

Chapter 12

An Integral Theory Approach to the Feedback System in Supervising Doctoral Students in the Nordic Higher Education Context

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ABSTRACT

Feedback giving makes an important part in the context of higher education thesis writing, in particular, doctoral thesis writing supervision. In the past decade, European level standardization higher education policies have encouraged a pedagogy paradigm shift towards a more student-centered learning approach. Within the Nordic context of higher education, feedback giving from supervisor to student has often been studied from the perspective of the supervisor, as a small part of the overall doctoral degree program. This study uses findings from foundational pedagogy literature in the field of Nordic pedagogy studies in combination with empirical data findings from interviews, and maps elements of the doctoral thesis writing feedback system from an integral pluralism approach. The integral model of a feedback system to a doctoral thesis supervision is novel for the Nordic pedagogy literature and it is meant as complement to the current canon of literature on Nordic pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s, as part of a larger effort of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to standardize and ensure compatibility of higher-education qualifications in 48 European countries, education policy changes were made throughout the European Union (EU). This move was part of the Europe 2020 Strategy by the EU, with the stated goal that 40% of individuals between ages 30 and 40 will have attained higher

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education by 2020 (EC, 2015). This move made the pursuit of higher education more interesting and attractive to young individuals, and recent statistics show an increase in enrolment in higher education within EU countries in general (Eurostat, 2016, 2013). Another effect of these policy changes was that a more student oriented teaching and learning process began to be emphasized. This shift in ideology towards a more student-centered learning approach is also reflected in pedagogic textbooks in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland). With this ideological shift, the teaching-learning dialogic process of feedback was implemented within higher education programs. In particular, doctoral student supervision has come into focus, since the doctoral degree process-product is cognitively most demanding in terms of learning goals, yet heterogeneous in terms of context of discipline. It is not uncommon in the Nordic higher education context for a doctoral student in medical sciences to have group supervision throughout their doctoral studies and thesis writing years, whilst in the humanities, supervision takes place on a one-to-one supervisor-student basis (Lauvås & Handal, 2005).

In the Nordic countries, since the 1970s to the present, most Nordic books on pedagogy are written in their respective Scandinavian languages. There are three most influential books on pedagogy in the Nordic context that include the foundational works of: (i) Handal, Holmström and Thomsen (1973) on teaching at university level, covering academic and practical challenges, (ii) Elmgren and Henriksson (2010) university pedagogy in various facets from teaching to academic thesis writing, and (iii) Stigmar (2009) how to become a professional teacher in higher education. These three books were reviewed by Lauvås and Handal (2012) as means of tracking the evolution of the Nordic pedagogy tradition in the past fifty years.

Study Focus and Research Questions

With the pedagogic paradigm shift towards a more student-centered learning approach, this chapter focuses on the process of supervision and feedback in doctoral thesis writing, in the Nordic higher education context. This study uses an Integral Theory perspective to frame a student-centered approach to thesis feedback advising. Based on the literature of the foundational books reviewed by Lauvås and Handal (2012), and their practical advice on how to optimise the use and giving of feedback for master and doctoral students in their thesis writing (Lauvås & Handal, 2005), the four-quadrant model of Integral Theory is used to uncover knowledge gaps in current Nordic pedagogy literature and to complement these knowledge gaps with empirical data collected in the form of interviews. The respondents to this study are affiliated to Nordic institutions of higher education. Details of the respondents' profiles can be found in the methodology section of this study. The names and institutional affiliations of the eight respondents have been anonymised. The research questions investigated in this study include:

What practical facets of the feedback system are reflected in the Nordic context of higher education, specifically in doctoral thesis supervision?

In what ways can an Integral Theory framework contribute towards a more holistic student-centered feedback system at doctoral supervision level in the Nordic context of higher education?

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