Professors as mediators of academic text cultures: An interview study with advisors and masters degree students in three disciplines in a Norwegian university

Olga Dysthe, University of Bergen, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on supervising professors and master’s degree students’ understanding and experiences of supervision practices in a Norwegian university, with focus on differences in text cultures and text norms between and within three academic disciplines. The interview study shows that each discipline is a heterogeneous discourse community with largely unarticulated differences. The findings suggest three supervision models, described as Teaching, Partnership, and Apprenticeship. Dominant trends in supervisory relationships and textual practices are distinguished, and characteristics of each are outlined. Connections are shown between the models supervisors adhere to, the kind of texts they expect from their students, and how they provide feedback. As an example of this, conflicting attitudes toward exploratory student texts are discussed. The study shows that supervision models and textual expectations are influenced by the disciplinary text cultures in which supervisors and students take part. Finally, some practical implications of the study are suggested.

KEYWORDS: supervision, writing, graduate students, academic text cultures, dialogism

Introduction

In supervising and mentoring graduate students, professors represent the disciplinary culture and the discourse society into which the graduate student is being socialized, and the supervisor’s conceptualization of the supervision relationship is of great importance for the interactions between the two about the student’s text. This interview study of supervisors and master’s degree students in Norway focused on writing and supervision for three reasons. First, texts are pivotal to research, and much supervision tends to focus on the writing of texts and the interaction around texts. Second, in spite of an increasing amount of research on supervision in the emerging research field of pedagogy in higher education, little attention has been paid until recently to writing and text-based supervision (Lee, 1998, p. 121). The extensive research on writing and response in English and in Applied Linguistics is unfamiliar to most researchers in Education, and there is clearly a need to bring together the different research traditions that illuminate different aspects of writing in higher education. Third, my own contact with graduate students across the disciplines has confirmed that supervisors’ attitude to students’ writing, as well as their expectations of students’ texts, varies a great deal and is of utmost importance to the students’ writing development.¹
My research questions focused on the ways specific social and institutional contexts shaped supervision practices, and particularly on disciplinary text cultures and text norms as well as criteria for good student texts. I also investigated students’ and supervisors’ views of what constitutes good supervision, particularly as it relates to the development of the written texts.

I chose to interview both students and supervisors because understanding both perspectives is vital to gaining new insights and to changing practices. A common perspective in writing research has been to separate the two groups, and in spite of the growing understanding of their interrelatedness, there is still a strong tendency to view a student’s success or failure in writing a thesis as a question of individual writing skills (Torrance & Thomas, 1994). I conducted separate interview studies in three disciplines: History of Religions in the humanities, Administration and Organizational Science in the social sciences, and Fishery and Marine Biology in the natural sciences. My informants were ten master’s degree students and eight professors in each discipline.

In this article, I first describe the textual traditions of each of the three disciplines as understood by the supervisors. The information underlying this section was primarily provided by the professors. I then identify three distinct models of supervision—which I call the Teaching Model, the Partnership Model, and the Apprenticeship Model—and discuss characteristics of each of them in light of disciplinarity. I finally look more closely at one aspect of supervision—the use of exploratory texts in the thesis writing process—and discuss the models in light of sociocultural theory.

Contextualizing the Research Study

Because a research study, like any other text, is deeply embedded in the cultural, institutional, and personal situation from which it arose, I briefly provide some background information. Because graduate supervision is closely tied to mentoring the writing processes and giving feedback on texts, the tradition and status of writing at Norwegian universities is a pertinent starting point.

The Norwegian university tradition has been strongly influenced by the German Humboldt idea of a university emphasizing institutional independence, academic freedom (also for students), and research-based teaching, but the more utilitarian American university tradition has competed with the German tradition in shaping the modern Norwegian university (Bleikli, 1997). The Norwegian university model has been called an “exam giving university in contrast to the Anglo-American instruction giving university” (Øverland, 1988, 1994), and critics of our system have said that while American students “take courses,” Norwegian students “take exams.” Except in professional studies, students have in principle been free to acquire the required knowledge in any way they want. It follows from such a system that students’ grades depend only on the final exam, that writing papers is optional, and that there is a very strong emphasis on external assessors in order to secure a fair evaluation of the final exam.

Writing has traditionally been considered one of the skills students are supposed to possess when they entered academic life, and specific writing instruction was therefore not deemed necessary. As they are throughout Europe, “First year composition courses” are nonexistent at Norwegian universities, but short preparatory courses in Academic Writing have been introduced. Writing has long had a prominent place in high school instruction, and new students are generally unprepared for the demands of writing at the university.² A survey I made in 1995 at the University of Bergen showed that a considerable number of master’s degree
students had never written any formal papers during their undergraduate years except at sit-down exams of 6-8 hours. However, that picture is changing due to the Quality Reform.

The Norwegian master’s degree has traditionally included an extensive research project alongside course work, with a time frame of one and a half to two years in the humanities and social sciences and three semesters in the natural sciences. Writing thus gains vital importance at the graduate level, and many students experience problems finishing within the expected time frame. To meet this challenge, the system of supervision or mentoring has been redesigned to include supervision contracts that secure close supervision of the research and the writing by the professor and clearly defined responsibilities for the student. The role of graduate supervisor has gained in importance over the last decade, and focus on improving of this part of higher education has increased.

A unique feature of Norwegian universities is that new academic staff are required to attend a course in university pedagogy consisting of seminars about different aspects of teaching and mentoring. As part of my work in the unit responsible for this at the University of Bergen, Programme for Research on Learning and Teaching, I conducted Writing Across the Curriculum seminars for teachers and writing workshops for graduate students in many departments. The study reported here grew out of a need to know more about supervision practices and expectations of student writing across disciplines. I also found that such knowledge was not transparent for the supervisors themselves, mainly because both teaching and supervision have been private and unarticulated practices (Dysthe & Lied, 2000; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Shulman, 1999): while collegial discussion and dialogue is acknowledged as a vital aspect of the academic research culture in most disciplines, this has not been the case for teaching and supervision. Indeed, while teaching is gradually becoming more team oriented due in part to the Quality Reform, graduate supervision remains to a large extent each professor’s private concern.

Very little research has been done in Norway on graduate writing and even less on graduate supervision (Lauvås & Handal, 1998). An exploratory study was therefore necessary as a first step before engaging in the kind of situated, in-depth study that will ultimately allow scholars to understand the complexity of supervision issues.

In the literature review I focus mainly on American research. In the theory section I outline a broader, socioculturally based theoretical framework before I discuss specific concepts that are particularly relevant to the topic of this article.

**Literature Review**

Interest in research on supervision in higher education has paralleled the establishment of academic professional development units in universities all over the world. It has mainly focused on postgraduate research supervision. A number of studies have documented students’ experiences of problems in the research process, the research culture in general, and with supervisors in particular (Burgess, 1994; Deem & Brehony, 2000; Zuber-Skerrit & Ryan, 1994). Many studies have pragmatic purposes, such as justifying institutional changes or legitimizing closer scrutiny of supervisory practices. The research is often based on psychological theories derived from research on counseling and mentoring, and focuses on relational processes between supervisor and student. Several studies have looked at power relations particularly, including the precarious situation of female students in male-dominated disciplines (Conrad, 1994; Leonard, 1997). Some of these have led to action research studies aimed at replacing authoritarian domination with symmetrical dialogue (Delamont, Parry, & Atkinsson, 1998; Ryan, 1998; Yeatman, 1998). A recent issue in supervision research is what identities are fostered by different
supervision practices and their philosophical foundations (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000; Lee, 1998).

Studies dealing with disciplinary communication in higher education, both undergraduate and postgraduate, are particularly important to the present work. Faigley and Hansen (1985) focused on two students’ experiences of the difference between writing in an English composition course and in another discipline, while McCarthy (1987) followed an undergraduate student in English and biology over two years, mapping the diverging expectations of student writing. Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman (1991) analyzed the problems and the writing development of a graduate student in a rhetoric program. Walvoord and McCarthy (1990) reported on studies of academic writing and response in four college classrooms and tried to identify factors that led to successful enculturation, but did not problematize the professor’s role as representative of a unified discourse community. Prior (1991) found that, even though the professor’s response significantly influenced students’ writing, enculturation was a complex issue that could be understood only by looking at the whole activity setting. In his later studies, Prior offers thick descriptions and detailed analyses of how graduate students’ literate activity is situated in different disciplinary communities of practice (Prior, 1991, 1994, 1998).

The sciences are the most studied professions in the academy. Most of the research studies in rhetoric of the disciplines and professions attempts to illuminate how knowledge is created in the professions and does not look at how newcomers are enculturated. Latour and Woolgar (1986) observed the scientists at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies over several years; Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) studied scientists’ discourse practices in general; while Myers (1990, 1996) looked closely at research proposals in biology. Bazerman (1988, 1994) also focused on the hard sciences, both in his genre study of the experimental article and in his historical accounts of scientific knowledge making. Swales and Najar (1987) analyzed introductions to research articles, while MacDonald’s (1994) book on professional academic writing had a broader rhetorical and linguistic focus on the humanities and social sciences. Geisler (1994) chose philosophy for her in depth study of academic literacy and the nature of expertise, and based her work on sociocognitive theory. Prior (1998), on the other hand, has taken a consistently sociocultural perspective, as has Blakeslee (2001) in her case studies of how audience influences the production of text in physics. We thus see a broadening both of the disciplinary contexts of the studies and the researchers’ choice of unit of analysis. In the socioculturally oriented studies, the unit of analysis may include the whole activity setting and not just the dyad of student and supervisor.

Theoretical Perspectives, Research Questions, and Conceptual Foundations

Supervision of students’ research and writing processes is an important aspect of teaching and learning at universities, and should be understood in light of theories of knowledge and learning as well as theories of communication and text. My own perspective is based on sociocultural theories, particularly on dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Linell, 1998; Markova & Foppa, 1990, 1991; Nystrand, 1992; Rommetveit, 1974; Säljö, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1991, 1998; Wold, 1992). Sociocultural and dialogical perspectives are concerned not only with the individual student or professor or even the dyad, but also with the social-institutional contexts of writing and supervision. For students, learning to write a thesis means on one level learning how to think and write in the discipline or specialization in which the work is situated, but at another level each student’s idiosyncratic experience influences his or her textual work and reactions to the supervisor. The underlying
assumptions of this paper are that the relationship between knowledge and language is a complex one, that textual practices are closely intertwined with the research process, and that writing is both an individual and a social practice. This also leads us to expect that supervisors’ feedback practices likewise reflect the textual traditions in their respective disciplines as well as their individual experiences and knowledge of texts.

