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Estimating Dissertations and dissertation theses – Questions and considerations

Introduction

in this article we focus in dissertations in Finnish Science universities and in Art universities. The diversification in field of dissertation and dissertation thesis has made the subject many sided and it has also caused problems in estimating the thesis and artistic dissertations. This article is based on research made about postgraduate studies and dissertation thesis estimating processes.

Focusing in estimation and its problems

The field of research has changed and diversified in Finnish (art)universities both focusing the subjects and the methods used in research. Getting conversant with the dissertation theses made during the last few years has raised many questions about the essence of science and art, about the research processes, about estimating the final products (thesis) and about the whole process of estimating and giving the statements about the dissertation. In this article we focus in some of the artistic doctoral thesis in Finland.

Estimation (asses, asidere in Latin) means originally sitting beside another person or following and learning together with another person. the function of estimating is making possible and developing of rational action. Estimating is sometimes also seen as evaluating which originally means “to raise the value up for consideration” (Karjalainen 2000, 5). Estimation has a lot of positive charge, it means understanding, which will help the author to develop his work or achievement even further. The meaning of estimation is to give feedback from the work done and on the other hand to give guidance, kind of lighthouses and landmarks for further achievements. In focus of estimation there is the ability to see factors as they are in reality, but also to see the things the way they should be (compare with Djupsjöbacka 2004, 2). Often the estimation tends to change into negative critics and at the same time it loses its original meaning.

Beside the traditional dissertation thesis there has occurred a new style to make dissertation in art universities: dissertation product or production which vary quite widely depending about the field of art in question. Quintessence is to make difference in art making, research of artistic work or researching art in common. In many fields of art the highest level (doctoral) thesis include both artistic work and research of processes in making art. We live in a time where the traditions are not necessarily offering much help in new types of estimation. Often we have to create new ways of estimating when we are facing new types of doctoral dissertations and thesis.

For example the artistic department of Sibelius-Academy focuses mostly in artistic work when heading to doctoral dissertation. This means for example public performances in concerts, publishing recordings, performing compositions in public or publishing new compositions. In developer education a dissertation may include many different sections. These may be concerts, recordings, composition editions, teaching demonstration lessons, teaching materials, developing equipment or computer device. In addition to these a dissertation should always include a written report on the development focus including a clarification about different parts of the dissertation forming an entirety.

Questionnaire based research work, exact measurements and experimental arrangements are made nowadays alongside with essayistic literature style or conversational style reports where the interpretation or making the recapitulation is left to the reader. As it is new doctors have been achieved by singing, instrument playing or physical movement (dancing). Often has the art universities doctoral thesis expanded, confused or broken the traditional limits of a dissertation or thesis depending on the point of view of the estimator. New experiments have been made especially in art universities which concentrate in artistic doctoral thesis. (Hellman & Honkavaara 2000, B1). Also the discussion about the postgraduate thesis, dissertations and estimating them has been quite active lately in Finland (Kiljunen & Hannula 2001; Tuminen & Kurki 2001; Kotilainen 2004).

Trail-bazing postgraduate thesis has been made for example in Sibelius-Academy artistic line dissertations since the year 1990 (Sariola) and in the so called developer education (Vapaavuori 2001; Kukkamäki 2003, Djupsjöbacka 2005). For example in an artistic dissertation there are five public concerts with different programs required. Many of the dissertations are connected in working life and developing the occupational practices much more closely than traditional scientific research work and this makes them more motivation for the postgraduate student than the traditional research style dissertation. Students have a strong practical interest. This is the way that theoretical and practical interests get together, science and artistic work will get together alongside with new "hybrid dissertation thesis" which will be estimated using new methods and practises.

For example the music performance situation has a strong emotional impact which a traditional researcher seldom, if ever, will be able to achieve in his work. This emotional impact is not only included in the performance situations but it is also present in every day artistic work where the artist must keep continuously in contact with his own emotions and feelings. When a musician is playing even one note from his instrument there are strong emotions involved immediately. To a musician an echoing note is never a neutral acoustic phenomenon; it always has a specific flavour

and emotional charge. If a musician loses his emotional relationship with the sound of his instrument his music will not live longer. A musician must keep sensitive and spontaneous, sometimes even impulsiveness is a better quality than emotional coolness or coldness. (Lähtenmäki 2001.) In other words "If we know the Latin word for a rose, but we don't know the beautiful perfume it has, we have lost something quintessence of the essence of a rose. (Eisner 1981; Sava 1982; 1998). Varto (1993,164) says that the whole western history would probably be quite different the great philosophic thought of Descartes "I think, therefore I exist" would have been "I sense, therefore the world exists".

Traditionally the field of research has been divided into scientific or artistic approach. Are these two, science and art somehow opposites of each other? We declare that they are not judging by the processes involved. Someone may see them as dualistic opposites, but still they may be very interactive feeding each other (Eisner 2002; 2004). In both art of science making and artistic work (or researching artistic work) inventiveness, creativity, inspiration and going into ecstasies over the work are needed together with rational thinking and strict discipline. Also Irrationality, waiting and fulfilment, stopping and existing belong to the essence of achievements. No thing may grow in a field which is being ploughed all the time. Especially in making art we may see the irrationality, the hidden knowledge and skills, the harmony and the chaos, the incompleteness and the mysterious riddle keeping inside us all – and luckily so.

