An Activity Theoretical Perspective on Writing and Supervising a Master's Thesis

Dr. Madhu Neupane Bastola

Abstract

For students as novice researchers, a master's thesis is the most demanding component because it requires them to display and learn research skills and work independently. Unfortunately, master thesis supervision has remained far from the limelight of university pedagogy. Drawing on mixed-methods research, this paper characterizes the writing and supervising of a master's thesis from the perspective of cultural-historical activity theory. It presents various components of the activity system and how the interaction between these systems creates conflicts and contradictions. The implications of such an understanding to effective master's thesis writing and supervision have been provided.

Keywords: activity theory, contradictions, master's thesis, supervisory feedback

Introduction

Writing a thesis is the climax of a master's degree with a thesis component (Biggam, 2017). For many students, it is the first piece of independent research work that demands them to be proactive researchers and, to some extent, contribute to the body of knowledge by means of creative originality (Paltridge & Starfield, 2019). It is often a demanding task for students irrespective of their language background. Consequently, students often perceive that "the amount of energy they spend on writing this work equals or outweighs the energy they spend during their whole studies" (Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015, p. 357). Supervisory feedback is at the heart of postgraduate research supervision (Bitchener et al., 2010). However, despite the growing number of master's students worldwide, supervisory feedback on master's theses is under-researched (Ginn, 2014, Neupane Bastola & Hu, 2023). Not surprisingly, graduate supervision has been little researched in the Nepalese higher education setting.

Although supervisors and students are primary stakeholders in the supervision process, the process occurs in particular cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts (MacKay et al., 2019).

Therefore, we need "to go beyond the individual act of feedback itself to consider the factors that influence feedback choices and student responses to these [choices]" (Hyland & Hyland, 2019, p. 12). In this context, it is crucial to examine supervisory feedback as a systematic activity involving multiple agents functioning at the individual, group, and community levels (Vehviläinen & Löfström, 2016). Therefore, this study draws on cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 2009, 2015) because it provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for examining the interaction between supervisors' and students' social, cultural, and historical contexts within which the activity of graduate research and education is embedded.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural-historical Activity Theory

Cultural-historical activity theory stresses the interconnection between social and individual processes in human learning and development (Kang & Pyun, 2013). The theory that was developed by Engeström (2015) based on Vygotsky (1978) and Leont'ev (1981) has evolved into three generations (Engeström, 2015), of which two generations have been described here. The first-generation theory was represented by Vygotsky's triangular model of complex mediated acts that incorporated: (a) subject (i.e., an agentic individual or group), (b) mediating artefacts (i.e., physical or symbolic tools), and (c) object (i.e., the overarching goal) (see Figure 1). It emphasized the interconnection between human agency, cultural means and objectives of human activities. The seminal model that connected human learning and understanding to sociocultural context laid the foundation and provided the basis for all contemporary variants of cultural- historical activity theory (Lektorsky, 2009).

Figure 1

Common Reformulation of Vygotsky's Mediated Act
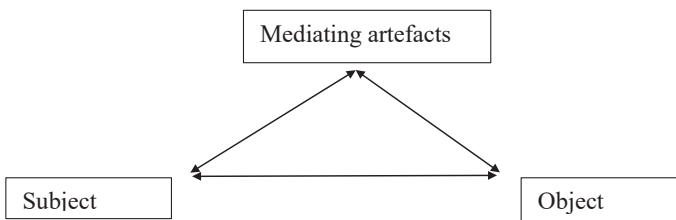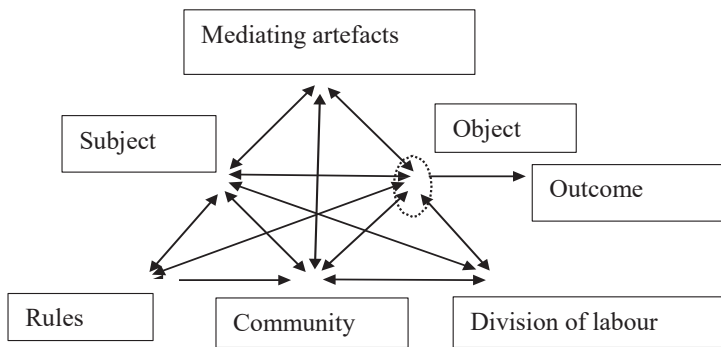

(Engeström, 2001, p. 134)

In the second-generation theory, Leont'ev introduced the concept of division of labour (i.e., shared responsibility among members) into the human activity system (Engeström, 2015; Lektorsky, 2009). Later, Engeström (1987) expanded the famous triangular model by adding three more elements (i.e., rules, community, and division of labour) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

The Structure of a Human Activity System

(Engestrom 2001, p. 135)

Components of an Activity System

As shown in Figure 2, an activity system is composed of six elements leading to an outcome: (a) subject, (b) mediating artifacts, (c) object, (d) rules, (e) community, and (f) the division of labour (Engestrom, 1987). The interaction between these components leads to an outcome. According to Roth and Lee (2007), "all of these theoretical units must be understood as threads that make a strand or fibre" (p. 199).

