Collaborative Learning in Thesis rings

A.G.L. Romme
Tilburg University

J.F.H. Nijhuis
Universiteit Maastricht

Summary

Supervising students doing internships and writing their thesis in higher education is typically a matter of personal interaction between supervisor and student. This leads, especially in higher education organizations with many graduating students to a considerable additional burden for lecturers and professors. This book contains a practical manual to enhance the quality as well as efficiency of supervision by way of thesis rings. A thesis ring consists of one or more supervisors and a number of students who share the responsibility for the supervision process of the student-members. As such, a thesis ring forms a permanent capacity for thesis supervision. The authors describe the educational principles, rules and methods of thesis rings. They also present a scenario to start a new thesis ring. In addition, this book provides some practical guidelines for collaboration between supervisors and thesis students, and for leading discussions during meetings.

Why read this book?

This book was written for lecturers, supervisors and professors in higher education who want to get more results from their supervision. In addition, it is also very useful for students who (are going to) participate in a thesis ring, as an introduction to and orientation on working in thesis rings.

About the authors

Professor dr A.G.L. (Sjoerd) Romme is currently at Tilburg University, as a professor of Management. He is also program director of the Business Studies program of Tilburg University. He holds a Ph.D. degree from Maastricht University. Sjoerd Romme has published several books and a large number of articles in Dutch and international journals about new organizational forms, strategic management, learning processes in organizations, and educational design and innovation.

J.F.H. (Jan) Nijhuis MA is lecturer at Maastricht University, departement of Management Sciences. He obtained his Masters degree in economics from University of Groningen. In his current position, Jan Nijhuis organizes courses in the field of logistics and production management. He has published a number of contributions to books as well as articles in international journals, particularly on problem-based learning.

LIST OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction

Supervising students doing internships and writing their thesis in higher education is typically a matter of personal interaction between supervisor and student. This leads, especially in higher education organizations with many graduating students, to a considerable additional burden for lecturers and professors. Moreover, this one-to-one interaction between supervisor and student has, besides several advantages, also one potentially problematic implication: if the supervisor and student can not get on well together, this often results in delayed graduation, demotivation, waste of time, and the like. The question is if the quality and efficiency of the supervision process can be improved, for instance by organizing supervision differently?

Early 1996 at Maastricht University the idea arose to apply the principles of collaborative learning to the supervision and organization of the graduating stage. In April of that year the first experimental thesis ring started at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, in order to supervise thesis projects in the field of organization science. Subsequently, other supervisors have been starting their own thesis rings (in Maastricht University, and other schools and universities in The Hague, Delft, Leuven and Tilburg).

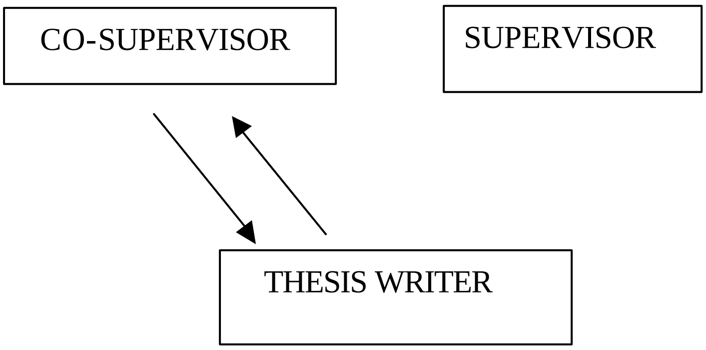
This book is the result of this educational innovation process. It describes a theoretical framework taken from the literature on collaborative and cooperative learning, and also includes a practical manual for teachers and professors considering the start-up of their own thesis ring. In addition, this book can serve as a guide for students who actively participate in thesis rings, for example, as co-supervisor, chairperson or scribe.

1.1 WHAT IS A THESIS RING?

A thesis ring consists of one or two supervisors and 5 to 15 students writing their Master's thesis, who share the responsibility for the supervision and assessment of these thesis projects. The aim of this way of supervising thesis projects is: to enhance the quality and efficiency of supervising activities. As such a thesis ring forms a permanent supervisory capacity in which students can flow in at any moment and flow out again after their graduation. It is important to understand that this educational instrument is explicitly aimed at *supervision* and not at thesis writing itself. So it is not a "thesis workshop" where students are actually doing work (e.g., writing a draft chapter), but a place where they come to be supervised, and additionally act as co-supervisor of other students. So the thesis ring is, as it were, an extension of the supervisor.

A successful operation of a thesis ring depends on the actual sharing of supervisory responsibility. If co-responsibility for supervision (including assessment) of theses is actually imposed on the student, the student-participant in a thesis ring gets two different roles (see figure 1.1). First, the role of the thesis writer who is being supervised. As such, the thesis writer is a kind of customer of the thesis ring. The second role is that of the (temporary) co-supervisor who supervises other thesis writers in the ring together with the supervisor. This means that the student-participant regularly switches between his/her role as a thesis writer and that as a member of the supervisory team. This frequent change of roles is an important condition for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experiences among students. As a thesis writer the student-participant gains experience by writing a thesis and as a co-supervisor he observes and reflects on the progress of other thesis projects. Thus, the writer's own learning process as well as that of the other students is stimulated.

Figure 1.1: Students frequently switch between the role of co-supervisor and that of thesis writer in a thesis ring.



1.2 STRUCTURE DETERMINES BEHAVIOUR

Two straightforward starting points are important for understanding the idea to organize the graduating stage on the basis of joint supervision by teachers and students. The first starting point is that *structure* – in the widest sense of the word – *to a large extent determines behaviour*. That is, the way in which a system is arranged and organized (or structured), largely determines the behaviour within that system. Think of, for instance, the physical structure of a building which determines the walking routes of its residents and visitors. There may be several routes taking you from A to B in that building, but you cannot walk through walls, walk into a room through a window, jump from one floor to another, etc.

Another example is the scheduling and design of tests that determine students' study approach to a high degree. In other words, the so-called 'path of least resistance' through a system is determined by this system's structure. Electricity, for instance, always follows the way of the least resistance, and this simple but straightforward principle also applies to the behaviour of students: they take the easiest, fastest or most obvious way through an educational program, taking into account their own competences and skills and the "resistance" they expect to meet on the various routes.

A second starting point is that *some structures are more effective than others* for achieving certain results. Though our common sense often tells us that results can be produced especially by means of changes in behaviour, the leverage effect of changes in structure is generally much larger than that of changes in behaviour.

These two starting points underlie the idea to organize thesis supervision by means of thesis rings. As to the structure of thesis rings, special attention is paid in this book to the strong effect of adequate rules for organizing the supervision and assessment of thesis projects. In general, these organizing rules are intended to enhance the student's performance and involvement as well as solve any problems faster and better.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THESIS SUPERVISION

The basic objective of any thesis (supervision) process is producing and delivering a thesis that fulfills the requirements set for the thesis. In addition to this individual objective, supervisors may have additional purposes in mind, such as:

- maximizing the quality of the thesis;
- activating the student's sense of responsibility and competence, also with regard to the supervision of others;
- solving problems arising during the supervision process;
- exploiting economies of scale when supervising thesis projects;
- promoting and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experience among students.

Particularly the role of the supervisor will be decisive in trying to realise (one of) these objectives. In addition to their role as experts, supervisors in thesis need to develop facilitation skills. In order to realise (some of) the objectives, the student's contribution as co-supervisor of other students is of great importance. In case of a thesis ring this contribution can also be as chairperson or sribe. In addition, effective and efficient design of the collaboration between academic supervisors and students - also among themselves - will be decisive.

1.4 PREVIEW

The following chapters describe the theoretical background of thesis rings as well as practical procedures and guidelines for setting up thesis rings. Each chapter can be read independently; any interdependencies between chapters are described on the spot.

Chapter 2 outlines several theoretical notions and empirical findings in the literature on cooperative and collaborative learning.

Chapter 3 describes a script for starting a new thesis ring, which begins with the recruiting of students and ends with the first final assessment. During the starting period of a new thesis ring the academic supervisor gradually introduces the students to this (in most cases) new collaborative setting.

Chapter 4 deals in more detail with the principles and decision rules required to obtain effective collaboration within the ring. This chapter thus deals with several straightforward structural tools that will promote optimal supervision practice.

Chapter 5 deals with the effectiveness of (student-) supervisors within the scope of an effective dialogue between supervisors and thesis writer. In *chapter 6* we describe the tasks and tools of the chair in meetings. Then, *chapter 7* discusses the facilitation skills the supervisor needs in order to increase the self-organizing capacity of the thesis ring. In terms of the relation between structure and behaviour, chapters 4 to 6 mainly focus on behavioural interventions.

Finally, *chapter 8* contains an explanation of the assessment process, in terms of external quality control as well as the application of assessment criteria and assessment procedures.

Chapter 2

Starting a New Thesis Ring

This chapter describes the steps necessary to start a thesis ring. These steps will be described sequentially, although it is evident that in practice these steps will overlap each other to some extent.

2.1 RECRUITING STUDENTS

The first step involves recruitment of students who are interested in a thesis ring. In principle, students in several stages of their thesis process, are eligible for this purpose: students who have been busy writing their theses for a longer time (supervised by the teacher starting the thesis ring), students who have just started, and those who have not yet started. This will result in a heterogeneous composition of the start-up group concerning experience, stage of thesis writing process, and the like. This heterogeneity is very beneficial to the transfer of knowledge and experience within the group. In addition, the workload will in this way be spread over time, as thesis projects progress towards completion they typically require more supervision time.

To recruit those who are interested, several canals can be used, such as websites, e-mail, personal contacts, lectures or tutorial seminars, notice-boards, faculty or university journals, and the like.

2.2 MUTUAL ADJUSTMENT OF EXPECTATIONS

If a student is interested, the supervisor and the student concerned can express and mutually adjust their expectations of the thesis ring. Especially, if the student in question is unfamiliar with the phenomenon of a thesis ring, it is important to give him/her further information about it. Student should know what is awaiting them and should not pitch any unrealistic expectations.

Writing a thesis is a very individual, and in many cases lonely, process. This may be a strong motive for students to participate in a thesis ring. By collaborating and consulting other graduates, they no longer feel they are the only persons struggling with thesis writing. Another obvious advantage for students is that they can regularly observe and discuss the development of the thesis projects of a number of their fellow-students. One of the student-participants in a thesis ring described this advantage as follows: “Normally, you write just one thesis. In this ring you write your own thesis, but the amount of learning that arises is as if you are writing five of them”.

2.3 PLANNING A MEETING

If the academic supervisor has obtained commitment from at least four or five students taking a concrete interest in the new thesis ring, an appointment is made for the first meeting. When preparing this first meeting, a few things should be arranged by the supervisor, which can be done by student-participants at a later stage. It concerns the following actions:

1. reserve a meeting room
2. *optional*: arrange coffee and tea
3. draw up a list of addresses (preferably e-mail addresses)
4. prepare the proposed agenda (more about it later)
5. *optional:* make an outline of the objectives and working methods of the thesis ring
6. send invitations/agenda (with any corresponding documents) to all participants.

2.4 PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

In preparing the scheduled meeting, the supervisor evaluates the steps taken so far, for instance on the basis of the following questions:

- Do I really have enough students to start a thesis ring; how to proceed if some students drop out after the scheduled meeting?
- How do I stimulate the students to take up the role of co-supervisor?
- Are these students ready for this way of supervising? If this might not be the case, how do I prepare them?
- How do I explain how a thesis ring functions?
- Do I need any additional support when starting a thesis ring, for instance in the form of an experieced chairperson who is going to shoulder the task of leading the discussion during a number of meetings? (Many new thesis rings in the Netherlands have been started by a joint effort of an academic supervisor and a student-chair, who had built extensive experience as a chair in another thesis ring.)

2.5 AGENDA-PROPOSAL

With regard to contents of the agenda for the first and/or second meeting, the following items should be included:

a. aim of the ring;
b. domain of the ring (discipline and the kind of thesis-topics that can be incorporated);
c. method;
d. conditions for joining;
e. assessment approach;
f. election of chair;
g. organization and maintenance of memory (regulations, decisions and the like);
h. election of scribe.

It is important to know that some subjects need not to be definitely decided upon. A preliminary decision can then be made, and subsequently (after several meetings) it can be reconsidered. In this way also much uncertainty can be reduced for the students, because many questions will be answered by learning-by-doing.

