



Supervision Beyond Borders: Perspectives on a Mutual Process of Becoming in Higher Education

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Abstract

In the context of problem-based higher education, students are typically supervised by a person referred to as either a teacher, a tutor, or a supervisor. The supervisor's job is to facilitate students' learning—most prominently by asking questions encouraging students to reflect and become active participants in the construction of knowledge. But supervision can take many different forms. The purpose of this paper is *not* to provide readers with a set of strict guidelines for how to supervise students in the context of problem-based higher education. Rather, we merely strive to show that even within the confines of the neoliberal university, there *is* room for maneuver to resist the status quo of commoditization and to carry out oppositional practices that may ultimately result in transformational learning. To accomplish this goal, we have employed a post-qualitative perspective allowing us to think supervision differently and describe ways in which the relation between supervisors and students may also be performed differently. We argue that while it is necessary to let go of the rigid thinking and professional expectations about what proper supervision is that confine supervision to a limited and limiting space, such oppositional practices can challenge hegemonic discourses and contest the legitimacy of the structures governing higher education today. More specifically, we draw on a patchwork of collaborative narratives written before, during, and after the fall semester of 2018 to describe a particular process of supervision that significantly affected the both of us, that is, the student as well as the supervisor.

Keywords Supervision · Problem-based learning · Higher education · Post-qualitative inquiry · Collaborative writing

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Let There Be Sin

July 2020.

Allow us to begin by making a confession: In what follows, we will first state our purposes in negative terms. In other words, we will start by saying what we will *not* be doing in this paper. While well aware that explicitly stating what you do *not* intend to do is often considered a cardinal sin of academic writing, in this case, we believe that the end justifies the means. Thus, we deliberately choose to begin this paper by sinning against the academic commandments because doing so aligns with our general objective as well as our epistemological position. As such, the opening lines that follow are placed there as a sign of warning about what the text has in stall for the reader as we purposefully transgress the normative boundaries delimiting what researchers are expected or allowed to do under the strict rules of academic conventions.

Dear Reader

In keeping with the ideas presented previously, let us begin: The purpose of this paper is *not* to provide readers with a set of guidelines for how to supervise students in the context of problem-based higher education. Hence, our aim is *not* to supply an answer to the question about how one *should* supervise. Instead, we merely strive to show that even within the confines of the neoliberal university, there is room for maneuver to resist the status quo of commoditization and to carry out oppositional practices that may ultimately result in transformational learning for students as well as supervisors. Besides, such practices may be used to challenge hegemonic discourses and contest the legitimacy of the structures governing higher education today. That said, we aim to offer an alternative perspective in the form of a tentative answer to the question about how one *might* or *could* supervise. Thus, this paper is aligned with intentions to think supervision in higher education otherwise. In it, we describe how we have navigated the process of supervision and the relationship between the supervisor and the supervised by letting go of the rigid thinking and professional expectations about what proper supervision is supposed to look like that confine the practice of supervision to a limited and limiting space.

All the best,

Kathrine & Lasse.

She/her/hers He/him/his.

We/Our/Ours

Throughout the paper, we use our real names to refer to ourselves. That said, we sometimes leave it to the reader to decipher which one of us is the one writing from the first-person perspective using the pronoun “I.”

We first met in January 2018 when Lasse, who was 28 years old at the time, was enrolled as a student at Aalborg University and about to commence the second semester of a master’s program in sports science with the Department of Health Science and Technology. Lasse’s primary interest was in talent development, human rights, and Sport for Development and Peace in Uganda. As part of his graduate studies, Lasse traveled to Uganda, where he lived for

two periods of approximately five months. During these prolonged stays in Uganda, Lasse conducted fieldwork on a Danish football academy outside Kampala. Kathrine, who was 39 years old at the time, was one and a half years into a Ph.D. program offered by the same department. Kathrine had planned to conduct an ethnographic study of critical thinking in problem-based project work in the context of health science education as part of her Ph.D. More specifically, Kathrine was interested in studying how problem-based project work affects students' collaborative efforts during group work with and without supervisors present. As a Ph.D. fellow at Aalborg University, fellows are required to teach and supervise undergraduate as well as graduate students. Incidentally, Kathrine ended up supervising two of the projects Lasse did as part of his master's program.

The events that inspired this paper took place over two years of collaborative work. During that time, we collaborated on multiple projects that took us to numerous different places and involved frequent meetings in person and via online communication platforms in addition to exams, lunches, visits, and walks, as well as an international conference.

From Uganda With Love

September 2018.

