Talking about writing: What to do when a problem comes up?

Handout

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Strategies and Pitfalls

[for more details on my study, see *Summary*]

A supervisor raising a problem
In general those problems concern a certain aspect of the thesis the supervisor is not satisfied with (disapproval).
Frequent pattern: supervisors explains the problem and suggests an alternative. Students might respond in different ways:
1. minimal (unmarked) acknowledgements: *okay, yes*
2. intention to follow the suggestion: *yes, I will do that*
3. a positive evaluation of the suggestion: *that's a good idea*
4. a 'display of understanding': *so you mean that I should …..*
5. a negative evaluation of the suggestion: *yes but I think …, on the contrary….*

- Response 1, 2 and 3 do not give clear indications as to **how** the student has interpreted the suggestion: shared cognition is not sure.
- Response number 4 on the contrary does. The display of understanding appears to illicit corrections or clarifications given by the supervisor, that seem necessary. Hence, it is profitable to ask the student for displays.
- Response number 5 may lead to a more extended discussion concerning the problem raised by the supervisor. Comparison of less and more successful discussions lead to the following features threatening the efficiency:
  - ➢ the absence of 'metacommunicative' moments in which statements and positions are being made explicit;
  - ➢ supervisors not accepting the solution proposed by the student;
  - ➢ the discussion leaving the central point, taking 'side paths' (after which the discussion is being started up again from the beginning);
  - ➢ repetition of statements without arguing the underlying arguments.

In the observed cases discussions could become extremely wrong if supervisors (and students) communicated merely from a 'persuasive' perspective. In that cases speakers are concerned with convincing the other one, rather than exploring the statements and arguments. In this, the supervisor acts in his/her role of the expert and assessor, knowing what is right and wrong.

A student raising a problem
In general those problems are expressed in words like: *I don't know how …* Supervisors might respond in different ways: (1) propose a solution, answer the student's question, (2) ask for more information, (3) postpone the problem to a further moment in the conversation or to a next meeting, (4) solve or analyse the problem collaboratively.

Advances and pitfalls and of those responses:
1. *propose a solution, answer the student's question*
- (+) it might be a quick way to fix
- (-) the student is not stimulated to solve the problem by himself and the solution might concern just this particular problem. The learning effect in the long term will be minimal
- (-) in several of the studied cases, even more elaborated solutions by which a supervisor demonstrates the way of thinking (the reasoning) within the discipline, appear to lack the desired learning effect (-) it is not the most adequate solution or answer
- (-) it might be the wrong answer or a bad advice

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2. ask for more information
- (+) the supervisor can change his 'speaking mode' into that of a listener
- (+) this might illicit the causes and precise features of the problem or question, which improves the chances for a proper response
- (-) the supervisor should be able to interpret the student's answers in a way which helps diagnosing the problem
- (-) it might impede the structure of the conversations if questions are being asked 'in-between'
- (-) the supervisor has to be patient in order to give enough time to the poor-formulating the student

3. postpone the problem to a further moment in the conversation
- (+) the structure of the conversation can be kept tight
- (-) it might be forgotten

or to a next meeting – most of the time combined with an assignment for the student to first work on the problem and see how it goes
- (+) that next time, more concrete results of the student working on the problem, might be available; this will give more and clearer indications as to the severity and precise properties of the problems experienced by the student
- (+) particularly useful with anxious student's 'seeing' all kind of problems that have not yet occurred
- (-) the student might loose time working on it in the completely wrong way (and will have to do it over again)

4. solve or analyse the problem collaboratively
(+) the supervisor can observe the student's knowledge and skills
(+) the supervisor can observe student's problems and thus help or correct 'to the point'
(+) it might help the student overcome barriers s/he cannot bridge her/himself (all alone at home)
(-) observed supervisors appear to be the most active solvers: about 75% of the words spoken in these scenes are uttered by the supervisor; it tends to be 'modeling' in stead of working together
(-) the supervisor should be a good coach
(-) it takes a lot of time

General remarks

1. Talking about writing is a rather complex activity, because of:
   - ➢ the complex content (designing a scientific research, gathering and analysing data, proper written presentation);
   - ➢ the different roles a supervisor has to play: teacher, coach, assessor (gatekeeper) and sometimes editor;
   - ➢ inabilities of speakers to formulate their thoughts in a clear way. More specifically: being clear about the propositional and action knowledge necessary for completing the thesis task in a proper and efficient way;
   - ➢ risks of 'Face Threatening Activities'. More specifically: the 'negative face' of the student being threatened by a supervisor minimising student's autonomy, the 'positive face' of the student being threatened by the critics of the supervisor and when s/he asks for explanations on aspects of the task that are considered being known (for example: *academic level, good research question, working things out*. So called *institutional key words*). The positive face of the supervisor might be threatened if s/he appears to be wrong or incapable explaining things;
   - ➢ talking, thinking and listening are difficult (impossible) to perform simultaneously;

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➢ procedural knowledge is required for explaining problems; if this lacks, speakers can just talk in terms of problems (evaluations) and solutions, not in terms of causes (explanations);
➢ time pressure while working on an extensive task.