The first two meetings are decisive for the basis to be created for the role of co-supervisor that the students are going to take up. So take all the time necessary for this, possibly through a second meeting.

From the very beginning, the role of chairman should preferably be filled by a different person than the supervisor(s). This may be for instance an experienced chairperson, such as a student from a thesis ring already existing for a longer time. If this is not possible, then it will be necessary for the academic supervisor to lead the discussion in the first and possibly second meeting.

2.6 FIRST MEETING

The meeting is best structured as follows:

- Opening round
- Organizational part
- Contents part
- Evaluation round.

The ins and outs of this meeting structure will be further elaborated in chapter 3. The aim of the first meeting is to create a number of enabling conditions for the functioning of the thesis ring in the next meetings. It is important that all participants commit themselves to - or do not object to - the decisions that are made about aim, domain, method and the like. It may be a leap into the dark for many participants, but if they feel involved with the start of something “new”, a certain sense of shared responsibility will arise immediately.

2.7 LAYING DOWN PRELIMINARY REGULATIONS

After all items on the agenda mentioned before, have been discussed in the first (and possibly second meeting), it will be of importance that the scribe lays down the decisions made, in regulations. As an illustration, the regulations of some Maastricht thesis rings are attached (see appendix I). The scribe should hand out the regulations (or make them available via the ring’s website) to each new member.

2.8 FUNCTIONING OF THESIS RING

After the first meetings, the thesis ring can start focusing on its primary task – supervising thesis projects. Meetings will then go off, for instance, as follows:

- Opening round	
- Organizational part:	- *approving of minutes*
	- *planning new meetings*
	- *drawing up the definite agenda*
- Contents:	- *discussion of progress of student A*
	- *discussion of progress of student B, etc.*
- Evaluation round	

The contents part of the meeting usually takes up about 90 per cent of total meeting time. The opening round, organizational part and evaluation round together provide, as it were, the infrastructure for these supervision activities. This meeting structure will be further described in Chapter 3.

In the course of the first year of the new thesis ring, the initial rules, arrangements and working methods may have to be revised. If this concerns minor issues, these can be discussed on the spot and adjusted. If changes concern major issues in the field of the overall objective, domain or working method, these are better discussed in a separate meeting.

2.9 THE FIRST THESIS BEING COMPLETED AND ASSESSED

The start of a new thesis ring is completed with its first thesis being assessed and graded. The thesis ring thus delivers its first product to the outside world. This is a critical moment in the development of the thesis ring towards mature teamwork between teacher and students. With respect to assessment, it may be difficult for some academic supervisors to share his or her exclusive authority in assessing a thesis. For the student on the other hand, the first assessment has mainly the character of the ultimate 'latmus' test: will the principle of joint responsibility be actually realized in the situation of grading? We recommend to give the assessment procedure a trial run some time before the actual first real assessment.

In most universities there is a *second assessor* who, within the scope of quality control, assesses the final version of the thesis together with the academic supervisor. In that way the internal assessment of the thesis will be externally gauged. External quality control can be organized in several ways, for that matter. This will be further dealt with in chapter 7.

Chapter 3

Rules for Organizing the Thesis Ring

A set of rules has been developed as tools to realize the purpose of the thesis ring – also in view of the leverage effect of structure on behaviour (see chapter 1). We shall discuss the three main rules regarding decision-making and the structure of meetings, as well as the relation to the exam regulations.

3.1 POLICY DECISIONS ARE TAKEN BY CONSENT

Decision-making on policy issues of the thesis ring is based on the rule of consent, or *non-argued objection*. That is to say that a decision is taken, if none of the participants has an argued objection. As a result, teachers and students are equal to each other as participants in decision-making, which is necessary to substantiate the key principle of shared responsibility. The no-objection rule is used, for instance, when choosing a chairman and scribe, delegating certain powers to members of the thesis ring, or assessing the final version of a thesis.

The rule of consent is sometimes confused with the rule of consensus. There are two main differences between consent and consensus. First, in case of consent, a decision is made if none of the participants says *no* whereas in case of consensus a decision is made if all participants say wholeheartedly *yes*. Secondly, in case of consent argumentation takes a central place, whereas in case of decision-making by means of consensus, the underlying motives and reasons often remain unclear.

For electing the chairman and scribe as well as for the assessment of theses, we developed a procedure in the first thesis ring, in which the no-objection rule is used to come to a decision. See the example regulations in appendix I for a detailed description of these procedures. Both procedures are aimed at trying

- to reveal in the first instance, the *differences* in proposals (with reference to candidates or marks), particularly by minimalising the interdependence between the proposals;
- subsequently, to examine and to discuss the *common* denominator in the proposals;
- in order to finally come to a decision against which none of the participants raises any argued objections.

In other words, these procedures form an instrument to stimulate the dialogue in the form of an exchange of arguments and to elect a person or to determine the final mark, on the basis of this dialogue.

When assessing the final version of a thesis, the next two additional rules are applied. First, the author of the thesis has no say, that is, he or she does not dispose of the possibility to raise objections. This means for that matter, that the thesis writer in question can indeed participate, for instance by a short introduction and by answering questions, but does not participate in the ultimate decision-making about the mark. So, this assessment procedure actually consists of a combination of (formative) self-evaluation and (summative) assessment by fellow-students and academic supervisor(s). If the involvement of fellow students in the formal assessment process raises substantial resistance among superiors or colleagues of the supervisor in question, the status of assessment by the thesis ring can be formally defined as an *advice* to the authorized assessors (incl. the academic supervisor and any external assessors).

A second additional rule is that the supervisor acts as the only authority towards external stakeholders. That is to say: the supervisors delegate as it were, their authority to assess a thesis, to the thesis ring (incl. the teachers in question), but remain the only ones who are ultimately responsible towards any outsiders. If an external assessor is involved, assessment in the thesis ring can also be looked upon as a form of internal quality control (see chapter 7).

3.2 STRUCTURE OF THE MEETING

Every meeting proceeds according to the same set up, namely consecutively: opening round, organizational part, content part, and evaluation round. The opening and evaluation round have a transitional function between the outer world and the meeting, as well as a psychological function, because everybody's presence and contribution are explicitly acknowledged by means of such a round. In addition, the opening or evaluation round may result in topics that can be put on the agenda of the same or (one of) the next meeting(s).

The distinction between the organizational part and the content part is of major importance for an efficient and conveniently arranged flow of the meeting. The organizational part involves all organizational issues, such as checking the report of the previous meeting, arranging subsequent meetings, and the drawing up of the agenda (mostly on the basis of a proposed agenda, made by the chairman and scribe). At all events, the content part concerns the discussion of the thesis students' progress, sometimes supplemented by other subjects, such as proposed changes in the thesis ring regulations. By clearly distinguishing between the organizational and content part, it will be easier for the chairman to guide and lead the meeting.

Furthermore, it is also highly recommendable to send all participants any relevant documents (such as a thesis proposal or draft thesis chapters) together with the proposed agenda, minimally five working days beforehand. In addition, appropriate arrangements about a meeting-place, and copying and forwarding documents are necessary. Internet and e-mail are very useful for this purpose. The scribe drafts the agenda in consultation with the chairperson (and possibly the supervisor).

3.3 THESIS RING AND EXAMINATION REGULATIONS

An important question is how a thesis ring fits in with the examination regulations in higher education, which typically assume that only authorized academic supervisors can act as assessor. As far as we know, none of the rules define this authority to act as an examiner as being completely exclusive; that is to say that, in principle, there is practically always a possibility to involve students in supervision and assessment. But even if it would indeed be a question of exclusive examiner's authority, the supervisor is free, within certain limits – determined by the examination board in question – to shape and organize his/her educational or supervision work in his/her own way.

With reference to the thesis ring, the following starting point may be applied: minimally one supervisor functions as the representative of that thesis ring, authorized to supervise and to assess, whereas he or she shares his/her responsibility within the thesis ring with the students involved. As such, the students can be given a formal advisory role in the set of regulations developed for the thesis ring itself. Though, from a legal point of view, it will of course not be nominated for a prize for transparency, the operation of the thesis ring is in this way in accordance with the examination regulations.

In most cases, quality control of bachelor or master thesis project also involves one or more external assessors, who are not involved in the supervision process and in this way can give an independent assessment of the final version of the thesis. In chapter 7 several ways to organize external assessment in thesis rings are described.

Chapter 4

Instructions for Supervision

The supervisor is not the only person supervising the thesis student. In the thesis ring, (s)he is also supervised by his/her fellow-students, who, as it were, jointly form the supervision team. This means that the quality of the dialogue between thesis writer and the supervision team and the dialogue within the supervision team, is decisive for effective guidance and supervision of the thesis writer. In this chapter we discuss a number of practical guidelines for this dialogue.

4.1 INFERENCE LADDER

Before going into the concept of inference ladder, the following example is given from a discussion of a draft chapter between supervisor and thesis writer. Part of this discussion proceeds as follows:

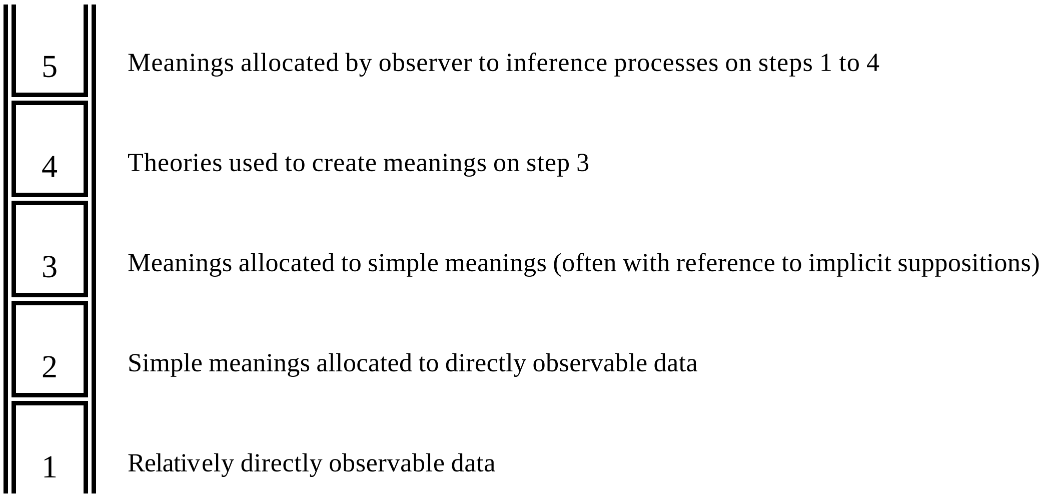
Supervisor: I think that the way in which you are reviewing literature in chapter 2 is unacceptable. It is not clear what your interpretation is and where you lean on the authors you read. You should really tackle this differently! *Thesis writer:* Yes, but last time you said that this draft-chapter should be written in a much livelier and more fascinating way to hold the reader's attention, and now (...) *Supervisor interrupts*: May be true, but in your rewritten text you are now really inclining to a journalist's story, in which facts and interpretation are running over into each other. I have a few other remarks as well, so let's continue. (....)

This discussion between thesis writer and supervisor will very likely not lead to the improvements required by the supervisor. This is mainly due to the apparent incompetence of both persons to define the problem and possible solutions in a way that is (a) clear and understandable to both parties and (b) leads to a joint way of solution.

In this respect, the work of Argyris and Schön in the field of reasoning, speaking and discussing, provides some useful guidelines. These authors state that a typical diagnosis – such as from the text of the thesis writer in the example – is executed on a high level of inference. In figure 4.1, this argument is elaborated in terms of the so-called inference ladder. On the bottom of this ladder there are the *directly observable data*, such as conversations among persons, written text, statistical data, drawings, and the like. In case of thesis supervision, these are for instance text fragments from a draft chapter, or data arising from empirical investigations by the thesis writer.

A step higher up the ladder we find *simple meanings*, which we connect or allocate to directly observable data, such as for instance a text, conversation or drawing being either difficult, acceptable, beautiful or pleasant or not. For the supervisor in the example given before, such a meaning is for instance the literature review in the draft chapter being "unacceptable".

Figure 4.1: Inference ladder (source: Argyris et al., 1985)



On the third step of the inference ladder are the *meanings*, which are allocated again to the simple meanings on the second step. This happens through suppositions or assumptions, which are made either explicitly or not. In the example the supervisor supposes, among other things, that a good, acceptable literature review should take place by a clear separation of literature review and one's own interpretation. Besides, the supervisor apparently supposes that this understanding had better be taught to the thesis writer by means of powerful wordings. Finally, the supervisor also supposes that the thesis writer understands how to solve the problem mentioned. Anyway, these last two suppositions have an implicit character: they are not made explicit and probably not deliberately "thought" either.

