

# WAYS OF KNOWING IN ASSESSING THE PHD AND RAMIFICATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR

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## **Abstract:**

The paper draws together a number of findings from the *PhD Examination Project* conducted by the authors as part of the SORTI (Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact) program conducted at The University of Newcastle. Its particular focus is on an analysis of the roles of examiner and supervisor, and the interface between these, as seen through the lens provided by Habermas's 'Ways of Knowing' thesis. Early scripts appraised of examiner comment directed to the candidate seemed to reveal a preponderance of text that conformed with Habermas's 'empirical-analytic' way of knowing, displaying a fairly technical approach to the task and positioning the examiner in the role of 'expert'. At the same time, there was little evidence of 'self-reflective' knowing that might betray a more sophisticated task being undertaken and a role of some asymmetry between the examiner and candidate. Since the latter way of knowing would seem to fit better with a regime dealing with original thought and new contributions to knowledge, it has been postulated that the dominant text in PhD examination may work to constrain the generation of new knowledge rather than encourage it. A recent paper (Lovat & Morrison, 2003) explored this postulation with special reference to those aspects of examination script that made explicit mention of the role of the supervisor, finding essentially the same phenomenon, but with a slightly different balance in favour of 'self-reflective' text. This paper will draw strands out of SORTI's more comprehensive work that might inform this particular analysis, expand on the analysis itself and indicate ways in which the analysis could inform the practicalities of research training and especially the role of the supervisor.

# **Ways of knowing in assessing the PhD and ramifications for the role of the supervisor**

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## **Introduction**

Increasing concern for quality control and transparency of higher education processes have led to increased scrutiny in the field. Included in this scrutiny has been an interest in the processes surrounding the phenomenon of the doctorate (*cf.* Tinkler & Jackson, 2002; Lawson, Marsh & Tansley, 2003). The work of the Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact (SORTI) at The University of Newcastle is best understood as part of this growing interest. Among the centre's project strands is one concerned with the doctoral examination process in Australia, a process that relies entirely on the evaluation of a dissertation by a party otherwise uninvolved in its generation. The 'PhD Examination Project', currently supported by an ARC Discovery Grant, will eventually draw on data from nine Australian universities, but this paper reports on findings from the first two cases for which data entry and core textual analyses are complete. The overall aim of the SORTI investigations is to develop new, strategic and significant knowledge for research pedagogy and assessment. This paper outlines some of the initial findings from the investigation and then draws these into one of the more prominent interpretative analyses being applied to the textual data, courtesy of the 'Ways of Knowing' thesis of Jurgen Habermas (1972; 1974). The main section of the paper will re-capture and summarize the heart of the underlying epistemological position being taken, attempt to further substantiate recent findings from this strand of the analysis (e.g., Lovat, 2002; Lovat & Morrison, 2003) and, finally, speculate on ramifications for the practicalities of research training in general and supervision in particular, should the application being made of the Habermasian theory continue to prove tenable.

## **Approach**

The PhD Examination Project utilises a mixed methods design, with approaches ranging from statistical analyses to purely interpretative approaches (*cf.* Holbrook, Bourke, Farley & Carmichael, 2001). The key to the design is a core set of analyses that are replicable across institutions that draw on candidate history, examiner and committee decision, and a content-based analysis of key features of examiner written reports. Woven into this sequential, comparable set of analyses are concurrent strands of interpretative analysis that explore the text in great depth. The findings and insights from these particular analyses serve to question and 'extend' the findings emerging from the core analyses. Some of the directions suggested by these findings become 'core' with the result that they are routinely tested or applied in all cases. The application of Habermasian theory to the analysis of the report discourse has proved a particularly productive form of extended analysis to this point.

## **Selected findings of the PhD Examination studies**

In one of the earliest SORTI papers, Holbrook (2001) undertook a critical review of relevant literature and research pertaining to doctoral examination or supervision. She argued that the

research lacks cross-disciplinary, cross-national research studies, operates from an impoverished theoretical base, and demonstrates a lack of attention to fundamental aspects of learning and assessment at advanced levels of study. Her review thus functioned as a rationale for the PhD examination project.

