

# Online supervision at the university

*– A comparative study of supervision on student assignments face-to-face and online*

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## Abstract

The article presents and condenses the background, findings and results of a one yearlong research project on online supervision and feedback at the university. The article builds on presentations and discussions in different research environments and conferences on higher education research and development (Bengtzen & Jensen 2013a; Bengtzen & Jensen 2013b; Jensen & Bengtzen 2014). Through an empirical study of supervision and feedback on student assignments at the university across face-to-face and online settings we show firstly, that the traditional dichotomy between face-to-face and online supervision proves unhelpful when trying to understand how online supervision and feedback is a pedagogical phenomenon in its own right, and irreducible to the face-to-face context. Secondly we show that not enough attention has been given to the way different digital tools and platforms influence the supervisory dialogue in the specific supervision context. We conclude by terming this challenge in online supervision a form of ‘torn pedagogy’; that online tools and platforms destabilise and ‘tear’ traditional understandings of supervision pedagogy ‘apart’. Also, we conclude that on the backdrop of a torn pedagogy we forge a new concept of “format supervision” that enables supervisors to understand and reflect their supervision practice, not as caught in the physical-virtual divide, but as a choice between face-to-face and online formats that each conditions the supervisory dialogue in their own particular ways and with their own pedagogical implications.

## Introduction

In higher education today there is an increasing focus on the use of digital media in supervision on student assignments. Often the use of digital tools in supervision matters is said to be particularly beneficial when supervising students at a distance, with particularly “busy” students that also share a professional practice rather than merely following a program, and to maintain an ongoing debate and dialogue, thus exchanging information and keeping in touch with the students (Wisker 2012; Handal & Lauvås 2011; Sindlinger 2012; Enos 2011; Bengtzen, Mathiasen & Dalsgaard 2015). As a supplement to traditional Email correspondence, digital tools such as Skype, Google Hangout, and Google Docs are often used for supervision meetings and as tools for text feedback on student papers in progress. Otherwise acknowledged for their potentials when giving text feedback in supervisory contexts, the digital tools are often derogated when matters concern the supervisory dialogue, as being a poorer and less authentic substitute for the face-to-face encounter. When dealing with the supervisory dialogue the embodied contact and presence are often foregrounded as crucial when establishing the good and trustful relationship between supervisor and student, and the non-mediated character of the face-to-face dialogue is accentuated as a key factor and

contributor to students' possibility for deep learning in supervision contexts (Wisker 2012; Handal & Lauvås 2011; Peelo 2011; Lee 2012).

Besides seeing net-based doctoral supervision as a support system that may enhance already known pedagogical strategies, the research in this field has been keen to show the limitations of educational technologies. As also shown in Bengtson (2016), De Beer and Mason point out that the “[d]isadvantages of electronic communication include its inability to read body language cues and facial expressions; the difficulties surrounding the process of checking one’s understanding of material; and the risk of critiques being too brusque or being seen by inexperienced researchers as personal criticisms” (de Beer & Mason 2009: 223). This hesitation regarding net-based doctoral supervision is also found in Sussex (2008), who states that “[w]orking at a distance when one does not have a good personal knowledge of the other member of the supervisor-student dyad can be difficult. (...) the relationship is less evolved than that with the on-campus students, and there are channels of communication which are not present because of the lack of face-to-face contact.” (Sussex 2008: 133). Even as recently as in Erichsen, Bollinger & Halupa’s quantitative study (2014) net-based doctoral supervision is described as being more “difficult and challenging, [as] it requires more effort, focus, and commitment than traditional programs, one must also have more self-discipline, be highly organized as well as have a greater responsibility for one’s self.” (Erichsen, Bollinger & Halupa 2014: 330).

This critical perspective on the usefulness of digital tools in supervision at the university is pointed out in practice-close research that highlights the voices of the practitioners themselves (Enos 2009; Sindlinger 2012; Friesen 2011; Bengtson, Mathiasen & Dalsgaard 2015). Because the embodied face-to-face encounter over the years has been established as so potent and important a dimension of the supervisory dialogue it has also, sometimes unintentionally, created a dichotomy between face-to-face and online contact, in which a hierarchy has been built where the face-to-face relation is seen as the most primary and authentic form of contact between supervisor and student. Handal and Lauvås is not as such in opposition to online supervision, however they underline that the face-to-face dialogue “is not just more rich, but also attain a stronger dynamic.” (Handal & Lauvås 2011: 228, our translation). As a consequence, they argue, “it is difficult to relate personally, in the good sense of the term, if you do not meet physically and talk together in that mode.” (ibid., our translation). Norm Friesen who is otherwise a promoter of online learning in environments at the university level, stresses the more immediate and flow-like qualities the face-to-face encounter contains compared to its online counterpart. Friesen accentuates what he calls the more “crafted” aspects of online communication when forced to explicitly craft one’s own presence vicariously by use of digital tools (Friesen 2011: 156). According

to Friesen “the offline classroom clearly appears as a place that is suitable for pedagogical practice”, which he opposes to online contexts that “by contrast, impose forms of specialization and classification that need to be consistently combated and counteracted by both students and teachers.” (Friesen 2011: 157). Max van Manen and Catherine Adams (2009) make the same distinction between the verbal face-to-face encounter and the written dialogue by means of digital tools used for student feedback.