When a professor's post is being established there must be clear definition about the scientific or artistic validity of the post holder. The future will show if there will be third validity for example in Sibelius-Academy developer education field or in some other art universities. This would be one way where the dialog between scientific and artistic work and research would give new points of view for both areas (Sava 1998). As well good artists as good researchers share the uncompromising, systematic, criticalness, intuitiveness and highly developed routines in their approach for achievement (Lähtenmäki 2001).

Could a doctoral thesis in future consist of administrative elements beside the scientific or artistic thesis? Could, for example Jorma Ollila (head manager of Nokia), include something from his great career as a administrative and commercial leader in a doctoral thesis focusing in economics? What about pop music artists, could for example Sting or Rolling Stones become awarded a doctors status for their music? What is the situation of an artist who may create a new ism in his paintings? What about the Danish computer nerds who created the Skype-programme which enable the free telephone calls to all over the world? We could go on with these examples forever. We also may ask if a doctoral status will be given in future for a team or group of workers or just to single persons.

At this very moment there is a doctoral thesis being estimated in University of Helsinki which is made by two persons together. How is it differing from thesis a medicine with a group of researchers writing articles in a high level journal and put their names as the first writer one after another? The changes in established practices make the estimating and criterions difficult. One of the main problems is the lack of clear criterions or them being non-specific. The abstraction level of the criterions is also one of the problems. We may simply say that scientific thesis should be estimated using scientific criterions and artistic thesis should be estimated

using artistic criterions. The third group would be scientific-artistic thesis, which should be estimated using both criterions. The scientific and artistic criterions (for example in artistic thesis of Sibelius-Academy) have already been established (Kurkela 2000, 17-19; 2001, 38-50).

The estimator of an artistic doctoral thesis is sailing between two extreme ends, between integrated and standardized criterions and those which are not integrated and standardized. The estimating is always better and more objective when the criterions are detailed and standardized. The estimator has very little or not at all possibilities for personal estimating. When the criterions are implicit or undefined, the doctoral candidate will be dependent of the mercy of the estimator. On the other hand we may ask if the strict criterions will be narrowing the choice of the many-sided topics of the thesis. Are we giving too much value to the traditional research which can be more easily estimated with old criterions?

Standardized, integrated
criterions

Not standardized, unintegrated
criterions

Less subjectivity in -----the estimator-----
estimation

More subjectivity in
estimation

Picture 1. Estimator in field of criterions.

Both art universities and in science universities share the idea of doctoral thesis including the deepest expertise and skills in the area of the thesis. This is the same requirement whether the focus is in traditional research, artistic series of concerts, art productions or development projects. The estimators are all persons who are (in ideal situation) qualified and publicly recognized specialists of the focused area, who have the deepest knowledge and who should be able to estimate and recognize the best of their own special area research. Though, we must remember that these specialists are still human beings with all their faults and mistakes.

Thoughts of the contents of the estimations of thesis

It is most interesting to estimate the contents and relationship between the estimation and the thesis itself. What are the facts and criterions behind the estimation process? What is the relationship between the contents of the thesis and contents of the estimation? How is the estimator evaluating the thesis in the whole research focus? Part of the estimators is giving detailed comments while some others mention only main lines. A lot of difference is seen in the estimator's way of writing down the criterions of their estimation as well as the good and bad points of the work. Each estimator must speculate the relationship between the details and larger entities. It is also important to notice the common criterions of the faculties or departments and their relation to the estimation. In many cases the content of the estimation is not in good connection between the situation of the dissertation. Sometimes the content of the estimation is quite negative although the grade given is good.

Usually estimators give their own estimation of the thesis. The use of two independent estimators is to guarantee the objectivity of the estimation. It is obvious that the estimator conception about the thesis becomes better and more valid with more and more experience of the estimation (Rantala 2000, 163-176). We may ask whether there should be more estimators for each thesis to make the estimation more objective? What will happen if none of the estimators sees the ingenuity of the work? Is this system guiding postgraduate students to direction where no big scientific or artistic breakthroughs can be made. In most of the cases if the thesis is not accepted in one university, it is not accepted in another university either.

Sometimes the estimators have a different conception about the quality of the thesis from each other. Often foreign estimators estimate thesis higher than estimators from own land. Also the final grade may be stated different than the estimators wish by the university faculty meeting. It is also seen that some estimators are more instructive and tutorial than the others. It seems that the more the thesis differs from the traditional style by the methods or by the contents the more negative critic the thesis will get publicly. Some of these kind of works are ahead of our time and some of them evolve necessary discussion about the limits of the research itself. The real value of many of these new style theses with unusual paradigms may be perceived after many years from publishing.

