

How a Researcher Is Made: Supervision, Assimilation and Integration

Abstract

The members of this project consortium come from three institutions; Stockholm University, Södertörn University College and the Stockholm Institute of Education. Three members of the group are senior researchers and three are graduate students.

The aim of the project is to expand the present training of graduate supervisors by creating a three-day continuation course, which will concentrate on questions of assimilation and interaction. This continuation course will be designed promote integration between graduate students and supervisors from differing ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds, of differing gender and/or sexuality and from differing intellectual traditions.

In order to command the respect of the graduate student, and to facilitate the research process, the supervisor needs to be fully cognisant with scientific/scholarly discourses and to have the pedagogic skills necessary to convey his/her knowledge and skills to the student. The course, as planned, will consist of a few lectures on theoretical issues relating to the supervisory situation.

However the main emphasis will be on case studies and practical exercises designed to increase the participants' self-awareness. This aspect of the course, it is hoped, will help supervisors improve the quality of their work and develop strategies for dealing with specific problems that can arise in supervision. The project also aims to heighten awareness of the importance of graduate supervision by organising a hearing at Stockholm University and by instituting a basic course in graduate supervision at Södertörn University College.

Key words: Acculturation, Social Integration, Supervisor-supervises relationship, Graduate School Faculty, Gender Issues, Intercultural communication.

Developing Graduate Supervisor Training

HOW A SCHOLAR IS MADE

Case study for consortium project 002

Stockholm university, Södertörn University College, and Stockholm Institute of Education

<i>Budget:</i>	Council funding:	712 000 SEK
	Other:	-
<i>Staffing:</i>		1,05 FTE
<i>Audience:</i>	We aim to recruit participants amongst supervisors who have already participated in the basic training programme	

Project Overview:

A basic training programme for graduate supervisors has been established at Stockholm University in course of the past two years. At present this programme resembles equivalent courses at other universities in the country. It brings together research supervisors primarily from the faculties of law, humanities and social sciences and its primary aim is to raise awareness of the kind of problematics that arise in connection with graduate supervision. Lectures on various modes for supervision, ethics, group dynamics etc., are interspersed with practical exercises in conflict management and conversational strategies. Part of our present activity is devoted to introducing this basic programme at Södertörn University College. Since there is not time within the framework of this course to address issues of cultural and social difference to any greater extent, we now intend to expand the training programme to focus more specifically on these problems. We are also in the process of putting together a three day course which will focus on this.

Our project is grounded in an awareness that the population of Universities and Colleges of Higher Education at the present time is increasingly diverse. Some research projects attract a large number of graduate students from other academic traditions; an increasing number of students and faculty belong to a first generation of academics and an appreciable number of faculty have an international background. This phenomena can impinge upon a relationship whose function is at least to some extent to assimilate the graduate student into the research community. At the same time differences of background and experience can enrich the learning process, but for this to occur, the parties must be open to the existence of and appreciate different standards and expectations.

Goals

The program intends to further increase supervisors' self-awareness. It should stimulate them to reflection over their own practice and the kind of problems that can arise because of social and cultural differences, as well as differences of gender, sexuality and academic tradition and how they intersect.

Objectives

The participants should become more responsive to questions of difference in the

conduct of their professional duties as researchers, teachers and graduate supervisors. We expect that they will be able to maintain and extend networks of graduate supervisors who are interested in these particular problems, and that they will assist their own institutions in developing practices that pay attention to cultural, social and sexual variety.

Format/Length

The programme consists of a three-day course that will address issues of ethnicity, class, gender and sexual orientation as elements in the learning process. The course will consist of lectures and practical exercises (roll play, case studies, forum theatre). Participants will be expected to keep a course journal and to use their own memories of the supervision process as a basis for learning. The focus will be on factors that impede communication and on situations where a lack of communication or understanding may affect the progress of the candidate's research project.

Partners:

Internal: The Educational Development Unit at Stockholm University has the overall financial responsibility and provides the administrative backup for this project. The other collaborators have been granted partial leave of absence from their regular employment to work with course development.