Even though Manen and Adams are especially interested in understanding the value of presence in online writing, they give a special status to the face-to-face encounter claiming that “the spoken word is irrevocable in a manner that is rarely true of the written word. In normal conversation or discussion, what has been said and heard cannot be taken back.” (Manen & Adams 2009: 8). We argue that a hierarchy is implicitly established in online supervisory settings ranking the spontaneity, authenticity and interpersonal dynamics as having high value, and that these features are more often connected to the embodied dialogue in contrast to dialogues online. This view is not only present in the perspectives of practitioners but imported as a quasi-normative element in the research literature as well in an unhelpful manner. Even though online presence today is widely acknowledged as a field of interest in itself, there is still in the pedagogical literature a tendency to understand the purpose of digital technology to “move the potential to observe body language (by means of video e.g.) to a closer likeness in that of face-to-face communication.” (Evans 2009: 94). On the backdrop of these tensions in the understanding of online supervision, we have made a comparative study between face-to-face and online supervision. Firstly, our aim is to research especially the phenomenon of online presence in a more nuanced and constructive way, showing that the embodied nature of the face-to-face supervisory dialogue does not in itself make possible a more wholesome and authentic form of presence, but “merely” establish conditions for supervision different to conditions online. Secondly, as most of the research into online presence is done in the field of clinical psychology, counseling and therapy, we wish to shed light on the phenomenon of presence in online supervision in relation to feedback on student assignments at the university.

## Methodological approach - researching online presence

As inspiration for our methodological approach we have chosen to focus on that part of the literature on online supervision and counseling that views online presence as equally important to the face-to-face contact, hereby acknowledging the online dialogue as being of equal value and potency in comparison to the embodied dialogue face-to-face. Firstly, we define what is generally meant by the term “online presence”, and secondly we draw

out from the literature three main analytical categories used in the analysis.

### What is online presence?

In all forms of supervision personal presence is key to establishing a good supervisor-student relation and thus the foundation for giving and receiving feedback on student texts. The personal aspect of supervisory dialogues has broadly been pointed out as being of primary consequence to good supervision practice (Wisker 2012; Handal & Lauvås 2011; Lee 2012). This is no less important in the online relationship, even though the conditions for presence change radically in some ways. As Evans defines it, a person's presence is "a representation of their self as a whole person, with a uniqueness where (...) the actual essence of this person could not be represented with another human being." (Evans 2009: 31). Evans compares personal presence with being similar "to that of an individual's fingerprint and cannot be replicated." (ibid.), and she states that in the context of "online relationships and communication, such a presence is evident and can be experienced in a similar manner to that of the face-to-face encounters" (ibid.). Evans argue that exactly such "personality and mannerisms" (Evans 2009: 32) are essential to build trust between supervisor and student and thus arguably also to attain an depth disciplinary learning space.

Important and natural for an interpersonal relationship and professional dialogue online presence operates on different parameters than face-to-face contact. Contrary to the face-to-face dialogue in which presence makes itself manifest spontaneously and embodied often without much control, online presence is made manifest in a more self-conscious, overt and crafted manner (Friesen 2011; Friesen 2005; Manen & Adams 2009; Fenichel 2003; Bengtsen, Mathiasen & Dalsgaard 2015). However, Suler points out that "carefully constructed text, even when intended to be empathic, may lack spontaneity" (Suler 2004: 37), and so a balance must be found, as highly crafted online presence may result in outcomes opposite the intention. As Anthony (2003) points out online phenomena such as "tone" and "voice" are important to create a "recognizable" conversation partner when cues due to body language and eye contact are not necessarily available (Anthony 2003: 26-27). Especially relevant for text feedback in supervision settings is the connection between relationship building and writing style. This form of online presence is accentuated by Suler who points out that:

"Writing affects the relationship and the relationship affects the writing. The same reciprocal influence exists between the text relationship and *writing style*. Concrete, emotional, and abstract expression; complexity of vocabulary and sentence structure; the organisation and flow of thought - all reflects one's

cognitive/personality style and influence how others reacts"  
(Suler 2004:21)

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Thus, the way of conveying presence, as Suler points out in the quote, differs across face-to-face and online settings. What we consider to be a polite and decent tone in face-to-face encounters may be entirely different when supervising online and can, if not attended to, wreck the possibility for learning if the student feels abused or talked down to by an ignorant supervisor. Anthony and Nagel (2010) argue that any supervisor must be aware of the proper "rules of Netiquette" (Anthony & Nagel 2010: 49) demanded in a particular online setting. Especially when giving feedback online the attention to proper netiquette is mandatory. Receiving feedback can be experienced as quite harsh for students not used to the sometime direct tone in feedback giving through the use of email or written comments, where body language and eye contact is not available to soften the critical message. The lack of auditory, visual and physical cues in online feedback and supervision makes it harder for the supervisor to sense if the student has stopped listening because of strong emotional reactions to the critical tone of the textual feedback.

