

Walk Not Only Under the Street Light: Episodes of PhD Supervision from a Student's Perspective

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When prof. Gunnar Nygren and I landed in San Juan, Puerto Rico, for a conference, we decided to use our free afternoon to explore the city. I felt how my legs were willing to rush and it was hard to choose a direction. There was so much to see: tamarindo trees, the warm ocean, the fortress, and the colourful old town, from which you can spot small boats playing loud salsa music... I kept trying to look at everything at once, running some steps forward and stopping, and trying to take a picture, and then another. Gunnar was walking at a seemingly comfortable tempo. He looked around and curiously commented on the things he saw. I noticed that he always moved at least a bit, never completely stopped, neither did he start rushing or stressing. I remember how then I, a first year PhD student of prof. Gunnar Nygren, understood, that I wish that I would one day learn to walk like that.

What Has Not Been Written

Supervising (as well as being supervised) the thesis work includes, on one hand, the ability to “push the limits”, try new methods and “teaching the student to think critically and complete similar tasks in the future” (Bernler & Johnsson, 1985, p. 62). Also, developing professional competence and skills (Emsheimer, 2016). On the other hand, as any process with limited time and resources, writing a thesis is a product oriented occupation. Encouraging individual exploration vs. focus on producing the final manuscript, and guiding students towards this balance, is one of the central and possibly the most challenging tasks while supervising thesis work. In some cases, the goals of “deep learning” are being contrasted to “graduating on time” (Dystrhe, 1999), as if one of them is achieved at the expense of the other. Completing the thesis requires that the supervised student can identify the necessary boundaries that need to be drawn and decisions that need to be made in order to get the job done, and guidance is important for both of these parts.

Supervision is a dialogue, a conversation, that, unlike other academic texts, seldom gets documented. Therefore, in this essay I would like to offer a reflec-

tion on excerpts or episodes from the supervision occasions that could show how exploration and boundaries can be combined in the same “walk”.

Away From the Street-light

Each story is hard to separate from the storyteller, and this one is not an exception. When I reflect on my personality as a researcher, I feel more excited about the part that Emsheimer (2016) calls “exploration” rather than being the one who always takes the straight path. While looking for a PhD thesis subject, I kept coming back to the areas of informality, invisibility and self-censorship in journalist-source relationships. It is rooted in my experience as a journalist in the newsroom of an analytical news weekly. Many of the story ideas come from the informal, sometimes unexpected conversations with the people who you even would not call “sources” but whose knowledge influences journalistic thinking. The contacts we have shape us, but having a network of informal sources can come at a price, since the relationship between journalists and their sources is always interdependent, it is an exchange (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Berkowitz, 2009), and the closer or more sensitive the source is, the more subtle nuances and unwritten rules that exchange might include (Davis, 2010). Indeed, a large part of journalistic processes happen in the “backstage” and are not directly visible in the media content. That might explain why informality or relationships with sources that do not appear in the media content have received relatively little scholarly attention. Despite the agreement that they are important, if not crucial, in journalistic work, we do not know how the sources that are not quoted in the content contributed, and under what conditions they agreed or refused to contribute.

I shared my concern with Gunnar. How will I research informal relationships, that are both hard to define and measure?

“If you lose your keys in the darkness, and you look for them only under the street-light, because the rest of the street is dark and it is hard to see, you may never find them,” he said, which would be an example of supervision that encourages to push the existing boundaries and look further.

Taking a step outside the “street-light” was easier since Gunnar had done it himself. Individual stories by journalists and those studying journalism, from very different national contexts, can yield overwhelmingly rich empirical material. It allowed him to create a nuanced and sensitive picture of journalistic culture, including comparisons of how journalists perceive their

profession, the changes and paradoxes within it (for example, Nygren, 2015; Johansson, Nygren, & Malling, 2019).

Gunnar has also repeatedly stepped outside the floodlit area and was curious about the things that have not been said. This interest is clear in one of his first books on the local journalism “Inte bara kontokort”:

What is the importance of the social relationships between journalists and their sources? Can journalistic criticism be affected if the sources are known too closely? (...)

and

What areas are underreported, and what questions do journalists tend to leave aside their daily work? (Nygren, 1999, pp. 23–24).

These questions are just as relevant, if not even more important, today, when both the journalism and journalists have to redefine their professional contribution and role.

At the same time, Gunnar could be very honest about the areas that he had not yet explored or decided not to look into:

I must admit I have not read X. But would you like to borrow a book, which I once bought at a moment when I planned to get ambitious about the X?

This openness and honesty about your own deficiencies can be an ice-breaker and help to engage in dialogue even the shyest students who are afraid to admit their own shortcomings. The style of this conversation is the opposite of the master-apprentice model (Dysthe, 2002), with an omniscient master and the diligent, following student. Being aware that there is no master who knows it all encourages independence and responsibility from the student to find out about the specific subject on their own.

