback the student receives, then, will always be specific for this interaction with this student during this stage of the project and will be geared to the relevant next step in the process. This entails that there is no standard procedure or ‘script’ for the practice of supervision. Since the supervisor finely tunes her feedback to ‘the current floor’, to what the student has been doing and to what she has produced, every supervision track is different. Differential products generate differential responses: the supervision process emerges interactively according to the quality of the work submitted, the nature of the research, the personal characteristics of both supervisor and student, and the emotional situation of the student.
2.7 Minimal requirements for theses as academic papers

Problems may arise if a student does not succeed in supplying an improved next version, since in those cases the risk increases that the student fails to meet the minimal criteria for theses as academic papers at the end of the process. The data show that these minimal requirements relate to different domains of academic writing. They concern:

A systematic report of existing research:

(3) Everybody should at least be able to go through some literature and report on what they've found in a systematic way.

(6) A thesis should minimally show that the student has understood the literature involved and that he is able to write about it clearly.

Research methodology:

(1) Methodological cleanliness – seeing the wood for the trees I suppose that’s the main thing isn’t it – being able to handle a complex set of data or a complex set of problems and going through the whole analysis while keeping track of the original questions being asked the original hypotheses and drawing it all to a sensible conclusion – to a sensible interpretation if you like – a sort of internal consistency and internal processing of the material which they’ve tackled.

(3) [They have to] give a minimally original – well it doesn’t have to be original actually – a sort of systematic analysis of the data – and it doesn’t have to be perfect – that’s an important point by the way – I don’t know exactly myself at what point you can let it pass – because it is a relatively new field – where there are very few norms – that I’ve sort of thought up my own norm – that if I have the feeling that somebody has learned an awful lot from this and if he has been able to describe the literature in an orderly fashion minimally – or the methodology he’s used – and if it’s minimally clear that he was able to use it to well in some cases not all analyses were good – but that in some cases it happened that they saw that it really produces something – that it produces more than the intuitions you had – if you sort of do it in this way – that then well let’s say it is a pass.

(7) They should have collected facts independently and put them framework and they should have studied the literature independently – then they will pass.
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(11) I’m satisfied if someone at least has succeeded in isolating a problem — and then write it up in such a way that it’s clear it’s not a simplification.

(13) They have to collect facts independently — and these should be placed in a framework — that they’ve looked at the literature — that they’ve processed these independently — then they will pass.

Argument and rhetorical organization:

(1) [My] first criterion is — you know — interior consistency.

(4) They are free to find their own form as long as it meets the requirements of structure, makes sense and sticks to the topic.

(8) It’s self-evident that the content has to be reasonably good so we’re really talking about the way they’ve expressed that content — it seems to me that brevity and sticking to the point — remaining relevant and so on — are things that you’re looking for.

(9) [The minimal requirements are] that chapter one is connected to chapter three in some sort of way.

2.8 Accommodating the requirements

At closer consideration, however, it appears that, in their practice, the supervisors do not always implement the criteria they name when they actually assess the theses they have supervised:

(2) With someone you might think — well they have to pass — this is the best they can possibly come up with.

(5) One measures always the student’s work against one’s sense of what he’s capable of doing — and if you’re convinced that he’s really done what he can — that there’s nothing more to be gotten out of him than that — that carries some weight — sure — it doesn’t carry weight around the eight or nine level let’s say — it carries weight around the five or six level.

Supervisors may adjust their expectations on the basis of the discourse history they share with the student:
(6) When a student comes to me who I know is a really weak student ... then I think well, if it is simply a proper overview of existing literature, then I will be satisfied.

This entails that the evaluation criteria are accommodated: the complete set of requirements is not implemented for every student. In reality tutors work with differentiated criteria for particular students: the evaluation criteria also emerge during the process; they are negotiated interactively.

Accommodation of the requirements is made necessary by social and real world constraints which prevent the student from achieving the minimal standards. These may result in the tutor finding herself 'involved in a trade-off between communicative and social goals' (Thonus 1999: 275).

There may be institutional obligations:

(3) We have such a long tradition – that we work from the assumption that if someone gets this far that he is ready to write his thesis that then he has to pass as well.

(11) [A student] who we have brought this far ... should actually be helped as much as possible.

The cognitive abilities of the student might be limited:

(2) Sometimes you work with someone for four or six months, sometimes even for a year or longer, and you realize this is not going to get any better, in those cases you should say: we accept the thing or the person will never graduate.

(10) [A student] passes if you are convinced that he has done all he can, that it is impossible to get anymore out of him.

Finally, the time available to both supervisor and student is finite. As mentioned above, the time the tutor is supposed to spend on the supervision of a single student is limited: a tutor is assigned between thirty-five and forty-five hours to supervise a thesis; the time available to the student is also indicated in the course-book. Moreover, having to extend the period of thesis writing may generate personal problems for the student: they could get a job if they graduated, or worse, they have reached the limit of their statutory enrolment, or their student grant will stop and they will have to break off their studies without graduating unless the thesis is accepted now. And last but certainly not least, the department has to produce a reasonable
number of graduates every year to ensure continued funding: ‘... for the department too, it is better if such a person doesn’t keep hanging around here’ (11).