On the fourth step, *theories* are used to create the meanings on the steps below. These theories have a basic form, that is, they consist of a collection of elementary cause-effect relations such as: if A, then B; if C and D, then not B, etc. In case of the conversation between supervisor and thesis writer, one of the cause-effect relations might be: "if I make clear to the thesis writer in powerful wordings that the text in question is unacceptable, he knows what to do to make it acceptable as yet". Another hypothesis might be in that case: "if I adopt a vulnerable attitude, for instance by asking the thesis writer if he knows what I mean, then this will increase the likelihood of loss of face for one of us". In the example, the cause-effect relations as such do not come up for discussion.

Finally, the highest step of the ladder consists of meanings that an *observer* allocates to the several meanings and inference processes on lower levels of the ladder. At this moment, we, as authors of this book, and you as a reader, are looking at the example and its interpretation, from this level. We make this observation with the help of the inference ladder as a central and integrative framework.

The inference ladder is of importance, because it makes you aware of the complex thinking processes that occur in every conversation. You will see that in practically every conversation, we:

- speak on a relatively high inference level (especially steps 3 and 4);
- rarely openly test or check the things we say with the help of directly observable data;
- in spite of that, mostly have the feeling that we are very concrete and clear when speaking; and
- can therefore avoid an open test.

These characteristics of many conversations are to a great extent due to the fact that, at an already early stage in our lives, we learn how to switch quickly and automatically from one meaning level to the other. In order to be able to react and act timely and efficiently, we *must*, for that matter, quickly allocate meanings to many situations on a higher inference level. Just think of the automatic reaction to someone in a car tooting his horn when you run up the street, or the actions you perform with the mouse on your computer screen with reference to certain possibilities or problems you watch on the screen. Many of these sorts of inference processes concern the skills to survive in certain situations, to solve a problem quickly, and the like. Whenever acquired, these skills form a sort of deeply ingrained routines; they operate by themselves, as it were, without having to pay any attention to them.

These sorts of automatic processes are extremely functional in many situations, but in other situations, however, they are *not* functional. The latter especially occurs in discussions which (should) focus on *learning and learning from each other*. This dysfunctionality can be reduced with the help of four categories of speech acts, which will be discussed next.

4.2 EFFECTIVE SPEECH ACTS

Every contribution or pronouncement in a conversation can be characterized as a certain type of *speech act*. There are four kinds of speech acts:

- framing
- advocating
- illustrating, and
- inquiring.

Your personal effectiveness in conversations – in thesis rings as well as outside – will increase if these four speech acts are increasingly more balanced and combined. Supervisors as well as students in their roles as supervisors, can use these speech acts.

Framing

Framing refers to the explicit wording of the aim or motive of the meeting or conversation. This aim may refer to an unsolved problem, dilemma, conflict or difference of opinion, but also to, for instance the starting up of a new project team, thesis ring, etc.

Example:

In the last meeting we came to the conclusion that the progress made in the DANE project is insufficient, and we agreed on further looking into the causes for this. So this is the purpose of this meeting.

In the example dialogue between supervisor and thesis writer, which we looked at before, there is no question of an explicit frame. The supervisor assumes in this case that there is a joint frame, without verifying this assumption. This also frequently occurs in all kinds of other conversations, and leads to quite a number of failures of communication, because the assumption of a shared frame is often not right. Therefore, explicit wording of the assumed frame, and subsequently verifying if this assumed frame is also shared by others, is of decisive importance. If the supervisor, described before, wants to make the frame he assumes explicit, he may for instance, start his conversation with the student as follows:

Supervisor: I assume that an understandable and conveniently arranged literature review exists of reviewing thematically or one author after the other, followed by an overall review of this literature, on the basis of criteria drawn up before. In the second step the author's personal preference and interpretation, may play a role as well. What's your opinion about such an approach?

Note that in this example the frame is explicitly described, and subsequently, it is inquired if this is also shared with the other. The latter is a form of inquiring, the fourth speech act, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Advocating

Advocating is a speech act consisting of emphasizing, in relatively abstract wording, an opinion, feeling or proposal. For instance: "we should try and increase the sales of this product considerably". Or: "I am dissatisfied and frustrated by the slow pace in this meeting". Though, at first sight, this last example looks like a description of a certain feeling, it is in reality, an emotional advocating (in this case against the pace of the meeting, which is experienced to be slow; in other words, this is an argument in favour of a higher pace).

Some people talk in an almost exclusively advocating way, and others hardly ever. Both extremes are inefficient in most conversations. For most people it is very difficul to express their feelings, particularly feelings in the present situation, the here and now. This is difficult because we are often not or only partly, aware of our feelings, and in addition, because we do not like to adopt a vulnerable attitude. Both factors usually result in negative feelings that are worded in common language and are not expressed until they have become so strong that they 'explode': "You just shut up!", "Watch it, don't you do that again!", etc. This kind of speech tends to evoke a lot of unnecessary, defensive reactions from the other person(s). It may be more effective to adopt a more vulnerable attitude, for instance: "I feel excluded from the discussion. Each time if I want to say something, Paul rattles on without me being able to come in between. That frustrates me enormously".

Illustrating

The argued proposal or feeling is substantiated by means of illustrating. This is done on the basis of direct observable data such as facts, events or pronouncements that provide specific illustrations, implications, evidence, and so forth. Illustrating is important as a speech act, because you can be convinced of the only possible effect or implication of your advocating, whereas the listener has a totally different effect or implication in mind.

In the conversation between supervisor and thesis writer quoted before, no use is in fact made of illustrating, which is not beneficial to the communication between the two of them. The supervisor could transmit his message more effectively by using more concrete illustrations, for instance in case of the problems with the literature review:

The way in which you are now reviewing literature in chapter 2, is problematic for me (*frame*). Let us have a look at a number of concrete examples together, to start with page two of this chapter. You first say there that … (supervisor quotes a certain paragraph from the text). In this paragraph you clearly refer to three authors, which makes clear that part of this paragraph is at all events based on these sources, but at the same time you also plead for your own opinion and interpretation (*illustration*). How can I, as a reader, now determine where literature review is ending and where your interpretation starts? (*inquiring*).

Inquiring

Inquiring as a speech act includes asking others questions, in order to obtain information or to be able to learn something. Though this seems to be very simple in itself, it is not easy in practice to ask inquisitive questions in an effective way. For, we are used to ask many rhetorical questions, in a way from which it appears that we are not really interested in the answer. For instance, by the manner of speaking, or even by not or hardly giving the other an opportunity to react: “You agree to that of course, everybody knows it is like that, isn’t it?”

Another reason why it is not easy in practice to ask an inquisitive question in the right way, is that such a question should practically always be combined with framing, advocating or illustrating. A “naked” question leaves the other in uncertainty about the frame, the scope or the intention. As to that, it may be a good thing to apply the following rule of thumb: an inquiring question always follows *after* framing, advocating and/or illustrating. Example:

I feel rather frustrated by the slow pace of this meeting (*advocating)*. Especially the discussion of Hans’s progress annoyed me, because I have this feeling that he is not willing to process the comment on his draft chapters; as to that, it struck me that he did not make any notes (*illustration*). Am I the only one being annoyed about this? (*inquiring*)

Figure 4.2: Overview of four types of speech acts

Speech act	Definition	Importance
Framing	Explicit wording of the purpose of the conversation or meeting (or part thereof)	Making the frame explicit is important, because the assumption of a shared frame is often not valid
Advocating	Explicit wording of an opinion, feeling or proposal in relatively abstract terms	Some people almost exclusively talk in advocating terms, others hardly ever; for many people, expressing one’s feeling is very difficult
Illustrating	Describing directly observable data as a concrete point of orientation	In many situations the other(s) has a totally different interpretation, effect or implication in mind of the advocated position
Inquiring	Asking questions in order to obtain information or to learn something	Real questions are important, because we generally ask many rhetorical questions; inquiring questions are particularly powerful in combination with framing, advocating or illustrating

These four speech acts can be applied to every conversation, talk or meeting. Appendix II includes an exercise to enhance effective participation in meetings of a thesis ring.

Chapter 5

Guidelines for Chairing Meetings

In this chapter we discuss the role of the chair, which is undoubtedly the most demanding and complex task in a meeting. To have the chairman grow into his function, it is important to have him appointed, if possible, for a number of meetings – for instance for five meetings or a period of three months.

The role and tasks of a chairman at preparing and leading the meeting is extensively discussed elsewhere. In this chapter we assume that the reader is informed about these basics. We shall therefore pay little attention to a number of elementary skills that each chairman should have, for instance, with regard to asking questions, summarizing, and the like.

It should be clear that a number of skills for effective supervision, which were discussed in chapter 4, are also of importance for chairpersons. Wherever necessary, we shall therefore refer to the previous chapter. In paragraph 5.1 the main tasks and tools of the chairman are discussed. In paragraph 5.2 the role of the chair in the discussion of progress of thesis projects is discussed.

5.1 TASKS AND TOOLS OF CHAIRPERSON

The chairperson can turn the meeting into the right direction in several ways and with the help of several kinds of interventions. The main tools are the agreements made about *decision-making and structure of meeting* (see chapter 3). Being able to apply these rules is very important for effective chairing. Part of the rules for instance, refers to introducing a clear agenda structure. The agenda is built up according to a regular structure of an opening round, organizational part, contents part, and evaluation round. The organizational part contains a number of subjects which return again and again, such as the minutes of the previous meeting and the definite determination of the part with regard to contents. The draft agenda, which is sent to the members of the thesis ring by the scribe beforehand, mostly contains a proposal for the organizational part, dependent on the letters to the chairman and other relevant subjects. Figure 5.1 gives an example of a proposal for an agenda. When making a proposal for an agenda (by chairman in consultancy with scribe), the time available should be taken into account. For a somewhat longer meeting, it is sometimes of importance to vary the order of the subjects of the part with regard to contents, which mostly takes up 90 per cent or more, of the time of meeting. The use of separate rules will again and again come up for consideration in the rest of this chapter.

Opening and evaluation rounds

In the opening round the chairman gives every person an opportunity to indicate how he starts the meeting (see chapter 3). Remarks may be “I have just heard that I failed last week’s test, I’m fed up with that”, “I’ve been very busy, do not expect much from me”, “I’m rather nervous and anxious to know the comment on my paper”. Thus the round fills a transitional function between the outer world and the thesis ring. In addition, everybody will be personally involved in the meeting by this round. Besides, this round provides the chairman with information about the attitudes and contributions of the participants in this meeting and as a result, he can better lead the discussion during the meeting.

Analogue to the opening round, the evaluation round is meant to create a transition from the meeting back to the surroundings. Each participant indicates how he or she is leaving the meeting, also assessing the process and outcomes of the meeting. Even for the evaluation round applies that the presence and contribution of each member of the thesis ring, is acknowledged. Strictly speaking, the evaluation round is not an evaluation round, because a discussion among the participants themselves, is not possible; however, the evaluation round may have an evaluation function, because problems are observed there, which can be tackled in the next meeting. At the end of the evaluation round, the chairman can call attention to problems and conclusions, and promise to deal with them in the next session (with or without a separate item on the agenda, for instance "evaluation").

Students attending a meeting for orientation or as an introduction, but other guests as well, may be invited by the chairman to participate in the opening and evaluation rounds. However, it should be avoided for persons who are not members of the thesis ring, to participate in the organizational part and the part with regard to contents. It would be wise to make clear to the persons involved, when they may participate and when not, prior to the meeting. The main task of the chairman in opening and evaluation rounds is therefore: (a) to give each participant an opportunity to say something and (b) to avoid discussions among the participants themselves, as much as possible.