Initial analyses of the content of 150 PhD examination reports from one institution revealed five key clusters of information including, the structure and organization of the report, examiner characteristics and issues related to the examination process, assessable components of the thesis, dialogic elements and evaluative elements (including judgement and instruction) (Holbrook, Lovat & Monfries, 2001). Holbrook et al. (2001) further analysed the evaluative elements and reported that examiners tended to summarise the qualities of theses positively rather than negatively. Three types of instructive comment were also identified. These included: 'Formative Instruction', where the examiner engages in teaching and treats the reader as an active participant; Instructive Commentary, where the examiner provides information but gives no specific suggestions for changes; and Prescriptive Instruction, where the examiner specifies corrections but provides little or no accompanying explanation.

A subsequent analysis of 303 examiner reports from the same institution identified that certain elements of the reports were associated with either favourable or unfavourable recommendations by examiners (Holbrook, Bourke & Lovat, 2002). Reports on stronger theses contained higher proportions of positive summative judgement as well as discussion of significance and contribution and publications that could or should arise from the thesis. Weaker theses were associated with higher proportions of formative and prescriptive instruction as well as negative summation, editorial corrections and inaccuracies in the literature review. The quality of a thesis appeared to precipitate the content and tone of the examiners report and also to predict the role taken by the examiner. Three distinct roles were identified. These included: 1) Assessor/arbitrator – the examiner provides prescriptive comment focusing on what is incorrect or inaccurate; 2) Supervisor—the examiner provides formative instruction and aims to teach the candidate and bring the candidate up to an acceptable standard through interactive dialogue; 3) Mentor-colleague- this role is characterised by the use of positive summative and dialogic text features indicating intellectual engagement and peer-type acceptance.

The interface between the quality of a thesis, the textual characteristics of the accompanying reports and the specific but sometimes overlapping roles adopted by examiners provided fertile ground for exploring the 'Ways of Knowing' thesis proposed by Habermas (1972; 1974).

### **Ways of knowing and the moveable relationships of the examiner and candidate**

According to the 'Ways of Knowing' thesis of Jurgen Habermas (1972; 1974), there is a consistent pattern through which knowledge is developed, revealed and further negotiated. This pattern occurs in all areas of knowledge, even where disciplinary boundaries exist. He argues that this consistent pattern arises from three different 'cognitive interests', which he calls 'ways of knowing'. First there is the empirical/analytic, which is a technical knowing/cognitive interest; second, there is a historical/hermeneutic form of knowing; while critical / self-reflective knowing is the third cognitive interest. These apparent divisions in the way knowledge is developed arise from human perception, rather than originating from any inherent partitioning within knowledge itself. For a project with the goal of identifying and

defining patterns of research higher degree examination across discipline areas, this seems an important thesis.

Each of the three ways of knowing position individuals in a teaching/learning relationship differently against each other. In this case, the relationship is between the examiner and candidate or between the examiner and the supervisor, sometimes with the candidate in the middle. When the technical way of knowing is operative, the examiner is most likely to take on the role of an "expert" in relation to the candidate (or the supervisor). Where historical/hermeneutic knowing is operative, a partnership between the examiner and candidate/supervisor develops, where there is an attempt to communicate and/or negotiate over facts or interpretations. Finally, when dealing with knowing of the self-reflective type, the traditional roles of examiner and candidate/supervisor are marked by an equality, a meeting of minds. Furthermore, the relationship is potentially reversed, with the candidate/supervisor being acknowledged as in control of their own knowing. Within this approach, the role of the examiner potentially transforms to that of listener and the relationship is marked by what Van Manen (1977) describes as "non-asymmetrical". By enabling this position, the examiner relegates the customary power given by the process, choosing to accept the role of listener.