The moment the student is allowed to stop writing, then, will have come when the text meets the criteria the supervisor has formulated for the work this particular student is able to do. This time has come when the formal requirements for a paper of the type thesis have been fulfilled, filtered by the real world constraints which apply to this particular student. Problems occur if these constraints cause a mismatch between the quality of the paper and the minimal requirements formulated for theses as academic papers. The result is a ‘double bind’ for the supervisor (Watzlawick et al. 1967, Bateson 1972): there is a conflict between her role in the dominant interaction and her role in ‘academia’. Her roles as sponsor and gatekeeper clash: on the one hand she feels she has to let the thesis go, on the other she feels she cannot pass the thesis (yet). This is complicated by the fact that the data show that writing a thesis is considered a joint effort of supervisor and student:

(1) It’s sort of a joint effort – I mean obviously part of the guidance is not to actually put words into their mouths and actually tell them what to write but I guess sometimes you come very close to that.

(3) We will just come up with a thesis you don’t have to feel ashamed about.

(10) I think a mark is based on a sort of team-work ... it is a sort of interaction – so the intensity of my contribution is to a joint project.

As shown in 2.6 the student is supposed to self-correct (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977) the drafts she has written. If the supervisor fails in her attempts to bring about these self-corrections, the decision to increase the number of ‘other-corrections’ until the thesis meets the minimum criteria, may disrupt the delicate balance between ‘scaffolding’ (Bruner 1975, Edwards & Mercer 1987) and ‘co-authoring’. If this happens the result might be that the authorship of the thesis has become ambiguous:

(3) You have to take care that it doesn’t turn out to be something you’ve fed them completely, then it won’t be their thesis.

(7) Then – in the end – it’s more my product than theirs.

(8) Sometimes I think I’ve written seventy-five percent of the thing.
Other reasons may also induce the supervisor to co-author the thesis: it will be assessed in the peer-group of the supervisor, via the second reader. As Mirande and Wardenaar note:

...He [the tutor] is often judged by the end-product of the supervision process: a good graduate student also means recognition for the tutor.


This brings one of the tutors to the following explanation when asked why she always corrects spelling and grammatical mistakes in the theses she supervises:

(12) You don’t want anybody to read it later and think ‘she can’t even write’.

These data indicate a sense of shared responsibility for the text that has been written. The supervisor is judged by her peer-group the basis of the work ‘her’ student produces and she will try to avoid ‘loss of face’ (Brown and Levinson [1978]1987) vis-à-vis her community of practice.

Finally, loss of face within the wider context of the academic community – fellow departments, national ‘visitatie’ committees – may also motivate co-authoring:

(11) [The thesis] is filed and is made accessible, if all goes well we’ll publish excerpts in the journal ... sometimes colleagues ask us about these sort of things ... I feel a responsibility for the standard of the work also in that sense.

So it seems that the ‘standard’ is set by the quality of the thesis, the written final product, on which the supervisor may be evaluated by her peers and beyond, in the professional community.

The student may also be faced with a dilemma. She may also be ‘caught up’ by ‘real world constraints’ and may have to satisfy herself with a thesis which is of a lesser quality than she had envisaged (cf. Mirande & Wardenaar [1983]1987). The data suggest that the reasons and timing for termination of the project – for deciding that the thesis is a finished product – may vary and may originate from both parties. It could be concluded then that contextual variables determine the course and the results of the thesis writing process. It is contextualized by multiple socio-cultural and institutional parameters that have to be negotiated in the supervision process.
2.9 Assigning a mark: implementing academic and other criteria

When the thesis has been accepted as a finished product, the supervisor and second reader have to decide on the appropriate mark. This mark will be between six (= pass) and ten (on a scale of one to ten), since the permission to the student to stop writing entails that the supervisor is convinced that the mark the paper should be given is sufficient. The influence of the second reader is therefore limited. In practice, supervisor and second reader only confer on a mark between six and ten on a scale of ten.

The criteria which are applied in this stage of the process are also accommodated. The pass-fail distinction here crops up in a different guise:

(2) It's very hard to say 'cause what easily happens -- especially since we've had this long tradition of sort of accepting that if somebody gets to the point of writing a thesis they're going to pass -- I mean I don't think it ever happens that somebody doesn't pass -- finally -- that means that the six -- it becomes a kind of catch-all -- for the things that shouldn't be sixes -- and maybe also for the things that should be sixes -- so you've got two people and one of them has written something that really should be a five -- and probably worse -- and you give that person a six or a six minus -- and so then you've got somebody else who really has written a six -- that paper that gets a six but deserves a four devalues the six for the person who deserves a six -- so there's a tendency for the real true six to become a seven -- and sevens become this great catch-all -- it's got the true sixes -- the true sevens all together in one grade -- 'cause it's not so bad really if someone deserves a six but they get a seven -- you put them next to somebody who deserves a seven and gets a seven -- it's not particularly noticeable -- but it is bad in a six. (cf. de Groot 1964)

(11) I only award this person a six because he's done his best.

If the thesis has not created major problems, i.e., as one of the tutors puts it, if it is not something 'that really has given me a pain in the head', it will automatically merit a seven:

(2) I think typically a seven is ... either very original and not at all well researched -- or more often something that is a good straightforward piece of work -- a straightforward topic -- not very original -- not so difficult to do but well done -- a straightforward task that's well done.

