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Becoming an Academic Writer through Feedback

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Schlagworte: text feedback; supervisor feedback; writing development; reactions to feedback; affect

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Becoming an Academic Writer through Feedback

Erika Unterpertinger

Abstract

The lines between feedback and supervision are blurred, creating uncertainty and a tension between encouraging students to take ownership of their projects and maintaining academic standards. For students, taking responsibility for the project is intimidating, but it can foster their development as academic writers. As I discuss, feedback can play a crucial role in these developmental processes. This is illustrated by the case study of Philip (pseudonym), a Master's student, and his writing process. Philip's case not only provides insight into the affective level of feedback, but also opens up the space for reflection on students' perceptions of feedback.

Introduction

A recent study identified the three most common challenges faced by master students as finding a topic, the advisor/advisee relationship, and struggles with text production (Jahic Jašić/Pavlović 2024). Feedback is intertwined with all of these challenges; in fact, many guides to supervision explicitly discuss feedback. They advise that feedback in supervision should be process-oriented and encourage students to take ownership of their writing (Bolker 1998: 168).

However, students put themselves in a vulnerable position when they submit potentially unfinished drafts to their supervisors, who often take on the dual role of advisor and reviewer (Brown/Atkins 1988). Filippou et al. (2017) also place master's supervision in a carefully maintained balance between autonomy and guidance, with students seeking „safe independence“, that is, to be able to make their own decisions whilst having the supervisor at their side“ (Filippou/Kallo/Mikkilä-Erdmann 2017: 347), which also includes receiving constructive feedback. However, it is often unclear to students which feedback is optional, especially when it comes from their advisor. This can be related to the phenomenon that students develop different strategies for dealing with supervision experiences (González-Ocampo/Castelló 2019), ranging from being emotionally affected but not taking action to taking action and reflecting on the situation and developing active agency in seeking long-term solutions.

The lines between feedback and supervision are blurred; this creates a great deal of insecurity, especially when supervisors move between encouraging students to take responsibility for their projects and to develop as writers while maintaining academic standards. On the students' side, becoming an academic writer is strongly connected to the development from knowledge recipient to knowledge producer (cf. Römmer-Nosseck 2017; Römmer-

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Nossek/Unterpertinger/Rismondo 2019). This is related both to feedback and to a shift in responsibility for the project. Feedback, as I discuss, can play a crucial role in a student's development as a writer. This is illustrated by the case study of Philip,¹ a Master's student who was interviewed as part of a larger Ph.D. project on students' processes of 'discovery'. As part of this project, Philip was interviewed three times over the course of seven months, taking snapshots of his master's thesis project before he began writing, while he was writing, and shortly after he had completed his master's thesis. The case study presented in this paper provides insight into how advisor feedback can be perceived by a student; in Philip's case, his advisor's feedback led him to question his overall choices and enter a period of procrastination. Philip's perception was that he had to confront his advisor with the position he had developed based on the feedback he had received. However, the feedback from his advisor can also be seen as the advisor acknowledging Philip as competent to make independent decisions about his project. As this brief description suggests, many emotions accompany the process of receiving feedback and developing strategies to respond to it appropriately.

In this paper, I begin with a discussion of the concepts that underlie becoming an academic writer – epistemological development, writing development, and text development. I then describe how the data were collected and analyzed within a constructive grounded theory methodology before proceeding with the case analysis of Philip's experience. In the discussion chapter, I address questions about how the shift of responsibility to the student occurs, what coping strategies are developed, and what emotions feedback evokes.

Becoming an Academic Writer

Academic writing as a set of specific skills is developed in higher education contexts after a student has entered university. As a skill set, it encompasses a set of interrelated competencies that include different levels of knowledge as well as different levels of text production.² From a developmental perspective, this skill set needs to be acquired over time. This development takes place at the level of the writers' attitudes toward knowledge and knowing (Hofner/Pintrich 2002; Bereiter/Scardamalia 1987; Kellogg 2008), at the level of writing about what one knows (Pohl 2007), and at the level of expressing what one knows (Steinhoff 2007).