Figure 5.1: Example of an agenda

Proposal for agenda of thesis ring 14 May1999
Place: room 1.016. Time: 13.30 - 16.30 h

Opening round

Organizational part
Minutes last meeting
Fixing dates for new meetings
Drawing up agenda for content part

Contents
Admission of Anne as a new member (aim: decision-making)
- Jeroen's progress (aim: providing information)
- Discussion Piet's thesis proposal (aim: forming opinion)
- Assessment Klaas' thesis (aim: final grading)
- Electing new chairman (aim: decision-making)
- Draft chapter Marieke (aim: giving feedback)

Evaluation round

Outlining frame for item on the agenda

The introduction of each separate item on the agenda (particularly the part with regard to contents of the meeting) is also of importance. For, the way in which the discussion is held, will strongly depend on the way in which the chairman outlines the frame within which the discussion of that item is held (also see paragraph 4.3 about framing). A short, but firm way of outlining the frame, is indicating the *aim* of the discussion of the item concerned. It is sometimes difficult to determine the aim of the discussion of an item on the agenda, beforehand. In many cases, however, the aim can already be described at the drafting of the draft agenda (whether provisionary or not), as also occurred with some items in figure 5.1. In this case you may think of:

- *Providing and/or exchanging of information*. One can speak of providing information if, for instance, the supervisor informs the other members of the thesis ring about recent changes in the examination regulations. Giving feedback on a draft chapter, is an example of exchanging information as aim, at which the thesis writer first listens to the comment on the text, and subsequently asks for further explanation of some items, etc.
- *Forming an opinion*. Discussing the subject, in order to come to one or more ideas and opinions together, without the need for a joint decision.
- *Decision-making*: reaching a decision about for instance, the admission of a new member, changing a part of the thesis ring regulations, or the final mark for a thesis.

Steering in case of possible "disturbances"

The chairman can also steer during the discussion of each separate item. During the discussion, some of the participants' contributions or remarks may (threaten to) disturb it. It may for instance be possible that somebody is straying from the subject, is expatiating too much, is speaking before his turn, or is going too much into detail. It will then be up to the chairman to steer in this. Figure 5.2 contains a number of instructions to maintain the structure in frequently occurring situations during meetings, at which distinction is made in ineffective and effective interventions.

Figure 5.2: Interventions by the chairperson in several situations.

PROBLEM / SYMPTOM:	NOT OR LESS EFFECTIVE:	EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION:
incomprehensible flood of words	cutting it off or ignoring it	summarizing and asking for its underlying meaning
strayings	reacting	ignoring, cutting off carefully, or asking for meaning
premature remarks	cutting off or ignoring them	reminding of structure (e.g. postponing discussion until that item is relevant or on agenda)
misplaced principal discussions	breaking off, or letting them continue	summarizing with the emphasis on concrete aspects
misplaced interruptions	allowing them	cutting off, and keeping change of turns under control
loose meaningless remarks	ignoring them	asking for meaning

Memory of the thesis ring and the scribe

An important condition for an effective chairmanship, is a *memory system*, in which agreements, decisions and other relevant information, are laid down in a way accessible to all participants. The scribe manages and maintains the memory of the thesis ring. In the Maastricht thesis rings, the scribe has the following tasks:

- drafting of draft agenda
- sending or making available to the members of the thesis ring the papers and documents – the minutes of the previous meeting, the agenda and documents sent to the chairman - some considerable time before the meeting
- timely reserving and announcing of meeting-room (preferably together with agenda proposal)
- checking if meeting-room is free, just before the meeting
- noting down the members present and absent and decisions (with main arguments) during the meeting, and laying down these notes in the minutes, after the meeting
- consulting together with the chairman about any possible actions to be taken, after the meeting.

Meeting-room and table formation

Another way of structuring, which is often underestimated, concerns the choice of the meeting-room and the table formation. The room in which the meeting is held, should be large enough, but not too large, should have appropriate acoustics, and some visual aids should be present (board, flip chart, projection screen, etc). There are several possibilities for the formation of tables and chairs: a circular formation (in case of round tables) or a square formation. The formation should be as such that it supports communication, that the participants are able to see each other well, without making unnatural movements, and that everybody can see and read the board or the flip chart. Finally, the chairman had better be seated at a place enabling him to have direct eye contact with all participants.

Supervision versus conditions

The key activity in each thesis ring meeting is the supervising and coaching of individual thesis writers. In order to show this key activity to its full advantage, a number of *conditions* are required. These are agreements made earlier, about for instance, the scribe's activities, the (maximal) number of the thesis ring, the chairmanship, the assessment of theses, and the like. Sometimes, problems occur concerning conditions, indicating the necessity to revise agreements made earlier. If so, the chairman may propose, concerning the issue in question, to:

- put it on the order-paper and make it open to discussion at once (if postponement disturbs the normal activities in the thesis ring),
- discuss it separately, later in the same meeting (if the remainder of the agenda allows this, and it is not required to postpone it until a next meeting),
- postpone it until a next meeting, in which sufficient time can be reserved for this issue, or
- have it further studied by a member of the thesis ring or group of thesis ring members, who will present a written proposal about any possible solutions, in one of the following meetings.

By separating the normal supervisory activities and the policy with regard to the conditions to these activities, it is avoided that these two matters get mixed up in vague and chaotic discussions.

Allocating of tasks and functions
A chairman and scribe are two conditions for the proper functioning of a thesis ring. So, for the functioning of the thesis ring it will be necessary to choose a new chairman and scribe regularly. The current chairman leads the discussion leading to the choice of the (new) chairman or scribe. To solve this issue through an open question, after the manner of: "Who wants to be chairman?", is to be advised against. This will generally not result in the best choice, because many members of the thesis ring will then immediately exclude themselves, for whatever reason. To make a good choice, it will be important to consider as many alternatives as possible.

The procedure as has been decribed in appendix I, is something to go by. Each thesis ring is of course free to implement chairmanship and scribeship in its own way. Some general understandings and principles that contribute to a well functioning chairmanship and scribeship are:

- Look at all possible choices within the scope of the requirements the thesis ring makes to chairmanship or scribe.
- It is not a question of winning or losing at the decision to appoint one person for a certain period; an optimal implementation of the functions of chairman and scribe, is to everybody's interest.
- If two or more participants are good chairmen, you may talk of a luxury problem – for, at this moment, only one chairman or scribe is necessary.
- See to it that the person concerned enjoys a maximum scope and trust from the other participants.
- Possibly choose a vice-chairman as well; there will then be somebody immediately taking over chairmanship in case of the chairman's illness or absence.
- Chairmanship in a new thesis ring in the first meetings, may be taken care of by an experienced chairman, for instance somebody from another thesis ring.
- It should be avoided as much as possible, that the supervisor is going to play the role of chairman, or has no other option. This will quickly lead to an increasing dependence on the supervisor, and in addition will go at the expense of effective chairmanship.

Steering the tension level
Finally, we discuss a part of the chairman's role that everybody knows, but that is also difficult to describe. It concerns the atmosphere, the climate and the tension during the meeting. Perhaps the term *tension level* is the best indication of what is meant here. In general, there are three possible tension levels during meetings. If the tension level is *too low*, feelings of boredom and frustration will be dominating ("I really have something better to do"). If the tension level is *too high*, most participants will be liable to stress, (initial) symptoms of exhaustion, irritations among themselves, and the like. So the tension level required, is somewhere in between these two.

The tension level of the meeting is of course only partly determined by the chairman, but in many situations he can, however, bring about a change into the direction required. In case tension is too low, the pace may for instance be increased, straying discussions cut off earlier, more direct questions asked, or a switch may be made from forming of opinion to decision-making (by wording a proposal and asking for consent). If the tension level is too high, the chairman may decrease the pace, have a(n) (additional) break, add a round in which everybody can give his opinion, return from decision-making to forming a notion or an opinion, or try to bring about some relaxation with a little humour. All in all, steering the tension level is probably the most difficult part of chairmanship, which will certainly not be learnt from a book, but by practice.

5.2 DISCUSSION OF PROGRESS OF THESIS PROJECTS

The always returning, and perhaps also most important issue during a thesis ring meeting, concerns the discussion of the progress of the separate thesis projects. In addition to the instructions that have been discussed in this chapter until now, we look in this paragraph at the part that the chairman can contribute to these progress discussions.

In this case the chairman is confronted with three moments of steering, asking a question as a frame for discussion, giving an opportunity to comment, and the reaction by the thesis writer. The *frame for discussion* can be indicated by asking:

- an open question
- a direct question.

In the former case, the chairman asks for instance “What do you think of Marjan’s thesis proposal?” An advantage of this way of putting a question is that every kind of comment or remark is welcome, but its disadvantage is that the discussion that follows, will be diffcult to lead. In the latter case, the chairman creates structure by a direct question about certain parts of the thesis. For instance: “Are there any remarks about the problem definition in Marjan’s thesis proposal?” or “What do you think about the structure and division of this chapter?” If there are different opinions about a certain aspect of the text discussed, the chairman can give scope to discuss it. However, the chairman should take care that the discussion does not stray from the subject. By an intermediate summary, and anyway one at the end of the discussion, the chairman will increase the effectiveness of the feedback.

A second moment of steering concerns *giving an opportunity* to comment. After asking an open or direct question, this may be possible by

- waiting for an reaction, or
- giving every single participant an opportunity to react by making a round.

In the former case, the chairman waits for any remarks from the participants, after asking the question. At this approach there is little structure. Everybody can react spontaneously, also to each other, as a result of which the discussion may get a chaotic and creative nature. The second possibility concerns making a round, during which everybody can comment individually. The advantage of this approach is that everybody is given an opportunity to contribute. The disadvantages are that those who get a chance at the end of the round, sometimes have to wait a long time, and that little or no discussion among the participants themselves will be possible during the round.

A third moment of guidance concerns the *moment of reacting by the thesis writer*. By choosing the right moment, the chairman can have the thesis writer profit optimally from the feedback given. The chairman may have the thesis writer react:

- directly, and
- afterwards.

In the former case, the thesis writer each time immediately reacts to the remarks made by the other thesis ring members. The advantage is that misunderstandings and indistinctnesses, can immediately be explained by the thesis writer. Reacting directly, however, is mostly at the expense of the thesis writer’s willingness to (really) listen to the comment, and in addition also at the expense of the possibility to get an overview of all comment. In view of these disadvantages, direct reacting is to be advised against, apart from questions that can be answered shortly. It is also possible to have the thesis writer react afterwards. This includes that the thesis writer does not react until all participants have been given an opportunity to comment. In this way the thesis writer will get a good overview of the comment, can subsequently determine what this means for his or her thesis, and can possibly ask for a further explanation at some points. Reacting afterwards, however, requires some self-control from the thesis writer.

At every progress discussion, the ultimate main issue is, if the thesis writer can go to work with the feedback received. The chairman should check this during the discussion, for instance: “Marjan, are the remarks made, clear to you now?” A closure of the discussion is only possible, if the thesis writer in question understands the comment. Besides, the chairman can make a kind of *continuation appointment* with the thesis writer, when closing the discussion. For instance by asking and having answered the question:”What can be expected from you next time?” With this, a kind of psychological contract is entered into, between the supervision team and the thesis writer. By the way, the need of such a contract strongly differs for each student. Many students do not need such a big stick, but for some of them, such an appointment will be an additional stimulance.

Chapter 6

Guidelines for Supervisor-Facilitators

At starting up and during the further development of a thesis ring, the implementation of the role of the supervisor, is of great importance. To a great extent, this role corresponds with that of the tutor in problem based learning, at which a number of duties and responsibilities, which are usually carried out by teachers, are taken over by students, or shared with them. Besides his role as a professional, the supervisor should therefore stimulate this process towards an increasing independence. The latter part requires the skill to act as a facilitator. The two levels of facilitation will be discussed in paragraph 6.1. After that, the constructive role of facilitation, which is of decisive importance for the thesis ring, will be further elaborated in paragraph 6.2.

6.1 FACILITATION ON TWO LEVELS

The facilitator's role of supporting and stimulating duty-aimed groups, can be implemented on two different levels, namely elementary and constructive facilitation (Schwarz, 1994). The *elementary facilitator* steers the group into the direction of defining and solving a certain problem – such as a problem in problem based learning or the progress of a thesis writer in the thesis ring. In this role the supervisor takes principal responsibility for leading the group and as a result helps the group to temporarily improve its way of operating. The consequence of implementing the role of facilitator in this way, is usually a permanent dependence on the presence of and steering by the supervisor.

In case of *constructive facilitation* the object of the group is to solve current problems, whereas, at the same time, it learns to solve these kinds of problems itself. In this role the supervisor helps to structurally increase the problem solving capacity of the group, for which it is necessary to share the responsibility for leading the group with other participants. A result of this implementation of the role of the facilitator, is a decreasing dependence on the supervisor for defining and solving problems. Table 6.1 gives an overview of the differences between elementary and constructive facilitation. In the development of the supervisors' skills, elementary facilitation is a first necessary step towards the skills needed for constructive facilitation.