The subject is a participant in an activity system in which "the subject's agency, his or her ability to change the world and his or her own behaviour, becomes a central focus" (Engeström, 2014, p. 77). The object/motive is the purpose or function of an activity system. It refers to 'raw material' or 'problem space' for an activity system (Taylor, 2009). An activity is directed by its motive (i.e., object), which is the fundamental defining element of an activity (Leont've, 1981). The dotted circle surrounding the object indicates that "object-oriented actions are always, explicitly or implicitly, characterized by ambiguity, surprise, interpretation, sense-making, and potential for change" (Engeström, 2018, p. 15). Subjects use tools or mediating artifacts to attain their object by regulating themselves or their environment (Roth & Lee, 2007). In using tools and artifacts, "humans' activity assimilates the experience of humankind" (Leont'ev, 1981, p. 56). The subject's access to these resources is of crucial importance because "[t]he different means (tools, instruments) mediate the productive activity in alternate ways, leading, not surprisingly, to dissimilar outcomes" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 194). Vygotsky (1978) identified "tools as a means of labour, of mastering nature, and language as a means of social intercourse" (pp. 53–54). In other words, tools help human beings gain control of the outer environment, whereas signs (i.e., language) enable them to regulate others and themselves (Vygotsky, 1978). Human-made things, more capable social others, and communication are fundamental to the very existence of an activity system (Lei & Hu, 2019; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

An activity system is social in all its components as it always takes place in a community governed by its rules. Community refers to "the simplest social unit that has the characteristics of a social learning system" (Wenger, 1998, p. 5), which "the subject belongs to while engaged in an activity" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 2). There is a two-way relationship between the subject and the community, each constituting the other. The subject's relation to the object of the activity is mediated

by his/her relation with people in the community (Engeström, 2015). In the activity of thesis writing, "[b]oth supervisors and students are part of a network of colleagues, management, and rules, and both have private life and professional commitments to consider" (Wichmann-Hansen et al.,2012, p. 57). This community is characterized by mutual engagement, shared responsibility among participants, and a shared repertoire of resources. These participants relate to each other in terms of a shared object (Taylor, 2009) that is the completion of a defensible thesis. Human activity is collective by its very nature and is governed by a certain division of labour, that is, the division of tasks among community members creating different positions and responsibilities for the participants (Engeström, 2018; Lei & Hu, 2019; Yamagata- Lynch, 2010). Such a shared obligation implies that no single individual has total control over the activity. Rules constitute essential resources for situated actions. Given its collective nature and social significance, human activity is governed by specific rules that constitute a historically accumulated repertoire of procedures, contracts, processes, policies, norms, and conventions that determine the appropriateness of actions and interactions in an activity system (Lei & Hu, 2019). The existence of rules does not mean that the individuals will accept them as a way of life because "[r]ules, explicitly enforced, are   instances of the overt exercise of authority and tend to be resented" (Taylor, 2009, p. 235). However, it should be noted that although individuals are free to set their own goals, pursue their own interest, and, at times, may obviate shared norms and rules, "they cannot have norms and rules of activity that are only theirs" (Lektorsky, 2009, p. 79).

Contradictions

In figure 2, double-headed arrows connecting various components show that they are influenced by each other. There can be contradictions, that is, "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). Unlike formal logic, which states that two contradictory statements cannot be true at the same time, cultural-historical activity theory views contradictions dialectically as being unified in an activity system (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). For example, an activity is simultaneously individual and collective, and its object always has a use value and an exchange value. Such contradictions "need to be creatively and often painfully resolved" (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 371).

It is worth noting that contradictions can become the primary source of change and development (Roth & Lee, 2007) because "new qualitative stages and forms of activity emerge as solutions to the contradictions of the preceding stage or form" (Engeström, 2018, p. 17). The analysis of inner contradictions might help "gain insights into how larger sociopolitical and economic struggles mediate local practices, subjectivities, and therefore learning among [students]" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 204).