Römmer-Nossek (2017) brings together personal epistemology, epistemological development, and writing development to create a model of writing development that also takes into account the knower's beliefs about knowledge and knowing. Students generally develop their stance toward knowledge in stages as they are academically socialized. At first, they take what they know from an authority figure and look for a 'right answer'. However, especially when

1 Philip is a pseudonym that was chosen by the research participant in question.

2 See Knorr (2019) for a comprehensive, language-sensitive model of the competencies involved in text production.

confronted with many perspectives on a topic, students become increasingly aware of the multiplicity of knowledge, and that there may not even be a ‘right answer’. Eventually, students develop a position regarding their knowledge base (Perry 1970; Moore 2002). As knowers, they move from being knowledge recipients to knowledge producers, which is also reflected in their development as writers (Römmer-Nosseck 2017; Römmer-Nosseck/Unterpertinger/Rismondo 2019).

A student’s development as knower can also be observed in academic text production: Pohl (2007) conducted a corpus study with student papers to study the way students present knowledge, describing the ontogenesis of academic writing as developing from object-focused to discourse-focused, and from discourse-focused to argument-focused writing (Pohl 2007: 487). This development is connected to beliefs about knowledge and knowing (Pohl 2007: 506–8), i.e. personal epistemology (Hofer/Pintrich 2002). On the level of expressing what one knows, Steinhoff (2007) proposes that developing a way to express one’s knowledge undergoes a series of developmental steps, from pre-conventional to (post-)conventional use of academic language.

As the case study presented in this paper will show, feedback can contribute to a student’s epistemological development, but this is not always an easy path. Feedback from supervisors can contribute to frustration and procrastination due to the blurred lines between feedback and supervision (González-Ocampo/Castelló 2019). These negative emotions are connected to “failed efforts to address a new task that prompts critical ways of thinking about what writing is and how to do it”, which Yancey/Robertson/Taczak (2014: 104) call “critical incidents”. Philip experiences a setback as his strategies fail. This acts as a catalyst for Philip to make a decision about his project and, at least from his perspective, face the consequences.

Data Collection: Case Study Design within a Constructive Grounded Theory Methodology

In this paper, the data that is analyzed and discussed come from a case study with Philip, a student who worked on and eventually completed his master’s thesis. Within the larger context of the Ph.D. project, I am interested in academic writers’ processes of ‘discovery’. However, these processes are not directly observable (Petitmengin 2006: 237) because processes of ‘discovery’ are complex (Petitmengin 2006: 238) and often not part of an individual’s reflective state, which is when an individual is consciously aware of what they are doing and how they are doing it (Gallagher/Zahavi 2021). Yet an individual has more information available to them than they might think, namely in the form of passive, “pre-reflective” memories of their experience (Maurel 2009: 59). This passive knowledge is not directly accessible, but it can be approximated through rich data. To obtain such rich data, I chose a case study

design (Yin 2018) that employs the following strategies to attain the desired level of in-depth information:

1. multiple sequential interviews,
2. relying on narrative interviews that are based on microphenomenological interview techniques (Petitmengin 1999; 2006; 2020; 2021; Maurel 2009; Tewes 2023), and
3. collecting multiple types of data through audiovisual recordings and reflective drawing prompts (following Prior/Shipka 2003; Busch 2013) at the beginning of two out of three interviews with one participant.

The interviews are designed to follow a participant through their writing process. The first interview is conducted at the beginning of the project, the second after the interviewee has begun writing a draft, and the last interview is conducted after the text is completed. While microphenomenological interviews have been used with individuals who have no prior experience with this interviewing technique (e. g. in addition, cf. Shinebourne/Smith 2009; in high-risk environments, cf. Eryilmaz/Dirik/Öney 2024), microphenomenological interview techniques require a high degree of self-reflection on the part of the interviewee (Heimann et al. 2023) as well as a great deal of experience on the part of the interviewer. As a result, multiple interviews do not only “form a stronger basis for creating a nuanced understanding of social process” (Charmaz 2003: 318), but also support the interview situation. The interviews are audiovisually recorded and transcribed into basic transcripts. In addition to the audiovisual material, two out of three interviews begin with drawings. In addition to serving as a point of departure for the subsequent interview, they offer a change of perspective from a linear narrative to a non-chronological, two-dimensional narrative space, and open up a reflective space for the interviewee. Where interviews and other verbal data collection are guided by a narrative, visualizing the writing process is an introspective process that does not require the participant to immediately create a narrative (Busch 2013: 37). Drawing one’s writing process not only makes actions accessible that are usually left out of a narrative, such as pauses or procrastination. It also makes use of an expanded language repertoire that includes symbols and visual metaphors. Thus, the drawings facilitate a focus on the proportions of and relationships between the elements of the process as a whole.