When we read postgraduate researches we often come to compare the difference between a licentiate's work and a doctoral thesis. It is not exaggeration to say that some of the best pro gradu-level works could be estimated as doctoral thesis if they would be compared without telling estimators the real level of the research. It is also visa versa: some of the worst theses could be estimated as pro gradu level works. There are also differences between the universities in the level of dissertation theses.

Focusing ethical questions

Estimating postgraduate thesis includes always also ethical questions. It is presupposed that the estimator always is a real specialist of the subject area, but is the statement actually true? Are the estimators always selected ethically right judging by their conceptions of research or conceptions of art? What is the real meaning of the estimator's gender, worldview or possible friendship with the professor guiding the thesis? What is thought about formation of different schools inside scientific thinking? The estimation may be dependent of the estimator's way of thinking and sometimes it may lead to bitter negative estimation. This may occur for example when a quantitatively oriented estimator starts estimating a qualitative thesis. We must ask whether the orientation of the estimator should always be same as the thesis. We also should ask what would be the criterions of being disqualified in estimating a thesis.

If there are a lot of corrections suggested in estimation, we should always consider his ability to be the opponent in the dissertation if he at the same time has given guidance for the candidate's thesis. This is true in many cases in Finnish universities: the opponent is in this case sometimes judging his own work. In a small country like Finland almost every specialist knows all the same area specialists in different universities. This sometimes makes problems in selecting the estimators for theses.

There has also been discussion about estimators discussing the thesis with each other while the estimation process. Would it be suitable to give a joint estimation about a thesis as it is done when estimating the pro gradu works.

Theses and comments

Some questions have been raised in discussion for several years: how does the profit responsibility, principles of effectiveness and ideas of market economy effect in dissertation theses and the estimations of them. Will the universities in future buy the best and fastest candidates of dissertating? The pressure to producing a lot of doctoral thesis is a fact in science and art universities of today. This has effects on the quality of dissertations and the whole work of the scientific unity. (Uusikylä 2004; Niiniluoto 2004; Riepula 2004; Lajunen 2004.) It would be most expedient to create clear, open and detailed criteria for estimating new types of theses (Ruismäki 1996, 95-106; 2001). Also the education for the estimators is totally missing today. In this field there is a lot of work to be done.

One possibility is to move in a system of estimation which would be common in all universities using only three levels of grades: failed – accepted – accepted with appraisal. The last grade would be given to a thesis which would be internationally valuable. Many universities have already started to move towards a system with less grades categories in their estimations. One possibility would be that the estimators would give a short estimation about the thesis or a wider guiding estimation for extra charge. It would also be possible to attach a self reflecting estimation of the postgraduate student as a part of the estimation process. The legal protection of the candidates declares that the candidates would know the criteria of estimating beforehand.

The main lines of improving the estimating processes could be:

- a) Lightening the estimating processes
- b) Standardizing the estimating processes,
- c) Creating new detailed criteria for different areas
- d) Focus more in guiding and advising estimations

Developing the estimation in new style dissertations

In the end we look at the new style Sibelius-Academy Developer education (and also other departments) projects and vocational postgraduate studies theses and their criteria. The theses must show high level professional specializing and ability to produce new methods, applications or practices together with the knowledge and abilities required in using them. In these new project type theses the estimating processes and criteria are slowly being formed and they are more difficult to determine than in traditional doctoral thesis. Still there are some criteria which could be used in estimating the production type thesis, Developer – education thesis, vocational thesis or a production development product –type thesis. They are:

- * The meaningfulness of the Project (usefulness and necessity)
- * novelty value and innovativity

- * publicity and criticality
- * usability as a means to professional practices
- * application values, exploitability, transferability
- * level of difficulty and ambitiousness
- * productization and market value
- * national and international significance
- * manysided reflection about the work

A new type of dissertation thesis may offer a postgraduate student new possibilities of choices and it may be suitable for music and other arts subjects orientation giving place to deepening the professional abilities and understanding in a good way. On the other hand strictly vocational thesis may lead in narrow and one sided professional orientation, negativity to theoretical thinking and low level extrapolativity.

Connecting production type theses with scientific and artistic ones offers a lot of challenges to guidance and estimating processes of a doctoral thesis but it also gives new meanings to the whole doctoral status. Also the polytechnics postgraduate theses have raised a lot of discussion in universities. Probably universities will be forced to reconsider their focuses in light of vocational perspectives and integration. This will ensure the multiplicity of research where both scientific and artistic areas may be living in perfect harmony supporting each other side by side.

Because the doctoral thesis is one of the criterions of university results it is most important that the guidance and estimating processes of the thesis must be in focus of all activities. It is important for the legal protection of the guiding professors and postgraduate students. This will also confirm the status of the doctoral degree in professional area as well as the whole university teaching and learning (Suomen yliopistojen rehtorien neuvosto, 2000). This also requires strong focusing in postgraduate students guidance processes (Engenström 2004).

The main principles in estimating research and scientific work must be innovation, openness, publicity, truthfulness, criticalness and autonomy or independence. Especially the quality of postgraduate theses must be focused in future more, not only the amount of theses. This will be the only way to raise the level of artistic or scientific research and this way it will be for good to universities as well as to the whole society.

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