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Multivoiced supervision of Master's students: a case study of alternative supervision practices in higher education

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This article describes and analyzes an alternative supervision model at the Master of Education Programme at the University of Bergen aimed at improving research supervision. A three-pronged approach was introduced, combining supervision groups, student colloquia and individual supervision. The supervision groups consisted of two supervisors and their Master's students, while the student colloquia consisted of the same students without teachers. The case study of this alternative supervision practice is based on sociocultural perspectives on knowledge and learning, combining theoretical concepts from Lave and Wenger and Bakhtin. The three arenas were found to supplement one another: while student colloquia provided personal support, and served as a first filter for ideas and texts, the supervision groups provided multivoiced feedback on student texts and enculturation into the discipline. Individual supervision provided more specific advice. Critical factors for supervision groups were regular attendance, mutual obligation, structure and clear rules.

Introduction

Supervision has been identified as an important factor (Phillips & Pugh, 1994), even as 'the most important variable in a successful research process' (Economic and Social Research Council, 1991, p. 8). Research supervision has conventionally been conceptualized as an individual activity in the humanities and social sciences, and the literature has to a great extent focused on the supervisor–student dyad. At the same time several studies have revealed the vulnerability of the individualized supervisor–student relationship (Zuber-Skerrit & Ryan, 1994; Burgess, 1994; Delamont *et al.*, 1998; Lee & Green, 1998; Yeatman, 1998; Dysthe & Breistein, 1999; Deem & Brehony, 2000). Overdependence on the supervisor, lack of ownership and mismatch

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of personalities were just some of the problems reported by both students and supervisors. A major issue has been the difficult balance between authority and independence. Several studies have raised the issue of authority and power, as well as what kind of identity the writing and supervision relationship fosters in students (Conrad, 1994; Leonard, 1997; Lee, 1998; Johnson *et al.*, 2000). Most international studies deal with postgraduate supervision, but the issues mentioned above are the same in Master's programmes where there is a sizeable research component. This is confirmed in two major Norwegian research studies of graduate supervision, one at the University of Oslo (Lauvås & Handal, 1998) and one at the University of Bergen (Dysthe, 2002). In this article 'graduate' is used to refer to the Master's level and 'postgraduate' for the Ph.D. level.

The Norwegian Master's degree takes two years to complete after a three-year Bachelor's degree. The Master's has traditionally included an extensive research project (approximately a 100 page thesis), and many students have experienced problems finishing within the expected time limit. After the Quality Reform of Higher Education instituted by Parliamentary Proposition 27, 2002 (St. meld. 27), completion on time has become a high priority of the universities. To meet this challenge there has been an increased focus over the last few years on improving supervision practices both at graduate and postgraduate level. Since individual supervision has been the main tradition at Norwegian universities, one of the measures taken has been the adoption of contracts that more clearly define the roles and responsibilities of both students and supervisors, together with workshops for supervisors (cf. Pearson & Brew, 2002). This article reports on an alternative model.

It was decided to change the Master of Philosophy Education programme at the University of Bergen from a sole reliance on one-to-one supervision by utilizing the potential in group supervision and peer review. A previous research study (Dysthe, 2002) had documented weaknesses in individual supervision, but also recognized a more collective supervision tradition, particularly in experimental fields, where the Master's students were integrated in research teams and where ongoing research was constantly being discussed, including the Master's students' projects. This approach was seen by both students and supervisors as an important supplement to individual supervision. Since the discipline of education had no tradition of integrating Master's students into existing research teams, we developed a three-pronged supervision approach consisting of:

1. supervision groups (2–3 supervisors and their Master's students);
2. student colloquia (same students, no supervisors);
3. individual supervision.

The general aim of the alternative model was, on the one hand, to counteract the negative effects of students having to rely on just one person for supervision, and, on the other, to investigate the potential of group learning in the research and writing processes. The particular aims were threefold: (1) to improve students' academic writing; (2) to provide support and help students solve the problems they encountered in the different phases of their research; and (3) to help students finish on time.

This article presents a case study of this alternative model for the Master's student cohort of 2001. The students attended a full-time programme, but a majority of them also worked part-time. The purpose of the present study was to find out how the combination of the three arenas worked. We needed to gain a deeper insight into the processes we had facilitated in order to get a more solid knowledge base for decisions about what should continue and what changes needed to be made in our supervision approach.