Sociocultural theories focus on knowledge and learning as social, situated, distributed, and mediated; on the centrality of language; and on learning as participation in communities of practice. These aspects make sociocultural perspectives particularly useful for a study of supervision practices. Wertsch (1998) has elaborated on the two meanings of “social”: the historical, institutional, and social situatedness of all activities on the one hand, and the relational and interactional character on the other. This study explores both of these aspects of the social, and its four major research questions show this:

- What characterizes the text culture and textual norms of each discipline?
- What criteria exist for judging student texts at the master’s thesis level?
- How do envision good supervision practices?
- How do students and supervisors describe and explain their own experiences of text-related supervision?

The first two questions presuppose that professors’ supervision of students’ thesis writing does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is guided by disciplinary text traditions, cultures, and norms. Such traditions and cultures may be more or less tacit for the participants, and part of my research agenda was to discover what these cultures were like. I expected that knowledge of these traditions and cultures also was important for understanding the enculturation of graduate students, which is a key element of research supervision. By conducting the same study in three distinctly different disciplines, I expected to learn more about how specific social and institutional contexts shape supervision practices.

The last two questions focused more specifically on the social in the meaning of the supervision relationship as interaction between student and supervisor, seen from the points of view of both. In an earlier empirical study of classroom communication and learning in high school, I documented the learning potential of dialogic interaction and in particular the interpenetration of writing and talk. Acknowledging Bakhtin’s notion of how understanding and learning emerges from the interplay of voices, I titled the Norwegian book based on this research Det flerstemmige klasseromm [The multivoiced classroom] (Dysthe, 1996b). In the university context, I was now interested in finding out how students and supervisors themselves had experienced different forms of interaction as useful mediation in the supervision process. Underlying these major research questions are theoretical concepts crucial to the discussion of my findings. One set of concepts derives from Bakhtin’s dialogism; the others are the notions of discourse community and disciplinarity. Dialogism is important because I see the co-construction of knowledge as essential to communication processes generally and the supervision process in particular. In this connection I have also chosen to focus on “appropriation” and “the authoritative and inner persuasive word”: the first concept because it is closely woven together with enculturation, the second because of the asymmetrical relationship between professor and student. “Discourse community” and “disciplinarity” have been central concepts in crossdisciplinary studies of writing for the last twenty years, and I want to explore their relevance to my material.

Bakhtin’s dialogism represents an alternative analytical perspective and epistemology to monologism, which still is the dominant paradigm in linguistics, cognitive psychology,
information technology, and communication (Linell, 1998; Markova & Foppa, 1990, 1991; Wold, 1992). Where monologism sees knowledge as a given, dialogism sees knowledge as emerging from interaction of voices; and where monologism is concerned with transmission of knowledge, dialogism is concerned with transformation of understandings (Nystrand, 1997). As Wertsch (1991) has pointed out, the communication model of monologism (often called “the conduit metaphor,” after Reddy, 1979) is deeply entrenched in the Western way of thinking and clearly opposed to the co-construction of knowledge through dialogical interaction that is at the heart of Bakhtin’s work. This distinction is important when discussing supervision, a communicative activity wherein students learn through interactions with their supervisors. In my analysis of supervision relationships, I found that some were clearly based on monological views of how knowledge is created while others revealed dialogical views.

Another central aspect of dialogism is that words always carry with them the voices and accents of other users. Learning, according to Bakhtin, can be seen as gradual appropriation of the words of others to make them our own:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intentions. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293)

For graduate students, enculturation entails appropriation of ways of thinking, speaking, and writing. However, the two concepts are not the same, as enculturation emphasizes the cultural element of the process from the perspective of the discipline (students are being enculturated into the discipline), while appropriation points to the internalization process of the individual. An important issue for supervision is which communicative models are most suitable for appropriation. Bakhtin’s account of “authoritative” versus “internally persuasive” discourse (1981, pp. 342-348) offers a relevant distinction for discussing supervision practices because it combine an understanding of a person’s dialogic appropriation of social languages and the ways outside forces assert their influences. The authoritative word demands that the listener acknowledges it, as it bears previous authority and is hierarchical and distanced. It binds the listener regardless of any power it may have to persuade him or her internally; it does not demand free reflection about its content, but “our unconditional allegiance” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). In contrast, internally persuasive discourse is affirmed by the power of its argument “as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word’” (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 345).

The dialogic co-construction of knowledge is a particularly pertinent, though sometimes underrated, element in academic knowledge production. At universities it takes place in culturally defined spaces, and the concepts of discourse communities and disciplines are attempts to define such cultures.

In higher education, the term “discourse community” has been used, on the one hand, to focus on common characteristics that distinguish academic discourse from nonacademic, and, on the other, to focus on ways disciplines differ from one another. It has affected the conceptualization of teaching and learning in higher education: goals of teaching and supervision, once formulated in terms of mastering content, were reformulated in terms of enculturation into the disciplines. Student learning is increasingly seen as “initiation into the shared conventions of discourse communities that govern how members speak and write” (Prior, 1998, p. 12). At our universities this understanding has spread far beyond applied linguistics, and
the reason may be the general dissemination of the term “discourse” in the wake of Foucault, Bordieu, and Riceour.

Later research and theories of disciplinarity (Bazerman, 1988; Becher, 1989; Prior, 1991, 1994, 1998) have painted a much more complex picture of discourse communities. Becher’s book Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual inquiry and the cultures of disciplines (1989) has significantly affected thinking about disciplinary cultures at universities. His analysis of the differences between disciplines in which knowledge is hierarchically constructed and those in which each researcher must define his or her theoretical basis is often referred to in explanations of the different traditions of academic writing in the natural and social sciences. Many studies have shown that discourse communities are far from being homogeneous, abstract entities, independent of time and place. Instead they are heterogeneous; shaped by shifting networks across many sites; changing over time; and influenced by personal, interpersonal, institutional, and historical configurations. In his book Writing/disciplinarity: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy (1998), Paul Prior used Bakhtin’s theories of speech genres as well as activity theory in his analysis of what he called “laminated” interactions of students, professors, artifacts, and institutional history. The complex dialogic models of activity systems offer alternative ways of understanding discourse communities. Prior also prefers to talk of “disciplinarity” rather than “disciplines” because the former “evokes process rather than a place or object” (p. 26). This resonates with my own study illustrating the heterogeneity of traditionally defined disciplines.

Methods

The quickest way of getting an overview of the field of graduate supervision would be to conduct a survey study. From my contact with the professors, however, I knew that their knowledge about writing, teaching, and supervising was mainly tacit. While a survey would report the obvious and superficial, I chose to interview both professors and students so that they might make some of their implicit assumptions about writing and supervision explicit.

Using qualitative interviews as the method of data collection must be seen in light of my interests in participants’ perspectives and communicative practices at my university. From my sociocultural perspective, given the complexity of the activity settings, a situated study including observations as well as texts would have yielded deeper knowledge of supervision practices in each discipline. The present exploratory study, however, is based on students’ and teachers’ own descriptions of the supervision process and the textual practices in which they participated. I chose one discipline from the Humanities, one from Social Science, and one from Natural Science. These three broad disciplinary groupings were chosen because previous research has established considerable differences between them, largely due to the different epistemological contexts of investigation that shape both the processes of inquiry and the expressions of knowledge in these groupings (Bazerman, 1988; Bazerman & Paradis, 1991; Becher, 1989; Myers, 1996; Parry, 1999). I chose the first two departments, History of Religions and Administration and Organizational Science, partly because I was involved in development work in each. Another reason was that each of them had experienced an increase in master’s degree students and was engaged in a process of improving supervision. The Department of Fishery and Marine Biology was chosen because it is one of the most important scientific research areas at the University of Bergen. Eight professors and ten graduate students in each discipline were interviewed about their views and experiences of text, writing, and supervision.
Of the 24 professors interviewed, 9 were full professors and the rest associate professors; 6 were female, none of them full professors (only 12% of full professors at Norwegian universities are female). Their age range was from 40 to 62, and the number of master’s degree students each had supervised varied from 10 to 50, with a majority having supervised more than 20.

Access to the sites was unproblematic and followed the same procedure in each. The selection of participants in the project was discussed with the head of each department and administrators responsible for graduate studies. In the case of History of Religions, all the professors were interviewed. Because the Department of Administration and Organizational Science counted 16 tenured staff and Fishery and Marine Biology 21 along with a number of researchers on contracts, supervisors were selected to represent both sexes, different subdisciplines, and variation in how many students each had supervised. Because the departmental heads were eager to use the findings of the project in their department development work, they were careful to select candidates who would be accepted as representative by the rest of the faculty. The same care was taken when selecting the ten students, with the additional criterion of including students who were at different stages in their thesis work. Student representatives were consulted in the process. All the professors and students who were asked to participate volunteered to do so.

The interviews were semi-structured. The questions were the basically the same for supervisors and students, and the participants were given the interview guide beforehand (by e-mail). The main questions in the interview protocol concerned (a) disciplinary text traditions, text culture, and text norms; (b) experience with academic writing; and (c) experience with graduate supervision (see Appendix 1 for the entire protocol).

The faculty interviews were conducted by me in each professor’s office and lasted approximately 90 minutes. All the questions were covered in all interviews, but the professors were encouraged to speak at length about the issues they felt were most important. Most of the supervisors were involved in the questions raised and appreciated the chance to talk at length, especially about problems involved in graduate supervision. This perhaps reflected the fact that, although the progress of students was often a topic at departmental meetings, supervision was not. A preliminary version of this report was sent to all supervisors for comments: only two of the 24 asked for changes in the text.

Two research assistants interviewed the graduate students. Jens Kjeldsen interviewed in History of Religions and Siri Breistein in the other two disciplines. These interviews lasted from 1-2 hours and took place in the offices of the Program for Research on Learning and Teaching. The students’ engagement in the topics was high. Students who were late in their thesis process were, not surprisingly, more reflective and more likely to comment in depth. Because both the research assistants had recently finished their master’s theses themselves, they communicated well with the students and got them to elaborate on relevant points. As most of the graduate students had left by the time the report draft was ready, few had a chance to comment.

All but two interviews were taped and transcribed. Two of the professors did not want their conversations taped, so I wrote the gist of them from memory and on the basis of notes.