Evans reminds us that just because the student does not explicitly state these reactions "it is vital not to make assumptions that an absence of written narrative indicates the client is not experiencing a range of feelings." (Evans 2009: 85). Friesen argues that because of these challenges it is important that teachers and supervisors "cultivate what has earlier been identified as a positive 'atmosphere' or 'tone' – what could also be called a sense of personal or even emotional immediacy or proximity." (Friesen 2011: 131). Therefore, we argue, that meta communication, tact and facilitation assume new meanings when supervising online, and an important road to further understanding of the special challenges of online supervision must go directly through notions of online presence in the form of tone and personality conveyed by means of writing style, online ethics and netiquette.

## Main research categories used for the study

From the described corpus of literature above we have made use of the following categories in our analysis of supervision through the use of Google Docs assignment draft and traditional paper assignment drafts. As aspects of online presence we argue that the following categories are necessary to apply in order to gain a better grasp on how the specific digital tool used conditions the communication between supervisor and student and hereby the supervision pedagogy applied.

### *Synchronous and asynchronous communication*

One of the key features of online supervision is that, as Suler points out, “unlike in-person encounters, cyberspace offers the choice of meeting in or out of ‘real time’.” (Suler 2008: 103). The distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication can be said to depend on “people’s experience of being in the same continuous time frame with each other” (Suler 2008: 104) or not. As in face-to-face supervision contexts the synchronous contact online is understood as enhancing “the in-the-moment or here-and-now connection to the professional as a higher degree of mutual presence” (ibid.), which Evans underlines provides the opportunity “for the inclusion of immediacy and (...) an increased sense of the practitioner’s (or teacher’s) presence and spontaneity.” (Evans 2009: 115). As Jones and Stokes describe synchronous communication may help the supervisor to “watch out for differences that may mean a different mood, a desire to say less or more, or that the client [student] is struggling with a difficult issue. This is similar to noting changes in speech or tone when working face-to-face.” (Jones & Stokes 2009: 58).

During asynchronous forms of communication there is, what Suler calls, “a stretching of the time frame in which the interaction occurs (...). You have hours, days, or even weeks to respond.” (Suler 2004: 25). As Suler further on stresses this is exactly what marks out the distinct opportunities for asynchronous communication. Suler claims that asynchronous communication forms a “zone of reflection” in which “you have time to think, evaluate, and compose a reply.” (ibid.) In contrast to synchronous communication the zone of reflection creates a constructive distance and “non-presence” (our term) that enables less spontaneous, and thus impulsive, forms of communication. It should be noted that synchronous communication does not in itself necessarily lead to experiences of heightened presence. As Suler describes, “some people feel they can create a stronger presence in asynchronous communication because they have opportunity to express complexity and subtlety in what they write (...).” (Suler 2004: 28). Thus, the value of choosing synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication is highly dependent on the specific context and intention in the supervision process.

### *The relation between textual and sensory modes of contact*

Another key feature of online supervision is the difference between textual and face-to-face contact. Contrary to traditional understandings of the supervisory dialogue, Suler (2008) underlines that just as the face-to-face relation makes possible a certain form of trust and openness, so does the textual relation. Actually, as Suler points out, “some of the advantages of the text communication may be attributed to the effects of absent face-to-face cues” (Suler 2008: 106), as the (experienced) anonymity may strengthen the student’s courage to present issues of conflict in the supervisory dyad, or to disclose certain disciplinary shortcomings on both



sides. Just as traditional supervision theories argue that the face-to-face relation secures an openness otherwise impossible in mediated communication, Suler argues that textual relationships may generate an equally important and beneficial form of openness as the student may feel less intimidated or on foreign ground when confronting the supervisor face-to-face in her office behind closed doors (ibid.). Suler states that instead of seeing empathy as a dialogical aspect only attributed to embodied encounters, there is just as well ways of promoting “text empathy” (Suler 2004: 38). Text empathy and relationship building features through text depend ultimately on the linguistic style used, which is backed up by socio-linguistic perspectives on the notion of style and ‘linguistic individuality’ in supervision at the university as described in Bengtson (2012: 94ff.) and Bengtson (2011).

