

Best practice in supervisor feedback to thesis students

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Research Team

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Project Aims

- To investigate what supervisors **and** students consider best practice in the provision of feedback on thesis drafts
- To investigate the extent to which their views & practices are supported by textual evidence

Theoretical justification

- Justification of feedback on several levels:
 - Theoretically
 - Genre theory - the relationship between function, content, organisation and language choice (Hyland, 2000; Swales, 2004)
 - Socio-cultural theory – negotiated instruction; scaffolding/supervision of draft writing; ‘model’ text analysis (Dudley-Evans, 1986; Lantolf, 2000; Storch, 2002)
 - Pedagogically
 - The equivalent of instruction in the classroom

Research justification

- Available research
 - Response to undergraduate writing since early 80s
 - L1 – Brannon & Knoblauch, 1981
 - L2 – Zamel, 1985; Leki, 1990
 - At postgraduate level, focus on difficulties from supervisor & student perspectives
 - Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cooley & Lewcowicz, 1997; Dong, 1998
- Research gap
 - Response/feedback on thesis drafts

Focus of study

- Supervisor views and practices re feedback on thesis drafts
- Student views on feedback provided
- The feedback given on drafts of student writing
- Similarities & differences within & across disciplines
- Similarities & differences in feedback given to/ received by L1 & L2 students

Supervisor perspective (1)

- Strengths & weaknesses of student writing
- Aims & priorities
- What kind of feedback provided
 - Content
 - Part-genre requirements/expectations
 - Organisation & structure
 - Coherence & cohesion
 - Linguistic accuracy & appropriateness

Supervisor perspectives (2)

- How feedback is provided
 - Overall system
 - When provided & why
 - How provided – meetings
 - Factors determining method
- Expectations & experiences of student response to feedback
- How effectiveness is determined
- Training
 - Is training provided?
 - Training recommendations
- Advice for new supervisors

Student perspectives

- Benefits of feedback
- Feedback priorities
- How feedback is provided
- Additional feedback desired
- Advice for new supervisors

Method

- Multi-method approach: triangulation of data
- Questionnaire – all 88 supervisors & students (not pair matched)
- Interviews – sub-set of 50 supervisors & students
- Text analysis – samples of thesis drafts

Participants

- 6 New Zealand universities
- 3 discipline areas: Humanities; Commerce; Science/Maths
- Supervisors – 35 questionnaire; 28 interview
- Students – 53 questionnaire; 22 interview

Focus of this presentation

- What supervisors say they provide feedback on - content knowledge
- Supervisor advice for new supervisors
- What students see as feedback priorities
- Student advice for new supervisors

What supervisors say they focus on when giving feedback

Area 1 - content knowledge

Content elements	Humanities(17)	Science/ maths(11)	Commerce(7)	Total (35)
1.Content feedback given	16	9	7	32
2.No content feedback given	0	2	0	2
3.On gaps in literature	6	1	3	10
4.On irrelevance	4	0	3	7
5.On wider significance	1	2	1	4
6.on arguments given	1	2	1	4
7.on literature guidance	2	2	1	5
8.on theory	1	0	2	3

Content knowledge feedback

- Questionnaires – 32/35 gave content feedback
- TA – supported Q – 14/15 scripts gave it
- Interviews elucidated one Q response in detail
 - Feedback on content GAPS
 - Theoretical understanding & coverage
 - Incomplete understanding of key concepts/constructs
 - Need to consider the BIG picture
 - Need to give a critical focus
 - Need to justify/explain arguments
 - Provide refs to new literature in the field
- Other areas discussed in interviews:
 - What needs to be edited out – *raided material*
 - What needs to be focused on next

Areas of focus – text analysis

Focus of FCs	Number of texts	Range across texts	Average per text
Content	14	2-12	6.6
Part genres	11	1-7	1.7
Coherence & cohesion	7	1-6	1.2
Linguistic accuracy & appropriateness	13	5-33	15

Advice to new supervisors

Advice	Humanities (17)	Sciences/Math (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
Identify problems; guide but don't solve	8	1	4	13
Focus on macro	5	1	2	8
Provide detailed specific feedback	4	2	1	7
Include positive feedback	5	0	0	5
Don't respond to all issues at once	5	0	0	5

STUDENT FEEDBACK PRIORITIES

The student perspective

- Across all three disciplines 53 students completed questionnaires and a subset of 22 was subsequently interviewed.
- The principal foci of questionnaires and interviews were:
 - Identified benefits of feedback
 - Identified feedback priorities
 - The ‘feedback system’
 - Suggestions for new supervisors