(14) A 7 means it's a decent performance ... a very respectable mark and it covers a very wide range.
So it seems that the sevens are the theses that truly deserve to pass: there is a certain inflation in the marks, in that a ‘true six’ may be given a seven.

Higher marks are given for work that is original or creative, or that makes a real contribution to the field:

(1) When you go up into the eights and nines – then you start drawing in the criterion of is this really now quite new – are these sort of new insights which the students have actually derived from his study and then you start grading it higher.

(2) An 8 ... can be either something that's very original but maybe not very polished ... but it can also be something that’s not particularly original, but very well researched. For something to be a 9 it’s got to be original and very carefully researched and thought out and very well written .. a very polished and original piece of work.

(14) If a student gets a very high mark it's not just because I feel they’ve done well but because there’s actually something there that really is impressive or distinguished.

But supervisors may not only take the finished written product into account when they have to decide on a mark. The diligence of the student may play a role:

(3) If I don’t think the thesis is too wonderful but they’ve really worked their butt off – and it took him really a lot to take this obstacle ... then I think it should be a seven – not a six.

(7) If at the outset the student knew very little about the topic concerned, then put a lot of energy into the thesis and made a lot of progress, then ... I let this be reflected in the mark.

If the supervisor feels she had to do too much of the work, the grade may be lower:

(1) In gross cases – yes I might say – she had to be sort of lifted over the barrier – then perhaps I might knock off one or two marks.

(11) If my actual support has been extensive the grade will be lower.

(13) If I really have had to feed them everything and the final product feels more like mine than theirs – I mean they’ve written the thing but you have done some extensive shaping – well then I suppose it might be a seven but no more.

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(15) [The mark goes down] if I really underpinned every nail in the construction.

The mark may go up, however, if the collaboration has inspired the supervisor:

(10) Some theses may force one to do more work than others, but this may be because the thesis is of such a high quality ... that one has to do a lot of thinking to be able to follow the line of thought of the student.

The implementation of these, unofficial, process-linked criteria, however, may create a conflict between supervisors and second readers, who base their judgements solely on the written product and who, by definition, do not have information about the process at their disposal. One of these conflicts is reported in the data by one of the staff members, who complains:

(14) They [the second reader] were reading the thesis very objectively and impersonally, and I ... as the actual supervisor, who had sort of worked through the process ... had seen this student gradually begin to master the material to the extent where a sort of personal voice was beginning to come through.

2.10 Concluding remarks

The production of a ‘doctoraalscriptie’ grants the apprentice entry into the academic community: she acquires a new identity and becomes a member of the guild of academics. This entails that the thesis functions as a masterpiece: ‘a piece of work by which a craftsman gained from his guild the recognized rank of “master”’ (COD 1979). One process leads to two ‘products’: a text, the thesis, and a social role, i.e. an academic. Writing a thesis should be a ‘generic’ act: the main objective is not the paper as such but the skill to produce academic discourse (cf. Walker & Elias 1987); the paper, however, is the tangible material result of the process.

The supervisor, therefore, might be caught in a double bind, which forces her to become, to some extent, co-author of the written paper. If this has not reached an acceptable standard, it might cause loss of face for the supervisor: her role in the process is not only to supervise and assess the thesis, she is also assessed herself on the basis of the student’s performance by her peers in the community of practice she is part of, and even by the academic community at large.

If the supervisor, however, decides that co-authoring is inevitable in order to present a qualitatively sufficient paper to the ‘world’, the second ‘product’, the new social identity of the student, might fail to come into existence. The student might then be
denied the opportunity to acquire the skills she needs to become an academic, i.e. someone who is capable of participating in professional dialogues and who has mastered the range of conventions within which the socio-cultural system of the discipline is encoded (Hyland 2000).

Social and real-world constraints, however, will often tempt the supervisor to let the thesis and the student go:

(2) *With somebody you might think – well they have to pass – this is the best that they can possibly come up with.*

(4) *It’s very hard for an individual to take it upon himself at this point ... to raise a fuss and say this is unacceptable.*

(10) *Someone we’ve brought to the gate – well I think those people ought to be helped whatever it takes.*

(11) *[Sometimes students graduate] who maybe should not have done so, for if you realize that they really receive their MA-degree, with the seal of our university, of our department, then the quality of what they have produced is clearly not sufficient. If, on the other hand, you’ve got the feeling, on the basis of earlier work you’ve seen and the time they have spent on it, that they have done what they are capable of, then it would be extremely hard to fail them at the last moment.*

The data suggest that the investment of four years of tuition the department has made has to be cashed in at this moment: once a student has been granted permission to begin working on her thesis, she can hardly fail. The pressure of social and real-world constraints may turn the writing of an MA-thesis into a ritual affair, into a mere ‘rite de passage’. If this happens, however, no personal blame can be assigned to the individual participants in the thesis writing process. It is the consequence of the *discourse ecology* of the thesis writing event. This shifts the focus from individuals towards systems: the double bind which is caused by the embedding of the event in the interactional and academic context.