However, as in face-to-face meetings lack of attention to the style used by your partner in the dialogue may have severe consequences and make your partner “withdrawing” (Evans 2009: 106) and refrain from disclosure. Suler, together with Evans (2009: 81), claims that because text communication “tends to be more ambiguous due to the lack of visual and auditory cues that confirm meaning, there will be a tendency for more misunderstandings, projections, and transference reactions.” (Suler 2008: 107). Just as in the embodied meeting the style used in textual communication takes skill and experience to master; “carefully constructed text, even when intended to be empathic, may lack spontaneity” – just as “completely freeform, loosely constructed text may confuse or annoy people” (Suler 2004: 37). Change of context and communication with different students, and supervisors, often demand a change of style, or an adaptation to the style of the partner you speak to, which means that “the most effective message often strikes a balance between spontaneity and carefully planned organization.” (ibid.).

### *Visibility and invisibility in the supervisor-student relation*

The potential for feeling more anonymous when interacting in online supervision has been well described by Suler as the “disinhibition effect” (Suler 2004: 28ff.), also featured in Sindlinger’s work on online supervision (Sindlinger 2012: 31), that in clinical matters includes the aspects of “Anonymity (You Don’t Know Me)”, “Invisibility (You Can’t See Me)”, “Delayed reactions (See You Later)”, “Solipsistic Introjection (It’s All In My Head)”, and “Neutralizing of Status (We’re Equals)” (Suler 2004: 29-31). These aspects are all relevant for research into online supervision, and in some respects also underlying some of the themes in the following analyses. However, it is Friesen’s focus on “silence” and “lurking” that we chose to foreground in this section as they have proved to be more explicitly relevant in the study. As Friesen explains silence in embodied dialogue is often intuitively grasped whether it signals respect, attention, embarrassment, hurt, or passive aggression (Friesen 2011: 133). Online



silence on the other hand has “a problematic ambiguity that can easily render it ‘brutal’ - or at least decidedly negative – in its effect.” (ibid.). It can be almost impossible to know if a student’s or supervisor’s failure to reply to what oneself understands as an important message is due to “technical difficulties, lack of time, to lack of interest or motivation, illness, or to other circumstances.” (Friesen 2011: 132). Online silence may in this way irritate or confuse the student or supervisor and lead to further messages where the tone gets a bit more strenuous each time. This way online silence challenges the rhythm and flow of dialogue in online supervision if not handled with communicative savvy and patience.

Another potentially disturbing form of invisibility in online supervision is what Friesen describes as “lurking” (Friesen 2011: 133). When lurking online you are “figuratively lying in wait” and you “do not share the same vulnerability or openness as those from whom I am hiding or for whom I am waiting.” (ibid.). As a supervisor that lurks I am “able to read the messages online, but I am effectively concealed, and I provide no indication as to the reasons for my concealment.” (ibid.). This is especially relevant in online settings such as students working in Google Docs, either individually or as a group. In Google Docs it is possible to see when a person, a fellow student or your supervisor, is present in the document, which means that the person can follow your work and the discussions that may be taking place in the commentary track. It can be intimidating for students to write when they know that someone is looking them over their shoulders.

With these research categories in mind we will now turn to a short description of our data material and move on to the analysis.

## Data material

Our complete data material for this study consists of 10 traditional exam papers and 20 exam papers written in Google Docs by graduate students at the faculty of Arts at Aarhus University (Denmark). The online Google Docs papers were all written by groups of students while this only applied for some of the traditional papers. The rest of these were individual papers. We collected the papers through the year 2013 and analysed them focusing on the tone and voice of the text across different versions of the papers. In the next step of our study, which is the focus of this article, we selected four traditional exam papers and four exam papers in Google Docs for a closer comparative analysis (all group papers). While narrowing down the number of papers we at the same time widened our analysis of each paper by taking in several versions written at different stages of the writing process. Since we are in this study interested in the interaction between the supervision process and the students’ writing process and how this affects the text, we chose two versions of each paper, one written before feedback/supervision and the next version written after feedback/supervision, assuming that the second version would contain

changes that were in one way or the other a result of the students reactions towards the feedback from the supervisor and the meeting between the students and the supervisor. Thus with two versions of each text we ended up with 16 texts (paper and digital) all in all for our closer analysis. This study focuses on the writing style of the student texts in progress, and not the face-to-face meetings, which foregrounds the texts themselves as having important aspects of 'presence' and personal voice – an angle often overlooked in much supervision research.

The point of departure of our analysis is the notion of presence. Our understanding of presence is broad covering both the writing style of the particular text – how the writers are present through their voice in the text – and the embodied contact between students and supervisor as it becomes visible as textual phenomena. Thus our analysis of the different stages of traditional papers on the one hand and Google Docs documents on the other is framed by three analytical categories of presence: 1) Formats and conditions for communication (“stages” and “change”), 2) Textual voice/actions and 3) Embodied contact. Our comparative analysis can be seen as comparative at two different levels. First of all we compared the two versions of each text looking at how the text had changed from the first to the second version, and in doing this we mainly focused on our second category of presence (“textual voice/actions”). As for the two other categories (“formats and conditions for communication” and “embodied contact”) these were applied for the comparison on the other axis – between paper and online formats.