I am at a local bar in Ntinda, Kampala, Uganda, 6616 km away from home, enjoying the view of a group of passionate Ugandan men in a variety of Premier League jerseys. Suddenly my phone vibrates to let me know I have an incoming message. It is from my supervisor in Denmark. I am surprised ... well, actually, I am not surprised that she texts me on a Sunday at 11:45 pm because our way of communicating while I have been doing fieldwork in Uganda has not exactly been conventional. I open the message. I am always curious when she contacts me. Her passionate approach to my research, our way of discussing and sharing ideas and reflecting together is beyond what I have ever met in my whole life as a university student. We have talked about it, this collaborative relationship of supervision and research, and I still remember her words about supervision being something requiring mutual involvement and affecting both of us academically as well as personally. John Law's (2004) words about methods creating realities ring loud in my head. I get the feeling that my supervisor's approach will somehow change my future realities.

The Million-Dollar Question

July 2020.

But how I wonder, can a supervisor, an average person embedded in an educational context heavily informed by a neoliberal logics, possibly contribute to changing a student's future realities?

Changing Future Realities Through Multiple Modes of Post-Qualitative Inquiry

According to Kuby et al. (2016), post-qualitative inquiry may be seen as a form of inquiry that "is about eliminating binaries, such as teaching/learning, reading/doing theory, and theory/

methods, and transgressing what has been normed in QR” (p. 141). At the same time, however, and in much the way as supervision, it is not something that can be put on formula, post-qualitative inquiry is not a method with a fixed and finished script ready to be pulled from a drawer and put to use. Therefore, post-qualitative researchers are advised to seek out different spaces and create new ways of doing their research while refraining from relying blindly on the illusion that research methodology and methods can be stabilized (St. Pierre 2019). On the contrary, post-qualitative inquiry like supervision may be said to be that “which emerges as a process methodology” (Mazzei 2020, p. 1). As such, it is something that “happens in the middle of things, in the threshold” (Mazzei 2020, p. 1). Thus, researchers should strive to make their methodological approaches open up possibilities for questioning the assumptions undergirding the prevalent beliefs about science in general and qualitative research in particular, as well as their own beliefs and those of others. It follows that from a post-qualitative perspective, methods are not merely neutral tools for gaining access to the world out there. Instead, they are performative, political, and create realities (Denzin 2016; Kuby et al. 2016; Law 2004).

In working on this paper, we have tried to create possibilities for changing future realities. However, it was not until after we received the first round of comments from reviewers, that is, in the middle of things and relatively late in the process of writing, revising, and rewriting, that we came to realize that what we are doing might be characterized as a kind of post-qualitative inquiry. In that sense, our work reflects a similar attitude to that expressed by St. Pierre (2019) when she writes that:

The work of post qualitative inquiry is not to find, describe, interpret, and represent what is but “to bring into being that which does not yet exist” (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 147), the new. For that reason, it must be treated “every time as something which has not always existed, but begins, forced and under constraint” (p. 136)—forced because it cannot refer to or repeat an existing structure, essence, truth, or judgment. Post qualitative inquiry does not exist prior to its arrival; it must be created, invented anew each time. (p. 9).

Thus, there can be no post-qualitative research methodology, nor can there be any post-qualitative research methods, research designs, research practices, data, or methods of data collection or methods of data analysis (St. Pierre 2019). But at the same time, and in keeping with post-qualitative ideas, “methods must agitate, problematize, and generate new modes of thinking-making-doing” (Springgay and Truman 2018, p. 186). Each of these three modes is evident in our work. Not only does the way we have *thought of* the relationship between the supervisor and the student constitute an agitation, the actual practice of supervision and the resulting relationship, that is the *doing*, in and by itself also functions as a problematization of the roles that supervisors and students usually occupy in relation to one another in the context of the neoliberal university. Finally, the writing may be said to constitute a kind of *making*.

Hence, thinking about and describing our relationship as a mutual process of becoming, becomes a critical provocation against the rigid normative structures that govern institutions of higher education today while also destabilizing taken for granted assumptions of qualitative research. By explicitly elucidating possible alternatives to the status quo, this approach makes visible new modes of thinking-making-doing, thereby contributing to producing new possible futures. Thus, this approach to supervision, our relationship, and the research we have produced constitutes our critique and rage against the institutional machine of the neoliberal university in which there is a heavy focus on evidence-based teaching, course planning,

classroom management, quantifiable measures of evaluation, standardized testing, and curriculum bureaucracy. The approach to supervision we describe in this paper is meant to function as an example that may be able to inspire and encourage others to follow in our footsteps and imagine supervision differently.