Unresolved contradictions, however, may give rise to unintended ways to circumvent the difficulty. For example, as Eco (2015) observes, if students are forced to write a thesis when they cannot manage sufficient time for this demanding task, they might opt for having their thesis written or submit someone else's already approved thesis as their own.

Cultural-historical activity theory has identified four types of contradiction (i.e., primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary) depending on where they appear in an activity system. Primary and secondary contradictions are inner to the given activity system, whereas tertiary and quaternary contradictions move beyond the activity concerned (Li, 2013).

Methodology

This paper is a part of a larger project that employed a mixed-methods design to collect data from in-text feedback on 97 thesis drafts, oral feedback on 89 proposal and thesis defenses, multiple-case studies with sixteen supervisor-student pairs, and questionnaire surveys involving 442 students and 102 supervisors. The sampling procedure involved three levels of selection - academic disciplines, supervisors and students, and supervisor-student pairs. First, four disciplines were selected following Becher's (1994) classification of disciplines. These four disciplines included Physics (hard-pure), Engineering (hard-applied), English Studies (Soft-pure) and Education (Soft-applied). The principle of maximum variation was followed to select the required samples from each discipline. Based on the information obtained from interviews and questionnaire survey, this paper discusses components and contradictions in master's thesis supervision from the perspective of cultural-historical activity theory.

Results and Discussion

Components of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory in Relation of Master's Thesis Supervision

In the section that follows, I briefly describe each of the components in the context of writing and supervising a master's thesis. Students and supervisors are identified by codes in this paper. The first letter in a code refers to the disciplines: P = physics, EN = engineering, Edu = English education, ES = English studies. Students are identified by "St", and supervisors by "S". The numbers distinguish students or supervisors within a discipline.

Subject

The supervisors and students with different motives engage in different activities leading to different outcomes. From this perspective, a student with the motive of developing research and literacy skills from writing a thesis engages in a different activity from the one whose primary motive is to complete a thesis as a requirement for graduation. Supervisors and students are the subjects of the supervisory feedback and thesis writing activities. They have different positions, plans, and responsibilities specified in the activity (Lektorsky, 2009). If the activities are to function well, they are expected to engage in intelligent analysis and mastery of situated supervisory activity and understand inherent contradictions therein: such as a supervisor has the responsibility to support and evaluate students' work and a student has the responsibility to learn and demonstrate   research skills at the same time (Engeström, 2015). Therefore, they need to exercise their agency to negotiate and develop intersubjectivity, "a shared understanding or shared focused attention" (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018, p. 70) for achieving the intended outcomes. According to Gunn (2014), "intersubjectivity is defined as the links made between two or more subjectivities through interaction" (p. 70). It is a mutual inner understanding rather than an outer form of communication. Supervisors and students may be motivated and feel responsible to take agency when they feel that they have control over their activity; such a sense of control makes them emotionally prepared to accomplish the object, whereas a loss of control may result in the avoidance of agency (Roth, 2009). Supervisors as well as students highlighted the importance of shared understanding during interviews and in their responses to open-ended questions, as shown in the following quotes:

> One of my students came to me with a draft proposal, and I provided her feedback along with the reading materials she had to go through before the final submission of her proposal. She was nervous and reluctant to work with me due to the reading and critical but constructive

comments. After realizing her anxiety, I gave her feedback step-by-step and guided through the research process without overwhelming her with the comments and feedback. She thought that once she accommodated my feedback, there would not be much work that would follow. At the beginning of her research, she thought that I was giving her a bit too much work. When she came towards the end, she realized how enlightening it was for her to go through the process and when she gave me the final draft, she told me that she actually understood the research process as she went through the series of feedback sessions with me. (EduS98-Questionnaire)

I have had a very comfortable time with my supervisor. His supervision, guidance, positive criticism and the way he motivated me to undertake my research work is the best thing ever happened to me. (ESt14-Questionnaire)

However, the lack of shared understanding created difficulty to both supervisors and students, as illustrated below:

Writing a thesis is not an ordinary work. It required a lot of effort and dedication. I had never had such an experience of writing a thesis before. It was very much difficult while collecting data for the thesis. I often happened to be misguided by the lectures and scholars. Their instructions and suggestions blurred and confused me and hampered my writing. (EduSt109-Questionnaire)

Object/Motive

The object of writing and supervising a master's thesis is the completion of a defensible thesis. The object (i.e., producing a defensible thesis) connects different actions related to thesis writing, provides motives, generates foci of attention, and gives continuity, coherence, and meaning to the activity. It also directs and regulates the respective supervisor and student and establishes the relation between them (Lektrosky, 1999). The supervisors and students with different motives engage in different activities leading to different outcomes.