Because the studies in the three disciplines were made separately and a year apart, the total material was small enough for me to review all the interviews several times. I made notes of important recurring topics and tendencies to code the transcripts. The material was first categorized according to the main questions in the interview guide (separately for students and supervisors), adding categories for important topics that had turned up during the interviews.
Some codes first came out of student interviews and were then applied to supervisors’ texts, and vice versa. One example was “control” (defined as the supervisor’s tendency to take over the student’s project), which came up several times in student interviews; another we named “metatalk” emerged from interviews with students who were dissatisfied with the supervision they received. The three models of supervision I identify in this paper emerged from the professor interview transcripts, even though none of the precise terms were used. “Dependency relation” came directly from a supervisor’s vocabulary.

Student and supervisor interviews were first analyzed and interpreted separately, then compared. A systematic comparison of students’ and teachers’ experiences and views was made for each major topic. Three written reports (Dysthe & Kjeldsen 1997, Dysthe & Breistein 1999, Dysthe & Lied 2001) were published in Norwegian, and each of them included a section with specific suggestions for improving practice, often formulated as questions. The primary purpose of the research was a pragmatic one, and the reports from each of the studies were distributed to the academic and administrative staff of the departments and were discussed in a seminar. Interestingly, none of the findings were disputed; rather, they served as constructive bases for discussions of how to improve writing and supervision. This has convinced me of the importance of grounding pedagogical development work on local research.

In the section that follows, I organize the presentation of results and discussion under three major headings: Text Traditions, Text Cultures and Textual Norms in Three Disciplines; Three Models of Supervision; and Expectations of Student Texts. I discuss each topic in light of the theoretical concepts introduced above, and by way of conclusion I briefly discuss some implications for practice.

**Text Traditions, Text Cultures and Textual Norms in Three Disciplines**

**A Changing Text Culture in the History of Religions**

The History of Religions, as it manifests itself at the University of Bergen, lies at the interface of several disciplines. It has a historical, an anthropological, and a philosophical dimension, and at the same time houses specializations like Sociology of Religion, Psychology of Religion, and Philosophy of Religion. This means that within the same department there are several different text traditions, because each specialization remains connected with its disciplinary source, namely sociology, psychology or philosophy.

The local history of the discipline is important in order to understand the text culture at a particular university, which may differ considerably from the culture of the same discipline at another university. The University of Bergen has a strong historical and philological tradition in this subject, which can be traced back to the first professor in the discipline, Alf Kragerud. He was a philologist and a specialist in gnostic texts, and many of the present day teachers were his students. The emphasis was on the study of ancient texts, usually in a foreign language. This is a very learned tradition, which among other ways manifests itself in extensive use of footnotes, and a German-inspired academic style was long seen as the model. This has changed to some extent, however. “It is possible to write much simpler and be just as scientific. We often find that the complicated texts written today are just an imitation of older textual conventions, with no more scholarly substance to them” (Professor Lind). The question of what textual conventions are necessary in scientific texts and what “simplicity of writing” actually means is central to the discussion of what counts as good texts in the discipline. Professor Lind’s statement, however, is controversial and had not been discussed among the teachers. In this tradition of the discipline,
earlier scholars wrote about texts and not about people. According to my informants, this practice has changed as the discipline has oriented itself more toward religion as a present-day cultural phenomenon. Thus both methods and texts have changed, depending partly on the object of study. Although the History of Religions is part of the Faculty of Arts, it has gradually become more oriented toward the social sciences. Both humanistic and sociological research methods are used and the ensuing texts share characteristic features with their respective methodological origins.

What limits our topic is that we work with religion as a cultural factor. We use archeological, ethnological, or anthropological or historical methods, and when we write, we write as historians when we use that kind of materials and methods and as sociologists when we use that kind of materials. In this respect there is nothing specific about our textual tradition. (Professor Haug)

The question then arises whether there is nothing that distinguishes a text in this discipline from a text from one of those other disciplines. Several of the teachers said that there are differences but that they are difficult to define:

If I read an article about a topic related to religion, I will know whether it is written by a historian or a sociologist, but I have problems putting my finger on the differences. It may have to do with styles of writing, but it definitely has to with the kind of associations one makes when writing and all the implicit allusions to topics in the discipline which only the initiated are able to pick up. (Professor Gran)

Such implicit allusions and associations are important aspects of a discourse community, and they illustrate that many parts of the disciplinary text culture remain tacit. Another teacher emphasized that what makes texts in this discipline explicitly disciplinary, is primarily “what questions are asked” (Professor Solstad). These quotations indicate that there are common features in texts that make them recognizable as belonging to the discipline, but these are neither easily identified nor is there a clear agreement on what they are.

As several teachers pointed out, textual practice and writing style also vary significantly, depending on where the text is published. German journals in the discipline have higher demands on precision and stringent presentation than Anglo-American journals, where the style is more verbose and where fluency is valued higher (Professor Traen). Whether this is carried over to the textual style when writing Norwegian has not been established in this study, but it is likely that academics who primarily publish in one of these foreign traditions are influenced by it also when they write in Norwegian and when they give feedback to students.

In History of Religions an interesting shift in audience has influenced the way texts are written. The discipline used to be an exclusive one with just a few students and a marginal relationship to the reading public. “You could say that history of religions operated in a time-bubble until the mid-seventies, using textual practices from the beginning of the century. Now we have to play a role in society, and we have to communicate in ways that ordinary people can understand” (Professor Gran). Interestingly, the public communicative tradition has not been as strong in this discipline as in the comparable disciplines of literature and art history. Today the subject is very popular with students, and many teachers and students want their research to reach the general public. This popularization brings with it a conflict between the traditional norms of academic texts and the kinds of texts students need to write if they want to become more accessible. Some students explicitly wanted to write for a more general public and found the traditional academic style limiting. Since a majority of the graduate students in the History of
Religions are working on topics relating to today’s religions, there is a tendency toward a less learned style than has been the tradition.

Criteria for good texts. When students were asked to verbalize criteria for good texts in the discipline, surprisingly few were able to do so. Professor Vik formulated the following criteria, which were discussed and agreed upon in a seminar I attended with most of the other teachers.

- **Content**: displays accurate knowledge and the ability to analyze data in an independent way, and discusses a few questions in depth
- **Argumentation**: argues coherently, documents claims, and demonstrates historical understanding
- **Text**: reveals internal and external coherence—a “red thread” (a metaphor used to indicate a clear problem focus throughout the text)
- **Language and formalities**: style is clear and logical, avoiding jargon; the piece is engagingly and interestingly written (“our only weapon is the language”), with references and bibliography in order
- **Audience awareness**: the writing is interesting for a wider audience, leads the reader through the text, and has a story to tell
- **Writer’s attitude**: the writer is clearly aware of insider and outsider positions, and is both descriptive and analytical

The only discipline-specific point among these criteria was how the writers positioned themselves in relation to their object of study: “on the outside and not on the inside,” meaning that the student should avoid writing as an engaged insider of a particular religion, but instead assume an outsider’s stance. This is connected but not equivalent to writing descriptively and analytically instead of prescriptively. This distinction is an important aspect of scholarly writing in all disciplines, but is particularly revealing in History of Religions, because many students come to the subject with a personal commitment to a particular religious view and have to learn to take a distant perspective.

Students tended to focus on formal aspects of the texts when asked about good text criteria: “You must always refer to primary sources, document secondary sources, and generally be very precise about references and footnotes. They are very particular about this in our discipline” (Kari, Religion). Some also commented on writing for a particular audience: “You need to write academic prose, but at the same time write in a manner that is easily understood, at least if you want others than the committee to read it” (Lars, Religion). The student interviews showed that the students were aware of three ways of learning about what constituted good academic texts: 1) Response and specific feedback from the professor 2) Reading fellow students’ thesis and other published texts 3) Explicit teaching. Only students in Fishery and Marine Biology mentioned the latter being important for themselves, while students in the other two departments commented on the lack of explicit teaching or discussion of textual criteria. All students underlined that feedback from their supervisor was their most important source of learning:

[Textual criteria] is not taught or made clear from the outset, but as you write and get response from the supervisor, you get a picture of what they expect … Also through reading other students’ thesis and journals. (Mari, Religion)

You learn from the supervisor, because that is when I meet demands I have not been confronted with before. But I feel it is very much up to me to find out,- you are told to write more academic but nobody teaches you how. (Jon, Religion)
In the History of Religions, we find that students are very much dependent on their particular supervisors as mediators of the academic text culture as they write their master’s theses, but their awareness of the varieties within the discipline is rather limited. The supervisors talked about a great variety of specializations, each with a text culture that the supervisors themselves claim is different from the others. Linguistically there is obviously no uniform discourse community, but at the same time there is a high degree of agreement about a set of general criteria for what counts as a good thesis. The professors and students clearly felt a sense of belonging in History of Religions, but besides the fact that their research focused on religions, heterogeneity seemed to be characteristic.

A Divided Text Culture in Administration and Organizational Science

Administration and Organizational Science is in many ways a hybrid of several disciplines. Not surprisingly, it was described as a “conglomerate of text traditions” (Professor Strom). One of its roots is political science, dating back to Aristotle; another is organizational theory, dating back approximately one hundred years. At the University of Bergen the discipline is only 25 years old. When teachers try to describe the composite nature of their textual culture, some of them take a historical perspective, mentioning important founding fathers who have contributed with model texts. Others describe their text culture by positing binary oppositions: qualitative vs. quantitative traditions, positivist vs. broad historical traditions, empirical vs. theoretical, historical vs. synchronic, sociology vs. history. Every choice has consequences for the text, but the nature of those consequences can only be discussed in context of a particular case. Differences in object of study, controlling questions, and methods also determine how to write well. While some teachers identified with one specific tradition, others wrote within several textual traditions, depending on the natures of their projects. When asked what constitutes common elements, several teachers mentioned the theoretical framework, others the focus on content: “An underlying ideology has been to transmit content. Content is all important as compared to form” (Professor Olsen). Professor Hanson elaborated on the textual differences within Administration and Organizational Science:

There are often bigger differences internally in a discipline than between them. The most important difference is probably between the empirically and the theoretically oriented. Those within a socio-constructivist tradition tend to write texts that are difficult to penetrate, as they work within an apparatus of concepts that the reader needs to know. In other traditions in our discipline, we are more concerned with clearly formulated controlling questions, with the student stating very precisely what she is about to do and what theory she will use. Such texts have a different goal, and they are easier to understand.