According to Watzlawick et al. (1967) double binds – by definition – cannot be solved from within the system: the only way-out is by withdrawal or *meta-communication*. If we continue to demand from our students that they write an MA-thesis to round off their studies, the only viable general advice that can be given to the supervisors to resolve the double bind analyzed in this chapter, is to communicate not only about the content of the task but also about the double function of the paper and the complicated tasks and roles of the participants in the process.
Appendix: Four profiles

Data 1 (Linguistics; British, male)

Do you like having tutorials?
Do I like it – yeah I DO actually – mean I like I like encouraging them – mainly what I do is just sort of boosting their confidence – I believe in letting people have a pretty free hand – with what they’re doing – I mean I keep an eye on basic things like methodology and so on you know and – I direct the reading and I like to give them a pretty free hand – but what mainly happens is they come in and sort of report on how far they’ve got and usually it’s you know where do I go from here – and I give them ideas and sort of you know chat through it for about half an hour to an hour – but always giving them the feeling that they’ve decided themselves and mainly my role is – it’s a bit sort of pastoral you know – the good old English tradition – pastoral care – it’s just being there you know just giving them a kind of – well a sounding board really to let them sort of bounce off a couple of problems which they have and then you know gently to solve them but giving them the idea that I’m still taking it very seriously and – I’m interested in whatever they give me and whatever they send me and just make sure that they keep their confidence up.

How do you go about it?
I usually ask them to hand in stuff a couple of days perhaps a week before the actual appointment – it doesn’t always happen like that – there are many sessions where I go through the stuff there and then but – I mean that’s the idea that I prepare myself beforehand yeah.

When you get stuff in what do you focus on, the English, the structure, the content?
Well I try to keep an eye out for all of those things I suppose – as far as the English is concerned I tend not to correct till the final version or until pretty well the final version – I don't want to put them off too much – I think if you start fiddling around with their English they start to get uncertain and then they lose a bit of general confidence in what they’re doing – well I mean I just look at overall content –
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ordering – sort of logical development of argument – look at methodological sides if they’re doing empirical work – large empirical work particularly – and make sure that their hypotheses are well and truly discussed in the analysis that they don’t lose track of what their original questions were.

Do you write comments in the margin?
Yes I do that but I suppose that the main message I’d like to give them orally there and then – with them personally – because then they see everything in the whole and it’s not quite so threatening for them – I mean I’d feel too much like a teacher – they just send me the stuff and I blablabla all over the place you know in red or any other colour – doesn’t seem to make much difference – I’d rather go through it systematically with them there and then – and then they go away – they usually make notes of what I’ve said and they go away with that together with the comments that I may have made in the margin.

Would you be the one who focuses the thing or would they also introduce things?
I let them take the lead as much as possible – I like doing that – I let them tell me what they’ve been doing – what they think of what they’ve done so far and – where they think they ought to go from there what they see as the problems and then I sort of react – I try to get things fairly straight at the beginning – sort of put them on the lines as much as possible after their initial reading period – and then we have a session – I mean I give them various things to look at first of all – go around think about it – that’s sort of a gestation period of about what three weeks four weeks and then when they come in you know – hammer out the sort of the broad lines of the research and perhaps stress the main lines and hope that they keep to them from there on – but usually they do actually – usually I don’t have anything fundamental to change in sessions after that.

What are your criteria for a good thesis?
First criterion is interior consistency – I would put – methodological cleanliness a little bit further down the list – seeing the wood for the trees I suppose that’s the main thing isn’t it – being able to handle a complex set of data or a complex set of problems and going through the whole analysis while keeping track of the original questions being asked the original hypotheses and drawing it all to a sensible conclusion – to a sensible interpretation if you like – a sort of internal consistency and internal processing of the material which they’ve tackled – that perhaps more than a shattering new insight on the field in all – that makes a scriptie an eight – a seven and a half perhaps and then when you go up into the eights and nines – then you start drawing in the criterion of is this really now quite new – are these sort of new insights which the students have actually derived from his study and then you start grading it higher – yeah but I mean the gross of what I get you know are – if
you like seven and a half – so most of them have completed a logical piece of work – internally consistent and have shown that they can process a problem fairly well. **When do you consider these chats successful?**

Well you can see the way in which they walk to the door – if they have a certain spring in their step it’s been successful – if they go out drooping then it hasn’t been – you see it actually from the next time round or from the stuff that they send you or – the fact that you know they might phone you out of the blue within a couple of days saying that well I’ve done it this way now or that I’ve just thought of this or that I’m doing it this way – I suppose those are all signs of it being successful but I mean you see it next time any way whether it’s been successful – I mean it is nice to send them away – they have the feeling they’re well on the way and that what they’ve done so far has been accepted – you know perhaps with minor criticisms and so on – but every time they should go out thinking that they’ve achieved something that there’s something I’m happy about.

**And when you grade them and you’ve done a lot of steering – do you take that into account?**

To some extent – not to a major extent I mean I think it’s our job to do the steering – but if I think this person couldn’t have got anywhere without my prodding I suppose I would yes bear that in consideration in the mark but not sort of – grossly – I tend to accept that certain people need more guidance than others not because they’re bad students particularly but because they’ve got a difficult topic or they can’t work in that particular way or they’re not used to that kind of you know methodology or whatever – so I tend not to hold it against them generally speaking but I mean in gross cases yes I might say yes well she’s had to be sort of lifted over the barrier – well then perhaps I might knock off one or two marks.

