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Supervising Theses in the Faculty of Arts  
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**History**

**Some general comments**

1) From «supervising a thesis» to «mentoring a student»:

Some years ago, my focus was more on the thesis process than on the student's academic life as a whole. The difference involves the extent to which activities not actually part of the planning, researching, and writing of the thesis are considered crucial to them. For example, I now spend a great deal of time helping students identify sources of funding (especially special scholarships, research contracts, etc.) and working with them to prepare convincing applications (reviewing draft versions of project descriptions, c.v.'s, etc.). Similarly, I do my best to help them get on conference programmes, to write book reviews, and generally to «get into the loop» so that they become well-recognized members of the emerging generation of scholars. All of this now seems to relate directly to the question of thesis supervision.

2) Learning to adjust to different styles and personalities:

In dealing with students, I have come to the conclusion that each student must be treated as an individual. Rather than working with students in much the same way (thereby forcing them to adapt to my style or risk failure), I try to recognize the conditions under which a particular student appears to thrive, and I then establish such conditions as far as possible. For example, some students prefer a highly-structured approach while others would be choked by it. Some need very regular contact while others need considerable isolation. Some need stroking, others need poking. And these needs may change several times over the course of two or three years. Obviously, my own personality is still my own personality; however, I try to use a variety of strategies to help each individual student fulfill their own potential.

**The process of matchmaking**

This process involves two necessary matches: student and professor; and thesis topic and professor's research interests. Some students seek to

work with a particular professor; the topic is identified subsequently. In other cases, the student has a topic and goes shopping for an appropriate professor.

Over time, I have become more cautious in declaring that a match has been made, especially in the case of «shopping» students. In the past, I ended up supervising several theses at the very margins of my research competency (and in one case, well beyond!). The result was that I had to do a great deal of work to allow me to help the student, and I lived in fear that I was unaware of some crucial information that any specialist in the field would know. In this situation, the student was also taking an unwarranted risk. Fortunately, my one experience had a happy ending but I learned my lesson. Saying «yes» to a shopping student may seem to be generous and «professional» but, in fact, a polite «no» may be better for everyone.

Similarly, some caution is needed for students who do not have a topic but who seek to work with a professor. I have found that, in some cases, this ambition is based on misinformation. For example, one recent student thought I was still actively involved in the Vancouver Island Project.

Thus, I now see the matchmaking process as requiring a slow, systematic approach (usually involving at least three meetings). In the case of «shopping» students, I now ask that a written statement (very preliminary, just a few paragraphs) be given me before our first discussion. Often, adjustments can be made so that both the essential idea of the student and my own research competency is respected. If not, I decline. For students who do not yet have a topic but who would like to work with me, I attempt to determine the historical questions which interest them most, and then suggest several possible lines of inquiry within my current research projects. Several meetings later, a thesis topic is usually identified; and in some cases, the student moves on to another professor.

The result is that more and more of my students are doing theses within areas of my current research. Both students and I seem to benefit; the «supervision» is more rewarding for me, and the students feel the importance (and relevance to others as part of a research project) of their work.

### From «obstacles» to «steps» within the thesis process

The conventional metaphor has involved the obstacles to be jumped by the successful student (coursework, comps, proposal, etc.). The connection among these «obstacles» was never too clear for the students, and there was usually a let-down (physical and mental fatigue) after each jump. To combat this problem, I try to integrate and interrelate the different activities so that they become steps toward a happy ending. For example, I tailor twenty-five percent of a doctoral course to suit the student's planned thesis topic. Similarly, master's students who would like to work with me are invited to begin meetings before their coursework is completed so that the writing of *memoires* or theses can be made a natural progression of the coursework period.

In keeping with the idea that students are all individuals, the path toward completion is never quite the same. However, two strategies always seem worthwhile. The first strategy involves the use of calendars and deadlines. How much time should be allocated for each aspect of the research and writing? When should a complete draft be completed? How much time for revision? The answers to these questions are inevitably adjusted along the way (usually by pushing the dates forward!) but they seem to help in situating (and making more realistic) the student's work.

The second and more important strategy involves the importance of *simultaneous* researching and writing. Often, students tend to define the thesis process in terms of researching then writing. One will hear the proud proclamation «Well, I've finished my research; now, I just have to write it up», and then, three years later, will hear that the student still has not finished. The problem is that research is generally fun and relatively easy once the project has been defined. In contrast, writing is always demanding, and it is especially demanding when it has not been done for the entire period of research.

For this reason, I encourage my students to combine researching and writing at all times. Until research is completed, the goal is four pages a day which should take two hours. Once the research is completed, the writing hours will increase (four to five seems to be the maximum). During

the research period, the content of the pages should relate to the evidence under examination. These short texts can be entitled «Working Papers» and while their primary goal is to make sure that the student is «in shape» (mentally and physically) to write the thesis, they usually prove to be quite handy in composing the first complete draft.