Theoretical background

Sociocultural theory perspectives: Lave and Wenger

In this article we view graduate and postgraduate supervision as a vital part of the process of enculturation into a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). We endorse a social theory of learning where participation in a community is the crucial aspect, and where identities are formed through shared practice and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). Students belong to many communities of practice. They aspire to membership both in a wider academic community, where values and practices are shared across disciplines, and in a specific disciplinary community. One of the most critical practices to master in order to gain such membership is writing (Lea & Street, 2000).

Students enter these communities as novices. Lave and Wenger use the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' to characterize the process by which newcomers become included. Legitimate peripherality is a complex notion, involving relationships of power. It may be an empowering position for students when they are given space and opportunity for more intensive participation, but disempowering if kept from participating: 'peripherality, when it is enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement' (1991, p. 36). Learning implies being able to perform new activities, tasks and functions as well as to master new understandings, all interwoven in the social practice:

Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. ... Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. ... To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities. ... Thus identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53)

From such a view of learning mastery does not reside in the supervisor, but in the way the community of practice is organized and how the learning resources are structured. From their case studies, Lave and Wenger draw the conclusion that apprentices learn mostly in relation with other apprentices and that near-peer relations are very productive.

In their trajectories from novices to full members, students need enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members. The key issue is *access*, 'access to a wide

range of ongoing activity, oldtimers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation' (1991, p. 101). Newcomers need access to three dimensions of practice: 'mutual engagement with other members, to their actions and their negotiations of the enterprise, and to the repertoire in use' (Wenger, 1998, p. 100). Newcomers, in other words, need to get involved in the activities of the academic community, to engage with the technologies of everyday practice in order to get to know what counts as knowledge and how to think, argue, write and speak within this culture. For Master's students this includes doing and evaluating research. Mastering the practices is an ongoing process where productive activity, for instance, writing drafts, conducting and analyzing interviews, discussing in groups, are dialectically related to understanding.

Lave and Wenger's distinction between a 'teaching curriculum' and a 'learning curriculum' (1991, pp. 97–98) is also relevant for our case. While a teaching curriculum means directive teaching or supervision in the form of prescriptions about how to do things, a learning curriculum means that situated opportunities for participation are provided where learning is *mediated* by the teachers and others. The relation between discourse and practice is crucial in understanding learning in communities of practice. Lave and Wenger distinguish between talking *about* a practice from outside and talking *within* a practice, and they conclude that newcomers need both: 'For newcomers then the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation' (1991, p. 109).

Supervision is a communicative activity and needs to be based on theories of language and communication. Although Lave and Wenger are concerned with the importance of language, they have not developed any specific theory of communication, and we have therefore chosen to include *dialogism* in our theoretical basis. Dialogism is not only compatible with situated learning, but is fundamental to socio-cultural perspectives on learning, for instance, the idea that meaning is created in the interaction between dialogue partners. We will focus specifically on two concepts from the Russian theoretician of dialogue, Bakhtin, namely, 'multivoicedness' and the 'internally persuasive word'.

Dialogism

'Dialogism' as a term is sometimes used narrowly to refer to Bakhtin's dialogue theories, but is more often used about a combination of theoretical and epistemological assumptions about human action, communication and cognition (Linell, 1998). Dialogism is often contrasted to monologism, because it represents an alternative analytical perspective and epistemology: where monologism sees knowledge as a given, dialogism sees knowledge as emerging from the interaction of voices (multivoicedness); and where monologism is concerned with transmission of knowledge, dialogism is concerned with the construction and transformation of understanding through the tension between multiple perspectives and opinions (Nystrand, 1992; Linell, 1998). When learning is understood as participation in a community of

practice, dialogic activities take place, both on an interpersonal level in specific situations and at the level of sociocultural activities which transcend situations. Accordingly, supervision practices include, on the one hand, specific dialogues between the candidate and the supervisor, or between group participants, and, on the other hand, dialogic activities involving, for instance, institutional routines, the use of linguistic resources and repertoires, and ways of thinking, talking and acting. This article deals with attempts to change both interpersonal dialogues and the situation-transcending practices.

At the core of Bakhtin's use of 'dialogue' is the co-construction of knowledge through multivoiced interaction (Wertsch, 1998). This is important for our understanding of 'feedback'. From a dialogical point of view, feedback must involve active participation from the student in order to foster the growth and transformation of understandings necessary to be enculturated into a community of practice. Here we find Bakhtin's concepts 'authoritative' versus 'internally persuasive discourse' useful (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 342–348). Bakhtin's concept pair offers a relevant distinction for discussing supervision practices, because it combines an understanding of a person's dialogic appropriation of social languages and the ways outside forces assert their influences. The authoritative word demands that the listener acknowledges it unconditionally. It binds the listener regardless of any power it may have to persuade him or her internally; it does not demand free reflection about its content, but 'our unconditional allegiance' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). In contrast, internally persuasive discourse is affirmed by the power of its argument 'as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with 'one's own word'' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). Ideally supervision provides internally persuasive discourse, but research has shown that it is often perceived as 'the authoritative word'. In order to make the discourse internally persuasive, Lave and Wenger's distinction between talking *about* and talking *within* is important to keep in mind.