**Anything you’d like to add?**

I don’t think so – I mean it’s all very much of a give-and-take scene – I like to handle it as flexibly as possible and try not to be dogmatic – I mean I’ve said it all I give them the idea that they’re doing something profitable – they’re doing something interesting they’re doing something which I enjoy – which I approve of.

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**Data 2 (Literature: American, male)**

**What do you focus on in your talks?**

It depends a lot – I mean it depends an awful lot on the individual – with a lot of students it has to do with the structure of the paper because that has to do with the
logic of the argument and so — and so lots of times there are problems with the logic of the argument — but that only becomes clear to them if you change around the structure of the argument — you have to change — talk about a particular paragraph — that should come earlier that should come later — with some students it has a lot to do with that — what to talk about when — why they talked about a certain thing at a certain point — instead of later — why they spent so much on one point and not enough time on another point — in other cases it’s — especially usually with better students — they might have lots of ideas and it might be quite well structured — but there are so many different ideas in it that really it’s more an outline for a book instead of the first draft of a thesis or chapter of a thesis — and then you have to say — this is something that you can’t deal with — you should concentrate on this — get better evidence for this point trim down — that’s more a matter of talking about ideas and what ideas are most likely to be fruitful and work into a good thesis — so it depends an awful lot you know — with some at one extreme really — it’s down to sentences and punctuation and which paragraph comes first — because you have to get that straight before the ideas become clear — the other extreme now it’s lots about ideas — which ones are gonna fit best into a thesis.

Do you think that good students and bad students go through the same process?

Yeah I think it’s completely different because — it’s not necessarily good students and bad students but in a way it often — with some students really — they’ve been here four five years — they’ve gotta get through it you know — it almost never happens that somebody’s been here for four five years and they simply never pass — and so in those cases it’s just a matter of trying to get something that’s good enough — to be acceptable and you try to encourage them to lead them up to some ideas to some kind of focussed topic — and you try to polish up the text to get them to fill in on secondary literature — but really it’s just leading them by the hand — with other theses — it’s much more about ideas and they’ve got ideas you’ve got ideas — you talk a lot about it — can be almost a sort of debate where you’ve got one idea about something and they’ve got another idea and you toss it back and forth and they either manage to defend their point of view and keep it in or they don’t — they change their mind about something — but yeah with the weaker students you just never get to that point — because if you’ll say something — they immediately simply take your point of view and — what you have to do is just — be careful not to say too much — for otherwise it just — becomes something that you have fed to them and it’s not their thesis — so yeah it’s completely different — with the best ones — really you learn a lot yourself — and with the worst ones it’s just a matter sort of holding somebody’s hand — until they get to the point where it’s acceptable.
Do you take these matters into account when you give your final mark?
I don’t think so – in a way you do – because – with somebody you might think – well they have to pass – this is the best that they can possibly come up with and so you might think well – I know all we’ve been through – you give them this grade – but I think most of the time – really you try to grade the work – you know what it’s worth however it’s come about – and try not really to grade according to the process but just to look at what you come up with in the end – it only becomes a problem with a student you’ve worked with for four five months six months a year – sometimes longer – and you just know that it’s not gonna get any better – and in those you do – but in other cases I always think myself – especially with students who are reasonably good – it’s gotta be in the end their work you know – you help them as much as you can but their name goes on it – they’ve done it and you can’t really take so much into account what they’ve been through to produce it – you just have to say – well you might think it had potential to be much better but there were certain problems – problems in their personal life or – ideas that they couldn’t quite come to grips with – but I think in the end you have to grade the thing on the basis of what it is – I think that’s true.

You must know your students quite well?
I don’t ever have a student I don’t know reasonably well – and some of mine I know real well – you know they’re people I have had in class for six years – some of them I know too well … [Couldn’t that be difficult – if you know them too well?] Yeah it can be – but what I always try to remember to do – is make it clear at the beginning what the sort of conditions are – because it does get to be a problem if they’ve got all kinds of personal responsibilities – like this woman who was difficult a few years ago – she also had a problem with her job – if she didn’t graduate by a certain time she thought she might lose her job – well that’s terrible – not only do you have that this person who is on the verge of tears all the time but you also have the feeling that her future her career – the food on her family’s table is in your hands and if she doesn’t pass by a certain time and if it’s not good enough by a certain date her family’s going to starve.

When is a thesis a six?
Yeah it’s very hard to say ‘cause what easily happens – especially since we’ve had this long tradition of sort of accepting that if somebody gets to the point of writing a thesis they’re going to pass – I mean I don’t think it ever happens that somebody doesn’t pass – finally – that means that the six – it becomes a kind of catch-all – for the things that shouldn’t be sixes – and maybe also for the things that should be sixes – so you’ve got two people and one of them has written something that really should
be a five – and probably worse – and you give that person a six or a six minus – and so then you’ve got somebody else who really has written a six – that paper that gets a six but deserves a four devalues the six for the person who deserves a six – so there’s a tendency for the real true six to become a seven – and sevens become this great catch-all – it’s got the true sixes – the true sevens all together in one grade – ‘cause it’s not so bad really if someone deserves a six but they get a seven – you put them next to somebody who deserves a seven and gets a seven – it’s not particularly noticeable – but it is bad in a six.