The supervisor's constructive facilitator skill is decisive for the functioning of thesis rings. Naturally, this facilitator role cannot be disconnected from the supervisor's professional knowledge. It is just this professional knowledge that gives the supervisor the status and legitimateness to steer the group process towards joint control and responsibility, during the start-up period of a new thesis ring.

Table 6.1: The elementary and constructive facilitator (source: Schwarz, 1994)

	Elementary facilitator	*Constructive facilitator*
Aim of the group:	Solves current problem	Solves current problem, whereas the group learns to improve its way of operating
The supervisor as facilitator:	@ Helps group to temporarily improve its way of operating @ Takes principal responsibility for leading of group	@ Helps group to permanently improve its way of operating @ Shares responsibility for leading the group
Consequence for the group:	Dependence on supervisor for solving problems	Increasing independence on supervisor for solving problems

6.2 THE CONSTRUCTIVE FACILITATOR

Collaborative learning and supervising may be very interesting and defiant for students as well as teachers. In practice it may be difficult, however, to switch over from the traditional *teacher-supervises-thesis writer* situation, to the fraternal co-operation process in a thesis ring. If the supervisor does not dispose of sufficient skills as a constructive facilitator, he may steer the complex combined action between the participants in his thesis ring, into a destructive direction. We shall now give a few instructions for constructive facilitation.

In order to get a good understanding of constructive facilitation, two factors are of importance. First, the students' *level of independence* as to their learning activities and collaborative behaviour. Students in the last stage of their studies are generally more independent than in the initial stage. Students, who are already familiar with independent forms of learning, are also more independent than students who were only confronted with instruction.

The second factor is the degree of *steering by the teacher*. There is for instance a high degree of steering, if the teacher shows how a professional in his field of study, tackles a problem, or demonstrates how an analysis should be done. The teacher can have a strong steering influence at the learning of effective collaborative behaviour, for instance by structuring and leading the meeting as a chairman. The degree of steering on the other hand, is relatively low if the teacher fraternally shares his experience and knowledge with students (as junior professionals), at which supervision in the field of independent learning and co-operation, is for the greater part omitted.

As is shown in figure 6.2, each level of students' independence goes with a certain degree of steering by the teacher. This figure is an adapted version of a similar figure in Moust en Schmidt (1998). The diagonal line from top left to bottom right represents the increasing degree of the students' independent learning and collaborative behaviour, and as a reflected image, the decreasing degree of steering by the supervisor. The diagonal line does not run from the top left corner to the bottom right corner, because on the one hand, students – individually and in groups – in the first instance already dispose of some independence, and on the other hand, there are always moments of learning, at which the teacher's contribution will be necessary.

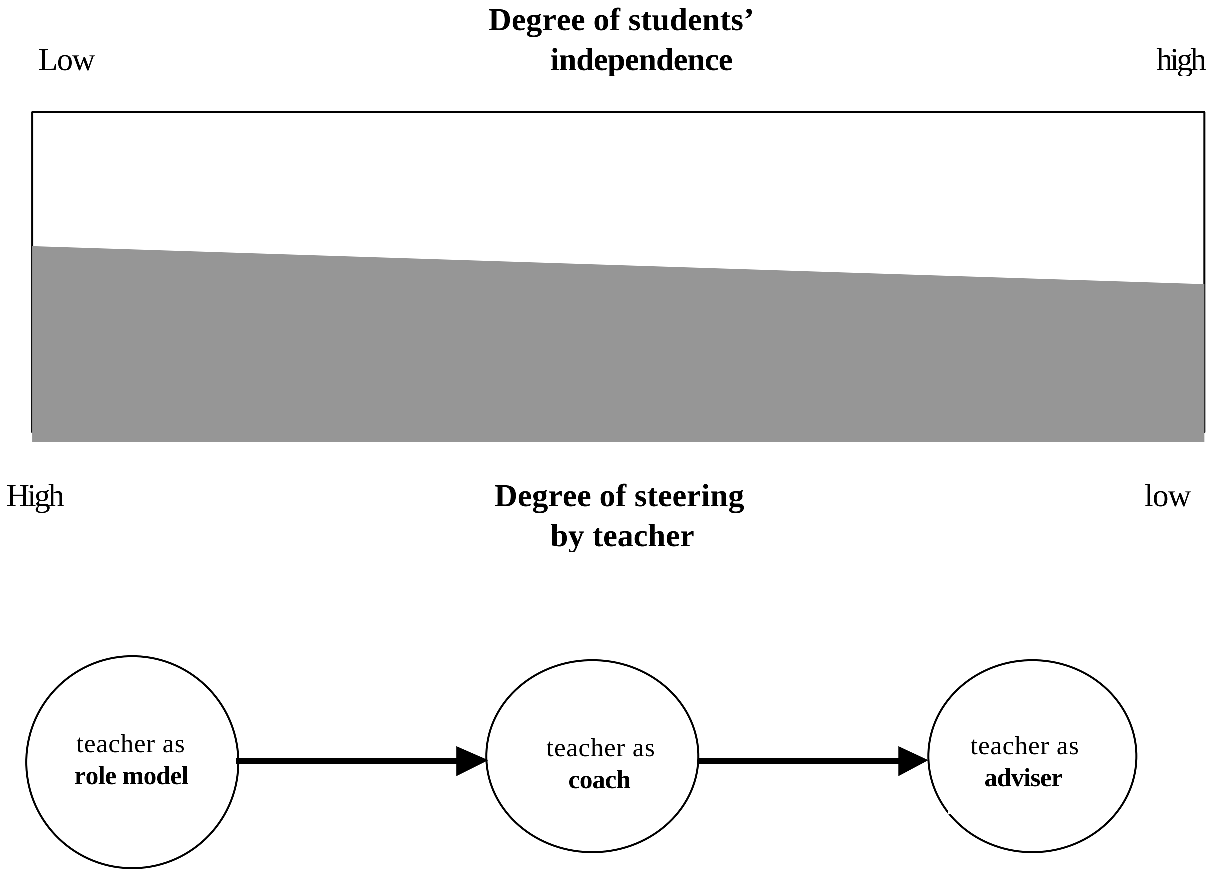
Students who are relatively dependent on others, need to be steered to a high degree, and more independent students are thriving best at less steering. In general, a study is aimed at letting the student grow towards the level of independent professionalism, during his training period. Dependent on the starting point of the students in question, the supervisor can lead a thesis ring to adulthood in a certain period. He can do so, by gradually changing his interventions as constructive facilitator, from role model to coach, and subsequently to adviser.

The teacher as a *role model* means that the teacher models the students' study-behaviour. The teacher then shows the student what activities and skills are necessary to master (part of) the profession and in addition takes the lead as a role model at guiding the co-operation processes in the group. That means that the teacher acts in a strongly steering way as a professional role model, as well as supervisor and leader of the group process. The teacher's role model in a thesis ring was indicated by elementary facilitation in the previous paragraph.

As a *coach* the teacher leaves, to an increasing degree, the course of things to other participants. The teacher only contributes, if he observes that the functioning of individual students or of the group as a whole, is insufficient within the scope of the aims or criteria agreed upon. That means that he asks for instance questions that invite for thinking more deeply about the problem discussed. In case of coaching, stimulating of self-steering and co-operation are essential, and not so much the compensating of a lack of self-steering and co-operation. In other words: the main issue is to develop the participants' potential skills, so that on the one hand, good theses are written, and on the other hand, a gradual less independence on the teacher is created. Coaching is mainly applicable to educational situations, in which the student has clearly left the learning stage of the beginner, but has not yet reached the adult stage of the prospective professional.

The role of *an adviser* means that the student-participants consult the supervisor in those fields in which he is an expert. If the thesis ring has reached this level of independence, it almost exclusively appeals to the teacher's professional knowledge. In this stage, at least one or two student-participants have attained a quite professional level of competence in advising and coaching, and the teacher only has to use knowledge and skills in his or her field of expertise (e.g. organizational design, marketing research, information systems). The teacher makes his personal professional knowledge available.

Figure 6.2: Constructive facilitation: steering by the teacher and the level of independence of students (adapted from: Moust en Schmidt, 1998).



In practice, especially the role model and the role as a coach, appear to be the most demanding and complex. It is somewhat paradoxical that the role of an adviser is the least demanding – of course in combination with the students' high degree of independence. This is logical though, because a great number of activities in the field of learning, supervising and co-operating, will then be done by other participants.

Especially the stage in which coaching is paramount, is decisive for the success of a new thesis ring. As a coach, the supervisor should elicit and stimulate the process into the direction of increasing independence. This happens on the basis of a so-called *constructive friction* between the students' competence level and the steering by the teacher: the teacher then somewhat anticipates as it were, but not too much, the development from the left to the right, in figure 6.2. On the horizontal axis, one can then speak of a limited distance between the teacher's style of supervising and the students' independence – at which the teacher is somewhat farther away to the right in the figure, than is necessary for a perfect congruence.

If the teacher appeals to the students' independence to a high degree, whereas their actual learning strategy is still characterized by a low independence, then the teacher breaks away, as it were, from the students and one can speak of *destructive friction*. This also happens if the degree of the students' independence is high, but the teacher provides too many solutions and too fast as well.

The complex nature of the supervisor's constructive role, can therefore be summarized as follows. On the one hand the teacher should guard the harmony between the students' competence level and the degree of steering; that is to say that for instance in case of low independence, especially model interventions are applied. On the other hand, the teacher should deliberately make use of constructive frictions, by creating a limited but stimulating distance between his own way of steering and supervising and the student-participants' level of independent learning and co-operating.

Chapter 7

Final Assessment

The assessment of theses is generally an emotionally charged issue. The student invests a lot of time and energy in his/her thesis, and is therefore anxiously looking forward to the reward in the form of the mark (and ultimately, academic degree) that follows from a completed thesis. This marking is usually carried out by two teachers authorized for this purpose, either after a final conversation or a kind of public defence, or not. In a thesis ring, the fellow-students participating in it, get, in addition to these teachers, a role in the assessment process as well. This is of importance, because only in this way, fellow-students are stimulated and given an opportunity – and compelled to some extent – to actually take their co-responsibility.

In many universities and colleges, students can formally not be authorized to assess and grade other students' work. In that case, students are given the *authority to advise* those formally in charge (e.g. the thesis supervisor) with regard to the assessment.

External assessors can partake in marking in two different ways. In paragraph 7.1, we shall discuss two possible situations. In paragraph 7.2, we shall pay attention to a number of aspects with regard to contents and form of theses. A discussion of the rendering of the assessment of form and contents of the thesis into a mark, that is to say, the process of marking in the thesis ring, follows in paragraph 7.3. By involving a larger number of persons in assessment than usual, the process of final marking, will not only become more open, but also more complex. That is why a procedure is discussed in paragraph 7.4, to get from individual assessments, to a group assessment.

7.1 PLACE OF EXTERNAL ASSESSOR

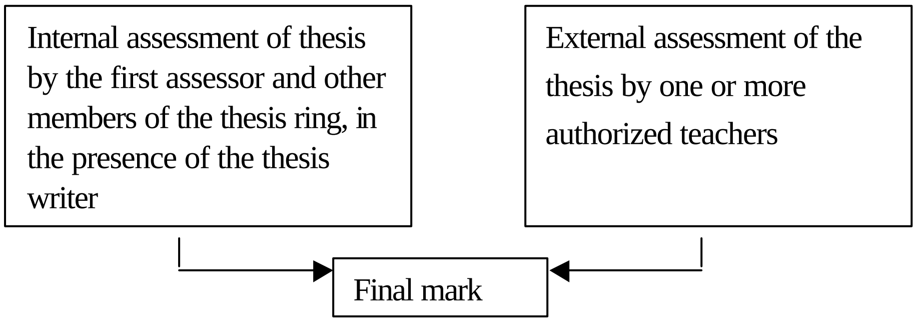
In addition to the first assessor, most examination regulations of higher educational institutions, often include an obligation to have the thesis assessed by one or more members of staff as well. Its aim is quality assurance and quality control. Thus the following steps are to be distinguished in the total supervision and assessment process:

- supervision
- internal assessment
- external assessment
- final marking.

We discuss a few possibilities for placing the external assessor in the assessment process. In all cases we start from the supervisor of the thesis ring considering the thesis in question to be "assessable" (i.e. probably leading to a sufficient final mark) anyway. If not, the thesis had better not be assessed (yet).

