Securing Trust, Roles and Communication in E-Advising – Theoretical Inputs

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Abstract: Students claim to learn a lot from advising and feedback on assignments. This is one of the results in a survey amongst students at The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. Traditionally, advising is mainly a face-to-face activity. However, with an increasing number of courses offered online, it is timely to discuss how to conduct advising sessions online and using an online medium. The meeting between the student and advisor contains a number of factors; for example: eye contact, tone of voice and facial mimic. Many subtle features establish the relationship between the advisor and student. The student needs to communicate the assignment and to trust the advisor, at the other hand the advisor needs to be reassured that the student understand and trust the feedback. This paper discusses how written advising sessions can be undertaken using an online medium, and still maintain the roles, the trust and secure the communication.

1. Introduction

E-learning is not something new, but accelerate in our days because of drivers like technological advancements and demand from the learners. E-learning is been offered by many institutions in higher education in Norway, also at The Inland University of Applied Science, where it is offered a variety of online studies. Some of the studies are delivered as e-learning only and others are net- and seminar based, and these courses differ from on campus education by the lack of physical meetings. With the way the online courses are organized, it is possible to stay at home, at work or whichever place, to learn. There is an ever expanding marked for e-learning and online education and the number of courses and studies offered as online or net- and seminar based are increasing in number. This will probably continue in the next few years.

With the increasing demand from the market, we have seen the emergence of various forms of e-learning like for example MOOC's (Massive Open Online Courses). However, the dropout rate is quite substantial in these courses – sometimes up to 70% (Hone & El Said, 2016). There has been several studies on MOOC retention. Hone and El Said (2016) refer to research showing that students that had prior experience with MOOCs had a higher retention rate. Age and level of education had also an impact; the older and more educated, the higher retention rate. This suggests that motivation for joining the course may have something to do with it.

Eom and Ashill (2016) claim that course design, instructor, and dialogue are the strongest predictors of user satisfaction and learning outcomes. This means that the design of the course should be focusing on adapting the course material, structure and content to suit an online situation. The options for contact and dialogue, where advising on student assignments and thesis is an important factor, and students rank this very high (Kjeldsen, 2006), with the students also need careful attention, and the instructor must train in delivering education in the online media. This paper particularly focus on the instructor and the written counselling dialogue between instructor and student in net and seminar based e-learning.

2. Background on advising

The advising session have different phases. First it is the beginner phase (introduction), the personal phase, and the equality phase (Pettersen & Løkke, 2004). Here the role of the advisor in more of an instructor, meaning that the advisor in this phase is the one that has the knowledge to share. However, it is important to empower the students so they can make their own choices. As Ausubel says, quoted in Pettersen and Løkke (2004): "…the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly". The second phase is where one develops a learning alliance between "the

partners" (the learner and the advisor) which symbolizes the symmetrical relationship that has now developed (Pettersen & Løkke, 2004). The advisor explores what the student presents, and challenges the opinions and perceptions of the student. The third phase is the consultative phase. Here the student has acquired knowledge and feels empowered to defend his or her own work as a student.

Going from on campus to online learning the change of media has posed some different issues regarding advising. Bolter call this a "remediation" which he defines:

> We might call each such shift a "remediation," in the sense that a newer medium takes the place of an older, borrowing and reorganizing the characteristics of writing in the older medium and reforming its cultural space (Bolter, 2001).

In an online medium, the body language will be a lot more absent than in face-to-face advising. It is thus important to take the other issues into consideration, such as organization and the interrelationship between advisor and student. It may also be important to be specific and clear about what the student can expect from the advising sessions and stick to that. This may also be a part of the establishing of trust, based on previous experiences. The students working online seems to focus fully on the curriculum. They are in our experience not interested in discussing issues that is not within the scope of the assignment. This is supported by Peltier, Drago and Schibrowsky (2003). When we supervise in writing via the internet, we cannot rely on any of the nonverbal communication. Sometimes we spend a lot of time and effort in working on formulations and language in order to adapt it as well as possible for the students to perceive it as best as possible. It is, however, difficult to adjust and adapt when one receives no information from the body language. When conveying an attitude and focus it is important that the student understand and take it in. To show that the student has our respect and we are interested in their assignment is important to establish the needed level of trust and understanding. Deprived from eye contact, facial mimic and other physical expressions, it is difficult to communicate interest and attention. It is about establishing trust and respect both ways in the relation, and when these important factors (like body language, facial mimic, etc.) are missing, the language and tone of voice is the only substitute, except in asynchronous advising such as in emails where the language, use of words and expressions are the only ways of establishing the relation. In any advising relation, it is important that the student should be able to openly express thoughts and ideas and also be susceptible for our advice and comments (Pettersen & Løkke, 2004).