As I am interested in “how participants construct meanings and actions” (Charmaz 2003: 313) in terms of how students perceive processes of ‘discovery’ and what is involved, I situate my project within a constructive grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2013). In contrast to more objectivist forms of grounded theory (e. g. Glaser 1978), the core belief of constructive grounded theory is that “research reality arises within a situation and includes what researchers and participants bring to it and do with it” (Charmaz 2013: 13). As such, participants and researchers co-construct meanings and actions. These meanings and actions are embedded in “pre-existing structural conditions, arise in emergent situations, and are influenced by the researcher’s perspectives, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical locations” (Charmaz 2013: 240). Consequently, these co-constructions require constant reflection, which is at the heart of this methodology.

Processes of ‘discovery’ in the context of this project refer to the phenomenon of a person gaining new insights into a subject, their field of study or themselves, which is mostly invisible (Perl 1994).³ Processes of ‘discovery’ are not linear and do not happen quickly, or sometimes not at all. However, they can lead to an aha moment (Schickore 2022) where these developments become visible to the knower. The present project methodically addresses these moments in which processes of ‘discovery’ become visible as a departing point for the present study. Feedback and supervision, as the data analysis will show, play a crucial role in Philip’s processes of ‘discovery’ both at a content level, and at a personal level.

The Data: Philip’s Master Thesis Process

The case study “Philip” consists of three interview transcripts as well as two drawings of the writing process and the discovery process respectively. The interviews took place between August, 2022, and March, 2023. Philip, who has chosen this pseudonym himself, was 26 at the time of the first interview and worked on a master thesis in the field of psychology at the University of Vienna, including an empirical research project. His first language is German, he wrote his master thesis in English; it was the first writing project in English. By the first interview, Philip had concluded his data collection and had presented his findings in a master seminar and was planning to spend the summer and the fall writing the first draft of his master thesis.

In his writing process drawing, he chose the representation of his research and writing process as a labyrinth, describing shades of green as “null Stress und [es war] klar, was ich machen muss” (P_II_1:7 – *zero stress, and [it was] clear what I had to do*). Shades of red, like the mid section of the labyrinth, demarcate “eine ewige Phase mit diesem Hin und Her und ich hab die ganze Zeit an den Sachen vorbereitet, hab dann Zoom-Calls mit ihr gehabt und dann war sie ,na wir machen es ganz anders“ (P_II_1:14 – *this was an endless phase with the back and forth and I spent my time preparing things, talking about it in a Zoom call and then she was like, ‘nah, we do it completely differently’*).

Philip’s writing process drawing also includes milestones in the form of little red flags that are surrounded by sparkles. Both of these represent presentations held in master seminars. In the first, Philip presented his empirical research design, in the second he presented his first findings.