What criteria have you got for a good thesis?
A good thesis is a paper that you could almost publish – that you could almost say – shorten it a bit here – lengthen it a bit there and then that’s publishable – if it’s that good – they don’t come along very often but if it’s that good then it’s at least an eight and maybe a nine – an eight is kind of ambiguous because – for something to be a nine – and there are very very few nines – but it’s got to be original and very carefully researched and thought out – and very well written well put together – it’s got to be really a very polished and original piece of work – but an eight can be either something that’s very original but maybe not very polished – lots of good ideas but a bit messy – a bit poorly organized maybe not so thoroughly researched – so it’s not really a nine but it’s a very original piece of work so it gets an eight – but an eight can also be something that’s not particularly original but very well researched – an interesting topic that requires judgement and hard work and intelligence to put together but not really originality – there have been some real good eights that just because they’re not really original – and I maybe not say brilliantly well written – they get an eight but they’re still very nice pieces of work – so an eight I think can be different things – very well written very well researched not very original – very original not so thoroughly researched as it should have been maybe not so perfectly well written – a nine really has to be everything and a seven that’s usually something that’s – I think typically a seven is something that’s really more straightforward – probably not so original – it’s either very original and not at all well researched – or more often something that is a good straightforward piece of work – a straightforward topic – not very original – not so difficult to do but well done – a straightforward task that’s well done.

When you have tutorials – when do you consider a session successful?
I think mostly it’s successful when the next time you meet you can see that it’s had an influence on the student you know – either because of something I’ve said – if someone comes back a week later or two weeks or a month later – and it’s clear that they’ve really thought about what we talked about – or that they’ve been able to rewrite something on the basis of our discussion of what they’ve written – then you think well that really that was good – lots of times you have a real nice discussion an interesting discussion you know – you toss a lot of ideas around – you have a real
straight discussion about some piece of writing – and then two weeks later a week later – a month later they’re back and – you know nothing’s happened – it seemed really good at the time but it’s not borne any fruit – so really I think you can never tell – you only really know when you can see the results – and sometimes it’s quite startling – you really have the feeling that – sometimes you have these real arguments – it’s really ambiguous you know – they have a problem and you got a few ideas but you don’t have any solution to the problem but then you can see that a month later or a week later that even though it was ambiguous – even though it was sort of vague and unsuccessful it’s somehow come to something – the questions that you discussed were good questions and – the person’s thought more about the questions – and has come up with an answer so you never really know until later.

When you have a session – do you go through what you’ve written or do you focus on different things?
It depends but I think most often we don’t go through all that I’ve written – I pick out kind of typical problems and maybe talk about these and if it’s a real problem then – someone that is difficult to work with – then I might go through it point by point - more often I think I talk more about the kinds of problems – the sort of approach – the general kind of approach that’s wrong – if there’s a certain kind of – say grammatical or problem something about punctuation that they do wrong – then I might talk about that just to make clear what it is they have to do and I think I try to – maybe give them a chance to look the thing over for a little time before just to see if there’s any questions I mean they can just sit there and read through it and see if things are clear.

Data 3 (Linguistics; Dutch, female)

How often do you conduct tutorials when you supervise a thesis?
I think fairly irregularly all of them really except at the end that’s often rather awkward because a number of these people who had a job as teacher and then they had to before the summer holidays rush rush they had to graduate – that’s rather a bore or they could get a job you know if they finished their thesis in time that causes quite a pressure which you could ignore it I suppose but it doesn’t work like that with me – you simply think well god – the kid simply has to finish before September and well then you do the supervising differently – you take different decisions and – what I do most of the time I discussed it with them at a certain moment – said to them well you’ve got so much time left – it looks like it – if you go on like this and you keep the production up then it will be a six and if you want to do it the other way then you
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will have to start working damn hard and – well – we will just come up with a thesis you don’t have to feel ashamed about but then – well most of them wanted to do that.

When are these tutorials successful?
Successful – let me think – it is a success – that means that in the first place that they’ve handed in a draft with some sort of structure – or when I know really clearly what’s the status of this draft they’ve handed in – that it fits in a bit with the stage in the process – is it the very first piece of writing – from very early on I work as much as possible on the basis of what they’ve written – after the first meeting – simply the first time someone has put something on paper you know say something about the theoretical background or something – then of course it’s not good but that doesn’t matter but you should be able to see if someone has tried in an orderly way at least in any way to think about what should come next and what should be discussed and then you’ve got the feeling that with a few fairly clear instructions you can really tell someone – this is missing and look you’ve put this here but it should be somewhere else etcetera and someone sees that too and agrees well then that’s good because then you’ve had a useful conversation and then there are no problems and people won’t panic so easily because it isn’t okay yet because they know too that it has that status but eh then – it has been really good if the next version they hand in if that version has been altered in that sense and I find it enormously frustrating that that very often turns out not to be the case while you at that moment are convinced that people understand what you mean – that they agreed that they saw it your way – and then you get something back and then you think – well isn’t there anything at all I’ve said – I find that the biggest problem - and I’ve often used tapes – let them tape the sessions – said listen to them at home – sometimes that works – sometimes I’ve asked them to do that and they thought that was very useful – I said come on make a tape because things go so fast – or very often I made the suggestion – I said come on make notes or something and sometimes they wouldn’t you know and then I thought well I’ll make the notes and – more and more I’ve come to preparing these talks – that I make some sort of plan – or a number of points I really want to discuss – I wrote them down – structures what had to happen so they could see exactly – well I could say first you have to try to round off the theory – this and this has to be done – or well first you go on describing the data but you have to take care that this and this – but in any case that they’ve got something on paper something concrete to take home – either the tape or the notes – because I’ve noticed that if you don’t do this that – in a number of cases which – how much I tried to limit it – then I said beforehand no longer than one hour and then it became two hours and well you know – if it paid so little dividend then that’s of course frustrating.