But let us be clear: This is an experiment! At the moment, we only have a rather faint idea about its trajectory. However, this is not an experiment for the sake of experimentation. This is not a game we play! As Denzin (2016), we strive to produce research that can “change the world through the way we write about it” (p. 90). That said, we take solace in the idea of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005), and trust that if we only keep going for long enough, writing from different and shared perspectives will eventually lead us to insights we could not have foreseen before we started writing.

What is more, writing as a method of inquiry does not only entail the actual process of thinking-typing. On the contrary, what writing as a method of inquiry also implies is that our text is never our exclusive property since it is produced with inspiration from multiple material, discursive, and affective sources. Furthermore, the text is not our own since both reviewers and readers in particular play a crucial part for what the final product may become and what will become of it. Some of the writing we do may turn out to be monstrous in the sense that it “seems opposed to the logics of clarity, concision, precision, directness, and brevity” (Honan et al. 2018, p. 8). Still, what we present here might not nearly be monstrous enough to deserve that label, not least since we have chosen to structure our paper the traditional way, that is, in neatly ordered and ordering sections labeled according to their content. Still, ours is not a narrative of progress. It is not meant to be a *Bildung* story. What we present here resembles what Richardson (2000) calls a *pleated-text*; it is made of experimental texts and texts about those experimental texts folded into one another. It is a collage of multi-voiced, collective stories with jagged edges.

Cultivating Empirical Monsters

Our collaborative endeavor included many more events than can be described in this paper. Therefore, we have had to choose to focus specifically on those episodes that most prominently stand out because they are atypical of how supervision is typically practiced and described in the literature. What the selected episodes have in common is that they illustrate how we thought, did, and made supervision differently.

In the process of researching and writing that we have come to refer to as a process of mutual becoming, we have not collected any data, we have not analyzed any data, and we have not interpreted any data. In fact, we have no data in the traditional understanding of this concept. What we have done is to cultivate a number of scattered stories interspersed with theoretical considerations and analytical reflections to help illustrate how our understanding of different aspects of the supervision process has evolved as a result of our collaborative efforts. We thus confront the fear of the academic traditional internal machinery head-on, and we refuse to be trapped by a type of writing that is produced for the sake of production. Instead, we seek out new and different forms of connections between the I, the you, the we, the us, the reader, and the text to avoid ending up as researchers and writers and humans, who are “inert, dead, coded, ranked and listless numbers” (Honan et al. 2018, p. 1).

We deliberately use the word “cultivate” here to distance ourselves from the idea that researchers can collect and code data from the field as if they were picking flowers or gathering

pretty rocks. For quite some time, scholars from a variety of disciplines have challenged the traditional idea of data, cf. for example, Brinkmann (2014), who writes that “nothing is simply given. What we call data are always produced, constructed, mediated by human activities” (p. 721). While Brinkmann goes on to suggest that the word “data” be replaced by the word “creata” to signal that it is something produced, constructed, and mediated by human activities, we advocate in favor of another alternative, “cultivata,” because the connotations of this word seem to fit our understanding of what data is and how it is produced better. Thus, the word *cultivata* produces associations of something organic that may be brought about through complex interactions between human activities and what is supplied by the world as such. In the words of Barad (2007), the universe comes to meet us halfway.

Supervision as Superpower and the Neoliberal University

It is a funny word. Supervision. Or super-vision. Or super vision. Or super(-)vision. No matter how you decide to write it, when you repeat it to yourself and listen carefully, it ends up sounding like some kind of exotic superpower. Cannot you just imagine how it would be something bestowed on a select group of particularly gifted individuals whose superior sense of sight would allow them to see straight through walls and other solid objects as if they were made of clear glass? If I remember correctly, Superman has this power, and I think we can all agree that having this kind of superpower would be quite helpful in many situations ... especially if you are the nosy type. Anyway, while supervision, of course, is a noun, it has a closely related cousin in the form of the verb “supervise.” To supervise. Being a verb, the word “supervise” clearly signifies that it is something you *do* rather than something you *have*. In other words, whereas the noun seems to signal that super(-)vision might be an innate superpower that is only the exclusive privilege of a select few, the verb “supervise” seems to gesture in the direction of a different understanding, one not nearly as elitist as the former. In this sense, “to supervise” seems to indicate a commonly occurring activity that may be taken up by just about anyone who feels she has a desire, need, or professional duty to do so. Essentially, and what is most important for the point we want to make here is that in the context of problem-based higher education, students are typically supervised by a person variously referred to as either a teacher, a tutor, or a supervisor. Importantly, however, even though he or she may be *called* a teacher, the goal for this person is not to *teach* the students in the sense of lecturing. On the contrary, the supervisor’s job is to try to facilitate students’ learning processes. In problem-based approaches to learning, this is done by asking questions that encourage students to reflect and become active participants in the construction of the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to acquire. In theory, that is what it means to supervise in the context of problem-based learning. Nevertheless, even though this is how the role of the supervisor is described to students, who are exposed to problem-based learning, students will often regard the supervisor as someone, who is indeed endowed with superpowers, that is, as someone who has all the right answers and always knows best. According to Garvis and Pendergast (2012), “Under the traditional model, it is assumed that the supervisor is the expert and the student is the apprentice who learns by doing” (p. 26), but beyond that, the role of supervisor may also involve several other roles such as an advisory role, a quality control role, a supporting role, and a guiding role (De Beer and Mason 2009). However, in problem-based learning, the role of the supervisor is often slightly different since she or he is unlikely always to be an expert on the subject matter of the projects chosen by students.