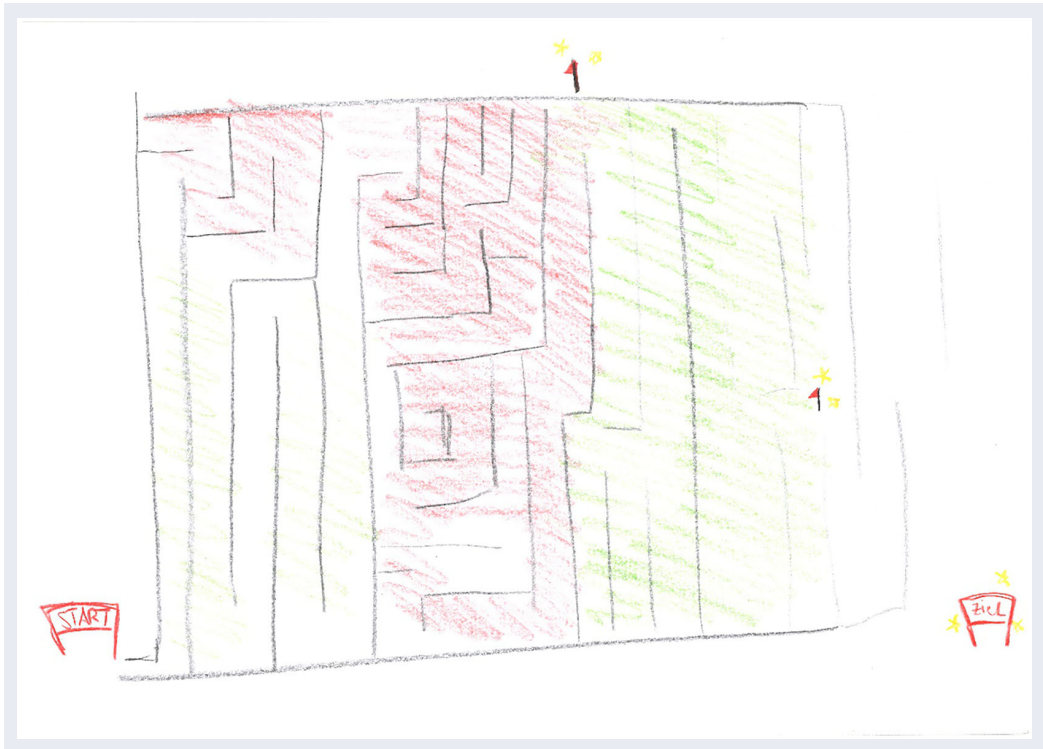
It is notable that the labyrinth seems to fade out between the second little flag and the end goal on the right bottom corner. Philip described this in the first interview as being “sehr

3 While studies have discussed the epistemic/heuristic function of writing (Ortner 2000; Molitor-Lübbert 2003; Eigler 2005; Dengscherz 2019) and writing to learn (V. Baaijen/Galbraith/De Glopper 2010; V.M. Baaijen/Galbraith/de Glopper 2014; Galbraith 2015), the process of ‘discovery’ itself is yet underexplored. Few studies have tried to conceptualize what processes of ‘discovery’ entail. They have mostly focused on professional writers as opposed to students that are situated in the learning environment of a college or university (Galbraith 1992; 2009; Karsten/Bertau 2019; Odell 2016; Perl 1994).

vage und das Ziel ist irgendwo, aber ich weiß gar nicht [...] Ich weiß gar nicht, wie dahin kommen." (P_I1_1:30 – *very vague and the end goal is somewhere, but I do not know [...] I do not know at all how to get there*).

Figure 1

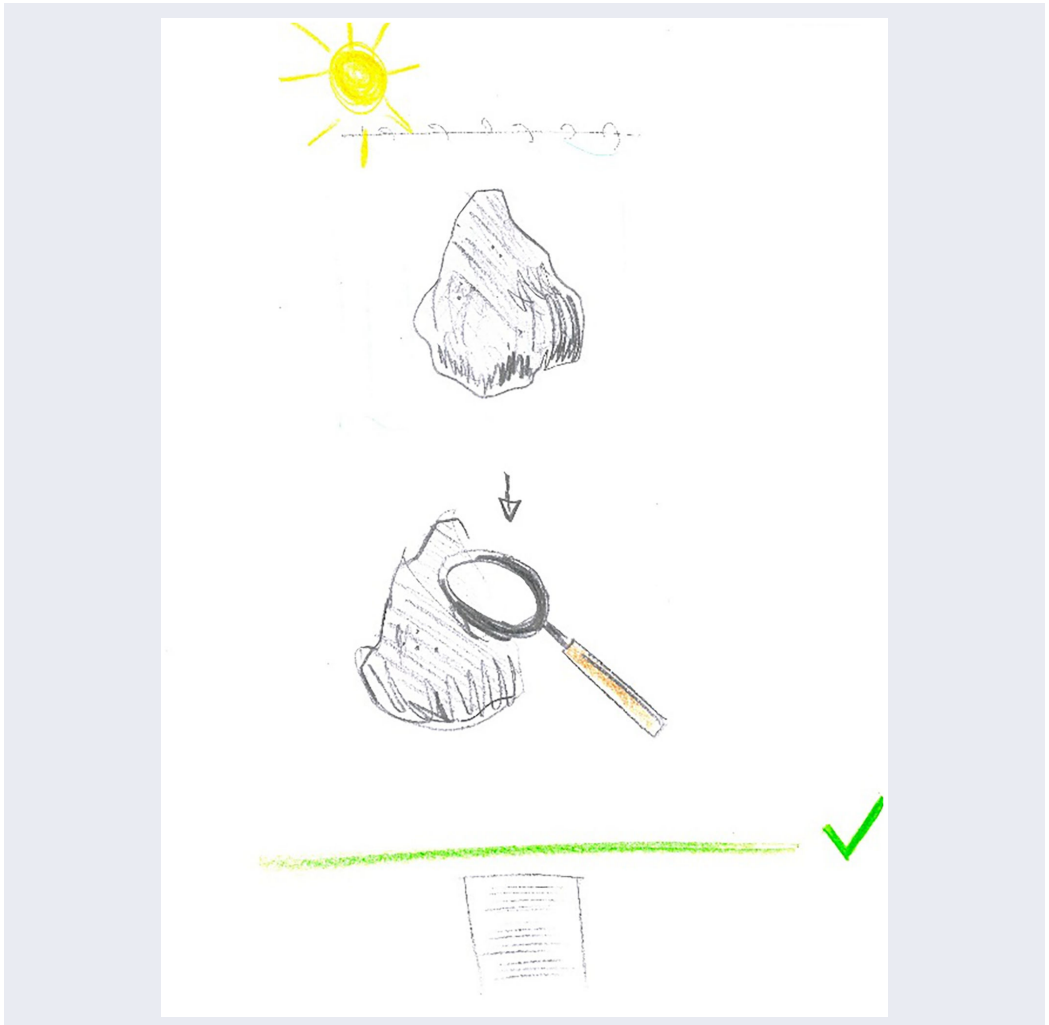
Philip's writing process drawing (source: E. U.)