External: We are employing expertise from the Centre for Historical Studies at Umeå University, from the Departments of Ethnology and Theatre Studies and from outside the academy.

Faculty: Three of the faculty involved are university lecturers at the three institutions involved. The other three members of the project group are graduate students in political science, education, and computer science.

What makes this program effective?

Program:

Participants:

Assessment:

Measures used: Since the course will not run until early spring 2004, we cannot as yet answer this. We expect to use both qualitative and quantitative modes of evaluation i.e. both an evaluation form and oral evaluation within the group

Results/Impact:

Next Steps in Assessment:

Lessons learned:

The future

We expect this course to become part of the regular programme for the further education of faculty at the institutions involved.

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How a Researcher Is Made: Supervision, Assimilation and Integration

– Så skapas en forskare: assimilering och interaktion i handledning

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Abstract

The project's aim is to expand the training of graduate supervisors by creating a three-day continuation course concentrating on questions of assimilation and interaction. This continuation course promotes integration between graduate students and supervisors from differing backgrounds and intellectual traditions.

In order to facilitate the research process, the supervisor needs to be fully cognizant with scientific/scholarly discourses and have the pedagogic skills necessary to convey her knowledge and skills to the student. The course consists of lectures on theoretical issues relating to the supervisory situation and practical exercises.

The emphasis is on case studies designed to increase the participants' self-awareness. This helps supervisors to improve the quality of their work and develop strategies for dealing with possible problems in supervision.

Key words

Acculturation, Social Interaction, Supervisor-supervisee relationship, Supervisory process, Graduate School Faculty, Diversity, Intercultural communication, Self-awareness, Intersectionality

Introduction

A basic training programme, primarily for postgraduate supervisors in law, the humanities and social sciences, has been offered by the Centre for Learning and Teaching, Stockholm University, for a couple of years. The Natural Sciences Faculty also organises a basic course for supervisors. The first named resembles equivalent courses at other universities in the country and its aim is to increase awareness of the problems that arise in connection with postgraduate supervision. Lectures on various modes for supervision, ethics, group dynamics etc., are interspersed with practical exercises in conflict management and supervisory strategies. This basic course has been introduced at Södertörn University College as part of our project.

The basic course inevitably offers only an overview of problems without providing an opportunity to penetrate particular issues in detail. Our project focuses on one such issue, namely intercultural encounters. We are aware that, at the present time, the population of Universities and Colleges of Higher Education is becoming increasingly diverse. Some fields and research projects attract a large number of graduate students and faculty from different academic traditions – a factor that may be further complicated by issues of cultural difference, by class, sexuality or ethnic background. These factors can influence the supervisor relationship in a number of ways. Differences in background and experience can very well enrich the learning process, but for this to occur the parties involved must be aware of and appreciate differences of standard and expectation.

Rationale for change

We live in an increasingly international age and at a time when we have become aware of the significance of diversity. We can no longer expect PhD candidates to conform to earlier norms. Postgraduate students and their supervisors already come from many parts of the world and from varying social and academic backgrounds. The Bologna process is likely to add to this trend. Diversity of this kind may be exacerbated by differences of gender and sexual orientation.

The relationship between doctoral candidate and supervisor varies inevitably with the individuals concerned. Nonetheless supervisors are likely to benefit by an increased awareness of such preconceived notions of gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity as might affect communication between them and the supervisee. The aim of the supervisory process is, however, to educate postgraduate students within the Swedish Academy. Certain standards, critical thinking and democratic principles, are fundamental and to succeed, students must be integrated into the Swedish academic model independently of their background. This process, we believe, will be aided by a training programme that encourages supervisors to reflect over issues of diversity and over their own attitudes to them. We wish, in other words, to promote the assimilation of postgraduate students from different backgrounds into the research community.