## Findings

### *Formats and conditions for communication*

Our analysis shows important differences in the format of the traditional papers versus the Google Docs papers, and these different formats result in different conditions for the communication between students and supervisor. And in this case, since we are looking at group papers, it also has implications for the communication within the group of students. In the writing process of the traditional papers the supervisor only has access to a few versions of the text at different stages of the process. Each of these versions is a whole (more or less complete) text that the supervisor is presented to, for when he is to meet with the students for supervision. This means that the changes of the text happen in shifts, without the process being visible, and every time the supervisor is presented with a text from the students it is in some way a new product that is likely to have changed a lot from the last product he discussed with the students. With Suler's term it can be said that in the traditional papers most of the writing process is 'invisible' to the supervisor. He does not see all the textual changes the students have made and all the dead ends they have been down during that process. This is highly different from the experience when students write in Google Docs because of the track changes function that makes it possible for the supervisor and the students to follow every little change made within the text. Instead of a sample of completed draft versions of text, Google Docs shows multiple stages of the text that are each adding a new fragment to the text. With all the small steps and changes possible to detect, the writing process is to a much higher degree made 'visible', and the supervisor is potentially present (though at a distance physically, but not textually) during the whole process in the sense that he can follow the students' writing while it happens.

With the online student papers the supervision changes format. Instead of just meeting the students a few times during their writing process the supervisors wrote comments about the text directly in the document while the students were working on it. In a sense this makes the supervision synchronous in another way than in the face-to-face settings because of the possibility of commenting on a problem while the students are struggling with it, and the supervisor may join them in a chat dialogue when the students comment on the comments or ask questions about them, which the supervisor then may answer immediately. The online supervision was seen to be asynchronous, as it was not necessarily received at the same time as it was given. The supervisor at times wrote comments that the students did not read until later – at times because they had already moved on in their writing process, and at other times because they had closed down the document again and were off to something else.

This synchronous/asynchronous relationship applies to the conditions for supervision on traditional papers in the opposite way: With traditional papers the supervision is on the one hand asynchronous because it only happens a few times in the writing process and thus does not necessarily fit with where the students have come to in their thinking process, and on the other hand the supervision session is always synchronous as both students and supervisor are bodily present in the same room when the supervisor's comments about the text are delivered to the students. Thus with regards to the *writing* process the traditional supervision is potentially asynchronous while the online supervision is potentially synchronous but with regards to the *meeting* between students and supervisor the face-to-face meeting is synchronous while the online meeting is potentially asynchronous. This shows that synchronous and asynchronous forms of contact are relative to whether one focuses on physical or textual contact. Both forms of contact seem to be equally relevant to students, but in different ways.

#### ***Meta communication and presence as 'embodied' contact***

Since both the traditional papers and Google Docs papers used for this study are written by groups they contain meta communication at two different levels at the same time: first of all the students meta communicate with the supervisor about the status of the text, what they would like to discuss with the supervisor, and what they would like him to focus on in his feedback. Secondly the students also meta communicate within the group about the text and the writing process. As with the conditions for supervision the different formats also make different kinds of meta communication possible and makes it visible in different ways and to different degrees. With the traditional papers the meta communication between students and supervisor were seen to happen most often via email, when the students sent their text prior to the meeting and explained to the supervisor what they had been working on and what they would like him to focus on when they met for supervision.

Applying the category of synchronous/asynchronous again shows that the meta communication between students and supervisor in the traditional papers is asynchronous in the sense that it is disconnected from both the writing of the paper and the supervisory meeting. The students write their version of the paper, then they write an email to the supervisor about the text and then they meet with the supervisor. This asynchronicity is a displacement in time, but since the meta communication happens in another medium (by Email correspondence for example) than the text, it can also be said to be displaced with regards to where (displacement in space) it is carried out. Friesen discusses this through the categories of place versus space with *places* being physical/embodied places in the world while *spaces* refer to the spaces we meet when we engage within the digital world. Using these categories the meta communication around the

traditional papers can be seen as asynchronous with regards to *space* (email and text document) but synchronous with regards to *place* since the actual supervisory meeting, where the students and the supervisor talk about the texts, takes place in a physical room with the participants present at the same time. In Google Docs the meta communication is an integrated part of the ongoing communication between students and supervisor in the commentaries and it is thus intertwined with the text feedback and the dialogue about the text. Thus, the meaning of 'embodied contact' is here suggested not so much in the meaning of physical proximity, but instead as the experience of communicative intensity, focus, attention and proximity of personal presence no matter through what medium this contact takes place.