Do you also write things in the margin, things you want to be altered or ..?
I tend to do that too much – to correct things myself – especially at the end if they are in a state and can’t stand their own text and it still isn’t up to standard – that I simply
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rewrite a part – just say an important introductory part or just a paragraph – that I
rewrite this myself – and well you know also because often their English is so bad –
the language itself interferes in that sense – that I think well they can’t think clearly
if it isn’t written up correctly – I mean you know bad writing – and I’m sure you
agree with me – according to me is bad thinking – and then well if an introductory
piece on the research questions is not – if that’s not good and clear – then well I think
the writing up will be troublesome.

Are there things you really can’t say to a student – taboo-like?
Well yes I do think there are – that is the double bind you have to deal with – I feel
this very deeply – if things don’t go well – then you think well yes but I should have
done better – you know those people do not reach the end of their studies for nothing
– they can’t be stupid – everybody should at least be able to go through some
literature and report on what they’ve found in a systematic way – and give a
minimally original – well it doesn’t have to be original actually – a sort of systematic
analysis of the data – and it doesn’t have to be perfect – that’s is an important point
by the way – I don’t know exactly myself at what point you can let it pass – because
it is a relatively new field – where there are very few norms – that I’ve sort of
thought up my own norm – that if I have the feeling that somebody has learned an
awful lot from this and if he has been able to describe the literature in an orderly
fashion minimally – or the methodology he’s used – and if it’s minimally clear that
he was able to use it to – well in some cases not all analyses were good – but that in
some cases it happened that they saw that it really produces something – that it
produces more than the intuitions you had – if you sort of do it in this way – that then
well let’s say it is a pass.

Just now you said whether they’ve learned a lot is one of your criteria?
Yes I tell them – if I don’t think the thesis is too wonderful but they’ve really worked
their butt off – and it took him really a lot to take this obstacle – then I think it should
be a seven – not a six.

Do you focus the tutorial or the student – or both?
That depends – I think that first I try to find out – well what I said before – my ideas
about the status of the draft – do they correspond a bit with their ideas – I mean if
they think they’ve written the end all version and that everything is fantastic and I’ve
got the feeling they’re sort of halfway – then there’s a real problem – then you have
to adjust your strategies – that’s often a real shock – then you have to be really
careful – then I sort of gently break the news – with others it’s no problem at all – I
let them read through my comments first.
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Is there anything we’ve forgotten?
What I’ve learned about supervision – well I tended to bring in my own ideas too quickly – you try to be efficient – and then you say what you think and what’s wrong and what has to change – now I’m much more cautious – the first quarter of an hour I try to react to what they’ve written – I really try to work consistently with what they’ve put on paper – try to link this to how I want them to think in order to revise it – and I think that’s the explanation – in as far as it works – that I try to step into their shoes – that I don’t think what nonsense and simply say rewrite this – but that I try during the first ten minutes to really thoroughly discuss what they’ve written and what they haven’t written – I try to lead them slowly into the direction that they see the consequences of what they’ve written – what it leads to – and if they realize then well that’s silly then you’ve reached the point where you can really go on from there – I don’t dare to say it really works but I think it makes sense because you come far too soon – I mean you really interrupt the thought process in an arbitrary way – that they can’t make the connection – so we have to do it – that means it really can’t be anything else but really labour intensive.

Data 4 (Literature, American, male)

Do you make special appointments with students who are writing their thesis with you?
I can make them if that’s necessary and sometimes I do it through the mail – I send them back edited drafts and they send me what they’ve just written so that I can look through it before we actually meet – that’s the way I prefer to do it – so there’s a variety of meetings and other forms of communication – and in fact that turns out in many cases to be a weekly meeting – things are going badly – let’s say they want a bit of help.

How do you go about it - you just go through the ..?
Yeah – I’ve already gone through it – that’s the time-saving factor – it depends a lot on whether they’ve actually written something or not – if not all I feel I can really do is give them a kind of pep-talk and fire lots of suggestions at them but once they actually start putting things down on paper it’s easier all the way round – one has at least a kind of anchor to go by – so I might give them the paper to read and then if they have any questions about my comment or if there is anything that I didn’t want to write out in full we can talk about it from there – or if they are having trouble I’ll ask them very often ‘how do you think it’s going’ you know – you got problems finding the material or do you know where to go next – and I try to do it as a kind of
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problem-solving arrangement on the basis of an edited text – form as well as content – sometimes you have to do the form just so that you can get a clear sense of the content or if you can’t then there is a great difficulty.