Review of relevant literature

Beside literature about adult learning (Brookfield, 2001) and graduate supervision as a whole (Jensen, 1991, Lindén, 1998, Bergenheim, 2001, Strannegård, 2003) we have considered works that focus on diversity and communication. Jensen, Maini, Falk Nilsson & Lundahl (1991) describe supervision as a socialisation process which will result in graduate trainees identifying themselves as researchers. The book discusses several gender biases; for example, male supervisors do not believe that female postgraduate students are as good at research as males. The National Agency for Higher Education (HSV) demonstrated that a large

proportion of the female postgraduates (45%) felt that they are or have been discriminated against (Högskoleverket, 2003). This may be why female supervisees, at least in Norway, choose female supervisors (Smeby, 2000)

Trueba (1998) describes another aspect i.e. the multicultural campus. This is becoming increasingly common, as there are more and more masters programmes aimed at international students. According to Bates (2000) there are an increasing number of co-operative programmes between universities far apart geographically.

Hooks (1994) and Fazlhasheimi (2002) describe the invisible, but nonetheless oppressive structures in universities as a whole and discuss the workings of the educational programme, cultural norms and language. Fazlhasheimi's study is based on interviews whereas Hooks relies on personal experience. Both books stress the importance of recognising the individual beyond the stereotype.

Questions

Our prime question has been how we could work practically to mitigate problems of communication between supervisor and PhD candidate that could be traced to issues of diversity. Our second question has been what pedagogic methods would best serve our aims.

Importance of the project

There is an increasing awareness at present that supervision is a professional task that places particular demands on a University teacher. This is partly attributable to the demand that the dissertation be completed within four years of full time work. Since all those involved in the project are involved in the supervisory process, either as supervisors or as postgraduate students, we obviously have a vested interest in these issues. The members of the project group who have experience of other cultures and working environments have all been exposed to the socialisation process mentioned above.

The project leader too has been responsible for the development of supervisor training at Stockholm University and naturally wishes to emphasise the importance of developing courses directed at researchers. Recent reports from HSV point to how very central the role of the supervisor is perceived to be to the process of successfully completing a dissertation (Högskoleverket, 2003, Ekström & Johannesson, 2004).

Method

Since the aim of the project was to put together a model for a continuation course for research supervisors interested in questions of diversity, our meetings were designed to promote this end. We started by reviewing the literature on the topic of assimilation and discussed how far we needed to consult outside expertise. In the spring, we consulted the doctoral ombudsman at Stockholm University about the problems postgraduate students' experience. In April 2003, we organised a private workshop where we tested a number of potential lecturers. We decided to engage Dr Tiina Rosenberg, who speaks thought-provokingly on issues of sexuality, gender, and class while still insisting on the importance of maintaining a professional distance between teacher and student. We also invited a theatre director, Tova Magnusson Norling, to describe the leadership problems that arise in dealing with actors. In this context, we discovered that encountering a professional from a very different walk of life encouraged us to review some of our own practices.

In May, the team participated in a national conference at the University in Umeå. We were able to listen to Dr Mohammad Fazlhashemi's description of his investigation and decided that he would be a suitable person to invite to talk on ethnicity – not least since he

can speak from personal experience. Some of the team were also present at a Forum theatre session at the conference and this inspired one of the sessions on the course.

During the autumn research supervisors from Södertörn took part in the basic course under the leadership of Catherine Dahlström and Göran Malmgren (Södertörn). Meanwhile, the details of the continuation course were planned and teaching material, a case study based on authentic events along an accompanying exercise in conflict management, was written.

Although the final course used recognised pedagogic methods (Forum theatre, role-play, and group discussion), both lectures and the practical exercises aimed to provoke and challenge the participants. Our purpose was to uncover unspoken rules and ill-defined norms that make communication and assimilation difficult and to encourage researchers to look at pedagogic situations outside the University for inspiration.

Results

The basic course (based on the Stockholm University model) offered to supervisors from Södertörn University College taught us two important things. In the first place, that a course of this kind works best if the participants do not know one another well, or collaborate on a daily basis. Clearly the smaller institutes of higher education in the Stockholm region should co-operate either with one another, or with Stockholm University, when it comes to the training of supervisors. Secondly, since the course places so much emphasis on reflection and collegial exchange, 100% participation should always be a goal. In other words, it is imperative that participants, both in the basic and in the continuation courses see this as 'time out' from their everyday activities.