Accepting that any interest and knowledge has its limits was something that I noticed often only senior researchers can afford. It takes reading many books before you can say with some confidence that you missed some of them. The younger the researcher, the less likely they will admit that they are not very strong at method X or theory Y, since they think it is expected to know everything. I take this open and non-defensive approach both as a professional lesson but also as something that should be generally applied in any situation, even outside the working context.

To Have Time

A skill to create an atmosphere where the student feels that he or she “showed up just on time” and that “this project is the most exciting and important project at the moment” is another skill that is an important prerequisite for an open dialogue. No matter how many meetings or speeches he had booked that day, I have never seen prof. Gunnar Nygren acting as a stereotype of a “distracted professor” who is busy with something else rather than being present in the conversation here and now. Moreover, he would find a moment to ask something that is not directly related to work, for example, about the housing worries that the student had last time they met. It is a skill of an attentive and caring listener. How does he remember and have time?

Here I would like to share a story from our conversation that took place after a conference in Oxford, 2016. Late in the night, when all the other conference participants were most likely discussing something else than deadlines, my supervisor insisted on drafting “a bit more detailed plan for the rest of the PhD”. He sat in a crowded, loud café with a pen and pencil and insisted on finishing the plan here and now. Finally, when the meeting ended, we agreed to take a short break before we go to a midnight classical music concert in one of the churches. After each supervision Gunnar used to ask me to briefly write down an email on what had been agreed, so we both remember it the same way and could make the necessary adjustments if needed. However, I went back to my hotel room and took my freedom to procrastinate. I did not write a summary. I opened my social media and uploaded a picture: “Milda Malling has checked in at: Oxford University, Jesus college”. I called home and talked to my family. And, after the break, 40 minutes later, I met Gunnar by the elevator. When asked about what he had done during the break, he answered: “Oh yes, I used the break to rewrite from my notes the summary of what we have talked about, so I do not forget”. All the literature that I have read on teaching and learning in higher education warns about the risks that the thesis advisor can feel the urge to do part of the job. But how to resist it when you have to deal with the supervised who would rather update their social media profile than write a summary from a meeting?

Setting Boundaries for the Moving Horizon

There are students who would rather read ten more research articles than write ten more lines in their thesis and moving on from one step to another might be a struggle. As planning is one of the crucial parts for any bigger task,

Emsheimer (2016) suggests treating a thesis as a project, a neutral zone, where the supervisor and the supervised meets and discussion is about the written text (Skjervheim, 1971, in Emsheimer 2016), where both the writer and the advisor have certain roles.

In some cases, it takes several iterations and walking an extra mile in order to understand that some of the advice the professor said in one of the first discussions about the project was right all along. One of them in my opinion was especially correct: “When reworking the text again and again it is easy to make it worse.”

Indeed, when it comes to academic texts it is easy to fall into a trap of rewriting. The same text is being reworked many times, and the word limit is strict. At some point, new ideas replace the initial thoughts and research questions. The beginning of the text is lost, since the author might get an illusion that some of the ideas have been communicated so many times that they become self-evident. The text appears to be better for the author but could be harder to grasp for a reader who sees it for the first time.

My impression is that in academic writing, just like in music or the arts, or any similar occupation, there is never a point where you know your job is done. I mention music, because I spent 12 years as a violin student at a professional school. No matter the stage of your career or experience it is always difficult to get a feeling of “having practiced *enough*”. Professional, even famous performers share it too, as I found out when I was writing a biography book of a prominent Lithuanian violinist Raimundas Katilius. Also known as a great pedagogue, he compared playing an instrument to a moving horizon – the further you work, the more complex the task seems to get, the more you see how much more space there is for improvement.

It is always possible to have a better theory, a more thorough method, a richer data set and rewrite one more time. Prof. Gunnar Nygren took a well-needed role: to define and catch this “horizon”, by teaching to appreciate the collected original data and the own analysis. It is very crucial in order to be able to move on and not to get blind of the work: “The fact that there is (no correlation) is also a finding!, he can say full of enthusiasm.”

I remember how I once said aloud: “I did as good as I could - but is it enough?”. Gunnar answered: “But can you even do better than what you CAN? You can only do as good as you can”. I quoted this answer many times later on, both in professional and private life, as an example of an eye-opener for the unproductive energy spent to regret for the work that has not been done instead of enjoying the progress.

A supervisor will always try to lead towards a more direct approach, while a student will have to make the (un)necessary explorations in the process. However, an open and down-to-earth conversation on the way is key not only for stepping outside the floodlit areas, but also for admitting, and even appreciating that you do not have to grasp it all during one journey.

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