Within the sub-discipline called “study of professions,” the texts are more similar to historical texts that account in detail for the source material. Other empirical texts have more in common with lexicon articles. While the positivist tradition of writing values sustained argumentation, with precision more worth than elegance, there is also a more metaphoric textual tradition, with J. P. March as a model. (Professor Hansen)

Professor Hansen here states very clearly, without using the term itself, that there is no unified discourse community in this discipline. Not only are the textual expectations different for students depending on the specialization, but also the most important differences cut across disciplinary boundaries altogether.

In the March tradition you can meet surprising perspectives and ways of using words, but it does not represent an alternative epistemology. That is more the case with the Continental orientation
toward Habermas, Foucault, and Bourdieu. This is a critical, historical, and narrative tradition, where you can find concept development in the texts themselves. But it does not necessarily mean more exciting texts; they can be very longwinded. (Professor Rein)

This quotation pinpoints the division that seemed to be most clear-cut, namely between the traditional and Continental perspectives. This division entailed not just incidental differences but questions of epistemology, with consequences for which texts were considered good or bad. In my interviews with supervisors representing each of these traditions, there was an underlying uneasiness about how a professor from the other tradition would evaluate their students’ texts. The interviewed students had vague ideas about text cultures and typically used words as “maybe,” “probably,” and “possibly” when answering. While they thought there must be textual differences between, say, the social sciences and the humanities, they merely felt that “something” must distinguish their discipline from other social sciences. The same vagueness was typical regarding different text traditions within the discipline: “I think there are differences, but I have not noticed them” (Arne, Administration). Students were, however, more specific when it came to what they thought the professors expected from good texts, but they varied in what they chose to emphasize:

They prefer texts at a high level of abstraction. You get a better mark if you use a fancy theoretician who is not easily accessible. … You may study an organization empirically, but it is regarded as much better if you can present it theoretically. You also need to use the specific terms of the discipline. They are very fond of their terminology. (Rita, Administration)  
It is important in a social science discipline to see your topic from many points of view. You should reach a conclusion, but not too strongly—show that you are open to other approaches. (Jan, Administration)

Criteria for good texts. In spite of the heterogeneity of the disciplinary culture, there existed a consensus among the supervisors about focusing on four major points when evaluating graduate texts: 1) Content, 2) Research attitude and method, 3) Form, and 4) Audience awareness. Content-oriented criteria were mentioned most frequently and forcefully, which was consistent with the characterization of the discipline as being extremely content oriented. “We don’t think of good texts but of good content” (Professor Rein). “The most important criteria for a good academic text in our discipline is that it brings something new” (Professor Strom). The application of this criterion to graduate students’ texts revealed the central position of the master’s thesis as a research contribution and not just as training for future research.

When it came to elaborating these criteria, however, different opinions arose about what constituted good texts, as could be expected from the supervisors’ accounts of the diverse cultures within the discipline. The major occasions for developing consensus about assessment criteria in a discipline are when professors gather to sit on exam or faculty appointment committees. These situations also give rise to conflicts. While some teachers admitted to considerable conflicts among the faculty and to different signals being sent to students, others claimed that confrontations were few. This suggests a tendency for groups of like-minded people to isolate themselves and to adopt a strategy of “live and let live” to avoid confrontation. Such behavior might only be possible in a large department: in a small department like History of Religions, closed circles of such like-minded people would be near impossible because all the professors sit on exam committees with one another. This may be one factor explaining why History of Religions developed a higher degree of consensus on specific assessment criteria than did Administration and Organizational Science.
The discipline of Administration and Organizational Science presented itself as a hybrid discipline, combining fields of study as different as political science and organizational theory, and it is therefore no surprise that the discipline contained “a conglomerate of text traditions.” The major differences, however, cut across specializations and depended on whether the research was empirical or theoretical, qualitative or quantitative. Common elements among the supervisors’ good text criteria included a strong focus on content, a corresponding deemphasis of form, and an emphasis on the necessity for the writer to position himself within a specific theoretical framework. In spite of these commonalities, differences among supervisors resulted in mixed signals being sent to students. The uneasiness these supervisors expressed toward establishing consistent assessment criteria ran counter to the uniformity I discovered among the natural scientists.

Clear Norms for Experimental Texts in Fishery and Marine Biology

The Department of Fishery and Marine Biology resulted from a merger of two previously independent disciplines—Fishery and Marine Biology—and professors referred repeatedly to their separate traditions and cultures. Students, for whom the merger was ancient history, never referred to such differences. Supervisors in Fishery and Marine Biology were much more concerned with issues of text and language than were supervisors in Administration and Organizational Science. The supervisors themselves gave two reasons for this: one was the strong publication pressure and the other was the strongly normative textual tradition. This made acquiring textual proficiency both easier and more difficult for students in this discipline than for those in History of Religions and Administration and Organizational Science: easier because there were very clear textual models to follow and originality was neither required nor encouraged, more difficult because the demands on clarity and precision gave little room for individuality.

There are fundamental differences between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand and our discipline on the other. I would think that our students relate to “the research front” to a much higher degree. (Professor Klett)

There are good reasons why we are so particular about the text. There is a certain way of writing about experiments, and students have no choice but follow the model. … Everything has to be very precise, no ambiguity, no chance of different interpretations. Terminology must be learned and used correctly. I spend a lot of time correcting and discussing language, style, and expressions—it is a lot of work. Sometime it surprises me when students hand in very awkward and unfinished texts that they don’t look at previous theses, because they are the same. When they describe the method, for instance, it has been done ten times before and there is no point in trying to write it their own way. (Professor Steine)

The IMRaD model (Introduction, Material and method, Results and Discussion) for structuring and writing texts in the natural sciences has been described in numerous books and articles (Swales 1990, Myers 1990), and several of the teachers referred to books on science writing, such as Bowen & Schneller (1991) and Pechenick & Lamb (1994). Most of what the supervisors said about writing is therefore common knowledge, and I will not repeat it here. While writing the “Materials and methods” and “Results” sections was described as a skill that could be taught, the Introduction and the Discussion sections were seen as the parts of the thesis that showed the student’s grasp of the field. “The introduction gives the reasons why the project
is chosen and is a zooming-in process from the wide field to the specific problem. It reveals the student’s view of science and knowledge production in academia” (Professor Tune).

When asked about different text traditions within the discipline, most of the supervisors related those differences to the difference between experimental and descriptive studies but added that actual differences were minimal. Professor Fredli, however, who had more than thirty years experience as editor and referee for several international journals, was more specific. He pointed out four possible reasons for difference: first, the area of research; second, the historical origins, such as the style of an influential researcher; third, specific characteristics of Fishery and Marine Biology departments at different institutions; and last, the tradition of the journal in which the author intends to publish.

According to Fredli, the text of descriptive studies is distinctly different from that of experimental studies, and descriptive studies vary more widely among themselves: “There is of course more scope for different ways of writing when you describe ecosystems, for instance, than when you report an experiment” (Professor Fredli). Different ways of writing may result from new tools for analysis, such as molecular genetics, but descriptions of the anatomy of animals and flowers will still be necessary.

There may be different reasons that text traditions in the same discipline vary from one university to another. The experienced editor has noticed such variations in Scandinavia, for example, that the University of Uppsala maintains the tradition of Carl von Linné in the way species are described. In Norway, marine biologists in descriptive disciplines at the University of Tromsø write differently from those at the University of Bergen. According to Professor Fredli, this is because “in a new university it is more acceptable to develop untraditional and innovative ways of doing things and subsequently also of writing, while we in the more established institutions have problems breaking old traditions” (Professor Fredli).

The last variation factor that influences the style of writing is the journal, which constrains article length, citation practices, and use of illustration. These differences may be minor, but most of the teachers emphasized the importance for master’s degree students to decide where they might publish in order to tailor their style to the particular journal. This was not mentioned by teachers in the other two disciplines, partly because the monograph was the predominant thesis format and partly because there was not the same pressure to publish as in Fishery and Marine Biology, where master’s thesis projects usually are part of the supervisor’s research project (the external financing system demands international publication). While a few journals specialize in review articles and essays that allow greater opportunity for individual styles, Professor Utvik stated that the overwhelming majority demand the classical IMRaD format.

There were two primary indications that Fishery and Marine Biology emphasized texts and writing more than the other two disciplines I investigated. One was that they taught academic writing to their master’s degree students, and another was that several of the supervisors I interviewed explicitly referred to literature about academic writing in biology. The graduate writing course was organized as an integral part of a four-week intensive, compulsory introductory course in which students worked in groups of 2-3 on a mini-experiment. Each group went through all the experimental stages and collaborated in the writing of a practice thesis. In preparation, several journal articles were discussed with a view to the quality of writing, and lectures were given on how to write the different sections of the IMRaD format. The groups were given thorough feedback on their drafts. The teachers who had long experience as supervisors said that this course had made a significant difference in the students’ thesis writing and served
as a reference point in their own supervision. The writing course was a unifying element in a department with many specializations, and several of the teachers mentioned it as one of the reasons why they had succeeded in agreeing on a common set of criteria for evaluating master’s theses.

All the students commented positively on the usefulness of this course and referred to it as their main source of knowledge about text norms and textual expectations. They were able to articulate what was expected of their texts much more clearly than the students in the other two disciplines, and some of the students called their text “pretty standardized”: “The structure is given: introduction, material and method, result and discussion and conclusion. This is how our texts are supposed to be, and I like that” (Ivar, Marine Biology). “We are supposed to use this structure, you know, and write very clearly and precisely” (Mari, Marine Biology). However, the same students who could talk about the constituents of good texts were often unsure about how to practice what they were told: “My supervisor tells me I can write the way others have done, like in the journal articles—it does not have to be personal in any way. But it is new to me. I have never done this before, and I feel it is very vague, actually, when I try to do it” (Mari, Marine Biology). The interviewed students all felt that the standards were high: “You feel you should write at a level which could be published, language and all, and that is pretty tough” (Gunnar, Marine Biology).

Criteria for good texts. Fishery and Marine Biology was alone in agreeing formally on criteria for evaluating master’s theses. Perhaps the most striking feature of the criteria is that formal features such as style, diction, and grammar count toward 1/3 of the final grade. “Language is evaluated with regard to ability to formulate well, grammar, spelling, and terminology. Theses written in English are not to be evaluated more leniently than those written in Norwegian” (Rules for Evaluating Candidates Scientific Theses at Fishery and Marine Biology, 1.11.2000). The criteria site the scientific article as the given standard and do not include more specifics regarding format, except a call for a more thorough methods description and discussion than space permits in a journal article.

