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Supervising Geniuses

Reflections on Transmission and Application of the Scientific Apparatus to Doctor Candidates in Creative Fields

In a future workshop, I would like to participate in training and discussing how the scientific apparatus best can be transmitted to, and applied by, doctor candidates in creative fields, which here is taken to mean fields of art and design.

The task of the supervisor of doctor candidates is to help them apply the scientific apparatus appropriately on their chosen topics so that reasonable conclusions may be achieved. Theoretically, this task may seem easy; practically, however, obstacles occur. This essay briefly outlines the concept of the scientific apparatus, the position of the doctor candidates, and supervision models. Conclusively, it welcomes supervision training in neutral and friendly circumstances.

The Scientific Apparatus

In a doctoral project, the scientific apparatus basically demands a consideration and clarification of the following elements:

- the problem treated and arguments for its relevance
- the underlying premises of the work
- *status questionis*, or a literature survey that reveals present state of knowledge
- unambiguous research questions
- hypotheses that are founded on logic, supported by observations or evidence
- the research methodology applied to solve the research questions put forward
- documentation of the collection of data and its analysis
- conclusive discussion
- suggestion of further research

How these elements are accounted for will vary. However, they all should be included explicitly or implicitly in a dissertation. The problem in the creative fields is that some candidates may insist that the scientific apparatus, or part of it, is irrelevant, too theoretical, or does not fit their project. However, the elements of the scientific apparatus are only ingredients. When we cook, whatever we make, we mix fluids, cereals, vegetables and animal stuff. Food consists of these things in the human world. Likewise, the basis of research is expressed in the scientific apparatus. A doctoral candidate has to accept and use it in order to be granted a scientific title. Candidates who refuse to adapt to the scientific

apparatus and choose to play their own games are of course free to do so. However, they should not be astonished if their work is turned down as a doctorate.

The Doctor Candidate

Doctor candidates go through certain steps during a doctoral process. In the very beginning, most will be enthusiastic, having ideas and visions for their future work. When the process starts, new phases set in. The Swedish psychologist Dr. Jitka Lindén lists five steps.

- First, comes confusion, loneliness and the feeling of incompetence.
- Second, the candidate acquires knowledge and may turn arrogant.
- Third, doubts occur whether research is the right thing to do. This phase may enter when the mandatory courses on research are finished and the candidates stand alone and are expected to continue their work on their own. This is a crucial phase.
- Fourth, is the hard working period of implementation and finishing the work, accompanied of a self critical and more realistic attitude.
- Fifth, deals with communication of the research findings, and the adventure of becoming a scholar who is expected to take initiatives, contribute to further theory development, establish new projects and supervise others (Lindén 1998: 67).

The various phases demand different attitudes and actions taken by the supervisor. It may be difficult for the supervisor to understand the situation of the candidate, especially if their meetings are seldom and he/she moves from naïv to arrogant. Nevertheless, the supervisor cannot expect the candidates themselves to overview their phases. Supervision training providing practical examples that can be discussed theoretically may help supervisors perceive future situations rightly and handle them adequately.

Supervision Strategies

The doctoral framework consists, according to Lindén, of four basic elements: an organization, the doctor candidate, the supervisor(s) and the research. These elements interact throughout the process, figure 1.

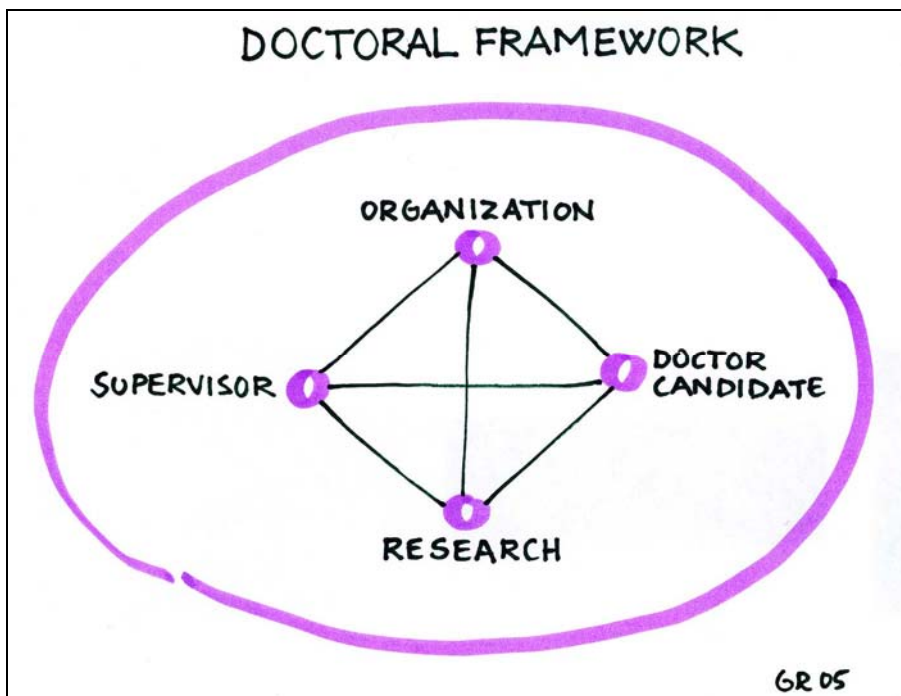


Figure 1 Doctoral framework (Lindén 1998: 58)

If the model is taken as point of departure, different strategies for supervision and their combinations, can be distinguished.

1. Doctor oriented supervision. The candidate is in focus; the well being and personal growth and experience of the candidate is seen as the main factor. The supervisor's role is primarily pedagogical and supportive, whatever the outcome may be.
2. Product oriented supervision. The research is accented; the research process, its methods and outcome is most important. The supervision is professional and skilled, informing and critical, expecting good results.
3. Organization oriented supervision. The needs and requirements of the organization or institution direct the process. This may happen if the institution is dependent on a set number of candidates to get funding. Both research and personal wellbeing suffer under such circumstances.
4. Process oriented supervision takes a holistic perspective, balancing the various perspectives and needs of all the factors involved. At best the candidate will experience personal development professionally and emotionally, and deliver good results that are beneficial for the institution (Lindén 1998: 58-59).

The Supervisor

In the relationship between a supervisor and a doctor candidate, the supervisor is the professional superior. However, one has to distinguish between familiarity with the scientific apparatus and knowledge of the topic in question. In small and newly established academic fields, an appointed supervisor may have a doctoral degree that in principle guarantees the demanded academic skill, but he/she may not be professionally superior in the actual research topic. In such cases, the supervisor at best, is able to give good general advice and be a critical reader. If the candidate needs more, the supervisor should be explicit about the limits of his/her competence and encourage the candidate to seek other professionals when necessary. Still, such a situation is unstable and may give rise to difficulties. When several

supervisors are involved in one project, the reason normally will be that they accent different aspects of the project, which they encourage the candidate to pursue. The candidate may be pulled in various directions, and instead of becoming inspired, may be stuck in contradictory demands. Besides, a conflict of values will easily arise between the professionals involved. Concerning art and design doctorates, such conflicts may be one of art or design expectations versus academic standards.

Conclusion

Respect and humility in all matters, professionally and emotionally, are vital between supervisor and candidate. Academic courtesy towards everyone involved in a research project should be a premise. Opportunities to train and discuss supervision situations among peers in neutral atmospheres may contribute to the development of improved supervision skills. It is very much welcomed!

Literature

Lindén, Jitka. 1998. *Handledning av doktorander*. Sverige: Bokförlaget nya doxa.