2. When a problem comes up, people tend to respond by suggesting a solution. Efficiency will be threatened if the analysis and/or diagnosis of the problem appears to be inadequate. When discussing major issues of the thesis, it is worthwhile exploring the problem first.

3. Repetitive patterns shouldn't occur more than twice. This specifically concerns patterns like: student raising a problem → supervisor suggesting a solution → student repeating the problem → supervisor repeating solution etc. In that case the supervisor should change his/her strategy. For example: discussing why the student does not accept the solution or examining the problem together.

4. Supervisors spear to be dominant in the thesis conversations: they control the structure of the conversations by bringing in most of the (sub) topics and they talk more (on the average 67% of the words, ranging in the nine conversations from 53% till 74%). Students talk more when they bring in a subject and when the supervisors opens a scene with a question. In some cases, when a problem has been discussed several times yet, asking students to tell their stories appears to lead to a break-through. Apparently because the information raised in this way, enables the supervisor to a response aligning the student's perspective.

Table 8.14
Amount of words uttered by Supervisor and Student in different types of scene openings

Types of scene openings	Number	Words Sp (%)	Words St (%)
Openings by Supervisor			
Question Sp	45	55	45
Problem Sp	27	73	27
Proposal Sp	91	80	20
Openings by Student			
Question St	21	55	45
Problem St	18	48	52
Proposal St	18	53	53
Total	220		

Tabel 8.16
Division of different types of scene openings in different kind of scenes

	Talking specifically about text		Other scenes	
	N	%[1]	*N*	%
Questions	12	18	54	82
Problems	21	47	24	53
Proposals	38	35	71	65
Total	71	32	149	68

[1] This is the amount of that type of opening in text scenes in relation to the total amount of openings of that typeFor example: of all question openings 18% is uttered in text scenes, 82% in the other scenes.

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A fragment from a thesis Conference (Case 3: Science Education)

The student's text is being discussed and the supervisor raises a problem. The response of the student indicates that the interaction (instruction) of the supervisor might not be the most adequate way to discuss this problem.

This dialogue originally is in Dutch; I have tried to translate the (clumsiness of) the speech as accurate as possible. This clumsiness and lack of grammaticality is normal in conversations.

[Sp]* 131. Over there, there is a small 'break point' and you can see that uhm that might be a very small detail but that uh yeah we will have to look once whether those texts, like you if you build a text logically so that's why I examine this little piece more narrow, deeper, uhm won't do it everywhere though

[St]* 132. (???)*

[Sp] 133. look the little word, referential words, *in there* <…>* and if you, also when you, here for example, **the** *interview,* that's, that's a uh

[St] 134. which interview

[Sp] 135. yes, which interview then, so the use of that kind of words that refer to something, that means that in advance something has to be said about it so yeah that is such a general thing

[St] 136. referential words

[Sp] 137. use of *in here, in there* or *by that,* or

[St] 138. *the research*

[Sp] 139. *the*, use of a definite particle, you see it too and that is (???)

[St] 140. yes, that is

[Sp] 141. is also at another spot, **the** *general risk scheme*

[St] 142. **the** *general*

[Sp] 143. does it say which one? that also is an example of this. And for example a bit upwards in the text, **the** *intuitive notions*, so that's yeah with writing this kind of things, if you handle that more consciously you will end up with an easier, better, maybe more logical structure

[St] 144. yes, the one time it can be clarifying so what you mean exactly, or keep it vague, **an** *interview*

[Sp] 145. yes, often you can indeed solve this by writing *an* in stead of *the* or

[St] 146. yes, or indeed what, because I have with several things you have there, cause we have discussed this already and I have adjusted several in that it do is clear that okay what do we mean by a number of things

[Sp] 147. well, okay, I will not be going to concerning all kind of things, I have done it here once as an example because we should once

[St] 148. yes, fine

[Sp] 149. talk about it <…> uh <…> and I <…> another remark (…)*

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* [Sp]: the supervisor speaking
* [St]: the student speaking
* (???): unclear passage
* *italic*: when speakers refer to words in the student's text
* <…>: short pause
* (…): turn continues

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