At the heart of Habermas' thesis is the notion that the cognitive interest to be 'emancipated', or free in our knowing, impels an intensive critique of all of the assumptions and sources of our knowing up to that point in time. Among the assumptions and sources are those of both the external and internal world. Externally, one confronts one's enculturated past, one's corporate beliefs and community values, one's family, school, political and religious heritage. Internally, one confronts one's self: there is no knowing without knowing the knower. Through critical, self-reflective knowing, one is challenged to let go of much of the past and to embrace new futures. The end of critical, self-reflective knowing is *praxis*, practical action for change. One cannot remain in the same place once one has confronted one's past and one's self. The proposition of earlier work in this series is that this is the form of knowing one might expect to be dominant in a learning regime that is purportedly about the change we title 'original' or 'new contribution'.

However, initial analysis of case studies of examination and re-examination reports (e.g., Lovat, 2002; Lovat, Holbrook, Bourke, Dally & Hazel, 2002; Lovat & Morrison, 2003) have demonstrated that the mode of assessment employed by examiners more closely falls within the bounds of the empirical-analytic way of knowing. Furthermore, their texts are largely negative, constructed from a position of expertise. There were few texts that developed a discourse of partnership, collegiality, symmetry or the awe one might expect as the examiner witnessed original and significant contributions to academic knowledge. Moreover, even in those theses that had been rated as 'top box' (an unqualified pass), examiners still made negative comments (*cf.* Holbrook, Bourke & Dally, 2003). One case study of such a thesis illustrated three highly castigatory examination reports, with comments including: "shortcomings in the way the thesis is argued," " .. analysis which is very limited in scope," " .. does not deal with the arguments," " .. without an acknowledgment of its underlying arguments," " .. understandings are so limited," " .. reading .. is very limited," "Most important are weaknesses in the structure of the thesis." In spite of such derisory assessment, all three examiners, by recommending a 'top box' pass, presumably rated the thesis as constituting a major contribution to the world of public knowledge.

The above phenomenon, being not unusual it seems, has led to the postulation that, in the PhD examination report, we may be dealing with a virtual literary genre, born of assumptions

about the nature of the task and its incumbent duties, and built up over time to become a set of expectations attached to an informal yet quietly prescriptive aspect of academic culture. If this were so, it would suggest that examination reports may largely be constructed according to this genre, regardless of the quality of work under examination. The case has further been made that, were such a dominant genre in the examination script revelatory of the entire regime of the PhD, the potential was there for routine discouragement and even obstruction of the 'originality' and 'new contribution' factor that is meant to be the over-riding assessment item of the PhD. Again, this is working on the assumption, informed by the Habermasian thesis, that a PhD regime replete with boundary shaking and original contributions would be evidenced in an examination genre that was fairly well filled with positive comment, at the least, and robust self-reflective script, at the most.

In Lovat (2002), working on the evidence provided by one institution and concentrating on the examiner-candidate texts, it was argued that the dominant way of knowing, and the relationships constructed in the reports, emphasised a technical rather than self-reflective regime. There was only one report that offered a text providing some clear indication of a different mode of thought and positioning. The examiner's language clearly positioned the student as expert and established a relationship that spoke of Van Manen's 'non-asymmetrical' relationship. The examiner indicated a desire that that he/she might have written the thesis, demonstrating some awe towards the candidate's original contribution. The examiner also made explicit the self-reflectivity impelled by reading the thesis, including being brought to an enhanced understanding of her/his own work:

I thought that the interpretation of my work was very interesting as I had quite a lot of trouble digesting the data and simplifying it to explain what was happening and why. X's interpretation of this and his approach ... demonstrate how a fresh approach by a creative researcher .. can re-interpret source data to add value and create or develop valuable new knowledge. When I think of my work now in these .. terms, I find that the results become more meaningful.

More recent analysis has uncovered some further instances that speak of 'non-asymmetry', normally to be found where the examiner names explicitly that some benefit has been derived from reading the thesis. A few of these instances are as follows:

In general I found the study to be very informative to me personally.

It is a document that I shall keep on my shelf and no doubt refer to regularly.

X did a superb job analyzing the studies. Her periodic summaries of them were very helpful for me.

The author has produced an interesting work on a very topical area in electric power systems. The reviewer is quite impressed.