To sum up then, our three-pronged model of supervision is grounded in sociocultural theories of knowledge and learning, and more specifically in Lave and Wenger's theories of what it takes to become full participants in disciplinary communities of practice. Their concept of legitimate peripherality underlines the importance of how novice Master's students gain access through growing involvement, and the three dimensions of such practices—*mutual engagement*, *negotiation* and *practices of repertoire in use*—offer a useful lens for looking at how supervision practices are institutionalized. Dialogism provides us with a theoretical understanding of the importance of co-construction of meaning in group feedback as well as in the dyadic supervisor–student relationships; an understanding that is deepened through the way Bakhtin contrasts authoritative and internally persuasive discourse.

The case study

The alternative supervision model in our Master of Education Programme spans three cohorts of Master's students. This article is based on a study of the supervision practices during 2001–2003.

Table 1. Overview of the cohorts of Master's students

	1. (2000–2001)	2. (2001–2003)	3. (2003–2005)
Master's students admitted	20	20	20
Withdrawals	3	4	3
Participants in project	12	11	16
Individual supervision only	5	5	1
Participating supervisors	5	5	7
Number of groups	2	2	3

Many of our students were initially sceptical about collective activities. A way of creating a feeling of community among the students is to facilitate the students' knowledge of each other's research ideas and projects, something which develops mutual engagement. The following measures were therefore implemented: (1) students shared their project ideas in the writing workshops during the first semester; (2) students wrote a theory-based article on a topic relevant for their research project and presented it orally for everybody; and (3) students exchanged written reflections about their project plan at several stages.

The case study is based on the experiences with Master's students who started in autumn 2001 (cohort 2). An external evaluation of cohort 1 (Handal & Monsen, 2003) had pointed out the need for clearer goals and more structure for students and teachers. Based on this evaluation, in cohort 2 we established clearer rules and routines, required more commitment from students, and included group supervision in the Master's programme's teaching plan.

The number of participants in the alternative supervision model for cohort 2 was 11 students and 5 supervisors. It could be claimed that with such a student-supervisor ratio, any pedagogical experiment was bound to be a success. Our intention is not, however, to report a success story, but to explore the potentials and problems in collective forms of supervision.

Twenty students were admitted to this cohort, but four withdrew early. Most of the Master's students were adults with a job in teaching, counselling or the health professions. Many of them continued working part-time while studying, even though the Master's programme was advertised as full-time, and this resulted in a high withdrawal rate. Participation in the supervision arenas was voluntary for students, but those who agreed had to sign a contract of regular attendance. Time constraints were the reason given by the five students who chose individual supervision only.

The three supervision arenas

The student colloquia

The colloquia were organized by the students themselves from the first semester (each year is divided into two semesters). The participant students were organized in two colloquia groups of five and six students respectively. The groups functioned as

a weekly forum for discussion of texts and tasks connected to the courses in educational theory and research methods. In the second semester they were reorganized to match the supervision groups, and, even though they continued to be used for discussion of theory and journal articles, they gradually became more focused on the project plan, and later on the research process and thesis writing. They met regularly once a week during the first year, more 'on demand' during the second year.

Supervision groups

The participant students were organised in two supervision groups consisting of the same students (as in the student colloquia) and their supervisors. The first group had five students and two supervisors, and the second six students and three supervisors. Writing workshops based on principles of process writing were integrated in the students' study programme before the group supervision sessions were established. We also included systematic training in feedback strategies. The students had chosen their research topic, but had not formulated research questions before the supervision groups started at the beginning of the second semester. The discussions and feedback in supervision groups were strictly project-based, and catered primarily for the intellectual side of students. The focus of the supervision groups followed the progress of student research projects, starting with the elements of the project plan and ending with the chapters of the thesis. The groups met every third week in the second semester, and once a month in the third and fourth semester.

During each supervision session only two or three students delivered texts for comments (focus students). Before each meeting the focus students sent their texts to the rest of the group with a note explaining the type of text and what they would like feedback on. At the beginning of each session the focus students were advised not to respond (explain or defend) to the comments made. The other group members were advised to formulate their comments concretely and cautiously, and to refer to positive elements in the text. Each session had a student group leader whose assignment was to ensure a clear structure, and to divide the time equally between the focus students. The supervision process ended with reflection about positive and negative aspects of the session.