Therefore, in problem-based learning, supervision is a highly situated practice that requires empathy and a finely tuned sense of what is needed in order to make the most of each situation to stimulate the development of a positive and productive relationship between the supervisor and the students that will allow the students to tap into their potential for academic as well as personal development.

In recent decades, higher education has changed as a result of an increased demand produced by industry's need for qualified employees who can adapt to a fast-changing labor market (Barnacle 2016). While some universities have retained their use of the traditional ways of teaching that rely primarily on lecturing to large numbers of students combined with a significant amount of independent study that students are expected to do on their own, other institutions have adopted alternative pedagogical approaches in order to try to adjust to the specific challenges of neoliberal societies. One such approach is problem-based learning, which is based on an integrated approach to learning rooted in John Dewey's educational theories and constructivist philosophies (McCaughan 2015). More specifically, problem-based learning may be roughly described as a pedagogy that is focused on facilitating students' learning by engaging them in group work revolving around complex, authentic, real-world problems that have no one right solution (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2004).

Beginnings and Becomings

January 2018.

I quietly roamed the endless, dull hallways of the building that housed the Department of Health Science and Technology. I was looking for inspiration. I had high hopes of finding it somewhere in one of the offices lining each side of those endless, dull hallways. I was on the lookout for something or someone that would be able to light my fire. I was tired of listening to supervisors' same old, boring lectures about the same old, boring theories and methods. There had to be someone in this department who would be open to my crazy thoughts and ideas.

Rendezvous

When we first met in January 2018, we had never seen each other before. At first, there was nothing unusual about our first meeting except maybe for the fact that the student had shown up unannounced. However, as the conversation gathered speed, we gradually came to realize that we shared an interest in doing things differently, that is, for experimenting with new and unconventional types of research as well as for alternative forms of representation. "Do you like to write?" the supervisor ventured about half an hour into the meeting. "I love to write!" the student answered, and that seemed to seal the deal. It came as a surprise to both of us.

Shifting Perspectives

As mentioned earlier, in problem-based approaches to learning, supervisors must ask questions that encourage students to reflect and become active participants in the construction of the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to acquire.

But ...

When I met Lasse, I was so tired of asking the same old boring questions and getting the same old boring answers, and so in order to try to provoke Lasse to provide a new kind of answer, to make him think for himself, on one occasion early in the semester, I resorted to asking a different kind of question that I hoped would upset his usual way of thinking.

“But what do *you* think, Lasse?” Kathrine says, looking intently at me. Since when has that been a relevant question to ask? I think to myself. What is it she wants me to say? Does she expect me to come up with an answer based on some obscure philosophical theory that I have no clue about how to decipher? Just as I am about to throw in the towel and admit to the fact that I am utterly ignorant with regard to this matter, Kathrine beats me to it as if she has read my mind: “No, what do *you*, Lasse, believe? You yourself?” This moment constitutes one of the greatest milestones in my time as a student at the university. Here is a supervisor, a person, a woman who confronts me head-on and seems genuinely interested in listening to what I think and have to say. On previous occasions, I have often felt like my opinion did not matter unless firmly supported by research literature or the statements of established scholars. But here all of a sudden, an opportunity presented itself for me to make my personal opinion count. Thinking about that moment still gives me the chills.

Exploring Exploitation Ethnographically

September 2018.

The project Lasse was working on was about talent identification. More specifically, it was a critical ethnographic study of a Danish football academy in Uganda that specializes in talent development. As part of his project, Lasse spent three and a half months doing fieldwork in Uganda. Lasse’s fieldwork involved visiting different football academies and investigating how children are treated in talent development programs, and how practitioners, coaches, scouts, and academy owners articulate and justify their actions. Furthermore, Lasse also became interested in studying how his methodological choices affected the outcome and potential consequences of his study. In the course of doing the fieldwork, Lasse realized that what he most aspired to do was to try to create alternative stories about talent development. Thus, he ended up telling dangerous stories about a specific Danish football academy in Uganda. Experimenting with different forms of textual expression, he gradually grew more and more willing to take risks in his critical writing. His heartfelt hope was that his texts would inspire new ideas and contribute to bringing about social changes, eventually allowing football and talent development to become catalysts for positive change rather than factors enforcing stigmatization and the negative implications associated with colonialist thinking that leads to a condescending attitude towards Uganda and its people. In this kind of imperialist thinking, Uganda is seen as nothing more than a market. A black market.