Do you correct their English in all their drafts?
Yeah I try to but if I’ve corrected something already and they give me that say the next week – an extra bit with the first bit attached that wasn’t corrected let’s say a xerox of their uncorrected version then I don’t repeat myself – that’s kind of silly and a waste of time but they should have – if they want to do it that way – at least one corrected version of every stage of the draft they’ve written all the way through the thesis – it’s pre-professional training – that sense where the guiding idea should be that some day if they should want to publish they’ll have to know how to submit things in what form – with some the problem of content is sort of essentials versus accidentals and either they have something to say and it comes through despite stylistic problems or they don’t and the style won’t help them – sometimes indeed if it’s too confusing to understand whether they have something or not then we need to talk a bit – state your thesis as briefly as possible and let’s take it from there – and often the problem is indeed that they don’t have a thesis that they’re sort of quoting and rambling and describing without any clear notion of a problem to be addressed or a conflict to be discussed or some sort of drama to anchor the paper.

Do you get that often?
No because that’s the first thing one does – to try to identify a problem – whether it’s a solvable problem or not remains in many cases to be seen but – for example there is a there is a student now writing a thesis on unreliable narration in The Sun Also Rises and she is having a dreadful time and I see her just about every week – and I think she is doing better than she thinks she is but it’s just a lack of confidence on her part – in the theory that she’s got to wade through – theory of unreliability which is a very tricky thing to get right – and in what is Jake Lawrence in The Sun Also Rises unreliable – until she comes up with a kind of satisfactory explanation for herself of where he is unreliable it’s gonna be very rough going – and I cannot do that for her – she’s got to kind of look for it and hopefully she’ll find something.

Do you have some sort of strategies to pull someone in the right direction?
In fact I wrote something on The Sacred Fount on that very issue so she’s got my work to look at as an example of those kind of things and I’ve steered her towards the criticism that I used for my own chapter on unreliability – and that was a problem of a different sort – a healthy sort in a sense – that she found that she had difficulty adding to what was already there in front of her that so much had been said – so there are two difficulties – to get it clarified for herself and I think she did a good job of adding to the critical background and then trying to find ways to look for signs of
unreliability in the text which is – again I’ve given her sort of smorgasboard of possibilities and sent her off to see what she can do.

*So you leave it very much to the student to find their own solutions?*  
I’m trying to – yes I’d hate the thought of writing through the student – I mean I might say ‘if I were to do your topic I might do it this way or that way’ to give them ideas, but I try to stress that they are free to find their own form as long as it meets the requirements of structure, makes sense and sticks to the topic.

*Are there other requirements for a thesis?*  
Well to have a good topic is most of the problem I think – something that is interesting enough and important enough to take you the forty fifty pages of exploration – and something I never understood whether a thesis should be original or not – I gather they don’t have to be exactly original but it’s nice when they can be – and students need to at least write original theses in the sense that they’re discovering things about themselves that they wouldn’t otherwise have known – often I sort of help them write the proposal – for the sake of the committee just – not only to get it through but also to give them a sense of what the question is and what you should go back to when you get stuck somewhere – what is the main point of what you’re doing – so proposal, outline, rough drafts and the final version.

*When you give a mark do you take the process into account?*  
I do – yeah – you always have to measure – ah there are some very difficult cases – a couple I can think of which fortunately weren’t mine – or maybe one of them was mine – but students who really maybe in some absolute sense shouldn’t have passed – because when one thinks that they’re actually becoming a doctorandus with the seal of the University of Amsterdam – of our department – what they’ve done is not perhaps arguably of sufficiently high quality – but if you feel on the other hand that they have done what they’re capable of based on their reputation – the work you’ve seen in class – and time they’ve spent – it’s very difficult at that point to fail them at the last moment – that’s a very painful decision – and that really shouldn’t be the case but on the other hand it’s very hard for an individual to take it upon himself at this point at a long at the end of that history to raise a fuss and say this is unacceptable – so in that sense one measures always the student’s work against one’s sense of what he’s capable of doing – and if you’re convinced that he’s really done what he can – that there’s nothing more to be gotten out of him then that – that carries some weight – sure – it doesn’t carry weight around the eight or nine level let’s say – it carries weight around the five or six level.
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How do you go about it?
Well you just read what they write closely to start with – you show them that you’ve spent time on what they’re doing that you’re concerned – that you don’t have to tell them – they can see that you’ve actually worked on what they’ve given you – and by leading all over it you try to shape it into something that will be better than what they gave you to start with and it’s frustrating whenever they don’t seem to take your advice – those cases are discouraging – but by and large they it is clean next time through.

Have we covered everything?
I can say just to summarize that the basic thing for me would be to work on paper with them as much as possible and to use the paper as a sort of objective lever to encourage them – to help them – there’s a kind of impersonality of what’s actually already on the page that’s useful in personal encounters – so you don’t have to look at them as if they were somehow weak or incapable – it’s just what they’ve written is not adequate in this way and one tries to keep it on that.