Individual supervision

The 11 participant students received individual supervision in addition to being involved in the aforementioned groups.

Method and design

Research questions

The overarching research question in the case study was: How did the combination of student colloquia, supervision groups and individual supervision function as support for Master's students' research and writing process?

More specific questions were:

1. What characterized each of the three supervision arenas?
2. What were the potentials, problems and special contribution of each arena?
3. What was important for good feedback in the groups?
4. What were critical factors for this model of supervision?

Data collection and analysis

The research focus of the case study is the students' perceptions and experiences with the alternative supervision model. The research questions as well as the theoretical perspective adopted call for a primarily qualitative approach which aims at revealing the way the research participants construct their reality.

The case study relies on data gathered from three sources:

1. Internet-based student questionnaire (December 2002): a questionnaire was sent via email to the 11 participant students; 6 students responded. The questionnaire was divided into two parts:
 - (i) closed-ended questions that addressed practical and organisational sides of group supervision, with the purpose of registering the routines followed (text form and submission, feedback rounds, leadership);
 - (ii) open-ended questions that addressed two main areas: (a) group supervision—the following themes were explored: context and practical organization, student activity and feedback type, feedback content, student vs. supervisor feedback, function and quality; (b) the three supervision arenas—the themes investigated were differences and similarities in the arenas, the contribution and influence of each. The answers were summarized and grouped using the criterion of resemblance.
2. Semi-structured individual interviews (December 2002): one student from each of the two groups was interviewed. The interview questions built on the results of the Internet-based questionnaire, and focused on the following themes: group relations, feedback, and contribution of group supervision and student colloquia. The interviews were taped, transcribed and analyzed qualitatively, drawing on Kvale (1997). The data was first divided into parts and grouped under each of the three themes. A meaning condensation and meaning categorisation followed.
3. Recorded supervision group sessions from one of the two groups: four sessions (November 2002, January, February and March 2003) were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using a phenomenological method of analysis based on Giorgi (1985). The focus of the analysis was on the main features of the group supervision process and its influence on the students' writing process. A separate article based on the results of this in-depth analysis is being published (Samara, 2006).

Validation

This is a study conducted in our own culture. Dysthe was involved both in the planning and the practice of the alternative supervision strategy. Westrheim was involved in the evaluation of the whole Master's programme, which was done after each academic semester, where the Master's students evaluated the programme in an open forum discussion. Samara, however, who made a separate investigation of the supervision practices, was a newcomer to the department in the autumn of 2003, and had no stake in the approach taken. This was regarded as important in order to counteract 'cultural blindness'.

The case study uses multiple sources of data gathering, in an effort to triangulate the data. Moreover, a preliminary version of this article was circulated to all the participating students, who commented in writing, particularly on the importance of the colloquia and how they functioned. Student comments are included in this version. The authors also made an oral presentation of a draft version of this article to the teacher group, in order to get feedback on interpretations and conclusions.

Findings

Overview

The organization of the three arenas and what took place in each is presented in Table 2. Table 3 provides an overview of the contribution and the feedback characteristics of each arena. Student colloquia primarily provide students with a safe environment, where the role of emotions in academic work is acknowledged. Group supervision provides the most important arena for enculturation into the thinking and discourse of the discipline, and individual supervision provides the necessary quality assurance.

Contributions of each supervision arena

Student colloquia. The students reported the colloquia as a place for exchanging experiences, letting out frustrations and talking about both personal and research-related problems. One of the dilemmas of the colloquia was how to balance the need for support and the need for critical resistance that they all felt. 'It is important to be able to formulate your frustrations in words and put them in perspective by sharing them' (Informant 1).

The colloquia are described as a *first filter* or *sorting arena* for ideas and texts, which later on might be presented in the supervision groups in revised versions. A quotation from one of the student interviews illustrates this:

When I feel very uncertain, I prefer to bring the issue or the text up in my student group first. This is a very safe place as we have got to know each other well on a personal level, as well as our projects, and they will tell me if I am way out. I then feel confident presenting another version in group supervision, where I know I will get many comments. (Informant 1)