Verbal dialogue can be divided in five categories: social interaction, procedural interaction, expository interaction, explanatory interaction, and in-depth interaction (Offir, Lev, Lev, Barth, & Shteinbok, 2004). Offir et al (2004) used these different categories of dialogue as a framework for analysis, but they also work as descriptions of dialogue that can be used within the scope of distance education and e-advising. Social interaction establishes the social relation in the relationship. Procedural interaction is about clarifying the objective and requirements of a course or the assignment. Expository interaction is about subject content and can be about establishing level of knowledge about a (by the student) chosen subject. Explanatory interaction can be used in the phase were the advising is on students work, modifications to work submitted to advisor, e.g. In-depth interaction is where the advisor "challenge" the students in order to promote reflections and alternative views and ideas that will again enhance the assignment.

We also want our students to become what Schön refers to as "reflective practitioners" (Schön, 1987, 1991). It is thus important to facilitate for these reflections. We can do this by making the students write reflective journals (Bassot, 2013; Moon, 2004, 2006). We can also offer them feedback on these journals. However, giving feedback on these journals can be a challenge if one has not experienced writing such reflective journals themselves. The journals may not only be in writing and by email or posted in a forum in a Learning Management System. They may be recordings that the students present as streaming video for all (including fellow students) or just to the lecturer.

The physical distance is also discussed by Moore and his theory on Transactional Distance (Moore, 1997). Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) is defined as "a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner" (Keegan, 1993). The TDT is a function of three key variables: "structure," "dialogue," and "learner autonomy." They are defined by Moore in Keegan (1993) as:

A dialogue is purposeful, constructive and valued by each party. Each party in a dialogue is a respectful and active listener; each is a contributor, and builds on the contributions of the other party or parties.... The direction of a dialogue in an educational relationship is towards the improved understanding of the student (p. 24). Structure expresses the rigidity or flexibility of the program's educational objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods It describes the extent to which an educational program can accommodate or be responsive to each learner's individual needs (p. 26). Learner autonomy is the extent to which in the teaching/learning relationship, it is the learner rather than the teacher who determines the goals, the learning experiences, and the evaluation decisions of the learning program (p. 31).

One of the points stated in the TDT is that increased dialogue reduces the transactional distance. Also increased structure reduces dialogue and increases TDT according to Moore in Keegan (1993). Paul Gorsky and Avner Caspi (2005) discuss TDT and points to research that is hesitant towards TDT and that show that the theory is not applicable to all different types of e-learning. They refer to research that does not always confirm Moore's theory. For this paper, the structure is limited to the number of advising sessions that is scheduled for the particular assignments and what is available to the students either via email from the advisor, in a Learning Management System or other internet resources (e.g. University web page). Regarding learner autonomy, it is expected that there is a certain level of autonomy regarding choosing e-learning rather than on-campus-education, although this is also tied to other parameters such as physical distance to campus, work and life situation, finances, to mention a few.

Wegerif in Bender (2012) also claims that social dimensions have an impact on the transactional distance. If one is not a part of a social network, or otherwise feel left out, this will interfere with the students' self-esteem and interfere with the dialogue with the students. Reverse, if the students feel like a part of a group or social network, the dialogue will be positively different regarding the advisor-student relationship. According to Wegerif, the students belonging to a social group experienced feedback and dialogue with the teacher/advisor as motivating, and the students that felt excluded experienced this dialogue as "cold and remote" (p. 11). This suggests that to avoid TD due to solitude in an online environment, some sort of group activities should be undertaken.