Along the same lines, I now encourage students (both master's and doctoral) to make presentations, participate in conferences, submit manuscripts to journals (starting with Research Notes), etc. The many good results of such activity include greater self-confidence, better perspective on their own research, more visibility in the job market, etc. One problem may be that the importance of completing the thesis gets lost amidst the tangential activity. As a «mentor», I now try to guard against this problem through frank discussions with the student especially if it starts to become an avoidance strategy.

### The «confessional» or committee approach?

While being a single supervisor certainly does have some advantages, I have become increasingly convinced that the participation of two to three other professors is necessary. One reason is purely practical: the need to form a jury for the defence. Another reason is more substantive: the value for a student of receiving constructive criticism *before* the thesis is finalized. Indeed, students deserve to benefit from the insights of several professors. The potential difficulty lies in the possibility that a professor may mistake the role of committee member with that of supervisor with the result that the student receives mixed messages or, in extreme cases, is cut down in the crossfire. The only way to avoid this difficulty is to identify clearly the leadership role of the supervisor and to pay attention to the selection of professors for any particular committee. Also, an easily accessible exit needs to be available to solve problems within a committee.

### Dealing with slow (or no) progress

In the case of a master's thesis student who is not making satisfactory progress, I first re-evaluate the conceptualization and (especially) the size of the project. Without much hesitation, I consider the possibility of suggesting that the student take two more courses and turn the thesis project into a *memoire*. I have done this in three cases in recent years; in two of the cases, the students successfully completed their degrees (they would never have finished otherwise), and in one case the student eventually

dropped out anyway.

For doctoral students in neutral or first gear, the available strategies seem more limited. The first approach is to re-evaluate the project and try to diagnose the difficulty. Often, the problem is putting words on paper (which is a sign that what one wants to say is not clear in one's head). Otherwise, the keys to success seem to be self-discipline and stamina. Is the student resisting distractions? Is the student burning out? Getting enough exercise? Eating properly? Professional help (health services, counselling) should probably be used more than it is. Also, talking with student peers (especially those at more advanced stages) can be good therapy.

However, I do not feel that I have arrived at any reliable strategies to help students «jump-start» themselves.

### **The final steps...**

One approach is to discuss the final steps at the start of the thesis process. For example, I encourage beginning students to attend oral defences especially those that promise to be very good *or* very bad ones. Also, the length of time required for the final steps needs to be emphasized as do the details of the evaluation process (often seen as very mysterious). The analogy of a marathon seems appropriate; the «half-way» point of the 26-mile race is at the 20-mile marker.

### **How far should a supervisor go...?**

In some ways, the move toward mentoring has made the professor's role far more labour-intensive. Indeed, the time spent with graduate students and their expectations of professors do seem to have increased considerably. However, my impression is that the preventative medicine image applies. By working hard to keep students working at a healthy and productive rate, the time spent on casualties seems to be a lot less.

And, in the end, I try to remember that it is unrealistic to think that all students will succeed. I may do a considerable amount of editing (especially on the first drafts), for example, but the students have to write their own theses. Some students should withdraw (ideally, at an early stage). Thus, I try to help students fulfill their own potential, and in so doing try to go far enough but not...

## **Marie-Anne Geurts**

## **Géographie**

### **À quelles conditions acceptez-vous de diriger une thèse?**

Aux conditions suivantes:

1. que le sujet proposé m'intéresse;
2. que je puisse honnêtement contribuer à la recherche proposée, par la connaissance des fondements et des méthodes de la discipline envisagée (exemples: fondements de la palynologie et analyses microscopiques des pollens), voire plus intensément par la connaissance du sujet (exemple: évolution de la végétation) et du terrain (exemple: la région de Kluane au SO du Yukon);
3. que je sente que l'étudiant cherche une relation de maître à élève et qu'il m'approche pour cette relation;
4. que ses résultats antérieurs le rendent facilement admissible au programme envisagé et le qualifient éventuellement pour un financement extérieur ou de l'École des études supérieures et de la recherche.

### **Le choix et l'orientation du sujet de la thèse**

Jusqu'à présent le choix s'est toujours fait avant le début de la scolarité. On décide du sujet à partir d'une réflexion commune basée sur l'étude de documents existants sur le thème et la région (diapositives, écrits, cartes). Souvent je suggère un projet en montrant simplement de l'enthousiasme pour un type de forme (en géomorphologie) ou pour un problème paléoenvironnemental et en posant une série de questions à propos de cette forme ou de ce problème.

### **Les étapes du début**

Dès qu'un sujet est choisi, je fais étudier les méthodes et techniques appropriées pour le réaliser; ceci est très important car tous les sujets envisagés comportent une part de recherche sur le terrain et une autre en