Table 2. Overview of the three supervision arenas

	Student colloquia	Supervision groups	Individual supervision
Participants	4–6 master students	2–3 supervisors and their Master's students (4–6 in each group)	1–1
Frequency of meeting	Once a week in semester 1 and 2; later 'on demand'	Every third week in semester 2, once a month in semesters 3 and 4	Varies with stage of project; typically once a month
Topics/content	Theoretical and methodological concepts First stage of written drafts: free-writes, think texts, first drafts. Personal problems and frustrations	Written drafts, maximum 3 pages 1. semester: project plan 2. semester: data collection, methods chapter, analysis 3. & 4. semester: chapter by chapter thesis writing	Late versions of drafts. Longer texts (drafts of chapters in thesis) Specific problems relating to research methods, theory, writing.
Organization and format	2 hours All students could ask to present problems or submit text. Oral conversation Feedback Discussions	2½ hours Text from 2–3 students each time. Texts distributed 3 days ahead Feedback Discussion	Varied. Typically written feedback, discussed face to face.
Structure of session	Loose, informal structure Gradually more structure	Strictly structured Clear rules and routines Clear leadership	Varied
Purpose	Personal and disciplinary support	Project progress, help with specific, common problems, inspiration	Progress, advice, quality assurance of thesis

Table 3. Overview of contributions of the three supervision arenas

	Student colloquia: 'safe haven'	Supervision groups: 'enculturation'	Individual supervision: 'quality assurance'
Contribution	Fellow students provide: ● a place to share problems ● a place for emotions ● support ● encouragement	Supervisors and peers provide: ● mutual engagement and participation ● multivoiced discussions ● ways of thinking and arguing ● disciplinary knowledge ● negotiation of divergent voices	Personal supervisor: ● engagement in project ● specific advice ● sharing responsibility ● criteria and progress ● quality assurance
Characteristics of feedback	● Low threshold (easy to share) ● Real readers: 'I don't understand ...' ● Peers are good at: reformulation questions confidence building	● High threshold (anxiety of sharing unfinished text) ● Supportive ● Critical ● Many suggestions and new ideas ● Text models ● Models for peer response strategies	● Focus on overall structure and on all levels in text ● Focus on revision: multiple versions of same text ● When is the text 'good enough'?

The student colloquia provided a structured space where the students shared their fears of failure and their desires to succeed, their frustrations and their joys. It can be argued that the colloquia had an important function in forming the students' academic identities, because in this safe and nurturing environment they learnt that the mixture of fear and desire, of failure and success that each of them thought was particular to them, was a common denominator instead of an individual problem. Learning to handle conflicting emotions, and to turn potentially debilitating fear and ambitions into working energy, seems to have been very important for the progress of the students, just as Lee and Boud (2003) have shown in another academic setting. The emotional side of carrying out a research project and writing a thesis is usually privatized and often under-communicated, but the colloquia clearly changed this.

In the interviews students said that the atmosphere felt safer than in the supervision groups, and they emphasized that the mutual trust students developed among themselves in the colloquia was also an important prerequisite for the good functioning of the group supervision. The informality, openness and personal commitment to one another that developed in the student colloquia, over time, turned out to be invaluable to the students themselves. They emphasized that only by being participants in both types of group were they able to get to know one another well enough to develop the close ties and commitments needed to combine criticism with support.

Supervision groups. Multiple and divergent voices were the feature of these groups that was highlighted by the students, and it seems to be the very basis of the power of the group. According to the students, supervisors and students contributed in different ways; the first by providing solid academic knowledge and the latter, for instance, by discovering new sides to established knowledge:

The difference between teachers and students is that the teachers possess deeper subject knowledge. But on the other hand students come up with new thoughts ... we can read a book and ask new questions that those who have been reading it [book] for the past 10 years do not ask. (Informant 2)

The combination of these two types of contribution, as well the exchange of ideas and perspectives, makes group supervision an arena for discussion and creation of new understandings: 'It is the interaction itself that is most productive, the sparks that are produced, the discussion that initiates new thoughts neither of us had before. It is some kind of magic that happens there' (Informant 2).

The supervision groups served many functions, but we have chosen to highlight multivoicedness and disciplinary enculturation as the most central. There is clearly a connection between the two. The students were newcomers in the discipline, but their voices were heard alongside those of the full members. Because there were two or three supervisors present who commented on a great variety of student texts, and took part in discussions ranging from methodology and theory to discourse practices, students were constantly exposed to how representatives of the discipline reasoned, argued and gave feedback on academic writing. Students appreciated this: 'Actually I prefer when there is disagreement among the supervisors; this helps me think better and more critically' (Informant 2). Another student's suggestion for improvement of the supervision groups was: 'Teachers should disagree more often'. We think this indicates that group supervision helped students see disagreement as productive instead of threatening. With just one supervisor, the students are exposed to fewer intellectual challenges, and they do not experience first hand the heterogeneity of a disciplinary community, which is also an important part of enculturation.