The Department of Fishery and Marine Biology at the University of Bergen is a merger of two previously independent disciplines, but it seems that today the differences between experimental and descriptive research cut across such borders. Although descriptive texts have greater latitude for variations than experimental texts, there is a high degree of uniformity in the expectations within each type. International journal articles set the standard for good student texts in this department to a much greater degree than in the other two departments in my study, which may account for the clear norms. There is a strong focus on textual features in the established criteria, and the professors communicate the formal criteria explicitly to students both in a compulsory writing course and in individual supervision.

Disciplinary Text Cultures, Discourse Communities, and Supervision Practices
The notion of homogeneous discourse communities has been largely dismissed by socioculturally oriented researchers over the last few years, and this study has confirmed the heterogeneity of all the three disciplinary text cultures. It has been shown that the professors were aware of this heterogeneity, though it was never a topic of discussion among colleagues and few of them were able to articulate the differences or their sources. Since this knowledge seems to be tacit for most of the supervisors, it is not surprising that the graduate students had little explicit knowledge of variations within the disciplines. More surprising was the fact that many of them were unsure what criteria would be used to evaluate their thesis texts, even though those
the criteria were in fact quite general, serving as guideposts for good academic texts. What differed was the relative weights placed on content, formal features, and audience awareness, with Fishery and Marine Biology being most strict on formal features, Administration and Organization placing specific demands on content, and History of Religions emphasizing adaptation of the text to the audience. The heterogeneity within the disciplines seems to disappear at the level of criteria.

There may be several explanations for master’s students’ ignorance of assessment criteria. One is that they occupy an intermediate level between the undergraduate novice and the doctoral student. Norwegian master’s degree students have limited experience in academic writing, and the supervisors in this study focused on general criteria of academic texts, while the more subtle differences among various traditions, specializations, theoretical perspectives, or influential researchers in their field were left for postgraduate supervision. Another explanation is that most of this knowledge is tacit even for the supervisors, and even though it influences their feedback on specific students’ texts, it is never lifted up to the level of discussion. Both professors and students suggested that it would be useful to have more specific discussions about texts and how they differ both within and across disciplines. Such discussion might establish actual discourse communities without dissolving the heterogeneity that characterizes each discipline.

In the next section I turn to the supervision processes, first describing three distinct models of supervision that emerged from my study and then discussing how these models relate to disciplinary differences.

**Three Models of Supervision**

The relationship between graduate students and supervisors can be described in many ways. Australian research literature on supervision has focused especially on the issue of authority and power (Lee, 1998), and recently also on the identity the supervision relationship fosters in the student. From a dialogical perspective, the authority and power issue is related to the symmetry/asymmetry issue and to the dialogical or monological nature of the relationship between supervisor and student. This is demonstrated particularly in the supervision meetings and in the way the feedback is presented, but also in the way the students respond and the way they treat the comments from the supervisor.

I identified three basic models of the supervisory relationship. I briefly describe each model and then discuss characteristics of each based on examples from my data.

**The Teaching Model** describes a traditional teacher-student relationship defined by an emphasis on asymmetry, status difference, and dependency. Feedback is seen as correction, and students rarely hand in exploratory texts. This model may be driven by the supervisor’s conceptualization of the relationship, but just as often by the student’s expectations and by a joint focus on effectiveness in relation to producing an acceptable thesis.

**The Partnership Model** is more symmetrical: the student’s thesis is seen as a joint project. The contractual nature of cooperation is emphasized. Feedback is presented in dialogue, and exploratory texts form a basis for discussion. There seems to be a more conscious pedagogical philosophy behind this model, and the supervisor aims at fostering independent thinking.

**The Apprenticeship Model** is characterized by the student’s learning by observing and performing tasks in the company of the supervisor. The student and the supervisor may be involved in a joint project, but there is no doubt about who is the master. This model is distinguished from the Partnership Model in that the supervisor assumes a much clearer authority
base that is recognized by both parties. It is distinguished from the Teaching Model by its cooperative nature, often as part of a larger research team.

**The Teaching Model**

What I here call the Teaching Model is a continuation of the prevailing teacher-student relationship in supervision primarily defined by the status difference between the two and the students’ heavy dependence on the supervisor. The student produces work that he or she brings to the teacher. The student sees the supervisor as the authority and the expert whose primary job is to correct the text. Exploratory texts are unnecessary as they are not ready to be corrected. The Teaching Model describes a dependency relationship based on meetings in which the student feels the need for advice and help, especially feedback on drafts. Often this help goes beyond what is asked for and becomes directive. It carries with it the traditional power relations that the student at once resists and is constrained by. This explains the widespread ambivalence of students who resist being directed while avoiding responsibility for their work. Since Norwegian undergraduate students in general do little research writing before they start their master’s programs, they have primarily experienced the teacher as evaluator of their exam writing. They may therefore either be prone to continuing their earlier roles as “pupils,” or they may react against such roles. The following student quotation describes some of the characteristics of the Teaching Model, particularly the tendency of the supervisor to direct and control the student and to “take over the text.”

There are some supervisors I would never have. They are known to direct their students, and the students write the way the supervisor likes it or they work on their own ... My impression is that the biggest problem is that the students feel they are being controlled or directed too much, that they cannot write their own way.... Then they either conform, or they isolate themselves, just keep away. Write a lot on their own and just go to the supervisor when they finally feel they have total control of themselves. ... Other supervisors are very open for new thoughts and encourage it. (Else, Administration)

According to this student, the supervisor’s attitude is the problem, and my data show several examples of how graduate students cope with supervisors who act as teachers. The most extreme reaction was from Jan, a student who chose to isolate himself until he felt he knew what he wanted to do and would be able to stand up to his supervisor. He had deliberately postponed handing in anything to the supervisor. He was convinced that students exaggerated the supervisor’s role and therefore became more dependent on them than necessary. “Students easily fall into a role of ‘learned helplessness’ instead of working out for themselves what they want to do and say” (Jan, Administration).

Looking closely at the supervisors who seemed to fall into the Teaching Model uncovered variations between them. Some supervisors’ feedback practices appeared to be deliberately directive, and they made no excuses for their role as teachers: “I prefer students to bring me drafts which they have worked thoroughly through, and then I correct them, even down to commas” (Professor Gran, Religion). Others were conscious that they were caught on one side of the dilemma between freedom and control and often felt pressed by students into the role of authority: “I often found that my authority as a senior academic, combined with the students’ respect for authority, too often resulted in the student just accepting my suggestions as the final word of God” (Professor Solstad, Religion).
The Partnership Model

The Partnership Model is based on a more symmetrical relationship. The symmetry is not symmetry of knowledge or experience. It has to more do with the task of the thesis being seen as a joint responsibility and the contractual nature of the cooperation between the teacher and the student. I found three characteristic aspects of partnership supervision: Dialogue was the central strategy of supervision, exploratory student texts and exploratory talk were an integral part of the supervision process, and feedback on drafts was open for negotiation.

Professor Haug in History of Religions exemplified the Partnership Model. He was very conscious of his own pedagogical philosophy and articulated his view of his supervision practices more clearly than most:

When a student approaches me about supervision, I invite him or her to a discussion in which I tell him my experiences of what works best and then we discuss it. Basically I want my students to write something from the first day of supervision, even if only half a page, as this makes a dialogue between us easier. I also want the students to see me regularly and often, especially in the beginning, in order to develop a joint understanding of the project. ... For me contact with the students is really rewarding—I learn so much from talking to them, because they are not set in their ways of thinking, as we are who have been at this for a long time and learned what you are supposed to think. (Professor Haug, Religion)

Yeatman (1998) argues for a reconceptualizing of supervision in terms of mutual contracts between supervisor and student. Professor Haug also underlined the importance of clear mutual expectations and made sure that the contract was unambiguous.9

Many students commented on their experiences of feedback sessions filled with discussion and dialogue around drafts and a non-directive attitude from the supervisor that included a lot of support for their own choices:

I have written things my supervisor disagrees with, and then we discuss a lot … we interpret the concepts in conflicting ways. … Then there are e-mails back and forth, and we refer to literature to see who is right. And my supervisor constantly says, “What you think may be right; rely on yourself and do what you think is right. I do not want to direct you.” (Inge, Administration)

Those students who are most content, have supervisors who they can play ball with. … My supervisor suggests theories I can use and backs me up when I have made a choice. (Anja, Religion)

Many students connected dialogue with good supervision, whether in the form of “e-mails back and forth” or “playing ball with the professor” orally, and they emphasized that this depended on the supervisor’s basic attitude toward the student. When Ina was concerned about ownership of her text, she saw it as a sign of respect more than as a supervision strategy: “[Good supervision is] to give constructive criticism. With that I mean not taking the text away from the writer, not make it the supervisor’s text, but let the student own it. I would call this respect, constructive respect” (Ina, Administration).

A number of students in the humanities and social science talked about the importance of owning their own text. The concept of “ownership of texts” is a difficult one, both historically and philosophically, especially from a sociocultural and dialogical perspective (Faigley, 1992; Gere, 1987). In this context it is clear that for the students this rhetoric is one way of expressing a wish to be in control of their own projects. This does not mean that they want the supervisor to refrain from criticism or withhold his own opinions: there is little value in either positive or critical feedback if it is not concrete. It seems to be the basic attitude of the supervisor that makes
the difference. Ina found it most important that the supervisor give constructive criticism, but “he must respect that it is my text.” Elin said: “It is important that ... when the supervisor comments on your text, he says: ‘This is not clear; what do you want to express?’ Then you yourself need to think through where you are and what you want.” Other students echoed this in various ways. Inge valued that his supervisor disagreed with him but still relied on him to make his own choices. Nevertheless, Inge doubted whether he would dare trust his own judgement, or whether he should play it safe and go along with the supervisor’s views. “In the end, the supervisor is on the committee.” This comment offers an important glimpse into the contextual considerations that students must take. When getting a good grade is high on their list of concerns, students like Inge are willing to sacrifice individuality and self-determination if they feel those will jeopardize their grade.

Even though many students in both disciplines highlighted their fear of being over-directed, there is also a certain ambivalence. Some students express a wish for control, for being given specific answers and even directions. Students sometimes place contradictory demands on supervisors in different phases of the research and writing process. Supervisors who prefer a partnership relationship struggle with students who prefer a “teacher” who tells them what to do with their text. Two of the teachers, one in History of Religions and one in Administration and Organization, draw the same practical consequence of their deeply held commitment to students’ authority over their own texts: Neither of them give written comments to students’ drafts, instead offering oral comments in an attempt to make the students responsible for what they write: “I find that when I offer my comments to the text in the context of a dialogue with the student, there is much more chance for the student taking responsibility for his own text” (Professor Solstad).

