

# TEACHING TOPICS GUIDING STUDENTS

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*This teaching topic is about supporting students during the thesis process. Three study advisors (Joleen de Jong-Veneberg, Annet de Kiewit and Sharon Vonk) wrote this teaching topic as an element of the University Study Advisors Qualifications trajectory. They each describe a case, a problem analysis and their conclusions, supported by literature.*

During the MSc thesis process students work individually. Their projects are complex and comprehensive, and the number of supervision hours is restricted. Students have to make use of all prior knowledge and academic skills, deepening and broadening both if necessary. The process also demands project management and

communication skills in their interaction with supervisors.

Within the framework of the UT study advisor qualification (BKS), three student advisors have outlined ways to enhance the success and progress of students engaged in the thesis process. Each takes a different perspective.

## JOLEEN DE JONG-VENEBERG · STUDY ADVISOR BMS

### Case A: Delay Master thesis

Hannah calls for an appointment. She has been stuck writing her Master thesis for over six months and hasn't had contact with her thesis supervisor during that time. The threshold for contacting her supervisor or her study advisor has risen higher and higher. What factors played a role in her delay and how can these be beneficially influenced by the thesis supervisor and/or study advisor?

### What's the problem in this case?

In the social sciences, most Master programmes have a duration of one year. A substantial number of students, however, need more (sometimes much more) time to complete it. In the Master of Psychology, 53% of the students in the 2013 cohort completed their Master within 1.5 years, while 78% required **two years**. In most of the other programmes within BMS, a comparable (or even worse) percentage was found.

Students usually get stuck in the process of writing their Master thesis. The thesis is the final element of the programme to be completed before entering the job market. It is a large project in which many skills are required from the student. Several factors play a role in the success and progress of a Master



thesis. In addition, students often tell me that it is difficult to find the right balance between working independently and asking for support. Better insight into the factors that play a role in different phases of the process may help supervisors and study advisors to support students in a more efficient and effective way.



CLARITY OF RULES AND GUIDELINES



EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNICATION WITH THESIS SUPERVISOR



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH PROGRAMME STAFF AND PEERS

7

# FACTORS THAT PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN STUDENT PROGRESS WITH THE MASTER THESIS



STUDENT'S SKILLS REGARDING CONTENT AND PROCESS



EXTERNAL PARTIES (SUBJECTS, EXTERNAL ASSIGNMENT)



STUDENT'S IMAGE OF LIFE AFTER THE MASTER



PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

## FACTORS THAT PLAY A ROLE IN THE MASTER THESIS PROCESS

To answer the question of what factors play a role, I conducted exploratory research on the Master of Psychology. During a period of three months, I analysed the conversations I had with students undertaking their Master thesis. I also asked thesis supervisors for their input on reasons for delay for all of the students who were enrolled in our Master at that time. In total, there were 11 different reasons for delay for approximately 50 students who were working on their Master thesis at the time. After discussing this topic again with a majority of the programme staff at Education Day Psychology at the beginning of 2017, I was able to reduce the 11 reasons to 7 factors that play an important role in student progress with the Master thesis.

After having done my own exploratory research, I looked into some literature on study success. I discovered that the most relevant and recent literature on study success is aimed at the Bachelor's level and study success is primarily defined as the percentage of students completing their Bachelor's degree within four years, as this is a factor the government identified as important. Nevertheless, generally this research described the same factors.

Members of the Werkgroep Studiesucces 2.0<sup>2</sup> of the University of Amsterdam did extensive qualitative and quantitative research within their university and conducted a literature review. They found 4

factors (Expectations, Support, Assessment & feedback, and Involvement) to be the most important. These correspond with factors 1, 2 and 3 in the figure above.

Faber, Mittendorff and Huizinga<sup>1</sup> conducted research within Saxion Hogescholen and mention factors such as activating education, promotion of student engagement, career guidance, graduation and planning workshops, as well as clear frameworks as important principles for enhancing study success. These correspond with factors 1-5 in the figure above.