The supervision groups emphasized mutual obligation and regularity. Our groups consisted in principle of two supervisors and all their Master's students, but participation was voluntary for students. There was, however, a strong contractual obligation of regular attendance once they did sign up. Students unanimously reported that the strong obligation to attend and to participate actively, both in the form of giving constructive feedback to peers and in the discussion, were important success factors for the supervision groups. The organization, the structure and the leadership made it impossible for 'free riders' to survive. We found mutual obligation, regularity, strategies and routines and clear leadership to be essential factors in the functioning of the supervision groups.

Individual supervision. Even though we have not focused specifically on the individual supervisory relations, we will nevertheless highlight some tendencies. There is no doubt that individual supervision played a central role. An important function of the

individual supervisor was to secure the quality of the thesis. As reported in the questionnaire, the students particularly appreciated that their supervisor: (1) had a particular engagement in their project; (2) shared the responsibility for progress; (3) pushed them to work; (4) gave feedback on long texts, often drafts of chapters and the structure of the thesis as a whole; (5) highlighted quality criteria; and (6) told them when the text was 'good enough'.

The students felt that the supervision groups and colloquia took the onus off the individual supervision meeting. Our findings indicate that: (1) less time was spent on individual supervision; (2) it was not so critical if the chemistry between student and supervisor was not perfect; and (3) controversies were less threatening. It can be argued that students were less vulnerable if the individual relationship did not function since they had two other supervision arenas.

Feedback

Characteristics of feedback in groups. Feedback on written text was the central activity of the supervision groups. Most of our Master's students have worked for some years in a profession, most in teaching, special education and the health services. Their strength is practical workplace experience, while their weakness is often in academic writing and in giving feedback. Students argued that 'Training in response strategies was necessary in order to break old feedback patterns and help us find a balance between free dialogue and systematic and prepared feedback' (Informant 1).

The students in our study have the advantage of being forced into sharing early draft versions, and of being in a group context where peers do the same. In the questionnaire we asked the students to list the factors for good response in group contexts. Table 4 presents a summary of the results.

It is interesting that trust, safety, sensitivity and respect top the list. This tells us that feedback has a very strong relational component that cannot be disregarded in any supervision context, particularly in groups. All the students also underlined the importance of good preparation for the group sessions, and their annoyance with fellow students and supervisors who just improvised feedback. Because of increasing

Table 4. Master's students' list of crucial factors for good feedback/response in groups

Trust and safety	Important in order to dare to reveal problems and accept suggestions
Sensitivity	Equally important for teachers and peers. Sensitivity towards other students, particularly the one in focus
Respect	(a) Mutual respect, regardless of intellectual capacity (b) Respect for the dynamics of the group process
Preparations	(a) Good knowledge of the text. Preparation is a key factor (b) Understand the needs of the writer
Structure and strategies	Agreed upon routines and strategies avoid wasting time
Dialogue	Dialogical response ideal in a group setting, but time consuming
Engagement	Characteristics of engagement needed in response-giving: personal; positive; critical

student expertise, peer feedback became just as important as that from the supervisors. The conclusion is that both are indispensable:

We have learnt so much about giving feedback and today I carry this with me as tacit knowledge—I don't have to think about it ... The teacher may offer deeper feedback because of his long experience and knowledge. But I miss a fellow student who is absent just as much as a teacher—both kinds of feedback seem equally important. (Informant 2)

But, in spite of increasing expertise, the students reported that basic elements in good feedback are easily forgotten, particularly foregrounding also the good qualities in a text. The quotation below is from one of the student interviews, but was supported in informal conversations with other students:

Our biggest mistake has been to forget the importance of positive feedback ... We do not have a culture of praise, and we become so focused on what needs to be changed in a text; we need to make a mental note: Remember the positive feedback ... without praise I lack the motor which gives me energy to do the work ahead. (Informant 2)

Discussion

In our discussion we will look at our findings in light of the perspectives and concepts outlined in the theoretical section.

Master's students' legitimate peripheral participation

Students are on the periphery of the disciplinary communities of practice. They are not expected to gain full membership during their two-year Master's programme, but certainly to gain a more central position. One of the major problems for students, however, is 'gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36). The supervision groups gave our Master's students regular opportunities to participate in a forum where theoretical perspectives, methodological questions and practical know-how of the craft of research were being discussed at a level where they felt comfortable to contribute. They thus became involved in activities and tasks that are central in the discipline. Giving and receiving feedback *in public*, in particular, seems to have been an empowering and identity-forming experience. With two or three supervisors present, they had access to authoritative, but sometimes divergent, voices of the community. It was important for the students' involvement, however, that they had their own colloquia and that they were in the majority in the supervision groups. The varied participation opportunities provided by the three supervision arenas together can thus be seen as an enculturation process into the discipline's community of practice, through *mutual engagement, negotiation in the joint enterprise* and *shared repertoires* (Wenger, 1998).