### *Textual voice/actions*

Our analysis of the textual actions (revisions and changes in the texts) the students have carried out when changing the first version of the text to the second one shows that overall these actions can be labeled as "genre adaptations". This applies both for the texts written in Google Docs with the teacher commenting on the text online and for the traditional papers where the students have met face-to-face with the supervisor for feedback on their text. An example is seen in one of the traditional papers where the first version of the introduction to the paper contains broad reflections on the topic and questions about it founded in the students' personal experience. While in the second version these reflections and questions have been revised and linked to the field and the theory on the topic, thus changing the text from a loose draft of the students' thoughts on the topic towards a more finished academic text grounded in the research field. It is not in itself surprising that what happens in the writing process is that the texts develop towards a more and more finished product written within the conventions of the academic genre. What is interesting in this case is that it seems to happen in very much the same way whether the students are supervised online or meet with the supervisor face-to-face. As we have defined presence as on the one hand bodily presence and on the other hand textual voice, these textual changes can also be seen as elements of presence in the sense that they are examples of how the students develop and "find" their writing style.

Schematic and systematic display of findings:

Looked at in a more systematic way the central findings can be pinned out in the following categories:

- Stages:

Because the elements of process and progress in the traditional students papers used for supervision and feedback was black boxed, the texts appeared every time as 'new' and 'whole' papers. In

contrast the student texts in Google Docs displayed a visible process with multiple small changes and steps depending on what had been edited and by whom in the group.

- Change:

Based on the difference in stages, I argue that supervisors have more and better access to the development in thought and argument by use of a digital tool that registers, archives, and makes visible the changes and their genealogy. For the supervisor to access the link between thinking and writing style in students' learning approaches opens up new and overlooked possibilities for supervision and feedback.

- Meta communication

In the student texts themselves the meta communication in the traditional ones was almost complete lacking because of the tradition for dealing with such matters in the accompanying face-to-face meeting. In contrast, the meta communication in the texts written in Google Docs, could be accessed in the chat function and supplementary tracks and options for commentary. This adds a layer to supervisors' possible access to the genealogy of the document – not only the writing and thinking itself, but also the students' reflection about it simultaneously.

- Textual actions:

In a 'sea' of differences one similarity between traditional and online students texts is the result, or the 'textual action', of the documents. It seems independent of the medium the aim and purpose of the texts was in both cases to adapt to the academic genre of writing and thinking – the harnessing of argument, focus of structure, documentation via scientific references, etc.

- Presence:

Whereas the traditional students papers can be said to operate with two categorically different forms of presence – the textual and the physical presence – the online texts in a way merged presence into *one* dimension: within the text itself. The online texts were surrounded by different forms of commentary-tracks, chat arenas, and feedback options, which gave the online texts their own form of 'embodied' presence.

The pinned out findings can also be displayed schematically in the figure below:

<b>Schematic overview of the findings</b>		
<b>Codes for analysis</b>	Traditional papers	Google Docs
<b>Stages</b>	Few	Multiple
	Whole	Fragment
<b>Change</b>	Shifts	Small steps
	New products	Track changes
	Invisible	Visible
<b>Meta communication</b>	Mostly external (amendments)	Social, logistic, content specific
		Internal and external
<b>Textual actions</b>	Genre adaption (anchoring, control, revision, development)	Genre adaptation (similar)
<b>Presence</b>	Two forms of presence:	Both forms of presence are played out in the document as textual changes and comments ('textual presence')
	1. Writing style (in text)	
	2. Embodied contact (outside text)	

## Dissolving a dichotomy and reinforcing the importance of difference between online and face-to-face supervision

As a consequence of our findings we argue in the following that the dichotomy between face-to-face and online supervision should be dissolved, while the pedagogical difference between different digital tools should be reinforced. By this we mean that too *much* attention has been given to the partly artificially constructed difference between face-to-face and online supervisory dialogues, and that too *little* attention has been shown the pedagogical implications of using the different tools available for feedback and guidance.



### Dissolving the online/face-to-face-dichotomy

Our study initially focused on the different pedagogical strategies and implications arising when working with online contra face-to-face supervision. However, the most important result of our study is the realisation of how unfruitful it is for future understandings of online supervision if we maintain face-to-face and online supervision as a dichotomy. From our findings we learn that the duality between synchronous and asynchronous communication and feedback is not merely relevant when discussing online supervision, but also a valid and relevant distinction in face-to-face settings. Just as the distinction between visible and invisible student voices is equally relevant in virtual and embodied environments. Friesen's (2011) terms of space and place could be applied in the reversed sense, as supervision face-to-face can sometimes feel like there is a screen between the student and the supervisor, just as supervision online can be experienced as a "place" if trust and mutual recognition is established and the relation is strong. In a similar vein Crossouard (2008) has shown how net-based forums, for some students, "supported social relations that were helpful for their learning. The web site was described as 'our student bar', or a 'town hall', and gave some students a sense of belonging within the institution (...)." (Crossouard 2008: 60). Furthermore, restating findings by Turkle, Crossouard points out that "an online environment 'gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones'. (Crossouard 2008: 63). The notions of place and space do no longer seem to apply as a way of dichotomizing face-to-face and online learning environments.