The first possibility is shown in figure 7.1. In this scenario internal and external assessments are made separately, and they are subsequently compared to and turned into a definite final mark The final mark can be determined through a simple arithmetic solution, for instance as the weighed or nonweighed average of internal and external assessment, or through a separate meeting, in which the internal and external assessments are compared. A combination of the two procedures is also possible: for instance taking the average as final mark, if the first and second assessment differ 1 mark maximally, and further deliberation, if the difference between the first and second assessment is more than 1 mark.

Figure 7.1 Internal en external assessment are done separately

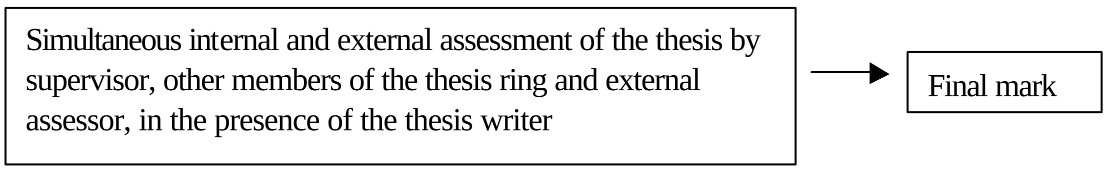


A second possibility is to have the internal and external assessment made simultaneously and in an integrated way, such as indicated in figure 7.2. In that case, the external assessor participates in (that part of) the meeting in which assessment is made. In this scenario there are several options:

1) the external assessor is at the same time one of the supervisors (so, in that case there are minimally two teachers as permanent members of the thesis ring); in this case internal and external assessment are integrated to a high degree
2) the permanent external assessor only participates, if a final assessment is on the agenda
3) a permanently changing external assessor only participates, if a final assessment is on the agenda.

The last-mentioned option assumes that the external assessor in question, is familiar with the assessment method of the thesis ring.

Figure 7.2. Internal and external assessment are made at the same time



These two possibilities for external quality control in the thesis ring, differ particularly, as far as *the degree of dialogue* between internal and external assessment is concerned. In the former case it is limited and is high in the latter. Experience therefore shows us that simultaneous internal and external assessment, are the most instructive for the students, particularly as far as the application of assessment criteria and the discussion about it, are concerned.

7.2 FORMING AN OPINION ABOUT A THESIS

The assessment of a thesis starts with the forming of an opinion about the contents and form by each member of the thesis ring. Objective standards for the assessment of the contents of thesis texts are hardly present. To some extent, one should therefore appeal to subjective standards, which are characterized by personal experiences and preferences, foreknowledge and the like. In order to plan the discussion about contents and form as much as possible, this paragraph further elaborates the requirements with regard to contents and form1. The following aspects with regard to contents are discussed:

- aim and problem definition
- research method
- analysis
- argumentation
- consistence
- evaluation / discussion
- value added
- originality.

Subsequently the following aspects with regard to form are discussed:

- structure
- care.

In appendix III a checklist is included, which can be used at assessment or at giving feedback. If necessary, this checklist can be adapted to the demands made by the field of study in question.

Aim and problem definition
Before describing the problem definition, the author should explain how and why he has come to this problem definition. Mostly it is an incidence, observation, phenomenon or problem, giving rise to further research. An understandable description of this motive - whether referring to relevant literature or not - should make clear to the reader, why the subject and problem definition of this thesis are of importance and deserve to be further researched into. Mentioning one's own interest in the subject, may be part of this introduction, but will not suffice.

In many cases, it is to be recommended to formulate a concrete aim. The aim of a thesis indicates in what way the thesis tries to contribute to the field of study in question. A possible aim is for instance, filling the gaps in a certain theory or the explanation of a certain phenomenon.[2]

As a reference frame for the assessment of the (actual versus the required) level and depth of the problem definition, the assessor can make use of that which was studied during the training prior to the graduating stage. Other relevant aspects of the problem definition are: clearness, originality and defining (for instance to geographic area, population, period of time, and the like).

Because of the complexity and/or degree of the problem definition, it is mostly useful to split it up into a number of subquestions. In this way the problem definition is divided into smaller parts, which are easier to handle. A rule of thumb, which proved its value in practice, is to subsequently work out and to answer each subquestion in one chapter. The answers to the subquestions should jointly contribute to the conclusion. In order to obtain a good connection between problem definition and subquestion, the same terms as are used in the problem definition, often return in the subquestion. Mind the missing subquestions or even the superfluous subquestions. Will the expectations that were raised by aim and problem definition, be realized?

---

1 For more detailed information about the parts, see Nederhoed (1993) and Renkema (1995)
2 See Nederhoed (1993).

Research method
A thesis is a search for new knowledge or the application of existing knowledge. So, in general, we must confine ourselves to an assessment of the research method, especially with regard to the validity and reliability of the results. An adequate description of the research method applied, may therefore not be missing in a thesis. The main issue with regard to contents at choosing the research method(s) is, whether it fits in with the problem definition of the research. We are mentioning here the following research methods, which can be used separately or combined: literature research, participant-observation, case study, survey, and experiment.[1] Other criteria may result from the examination and thesis regulations of the educational institution.

Analysis
Each research method implies a certain way of analysing data, dates or observations. In case of study of literature the stress is laid on the interpretation of literature. The assessor watches the use of definitions, the reflection of several views, the distinction in essentials and matters of secondary importance, and whether the analysis of literature leads to concrete findings or statements (either in the form of hypotheses or not). With a case study qualitative processing of data is mostly carried out. With assessment the following questions are of importance: does the researcher give a clear description of the data, what relations are researched, has the researcher's influence on the dataset been neutralized as much as possible? With a survey the emphasis will be more on quantitative processing and statistic analysis. Are the right techniques used? With an experiment the stress is laid on the relations between the intervention and the effect measured. Is the relation to be expected tested in the right way? Are (known) disturbing influences corrected?

Argumentation
During the preparation and the writing of the thesis, the author makes a number of important choices, for instance with the (re)fomulating of the problem definition, the theory and literature to be reviewed, the research method applied, chapter division, paragraph division, etc. The argumentation for these choices must be clear(ly) (explained) to the reader, and also be explained at the moment when the choice is described. So, the reader should not find the explanation of the choice made, three pages further on in the thesis.

Consistence
"Consistence" stands for consistent reasoning and the correct connection between the several parts of the thesis. Is the train of thought about a certain issue sufficiently pursued? If the thesis writer analyses two cases of datasets, is this then carried out in the same way? Do problem definition, subquestions, research method, analysis and conclusion link on well to each other?

Evaluation / discussion
The discussion about or evaluation of the findings, concerns a reflection on the restrictions and the

---

1 Each field of study knows its own research methods. The enumeration mentioned, is especially characteristic for business research. Business research methods are, among other things, described in Yin (1994), Verschuren and Doorewaard (1995), Baarda and de Goede (1995), Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), Jorgensen (1989), Kervin (1992), den Hertog & van Sluijs (1995), Schindler and Cooper (1998).

implications of the research. In this, the thesis writer indicates, among other things, to what degree the findings of the research refer to (or generalization to) other populations, cases, and the like. In how far are the results to be generalized to other fields (of study)? What new questions are raised because of the research? What could, in retrospect, be improved or done differently? What is the meaning of assumptions that were made at the beginning of the research?

Value added
By formulating the aim of the thesis, the thesis writer indicated earlier what he wants to contribute to the existing knowledge in a certain field. The value added of the thesis, exists on the one hand of the relevance of this aim, and on the other hand of the degree to which this aim was realized. What is the contribution of the aim of this thesis to the scientific knowledge and/or practice in this field? In how far has the aim been realized; has any knowledge actually been added or understanding obtained? In order to pass a positive judgment on the value added of the thesis, the evaluation of both parts – aim relevance and aim realization - should be positive.

Originality
When assessing originality, the aim is to determine in how far the thesis is the thesis writer's own work. Has the thesis writer copied literature A or has he indeed described/placed it in his own wordings and frame? Do the main ideas and choices originate from the thesis writer, or have they indeed been brought forward by the supervisors? Is the relation between thesis writer and thesis ring to be described as that between researcher and sound-board, or that between executor and stimulator/problem solver?

Structure
For the structure of the thesis the following parts are of importance: summary, table of contents, introduction (incl. aim, problem definition, relevance, subquestions), structure in chapters, and concluding chapter. Each chapter should consist of an introduction, argument and conclusion.

The structure on the level of paragraphs includes the following parts: use of relevant (sub)headings; connection between sentences and paragraphs; adequate use of enumerations (with the help of for instance: first, then, finally); indicating contradictions by means of on the one hand/on the other hand, however, but, contrary to, though; indicating of cause and effect relations with copulatives (by this, that is why, as a result, etc.) or verbs (cause, bring about, result). Each paragraph should contain exactly one key sentence, and besides, it should not be too short.

Structure on the level of separate sentences contains the following aspects: the length of the sentence (rule of thumb: fourteen to eighteen words per sentence is the optimum), grammar, sentence structure, punctuation marks; the frequent use of active sentences (subject, verb, etc.) and a limited use of passive sentences (subject, form of to be, past participle). Also mind the use of words, formal or colloquial language, use of spoken language, and the number of statements in one sentence. Is there a pithy sentence structure or not?

Care
When assessing care, the following, among other things, may be watched: lay-out, figures and tables, readability, letter size, paper format, line space, margins, page numbering, volume, title page, and literature references.

7.3 GRADING AND FEEDBACK

In general, when assessing and marking the final versions of Master's theses, it is a question of form aspects and aspects with regard to contents. That is to say that the form of the thesis should meet certain minimal requirements. If these are not met, the thesis can*not* be marked sufficiently, irrespective of its quality with regard to contents.

It is important that the supervisors timely call attention to a draft chapter or draft thesis not meeting the requirements with regard to form, and indicate what parts have to be improved. By doing so, you can prevent the nasty situation that it is established with the final assessment, that the form is (still) insufficient; in such a situation the student in question may not only suffer loss of face, but one can also speak of of a waste of time of all participating assessors.

With a sufficient form, the contents will be decisive for the mark. A bad finish (insufficient form), can therefore not be compensated by a good contents! If the form of the thesis is sufficient, there may be a possible weighing between aspects with regard to contents and those with regard to form (for instance 60 respectively 40%).

In every supervision process, all kinds of secondary, often implicit achievement criteria, threaten to be included in assessment. Think for instance of: what did this student actually learn himself? How much work and time did she spend on the thesis? Did the thesis writer perform to the best of his ability? What did he contribute to the other tasks in the thesis ring, such as supervision, chairmanship and scribeship? Did she actively contribute to the supervising of other students in the thesis ring? What to do now with these so-called secondary criteria? Experience shows that already at a very short time, this kind of criteria is the cause of a *pollution* of marking. They may be interesting aspects of the achievement and the functioning of the thesis writer in question, but, strictly speaking, they are, as far as assessment of the thesis as final product is concerned, *not* relevant. Primary requirements with regard to form and contents, should be paramount.

There is one exception to this rule. Only in case of doubt, for instance between a 6 and a 7, secondary considerations may be decisive. It will then be like touch and go: secondary criteria may then tip the balance upwards or downwards. This exception is of course less relevant for educational institutions, where marking may also consist of halves.

On the basis of the criteria discussed in the two previous paragraphs, we can now make an overview of relevant aspects of the assessment for a thesis. This is a feedback or score form, see appendix III. This form is meant to give the thesis writer an understanding of the strong and weak sides, on the one hand. On the other hand, the form may also be helpful at final marking. The scores for each part may then be used as a basis. Of course, this form may also be used to give an interim feedback on the draft chapters. By way of example, we have completed the form on the basis of an existing thesis, you can find this form at the end of this chapter.

With marking, diffences occur between assessors in the field of the score for each part and the weighing of each part. They depend on the personal preference of the assessor and the values and standards of the discipline involved. Some assessors highly appreciate originality and creativity, others have a keener eye for thoroughness and validity of the results of the research. For certain disciplines, such as psychology, an empirical research is a must , other disciplines, such as literature and historical sciences, are far more aimed at the study of literature and indirect source material. The argumentation for the mark will come forward at marking.

