



LUND UNIVERSITY

How to train your advisor? Thinking about doctoral advising from the student's perspective

Schmitt, Irina

2010

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schmitt, I. (2010). *How to train your advisor? Thinking about doctoral advising from the student's perspective.*

Total number of authors:

1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Studieuppgift 2

Course Forskarhandledning
Lund University
Spring term 2010
Anders Sonesson
Åsa Lindberg-Sand

How to train your advisor?

Thinking about doctoral advising from the student's perspective

Irina Schmitt
post-doctoral researcher
Centre for gender studies
Lund University
irina.schmitt@genus.lu.se

The best dissertation your advisee can write will come from her feeling that she owns her own work.
(Bolker 1998: 163)

Introduction

Doctoral researchers inhabit a number of sometimes conflicting roles and relationships, both work-related and private. During the work on their thesis, they need to balance these roles and relationships; part of that balancing act is done unwittingly, as awareness about these roles might be limited at first. In this text, I want to reflect on precisely the limitations of the doctoral researcher's knowledge about these roles. For another course, I reflected on research about diverse advising cultures and the process of advising (e.g. Näslund, 1999). For this paper, I am more interested in thinking about the expectations doctoral researchers might have in their advisors and the process of advising.

Therefore, I asked a group of doctoral researchers in different institutions to send me their ideas about how advising should be ideally. I purposefully did not ask them to reflect their current experiences, in order to make the 'task' less threatening. Rather, I asked them about their 'ideal handledare': "Hur se bra handledning ut för dig? Vad innebära det? Gärna fantisera lite. Ni behöver inte redovisar realiteten (men kan gör det, om ni vill)".

In the end, three colleagues replied, from three different institutions, and at different stages of their work; all three present as women. Two send their thoughts, one asked me to meet informally to talk about her ideas. Two mostly reflected, both critically and positively, on their ongoing advising, one created a brief guideline for advisors.¹ I would like to present this guideline as a starting point, as it reflects both some of my own irritations as a doctoral student not that many years ago, and some of the issues I would like to take up in this text:

¹ I refrain from presenting them more biographically, to protect their anonymity; the names given are pseudonyms.

Vad är bra handledning?

Jag har haft ganska lite tid att fundera över detta, då min doktorandtid just är inne på sin [...] månad... Men jag har ändå en del tankar, kanske speciellt då om handledning inledningsskedet av forskarutbildningen.

Så några råd till en handledare:

1. **Prata** med doktoranden hur ni ska jobba! Hur vill du jobba, vad förväntar du dig av doktoranden, vad kan doktoranden förvänta sig av dig. Bestäm tillsammans hur ni ska lägga upp handledning. Ska det alltid diskuteras en text, eller ska ni träffas regelbundet för att stämma av läget?
2. **Tänk** på att doktoranden kanske inte vet alls vad som förväntas, praktiskt och intellektuellt. Prata om arbetsplatsen, seminariekulturen, vad som kan vara en lämplig tidsplan för att göra kurser/fältarbete och skrivande. Sen är det ju inte säkert att doktoranden håller med, men då slipper man gissa.
3. **Tips** om kurser, sommarskolor, mailinglistor och karriärplanering. Som handledare vet du saker som tar ganska lång tid att leta reda på själv. Rådgivning kring praktikaliteter ska inte underskattas.
4. **Berätta** för doktoranden hur du är som handledare och vad som kan vara bra att söka hos en biträdande handledare. Om du är snäll och stöttande kanske doktoranden behöver någon som läser mer kritiskt? Om du inte alls forskar inom doktorandens område, förklara vad du ändå kan så att en biträdande handledare kan väljas med hänsyn till detta. Och också så att doktoranden vet vad hon/han kan förvänta sig.
5. **Summan av allt ovan kanske är tydlighet?** Jag tycker att det är viktigt att alla vet vad som gäller, det tar ganska mycket energi att gissa sig till saker.

På ett mer personligt plan, jag drömmer om en handledare som utmanar mina tankar, som läser kritiskt, som förstår vad jag säger (och som berättar om han/hon inte gör det!), som uppmuntrar, som kan dra fram mina huvudpoänger när jag är ostrukturerad, som kan berätta för mig vad jag säger och hur det framstår. Som förstår balansen mellan att uppmuntra, ställa krav, stötta och vara solidariskt. (Emma, D1)

The main point of these ideas is clarity, quite likely fed by the frustration of having to do guesswork on central aspects of the doctoral process. With this text, I would like to explore this question further – is it an important tool in advising doctoral researchers to let them do their own ‘footwork’, as a means to acquire independence and a sense of entitlement? Or is this simply a waste of time in an already short educational process?

Academic cultures – who belongs?