The pilot course was held over three days at a day conference centre in central Stockholm. Attended by supervisors from Stockholm University, Södertörn University College, and the Stockholm Institute of Education, the course featured lecturers/discussion leaders who took up cultural differences within and outside the academic world, often using their own personal experiences.

We have evaluated the course from the course leader's perspective and from that of a senior team member who was present as an observer. The observer incorporated both oral and written comments from the participants into her evaluation.

The course leader's evaluation

The mix of participants was very successful. There was a considerable variation of age, discipline and ethnic background. Many had experience of other academic environments, which offered useful insights. In the future, it might be useful for people running such a course to think of these factors when choosing whom to admit.

The lectures and Forum theatre were appreciated and led to debate. Insight into the leadership problems in the theatre were rewarding. Despite, or because of the emphasis on diversity, it was plain that the participants kept looking for a common ground, which they found in the supervisor (as opposed to the supervisee) role. During the theatre exercises too the delegates kept returning to 'normal' conflicts between supervisor and postgraduate students and avoided issues of sexuality, class or ethnicity.

The division of roles between the seminar leader and the lecturers was not as clear as it should have been. Clearly, this must be agreed in advance. It is presumably best to let the lecturer introduce the topic and then allow the seminar teacher lead the discussion. This should assure that the themes of the course are highlighted.

Mohammad Fazlhashemi's lecture on diversity in the academy was very rewarding especially because he both presented an investigation on the topic, and spoke from personal

experience. This is an important lesson for the future. The lecturer employed for this purpose should come from a non-Swedish ethnic background.

The exercises worked well and there could be more of this. We concluded that it would be better if the lecture on assimilation were to be converted into an exercise, forcing the participants to review their own position. The role-play manuscript needs some revision to bring out the problem of ethnicity more. As for the memory exercise, the discussion was most successful in small groups. Since, for ethical reasons, much cannot be reported in a plenary, a general discussion is clearly difficult, not very enlightening, and probably unnecessary.

Observer's evaluation

Both the oral and written comments from the participants show them to be very pleased with the course. This is true of both the mix of the participants, as well as the content and the organisation of the course. Some mention that arranging this kind of course at all is a commendable and positive initiative, and several mention the advantages of mixing supervisors from different fields of research. It seems that in many departments it is hard to discuss the problems of the supervision process without a loss of prestige, which underlines the need for this type of course.

The space given to discussion within the course is good, which was noticeable when the lecturers introduced the topic, and then most of the participants took part in the discussions. Dr Tiina Rosenberg began with a refreshing take on her topic (the normative, gender and sexual orientation), while the lectures by Dr Mohammad Fazlhashemi (ethnicity) and Tova Magnusson Norling were thought provoking. Some of the participants would like to see more discussions in small groups. Some felt that although a large number of topics were touched upon, very few possible solutions were offered. Participants give mixed judgements of some of the practical parts of the course. The forum theatre and the role-play were met with some resistance, but also some enthusiasm. Some people regard them as the best part of the course, while others find them too superficial. Both those who thought that these parts should be given less time, and those who thought they should be expanded, wanted greater concentration on a few cases. The question also arose regarding to what degree the case descriptions were designed to open up a multitude of perspectives i.e both gender, ethnicity, age difference, academic background etc.

From the perspective of the project team, it can be concluded that there is a distinct problem in keeping active supervisors to the topic of "the meaning of social categories in the supervision situation". Discussion often drifted to common problems of supervision. In all cases, several perspectives were illuminated during the course. The course started by positing that the problem lay with colleagues and supervisees. However, the focus then moved towards the participants' own roles. The role of the supervisor was discussed in conjunction with the departmental framework, and the focus moved finally to the relations between the supervisor and the supervisee. In the end, the complexity of the problem area was well illuminated.

