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Group-tutoring of essays

Abstract

In Swedish: Boken "Coaching och handledning av grupper – inom universitets- och högskoleutbildning" ges ut av www.studentlitteratur.se/universitet/.

In the Department of Sociology, Lund University, nearly 200 students have in recent years annually begun to write essays on the bachelor or the master level. The scope of the essays has varied but generally their quality is good. There is low productivity, and a very small proportion of the students finish their essays in due time. From 1998 the admission is restricted, so only 80 students are accepted annually for the bachelors level. On the masters level there is still free admission and about 40 students are accepted annually. Thus in the foreseeable future about 120 students will begin to write essays annually. In recent years measures have been taken to increase the productivity with the quality of essays being kept intact. The payment for tutoring has been raised. Different supporting activities for the benefit of the students have been introduced. By the composition of official evaluation criteria the arbitrariness at the examination of the essays has been reduced. Now we wish to go further by developing a system of tutoring students in groups.

The project aims at developing group tutoring of students who write essays on the bachelor and master levels in undergraduate studies in sociology. We wish to do that by introducing group tutoring while "coaching" and continually educating the tutors for this task. We apply an approach of learning by doing and action learning. Group tutoring should increase the productivity while maintaining the scientific quality of the essays.

Group supervision of student term papers – final report

Anders Persson & Gunnar Andersson

Department of Sociology, University of Lund, August 2002

The project "Group tutoring of papers" received funding from *the Council for Higher Education* during the period 1999 - 2001. With minor variations, the project has been implemented in accordance with the original plan. The project's first term, autumn 1999, was preparatory in as much as group supervision was carried out on a voluntary basis. During the two following terms group supervision was compulsory for the students, as were timetabled meetings with the coach for the supervising tutors. During the project's final term, spring 2001, a substantial report was compiled on the project. While Anders Persson was on leave of absence, acting as principal secretary for a government enquiry, the project came under the leadership of Dr Gunnar Andersson¹.

We have reported the results of the project at a seminar on pedagogical ideas at the University of Lund, and the project has received attention in an article in Lund University's staff magazine *LUM* no. 5/2001. We are also presenting the results of the project in an article in the National Agency for Higher Education's newsletter *Nyheter & Debatt (News and Debate)* (3/2002). The publisher, Studentlitteratur, has accepted the manuscript of our book *Coaching och handledning av grupper (Coaching and supervision of groups)*, which will be published in the autumn of 2002 (the book's table of contents is attached as an appendix). We regard this book as the actual final report from the project and in what follows we therefore provide a concise account of the background to the project, its organisation and its results.

Background to the project

In the early 1990s the Department of Sociology – in common with many other departments – was able to record both a substantial increase in student numbers as well as in resources available to run undergraduate studies and development work. A substantial evaluation project occupied the department for several years and in 1998 resulted in a complete change to the entire structure of studies in sociology. One of the objectives of the new undergraduate studies was to increase the input of written work at a lower level, in order to provide a better

¹ The Council was informed of the temporary change of project leader and the change was approved 071099.

preparation for writing term papers at the undergraduate level. The situation was namely one in which the majority of the students successfully got through 50 points (2.5 terms) of ordinary study courses at the same time as a significant number then dropped out on account of writing term papers. That group who were therefore sometimes known among the students as "the fifty point proletariat" was gradually increasing and the number of students who either never finished their studies or who lagged behind for a long period in writing their term papers was becoming an ever more acute problem. The problem of low rate of throughput has long been recognised – so well-known that many teachers had incorporated it within the system and quite simply maintained that: "...it is not possible to write a good term paper in the prescribed ten weeks" – and it was probably largely the same at many other social science departments in the country. A strongly contributory reason for the situation in Lund was that the paper was the most important factor when it came to differentiating those applying to graduate studies, which is why the required level of the papers was raised among all those who wrote papers – not only among those who intended to apply to do graduate studies. Low rate of throughput was a financial problem for both the department – whose allocation of resources varied to a certain extent according to completed degrees – and the student – whose period of study was thereby considerably lengthened and who was therefore forced to finance a long drawn-out period of work on a term paper with study loans.

It was known that there were a number of other academic institutions where the study period had successfully been shortened, and with them in mind, as early as the beginning of the 1990s, various trials were instituted that involved the usual, individual way of conducting supervision being supplemented with elements of collective supervision. These trials were, however, voluntary in the sense that it was up to individual teachers to put them into practice and participate in them. In conjunction with a number of new Masters level courses in sociology starting in the early 1990s, attempts were made to introduce compulsory elements of collective supervision. This resulted in vigorous opposition from the department's teachers along the lines of a kind of libertarian position emphasising the students' free choice of subject, supervisor, level of ambition and period of study. The trial came to nothing. Collective supervision therefore had to continue as a kind of voluntary option, often with great success in terms of fewer students dropping out and shorter periods of study. The writers of this report, for example, completed a very successful Masters level course in social psychology, in which elements of collective supervision were available (resources seminars,

tuition in problem formulation, requirement for writing essay plans and so on) that contributed to an increased rate of throughput and term papers of good scholarly quality.