Mutual engagement in peer projects and thesis writing as a joint enterprise

The joint enterprise for our students was the common goal of doing a qualitative research project and writing a thesis. Mutual engagement presupposes knowledge of

each others' project. In an individualistic research tradition the autonomy of the researcher has been held in high esteem. The training for independence started with the Master's project (Lee, 1998), and the accepted truth has been that Master's students needed to concentrate all their time and effort on their own project. Our supervision approach challenged this view by asking students to invest time in reading and discussing peer projects from the very beginning, and gradually the students developed mutual engagement and genuine interest. One of our clearest findings was that *students benefited from involvement in fellow students' projects*. Many students were surprised to find that reading and discussing peer projects was so useful for their own. Engaging in peer projects turned out to be a bonus, not a waste of time, but the point we want to make is that, when the goal is the production of individual theses, such mutual engagement does not happen by itself.

Research work and academic writing at Master's level are not isolated activities but deeply embedded in the disciplinary culture. Learning the craft is therefore not primarily dependent on skills training, but on enculturation and appropriation of the thinking and discourse in the discipline (Pearson & Brew, 2002). The colloquia groups set the premises for the joint enterprise by functioning as an arena for the students to get to know each other, create a safe environment and try out their texts. The response the students received on their texts, especially in the supervision groups, gave them access to what a Master's thesis in the particular discipline should be like. This goal was common for all; the text genre the students had to master, the way of thinking, doing and analyzing research, and the language used became the students' shared repertoires. The students became active participants in these repertoires, through alternating between the role of the supervisee and the supervisor by giving feedback to texts following clear rules and routines.

The importance of repertoires

Repertoires, interpreted as shared rules and routines, are another aspect of communities of practice, according to Wenger (1998), and our study has confirmed their importance for successful supervision practices. On the one hand, they were necessary for the effectiveness of the work in the groups, primarily in the supervision groups, but also to a certain extent in the colloquia. On the other hand, the repertoires functioned as identity markers, and helped create a feeling of belonging to a community. According to Saugstad (2004), a recent trend in supervision in higher education is the informalisation and deritualisation of group functions. Our emphasis on structure and rituals goes against this trend, and we draw the conclusion from our case study that this is necessary to make social forms of learning function well.

Multivoicedness, dialogue and co-construction of knowledge

The dialogic co-construction of knowledge is a strong, though sometimes underrated, element in academic knowledge production (Rommetveit, 1996, 2004). Our Master's students' surprise at discovering the learning potential of discussion and dialogue in

the supervision groups tells us that there is a need to develop new forms of academic practice where there is room for multiple voices. According to Bakhtin (1986), the juxtaposition of voices is not enough; it is the tension between diverging voices that creates the potential for new understandings. This seemed to be confirmed by the way students talked about their experience in the groups. In both the colloquia and supervision groups, the students received response on their texts which came from various perspectives, at times conflicting. This interaction of voices enabled students to critically reflect on the various perspectives and appropriate the discipline's languages and practices. The supervisors provided the norms of the discipline and expert positions that were not always in agreement. When students see that teachers disagree, they feel more confident to do so themselves, and they learn this by participating in the community of practice, not by being told. This fosters internally persuasive discourse.

Individual supervision moving from 'the authoritative' to 'the inner persuasive word'

An indirect effect of the supervision groups was that dialogue became firmly established as the communicative mode between supervisors and students in the groups. We do not have sufficient empirical material to conclude that this influenced individual supervision in the direction of dialogical supervision practices, but it seems likely. In a previous study of supervision the monological model seemed to be the default model, not necessarily because the supervisor was authoritarian, but often because the student lacked self-confidence and sought authoritative answers (Dysthe, 2002). As our students moved between the three supervision arenas, they were able to try out alternative positions.

Our student informants clearly stated that they gained self-confidence from taking part in colloquia and supervision groups, and that this helped them voice their own opinions. A supervisor–student relationship is necessarily asymmetrical, because of the difference in knowledge and experience. It could be argued that providing three supervision arenas instead of one makes the student less dependent on his or her supervisor, and shifts the power in favour of the student. In the Norwegian system, however, the supervisor does not determine the grade of the thesis, as the examination commission consists of an external as well as an internal assessor. This reduces the power of the supervisor and also makes a partnership model of supervision more viable.