When a new thesis ring determines a final mark for the first time - or for the first time for quite some time -, one can, to some extent, also speak of determining a standard measure within the thesis ring, influencing all following assessments to a high degree. The supervisor(s), who is (are) the only one(s) having a good view and understanding of final mark standards committed to faculty and discipline, should therefore steer this moment of assessment specially well. This may for instance be done by making a number of theses with final marks (and completed assessment form), which were assessed earlier, available for inspection to the thesis ring members. In this way, the thesis ring members get access at this point, to the memory of the thesis ring, department or educational institute. A second solution for the standard measure issue, exists of an external quality assessment by an external assessor. In paragraph 7.1 several options were discussed for having an external assessor participate in decision-making.

7.4 GRADING IN THE THESIS RING

We confine ourselves here to marking in the thesis ring, aimed at determining a well-argumentated common final mark. If it is a question of an external assessment or quality control, then one can speak of a proposed joint marking in the thesis ring, leading to a definite mark through an external quality control.

It is an enormous challenge to try with a group of for instance, six student-supervisors and two supervisors, to determine a joint final mark that is in accordance with the external standards. We therefore developed a detailed procedure, enabling the chair to lead this assessment process (see appendix I).

The assessment process begins with putting the assessment on the agenda by the scribe, and making copies of the thesis available (or forwarding them) to all participants of the thesis ring. If this occurs not later than one week before the meeting in question, each member of the thesis ring will be able to read the thesis and to form a first notion of a mark. If required, the scribe may provide an assessment form (see example in appendix III).

During the meeting the joint assessment procedure begins with a short introduction by the author of the thesis. Then, each participant, with the exception of the thesis writer himself, is given an opportunity to propose a mark. It is important that this is done without any interaction among the assessors. When doing so, a sort of ballot-paper is used, saying: I, ... (name) propose: ...... (mark).

These proposed marks are submitted to the chairman, who then asks each participant to argue his/her proposed mark shortly, whether on the basis of the used assessment form or not. The chairman confines himself in this round to reading out each proposed mark, and the request for an explanation: "Henk marks 6. Could you explain that?" After Henk's explanation, the chairman proceeds with the next proposed mark, etc. The order, in which the chairman asks for arguments for the proposed marks, is not important. The chairman sees to it, however, that each member of the thesis ring (with the exception of the thesis writer) gets his turn, and in addition, immediately cuts off any discussions among the participants. Especially in case of a larger number of participants, it is to be recommended to sort out the proposed mark, per mark, after an explanation.

After this argumentation round, another round follows in which each participant is given an opportunity to change the proposed mark. So, the proposed mark can be changed as a result of the arguments and proposed marks put forward by others. In general, this round is very short: to the direct question for the need to change the mark, the answer is "no" or "yes"; in case of "yes", the person in question should indicate the changed mark (whether with or without a short explanation).

After this round the thesis writer is given an opportunity to react and if required, to withdraw the thesis from the assessment procedure. Even during this stage the chairman does not allow any discussion.

On the basis of the individual proposed marks, whether changed or not, the chairman then makes a proposal for a joint mark, and asks for consent for this, from each member of the thesis ring (with the exception of the thesis writer). During this round, it is, in the first instance, only needed to give consent or not. The chairman can give a participant who is still doubting, some additional time by continuing the round, and ask the participant in question as yet for consent, at the end of the round. If each participant gives consent, a joint decision has been taken.

If there is minimally one person who gives no consent, or objects, he subsequently gets a chance to explain his or her objections. This is often a signal to start a discussion on the weighing of several arguments and its rendering into a final mark within the scope of the thesis in question. At a given moment, the chairman returns, on the basis of discussion, to the persons who did not give their consent in the first instance, asking them if their objections are Adominant . Is the objection of one or more persons not dominant, then the proposed mark will be accepted as yet.

If the objection of one (or more than one) person(s) is dominant though, then the chairman asks those who proposed the mark – to which there is a dominant objection – to change their proposed mark. Subsequently, the other participants are also given an opportunity to change their individually proposed marks. The chairman can make a new proposal on the basis of the new information. This process repeats itself, just as long as a decision on the joint mark has been made, or until it is clear that a joint decision is not possible (at this moment). This latter situation may be solved for instance by:

- asking the thesis writer to revise the thesis at a number of points, and submitting it again to the thesis ring at a later stage;
- postponing a definite decision until the next meeting, and reassessing it there;
- inviting an additional (external) assessor before the next meeting, to put forward his/her assessment;
- leaving the decision up to the teacher-participant of the thesis ring, who determines the definitive mark in consultation with one or more external assessors;
- one of the other solutions within the scope of external assessment, discussed in this chapter before.

The experiences in Maastricht thesis rings show that students and teachers deal with thesis assessment in a responsible way. The chairman can turn the assessment process into the proper channels by applying the procedure described above, as a steering-instrument. Below you will find some additional instructions and understandings, contributing to an efficient assessment process.

From divergence to convergence

The assessment procedure generally progresses from divergence at the beginning of the assessment, to increasing convergence at the end, aimed at the objective of a joint final mark. The first step of assessment, in which each participant proposes his or her individually proposed mark, is characterized by minimal interdependence and interaction among the participating assessors. During the process, more and more interdependence is allowed, aimed at dialogue and convergence towards a joint mark. To some extent, this procedure therefore forces to convergence towards a joint decision.

Differences of opinion in learning processes

In general, differences of opinion are experienced as negative: they take time, go at the expense of productivity, put pressure on relations and may degenerate into a struggle for power, etc. Especially in learning processes, differences are, however, of a positive nature to a high degree, because learning to deal with differences, is a crucial skill in any situation of co-operation. Practice shows that a great difference of opinion during marking, delivers an important learning and developing moment in a thesis ring. It is the most explicit confrontation with the issue of interdependence and intersubjectivity, which is crucial for the professional and academic training of students in institutions for higher education.

What to do at stalemate?

If stalemate arises, one can speak of a fundemental difference of opinion about the assessment of the thesis. We shall explain this on the basis of figure 7.3, in which a black square indicates the proposed mark and grey stands for marks that are acceptable as well. In this figure, no joint decision is possible (yet), because no single mark has a full basis. Anne does not give consent to a 7 and Jan does not give consent to a 7.5. In this type of situations, very exceptionally by the way, there is only a possible solution, if the arguments given are returned to, and are tested again for their validity and mutual weight. It is essential for the chairman not to panic, but to stress the joint responsibility for the assessment and to ask directly for a renewed assessment of the thesis. ("Anne, what do you think of Judith's and Jan's remarks about the faulty construction of chapters 3 and 4, particularly concerning .....”). In this way it appears to be possible in 9 out of 10 stalemates, to bring about as yet, a convergence in assessment and marking. In general, such stalemates appear to be very instructive for all participants, because a solution is only possible by striving for maximal tranparation of the process and its result.

Figure 7.3: Individually proposed marks

Member of thesis ring	....	6.5	7	7.5	8	8.5	..
Henk							
Klaas (GL)							
Anne							
Jan							
Judith							

The black squares represent the proposed marks, the grey squares represent marks that are acceptable to this assessor as well.

Creating a negotiating climate?

Sometimes, the procedure previously described, strongly creates the impression of a negotiating process. This is, to some extent, an inevitable consequence of the interdependence among the assessors and the no-objection rule applied. The larger number of participating assessors in a thesis ring, requires to a transparant procedure in which each individual reaction is heard, and is subsequently discussed, weighed and integrated into the final mark.

In practice, the risk of a negotiating climate in thesis rings appears to be limited. First, because the author of the thesis leaves the thesis ring after a sufficient final mark, and favouritism is therefore not rewarded. Secondly, supervisors appear, on the basis of their expertise and experience, to dispose of an additional “power of the argument” in such situations.

At this spot it is also very appropriate to stress that the teacher in a thesis ring gives *nothing* away of his influence on the final mark. For, teachers keep their influece on the final mark for 100%: they must agree to, or give their consent to the mark, and so it will never be possible for a mark to be given that is unacceptable to the teachers.

Several kinds of arguments

During assessment, several arguments may be used. The chairman can take this into account when steering the discussion. We shall discuss four sorts of arguments here, indicating how the chairman can deal with them, without having to comment with regard to contents.

First, there is sometimes a difference of opinion about parts of the mark. Some members of the thesis ring give a high marking for, for instance, the part “sentence structure”, whereas others give a low grade. In this case, the chairman should steer the discussion with the question, why there is a high versus a low marking for sentence structure in the thesis. Subsequently, the chair structures the discussion by comparing the arguments with each other and checking on what points there is agreement and on what points difference of opinion is maintained. For comparison of arguments, the chairman can use a feedback form.

Secondly, there may be a difference of opinion about the translation of the several parts of the mark, into the final mark. It concerns the general frame of reference: when do you give a 5 and when do give a 10? By mentioning extremes, the arguments used are becoming clearer. Marks for theses assessed earlier, or the assessment of an external assessor, may also function as a frame of reference.

Thirdly, also non-arguments can be given, such as:”If Hans objects to that now, he should have said so at earlier meetings. “Or: “I think that Annelies has done her very best on this thesis.” This type of argument is in fact a non-argument, which may confuse the discussion to a high degree. It makes little sense to go into this sort of arguments, and therefore the chairman had better cut them off, possibly with a short question (like: “What does your remark have to do with the assessment criteria in our regulations?”). Figure 7.4 summarizes the several sorts of arguments and the way in which a chairman, or any other participant, can intervene.

Figure 7.4: Chairman's intervention is dependent on the kind of difference of opinion

Difference of opinion on:	Ineffective intervention:	Effective intervention:
Parts of the thesis	Comparison of several parts; confusing discussion about final mark	Comparing similar parts and asking for standard measure
Final mark	Negotiating about a compromise	Asking for standard measure; Comparing with external assessment or other assessed theses
Non-argument	Going into contents	Asking for relevance for assessment

REFERENCES

Argyris, C., Putnam, R. & Smith, D.M., *Action Science*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.

Baarda, D.B., de Goede, M.P.M., *Methoden en technieken*, 2e, herz. dr., Houten: Stenfert Kroese, 1995.

Bouhuijs, P.A.J., H.G. Schmidt & H.J.M. van Berkel (Eds.), *Problem-Based Learning as an Educational Strategy*. Maastricht: Network Publications, 1993.

Den Hertog, F., van Sluijs E., *Onderzoek in Organisaties*, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1995.

Endenburg, G., *Sociocratie als Sociaal Ontwerp*, Delft: Eburon, 1992.

Gijselaers, W.H., Connecting problem-based practices with educational theory. In: L. Wilkerson, W.H. Gijselaers (Eds.), *Bringing Problem-Based Learning to Higher Education: Theory and Practice*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996, p. 13-21.

Hammersley, M., Atkinson, P., *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, second edition, Routeledge, London, 1995.

Jorgenson, D.L., *Participant Observant: A Methodology for Human Studies*, London, Sage, 1989.

Kervin, J.B., *Methods for business research*, New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Moust, J.H.C., De effectieve tutor: meer dan alleen een vakinhoudelijk deskundige?, *Tijdschrift voor Hoger Onderwijs*, vol. 12, 1994, p. 95-115.

Moust, J.H.C., Bouhuijs, P.A.J., Schmidt, H.G., *Probleemgestuurd leren*, Wolters Noordhoff, Groningen, 1997.

Moust, J.H.C. Schmidt, H.G., *Probleemgestuurd Onderwijs Theorie en Praktijk*, Wolters-Noordhoff, Groningen, 1998.

Nederhoed, P., *Helder Rapporteren*, Houten, Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum, 1993.

Renkema, J., *Schrijfwijzer*, 3e geheel herziene druk, Den Haag Sdu, Uitgevers, 1995.

Romme, A.G.L., Naar samenwerkend leren in het universitair onderwijs, *Tijdschrift voor Hoger Onderwijs*, vol. 16, 1998, p. 100-116.

Romme, A.G.L., Domination, self-determination and circular organizing, *Organization Studies*, vol. 20, 1999a, p. 801-832.

Romme, A.G.L., Redistributing power in the classroom: the missing link in problem-based learning. In: J. Troy et al. (eds.), *Learning in a Changing Environment*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999b, p. 109-126.

Schindler, P.S., Cooper, D.R., *Business Research Methods*, zesde druk, Boston, McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Schwarz, R.M., *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

Tanis, *De Techniek van het Vergaderen*, Den Haag, Schoevers Uitgeverij, 1994.

Verschuren, P., Doorewaard, H., *Het Ontwerpen van een Onderzoek*, Utrecht, Lemma, 1995.

Yin, R.K., *Case study Research: Design and Methods*, tweede druk, London, Sage, 1994.