In addition to these voluntary trials with collective supervision, a large number of organisational changes which had an effect on writing term papers were instituted at that time in the Department of Sociology in Lund: the allocation of hours to the supervisors of term papers was raised by 60 %; a "performance system" was introduced which meant that 40 % of the supervisor's compensation were paid when the supervision commenced, and the remainder when the student was examined; an external evaluation of, among other things, the term papers showed that their quality did not deviate from term papers at other departments of sociology in the country; a project was subsequently instituted in collaboration with the Department of Sociology at the University of Göteborg in which a selection of term papers from the respective departments were graded by the other department's examiners, giving approximately the same results as the external assessment; a supervisors seminar was also initiated with the aim of raising the level of expertise among the supervisors of term papers; criteria for assessment of term papers were drawn up, to which the students also had access.

During the mid-1990s almost 200 students a year began writing term papers at the BA and MA levels in sociology. The rate of throughput was very low and barely 10 % of students completed their term papers within the prescribed time, i.e. half a term for a BA paper and a term for an MA paper. From the beginning of 1998 restrictions on admissions were introduced and a maximum of 80 students per year were admitted to the 41-60-point level. Entry to the 61-80-point level remained open.

Research on the organisation of term paper writing in 17 undergraduate courses of study within the social science faculty at Lund University was carried out by one of the authors in the mid-1990s. The study revealed that term paper writing organisation varied along a scale, with endpoints labeled "freedom" and "regulation". The Department of Sociology and another department constituted two of the most typical representatives of these opposites. The sociologists organised the task of writing term papers in a liberal manner, while the other department's organisation was directed at regulation.² The perception that writing term papers

² A detailed account of the research can be found in Persson, Anders 1996 *Nyfikenhet, kritiskt tänkande och kvalite (Curiosity, critical thinking and quality)*. Lund: Evaluation unit, Lund University.

should take place in private and in complete freedom from all restrictions was solidly established at the Department of Sociology.

In the spring term of 1998 a follow-up study of students who had not completed their term papers within the allotted time was carried out. 258 students were asked to complete a questionnaire and of the 115 who replied, a large number pointed out that an important reason for the non-completion of term papers was solitude/isolation. One student wrote quite simply that "writing term papers is pure solitary confinement"³. Several students maintained that they had a need for a support group in writing term papers.

The conclusion that was drawn from both of the above-mentioned studies was that a libertarian-individualistic culture to a large degree characterised the task of writing term papers in sociology. In tangible terms it was expressed by the fact that the production of term papers was organised with its point of departure in the different choices on which the student and the supervisor agreed. However, the follow-up studies also show that the students wanted to have considerably more support and less work on their own in writing their term papers than what was the case.

As has been shown, several attempts had been made to change these conditions. The results had been good but unfortunately only lasted as long as those enthusiastic individuals who had taken the initiative were personally involved – to then return to "the normal situation": high scholarly ambitions and low rate of throughput, great individual freedom for students writing term papers, and widespread solitude without support.

The development project "Group tutoring of essays" emerged against this background with the objective of developing forms of group supervision of student papers at the BA and MA levels. The project was supposed to make a contribution towards changing the culture that characterised term paper writing by introducing group supervision for the students and at the same time to "coach" and thereby gradually train the supervisors for this task. What the supervisors did and what they learnt would consequently be integrated and the endeavour was thereby characterised by "learning by doing" and "action learning". Group supervision was

³ The follow-up study was carried out by the then assistant director of studies in sociology Margareta Nilsson Lindström.

expected to increase the rate of throughput, at the same time as maintaining the quality of the term papers at a reasonable scholarly level. Furthermore, group supervision was supposed to improve the regulation provided to those students who write term papers at the same time as ensuring their freedom in terms of, for example, choice of subject matter and method of working.

Concrete organisation of the project

The aim of the project was to develop a mode of supervision that allows individualised essay projects, with all the positive aspects of individual, motivated choice that that involves, and that simultaneously constitutes a social network in which students are able to maintain social support and collective supervision. At the same time we wanted to test whether this new organisation of supervision could shorten the study period for those students who wrote term papers, without lowering the requirements for a reasonable level of scholarly quality.