What is really at stake here is fostering academic self-confidence:

> The most important contribution the supervisor can make is to encourage and actually make sure the students write from the very start, to inspire them to search for knowledge and believe in themselves, and not become copies of the supervisor. (Professor Traen, Religion)

This quotation touches upon the fundamental question of what identity the supervisor wants to foster through the supervision process. Supervisors who consciously practice a Partnership Model are particularly concerned with how to give feedback that helps the students become independent, self-confident thinkers, not “copies of the supervisor.”

**The Apprenticeship Model**

An Apprenticeship Model has during the last ten years been revived as a theoretical model for education (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and also acclaimed as a model for supervision (Kvale, 1999). The model has its origin in the organized practices of job training, where the apprentice learns by watching and performing the tasks in the company of the master. Tacit learning by being immersed in a culture and by observing and copying a more experienced person is central to this model.

The master-apprentice model is most easily identifiable in the experimental part of the natural sciences, but I also found elements of it in the humanities and social sciences when graduate work was project based. In Fishery and Marine Biology, the graduate students often learned the practical part of their work directly through observing the supervisor and other more experienced persons:
It is like learning a trade, you have to watch and try again and again. And the supervisor has to be there, partly because the equipment is so expensive and partly because there is really no other way of learning the ropes of doing research in this field. (Professor Steine, Marine Biology)

Projects are fundamental to our department and the only way the master’s degree students can manage their part is by joining a team. It functions as a mixture of collegial teamwork and apprenticeship learning. It is actually more egalitarian than the traditional master-apprentice; there is definitely more of a team spirit. (Professor Utvik, Marine Biology)

Project organization means that the student’s thesis is part of a joint project, which again entails frequent group meetings where students as well as experienced researchers present their work in progress. In such close sessions, students are socialized into the ways the experts present their research data and the way they speak about and criticize the textual representation of their ideas.

The main difference between the textual practices in the previous models and in the Apprenticeship Model is that students are exposed to a variety of texts and usually discuss texts in groups. The concept of apprenticeship in learning to write is dependent on opportunities for critical reading and discussion of scientific texts produced by fellow researchers, both experts and more experienced students. This rarely happened, according to the students, except in project-organized research. The students in project groups received feedback from multiple sources and also regularly read the supervisor’s and other group members’ texts. Therefore, they were not as dependent on a single person, which alleviates the problem of too directive feedback from a single supervisor.

Research groups usually gather to present works in progress, both orally and in writing. Since the rationale for meeting is productive dialogue, it is common to use these preliminary, exploratory texts as “thinking devices” (Lotman, 1988). Participating students are thus enculturated into this ways of looking at texts. It follows that in an Apprenticeship Model of supervision that is linked to project groups, the aim is to foster student identities as both independent researchers and team players.

Expectations for Student Texts

Before I discuss the three models of supervision from a theoretical perspective, I look more closely at one aspect that distinguished the Teaching Model from the Partnership Model, namely teacher and student expectations of which texts can be handed in to the supervisor. Expectations tended to be implicit rather than explicit, and they were strong. Because this issue has not previously been dealt with in research studies of supervision, I go into some detail.

The study revealed an unexpected difference in both History of Religions and Administration and Organizational Science between supervisors’ expectations of what kinds of texts the students should hand in for feedback. One group of supervisors encouraged their students strongly to use writing as a “thinking tool” and to hand in what has been variously termed “exploratory texts,” “think-texts,” or “sketches.” Another group of supervisors accepted such texts, but preferred “presentational texts,” i.e., drafts of specific parts of the thesis. Another difference related to the completeness and polish of the drafts. Some preferred drafts that the students had developed as far as they could and that had reached a certain “maturity of thought,” as one supervisor expressed it. Others preferred “rough drafts” in which students had not invested so much of themselves and were still open for dialogue. The following account of the uses of exploratory texts seen from supervisors’ and students’ perspectives is based almost entirely on the interviews in History of Religions and Administration and Organizational Science, because informants from Fishery and Marine Biology did not refer to such texts.
However, as previously noted, members of that discipline did meet to share preliminary works in progress: that disparity is discussed at the end of this section.

Supervisors’ Perspectives

For professor Haug in History of Religions, a condition for supervising a student was that he or she agreed on handing in a written text before every meeting, from day one. After the first exploratory phase, where such texts might be very short sketches or “think texts,” his students would hand in rough drafts, which gradually became more polished. But at any point in the thesis process where his students had problems interpreting data, expressing theoretical arguments or experiencing writer’s block, he encouraged writing-to-think as a strategy and used these texts as a basis for dialogue.

Those supervisors who explicitly encouraged students to write and hand in exploratory texts, did so for several reasons:

· They believed doing so would help the students in their thinking processes.
· They had experienced that writing more freely helped students overcome their writing anxiety.
· Such texts made the students more equal dialogue partners.
· Such think-texts focused meetings with the students and made discussions more productive in the phases where students had no real drafts to submit.
· They saw exploratory texts as a way of learning about the student’s thinking and thus preparing to enter into constructive and creative dialogue with the student.

A crucial issue was what kind of feedback the teacher should give on exploratory texts. The teachers who told students to hand in such texts often talked in terms supervision as a dialogue, and saw such texts as a better basis for dialogue than talk. They had a clear understanding of feedback on exploratory writing as fundamentally different from feedback on drafts:

Such texts are only used as a point of departure for thinking aloud together with the student. We try together to find what themes and ideas lie hidden in the text, what the connection is between them, and what their relevance is to the overall research problems. (Professor Haug, Religion)

Another group of supervisors did not reject exploratory texts but did not want to read them except during the first few weeks of the thesis project: “I accept exploratory texts in an early phase of the students’ work with a thesis, but I have the best experience when the students have worked on the drafts as far as they possibly can on their own” (Professor Jonsen).

The interviews revealed many reasons why supervisors found exploratory texts problematic to deal with:

· They were unsure about how to give feedback on such texts: “I know little about how to deal with student texts which obviously are at a very early stage” (Professor Jonsen).
· “Commenting on such early versions of texts often turn out to be a waste of time” (Professor Gran).
· They had developed feedback practices focusing on correction rather than dialogue.
· They had experienced some students using “think texts” as an excuse not to work hard on a draft.
· They had experienced students using “think texts” as a way of avoiding criticism. “I don’t want a situation where the student says to me after I have criticized a text: ‘But this is not
finished, I am going to do it differently.’ Then I feel I have wasted my time” (Professor Jonsen).

They felt the text load would be too large if they spent time reading early stages of students writing. They therefore preferred exploratory talk to written texts.

The first two points show a lack of understanding of the purpose of exploratory texts and a preference for the Teaching Model of supervision. The three last points illustrate how the lack of meta-conversations about the respective expectations hinder development of more useful supervision approaches.

Student Perspectives

Interviews revealed that students were as divided on the issue of handing in exploratory texts as the teachers. Some students had considerable problems when the supervisor signaled that he only wanted well-prepared drafts:

I have been satisfied with the feedback I have got when I hand in texts. But when he said he only wanted finished texts, I felt it was all on his premises. It has not suited me at all. I have worked on seeing the overall structure, how the whole thesis hangs together. As far as I know myself as a student, my strength is that I have a lot of ideas and a loose structure. And I write and write and write, and change one chapter under the influence of the next. It is a very chaotic way of writing, and it is difficult. But I know that this is how I work, this is how I progress. (Elin, Religion)

This quotation describes a Teaching Model of supervision, and the student is not very satisfied with the fact that the supervisor imposes his ideas of text production on her, but she has just tried to conform. Another student, with very little experience of academic writing, described her supervisor’s encouragement to hand in unfinished texts as the main reason why she was able to finish her thesis at all:

I have handed in texts to my supervisor every fortnight for one and a half years. I have had to write through everything, I have not spent a year thinking about what to write and what to do. My thesis was created through the writing process. … For me, this has been the only way I could work, or I would have had terrible writing anxiety. … But since I was encouraged to hand in whatever I could produce, even unfinished sentences, it became a text at last. But then I had not written anything at the university before I started my master’s except two take home exams. I am absolutely certain that without the constant encouragement to hand in what I wrote, I would never have finished. (Anne, Religion)

This student experienced supervision as a partnership in which her need to write her way to meaning through a long series of exploratory texts formed the basis for discussion with her supervisor.

Other students, however, did not write or hand in exploratory texts, and their reasons were as varied:

· They were conditioned to look upon the supervisor as a teacher who evaluates their writing and were afraid of giving him a poor impression of their ability to think and write: “I don’t like giving him things which he might think I have not thought through. ... It has to do with lack of self-confidence that I keep it for myself” (Ina, Administration).

· The supervisor corrected everything they hand in: “He is very good at finding what is important, but he also corrects typos, and even though I can see that he does it automatically, it makes me self-conscious and I think I should have rewritten it.”

· They conform with their supervisor because it suits their own purposes:
My supervisor expects texts that I have worked through. I cannot hand in unfinished texts or loose thoughts on a paper. ... And I feel myself that I only want to hand in what I can defend. ... I think this is very individual from supervisor to supervisor. Some not only accept but also encourage ideas, sketches, and think-texts to see what may come out of this. But that does not suit me, nor my supervisor. (Geir, Administration)

They conform because a well-prepared draft gives them more control over their own text:

I must be very well prepared, very concrete about what I want, and this can be an advantage but also the opposite, because you may be set in one way of thinking before you come. ... Then the way back is much worse. But a well-prepared text also gives you greater control. (Aril, Administration)

The need for exploratory writing becomes less in later stages of the thesis.

In an early phase I handed in different types of texts to give the supervisor an idea of where I was—some think texts, some summaries of literature, some brainstorms. Now when I have started writing the thesis, I try to hand in first drafts. ... We discussed this and I agreed. (Kristin, Administration)

The first three of these students seem to be in a Teaching Model relationship, but their attitudes toward it are different. The last student relates one of the very few examples in my data corpus of metatalk, i.e., the supervisor and the student actually discussed what kinds of texts are most useful to write and to hand in at any given time in the thesis process.