Identified benefits of feedback

Identified benefits	Humanities (34)	Sciences / Maths (4)	Commerce (15)	Total (53)
1. Helps with appropriate language	14	1	3	18
2. Keeping the student 'on track'	12	0	4	16
3. Helps to improve the content	8	0	5	13
4. Encouragement and motivation	7	0	3	10
5. Logical organisation	6	0	0	6

Identified feedback priorities

Types of feedback received		Humanities (34)	Sciences / Maths (4)	Commerce (15)	Total (53)
Content	1. Relevance to literature	14	0	0	14
	2. Rethinking the way the work is being presented	10	2	0	12
	3. Help with finding literature	9	1	0	10
	4. Appropriacy of methodology	7	1	0	8
Organisation and structure	1. Organisational specifics	18	3	4	25
	2. Overview of organisation	10	2	4	16
	3. Cutting out or condensing irrelevant material	7	0	0	7
Accuracy of language	1. Vocabulary and register	18	0	5	23
	2. Grammar and spelling and punctuation	12	3	6	21

Feedback system

Feedback system	Humanities (34)	Sciences / Maths (4)	Commerce (15)	Total (53)
1. Written feedback followed by face-to-face meeting	26	3	11	40
2. Only / largely written feedback	3	0	1	4
3. Only / largely oral feedback	2	0	3	5

Suggestions for new supervisors

Suggestions for new supervisors	Discipline area	Number of respondents	Total (53)
1. Focus on both written and oral feedback with a view to feedforward	Humanities + Commerce	11 + 1	12
2. Make positive and constructive comments alongside critique	All disciplines	7 + 1 + 3	11
3. Understand the project	Commerce	5	5
4. Give suggestions but do not be too directive	Humanities	3	3

Suggestions for new supervisors (2)

- It is important to have positive feedback and encouragement (Humanities).
- Provide consistent and timely feedback (Sciences / Mathematics). (For this student 'consistent' incorporated ensuring that feedback from different supervisors was not contradictory.)
- Provide clear feedback ... not just questions which lead a student to wonder about how to interpret the feedback and what to do next (Humanities)

Suggestions for new supervisors (3)

- The supervisor needs to engage with the work (Humanities)
- The supervisor needs to be enthusiastic (Humanities x 2)
- Encourage students' ownership of their own work. The student needs to make the final decisions - this is a negotiated partnership (Humanities)
- The supervisor needs to make it clear that feedback is the opinion of the supervisor, but that the work is the student's own. This leads to a sense of empowerment for the student (Sciences / Mathematics)

Conclusions

- Content important to supervisors
 - A wide range of feedback areas & advice to new supervisors
 - project reveals the importance of a triangulated approach
 - Interviews often provided additional insights (e.g. Gaps; theory), lively illustrations (e.g. raided material); and sometimes a different picture to Questionnaire responses
 - TA generally supported Questionnaire and Interview responses (e.g. content; part-genre) but not always (e.g. coherence & cohesion)
 - No major differences in approach to L1 and L2 students at this level;
 - Only minor differences in approach of supervisors from the different discipline areas

Conclusions (2)

- Issues important to students:
 - Students valued written feedback on the organisation *specifics* of their writing, in particular the *quality, choice and appropriateness* of language.
 - Students wanted to receive positive and constructive comments alongside comments that critiqued their work.
 - Written feedback needed to be followed by face-to-face meetings.
 - The *relationship* between supervisor and student needed to be framed as a partnership of equals.
 - Supervisors also needed to recognise that ultimately the work was the students' own.

Limitations/constraints

- Sample size limited our ability to make meaningful comparisons across disciplines
- Wide range of views & practices were mentioned by some participants but this does not mean that others did not have similar views & practices – this made quantitative comparisons less meaningful
- Management of data collection process was problematic
- Reticence of supervisors currently supervising students to take part in Q, interview & bring sample feedback
- Variation in views & practices according to particular stages of the supervisory period were not accounted for

Further research

- Use the categories and responses provided in this project to mount a more quantitative investigation of feedback provided/received e.g. Develop a series of behavioural & attitudinal statements to be used in a closed-ended questionnaire (Likert-scale & ranking questions)
- Compare feedback given at different stages of the supervision process
- Sample size – comparable across discipline areas