The object of an activity has a double existence: as a material entity in the world (such as a completed thesis), and as a vision (i.e., a present or future mental image) (Roth & Lee, 2007). In this sense, the subject and object are so closely interrelated that "learning is equivalent to the mutual change of object and subject in the process of activity" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 198). In this regard, a Physics student who chose to write a master's thesis engaged deeply in the process and felt a great sense of achievement, as the following quote shows:

Thesis writing developed my writing skills and gave me a great sense of achievement. Sometimes I would feel proud of my writing and would tell myself "wow, this what I wrote. I could write something like this". It has also developed confidence in me. In addition, I have developed research skills, a high level of concentration, and been familiar with the ways of searching for materials on the Internet. I learned many technical skills. It developed independent study habits as well. In the coursework, if we do not understand something, we can ask others. However, in the case of research, this does not apply because our topic is different from that of others. Our friends and even supervisors may not be knowledgeable in our area. Most of the time we have to solve our problem ourselves. Therefore, it develops our independent study skills as well. (PSt1-Interview)

However, an Engineering student who had to write because the thesis was a compulsory

component expressed his frustration over the independent nature of work and seemed to have accrued limited benefits from the process:

> Students tend to work under pressure. My nature as a teacher and as a student differs largely. This is natural. As a teacher, we have a responsibility and want to keep our students on track. The students want to escape. This is natural. The whole semester is about the thesis, and they leave us free. If there were a class at least once a week, the students would meet their supervisor regularly. (ENST 3-Interview)

The quote reveals the student's limited agency in writing. Although, thesis writing is a collaborative process between supervisor and student, students need to be proactive to seek support and benefit from supervisory process.

The object "need[s] to be understood as simultaneously given, socially constructed, contested, and emergent" (Blackler & Gutierrez, 2009, p. 27) because it is shaped by historical practices and is "responsive to changes in material and conceptual tools, shifts in the division of labour, and so on" (Edwards, 2009, p. 198). Such a contested and emergent nature of object is evident in thesis writing because the target keeps on moving in the process as the learning progresses.

Tools/Mediating Artifacts

In the activity of thesis writing, although a final thesis, to a large extent, shows the student's effort, the availability and deployment of resources such as books, research articles, academic writing support, lab resources, and funding significantly determine the choices that students and supervisors can make, thereby affecting the quality of the final product (Gruba & Zobel, 2017). Several participants during interviews and in their response to open-ended questions highlighted that thesis research was compromised due to limited provision of the required resources:

> Due to the lack of financial support for research, students are avoiding lab-based research. (ES3-Questionnaire)

> Our lab is quite old and dusty, so while working on the research something gets damaged. Last time the weighing machine of ultra-sensitive capacity to measure about 0.0001 gram malfunctioned and we had to stop our work for one month just to repair it and use it again. (PSt2-Questionnaire)

Community, Rules, and Division of Labor

Thesis supervision is an activity that takes place in a community with some sort of authority holding it together through the process of coordination, cooperation, and reflective communication (Engestrom, 2009). Such authority in master's thesis supervision can be observed at different levels: university, respective departments, and the departmental research committee, supervisors, and students. For example, supervisors and students engage in different responsibilities to complete the process. For example, a thesis-writing student has the responsibility to familiarize themselves with the dissertation guidelines, select a suitable research topic with the help of supervisor, critically appraise relevant extant research, implement well-designed and informed methodology, present and interpret results thoroughly, draw appropriate conclusions, suggest implications, report research in a well-articulated and coherent manner, and contribute to existing body of knowledge (Biggam, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019). Supervisors are responsible for advising students in selecting a researchable topic,

formulating research questions and objectives, and designing methodology, providing constructive feedback on students' work-in-progress, and treat students fairly (Biggam, 2017). Both supervisors and students can have fulfilling experience when there is better collaboration between them, as shown in the following quote:

> Five years ago, I decided to allocate much time to thesis work to bring an improvement in quality. I thought if I read each thesis thoroughly in a year, and if the message goes to the students that their thesis gets to me, they will be serious in their work. Now I am very satisfied that students write most of the sections themselves. In the past, they used to hurry to submit their thesis; these days, they want to take time and ensure that everything is ok. I have really enjoyed this. They themselves are worried about the originality of their work. (PS2-Interview)

However, negligence of responsibilities leads to suboptimal performance and frustration to those who are responsible, as shared by an English studies supervisor:

> I rejected three theses of a supervisor, and I now have a hard time making these students work. What can we do? Supervisors overlook many things. If supervisors were serious, 80% of malpractices could be controlled from there. Even people on the research committee are not serious. They just ask students to submit their thesis even if they are not ready for viva. They are good at talking and even have a good public image, write books, publish articles but do not give time to students. Then students take that bad example and say, "If he can pass his thesis in that manner, why not I". (ES5-Interview)

As Biggam (2017) notes, thesis writing has its own formal as well as informal rules of the game. Formal rules include the maximum length and format (e.g., line spacing, font type and size, style of referencing, structure, etc.), formal submission cut-off date, disciplinary knowledge making practices, major areas to be covered in a thesis, evaluation scheme, and supervisor and student responsibilities. In some cases, formal rules are articulated in graduate handbooks, while in other cases there might be "lack of guidance and clarity" (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2011, p. 38). An engineering student complained about such a lack of clarity:

> The most unforgettable experience while writing my thesis has to be making sense of the incredibly vague and incoherent 'Thesis Report Guidelines', which the department constantly points students towards when there are any mistakes in submitted reports. For a department where the top priority of the comments during thesis presentation is to make your work as clear as possible, the guidelines that the students have to follow to make it clear being equivocal is ironical to the core. (ES4-Questionnaire)

There can also be informal rules, that is, unwritten processes and procedures that supervisors and students are expected to observe during the thesis-writing journey. An Engineering student revealed the violation of informal rules during viva:

> I infer simply a ceremonial vibe from any program titled 'Thesis Defense'. I have seen no student being given an actual chance to 'defend' their work. Instead, the Professors ceremoniously barrage the student with question after question. When any student tries to defend their work, they shut them out with even more questions without giving them any opportunity to respond. This is mostly preceded by them constantly interrupting the presentation time of 10 minutes allotted to the student. If a student is given 10 minutes to present their work, he should not

be interrupted for the entire 10 minutes. Otherwise, the whole concept of presentation is pointless. (ES46-Questionnaire)

Students are expected to "[e]ngage in meaningful discussion, seek clarification, probe perceived wisdom, [and] meet [their] deadlines" (Biggam, 2017, p. 18). In some cases, supervisor felt undue pressure from students lacking the sense of responsibility:

Sometimes, students do not work and invite others to threaten us. Once, one of the students I was supervising could rarely manage time. She usually used to send me messages on Facebook, which I tend to discard. Once she came to meet me and said that she wanted to complete her thesis within a week. I provided feedback in the first draft. The second time she brought the draft without many changes. I returned it. This happened in the third draft as well. Then her husband posing as a student leader, phoned and threatened me for not accepting her premature thesis. (ES4-Interview)

Irrespective of whether rules are explicit or tacit, the participants should play by the rules to negotiate their identity. However, contradictions may arise when such rules are not followed.

Contradictions in Master's Thesis Supervision

Contradictions are inherent to any activity system. The data revealed four types of contradiction in the activity of thesis supervision illustrated in this section:

Primary contradictions may occur within any of the six elements (i.e., subject, object, mediating artifacts, community, rules and division of labor) of an activity system because of the duality of the exchange value and the use value (Engeström, 2015; Engeström & Sannino, 2011). Emphasizing the importance of the process, Eco (2015) compares thesis writing to cooking a pig where "nothing goes waste" (p. 221). However, since students are always evaluated based on the product, they might value grade than the actual skills (i.e., use value) that the student develops in the process. It is necessary to have a balanced focus on the use value and exchange value. In this regard, there is a primary contradiction in the process or product oriented-ness of thesis writing. Supervisors shared that some students tend to value product over process:

Some students seem to be motivated to get a master's degree but not to conduct research in a true sense. Therefore, motivating students about the worth of research is the biggest challenge. (PS4-Interview).