In the second interview, after having progressed into the faded-out section of the writing process drawing, Philip talked at length about how his thesis advisor's feedback had caused a writer's block. The writer's block was prompted by questions of research ethics that Philip described as encountering a rock in the middle of his path (P_I2_3:196), which is even doubled in his discovery process drawing.

Figure 2

Philip's process of 'discovery' drawing (source: E. U.)



The upper left corner of Philip's second drawing shows the sun shining, which Philip describes as standing in for the summer months. The sun shines over a rock that is thinly veiled by what Philip describes as a curtain. After presenting his findings, Philip's advisor noted that it was a pity that he had excluded a specific group of study participants in his data analysis, which was in direct conflict with the preregistered research design. This raised questions of research ethics for Philip that at the first moment seemed insurmountable: „Ich hab dieses Feedback von ihr bekommen, das ist das Feedback, dieser Felsbrocken und ja.“ (P_12_3:34 – *I got this feedback from her, this rock is the feedback*).

His advisor's feedback led to a longer period of avoidance between June and November 2022. Philip describes this period as 'having a rock hanging over his head' and trying to (badly) veil it:

„ich habe es [das Feedback] mir aufgeschrieben und mir gedacht [...]: Oh, okay, das gibt dann irgendwie ein Problem. Da muss ich noch drüber nachdenken, was ich machen will. Und eben weil man immer im Hinterkopf hatte den ganzen Sommer so. Hm. Irgendwie kommt da ein Problem auf mich zu. Ich muss mich damit auseinandersetzen, aber ich hab es halt nicht.“ (*I wrote it [the feedback] down and thought to myself [...]: Oh, okay, that's a problem somehow. I still have to think about what I want to do. And because it was always at the back of one's head all summer long. Hm. Somehow, I've got a problem coming up. I have to deal with it, but I just didn't do that – P_I2_3:232*)

After this period of putting off dealing with the questions raised by his advisor's feedback, Philip described that this feedback forced him to reconsider the decisions he had made leading up to his data analysis:

„Ich habe mir halt richtig überlegt was würd es bedeuten wenn ich jetzt die Personen ausschließe. Ist es dann für meine Studie schlecht? Warum ist es so und was würde es genau bedeuten? Und was würde es bedeuten, wenn ich es doch nicht ausschließe, wenn ich die Präregistrierung jetzt ignoriere und wenn ich es jetzt in ihrem Feedback folge? Und hab quasi alles durch gesponnen und bin darauf gekommen, dass es eigentlich. Eigentlich habe ich mir was dabei gedacht.“ (*I really thought, what would it mean if I excluded the [participants] now. Is it then bad for my study? Why is this the case and what exactly would it mean? And what would it mean if I didn't exclude them after all, if I ignored the pre-registration now and if I followed their feedback? And I've kind of thought everything through and have come to the conclusion that it actually – P_I2_3:233*)