A sign of the success of the course is the participants' explicit wish to keep in touch through a mailing list and lunch meetings. The lack of prestige that occurs when supervisors do not collaborate on a daily basis also promotes a creative atmosphere and encourages a curiosity about other environments that is worth promoting.

A possible mistake was that there were no social activities planned for the evenings, or at the end of the course. This would have enabled people to make contacts and discuss the events of the day informally. In addition, it would have been a good idea to consider a reunion, or follow up meeting, one or two months after the course.

Discussion

The course was experimental in the sense that the topic has not previously been dealt with within supervisor training programmes, at least not in Sweden. Obviously there are a number of things that could be improved for the future.

Analysis: The success of the course can be attributed to the careful selection of participants from a broad range of backgrounds, and to their being inspired and provoked by lecturers who spoke from personal experience. As regards structure, parts of the course were better received than others; however, as the purpose of the course was to heighten the participants' self-awareness, the means by which this is achieved is of lesser importance. One element can easily be replaced by another i.e lecturers will naturally vary and more emphasis can be put on practical exercises.

In addition, this course could well be residential. This would maximise the use of the time, as well as allowing the participants to chat informally, develop the formal discussions and establish contacts. As a side effect of maximising the use of time, there would be more space for the practical aspects of the course.

Although the course was generally successful, as we mentioned in the results section, some things are in need of improvement. One improvement would be to keep questions of diversity more in focus. This might be achieved by arranging a meeting of all the lecturers beforehand to ensure that they understand the general principles behind the course. Another way of achieving coherence would be for the lecturers not participate in the discussion following their contributions leaving the course leader to chair the discussion. The instructions for the individual exercises also need to be developed further. For instance, the texts for the role-play need to indicate the problems arising more specifically. We concluded that it would be better – and more in accordance with model of collegial exchange – if the lecture on assimilation were to be replaced by a group session where the participants summed up what had come out of the course as a whole.

As we noted in the result section, the participants were keen on keeping in touch and continuing their discussion of the issues raised through a mailing list and lunch seminars. This clearly indicates that the participants were aware that problems of assimilation and interaction are not to be solved by one training programme, but are part of an ongoing process that demands assessment and reassessment over time.

Implications

Since graduate students and supervisors alike regard supervision as a key aspect of research training, there is obviously a need for well-developed programmes within the Universities and Colleges of Higher Education. It is our experience that supervisors who have taken the basic course are interested in continuing to train their supervision skills. Suggestions for further training are numerous and include models for constructive criticism, training in research ethics etc. Communication is, however, a central aspect of the supervisory process. Consequently, a course such as this, designed to help supervisors promote the process of assimilation within the academy, has a good deal to offer. Considering, moreover, the likelihood that the graduate student population will increase in diversity over the coming years, and that problems arising because of differences between academic environments and research criteria are likely to become more common, a course such as this clearly has a role to play.

Conclusions

As we noted in the introduction, it is important to remember that whatever our desire to embrace diversity, certain basic academic principles (critical thinking and democratic

working models) must be learnt by postgraduate students wishing to complete their education in Sweden. Research supervisors need to be aware of both the benefits of diversity – the way it can enrich the research process - and of the constraints imposed by the academy. Moreover they need to develop their own skills as professionals. Increased professional competence should obviously include a greater self-awareness and understanding of their own reactions to increasing diversity both in the student population and amongst colleagues.

The project has also underlined the importance of basic training programmes for research supervisors. These should provide information about the context of supervision and about the skills required of the supervisor, as well as offering practice in dealing with common problems of interaction. Indirectly, it has also underlined the importance of establishing networks of supervisors across disciplinary borders and of providing meeting places away from the everyday working environment. Since academic life is highly competitive, supervisors benefit from being able to discuss issues of supervision with colleagues from other departments and faculties. Issues of diversity whether they be based in ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation or academic culture inevitably raise questions of normativity, unwritten rules and so called ‘silent knowledge’. We hope that our course “Assimilation and interaction in research supervision” will help supervisors bring these problems out into the open, and thus enable better interaction between supervisors and supervisees.

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