Appendix I : Example of regulations of thesis ring

The following regulations are based on the second assessment method, discussed in paragraph 7.1, at which external assessment (in the form of a second and possible third assessor) takes place at the same time with internal assessment in the thesis ring. In case of another form of external quality control, the *assessment procedure* part in these regulations, should be adapted. The most current version of the regulations, as used by Maastricht thesis rings, is to be found on the website:
http://www.personeel.unimaas.nl/j.nijhuis/kringen/start.htm

1. AIM

The aim of the thesis ring is supervising students who want to graduate by means of a thesis in the field of (...).

2. METHOD

2.1 The thesis ring makes policy decisions on the basis of the consent or *no-objection* principle and it determines the contents, form and frequency of the meetings itself.

2.2 According to the no-objection principle, the argumentation for making a decision at decision-making, is paramount. That is to say that a proposal is accepted, if none of the members of the thesis ring present in the meeting raises argued objections to it.

3. MEMBERSHIP

3.1 The thesis ring has minimally one supervisor, who is authorized to supervise and assess theses at this educational institution.

3.2 New participants can be proposed by members of the thesis ring.

3.3 A student can officially become a member of the thesis ring, if he/she, after having been present at minimally one meeting (as an introduction), participates in a next meeting. An explicit decision is made about this, during the latter meeting. With the membership, the person in question also obtains an official right to vote in decision-making by the thesis ring.

4. ASSESSSMENT OF THESIS

4.1 In case of a final assessment of a thesis, minimally two authorized supervisors (among which the regular supervisor), should participate in the meeting in question.

4.2 Master’s theses and trainee reports are assessed in the thesis ring according to the no-objection principle. The following procedure is pursued:

1. The author of the working paper (hereafter: thesis writer) to be assessed, holds a short introductory speech, in which his own working paper is evaluated, and at which the main learning moments and learning points can be gone into.
2. Each member of the thesis ring present, except for the thesis writer, is given a ballot-paper on which he writes his own name and the proposed mark.
3. All participants hand in their ballot-papers to the chairman. Subsequently, the chairman asks each participant in a round, to give arguments for the proposed mark.
4. The chairman gives the thesis writer an opportunity to react (without discussion) and, if required, to withdraw his working paper from the assessment procedure.
5. Each participant is given an opportunity in a round, to change his/her proposed mark with reference to the arguments heard in steps 3/4.
6. The chairman proposes a mark and asks all participants (except for the thesis writer) in a round, to give consent for this proposal. If nobody raises any objections, then the proposed mark is accepted.
7. Members of the thesis ring who do not give their consent, have to explain their objections after the latter round. Subsequently, an open discussion may arise, in which the arguments given, are tested to their validity and weight.
8. The chairman asks the persons who did not give their consent in step 7, if their objections are dominant. If not, then the proposed mark is accepted as yet. If at least one objection is dominant though, then the chairman asks the participants, who earlier proposed in steps 2 and 5 the mark to which dominant objections are now raised, to change their proposal. Also other participants can possibly change their proposal.
9. The chairman may come up with a new proposal, on the basis of the new information. This process will repeat itself from step 6, until a new proposal is made, to which none of the participants raises dominant objections.

4.3 The academic supervisor(s), together with any external assessors, has (have) the ultimate authority for assessing and grading the final version of a thesis. Formally, students act in an advisory capacity when it comes to grading.

4.4 The following aspects are considered in the assessment of Master's theses:

FORM	CONTENTS
style	problem definition
readability	subquestions
lay-out	research method used
sentence structure	depth
paragraph connections	answer to problem definition
quotations	argumentation
table of contents	relevance of literature used

structure of chapters	creativity
references to literature	practical or social relevance
reading list	scientific relevance

If necessary, these aspects may be turned into concrete criteria. In illustration, the aspect of *reading list* has been worked out below:

The reading list should contain the following details:

In case of a book:	Author, *title book*, publisher, place of publication, year.
In case of contribution to book:	Author, title contribution, editors of book, *title book*, publisher, place of publication, year, page numbers of contribution.
In case of article:	Author, title article, *title journal*, volume number, year, page numbers of article.
In case of source on Internet:	Author of organization, title of source/contribution (if present), *title and/or address of webpage*, date, year.

See to it that title book, title journal and title webpage, have the same typographic design.

4.5 To a trainee report apply the same assessment aspects as to a Master's thesis (see 4.4), at which the stress is laid on the practical relevance of the trainee report for the company or institution at which traineeship took place.

5. ELECTING PERSONS

5.1 The function of leader of the discussion, also called chairman, consists of:

- *structuring* the meeting, among other things, on the basis of the agenda being divided into the opening round, organizational part, part with regard to contents, and final round; and
- *steering the tension level* in the meeting.

5.2 The function of scribe mainly consists of maintaining the memory of the thesis ring, supplemented with a few organizational matters:

A. drawing up a of list of decisions of each thesis ring meeting;
B. drafting of the provisionary agenda, in consultation with the chairman and supervisor(s);
C. timely sending round of list of decisions, agenda and the documents to be discussed;
D. maintaining and sending round of list of addresses of members of the thesis ring;
E. recording of all the theses assessed by the thesis ring, and to keep them for inspection for members of the thesis ring and other persons interested;
F. making regulations of the thesis ring available to each new (prospective) member;
G. possible organizational tasks, such as reserving of meeting room, coffee/tea, and the like.

5.3 Electing persons for filling certain functions (such as chairman and scribe), is carried out according to the no-objection principle. For this purpose the following procedure is applied:

A. Each participant (i.e. member of thesis ring present) gets a ballot-paper, on which he writes down his own name and the name of the person whom he/she considers the most suitable for the vacant function.

B. All participants hand in their ballot-papers to the chairman. The chairman asks everyone in a round, to give his/her arguments for the person proposed.
C. Each participant is given an opportunity in a round, to change his/her proposal on the basis of the arguments heard in B.
D. The leader of the conversation makes a proposal for the person coming forward most expressly from steps B and C and asks all participants in a round, for consent (no objection) for this proposal. He asks the person proposed, last. If nobody raises dominant objections, then the proposal is accepted.
E. Members who do not give their consent, should explain their objections after the round in D. An open discussion may arise in which the arguments given, are tested to their validity and weight.
F. The leader of the conversation asks the people who did not give their consent in the first instance, if their objection is dominant. If not, then the proposal will be accepted as yet. If the objection is dominant though, then the leader of the conversation asks the members of the thesis ring who had proposed the person (against whom objection is raised), to change their choice. Others may then change their choice as well.
G. The chairman may come forward with a new proposal, on the basis of the new information. This process is to repeat itself from step D, until there is a proposal to which none of the participants raises dominant objections.

Appendix II Speech acts exercise

In chapter 4, four speech acts were discussed (framing, advocating, illustrating, inquiring). Increasing effective participation in conversations, especially those in thesis rings, may be accomplished as follows

(a) First write out (part of) an interesting conversation, preferably on the basis of a tape recording. It is also possible to take a dialogue written out by others - for instance an interview in the newspaper. Then analyse this conversation on the basis of the four above-mentioned speech acts: this may be done by characterizing each spoken sentence or part of a sentence as frame, advocating, illustration or inquiry. It occurs only very rarely that a (part of a) sentence falls under more than one category. It is to be recommended, especially in case of doubt, to have the same conversation analysed by others as well.

(b) A second step is to examine one's own contribution to conversations. This may be done on the basis of tape recordings, or by having colleagues, fellow-students or other members of the thesis ring, write out a dialogue rather accurately. Analyse this conversation again, on the basis of the four speech acts, preferably together with a second person who was not involved in the conversation in question. It is good for this analysis to be repeated a couple of times for several conversations. The length of the analysed parts of the conversation is not important. A two-minute dialogue delivers more than one page of written text in no time.

(c) Make a self-diagnosis on the basis of the analyses in step b. Which speech acts do you use most, and which the least? What is the effect on the interlocutors in the conversations studied? Subsequently, you determine which changes you want to make in speech acts. Ambitious plans are fine in themeselves, but see to it that they are carried out in stages and realistically. Start with a relatively easy change. For instance: ask more inquisitive questions. If this change has been realized sufficiently, you can work towards a more complex change. For instance: I am going to improve my description of the frame at the opening of important conversations. Some rules of thumb:
    - concentrate on one change at the time, that is complex and challenging enough;
    - be selective in the conversations in which you are experimenting; in order to learn from them, these conversations should not be too complex, but not too simple either;
    - the effectiveness of these changes is determined by the reactions of other participants; however, do not be dicouraged if an interlocutor reacts akwardly, this is often a reaction to his own akwardness.

Appendix III Feedback / score form

Author: .... Title: .... Assessor: ....

Part	Score	Remarks
Aim problem definition subquestions		good is: to be improved:
Research method		good is: to be improved:
Analysis		good is: to be improved:
Argumentation		good is: to be improved:
Consistence		good is: to be improved:
Discussion		good is: to be improved:
Value added		good is: to be improved:
Originality		good is: to be improved:
Structure		good is: to be improved:
Care		good is: to be improved:
Other remarks		

Proposed mark: .... Date: ....

Appendix IV Frequently asked questions

Below, you will find a description of short answers to questions often raised with regard to thesis rings.

Question: What is a thesis ring?
A thesis ring is a supervisory tool, in the form of a group of students, who organize and design the supervision of their theses together with one or more supervisor(s). So, the thesis ring consists of minimally, one authorized examiner and all the students who are supervised by this (these) teacher(s) at that moment. A student joins a thesis ring at the moment when he or she starts with the thesis (or the traineeship that should lead to it), and leaves the thesis ring at the moment when the thesis has been finished and assessed. On average, once every three or four weeks, the thesis ring members convene. During a meeting, students and teachers discuss the progress of each thesis together.

Thesis rings have regulations in which agreements were laid down about decision-making, assessment and meeting processes. These regulations imply that the final version of each thesis is assessed in the thesis ring. This occurs on the basis of consent, which means that none of those present (among which the 1st and 2nd faculty assessors) raises dominant objections to the final mark. The thesis writer himself, has of course no vote in the decision-making about the final mark.

Question: Do I, as a teacher, give my power away?
No, the supervisor should agree to all decisions that fall under the policy domain of the thesis ring, such as admission of new students and final marking for theses. So you do not give away anything as a teacher. It is true though, that decision-making on for instance a mark, happens far more open, than normally. Supervisors should therefore argue their final mark in a thesis ring, far more explicitly. That means that expertise with regard to contents, is given priority to formal authority. We sometimes call this the power of argument.
The main reason to organize the supervision and assessment process in this way, is the enormously motivating and activating effect it has on students. In addition, it links well up to the important academic values, such as dialogue and intersubjectivity.
Ultimately, all formal authority rests with the teacher or supervisor. That is, formally students are only authorized to advise regarding grades of other students' work. In practice, students as advisors and academic supervisors as formally-in-charge can collaboratively arrive at a shared decision on the final grade.

Question: Are students really critical enough to co-supervise?
It appears that student and teachers together, dispose of a unique combination of ideas and experiences, as a result of which the quality of the supervision process is increasing.

Experience also shows that students, if an appropriate learning environment is created for this purpose, approach each other in a very critical, but constructive way and give valuable feedback. The role model of the supervisor is decisive for this, by the way. Even during the assessment of a thesis, fellow-students are generally honest. Occasionally, one can speak of (attempted) favouritism, which is, however, corrected and neutralized by consistently applying the rule of consent.

Question: What happens if you disagree on the final mark?
It may occur that an assessment of a thesis is progressing slowly and that it seems as if no decision is possible. In general, it appears that, if arguments are properly weighed and the discussion is cleared from improper arguments, a joint final mark will be possible anyway. Pursuing the procedure that was laid down, is very important with this. This procedure should also include a form of quality assurance, such as an external assessor who assesses the thesis in question as well. It is self-evident, that this external quality assurance should be in accordance with the examination regulations of the educational institution.

Question: What can a thesis ring do for me?
In general, teachers experience their thesis rings as a means to organize the supervision process more efficiently and effectively. A few things were already said about its quality. As to efficiency: one can speak of economies of scale, especially for teachers who have, either jointly or not, ten to fifteen students writing their Master's thesis a year, if students are supervised through a thesis ring. These economies of scale arise by concentrating conversations and discussions with thesis students at one moment (every three or four weeks) and reduced reading efforts from the teacher. In addition, there is an economy of scale within the scope of mutual learning effects and the exchange of experiences among students.