Beyond the concrete advising situation that involves a specific doctoral researcher, advising is also a tool of acculturation, or even of ‘cultural cloning’ (Essed & Goldberg, 2002). The process of doctoral education is not value-free. As statistics about the participation of women and minoritized students in higher education and in senior positions in academia show², participation in academia has less to do with merit than with the reproduction of existing ideas of academic habitus. Philomena Essed and David Goldberg write about ‘cultural cloning’, a concept I find particularly useful in the analysis of participation and belonging in academia:

Whereas biological cloning is still for the most part a fiction waiting to be realized, the *cultural cloning* of preferred types to inhabit segregated spaces is everyday practice, especially among social elites. The notion of *cultural cloning*, initially used to problematize the systemic reproduction of white, masculine homogeneity in high status positions (Essed 2002), brings into focus another side of exclusion. Yet, same-kind preference reproducing white (Euro) masculine privileges in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, or profession is not countered with the same force of indignation as we find in the case of the suggestion of biological cloning. (Essed & Goldberg, 2002, p. 1068)

It is in this light I find the discussion of advising highly interesting. Following Essed and Goldberg, advising is not merely the task of helping a junior researcher in the process of writing their (probably) first book-length text.³ It is even more so the socialization of ‘trainee academics’ into the academic way of life. This process might be more or less transparent, both to the advisor and the doctoral researcher. Researchers acknowledge this aspect (to some extent). Gunnar Handal and Per Lauvås discuss “studenter som vårt akademiska system inte tar hand om tillräckligt bra” (Handal & Lauvås, 2008, p. 205 ff). While the aim of their chapter on ‘under-supported students’ is obviously positive, I find their approach theoretically limited:

² If they exist at all – little differentiated knowledge exists, while anecdotal evidence points to a ‘disappearance’ of minoritized students after graduation.

³ Here, my own assumptions about doctoral researchers become clear: they are ‘normally’ young, and have not yet written a longer text independently. Obviously, this does not reflect the situation of all doctoral students; for various reasons, they might start with a list of publications under their belt.

Förutom det ofrånkomliga i att kvinnor är kvinnor – och män är män – är det trots allt de personliga kvaliteterna hos bägge partner, och inte minst hos handledaren, som är avgörande för hur väl handledningen fungerar. (Handal & Lauvås, 2008, p. 213)

More nuanced is the analysis of Dorte Marie Søndergaard, who writes about the process of 'making women into academics' and the surprise of male senior colleagues that female junior colleagues have to 'give up their femininity' in order to be successful in academia (Søndergaard, 2005, p. 201). Søndergaard also discusses the issue of power; women may be seen in highly "heteroerotic" terms, and thus powerfully restricted through those limiting expectations (Søndergaard, 2005, p. 202). As a doctoral researcher, these very gendered cultures are part of the 'training', and need to be negotiated, not only by women.

Obviously, gender is just one category of power that works in the process of 'cloning' Essed and Goldberg discuss. Educational class, that is, previous experience of the culture of higher education with all its unwritten class-coded rules is equally important to discuss. Following feminist and anti-racist approaches, teaching in general requires an understanding of diversity and the wish to counteract oppression within the classroom and around it (Kumashiro 2002: e.g. 31-32). Doctoral researchers come to an advisory meeting with diverse learning experiences, diverse approaches to learning and diverse cultural knowledge. As an advisor, I need to take this into account in order to support them in their own work, and I need to reflect my own cultural expectations. This does not mean that 'culture' should be used as a excuse for a laissez-faire approach; rather, the reflection of 'cloning cultures' needs to be followed by a demand to have high expectations of all junior researchers.⁴

Dreaming about the perfect advisor

In their comments to my question, the doctoral researchers had differing ideas of what makes the advising process most productive.⁵ As the earlier quote shows, Emma is very clear that transparency about the process and the expectations of both the teacher and the student are central, and lacking in her own advising right now (Emma, D1). She also reflected on the need for an advisor who is actually interested in the work of the doctoral researcher:

På ett mer personligt plan, jag drömmer om en handledare som utmanar mina tankar, som läser kritiskt, som förstår vad jag säger (och som berättar om han/hon inte gör det!), som uppmuntrar,

⁴ Here I want to develop my ideas further.