Mail From the Black Market

Dear Kathrine.

I have to tell you something! I have witnessed something criminal! I cannot stop thinking about it. Did you know that the boys are exchanged for money?! For money!

Seven-year-olds! Can you even imagine? You are not going to believe this, but the academy pays the local coach who has the boy on his team! They call it compensation! Compensation? For what? For the life of a seven-year-old? Each boy is worth 250 US dollars. Two-hundred-and-fifty-freaking US dollars for a child?! How much would you say *your* daughter is worth? Try putting a price tag on her! And while the academy is paying 250 US dollars in exchange for a body of raw material in the shape of a talented seven-year-old player, in the future, the academy might resell “the packaged goods” for *millions* of US dollars once it has been refined into a product for the football industry. What a bargain!

I am surprised and outraged and angry and, most of all, disappointed. I cannot believe that a Danish football academy covers itself up as an NGO, as a freaking humanist project pretending to help and contribute to positive change! But they are lying and patronizing and stigmatizing. They are a colonialist enterprise that is hoovering up the “best children” in the country in their quest for profit. In the meantime, the parents are unaware. They are left blind in the dark. They do not know anything about the money involved. But they *do* get a share: Their boy will get a free education if only they sign the contract giving up the responsibility for their boy for as long as he is enrolled in the academy’s program, which might be for up to ten years. This is what the contract says: “Furthermore, the parent/guardian in mention, hereby, authorizes the academy to take full responsibility and care of the above-mentioned child from this date until the 18th birthday.” What a disgrace! It is absolutely appalling. Dehumanizing. But what the hell do *I* do? What the hell *should* we do? What *can* you do?

Lasse.

Smitten

In the course of supervising Lasse, I did not plan on it, but I got involved—deeply, personally. I could not *not* be affected by it, by him, and his project. It seemed to grab me by the neck as we unconsciously refused to let the fact that I was supposed to supervise him hamper us, hamper our projects, our relationship, our actions, and interaction. And so just like every other research practice, our shared projects were not innocent. Rather, as Denzin (2006) notes, all research practices are:

performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political, by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other (p. 333).

Yes, I let myself be affected by what Lasse told me, by his indignation, his dangerous and deeply political stories about exploitation to the extent that the boundaries between us eventually became blurred. The critical spirit of Lasse’s project seemed contagious, and it quickly spilled over into our shared project about supervision in a new mode, so much so that the trajectories of the two projects that had begun as separate entities ramified and became entangled. I must admit that it got to me, and as we kept going, ideas and concepts began in the words of St. Pierre (2017), to “pile up and wash over us, producing a jamming effect that

infiltrated and destroyed the being we were told was real” (p. 1082). And thus, we became ready to embrace new possibilities of thinking and doing, being and becoming. In this way, we felt like we were moved by an intangible, demonic force beyond our control to think and do something different, differently.

Forbidden Territory

As part of this project, we have done a lot of different things differently. One such thing has been to read, write, and think collaboratively. For example, at the beginning of our collaborative endeavor, before the semester had even begun, we had the idea to start reading a book together, John Law’s *After method: Mess in social science research*, and to share our thoughts on the book with each other in Google Docs. We intended the shared document to be a place for academic reflection and discussion.

But...

Only a few days after we had agreed to start reading the book, this is what Kathrine wrote to me:

This is so much fun! I think to myself as I return to the space allotted to my own writing, having just finished commenting on the thoughts presented by Lasse about the first few pages of Law’s book. Alas, it takes a lot of time, but it also inspires new thoughts and ideas, and I can honestly say that I very much welcome the chance to practice my academic writing skills in a safe and supportive forum. I wonder if Lasse feels the same way. I hope so. But I still have to supervise Lasse’s project, and thus we are not just two random students sharing our thoughts on some trivial matter. Should I worry about my ability and responsibility to keep a professional distance and try harder not to get overly involved in the project? I must remember that it is not *my* project. I am merely the supervisor. Of course, by now, because I have already written about and made public these worries of mine, I have already transgressed into forbidden territory. It is too late to turn back now, however. And on closer inspection, maybe the fact that I cannot undo the writing I have just done does not have to be considered a problem. On the contrary, if I am truly committed to the ideas I hope to convey to students and the methods I value about equality and the value of sharing and collaborating, I should not strive towards sustaining the status quo that is characterized by asymmetric relations of power that serve to keep a particular hierarchy in place and me in a hegemonic position. Instead, I should practice what I preach by thinking of the relationship between a student and his/her supervisor as one characterized by mutual respect and a shared sense of genuine curiosity towards the topic of the project. Perhaps this is, in fact, what Taylor is getting at when she writes that there is a “need to install an ecology of ethical relations at the centre of educational practice in higher education” (Taylor 2017, p. 419). Maybe this alternative approach to supervising will constitute my own private little contribution to those endeavors going on within the field of higher education that testify to the fact that there is “widespread interest in ways of ‘doing’ pedagogy that contest the commoditisation and instrumentalism of learning and teaching that marketised assumptions presume” (Taylor 2017, p. 421). This is such a hopeful and optimistic way of thinking about higher education!

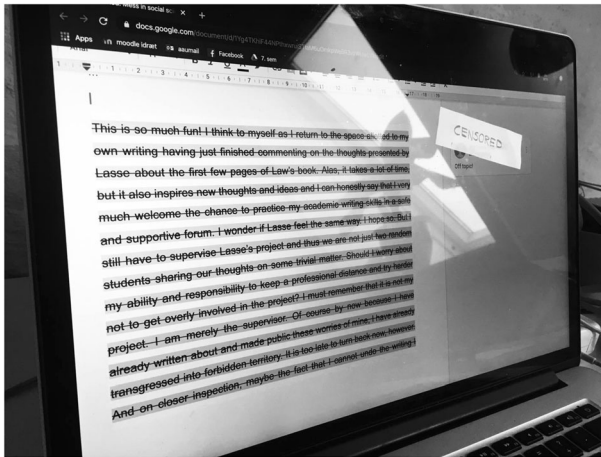


Fig. 1 Sharing (forbidden) thoughts in Google Docs

But Kathrine did not merely type these words up just like that. Rather, the way she presented them, see Fig. 1, made quite an impression on me as well.

For some reason, she had decided to highlight the text in yellow and add a comment that read: “Off-topic.” And on top of that, she had crossed the text out even though she could have deleted it altogether if she did not want me to read it. It was as if there was something she did not really want me to see, something forbidden, while she also seemed to be screaming the message out as loudly as she possibly could. Presenting the text like this certainly made it seem even more enticing, seductive even!

Reading Together, Writing Together, Thinking Together

I SLAM THE DOOR.

I SLAM IT AS HARD AS I CAN.

I SCREAM. I SCREAM FROM THE TOP OF MY LUNGS:

“NO WAY!! NO WAY!! NO WAY!! THAT’S JUST NOT POSSIBLE!!!”

Again and again.

Louder and louder.

Until I am all out of breath and have to continue in a whisper:

“You realize that you are selling children?!”

“How can you not see that?”

“How the hell can you live with yourself?!”

“This cannot be real!”

This cannot be real.

It is not. Luckily. Unfortunately. In the real world, I control myself. I curb my feelings of disgust and anger. I keep my voice down and politely ask the owner of the academy to explain it to me again.

Who wrote this? Who is this “I” speaking thus? Is it the same “I” as the “I” writing this sentence? I am not sure that I can answer these questions. If, by speaking, you mean the person in whose head these thoughts occurred, then the answer to the second question is Lasse. I had

these thoughts. And if by writing, you mean the act of typing the letters, then the answer to the first question is Kathrine. I wrote it. But that does not seem to matter anymore. Does it matter to you? As with some of the other pieces, this text exists in a liminal space between us where it no longer makes sense to talk about you or me, either-or, because our ideas and our words have joined and become fluid, no longer belonging to one or the other but rather to both:

It [the space-in-between] involves the dismantling of two separate subjects whose essential selves pre-exist the writing, and who are separated by an unbridgeable gap or space between them. Although the specificity of each still exists (and perhaps even exists more vividly), with each of their separate histories and separate social and spatial contexts, the focal point, the source of energy and change, is the movement-in-between, in which each becomes someone in relation to the other—each exists in the unfolding relation with the other, and in the lines of flight into the not-yet-known that open up between them (Gale & Wyatt 2010, p. vii).