Moore do not consider the competency of the advisor in his works. The students need to be confident about the competency of the advisor. This may be the most important factor, particularly for the older, more experienced students. They are in our experience more specific about their needs, even if they as a group also need to get the establishing of routines regarding how and when the advising is to be undertaken. The competency of the advisor can be viewed as in Skau's "Triangle of competency" (Skau, 2002). The advisors theoretical knowledge, which is competency attained through traditional education and the personal competency, which is about who you are as a person e.g. how you interact with a person and the work specific skills, skills obtained through the execution of the work, are important when securing the trust of the students. The advisor should have skills on the area on which she or he advise the student. One work specific skill is also to *listen.* In order to understand the needs of the student and to make the student also feel *seen* or *heard* can be viewed as a skill (Ranglund, 2012a). Using active listening, which is about ones total communication – both verbal, para – and nonverbal, the advisor can show the student that one is paying attention and de facto hear what the student is putting forward. The competency acquired through of the advisor is about handling the communication also in an online medium. To be able to communicate also in this medium in a way that will establish the cooperation that this "relationship" needs is important. The work specific skills also say something about the advisors skills regarding communication in different media. They not only need to master the face-to-face (also in classrooms and auditoriums) on campus advising, but also be able to be to the point and show theoretical skills in an online medium. The different media will also require different communication skills. The different media need different approaches regarding communication. If it is about using a video-based medium, such as Skype, it is possible to add mimic and body language to a certain extent. In emails and other asynchronous media, this is not possible. It is thus important to be able to express oneself in such a way that they are able to understand and be encouraged to follow the advice. This is confirmed in a study at Universitas Terbuka (Suciati, 2011).
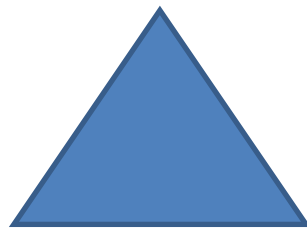
Figure 1: The triangle of competency, translated from Skau (2002)

In advising, it is very important to both listen and ask questions. In "Truth and Method", Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that we need to deepen our understanding of the nature of the question. We make no experiences without actively asking. When we acknowledge that a case is different to what we first assumed, we must apparently have asked ourselves if it is like this or like that (Gadamer, 2010, p. 326). It is in other words via questions we can revise our understanding. It is the *question* that is the basis and lead to the recognition of that a case seems different than we first thought, and this gives the question precedence. Gadamer wants us to place open questions. However, the openness is not without boundaries as it is it limited by the horizon of the question and the answer is not defined. The question must be afloat, not to determine, but rather be tested in the meeting with arguments. The verdict defines and closes the case, Gadamer (2010, p. 327) claims, adding that it will also contribute towards the balancing of pro and counter arguments. All genuine questions must have this openness. If the question does not have this openness, it is a fake question without a genuine intent. To determine the question is the road to knowing, according to Gadamer (2010, p. 328). It is through the answers to our questions that the preconditions for our preconceptions and our biases are tested. Through dialogue with questions and answers, one must articulate and take up ones theme again for reflecting about one's own preconceptions and prejudices, something that may revise our understanding.

Clarity and eliminating misunderstandings are also important. In a simple version of a communication model, noise and "interference" is what may be obstructing the mutual understanding of a message.
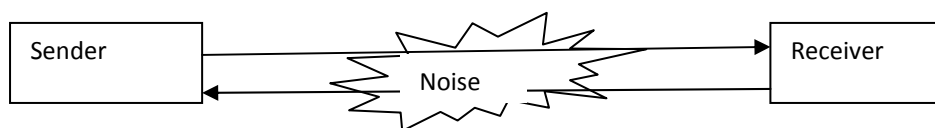
Figure 2: The simple communication model

Noise can be for example different cultures, different age groups and gender, and the channel in which the communication takes place (Dahl, Habert, & Dybvig, 2001). It is important to reduce noise as much as possible, but it is equally important to establish what the noise consists of. In his book «Truth and Method» (2010) Gadamer believed that one had to choose either truth or method (Mendelson, 1979). This gives also the reason to ask about what we are looking for. Are we mostly interested in showing off methodical skills, and ability to conduct interviews following procedures and techniques, and maybe even obtaining collegial confirmation? In spite of following correct procedures, methods and techniques, do we get the right answers? How sure can we be of obtaining *the truth*?