Most of our students are interested in completing their work rather than learning. Sometimes we are pressured to allow students to submit their thesis for viva even if it is not ready. (EduS5-Interview)

Students are result focused and do anything for that sake. They do not take it as a chance to improve themselves. So, the exploration of knowledge is not the case for them. (ES40-Questionnaire)

In the case of thesis supervision, contradictions can be observed in the need for supervisory direction and the goal of student independence (i.e., division of labor):

They leave us free from the beginning. Without proper guidance we are left to work independently. (ENSt1-Interview)

Usually, our teachers say "do it yourself" but do not provide guidelines. They point out what is wrong in our writing but rarely provide clear guidance for improvement. We are writing the

thesis for the first time and do not know what we should do. However, the supervisors feel like it's very simple. (ENSt3-Interview)

Secondary contradictions occur between two elements of an activity system such as between an object and a tool (Roth & Lee, 2007). For example, the supervisor and students highlighted that the quality of students' thesis (object) was compromised due to the lack of their access to required tools (e.g., reading materials, lab resources, and funds):

> Because we are technical institute, we discourage survey research and emphasize experimental research. However, it is very difficult for students to conduct lab-based research due to lack of funding. This situation has diverted many students' attention to survey research. (ES3-Interview)

> Although there is suspicion of plagiarism in students' writing, there is no mechanism to identify such issues. (EduS3-Interview)

The participants also highlighted the contradiction between object of writing a master's thesis and rules. In this regard, an education supervisor highlighted the lack of rules to check unethical practices:

> In some cases, students writing thesis for others have been identified. However, the university has not taken any step to punish them. This has promoted a bad culture. (EduS3-Interview)

> Similar frustration was expressed by an English studies supervisor:

> I once asked the controller of examination, "why don't you take initiation to check such malpractices? Can't you bring the culprit to jurisdiction?" No one is paying attention to such issues. (ES4-Interview)

As mentioned earlier, although contradictions between different elements might generate disturbances and conflicts, they can also be potential sources of innovation if taken seriously (Engeström, 2018).

Tertiary contradictions may appear between a new and the previous mode of activity (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). According to Roth and Lee (2007), "They exist between the object (motive) of the dominant and the object of a culturally more advanced form of the activity" (p. 203). Form this perspective, such contradictions are the result of participants' resistance to change or difficulty in adjusting to new requirements. One engineering supervisor accentuated the importance of publication requirements for students:

> We require our students to publish their research in journals or present at national or international conferences. The aim is to have third-party verification of students' work. It has helped students to promote their academic writing skills. (ENS3-Questionnaire)

Although the publication of research can be an effective motive for the third-party verification of research, some students found it difficult to adjust to the new system, thereby highlighting the contraction therein, as can be seen in the following quotes:

> We have to write a paper as well. I have to submit my paper for publication. My mid-term will not be held before the publication. This is my last chance, and I have to complete it at any cost. (ESt3-Interview)

Quaternary contradictions may occur between the newly recognized central activity and its neighboring activity systems (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). Such contradictions make it necessary to

pay attention to neighboring activities such as those that produce instruments (instrument-producing activities), subjects (subject- producing activities), and rules (rule-producing activities) (Engeström, 2015). Such contradictions are abundant in writing and supervising a master's thesis. For example, the activities that prepare supervisors and thesis writing students (subject-producing   activities), in many cases, seem to be inadequate to meet their intended objective. Following quotes introduce such contradictions:

> Students do not have basic research and writing skills, which they should have developed to some extent at previous levels. We should not blame students only. We faculties ourselves lack skills on delivering fundamental ideas of research and writing to our students. (EduS1-Interview)

> Sometimes, I felt frustrated because of lack of proper knowledge of citations, references, and writing. At that time, I used to close my laptop and sleep for hours and days. (EduSt32-Questionnaire)

> As Amundsen and McAlpine (2011) notice, "[y]et as vital as supervision is to the individual academic and student, to the discipline and to the institution, most academics receive no formal or systematic preparation for this complex role" (p. 38). Students find it daunting because research writing that appears to be normal, universal, and objective for supervisors is very new for students who are rarely involved in research activities. Therefore, they struggle to figure out the approved ways of producing and reporting knowledge (Starke-Meyerring, 2011). In this regard, highlighting the lack of previous experience, one engineering student said:

> For those not having any previous experience, it is tough to write a thesis because there is no boundary in our work. It would be easier if supervisors created some boundaries. However, rather than training, they leave us free. We get comments but not guidelines to improve our work. That makes us feel low and lose our confidence. (ESt1-Interview)

Frequent contradictions are also observed between the thesis writing activity and the rule producing activity. For example, the maximum completion period for a master's program in Nepal is five years. During the interview and in their response to open-ended questions in questionnaire survey, supervisors complained that because of this rule, quite a few students disappear after their course and reappear towards the end of the fifth year to complete their study within their remaining candidature. In their views, the situation is exacerbated when the Office Controller of Examination issues notices to clear residues of students who have left their thesis incomplete. For these students, thesis writing just becomes a ritual, as reflected in the description of such students' thesis defense as 'samuhik bratabandha' (a Hindu ritual performed to mark the acceptance of a group of students by a guru) given by a professor in my study. In such cases, the graduation motive becomes so dominant that the learning motive of thesis writing almost disappears; supervisors and research committee members might be compelled to accept theses that do not meet the required standards.