In concrete terms, the project was structured in the following way:

1. Group supervision: Supervisor was selected by the director of studies for undergraduate studies. At the same time, the students' option of choosing a supervisor was removed. Groups of 5-7 students were assembled and assigned a supervisor. The supervisor's compensation was reduced from 24 to 18 working hours per term paper (for a 10-point paper) and recommendations on how supervision resources should be used were distributed to and discussed by the supervisors;
2. Coaching and supervision training: A coach, i.e. a supervisor who supervises supervisors, was appointed and regular meetings between group supervisors and the coach were timetabled for the entire term.⁴ The meetings were oriented towards the problems that supervisors experienced in their supervision groups and became a kind of supervisors training. The supervisors were compensated the equivalent of 18 working hours during one term for participation in the coaching sessions;
3. Evaluation: A special evaluator was appointed to follow the project from beginning to end. The evaluator took part in the meetings that the coach organised and gradually evaluated the

⁴ Gunnar Andersson has acted as coach during the entire period of the project, for one term together with Anders Persson.

group supervision by means of interviews and questionnaires with the students and supervisors. The evaluator also carried out follow-up studies based on study statistics. The purpose of the evaluation was to illustrate the way in which the relationship between throughput and scholarly quality, in terms of the individual and the group is affected by group supervision.

Preparation for the development project took place during the autumn term of 1999 by means of a number of supervisors having the opportunity to supervise students in groups. The compulsory group supervision supported by the coach commenced in the spring term of 2000 and continued autumn term 2001. The project was evaluated on a continuous basis during these two terms. Group supervision with coaching was made permanent from the beginning of the spring term 2001 and since then has been running without special project funds.

Neither students nor any other group of participants have been involved in the management team or the reference group for the project, due to the fact neither body existed. However it should be mentioned that in a study of student influence that was undertaken in 1998 at the Department of Sociology it emerged that uncertainties regarding requirements and "codes" were a very important aspect of the students' experience of lack of influence and alienation (see further Persson, A. 1998 *Studentinflytande i massuniversitetet. (Student influence in the mass university)* Lund: Evaluation unit, Lund University.) This pertained not least to students who were writing term papers. The project has led to a part of the "hidden curriculum of study" involved in the work of writing term papers being made visible, which we assume has reduced the experience of arbitrary treatment that characterises the subordination of students in higher education. Students' views, as well as the views of other involved parties, of the project's organisation and results have been obtained in the evaluations of the project that were carried out.

The project's results

One of the aims of the project was to change the supervision culture in the Department of Sociology and we will therefore provide an account here of what that change involved. We are doing this against the background of the enquiry into different ways of organising the task of writing term papers within the social science faculty's undergraduate courses that was an important prerequisite in terms of knowledge for the project and that showed among other things that there were two almost pure ways of organising supervision of student term papers,

which were called the cultures of "freedom" and "regulation". The culture that is now under development in the Department of Sociology represents a synthesis of freedom and regulation. The chart below describes the three supervision cultures.

Figure 1: *Supervision culture*

	X	Y	Z
Free choice of subject?	No	Yes	Yes
Free choice of supervisor?	No	Yes	No
Free choice of student?	No	Yes	No
Is there a requirement for an essay plan?	Yes	No	Yes
Are there deadlines?	Yes	No	Yes
Examiner & supervisor same person?	Yes	No	No

The X-culture is identical to that which was previously described in terms of regulation. It is based on placing restrictions on a number of freedoms and could also be called a culture of compulsion. The Y-culture is that which previously characterised the task of writing term papers in the Department of Sociology in Lund. It has previously been described using the word freedom, however since it is based on individual choice it could equally well be called a culture of choice. The Z-culture is a kind of synthesis of both of the others and describes the way in which group supervision in the Department of Sociology has been organised within the framework of the development project.

Group supervision is organised such that the student chooses the topic of the term paper but not the supervisor. Neither does the supervisor choose the student. The relationship between supervisor and student consequently comes about as a result of external forces that they do not control. Group supervision also involves the introduction of the requirement for an essay plan, in other words a concept and a plan for the term paper that the student writes at an earlier stage. Various deadlines are also introduced, what they actually are may vary between the different supervisory groups, however, the idea is that the students should proceed at the same pace towards the objective of completing the term paper at the designated time. Finally, the system of having a separate examiner and supervisor is retained, which gives the student considerably more security than where these roles are combined.

The development project has not met with an especially high level of initial resistance, which may be to do with the fact that it went hand in hand with a total change in the external

framework of the established supervision culture: selection of supervisor and of student was done away with in one stroke and replaced with a system in which the supervisors were each allocated a group of students. This has meant that some supervisors have taken the old supervising culture along with them into the new situation, and consequently, either consciously or unconsciously, struggled against certain aspects of group supervision. This reluctance has however been worked on in the continual meetings with the coach with the result that while there was a certain amount of reluctance during the project's first term, the project's second term was to all intents and purposes free of this. To judge from the evaluation report where the views of students, supervisors and examiners on the project have been documented⁵, it appears however that opposition has been given expression in other arenas, not least in the evaluation itself.

