

Experiences from Group Supervision within an Alternative Path for qualifying University Teachers at a Doctoral Level

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An alternative qualification path in higher education in Norway leading to doctoral level is built upon approval of a portfolio, by a commission. Only a few universities or colleges have a teaching programme for this path, which can be compared to those for the traditional doctoral programme. Mostly university or college teachers on the “portfolio path” apply for approval of their qualification level on the basis of their teaching experiences, research and development, which are gained over years. This is a lonely path, even more lonely than the individual work with a doctoral thesis.

This article describes group supervision for supporting and facilitating a group of candidates’ qualification processes on this “side-track”. The value of group supervision based upon experiences over four-five years as a means to build a community of sharing, feedback, inspiration and support is obvious. Through peer learning and supported by a team of mentors in a collegial setting the candidates are empowered to become not only learners on their own individual path, but also, as a side-effect, able to establish a collaborative culture of sharing and discussions of common tasks. The project themes are linked to various aspects of their teaching tasks, and thus each one of the group participants is faced with a variety of teaching and learning challenges and discussions on how to understand and deal with various problems. In this way their learning path can be considered a contextual teachers’ training in an explorative and developmental way. The candidates’ own experiences of group supervision might also be transferable for more group supervision with students, and as such influence the educational culture itself.

Keywords; group supervision, teachers’ qualifying processes, career paths, portfolio documentation, and collective sharing cultures

Introduction

Supervision is an essential part of all doctoral training programmes. In ordinary programmes, leading to a PhD, the supervision is mostly performed on an individual basis through meetings between the candidate and a mentor. This is also the case in Norway.

In the Norwegian university system there is an alternative path leading towards qualifications at a doctoral level without gaining a formal PhD, on the basis of a portfolio judged by a commission. This path opens for applying for a position similar to those offered on the basis of a doctor's degree. Some university colleges offer specific programmes for supporting the applicants on their own personal qualifying path, others do not. The alternative path is often experienced as a lonely one, not least because it is a quite new path still without any strong traditions. The criteria for the approval of the portfolio as similar to the level of a doctor's degree, but different, is vague and with a variety of possible interpretations. For candidates following the alternative path supervision is even more important than for those following structured PhD-programmes.

In such a situation we have presumed that group support can be of great importance. In this article we will share experiences and discuss the role and methods of group supervision for a group of candidates within the alternative career path at one of the Norwegian university colleges.

The Career Paths of Norway

Different from most other countries Norway by legislation opens for choosing among two paths for qualifying as a teacher at superior level in higher education, either through a traditional doctor's degree or a promotion based upon a portfolio application.

Figure 1;

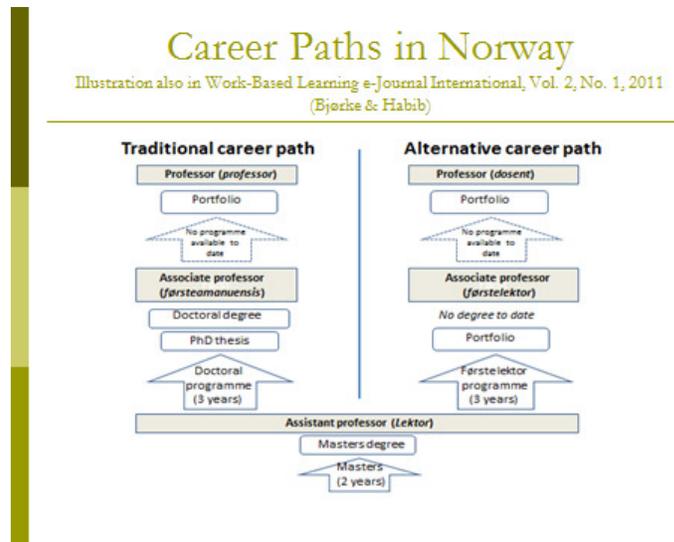


Fig. 1. The two career paths for academics in higher education in Norway, from Bjørke and Habib (2011) Work Based eLearning Journal, Vol. 2, No 1.