This is how I... you... we came to think of us, and what it is we are doing and becoming. Our project may be described as an attempt to deterritorialize the space that has been territorialized as supervision. In the words of St. Pierre, who is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, we try to “deterritorialize space that has been territorialized, charted, ordered, and then shut down” (St. Pierre 1997, p. 412). As researchers, we try to pry open and challenge the conventional way of thinking about supervision as something going on between a student or a learner who has all the questions and a supervisor or a teacher who has all the answers. In that sense, our research process (which hardly deserves this epithet in the first place) may be characterized as an “adventure that cannot be defined in advance because it takes advantage of flows and multiplicities and disjunctions to make a different sense in different ways or to refuse to make sense at all” (p. 413).

You've Got Mail!

July 2018.

On Monday, July 30 of 2018, at 2 pm, Lasse and I met in my office at the university for a final meeting before his departure for Uganda. Contrary to expectation, this meeting did not go the way we had grown accustomed for our meetings to go since we ended up having a rather heated discussion about how best to proceed with the fieldwork Lasse was about to embark on in Uganda. While I advocated in favor of a rather diplomatic approach that would not jeopardize the study by taking, what I considered at the time to be, unnecessary risks, Lasse was of a different opinion. To him, my suggestion for proceeding with caution and to not be overly critical and outspoken about what he would experience at the academy seemed downright cowardice. He did not say so, not in so many words anyway, but his demeanor left little doubt about where he stood on this matter. I tried to convince him that he might be better off putting his idealistic visions on hold for the time being to avoid alienating any potential participants. I also stressed that I did not think that it would be wise from a purely academic point of view to confront the ethical shortcomings of other (more experienced researchers) head-on. Instead, I recommended that he try to work against the system from within the system itself. At the time, I truly felt like this constituted the most prudent advice. Lasse, who was unable to hide his frustration, clearly disagreed with the strategy I suggested, but since he seemed to possess neither the academic capital, power, nor status needed to counter my arguments, he kept quiet. We did not exactly have a fight. Nevertheless, when Lasse left the office,

the score of whatever it was that we had had was not in his favor. We both knew that he had lost, and I had won this game and set and was just about to serve for the match. At least that was what I thought right up until the next day when I accidentally stumbled onto a text that made me realize that while serving for the match might be a particularly favorable position in which to find oneself, it is no guarantee for victory. Reading this text not only made me change my mind on the matter, but it also made me realize that Lasse's reservations were justified even if they were based on intuition. At first, I did not know what to do with this newfound insight of mine, but I could not help thinking about it, and so in the end, I wrote an email to Lasse, practically announcing my retirement from the match, leaving him with the win.

Beginning with a particularly salient quote from the text, this is what I wrote:

Dear Lasse,

As critical ethnographers, we openly position ourselves as advocates for the least powerful and most marginalised young people in society (Smyth and McInerney 2013). We deliberately ask more probing questions capable of unsettling some deeply entrenched assumptions and practices underpinning the existing social order. Our intent is to make everyday categories, assumptions and practices problematic for the purpose of revealing unequal power relations, whether in schooling or the economy, whilst advancing socially just alternatives (Down et al. 2018, p. 25).

I feel like someone somewhere is trying to teach me a lesson! What else am I supposed to make of the fact that I stumbled on to this quote from Down, Smyth, and Robinson the day after the meeting we had the other day? I have thought long and hard about your critical objections against my advice to proceed with caution. When I came across this quote, it reminded me about the importance of humility. At the same time, I also consider it to be a hint to you to not listen too much to what I have to say if your gut feeling tells you something else. Sometimes you have to do what feels right to you at that moment no matter what your supervisor tells you. Trust your instincts! I have a feeling that you have pretty good instincts, and so if you feel like the best way to get your message across is to scream it out loud, then that is what you should do. Do not let my petty fears hamper your hopes and aspirations! Be the change you want to see! Isn't that what they say? If you want to make the world a better place (that is what this is all about, is not it?), there is no room for holding back! And now that you have support for your point of view in the research literature, there are no more good excuses to be found. I guess what I am trying to say is: Go for it, Lasse! Nothing ventured, nothing gained! Kathrine.

As I am sure you can imagine, writing this email did not come easy to me. Not only did I have to admit to being wrong, I had to admit to being wrong to a student I was supervising! I was supposed to be the one who knew best, the one with the academic capital, power, and status—the superpowers—to overrule any and all objections that the student could possibly think up. And yet, here I was bluntly admitting that I was not omnipotent, that I did not possess superpowers after all.

Interlude

As I am translating my own words into English, I am struck with astonishment at how much I have changed my mind on this issue in the past year. How could I ever have felt that way? Six

months later, I advocated the exact opposite position. I wanted the whole world to know the horrific things Lasse had seen and experienced in Uganda. What was it that made me change my mind on this issue? Lasse's objections? Something I read? I do not know. How can I not know? How is that even possible?