### **Bringing in the Supervisor: Expertise Text**

In Lovat and Morrison (2003), working on the evidence provided by two institutions and concentrating on texts that included explicit reference to the role of the supervisor, it was found that the dominance of the 'empirical-analytic' way of knowing appeared to persist but that there was a greater number of instances where the examiner appeared willing to move from the technical regime, on occasion markedly towards the self-reflective. Lovat and

Morrison found that the majority of the examiners' comments that explicitly referred to the supervisor were focussed on custodial work, or what was named as 'expertise text'. The relationship constructed examiner and candidate/supervisor within a hierarchy, complete with clear inequality and asymmetry. The hierarchical implications were two-fold, as examiners either positioned themselves over supervisors, or positioned both themselves and the supervisor over the candidate. The examiner, positioned as expert and custodian of a body of technical and conventional knowing, often outlined to both supervisors and the learners, the ways in which the thesis must conform to particular standards and reproduce particular bodies of knowledge (e.g., developing sufficiently broad literature review, appropriate methodology and accurate application of it, more careful, accurate and/or meaningful interpretation of the results, etc.). The following excerpt represents the many typical texts that highlighted how examiners reinforced the role of supervisor as gatekeeper:

... the changes specified in my report and marked in the thesis need to be addressed to the satisfaction of the supervisor.

At times, this 'delegation' by the examiner constructed the supervisor and candidate as jointly responsible for the further development and repair of the thesis:

I would encourage the candidate and her supervisors to make the necessary modifications to this thesis.

At other times, the examiner's authority over the supervisor is unmistakably demarcated through a strong reprimand about the quality of the thesis. Here, we see obvious surveillance by the 'expert', not only of the candidate, but also of the supervisor. The gaze of the examiner, it seems, in doctoral examination is not restricted to the learner. That is, candidates are often not singularly criticized; rather, criticism is also applied to the standards of supervision as well.

In terms of direct instructions to supervisors or negative comments about their supervision, much of the examiner's language articulates a clear expectation that a primary role of the supervisor is to ensure that the thesis under examination is of an appropriately high technical standard. When this does not occur, the hierarchy between examiners and supervisors is evident in the examiner's directions. For example, one examiner commented that "... a final and careful proofreading from the supervisors is required." While another commented on more serious statistical oversights that needed to be addressed during future supervision:

I strongly urge these advisors to get their students to use standard deviations and to show confidence limits henceforth. They should at least insist on exact p values, so that others can work out the confidence limits.

Another urges:

Both the candidate and supervisors (should) remedy these aspects before final acceptance.

Such comments would seem to indicate that the process of doctoral examination can be as much an examination of the supervisor's expertise as of the ability of the student and quality of the thesis. Supervisors are therefore reproached, sometimes quite severely, when they have not been sufficiently meticulous in their duty of guiding the thesis to conform to appropriate standards, have provided insufficient guidance, or have failed to adequately perform in some other way, as indicated in the comments below. These comments also highlight that candidates do not have to bear criticism of their work alone:

I note that the candidate has not had the benefit of direct supervision by an expert in the field and therefore believe that responsibility for the ultimate product does not solely lie with the candidate.

All of the above matters should have been dealt with during the draft stages of the thesis and reflect badly on the supervisor more so than the candidate.

These [a previously stated list of errors] all suggest a rather lax critical review of the thesis by the supervisor(s) and should be corrected in the Library copy.

Examiners' concerns about theses do not solely relate to errors (minor or major) in the thesis. Within examiners' language that addressed supervisors' roles, there was also a concern for the lack of publication derived from the thesis prior to its examination. For example, one examiner first commented about lack of peer reviewed publications from a particular thesis before remarking, "... this ultimately reflects unfavourably both on the candidate and his/her supervisor(s)."

Some of the harshest criticism of the supervisor was evident in the lengthy comment reported below. Here, the examiner had been very impressed with some aspects of the thesis, but obviously felt that the candidate's supervision was substantially deficient, and over the course of the examination report, remarked at length on the poor quality of supervision:

It seems only just I should state at the outset that it was quite obvious that X had not received a level of supervision that would enable him/her a more critical, discursive approach to what is a quite remarkable and idiosyncratic project.

... I describe earlier a concern regarding supervision; it seems remarkable that such a vivid imagination as is described here and such a capacity for the construction of narrative was not given guidance to reach the potential of this research...