Conclusion and implications

As described in the previous section, writing and supervising a master's thesis constitute a complex activity which has several components and inherent contradictions. In this regards, effective graduate research and supervision requires a synergy between different factors. The supervisor and the student are the subjects of the activity system and it is necessary for the student to strive to learn,

and the supervisor to promote students' agency in learning by taking each other's perspective into consideration. Although there can never be a complete overlap between their understanding, given their diverse backgrounds, experience, and roles (Engeström, 2018), greater overlap ensures better understanding (intersubjectivity), which ultimately leads to a better outcome. Greater intersubjectivity requires that the supervisor and the student understand each other's needs and perspectives, take thesis writing as a collaborative project, develop a sense of mutual respect and trust, and keep the student's learning at the center of the whole endeavor. The object of thesis writing is ambiguous and open to change, certain level of ambiguity tolerance is necessary for both the supervisor and the student.

The interactions between the supervisor and the student are influenced by multiple mediating factors (i.e., artifacts, rules, community, and division of labor). Therefore, effective graduate research and supervision requires the supervisor's and the student's access to relevant resources, clearly stipulated and effectively implemented rules, a supportive community, and responsible division of labor. From this perspective, graduate research and education involves multiple perspectives of subjects and community members. These multiple perspectives and numerous mediating factors may give rise to contradictions. There will never be an optimal situation in an activity where everything is entirely in place. Challenges, contradictions, and dilemmas will always be there. Such challenges can lead to innovation when there are meaningful negotiations and interactions. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on the practices and implement the lesson learnt to move the activity forward, that is, to enhance the writing and supervision of master's thesis.

References

Anderson, C., Day, K., & McLaughlin, P. (2006). Mastering the dissertation: Lecturers' representations of the purposes and processes of master's level dissertation supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*, *31*, 149–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572017

Amundsen, C., & McAlpine, L. (2011). New academics as supervisors: A steep learning curve with challenges, tensions and pleasures. In L. McAlpine & C. Amundsen (Eds.), *Doctoral education: Research-based strategies for doctoral students, supervisors and administrators* (pp. 37–56). Springer Science & Business Media.

Becher, T. (1994). The significance of disciplinary differences. *Studies in Higher Education*, *19*, 151–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079412331382007

Biggam, J. (2017). *Succeeding with your master's dissertation: A step-by-step handbook*. Open University Press.

Bitchener, J., Basturkmen, H., & East, M. (2010). The focus of supervisor written feedback to thesis/dissertation students. *International Journal of English Studies*, *10*, 79–97.

Blackler, F., & Gutierrez, K. D. (2009). Cultural-historical activity theory and organization studies. In G. Gutierrez (Ed.), *Learning and expanding with activity theory* (pp. 19– 39). Cambridge University Press.

Chizhik, E. W., & Chizhik, A. W. (2018). Using activity theory to examine how teachers' lesson plans meet students' learning needs. *The Teacher Educator*, *53*, 67–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2017.1296913

Eco, U. (2015). *How to write a thesis* (C. Mongiat Farina & G. Farina, Trans.). MIT Press.

Edwards, A. (2009). From the systemic to the relational: Relational agency and activity theory. In A.

Sannino, H. Daniels, & K. D. Gutiérrez (Eds.), *Learning and expanding with activity theory* (pp. 197–211). Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, *14*, 133–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080020028747

Engestrom, Y. (2009). The future of activity theory: A rough draft. In A. Sannino, H. Daniels, & K.D. Gutierrez (Eds.)*, Learning and expanding with activity theory* (pp. 303–328). Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (2015). *Learning by expanding* (2nd). Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (2018). *Expertise in transition: Expansive learning in medical work*. Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2011). Discursive manifestations of contradictions in organizational change efforts: A methodological framework. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *24*, 368–387. https://doi.org/10.1108/09534811111132758

Ginn, F. (2014). "Being like a researcher": Supervising masters dissertations in a neoliberalizing university. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, *38*, 106–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2013.836746

Gunn, V. (2014). Mimetic desire and intersubjectivity in disciplinary cultures: Constraints or enablers to learning in higher education? *Studies in Continuing Education*, *36*(1), 67– 82. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2013.787981

Gruba, P., & Zobel, J. (2017). *How to write your first thesis*. Springer.

Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2019). Interpersonality and teacher-written feedback. In K. Hyland & F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in Second Language Writing* (2nd ed., pp. 165–183). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108635547.011

Kang, Y.-S., & Pyun, D. O. (2013). Mediation strategies in L2 writing processes: A case study of two Korean language learners. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *26*, 52– 67. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2012.762012

Lei, J., & Hu, G. (2015). Apprenticeship in scholarly publishing: A student perspective on doctoral supervisors' roles. *Publications*, *3*, 27–42. doi:10.3390/publications3010027

Lektorsky, V. A. (2009). Mediation as a means of collective activity. In A. Sannino, H. Daniels, & K. D. Gutiérrez (Eds.), *Learning and expanding with activity theory* (pp. 75–90). Cambridge University Press.

Leont'ev, A. N. (1981). The problem of activity in psychology. In J. V. Wertsch (Ed.), *The concept of activity in Soviet psychology: An introduction* (pp. 37–71). M. Sharpe, Inc.

Li, Y. (2013). Three ESL students writing a policy paper assignment: An activity-analytic perspective. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *12*, 73–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2012.11.006

Löfström, E., & Pyhältö, K. (2015). 'I don't even have time to be their friend!' Ethical dilemmas in Ph.D. supervision in the hard sciences. *International Journal of Science Education*, *37*, 2721–2739. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2015.1104424

MacKay, J. R. D., Hughes, K., Marzetti, H., Lent, N., & Rhind, S. M. (2019). Using national student survey (NSS) qualitative data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, *4*, 315–330. https://doi.org/10.1080/

23752696.2019.1601500

Neupane Bastola, M., & Hu, G. (2023). From the other side of the desk: Supervisors' perceptions of supervisory feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 59*, 100965. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2023.100965

Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (2019). *Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language: A handbook for supervisors* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Roth, W.-M. (2009). On the inclusion of emotions, identity, and ethico-moral dimensions of actions. In A. Sannino, H. Daniels, & K. D. Gutiérrez (Eds.), *Learning and expanding with activity theory* (pp. 53–71). Cambridge University Press.

Roth, W.-M., & Lee, Y.-J. (2007). Vygotsky's neglected legacy: Cultural-historical activity theory. *Review of Educational Research*, *77*(2), 186–232. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654306298273

Sadeghi, K., & Shirzad Khajepasha, A. (2015). Thesis writing challenges for non-native MA students. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *20*(3), 357–373. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2015.1063808

Starke-Meyerring, D. (2011). The paradox of writing in doctoral education: Student experiences. In L. McAlpine & C. Amundsen (Eds.), *Doctoral education: Research- based strategies for doctoral students, supervisors and administrators* (pp. 75–96). Springer Science & Business Media.

Taylor, J. R. (2009). The communicative construction of community: Authority and organizing. In A. Sannino, H. Daniels, & K. D. Gutiérrez (Eds.), *Learning and expanding with activity theory* (pp. 228–239). Cambridge University Press.

Vehviläinen, S., & Löfström, E. (2016). I wish I had a crystal ball: Discourses and potentials for developing academic supervising. *Studies in Higher Education*, *41*, 508–524. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.942272

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Wichmann-Hansen, G., Bach, L. W., Eika, B., & Mulvany, M. J. (2012). Successful PhD supervision: A two-way process. In M. A. R. B. Castanho & G. Güner-Akdogan (Eds.), *The researching, teaching, and learning triangle* (pp. 55–64). Springer Science and Business Media.

Yamagata-Lynch, L. C. (2010). *Activity systems analysis methods: Understanding complex learning environments*. Springer Science & Business Media.

Dr. Madhu Neupane Bastola is a lecturer at the Central Department of English Education, Tribhuvan University. Currently she is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong. Her research interests include English for academic purposes, graduate research and supervision, supervisory feedback, and corpus-assisted discourse studies. She has published in these and other areas in refereed and high-impact factor journals, including English for Academic Purposes, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, and Journal of Second Language Writing.