Nevertheless, the results of the project have been extremely good: the rate of throughput when it comes to BA and MA papers at the Department of Sociology in Lund has increased from under 10 % to over 50 %, with no negative effects on the scholarly quality of the term papers. After the two years of the project, the Department of Sociology in Lund has made permanent the way of working that has been developed in the project - group supervision of students; coaching of supervisors.

⁵ Written by Dr Berit Andersson, Department of Sociology in Lund, and to be published in our book *Coaching and supervision of groups*.

Appendix: Table of contents in the book manuscript *Coaching and supervision of groups*
(for publication autumn 2002 by Studentlitteratur)

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Underlag för pressmeddelande om boken *Coaching och handledning av grupper*

För några år sedan genomfördes ett förändringsprojekt vid Lunds universitet som syftade till att förkorta studietiderna utan att uppsatsernas vetenskapliga kvalitet påverkades negativt. Resultatet blev synnerligen lyckat: andelen uppsatser som blev färdiga inom den tidsram som föreskrivs i kursplaner ökade från under 10 % till över 50 %; uppsatsernas vetenskapliga kvalitet försämrades inte. Nu kommer boken där projektets resultat och arbetssätt beskrivs och problematiseras: *Coaching och handledning av grupper - i universitets- och högskoleutbildning*.

Författare är:

Gunnar Andersson, fil doktor i sociologi och verksam som lektor vid Sociologiska Institutionen i Lund. Hans huvudsakliga forskningsintresse har varit relationen mellan arbetsliv och familjeliv, främst karriär- och familjeliv och han har bl.a. publicerat *Leva för jobbet och jobba för livet* (1993). Nuvarande forskning handlar om skolledarskap i olika skolkulturer. Han har lång pedagogisk erfarenhet och har undervisat, utvecklat och ansvarat för kurser av många olika slag inom universitetets ram.

Anders Persson, professor (adjungerad) i utbildningsvetenskap vid Malmö högskola, docent och universitetslektor i sociologi vid Lunds universitet och f.n. forskare vid Arbetslivsinstitutet i Malmö. Hans aktuella forskning handlar om skolledarskap i olika skolkulturer. Bland hans tidigare utgivna böcker kan nämnas *Skola & makt* (1994) och *Social kompetens* (2000). Som praktisk pedagog har han belönats med studenternas pris som "bästa föreläsare inom p-linjen i Lund 1990-92" och Lunds universitets pedagogiska pris 1995.

Projektet finansierades av *Rådet för högskoleutbildning* och det sätt att bedriva uppsatshandledning och handledarutbildning som utvecklades har nu permanentats vid Sociologiska institutionen i Lund, där projektet genomfördes 1999-2001.

Projektets arbetssätt innebär att samtliga kandidat- och magisteruppsatser handleds i grupper om 5-7 studenter. En alltigenom frihetlig och individualistisk kultur - där studenter valde uppsatsämne, handledare, studietid etc. och handledare valde studenter - ersattes av en mer

omhändertagande kultur där studenterna väljer uppsatsämne och handleds i grupp i syfte att få flera studenter att lyckas skriva sina uppsatser och göra detta på en avsevärt kortare tid än tidigare.

Parallellt med grupphandledning innebar projektet att coaching av handledarna infördes. Den innebär att handledarna fortlöpande handleds av en kollega och "utbildas" i grupp samtidigt som de själva handleder sina studenter i grupp. *Learning by doing* således.

I boken, som ges ut av Studentlitteratur i oktober 2002, beskrivs ingående hur projektet genomförts och hur grupphandledning och coaching fungerar i praktiken. Läsaren får veta hur man som handledare går tillväga för att skapa och upprätthålla ett konstruktivt gruppklimat som befrämjar goda studentprestationer. Vidare beskrivs i minsta detalj hur man handleder och coachar handledare. Behovet av dessa förändringar inom universitets- och högskoleutbildningen sätts också in i det större sammanhang som utgörs av den högre utbildningens förvandling till massutbildning. Frågan "Vad är rätt kvalitet?" ställs också mot den bakgrunden.

Författarna vill rikta blicken mot hur studenter ska komma *ut ur*, och inte endast *in i* högskolan. Det är inte tillräckligt att bereda många plats inom högskolan, de måste också ges reella möjligheter att tillgodogöra sig en god utbildning. Grupphandledningen och coachingen har syftat till att åstadkomma detta när det gäller studenternas uppsatser. Boken har skrivits i syfte att komma universitetslärare i massutbildningen till undsättning, kollegor som liksom författarna har uppfattningen att *fungerande* universitetsutbildning kan och bör vara något omvälvande.

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