...relates to the supervisor's role, for work of this quality to be so undernourished, unsupervised is tragic.

Occasionally, such reprimands are extended beyond the supervisor to the responsibility of the whole institution. For example, the two comments below originate from different examiners and refer to different institutions:

I strongly recommend that the University of \_\_\_\_\_ more closely scrutinise PhD theses sent for external examination to ensure that they, at least, contain minimal spelling and simple English grammatical errors.

In the second example, the examiner overtly stated that the identified faults in the thesis were not raised as a criticism of the candidate:

... but as an observation of the 'sign of the times'. Z's research Doctoral committee may like to reflect on these comments. But, maybe the current members of such a committee don't want to know about this. Their objective may be to 'push as many candidates through, as quickly as possible', and not provide time for PhD candidates to 'reflect'. So be it . . . Overall it is my view that the role of postgraduate students is, to use an expression that has now entered the Australian vernacular, 'to keep the bastards honest' ('bastards' in this context refers to 'supervisors').

In summary, it seems that the same preponderantly 'expertise' text identified in the earlier work regarding the positioning of the examiner in relation to the candidate extends fairly widely to position the examiner as 'expert' in relation to the supervisor as well. Furthermore, this same text implicitly positions the supervisor in an expert role against the candidate. Indeed, examiner expertise text tended more often than not to blur any distinction between comments made about inadequate supervision and the implicit assumption that the main role of the supervisor was as gatekeeper. Within this text, there tended to be no allowance given for other conceptions of supervisor role. Nor was there much evidence of the extension of that mercy that was occasionally offered to the candidate being also offered to the supervisor. For slack supervision, there were no excuses.

### **Bringing in the Supervisor: Partnership Text**

In this section, the effort was to establish instances of what were broadly titled 'partnership texts', in order to ascertain whether a fundamentally different positioning was occurring between the examiner and the supervisor and, if so, whether this was resulting in a different conception of knowing being addressed. The knowing being searched for here was one conforming to Habermas' 'communicative' (or historical/hermeneutic) knowing where positioning would approximate negotiation between peers, rather than the clearly unequal relationship to be found in expertise text. Granted the assertion above that the positioning of examiner against supervisor tended to blur with assumptions by the examiner about the proper role to be played by the supervisor in relation to the candidate, a logical place to begin this exploration seemed to be with the comments of the examiner about this latter relationship. It was from this exploration that the notion of 'partnership text' arose. When something had gone wrong with the thesis, in the view of the examiner, there was a disinclination to blame both parties at once; this seemed to be evident in the expertise texts surveyed above. Either the student or the supervisor was held to account. However, where praise was to be given, invariably it was offered to the candidate and the supervisor, as though they were a team. The praise from different examiners reported below represents typical partnership text:

...I believe that the student and supervisor should be congratulated for bringing together an excellent examination of this very sensitive area.

I would like to congratulate the student and advisor on a well-done thesis.

Both he and his supervisors need to be congratulated. It is very heartening to see such high quality in...

It is clear that the candidate had access to outstanding supervision and methodological support. I would like to extend my congratulations to the supervisory committee.

...her supervisors deserve congratulations.

It reflects well on both the candidate and the supervisor.

This was a great piece of work and both the candidate and supervisors are to be congratulated.

I extend my congratulations to X and his committee for an outstanding piece of research.

Please convey my congratulations to X and Prof Y for this excellent work.

It is original, makes a significant contribution to the field and has important theoretical and clinical implications. The candidate and her supervisors are to be congratulated and I urge the candidate to prepare her work for publication.

Mr. X has extended the previous work of his supervisor's group at {name of University] in a most significant way. ...

In these comments, we repeatedly see examiners articulating a role for the supervisor quite beyond being a gatekeeper; it is rather a role as partner with the student, and even as co-constructor of the thesis.