The Beginning of the End

Unfortunately, the story does not end there, on an optimistic note, that is. As much as I would like to forget about the fact that this story is not a fairy tale, I just cannot. It would not be fair to leave you with the impression that we have discovered a miracle cure for the ails of supervision. We have not, and thus we always have, in the words of Foucault (1983), something to do.

Naked Lunch

We had just had a meeting, an excellent meeting in my office. Lasse and I. But when it was time for lunch, Paul (pseudonym) knocked on our door and asked if we were going to the cafeteria.

"Are you eating today?" he asked, but by "you," he clearly did not mean everybody in the office. His question was directed at Noel (pseudonym) and I. Not at Lasse. Nobody seemed to think twice about this rather odd exclusion of Lasse, and we all got up to go to lunch. When we had picked out and paid for our meals, Paul, Noel, and I went to sit at our usual table in the farthest corner of the enormous common room by the window. I do not remember what we talked about on that particular day, and I do not remember what we had to eat, just as I do not remember what the weather was like. It was a typical day, just like any other. What I *do* remember, however, is how I felt when I passed the table where Lasse was seated on my way out of the cafeteria.

Another Naked Lunch

I went to the cafeteria to have lunch. I sat by myself at a big table with lots of empty chairs when Kathrine, Paul, and Noel entered. The small party of faculty chose a table in the farthest corner of the huge common room by the window. Far away from me, which struck me as the most natural thing in the world at the time. In fact, it did not strike me at all until Kathrine mentioned it to me a couple of days later when I visited her at her home.

"Why didn't we sit together the other day?" she asked. At first, I did not even know what she was referring to.

"What day? Where?"

"On Wednesday. In the cafeteria."

"But didn't you sit with your ... colleagues?"

"Yes, but why didn't we all just sit together? You and the rest of us?"

"Oh. You mean, after our meeting?"

"Yes, why did not we all sit together?" she asked again.

Sitting here in her private living room surrounded by her personal things—books and photos of her daughter and souvenirs from around the world—I could suddenly see the absurdity very clearly.

“Yes! Why did not we?” I asked back.

I never thought about this before, either. In fact, I think I would have felt quite uncomfortable if I had had to sit with some of my teachers or supervisors to have lunch when I was a student. Nevertheless, on this day, it bothered me that we had not eaten with Lasse. It made me feel ashamed and snobbish... and a little disappointed in myself that I would allow such an absurdity to take place. Why had not I done anything to object to this idiocy? Was it really so utterly unthinkable for students and faculty to interact outside the formal setting of the offices? Right then and there, I decided that I was not willing to pay the price for the professional distance that was being asked. I did not want to sacrifice a personal relation for a professional one, no matter if the unwritten rules inherent in the institutional structures make it difficult to think and act in ways that defy the status quo.

The Turn of the Screw

It is becoming harder and harder to control the writing process ... and progress. I am used to having to deal with my own problems when trying to finish a text. I am used to being in charge of every decision. This time things are different, and the more we collaborate, the harder it gets. While I am clearly more experienced than Lasse, I do not want to pull rank on him whenever we disagree on something. As we proceed to recreate the experiences of the past in our discussions about how to describe the events that transpired, our experiences seem to ramify as they continually evolve unpredictably and mutate in unexpected ways with each new iteration. Gradually our conversations add new pieces to the collage of experiences. In that sense, this process of supervision and thinking and writing about supervision is never beginning, never-ending, always already something new.

Beginning Again and Anew

As promised in the introduction, we will not provide any advice on how to supervise. Rather, we argue that with every new relationship between a supervisor and a student, we have to begin anew and let the relationship evolve according to the specific context in which the supervision takes place. But as we have tried to show, there is room for maneuver even within the neoliberal university for doing, thinking, and making supervision differently, and we encourage others who are involved in supervision to seek out spaces within the institutional structures they inhabit that will allow them to carry out oppositional practices that may ultimately result in transformational learning in students as well as supervisors, so that “[a] thread in the academic subject’s sense of self slips loose” (Charteris et al. 2016, p. 35). That said, we agree with Kuntz (2015), who states that “[c]hanging how we think about and enact inquiry necessarily involves changing how we interpret and act within the world; therein lies the possibility for productive social change” (p. 13). Although according to Kuntz, “our contemporary mode of schooling seems most adept at training students to sit on the fence when it comes to questions of politics and research” (p. 13), in line with Kuntz’ ideas, we cannot endorse a politics of neutrality in research. Thus, if there is one thing we want to leave

you with, it is this: Do not sit on the fence and do not let students sit on the fence either! And so, we begin again and anew with this quote from bell hooks (1994):

Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom (p. 12).

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