His conclusion that “[e]igentlich hab ich mir was dabei gedacht”, *I had a plan (an idea), actually*, marks a turning point in Philip's master thesis project. In the aftermath of reconsidering his decisions so far and with the insight that he had made his decisions reflectively, Philip composes an email to argue for the position he takes. In doing so, he takes responsibility for his position and describes a shift in perceiving himself more on par with his advisor.

The Blurred Lines between Feedback and Supervision

The case study presented in this paper provides insight into how feedback from a supervisor may be perceived by a student; in Philip's case, his supervisor's feedback was a critical inci-

dent that led him to question his overall choices so far, to enter a period of procrastination as a result, and ultimately to develop as a writer and as a knower by making a decision based on the supervisor's feedback. Philip's case illustrates how a student might perceive feedback and highlights the blurred lines between feedback and supervision.

Looking back on the process of his Master's thesis, Philip describes how he listened very carefully to his supervisor's comments and feedback:

„wenn sie irgendwelche Inputs gibt habe ich sie mir sehr genau aufgeschrieben, Wort für Wort teilweise, weil sie wahrscheinlich am besten weiß wie man Sachen interpretiert und was man sagen darf und was man nicht sagen darf.“ (*when she gave any inputs I wrote them down very precicely, sometimes word-by-word, because she knows best how to interpret things and what can be said and what should not be said – P_IB_7:148*)

The argument that his supervisor 'knows best' suggests that Philip perceived his supervisor not only as competent advisor, but also as an academic gatekeeper. As a result, he interpreted his supervisor's feedback as much more normative than the feedback received from his peers.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that Philip's perception was that he needed to confront his advisor with the position he had developed based on her feedback. However, the advisor's feedback can also be seen as the advisor acknowledging Philip as competent to make independent decisions about his project. However, this was not explicitly communicated, which led to more uncertainty on Philip's part.

„Am Anfang voll die Kommentare, hilfreichen Kommentare und Feedback gemacht und am Schluss dann nicht mehr. Irgendwie den ganzen Diskussions- und im Schlusssatz irgendwie nur so drei winzige Sachen ausgebessert und ich hab irgendwie gemerkt, da hat sie keinen Bock mehr oder warum kommentiert sie dann nix? Da war ich ein bisschen enttäuscht, ich hatte gehofft, dass sie(.)“ (*In the beginning she left many comments, helpful comments and feedback, and then in the end none at all anymore. Somehow the whole discussion and in the final sentence somehow only three small things were corrected and I realized, there she wasn't in the mood anymore or why didn't she comment anything? I was a bit disappointed then, I had hoped that she would (.) – P_IB 7:149*)_

Philip's expectations were not met as his advisor did not explicitly state why she did not explicitly comment on her reasons. Philip is left with the conclusion: "Und das ist meine eigene Leistung, da sagt sie nix" (*And that is my own contribution, and she says nothing about it – P_IB_7:57*) and feeling abandoned in this process.

Making Decisions, Emotions, and Becoming an Academic Writer

Philip's writing process is strongly connected to emotions that seem to emerge whenever he encounters 'critical incidents'. The most prominent emotions are feelings of insecurity and bursts of confidence that are associated once a decision is made. This becomes apparent right from the start of the master's thesis project: While Philip describes the first phases as "voll lässig" (*pretty chill* – P_II_1:5), he reports that after a phase of indecision his advisor "[hat] so ein bisschen das Thema aufge(.) also nicht aufgehalst, aber halt, sie hat es dann vorgeschlagen" (*imposed a (.) well, not imposed, but she suggested it* – P_II_1:31). Not really happy about this, Philip considers changing his topic altogether (P_II_1:34), but in the end makes friends with his topic after he finds out that it is "eigentlich gar nicht so fad, und ich habe dann wirklich mal angefangen und festgestellt, dass es eigentlich ganz cool ist." (*actually not boring at all, and then I got started and realized that it's actually quite cool* – P_II_1:32).