This does not mean that there are no differences between sitting in front of somebody and communicating through digital media. Of course there is, but instead of focusing on the physical and virtual dimensions of face-to-face contra online supervision, we should instead focus more on the different, varied and multifarious forms of *contact* established across different settings whether they be face-to-face or online. As we have shown it is far more interesting to follow closely the various forms of dialogues made possible when supervising through different media and in different contexts. What is important is how the supervisory dialogue helps and supports students in organising their thoughts and arguments, and what options students have for different forms of dialogical actions. Equally, regarding the notion of presence in supervision settings. From our study we see that even though online supervision is often a written form of feedback and dialogue, it is not *online* presence that seems to influence the relation between supervisor and student, but instead *online presence*, by which we mean presence in general made manifest in different ways. We argue that the conceptual pairs applied by Suler, Sindlinger and Friesen are useful when analyzing supervisory dialogues across various formats and

settings, but not when such concepts beforehand are chained to specific media and physical settings. In such cases the language of theory holds online supervision practice in presupposed pedagogical frameworks that are not open to new perspectives.

To dissolve this unhelpful dichotomy we suggest that in future research on online supervision Lynn McAlpine and Judith Norton's concept of "nested contexts" may prove fruitful (McAlpine & Norton 2006; McAlpine & Åkerlind 2010). The concept of nested contexts describes how different levels of communication simultaneously overlap and are interwoven in supervision settings. To understand face-to-face and online settings not in opposition, or even in contrast, to each other, but as simultaneously present and potential pedagogical frameworks for communication and feedback between supervisor and student. In line with this point we suggest terms such as "nested contact" and "nested presence" instead of the term online presence. Supervisors and students are present in many different ways, which may overlap as they are in contact with each other by many different means of communication. They are 'multi-present' and perform multiple dialogues, sometimes aligned and sometimes not.

From another study on online supervision at the university (Bengtson, Mathiasen & Dalsgaard 2015) it has been shown how different online forums for supervision and feedback are nested within each other and connected in ways often surprising for the teachers trying to facilitate the online feedback. Sometimes the feedback meant for a specific course bound online platform "moves" or "escapes" to other online forums that the students had found easier and more adept for the feedback sought by them. When students move the feedback and communication with each other to a forum such as Facebook or other social media, it becomes difficult for the teacher to gain access to the communication and to supervise the students. However, what is the central point here is that the students are first and foremost interested in the contact with the supervisor and with each other, whereby phenomena such as contact and presence are more important for students and teachers than the physical-virtual divide. What is interesting is not that students and teachers communicate online and face-to-face, but that they find each other and make contact to each other by the different means available and proper to the context and the form of supervision wanted.

### **Reinforcing the differences between tools and users in online supervision**

One of the most important findings from our study is how different formats influence the conditions for supervision. This means that different pedagogical strategies must be applied during supervision dialogues. This is not linked to the online/offline-divide as discussed above, but present through different formats whether face-to-face or online. Here we wish to

stress the close relation between the specific digital tool used for supervision, and the dialogical rhythm, tone and culture made visible during our studies of the forms of communication during supervision processes. Whether the tool used is Word, Skype, Google Hangout, or Google Docs as used in this case, the tool must be seen as an actor in itself that play back, or strike back, at the supervisor and students (see also Bengtsen & Mathiasen 2014). We see how the different features for communication available in Google Docs invite supervisors and students to have different kinds of dialogue whether it is synchronous (by use of chat-features), asynchronous (by use of tracks for comments), collaborative (by use of features that allow multiple users to write in the same document at the same time), or cooperative (by use of features that keep the document in the cloud accessible for different users at different times and places). Dependent on what form(s) of communication is taking place, the supervisor must readdress and facilitate the learning dialogue according to the premises for contact and presence in the specific online context.

In this perspective the digital tools and platforms used for online supervision can be said to be “tool-beings” (Harman 2005; Harman 2002; Bogost 2012) that denote independent and influencing communicative beings conditioning the supervisory dialogue from within. This perspective on online supervision contrasts with traditional studies in online counseling where the less tangible and corporeal form of contact of the digital tools is sometimes referred to as a “black hole experience” (Suler 2004: 26) in which the counselor and client experience the digital tool absorbing important aspects of the communication, which disappear and are lost. Elsewhere the influence on supervision by means of digital tools is described as “dehumanizing” and “unsettling” (Simpson 2003: 114) because of the lack of intimacy otherwise found in face-to-face supervision. Communication through the use of digital tools is said to may cause “higher levels of fatigue” (Simpson 2003: 116) due to the disappearance of vital elements of the interpersonal dialogue, distorted or “disjoined” by the digital tool in play (Simpson 2003: 117). This focus is about how to eliminate the tool, to make it invisible. This is rather strange, we think, as the tool is *there*, with a logic of its own, and an agenda preset and developed out from core, systemised logic in the software set up. We suggest that we start recognising the tool as a pedagogical resource in itself, and a factor in the pedagogical interplay between student and supervisor.