### How can these factors be beneficially influenced by the thesis supervisor and the study advisor?

Based on the factors that play a role in study success, recommendations for action and intervention can be formulated for both the thesis supervisor and the study advisor. I have placed these actions or interventions on the timeline of the Master thesis process. The actions are aimed at factors 1-5 in the figure above, as factors 6 and 7, in most

cases, cannot be influenced easily or directly. These recommendations may seem obvious, but consciously undertaking them at certain times while keeping the five factors in mind is, in my opinion, important to keep yourself active and reflective and thus to provide adequate support to each student.

Needless to say, there are large individual differences between students, while educational contexts also differ from each other. It's important to keep this in mind when designing interventions. Also, some factors can be influenced during the Bachelor's programme, so it is also important to take a look at what is going on there.

**Last but not least, it really helps when thesis supervisors and study advisors share their experiences and keep learning from each other! In this respect, I highly recommend the course 'Supervising students' given by CELT here at the UT, for both thesis supervisors and study advisors.**

POINT IN TIME	THESIS SUPERVISOR	STUDY ADVISOR
<i>Start of the Master thesis</i>	Discuss learning goals/explore expectations	Information meeting on the process of the Master thesis and ways to succeed and enjoy it
<i>After 2 months</i>	Discuss time schedule and give feedback on product, process and communication; ask the student about their opinion and wishes	Second meeting on first experiences in the Master thesis process, coaching students to take action and seek support if necessary, and life after the Master (thesis)
<i>After 4 months</i>	Discuss progress and keep in contact with the student; refer to study advisor if a student is stuck or disappears off the radar	Question thesis supervisors on the progress of their Master students



## ANNET DE KIEWIT, STUDY ADVISOR ET

### Case B: Friction between student and supervisor

Student Mick bursts into my office: 'My supervisor is a dictator. I never know what I have to do.' Not long afterwards, Mick's supervisor Janice calls me: 'If only Mick would listen to me, he is so stubborn.'

### What's the problem in this case?

In a thesis project, both the student and supervisor have a tendency to focus on the content of the project. They might neglect the process and communication aspects of the project, which might be highly influenced by personal characteristics. If the project is not finished within reasonable time or conflicts occur between student and supervisor, it might be worth paying attention to these characteristics. The student advisor might act as an intermediary in this process.



## PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS: WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

Different types of personal characteristics of both student and supervisor (and in combination) might influence the effectiveness and efficiency of a thesis project.

Examples:

- Gender<sup>4</sup>
- Personal quality<sup>5</sup>
- Disability (*i.e.* ASS, AD(H)D, dyslexia)
- Mindset<sup>5</sup>

For this project, I chose the concept of 'mindsets' and focused on the aspect of communication.

### Why mindset?

Mindset plays a role in intrinsic motivation. Our perception of intelligence and talent is dependent on our mindset. A **fixed** mindset considers intelligence and talent something given that cannot be changed.

A **growth** mindset considers that given intelligence and talent are a starting point for development. A growth mindset is preferable within a learning/teaching situation as it is the expression of intrinsic motivation.

Dweck<sup>5</sup> gives multiple examples of interaction between people of similar and different mindsets, which might be translated into the situation experienced during a thesis project. This may help explain why conflicts occur between student and

supervisor, and may make it possible to find solutions and provide support.

### Fixed and growth mindsets in a thesis project

A student or supervisor with a fixed mindset will consider a thesis project as proof of mastery. The student will perceive the supervisor as merely a judge. A supervisor with a fixed mindset will pay little attention to the individual learning process of the student during the thesis project.

A student or supervisor with a growth mindset will emphasize the fact that the thesis project is one stage in an ongoing learning process. The student will perceive the supervisor as a coach. A supervisor with a growth mindset will adjust their coaching to the needs of the particular student.

## What can you do as an intermediary?

- You can make the student and supervisor aware of their mindsets and their influence on the process and communication.
- You can give examples of interaction that demonstrate a fixed or growth mindset, and by doing so provide input for change.

STUDENT	SUPERVISOR	GROWTH	FIXED
<i>Growth</i>		Thesis project taking too long, as both student and supervisor keep exploring new routes and do not communicate enough about the final product.	Supervisor will complain about the fact that the student is not working in a structured way and is not producing the expected product. Student will feel restricted.
<i>Fixed</i>		The student will complain that the supervisor is not giving enough direction about the end result.	The student and the supervisor will have a conflict about content and/or process as long as their expectations don't match.