To "see" someone is not only to visually see someone, but it is also about understanding and recognition. We are experts on our own way of life, but very often strangers when meeting others. The philosopher Martin Buber, who was interested in promoting authentic relationships in which communicators would "turn toward" each other to truly appreciate the value offered by the "other" (Raelin, 2012) claims in his book «I -Thou» (1992) about the relationship between people and the importance of dialogue to create an «I – Thou»-relationship between persons. The "I – thou" (M. Buber, 2013) relationship means that we relate to *the other* person as a subject, and not as a physical thing or object. Within first-line work this meeting is often called the "moment of truth" (Normann, 2000). In this meeting it is mainly about starting a dialogue with a *customer* or a *user* to create a "me – you" relationship where the customer or user is viewed as a subject. This is also

important in the meeting with scholars. "The moment of truth" is more than a social situation with a function, meaning that we want to achieve something within the meeting and the frame of "the moment of truth". It is also a personal meeting where one seeks to understand the other person via the conversation and body language. Often the employed and the users meet in an institution that also represents a set of governing structures and power relations (Johnsen, 2005). These structures will have an impact on and influence the meeting and interaction. The understanding for how the internal and external factors influence the meeting, and reflection on these questions is very important in many ways, and especially when structuring net and seminar based courses. For example, not to see the other person as an individual can be experienced as alienation and create a distance. This distance manifests through the difference of a talking *with* someone and talking *to* someone, and it is important to try overcoming this distance in net and seminar based education. In a dialogue, it is easier to understand, recognize and respect what the other person wants, but it is important to be sensitive because it may occur that one notices that one has been more concerned about presenting one's own points rather than listening to the other person. This mean that one has not been present in the conversation, listening and evaluating the arguments of the conversational partner. This makes it harder to understand the other person. Gadamer (2013) underlines the importance of obtaining understanding. For instance, sometimes the dialogue or conversation leads towards a defensive attitude. That means that openness and attentiveness towards the other person is lost. It is too easy to be defensive, and it is not always easy to see what is happening, and instead defend one's own thinking and practicing. In a monologue, the feedback is missing and that diminishes the opportunities for the same understanding. It is also easier to alienate and create a distance, which in the next turn might create and increase a conflict. It might also be a point to ask *why* we meet and *why* we have a conversation. Is it to confirm one's own assumptions and conceptions or are we opening up to understand what is happening and let the other person's horizon be apparent? Hence, it seems that it is important to pay attention to our own relational contribution.

3. Discussion

To listen and understand the require aids the process of providing what the student needs. Often when one is advising on a topic of special interest, it can be difficult not to impose one's own values and knowledge on the student. This may obstruct the learning process as the student may feel that it is no longer one's own work (Ranglund, 2012a). It may also lead to confusion and this is obstructive towards a learning process (Kember et al., 1999).

Predictability is also important. Light (2003) states the importance of having meetings on a regular basis as this:"… provide the positive growth experiences for students that enable them to identify their goals and talents and learn how to put them to use. The caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus." Herbert (2006) claims this also apply to e-learning. Regulated and predictable contact with faculty staff, included their attentiveness to students needs are rated high with regards to contribute to student retention and student satisfaction.

Another point to take into consideration is the students (learners) communication skills. Just as the advisor should be able to communicate to the students, the students' ability to communicate is also important. To explain this further, it is e.g. important to be supportive and keep a balance between positive and negative feedback. The feedback also needs to be very specific and constructive. Even if the students may use an impropriate language, it is important that the advisor stick to a more formal language. There is however, a difference between sticking to a formal language on the one hand and bridging the gap between the advisor and student. Løkensgaard Hoel (2001) saw the importance of adding typing mistakes in order to lower the level of communicating with the students. Her experiences were that if she were correct and very formal, she would get little questions or other feedback. If she "picked up" on the students mistakes, it made the threshold lower for the students and they were more interested in sending her emails.