To use a term from Harman’s vocabulary we might say that all digital tools “charm” us (Harman 2005) with the very style and particular inviting features of communication made possible by them. To paraphrase Harman we argue that every digital tool “wants us to love it, and love it *exclusively*.” These styles belong to places and objects no less than to people. The charm of Beirut [e.g. Skype] or Prague [e.g. Google Docs] consists in their saying

‘this is the way things are’, and not by their trying to be everything to all people simultaneously.” (Harman 2005: 139). The specific digital tool used for supervision may in a darker sense lure us in and invite us to forms of communication that we cannot easily foresee the consequences of. This links to the study on idiosyncrasy in supervisory dialogues at the university (Bengtzen 2012; Bengtzen 2011) where the focus has been set on how specific supervisors create particular and unique dialogical formats through their individual communicative styles and actions. In this sense the digital tool too can be said to influence the particular dialogue between supervisor and students and to promote idiosyncrasies in writing and thought in ways that challenge supervisors as well as students, as they discover that the digital tool conditions the range and scope of their dialogue. Such idiosyncratic aspects may become problematic when supervisors and students start to let the idiosyncrasy of the specific digital tool determine and control the supervisory dialogues. A similar phenomenon has earlier been studied by Handal and Lauvås (Handal & Lauvås 2005; Handal & Lauvås 1987) in face-to-face supervision where students exposed to many different supervisor ideals and idiosyncrasies start to play the “chameleon game” by resigning and trying to give the supervisors what they want by cloning the supervisors mindset instead of exploring and developing their own. A more fruitful way seems to be mindful of the particular tool’s advantages and disadvantages for the specific supervision process and to apply it accordingly when most beneficial for both students and supervisor.

## **Conclusion – “torn pedagogy” and “format supervision”**

This comparative study of online and face-to-face supervision has challenged the dominant traditional dichotomy when describing the pedagogical conditions for supervision online. We have shown that instead of maintaining a dualistic framework in the understanding of the interrelation between face-to-face and online forms of supervision, a pluralistic framework should be applied. This pluralistic view on online supervision implicates what we call a ‘torn’ element in supervision pedagogy as it destabilises and ‘tears’ traditional frameworks for supervision online. By this we mean that supervision pedagogy as such is challenged when studying online supervision, as the key elements of supervision pedagogy show themselves to rest on conditions depending on a specific format; e.g. the embodied format of face-to-face supervision. The two core elements of supervision pedagogy that change across different formats are dialogue and organization. We have shown in what ways the conditions for dialogue change in online forums, making the supervision dialogue potentially more diverse, multimodal, varied and sprawling in nature – and also very much dependent on the specific tool, or platform, used for communication. This leads to new understandings of the nature of

supervisory dialogues and the forms of presence and contact that frame supervision meetings online. This influences the supervisors' and students' ability to organise the assignment or task in hand, which the supervisor gives feedback on.

We have shown that depending on the format of the specific supervision dialogue different possible ways to organise and structure the feedback given become visible. Thus, the digital tool as a third actor, or third voice, influences the dialogue between supervisor and student. This calls for new understandings of the nature of supervisory dialogues and the implications for supervision pedagogy at the university, which can be labeled a 'torn' pedagogy. A 'torn' pedagogy takes into account not only the differences in student profiles but also the different technological profiles of the digital tools used in supervision - and how these may influence the learning and teaching approaches applied in the supervision process. Thus, a 'torn' pedagogy makes the often implicit relation between technology and thinking and writing style overt for the students and supervisors, thus changing the technological structure of the specific digital tool from being a tacit determining factor to becoming an overt resource to be used actively by the students and teachers.

To qualify future research into the nature of supervisory dialogues online we suggest the term "format supervision". The term "format" merges aspects of form, content and concept in communication. In supervision settings this means that format covers the communication style, the content of the communication, and the concept of the supervision meeting. The concept-aspect is the most important in this context, as it makes clear that different formats for supervision (whether these be embodied, or mediated by different digital tools, or a combination) foreground the concept – that is the privileged features and conditions of the specific supervision context. Hereby we wish to leave behind the dichotomy between face-to-face and online supervision by forging the term of format supervision that in essence points out that online supervisory dialogues are not really about the physical-virtual divide established decades ago, but about how different supervision formats condition the supervisory dialogue and the underlying pedagogical framework of supervision meetings at the university.

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