The difference in attitudes toward and use of writing to explore ideas was clearly tied to the distinction between “hard” and “soft” disciplines and their text traditions. The natural science discipline did not provide the same opportunity for students to hand in exploratory texts to their supervisors. All of the supervisors in Fishery and Marine Biology emphasized that the focus on brevity, clarity, and precision in reporting experiments discouraged exploratory writing. Some thought, however, that exploratory writing might be a useful starting point for writing the Introduction and Discussion sections. The interviews confirmed the common myth that, while writing in the humanities and in some social sciences is seen as part of the research process, in the natural sciences the role of writing is to communicate what research has revealed. Some of the teachers contested this view, however, and wanted to abolish expressions like “the writing phase” and “to write up the research,” since students in their view would benefit greatly from continuous writing from the beginning of their research project (Professor Tune, Marine Biology). Nevertheless, none of the supervisors interviewed in Fishery and Marine Biology had encouraged students to use exploratory writing.

By analyzing my data with a view to disciplinarity and writing, I discovered indications that the picture was more complex, and that exploratory writing in fact was an important aspect also of the experimental researchers’ discourse community. When the professors talked about the research teams into which graduate students were integrated, they briefly described team meetings where the members would present ideas or sketches or preliminary drafts for discussion. But for some reason many supervisors do not connect the way they themselves actually work—through exploratory talk and texts in a dialogical creative process—with their supervision practices.
Disciplinarity and the Models of Supervision

The Apprenticeship Model was linked by my data to experimental science and to project-organized research, and both of these dimensions cut across disciplinary boundaries. When I first compared the three disciplines in my dataset, I found that supervisors in Fishery and Marine Biology seemed to combine the Teaching Model and the Apprenticeship Model. Most of them corrected students’ writing extensively at all text levels, and in this process they behaved according to the Teaching Model, providing normative and directive comments. This was due partly to students’ lack of previous experience in academic writing and partly to the strong tradition of clarity, brevity, and precision.

Experimental marine biological research, however, warrants an apprenticeship approach, since the only way to learn the practical trade of research was by imitating a master. I therefore interpreted the combination of supervision models in Fishery and Marine Biology as a result of both the research and the text culture in this discipline. While the nature of experimental research led to the Apprenticeship Model of supervision regarding practical aspects of research, the strongly normative text culture and the attention to international publishing standards led to the Teaching Model when it came to writing.

The students indicated that while some of the student-supervisor relationships seemed to be strongly asymmetrical and had the hallmarks of dependency, others did not. There was some evidence that when the supervisor and student worked together on a research project, sometimes for weeks on a research vessel and sometimes in the laboratory, they developed a more symmetrical relationship. This relationship allowed the student not only to accept the normative and directive comments from the supervisor, but also to welcome them as a sign of interest in his particular needs. Applying Bakhtin’s distinction between monological and dialogical discourse to this phenomenon reveals greater complexity than an initial analysis of interview data revealed. Even though the interactions around the thesis text itself seemed monological, the dialogical relationships that developed between supervisor and student over time allowed the student to interpret those interactions differently. Focused case studies are needed to discover the details of this development, but this example should warn us against easy conclusions.

In Administration and Organizational Science, the Teaching Model was not prevalent with respect to textual matters, in keeping with the explicitly stated focus on content. Supervisors in this discipline did not invest much prestige in their own way of dealing with students’ texts and were therefore open to change. When it came to research methodology and theoretical positions, however, supervisors were more authoritative. According to one student, you either accepted or quit (Hans, Administration). Due to a move in the department toward larger research projects into which master’s degree students were incorporated, the Apprenticeship Model of supervision was gaining ground. This gave students a chance to discuss their projects with other researchers—an illustration of how the organization of graduate thesis work fosters monologic or dialogic relationships.

The most distinctive differences between supervisors practicing the Teaching Model and those practicing the Partnership Model were found in History of Religions. The contrast between professors Haug and Gran illustrates the complexity of the issue of connecting disciplinarity with certain models of supervision. I interviewed the two on the same day in their adjacent offices and was struck by the differences both in their attitudes and their supervision practices. Haug and Gran are both senior professors with national and international reputations in their respective specializations. They are the same age, but Haug was educated and previously employed in another Nordic country and was initially an outsider at the department. One of Haug’s
specializations was religion and politics, an area on the border of social science with no established textual traditions at the University of Bergen. He was a strong advocate of a Partnership Model of supervision (although the term was never used) and based his supervision on students’ exploratory texts. I understood this to be a consequence both of his view of how knowledge was created through dialogue and of the fact that his specialization had few established traditions. Professor Gran, on the other hand, represented the learned philological text tradition dating back to the founding father of the department, professor Kragerud. Professors in this specialization held a high status as learned scholars, and the transmission view of teaching was strong. The demands on textual precision and rhetorical skill were high, and students’ texts were corrected, often in great detail.

I believe the different supervision models in this discipline arise from disciplinary, institutional, and personal factors. The differences between the specializations are most significant. Perhaps students in Gran’s specialization had to rely on his expert knowledge, while Haug’s broader field embraced more common knowledge, which made partnership relationships easier. Additionally, the Teaching Model could be seen as a way of protecting the traditions of the old specialization. Finally, the personal and disciplinary histories of the supervisors had led to diverging views on knowledge, learning, and communication, reflected in different models of supervision, one dialogical and the other rather monological. Only a detailed, situated study including observational data, textual analysis, and more focused interviews could provide a full answer.

The Supervision Models in Light of Dialogism

The Partnership Model and the Teaching Model can be seen as competing paradigms of supervision. The Partnership Model is built on dialogism, an epistemology in which knowledge is seen as emerging from interaction and the interpenetration of different voices. This epistemology makes dialogue central. Both students and supervisors talk about supervision in terms of dialogue, of a willingness to listen to the other and to postpone judgement. The Partnership Model describes a relationship with an asymmetry in knowledge and power built nevertheless on mutual respect and mutual expectations.

The Teaching Model has its roots in monologism: supervision is basically seen as the transmission of knowledge from the expert supervisor to the novice graduate student. The effect may be the same whether the student’s lack of self-confidence forces the supervisor into a role of authoritative expert or the supervisor establishes an authoritarian relationship with the student because he believes this is the best way for the student to learn and improve.

This study has shown that supervisors who practiced a Partnership Model of supervision encouraged students to hand in exploratory texts, while those who practiced a Teaching Model tended not to do so. This difference makes sense in light of the two views of knowledge and learning underpinning the two models. Exploratory texts function as a basis for further discussions between student and supervisor. Lotman’s theory of the dual function of texts provides some insight. Lotman (1988) distinguishes between a univocal function of texts, which is primarily used to transmit knowledge, and a dialogic function of texts, in which texts are treated as “thinking devices,” or as one of the supervisors expressed it: “as a point of departure for ‘thinking aloud together with the student’” (Professor Haug, Religion). Several of the supervisors who adhered to a Teaching Model of supervision acknowledged that exploratory writing could be a useful cognitive strategy for the individual student to develop or clarify his or her thoughts and ideas, but they did not see its function as basis for dialogue. For students who
accustomed to the Partnership Model, “thinking on paper” became a way of sharing ideas “at the point of utterance” (Vygotsky, 1987) and in many ways a symbol of partnership. Britton et al. (1975) found that students who saw their teacher as an evaluator and not as a dialogue partner took few risks in their writing. This attitude is reflected in the comments of several of the students. Risk taking is a central element in creative processes, and finding ways of encouraging it seems to be a crucial and underestimated element in research supervision.

In my earlier research on writing and talking to learn, I focused on ways writing and talking can interpenetrate one another and thus strengthen the learning process (Dysthe, 1993, 1996). I cannot document that this phenomenon happens here because I have not observed real life supervision meetings, but the way students and supervisors talk about their experiences in the Partnership Model suggests this process.

Some of the conflicts between the three models become clearer if we see them in light of Bakhtin’s concepts of “appropriation” and “the authoritative and inner persuasive word.” Graduate supervision entails enculturation and appropriating the words of others, as well as finding an identity. The question is to what extent “the word” can be transmitted. In Bakhtin’s account, “[t]he authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused in it” (1981, p. 342). Bakhtin’s problem with the authoritative word is that it does not invite dialogue or give room for doubt and resistance. The authoritative word has social authority, as is often the case with the word from the supervisor who knows everything best. The danger is that this word may remain alien and unproductive, as happens when students unquestioningly take the supervisor’s comments as corrections to their own way of understanding or to their own text. The supervisor’s word, indeed any authority’s word according to Bakhtin, needs to be questioned, even resisted, in order to become productive and internally persuasive. Prior (1998) has shown this process in exchanges between a teacher and a student, West and Moira, “tracing how their words came to intermingle in the text and how West’s responses were authoritative or became internally persuasive to Moira” (p. 218). The university professor traditionally has occupied a place from where the authoritative word is spoken, so as supervisor the professor must insist on the position as dialogue partner, as professor Haug did, to achieve the dual goal of enculturation and independence. Enculturation is not a neat, one-way process: it implies reciprocity and co-production of meaning. Professor Haug’s statement about learning from his students is part of this picture.

Rommetveit has pointed out that in order for co-production of meaning to take place, the participants need “a temporarily shared social reality” (1974, p. 63). In my study, oral or written exploratory texts seemed to provide just such mutual understanding and reciprocity between student and supervisor. There seemed to be phases in students’ graduate work when they had a particular need for “shared social reality,” such as the planning phase, the data-analysis phase, and whenever they had writer’s block.

The Apprenticeship Model is also based on a dialogical epistemology. The professors in my study who conceptualized research as an activity that can only be learned from more experienced researchers in a community of practice adhered to the Apprenticeship Model. Two studies of Nobel Prize winners have emphasized the master-apprenticeship aspect of learning to be researchers (Kanigel, 1986; Zuckerman, 1977). Kvale (1999) has used these studies as a starting point for discussing the relevance of the master-apprentice model for the education of researchers today. Most of Kvale’s examples are from experimental fields, but he insists that this model is also relevant for the humanities. Using Gadamer’s autobiography, Philosophical
Apprenticeships (1985), as an example, Kvale notes that the philosopher was an apprentice to Heidegger and other major philosophers of his time. Such examples may seem quite far from a graduate student’s fumbling attempts at research, but the point Kvale makes is similar to mine: the model of supervision chosen by a professor grows out of his or her view of how knowledge is created.