These two paths are formally equivalent, but procedurally very different. The traditional doctor's degree leads to the position of *associate professor* (Norwegian; 'førsteamanuensis'). Thereafter you can go on qualifying for the title of *professor*. This career track builds upon a typical research oriented approach, with the doctoral degree as an entry point. The alternative path, in first instance is leading to the title '*førstelektor*' (which is officially also translated to *associate professor* in English). Thereafter one may be qualifying further as a '*dosent*' (which is officially translated to *professor* in English). This path does not have a dissertation as a necessary entry point.

Following the alternative path the candidates might apply for a teaching position similar to associate professor,¹ documenting through a personal portfolio;

- extensive research and development work, which in quality and scope is equivalent to the workload and the level of a doctoral dissertation,
- particular qualifications in teaching or other educational activities, and relevant pedagogic qualifications based on formal training or teaching and supervision.²

¹ The formally suggested translation of the titles in English are the same. But in Norwegian the title for the parallel qualifications is 'førstelektor' – "first lecturer"/"senior lecturer".

² Regulations of 9th February 2006 on employment and promotion in teaching and research, section 1-5.

- Until now we find only a small number of university colleges offering a programme for teachers who want to go for a portfolio documentation to meet the requirements for qualifying along the alternative path. Most candidates are just applying for promotion based upon their individual documentation, without any support from supervision or facilitating programmes.

An example of structured group supervision for teachers on the alternative path

Our experiences are derived from working with a group of qualified teachers without acknowledged superior competence working at bachelor level at one of the smaller university colleges in Norway. The intention is, through group supervision, to facilitate the teachers' individual processes to become able to prove their qualifications at a doctoral level through the alternative path.

Without a systematic supervision, the run for the alternative path might easily become a lonely one. Questions to be discussed in this article are; How can the group become a supporting team and how to make this team an inspiring meeting place for learning and personal development? And can such a group have an effect upon the collaboration with staff by building a lasting platform for a learning culture?

The group structure and its activity

The group has at present six members, guided by a team of two mentors. As the group has been ongoing for several years, adding members over time, the group has become a community of teaching and learning. In this setting the group members are teachers themselves and now go into a position of being "students". The group members all have several years of practice as teachers in a nurse education programme, as well as experience from work life practice. This means that the group-members have a common frame of reference from their background. The two mentors both have considerable experience from teaching at health education programmes at university level, even though they do not have a nurse background themselves. In this way the total supervision situation might be considered having the character of an interprofessional learning situation.

The group typically meets six times per year. Before each meeting the members have to submit a written document on their ongoing developmental work related to their current teaching projects. This document is scrutinised by the mentors and the peers in advance and comments are presented orally at the group meeting. The group meetings normally last for one day, enabling every participant to get their work extensively commented on at each meeting.

Examples of projects which the group work on might be analysis of processes of internationalization, developing reflection-in-action in technical oriented teaching programmes, developing peer-learning in placement settings or analysing curriculums as a basis for renewal. Examples of written documents forwarded for discussion are; plans for educational development projects, educational material, evaluations of pedagogical work, reports on work that has been done and manuscripts on possible scientific publications.

A group based supervision

The group supervision is designed as a mixture of a peer learning or a collegial assistance framework through feedback from the colleagues and facilitating feedback from the mentors. The peer learning process means that everyone in the group is paying interest into their fellows' projects, commenting on and giving feedback to each other. The feedback process represents training in constructive criticism in a structure of collegial assistance. Thus we try to stimulate collective guidance as shared learning to ensure double learning, both as a candidate and as a commentator. In this way the peer learning process might be described, as quoted by Boud and Lee (2005; 203), as "networks of learning relationships, among students and significant others". As these authors further point out, with peer learning as 'distributed' learning, learners might have a variety of didactic possibilities without necessary involvement from teachers and supervisors. In our case, the peers are commenting each others' works in our group meetings, as colleagues and equals, as well as they might be giving each other feedback in the preparations of written texts in between the group meetings.