*Possible student-supervisor thesis communication problems related to mindset.*

### TIP / IDEA

Introduce examples of communication resulting from personal characteristics found in manuals or examples of meetings of students and supervisors when discussing the aspect of **communication**.



### FIXED

I think a thesis with experiments will better suit you.

This is rubbish. I don't want to see you until you have finished the final draft.

Well done. This is good enough to be published.



### GROWTH

Which steps do you want to take to make this modelling study a success?

If you want to succeed you need to do more. I will give you an example of what I expect the draft to look like at this stage. You should compare your draft and this one for next time.

You have worked hard. Do you want to publish it?

## SHARON VONK, STUDY ADVISOR EWI

### Case C: Efficiency in study advice

On Monday morning, I had four appointments with students experiencing problems with their Master thesis project. At the end of the day, I had to conclude that the students had many problems in common and that I gave them similar advice. Couldn't this be done more efficiently?

### What's the problem in this case?

Students are supervised by a graduation committee. However, sometimes problems arise, such as getting stuck and difficulty in communication with the graduation committee members. This can lead to motivational problems and procrastination. In this case, students often consult me to help them get back on track with their Master thesis project. The study advisor usually gives similar advice to the students. But supporting each student individually is not very efficient. Is there another way to organize this kind of help? Could offering group guidance be an effective solution?





## WHY GROUP GUIDANCE?

Andre Baars<sup>6</sup> uses the taxonomies of Bloom, Krathwohl and Harrow to reflect on the problems of students. There may be cognitive issues (e.g. the student does not know how to make a proper plan) and affective issues (the student is not concerned with making a plan) and there may be problems with proactive behaviour (the student does not take any action at all). As a study advisor, you try to impart something to students; for example, new knowledge, how to implement a new idea, or an important insight. These 'student outcomes' can be formulated in terms of learning goals, which can be determined not only in the cognitive domain but also in the affective and behavioural domains.

Learning goals can be formulated based upon the three taxonomies mentioned. The aspects of remembering, understanding, application, analysing, evaluation and creation (based on Bloom) are part of the cognitive level. In a revision of Bloom, Krathwohl developed a complementary taxonomy. The aspects of receiving, responding, valuing, organizing and characterization are associated with the affective response. Baars also used Harrow's taxonomy. Although this taxonomy was developed for the psychomotor domain, Baars used these levels for the domain of behavioural change. The aspects are reflex movements, basic movements, perceptual and physical activities, skilled movements and non-discursive communication.

All of the learning goals that you want students to attain as a study advisor can be divided into the three categories of cognitive, affective and behavioural change. I was surprised to find that all of these learning goals may be attained through group guidance. An exemption has to be made for personal circumstances, such as family matters, as these circumstances can be better addressed through individual guidance. It is remarkable that study advisors focus so much on individual guidance, while most of the learning goals can be attained through group guidance.