The difference in media will affect the communication. Sometimes the media is given for the course and one just have to adjust accordingly. It is thus important that the faculty staff have skills and competency in advising in the different media that it is possible to advice in. The media may be synchronous and allow for video stream, but it may also be asynchronous and require different approaches than using mimic and facial expressions as one can in a video stream.

It is also recommended to view the student's background and do a proper search on one's audience is also recommended. This target group investigation may be well worth. Morris and Finnegan (2009) claim that first year students and first timers are the most likely to drop out. They will thus need extra attention as opposed to the more experienced students that have undertaken online courses earlier without dropping out. This is also confirmed in other studies presented by Hone and El Said (2016).

Not only the background, but also the other characteristics like which "generation" they "belong to". For instance, members of the different "generations" may have different needs and different approaches to advising. The previously mentioned "nexters" are generally "multitaskers" and many of them browse newspapers, Facebook and other social media all while in a class and lecturing (Clausing, Kurtz, Prendeville, & Walt, 2003).

Clarity regarding media in use, what can be expected, at what time they can expect it is vital. To be perfectly open and predictable regarding when to expect feedback, what type of feedback, in what media, etc., will contribute towards the trustworthiness in the relationship between the advisor and student. This applies to ordinary on campus education, too, but is even more important when the students have no way of showing up "at your office door" (Ranglund, 2012b). This requires planning and a bit of organizing in beforehand prior to the start of the course or study (Eom & Ashill, 2016; Gomez-Zermeno & Aleman De La Garza, 2016; Hone & El Said, 2016; Suciati, 2011).

Teaching and supporting the advisors is important. The advisors need to experience how net and seminar based courses "works" in order to fully understand and comply the situation before him or her. It is a very different situation than the "ordinary" face-to-face sessions on (or off -if agreed) campus advising session. The more research done on this and the more experience each advisor gets it is important to share this knowledge and distribute amongst peers. Also to facilitate for reflection not only with the students but also with one self, is important. Sharing experience and co-reflect with peers is necessary in order to learn more (Wenger, 1998).

Gadamer (2010) has helped us to acknowledge this. However, Gadamer's precondition is that the dialogue is between to equal partners. Habermas critizised Gadamer for ignoring the power that can be displayed between the partners (Habermas in, Lægreid, Skorgen, & Hagen, 2001).

A power distance can be displayed in different ways, but one empirical example may be the Danish social scientist Lars Uggerhøj (1996, Røkenes & Hanssen, 2002), who in a study of less privileged families, the social workers were clear about knowing what would be the best aid and not being susceptible to the arguments and viewpoints of the clients. The social workers expected that the clients followed their advice and had little mercy for the ones that did not follow their advice. The families (the clients) however, wanted to explain their version and understanding of the situation. This was not a conversation according to Gadamers principles. This is important to remember in the context of advising students. Do we subconsciously expect the students to be inferior to us due to our academic rank, our position at the University and being a researcher? It is thus important to keep this in mind and ensure that we recognize the students input.

It is also a part of the teacher skills to supervise in such a way that the students must find the answers themselves or within themselves. In other words should the role of advocacy in this case be limited. It is easy to give the students the "correct" answers instead of encouraging them to find the answers themselves. Referring to the levels of advising (socializing phase, learning alliance phase, consultative phase), this feedback will be within the "learning alliance phase" and whilst the advisor is supporting and empowering the student to be more confident and trust their abilities.

Peter Ferguson, a senior lecturer in the Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, refers to a study at "a major Australian university" studying teacher education. The conclusions in this study are similar to what we have experienced ourselves; that feedback need to be positive, clear and constructive. It needs to "guide them towards future improvement". The positivity is to motivate and boost confidence. They also need to recognize that the comments are coherent with the assignment. This study also shows that the students are willing to wait for what they consider to be "good feedback" (Ferguson, 2011).