⁵ I am obviously aware that this is not a full-fledged, thoroughly theorized analysis, and will take the liberty of doing a relatively superficial discussion of the material.

som kan dra fram mina huvudpoänger när jag är ostrukturerad, som kan berätta för mig vad jag säger och hur det framstår. Som förstår balansen mellan att uppmuntra, ställa krav, stötta och vara solidariskt (Emma, D1)

This topic is also taken up by the second doctoral researcher who answered, Hanna (D2):

En bra handledare tycker jag också är en som tar sig tid, visar engagemang och som ger feedback och lyssnar, men visst är det svårt att uppfylla de kraven, det ska ju passa med val av ämne, intresseområden, personlighet och så vidare. Positiv och glad och inspirerande är också viktigt, samt en som pushar och tror på det man gör. (Hanna, D2)

These thoughts are interesting in a number of ways. First, this colleague argues for an advisor who is able both give (critical) feedback and be supportive. She then immediately 'changes sides', and reflects that it might actually be hard on the advisor to be so demanding.

Hanna also writes positive (or partly positive) experiences with senior colleagues who offered advising, that are quite different from the meetings she has with her main advisor, for whom she mainly presents the work she has done, without getting further discussions.

han tog sig tid att lyssna, han kom med många idéer och hjälpte mig under ca tre timmar, med att titta på litteratur, problemformulering osv. Han brainstormade och det gav verkligen betydligt mer än redogörelse. Vi ritade modeller på tavlan, diskuterade och bollade problem. Efter de tre timmarna kände jag att jag fått ut mer än på alla timmar jag tidigare haft handledning. Min andra handledare är bra, han svarar snabbt på mail, läser snabbt och kommenterar på ett bra sett - däremot kan det vara mycket press ibland, att man ska presentera, att man ska prata inför studenterna för att träna osv. Han sätter mycket press men det funkar bra, i slutändan brukar jag förstå vad som var poängen. (Hanna, D2)

What Hanna finds productive is that both these colleagues actually engage her work, and take the time to do so. Having to wait for an unspecified time

I took notes from a discussion with the third doctoral researcher, Marta, who shared her ideas. She spoke about the need for the advisor to find "balans mellan fria tyglar och deadlines" (Marta, D3, from notes). More than the other two, she also reflected on the wish to have a advisor who invests in the doctoral researcher's project and has the approach that "vi jobbar tillsammans" (Marta, D3). This takes up the wish presented by the first colleague (Emma, D1) that the advisor should be solidaric with the younger researcher. Yet, even this third colleague spoke about the need for greater structure, with clear time for literature review on the first year and courses that demand written assignments with clear relevance for the thesis, as well as a clear 'avhandlingsplan'.

Initially, I was surprised that the three colleagues – with their different positions – demanded more ‘control’ from the advisor, in a sense that the advisor should clarify the process of the work. While Hanna has a stronger focus on the advisor actually being available, Emma was more demanding in terms that both participants in this process need to be clear how the process should be going. Even if the advisor would want to limit their commitment, it is essential that the doctoral researcher knows what to expect, and what to find elsewhere.

Being/finding an ideal advisor?

Joan Bolker takes up the discussion of the roles teachers (feel they should or expected to) take up in the advising process:

In an ideal world your advisor would be a mentor, a expert in your field, a coach, an editor, and a career counselor; someone to guide, teach, and encourage you from the first glimmer you have of ‘the Right Topic’ to your happy acceptance of a job offer from the institution of your choice. There are, however, few human beings who can fill that entire job description. (Bolker, 1998, p. 19)

Realistically, not even the most demanding doctoral researcher will expect any teacher to be able to inhabit all these roles. Yet, again following Bolker,

[it] is essential to remember how much power you hold in your student's life, not to abuse it, and to think hard about how best to use it on the student's behalf. (Bolker 1998: 170)

But is it not the doctoral researcher's responsibility to understand their field and the thesis process on their own? Of course, being able to ‘survive’ a highly obscure acculturation process can feel, in some way, wonderful. At the same time, we rarely meet those who ‘got lost on the way’. Demanding self-sufficient junior researcher who can make their own way, also reflects currently fashionable notions of independent citizens in neoliberal times. Independence can, with reference to the idea of cloning cultures, be translated as ‘being a cultural match, fitting in’. I, purposefully, read these doctoral researchers' demands for advisors who are active in the process of advising, both with regard to the concrete research and more broadly in terms of academic cultures and participation, as a critical reflection of an academic culture that reproduces itself.

Literature

- Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: a guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis* (1st ed.). New York: H. Holt.
- Essed, P., & Goldberg, D. T. (2002). Cloning cultures: the social injustices of sameness. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25(6), 1066-1082.
- Handal, G., & Lauvås, P. (2008). *Forskarhandledaren*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Näslund, J. (1999). *Uppsatshandledning: Många frågor och några svar (CUP:s rapportserie)*. Linköping: Linköpings universitet, Centrum för universitetspedagogik.
- Søndergaard, D. M. (2005). Making Sense of Gender, Age, Power and Disciplinary Position: Intersecting Discourses in the Academy. *Feminism & Psychology*, 15(2), 189-208.