One important function of the individual supervisor was to secure the quality of the thesis. This presupposes an expert, authoritative position. But the criteria need to be appropriated and become internally persuasive. The two other supervision arenas provided spaces for this appropriation process, particularly because the student alternated between the role of supervisee and taking a supervisor role as a peer reviewer.

The findings indicate that the three arenas supplement one another, as there was a strong connection among them. In our view this warrants an integrated approach instead of just individual supervisors, an approach where research and writing are closely connected throughout the whole process, where the interaction of writing and

talk is a systematic part in group settings. Multiple readers and discussion partners provide critical opposition and thus help develop the students' ability to handle different perspectives in their text, and to appropriate the words of others, instead of just relying on authoritative thinkers. This can be provided in different ways within a programme. Our three-pronged supervision approach has proved one possible way of doing this. One question that remains to be discussed is whether this approach is worth the time for students and supervisors.

Time and other critical factors

There is often an element of idealism involved in experiments and development work that makes the participants willing to accept increased workloads. When the development phase is over this may become a problem unless the benefits are so obvious that it warrants the extra time. In our case neither the outcomes nor the time spent can be measured accurately, but based on interviews and informal talks with students and supervisors, it seems clear that those who were involved thought it was worth their time. Being active in three supervision arenas was more time consuming for students than just engaging in individual supervision. They still preferred this model and argued that: (1) it saved time in the long run; (2) it fostered a sense of community among students and between students and teachers; (3) they learnt more; and (4) receiving feedback from multiple perspectives helped them write more effectively.

For the supervisors, however, the benefits were not as obvious. In some cases the supervisors reported spending considerably less time on individual supervision, because their Master's students were able to utilize group feedback, and developed both independence and increased ability to self-assess. Some students with low self-confidence, however, seemed to demand just as much individual attention from their supervisors in spite of the other arenas. When the supervisors discussed the time factor of our supervision model, the following elements were brought up as time savers. First, a number of issues were now taken care of in the group sessions, which otherwise would have taken time during the individual sessions, particularly the 'teaching' aspects of supervision: theoretical issues, research methods, writing formats, genre demands and quality criteria. Second, because the student colloquia and the supervision groups functioned as a first filter for texts, the texts handed in to the supervisor were often more finished drafts. Third, because another supervisor was familiar with the student project, it was easy to discuss problems, while sorting them out alone might take more time. All the supervisors involved in our study were positive to continuing this multi-strategy model, but were equally clear about the critical factors.

Critical factors and implication for practice

1. *Motivation.* As the students have little or no previous experience with group supervision, motivation is particularly important. It is necessary to demonstrate for them the value of participating in all the three supervision arenas.

2. *Engagement in peer projects.* There has to be in place some systematic way of developing mutual knowledge and interest among students for each others' research projects.
3. *Training in feedback strategies.* It is vital to give students the tools they need to succeed, particularly how to comment on each other's texts. This also involves teaching and training students in specific feedback strategies and skills and how to use feedback in revision.
4. *Commitment.* Especially in supervision groups, mutual obligation and personal commitment are essential. Regular attendance and thorough preparation need to be built in from day one.
5. *Clear routines.* Supervision groups require a strict framework regarding the frequency of meetings, text delivery, type and length of texts, feedback rounds, and meta-communication.
6. *Multiple perspectives.* The advantage of having supervisors who belong to different research traditions in the same group needs to be recognized. In that way divergent voices, multiple perspectives and critical thinking are more likely to occur. Students should be helped to see disagreements as productive and not threatening.
7. *Realistic time allocation.* To avoid overloading students and supervisors, the use of time should be constantly monitored and discussed, the purpose of each arena clearly defined, and texts for discussion carefully selected to provide common points of interest for all.

Concluding remarks

Systematic use of supervision groups at Master's level has been rare in humanities and social sciences until recently, particularly in Europe. This is understandable in the light of the individualistic research tradition. The autonomy of the researcher has been held in high esteem, and training for independence started with the Master's project. The accepted truth has been that Master's students needed to concentrate all their time and effort on their own project. Our supervision approach challenges this view, as it is built on the premise that joint activity will improve research training.

Because we think that learning to think and talk and write in the discipline is vital to Master's students' success, this may very well be one of the major gains of our supervision model. This is the closest students come to participating in the negotiations of the academic communities of practice, as long as they are not members of research groups. For the individual student, however, it is also vital to be directly confronted with the norms of disciplinary discourse, and this happened primarily in individual supervision, which thus provided the necessary quality assurance.

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