So, to the central issue of whether partnership text portrays a different positioning between examiner and supervisor, or supervisor and student, and whether there might be a different way of knowing coming into focus. On the one hand, there would seem to be a different assumption evident about the relationship between the supervisor and the candidate, with a greater sense of peer interaction coming through. On the other hand, there is little in the partnership text that fundamentally changes the positioning of the examiner against the supervisor, or indeed the candidate. While the text is more positive and in some cases quite full of praise, the position of the examiner is still essentially one of expert opinion, making judgments from on high. There is little in the text that speaks strongly of 'non-asymmetry' in the relationship with either the candidate or even the supervisor, and so it seems the 'empirical/analytic' way of knowing endures throughout the text as the dominant form, albeit slightly modified by an element of the 'historical-hermeneutic'.

### **Bringing in the Supervisor: Non-asymmetrical Text**

According to the 'non-asymmetry' thesis of Van Manen, it is possible for roles to be reversed, with the examiner relegating to the supervisor (and sometimes the candidate) the power that is clearly bestowed by the examiner role. Couple of rare examples were provided above of the type of text that portrays this relegation. In this part of the study, a larger number of such texts have come to light. Granted that this part of the study has concentrated on text pertinent to the supervisor, it may indicate that there is a stronger disposition by the examiner towards relegation to the supervisor than to the candidate. The comments below provide some glimmer of the different positioning that occurs when a measure of self-reflective knowing becomes instrumental:

The student and the advisor clearly know more about these techniques than I do.

I recommend the thesis for the award, and I leave it up to the candidate and his advisor to decide whether, and to what extent, suggestions listed below should be incorporated into the thesis.

In these examples, the examiners reduce the focus on themselves as expert, a view which underpins technical knowing, and opens the door for a relationship of learning that is more equable and fluid. The first comment is a complete and apparently comfortable relegation of expertise about method. This examiner is prepared to sit at the feet of both the candidate and the supervisor regarding technique. The second examiner more subtly relegates the final decision on the best course of action to both the candidate and the supervisor, making it clear in the words, "I leave it up to the candidate and his advisor .." that they might know better than the examiner what the final requirements should be. The notion that any recommendations are negotiable not only opens the door for interpretive dialogue to occur but, moreover and more importantly, acknowledges that the supervisor and candidate possess

knowledge that the examiner does not currently hold. The entire examination process is changed by such an approach, exuding negotiability, admission of the possibility of supervisor and candidate superior knowledge, and generally the use of a language that positions a different type of relationship between the three parties. The text qualifies for the term 'symmetrical' and it clearly relegates to the supervisor and the candidate much of the power over the process.

Other examples of 'non-asymmetrical' text include:

I benefitted from reading it, and I congratulate the author and her advisers on their work.

Each time that I have been asked by Australian academic supervisors to referee PhD theses, I have found myself amply rewarded and stimulated. X's thesis is not an exception to this rule. The high quality of your thesis speaks eloquently about Australian pedagogy and apprenticeship.

Of note in the above texts is the admission by the examiner of having benefitted and actually having learned from reading the thesis. This is the kind of text that accords with a process designed to elicit an original contribution to knowing. The examiners are reversing the roles and sitting at the feet of both candidate and supervisor. This positioning and the acknowledgment of originality is made even more explicit in the comments below:

My congratulations to her and her supervisor for the achievement of a valuable, original contribution to knowledge.

I applaud Mr X and his supervisors, Dr Y and Dr Z, for a very comprehensive, high quality, innovative, and forward thinking research report. The thesis clearly breaks new ground on ...

This thesis reports on research work on the further development of a new and unique \_\_\_\_\_ method, originally developed and reported by Y, a supervisor for this thesis ... Congratulations to the candidate and to his supervisors for an outstanding piece of research and reporting.

While these latter texts do not contain explicit admission on the part of the examiner of having benefited and/ or learned, one could deduce that such strong endorsement of original work would imply such admission. Presumably, one cannot both endorse new knowing having occurred while, at the same time, claiming to have known it all along. These latter texts are among the strongest of symmetrical texts yet uncovered for they both identify sharply that original contribution has occurred and, at the same time, portray relegation of power by the examiner to the learner and to the supervisor.