### What are the potential benefits of group guidance for a student?

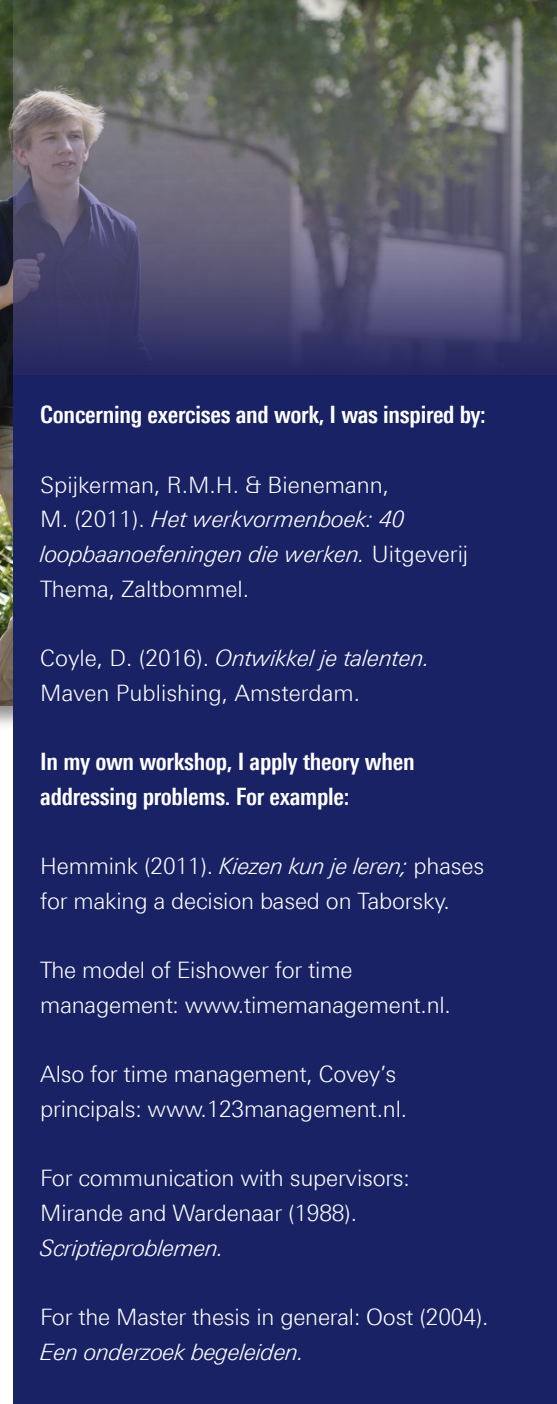
- Experience as a student that other students are having the same difficulties.
- Sharing problems helps to identify your own situation as a student.
- For students, it may be easier to learn from peers with the same issues, instead of the study advisor.
- Students can choose their own topics for group guidance, and only attend the sessions that are relevant to them.

### What are the potential benefits for the study advisor?

- The study advisor can work with more students at the same time, which means greater efficiency.
- The study advisor can stimulate students to learn from each other, which is a skill students can use in other situations as well.
- The study advisor can use methods involving group dynamics.
- Group guidance may be a nice variation to a advisor's daily work.
- The study advisor can address certain problems in a targeted way and approach the right students for this particular problem.

### How to prepare for group guidance?

Study advisors might not feel comfortable in front of a group because in their daily work they mostly work with individuals. They can gain more confidence by gaining experience. However, good preparation can also help. It will make them feel more in control.



### What are import aspects to pay attention to?

- Choose the appropriate working format, for example a seminar, a workshop or a course focused on the learning goals you want to attain.
- Pay attention to activities during the session, and special attention to variation and interaction.
- Learn about group dynamics so you can intervene if needed.
- Collectivity is a key factor. It is important that individuals can share their own experiences. Within these experiences you can try to find a sense of collectivity. In this way, each student can feel confident within the group, which will make it easier to learn.

### Which themes are relevant for a workshop for students experiencing problems with their Master thesis project?

Typical problems during this phase that a study advisor can offer some help with are:

- Making choices.
- Time management and project management.
- The writing process, in particular the structuring of texts.
- Communication with supervisors.

**Advice to study advisors who want to start working with group guidance: find a partner! Developing something together is more fun, and standing in front of a group together is less challenging.**

### Concerning exercises and work, I was inspired by:

Spijkerman, R.M.H. & Bienemann, M. (2011). *Het werkvormenboek: 40 loopbaanoefeningen die werken*. Uitgeverij Thema, Zaltbommel.

Coyle, D. (2016). *Ontwikkel je talenten*. Maven Publishing, Amsterdam.

### In my own workshop, I apply theory when addressing problems. For example:

Hemmink (2011). *Kiezen kun je leren*; phases for making a decision based on Taborsky.

The model of Eishower for time management: [www.timemanagement.nl](http://www.timemanagement.nl).

Also for time management, Covey's principals: [www.123management.nl](http://www.123management.nl).

For communication with supervisors: Mirande and Wardenaar (1988). *Scriptieproblemen*.

For the Master thesis in general: Oost (2004). *Een onderzoek begeleiden*.

## REFERENCES

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