The participants are working as colleagues at the same college and the discussions among them also take place between the group meetings. Thus we claim that this process makes a

platform for developing a continuous and critical peer based approach to educational development work at the college.

Supervision in depth and width

As the requirements for qualification according to the alternative path emphasize teaching and developmental work, the activities in this group have been closely related to the present teaching of each of the participants. This ensures that the group concentrates on developmental challenges relevant for practicing as university teachers. The candidates are stimulated to enter developmental projects more than just reviewing and refining current teaching.

In contradiction to much of the traditional supervision of doctoral candidates which is individually based, this particular supervision is group-based. The topics presented by the participants might represent great variations, although belonging to the bachelor curriculum. Taking part in the supervision group therefore makes the professional horizon wider instead of narrowing it. The group activities also give training in commenting on the work of colleagues, which must be regarded as an additional value by itself for university teachers in continuous need for developing their own competence as critical facilitators for students. Approaching the work of colleagues aiming to criticise it in a constructive way also gives training in critical reading of works outside their own core competence, which is a necessary skill for a qualified academic teacher. In this way the professional curiosity and the capability for generic thinking are stimulated.

Characteristics of the alternative career path - directions for ways of qualifications

Comparing supervision in the traditional doctoral programmes with the supervision given to teachers on their individual qualifying activities for an application along the alternative path is not easy. Some distinctions are needed. The doctoral programmes are research learning programmes. The goal is first and foremost to reach the standards of research work on a certain academic level in specified fields. For teachers on the alternative path, the goal is competence in high level teaching and to do research-and-development work in the field of teaching or within a professional work life context.

The challenge is to equalize the theoretical aspects of traditional research work, with an academic based research-and-development work within practical contexts as high level teaching or professional work.

The fact that the legal requirements acknowledge theory-building as equivalent to process-oriented developmental work, but still claim an analytical approach to the work, is essential for those following the alternative path. The need for excellent qualifications for teachers in higher education is obvious. Qualifications obtained through individual and personal processes, working with various projects out of an interest to improve teaching and learning or professional practices is of another kind compared to traditional research work going in-depth of a specific theme.

Teachers' tasks in higher education are not only lecturing or supervising students. As higher education is changing both in the knowledge expansion, in ways of teaching as well as the students' expectations and needs, this situation also influences the teachers' role. Teaching and learning today have changed from knowledge delivery, to new teaching paradigms, emphasizing student-centred and students' own activities. Northedge (2003) points out the challenge of meeting those diverse needs, referring also to the variety of students' backgrounds, what they bring to the courses and what they need.

Teachers' responsibilities are widened, including planning, development and evaluations, as well as expectations of adding new knowledge to the field. Continuous evaluation and self-evaluation are parts of the tasks expected by competent teachers. Through a portfolio-documentation the teachers following the alternative career path are expected to prove qualifications for a superior teacher role and for doing research and development at a high level.

Group supervision as a means to support teachers in developing a high quality teacher role

Group supervision might have both intended and additional effects. The intended effect is to give each participant individual feedback and inspiration to go forward with his or her work. The projects the teachers are involved in are mostly developmental work, with the intention of building up knowledge about processes, results and best practices in the area of

teaching and learning. This is not a learning situation with a pre-determined curriculum. To develop best practices might mean to explore, do describe, to intervene and to be part of the processes, while studying them. The format of this process is close to action-research. (Coghlan and Brannick, 2004).

The supervision therefore takes the form of a facilitation process, without controlling or correcting goal. Supervision at this level has the intention of being door-opener for the candidates (teachers) to explore and develop their knowledge and understanding of the situation, the teaching context, and to build and pass on new knowledge to the field. The channels for publishing new knowledge, results or experiences might have a wide range, through ordinary channels for academic publication and presentation as well as bringing new knowledge back to their own staff or own institution.