Regarding making the students write reflective journals, the advisors should themselves be invited to write (or record) reflective journals themselves in order to learn how this is perceived by the students. This may be a

very personal undertaking and it puts the "trust" issue at stake. To have ones reflective journal evaluated by a peer requires trust between the parties, not only between advisor and student, but also and maybe more importantly amongst peers (Moon, 2006)

We give examples of our own feedback from our own courses below, translated from Norwegian:

Example one:

«Well, many good suggestions that [company] could implement. However, you do not refer to the textbook or other curriculum. This means that you have very limited use of theory. I would like you to revise your assignment and use theory and use theoretical reasoning for what you suggest in your text."

Example two:

"This can be regarded as close to praxis, which is not bad. However, I do not see any references to the textbooks. The descriptions, the actions and the structure… the way I read it, it is the "GAP- model" that you refer to, which has some substance. However, in an academic context, this is not quite adequate. What you write about the service triangle, is ok. You have in assignment b some relevant points, but there is a clear lack of couplings between theory/textbook and your writing. A statement of the GAP-model is an explanation threat show why it is relevant to use this model, it is in many ways similar to the logic of the service triangle, and not totally unlike Grönroos either, to put it like that, but you do not mention this at all. You need to incorporate more theory in the assignment, meaning that you need to justify for the reader why you write what you write. For example, in the start you write about service. Here you could have referred to Aasbrenn, shown in the presentations during the lecture, and law books, logo, and reputation contribute to create expectations. It is more than commercial on the internet, television or newspaper as you write. In other words a greater usage of text and theory, better problematizing and discussion, and a tighter coupling to theory in general would be preferred."

The first feedback was well received, but also commented on being too short and that they would have liked some elaboration. Very well received was the second feedback, thanking for great elaborations and specific feedback. Worth noticing with both of these examples is that neither contain any "very positive" feedback, the feedback is perceived as constructive, and thus not negative in both examples. Ideally they could have had some more positive feedback in the beginning, if not on the content, then on appearance or other technicalities, something that would have been more in line with the results of Ferguson (2011). Gadamer (2013) says to lead a conversation demands that the conversational partner do not talk past each other. Hence, the conversation must be structured as questions and answers. The art of conversation has as it most important condition to secure that the partners follow the conversation. Gadamer (2013) further states: To lead a conversation demand that one does not argue the other down and under, but rather evaluate the statements and value the input. The conversation is thus the art of trying. In real life, it can be hard to live up to this ideal.

4. Conclusion

In other words, it is necessary to have skills on how to express oneself in a digital media. The medium of communication also have constraints. If one uses a video-based synchronous medium, it is possible to use the body language and make use of expressions in order to see if the students receive the advising as intended. In an asynchronous medium like email or discussion forum, it is important to establish rules for the communication. The rules are to secure predictability for the student and advisor. To be clear on the expectations are important in order to establish trust between the advisor and student.

The most important is however the competency on the topic in question. The students need to obtain an understanding about the level of knowledge with the advisor in order to trust the advices given. The competencies the advisor in an e-learning education need are thus wider than in an "ordinary" on campus situation, although this can be difficult enough.

The skills of communicating in an online medium needs to be practiced. Our recommendations are to let faculty staff practice on this prior to advising students online.

4.1   Future research

We are planning a project that will develop training possibilities for faculty staff that is about to undertake online advising. The project will also include establishing similar to a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in order for the new and experienced advisors to meet and share experiences. The experienced advisors (experienced in the online medium) will act as advisors for the "apprentaces" – the faculty staff that is learning about how to do advising in a new medium.

The focus will be on testing out all the different types of media, both synchronous and asynchronous, and on communication skills as well as skill on how to make good plans for follow up on online students in order to make them feel taken care of and noticed.

Major emphasis will also be put on the reflecting with peers, not only sharing knowledge and experiences. Faculty staff will get facilitation to use methods as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987, 1991) together with providing feedback on their reflective notes from both in and on action.

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