A More Complex Picture of the Supervision Models

Acknowledging the danger in postulating very clear and unambiguous models of anything, I want to conclude this discussion by pointing out two factors that complicate the supervision models. One is the ambiguous character of authority; another is the negotiated character of all relationships. The role of supervisor will always carry with it a certain authority, and a student-supervisor relationship will always be asymmetrical. Considered from a position of dialogism, this fact may be seen as negative, but one should consider how “authority” is construed. Bakhtin’s criticism of the authoritative (or authoritarian) word is a criticism of abuse of authority, which in the Soviet society was rampant, and monological discourse is for Bakhtin the exception rather than the rule. Graduate supervisors today have very few role models, and the ones they have are often poor because their own supervisors were either authoritarian or negligent. Bakhtinian dialogics may provide a fruitful position for the supervisor:

Dialogics seeks neither agreement nor transcendence of differences but rather articulation of differences. … Dialogics not only preserves the discourse of the other but revoices it. … There is no dialogic guarantee that improved understanding of the other’s ideas will leave us at ease with them. (Bialostosky, 1989, p. 109)

The supervisor’s special task is at once to make his own voice clear and to listen to and revoice the voice of the student; it is simultaneously to keep his own authority and identity and give authority and identity to the student. “Dialogic conversation thus reveals itself … [as] a way of talking especially capable of distinguishing itself as it recognizes others” (Bialostosky, 1989, p. 118). As I see it, Bakhtinian dialogue is not characterized by facile agreement or embracing the position of the other, but by valuing one’s own position while recognizing the other. In a follow-up, in-depth study, I would like to observe and to document how supervisors manage this both-and position of dialogue, being authorities and partners at the same time.

The student side of this complex relationship also requires further research, especially in order to find out how students negotiate their positions and interpret their roles. Master’s degree students who are integrated in a research team, for instance, become participants in real-world communities of practice in the sense that Lave and Wenger (1991) use the term, but we do not know how students discover their roles in the midst of experienced researchers, to what extent their voices are heard and revoiced, or how they appropriate the discourse of the particular community. However, we do know that other graduate students are either isolated or participate in “practice fields” designed to situate learning activities. A further study of the Apprenticeship Model should look into the distinction between “practice fields” or “practice communities” and “communities of practice” (Barab & Duffy, 2000, p. 33 ff.) in order to see what difference these participatory roles make for the interactions between supervisor and student.

The three models of supervision, though they provide useful distinctions, are not disjoint categories. Rather, they are in dialogue with one another, as is the case with Bakhtin’s notions of the authoritative and the inner persuasive word. In my account of the models, I have downplayed another finding that supports this: Most supervision processes that students and professors
related to me seemed to include aspects of all three models but were dominated by one of them, sometimes depending on the phase of the thesis work. The interrelations among the models would also be an interesting topic to pursue in a situated observation study.

Some Practical Implications

This study of supervisors and master’s degree students at a Norwegian university has its background in the changing faces of academia and the conflicting demands and ideals that confront both supervisors and students. These forces are perceivable most directly in feedback to students’ texts. I have distinguished between three models of supervision, described the characteristics of each, and discussed some relations between each model and the type of feedback given. The clearest finding is that supervisors who practice the Teaching Model, with its emphasis on correction of student texts, prefer “finished” drafts and do not encourage students to hand in exploratory texts, while those who practice a Partnership Model do. Students’ concern with control over their own texts best addressed by the Partnership Model, but some students prefer directive supervisors who make sure the text adheres to disciplinary norms.

To sum up, the conceptualizations of supervision as teaching, partnership or apprenticeship are not mutually exclusive, as elements of one may appear in another. There will, for example, be some extent of apprenticeship in all student-supervisor relationships. It is nonetheless possible to distinguish between the three models on the basis of the most dominant trends in a supervision relationship. I argue that such a distinction is useful in professional development work.

A discussion of the models could foster:

- An understanding of the differences between a monological and a dialogical paradigm for supervision and an ensuing discussion among supervisors and students of the practical consequences thereof;
- An awareness in supervisors about their own practices, helping them become more conscious about what “philosophy of supervision” they want to base their work on;
- An understanding of the importance of metadiscussions between students and supervisors, i.e., talk about different aspects of the supervision process, such as the kinds of texts to hand in, the types of feedback useful in different phases of the work, or ways to make implicit expectations explicit; and
- An understanding of the significance and usefulness of written and oral exploratory texts in different disciplines at different points in the supervision process.

Conventions for the student-supervisor relationship have changed significantly at universities all over the world. The old ideal of the reticent supervisor who saw the thesis as evidence of the student’s ability to work independently has diminished in stature (Johnson, Green, & Lee, 2000). Presently, academic time-frames tend to be more rigid, and the supervisor is frequently expected to make demands on the student and be in control of his or her progress. This involves much closer textual involvement and more feedback. “The balance between directing the student and giving freedom is more difficult than earlier” (Professor Solstad, Religion). There is obviously a conflict between the academic ideal of fostering critical and independent thinkers and the accountability movement’s push for finishing master’s theses on schedule. The issue of freedom versus control bears both on the disciplinary identity supervisors want to foster in their students and on the ways students interpret their supervisors’ interventions and negotiate their own goals.
Notes

1 “Supervisor” is here used in line with the Australian tradition, instead of the more common American term “research advisor” or “mentor.” The Norwegian term “veileder” has connotations of mentor, advisor, and supervisor, but includes the whole spectrum of supervision models. Also note that I use “professor,” “supervisor,” and “teacher” as synonyms in this article. All graduate supervisors are professors and academic teachers, with the exception of external advisors who may act as a second supervisor. This category has not been included in my study. Please note that all the names of supervisors and students in this article are fictitious.

2 In the introduction to the book Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective: Transitions from Secondary to Higher Education (Foster & Russell, 2002), the editors raise a number of questions central to the transition from secondary to higher education on the basis of a comparison of the U.S. with traditions and systems of England, France, Germany, Kenya, and South Africa. Norwegian high schools focus more on extended writing, centralized curricula, and writing exams than do their U.S. counterparts, and allow earlier specialization than U.S. schools (though later than schools in England and France), just to mention a few differences.

3 It is worth noting that a major reform of higher education—the so-called “Quality Reform”—was initiated by the Norwegian government in 2001 by Parliamentary Proposition 27, and it is planned to be in place in the autumn 2003. This reform seeks an international alignment of the Norwegian higher education system, introduces modularization of all courses, and focuses on accountability and quality assurance. Students will meet stricter requirements of participation and of regularly written papers, but will also receive more feedback, closer follow-up, more formative assessments (portfolios are recommended), and more student-centered teaching in general. The reform has been criticized by some academics who fear it will undermine the strong research foundation of our traditional master’s thesis and will make university more “school-like.” Two formal changes will be compliance with international degree requirements and names (BA, MA, Ph.D.) and the change from a fine-grained marking system to letter grading (A, B, C…).

4 Per Lauvaas and Gunnar Handal have been central in developing “university pedagogy” as a separate field of inquiry in Norway. In a recent study they interviewed one supervisor—graduate student pair from a number of disciplines at the University of Oslo. The research report published in Norwegian provides an important source of knowledge of differences and similarities in supervision practices across disciplines (Lauvaas & Handal 1998).

5 Australia has been one of the leading countries in higher education pedagogy. The professional development units, also called Centres for Teaching and Learning, employ tenured academic staff. Likewise, in Norway such centers are sites for scholarship (instead of just student-support centers), ensuring that the instruction they provide is research based.

6 This is not a phenomenologically oriented study; however, where the interviewees are asked about their own conception of the phenomenon, in this case their relationship, and where these definitions form the object of study.

7 I prefer this method to meaning condensation, which is recommended for instance by Kvale (1996), whose book I have found useful for many aspects of interviewing and data analysis. Regarding specific data analyses techniques, I have used Miles & Huberman (1994).

8 The notions of “specialism” and “subspecialism” are part of Bechers’ categorization of academic disciplines. See particularly pp. 36-50 of Academic Tribes and Territories (1989). I have chosen to use the more common terms “specialization” and “subspeciality.”

9 Yeatman has taken her model from management:

new contractualist technologies of managing individualized relationships are of a kind as to provide the structure that is needed. These are infra-legal mechanisms of contractual relationship which, within the relationship concerned, embed ways of making both parties accountable to each other for their respective parts within a shared project. They do this through the combination of several devices: 1) making next steps or goals and timelines explicit for both parties 2) providing a process whereby the explicit setting of next steps or goals and timelines has to be dialogued on each occasion of meeting together 3) providing a paper trail of these decisions, which in turn 4) allows for process of explicit review as to whether goals and timelines have been met. These are not the only devices which such contractualist relationships make possible. (Yeatman, 1998, p.10)

Yoni Ryan (1995) has also developed the benefits of mutual contracts between supervisors and students as a way of organizing supervision.

10 The evaluation committee for graduate theses consists of an external assessor from another university, another professor from the department, and the supervisor.

11 The concept of exploratory writing is an important element of process-oriented writing pedagogy. This pedagogy has previously had little influence at Norwegian undergraduate teaching in the universities, but considerably more at the colleges. It is to be expected that the Quality Reform (see note 2), with its strong emphasis on writing at all
levels, will result in a much greater focus on writing pedagogy, both rhetoric-, genre-, and process-based. The first Norwegian book on writing in higher education across disciplines is Dysthe, Hertzberg, and Hoel (2000) Skriving for å lære. Skriving i høyere utdanning. [Writing to learn. Writing in higher education]. A combined focus on both process and genre has been the hallmark of Norwegian writing pedagogy for the last decade.

A study of supervision practices at the University of Oslo confirms that metadiscussions between supervisor and students are very rare and that there is considerable room for improvement (Lauvås & Handal 1998).

References


Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

I. Text traditions, text culture and text norms
   · How would you explain what is characteristic of the text culture in your discipline?
   · Do there exist different text traditions, and if so, how would you characterize them?
   · What are the criteria for good texts (thesis related)?
   · How do students get familiar with the criteria?

Experience of academic writing
   · What are the main problems which students encounter in academic writing at graduate level?
   · What could be done to prepare students better and to help them cope?

Experience of graduate supervision
   General questions:
   · How would you characterize the most critical factors in good supervision?
   · What constitutes bad supervision?
   · What have you yourself experienced as problems in different phases of supervision?

Questions relating to text and feedback practices:
   · What are expected of texts handed in to the supervisor?
   · How are these texts dealt with?
   · Describe the feedback and revision process in detail.
   · To what extent does the supervisor suggest or make textual changes?