As Hattie and Timperley (2005) point out, supervision or facilitation might address three feedback questions; *Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next?* These three questions address the dimensions of *feed up*, *feed back*, and *feed forward*, as they express it.

The supervision of teachers involved in their own qualification, without any given curriculum, but driven by an interest of exploration and knowledge-seeking, will include all these questions. As a teacher starts on his or her path the first questions raised as an idea of a project is brought up, the question is; will this project-idea be of a kind that might be of value for my qualification process? Feeding up and forward is needed. And as the project is developing the two other questions come up – how am I going and where to next?

The feedback in relation to a given standard, a given curriculum or a certain goal is less important for the candidates in our group. Discussion might arise around the knowledge base, but not with the intention of controlling the acquired knowledge. In Hattie and Timperley's terms, the questions of feeding up and feeding forward are of greater importance.

The group participants might, as previously mentioned, bring along a written text, a plan for their activities, a didactic project, a draft for a report, an article, an essay or sometimes just an idea. These elements for further work constitute the substantial basis for the feedback in the group discussions. Hattie and Timperley describe a model of feedback to enhance learning which might focus on four different levels; the task level, the process level, the self-regulation level and the self-level. The three feedback questions might be related to all of the four levels. At a task level comments may concentrate on what to do and where to go. At a process level comments are aiming at discussing how to do it and whom to include. The self-regulation related comments try to enhance the candidate's ability to become responsible for own development and develop as an autonomous scholar.

Even though Hattie and Timperley (2007;102) claim that feedback at self (or personal) level is rarely effective, we will argue that in a group setting it may be a means to build up a collective agreement around the role of a colleague with competence in giving honest and critical comments to peers. We look upon this as a core competence for participants in vital and continuously developing learning cultures (Lave and Wenger 1991).

As mentioned the group supervision might give various additional effects. One of those might be the possibility to compare one's own work to that of their peers, as Boud and Lee (2005; 510) underline.

The value and outcome of group supervision

The experiences from our group supervision, so far, are that the support given to teachers aiming at a higher qualification level helps them to meet the requirements given. They are being supported as well as challenged in their research and development projects in their processes of building up their own portfolios. In addition, as the supervision is given in a group format, among colleagues, they are also given possibilities to establish and sustain a professional community of discourses. The process-oriented character of their work makes their profiles more conclusive than result-oriented. This collectiveness gives another qualification profile than the individual doctoral programmes do.

The participants claim that being in a student-like position themselves gives an additional experience that is of value for them as practicing teachers. These parallel processes seem in this way to give a double result. Their own experiences of group supervision might be transferable for more group supervision with students, which in the next run could have an impact on teaching traditions. We might add that a possible result could be that this alternative career path might influence on the educational culture itself.

One precondition for the inspiration that characterizes the group climate is also to be mentioned; as each group member brings along texts for the sessions each one's work is addressed. Taking turns, each person is seen and heard and her work is acknowledged by the rest of the group as well as the mentors. This is fundamental for a good group function. Another factor is the cooperation of the two mentors; in an intensive one-day session the feedback process is energetic. One mentor fills in and deepens the other's arguments, in a dialogical way, making the feedback a dance of arguments.

The group function as a team, with the members exchanging experiences in a peer learning process, the support they give each other are helping them out of the lonely, individual work, and they are building up a "we"-identification on this alternative path. The collective supervision situation give support to their individual processes, and the process is ongoing. The "we"-identification not only include common experiences from a series of group meetings, but also the understanding of their own common methodical approaches in action-oriented developmental projects.

It also seems that the group is about to establish a new culture, a set of properties, which is showing that academic teaching also is a question of widening the horizon, not only penetrating the depths.

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