### **Conclusion: Ramifications for Supervisors and their Candidates**

The text that includes reference to the supervisor in the way being referred to throughout is a minority of text, constituting just 15% of instances in Institution 1 and 27% in Institution 2. Within these limits, however, the findings related to this paper would seem to further substantiate the earlier thesis that the 'empirical-analytic' way of knowing is the relatively dominant mode employed in the examination report, and that this varies only slightly when the supervisor is referred to explicitly. Furthermore, there is some confirmation of the fact that, while this way of knowing may be more apparent when dealing with negative text, it persists even as a sub-text within much text that is positive. Again, it is suggested that such

text may constitute what might be described as an 'examination genre' and that, granted the stated intentions of the PhD to be 'original', 'creative', 'contributive of new knowledge', etc, such a genre could serve unwittingly to discourage the kind of risk-taking and innovation that might be essential to such a venture. Just as the genre might serve ultimately to discourage candidates as they become aware of the examination regime implied by the genre, so too might supervisors focus overly in their own work with the candidate on the technical, rather than the historical/hermeneutic or critical/self-reflective knowing potential of a thesis. In other words, knowing that such a genre is likely to dominate the examination process may well encourage supervisors to play safe in the mentoring of the thesis, rather than risk too much of the kind of boldness normally found as an attachment to the truly new and contributive.

The second way of knowing, historical-hermeneutic, was also identified in the text of the examiners, but to a less significant extent. It was wrapped in more positive and encouraging language, and invited a modicum of partnership. In the end, however, it was judged not to have moved the essentially expert positioning found when dealing with the empirical/analytic. Again, the subtlety implied here that positive text can in fact be only veiling an essentially technical regime may simply serve to underline the extent to which the 'empirical-analytic' genre has become institutionalised within the examination culture.

The findings from Lovat and Morrison (2003) did extend on the instances collected so far of text indicating a focus on self-reflective knowing and so moving the positioning between examiner, supervisor and candidate more towards one of 'non-asymmetry' and occasional awe at the emergence of new knowing. As illustrated above, the greater number of such texts than were found when the examiner/candidate role was in focus may reveal an enhanced disposition on the part of examiners to relegate some power over the process to the supervisor, while still being guarded about doing so to the candidate. The ramification from this finding for research training may be that the role of the supervisor is more powerful than previously acknowledged. It would normally be assumed as a truism that positive and contributive supervision is important for the process of assembling the thesis, however the explicitness of the role the supervisor has played in the way the thesis is constructed and presented is rarely if ever a consideration. There may be an indication in these findings that some examiners, at least, are more prepared to relinquish their own technical positioning and engage more wholeheartedly with the thesis if the role that the supervisor has played is obvious.

Clearly, more work of both an empirical and conceptual kind needs to ensue before we can be at all certain of this. Included in this will need to be more serious analysis of the actual theses in question, as well as their examination reports, in order to ascertain precisely what clues to the 'supervisor being behind the thesis' an examiner is picking up when she/he makes explicit reference to the supervisor. It is possible that, in some cases, there will be no clue and the examiner will simply be assuming on the role of the supervisor. While this would be less satisfying empirically, it may actually make the case about genre more intriguing. The notion underlying the genre thesis is, after all, one of examiner mind set above all. If we are able eventually to substantiate some shift in the epistemological stance when reference to the supervisor is made, it may be irrelevant whether the role the supervisor has played in constructing the thesis is explicit in the thesis or not. What will be relevant is what was going on in the mind of the examiner at the time. This leads to the thought that some follow-up interviewing with examiners will also be an essential methodological component at some point.

In summary, this aspect of the SORTI study is at the point of considering that, even when faced with a very good thesis, examiners appear to be heavily influenced by a culture, implicit if not explicit, that is disposed towards the technical (and quite likely, the negative) aspects of assessment. Where the role of the supervisor is obvious, it may be that some examiners, at least, feel more prepared to relinquish this role in favour of the kind of ‘non-asymmetry’ that allows for more generous comment, as well as the kind of acknowledgment of personal benefit and measure of personal awe that most clearly signals a work or originality and contribution. The finding is tentatively put at this stage but clearly is worth pursuing for confirmation, or its opposite, as the potential of such a finding for research training regimes would be immense.

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