In this case, Philip describes a discrepancy between feeling insecure about the choice of his Master's thesis topic and therefore avoiding the choice, a problem that is solved by his advisor's suggestion of a topic. However, Philip does not seem to like the fact that this decision is taken away from him, as suggested by the phrasing that he felt like the topic was imposed on him. As he often describes a power imbalance between himself and his advisor, since his advisor is the person who grades the project, he eventually accepts the topic and does more research. Philip describes a similar situation in what Philip describes as a red phase in his first interview (see fig. 1). He reluctantly accepts his advisor's feedback on how to approach his data collection. He then goes on to reclaim his ownership of the topic by developing a practical part of his survey, creating fictional posters for participants to rate, that connect his ideas to the literature he has already read: „Okay, die könnt ich nutzen und so versuchen, das was ich jetzt mach, könnt ich versuchen mit so einem Artikel zu untermauern.“ (*Okay, I could use these and try this, what I'm doing now I could try to back it up with an article like this one* – P_II_1:84).

The feedback that contributed to a pivotal point in Philip's development as an academic writer is linked to the metaphor of a large rock blocking the way forward. He makes this decision and communicates it and his reasoning in an email to his advisor: "da habe ich einfach auch aufgeschrieben, das ist der Status quo und [...] Ich schreibe jetzt ganz konkret auf, um was es geht und was meine persönliche Meinung ist zu dieser Situation. Dass ich sie frag, Was ist Ihre Meinung?" (*I simply wrote down that this is the status quo and [...] I am now writing down specifically what this is about and what my personal opinion is on this situation. I ask her, what is your opinion?* – P_II_3:86)

By taking a stand, Philip takes responsibility and experiences self-efficacy. This is accompanied by a change in how Philip perceives himself: instead of being dependent on his advisor like a student, he perceives himself and his advisor as being on a more equal level. As a result, Philip feels more motivated and confident to complete his master's thesis.

Each decision that has to be made, starting with the topic and culminating in the objection to his advisor, is accompanied by an initial feeling of comfort. Encountering critical incidents uncovers underlying insecurities about how to proceed. This could also be read as a lack of awareness that is a stage on the path to becoming an academic writer. In each of the cases Philip describes, he is aware that he needs to make a decision. In the first two instances, his advisor makes them for him, which is described with rather aggressive terminology. In the third case, Philip makes a decision and takes responsibility for it.

On an epistemological level, Philip's self-perception as a knower as well as his perception of his advisor shifts. His self-perception shifts from being a passive recipient of knowledge who has to adhere to an authority figure (in this case: his advisor) to an active producer of knowledge (following Römmer-Nossek 2017; Römmer-Nossek/Unterpertinger/Rismondo 2019). Each of these processes is followed by a period of confidence and optimism in proceeding in the next steps of the thesis.

In this last instance, the model of master's supervision that fosters students' "safe independence" (Filippou/Kallo/Mikkilä-Erdmann 2017: 347), succeeds. Philip is able to make his "own decisions whilst having the supervisor at [his] side" (Filippou/Kallo/Mikkilä-Erdmann 2017: 347) within a carefully maintained equilibrium of autonomy and guidance.

Conclusions

Philip's case not only provides insight into the affective level of feedback, but also opens up the space to reflect on students' perceptions of feedback. In two out of the three instances described, the creation of 'safe independence' failed because the threshold was too high for Philip to pass. As a result, Philip felt abandoned, particularly with the last instance of feedback described in this paper. Rather than experiencing 'safe independence', Philip had to deal with feelings of insecurity. After the first two instances of feedback, he goes through a process of regaining ownership of his master's project. After the third instance described, he takes a different approach, not simply following his advisor's suggestions, but making a decision about how to proceed with his data analysis and thus feeling safely independent. This third approach marks a development from knowledge recipient to knowledge producer. Philip demonstrates what González-Ocampo and Castelló describe as the third strategy to deal with hardships in the supervision process where students develop active agency and seek long-term solutions to the problems faced (González-Ocampo/Castelló 2019: 302). As a result, Philip experiences self-efficacy.

Feedback in the master's thesis process can lead to critical incidents that can be handled in different ways. In Philip's case, there was a progression from avoidance to development through safe independence. However, as Philip's fluctuating emotions show, this could have been better supported by a clearer distinction between constructive feedback and guidance from the supervisor.

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