

Developing Guiding Encounters in Practical and Didactic Education: Action Research in Teacher Educators' Practice

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Summary

This dissertation documents how a group of teacher educators researched their own practice in order to increase the competency to meet the educational needs of the student teachers. Evaluations show a considerable problem with relevance in Norwegian teacher education where the student teachers do not experience a satisfactory connection between the theory which they meet through their studies and the current problems they meet in schools. There is little documentation of how teacher educators work to develop education study programs. This study composes such a case. It emphasizes how the written assignments and guiding in connection to the assignments can contribute to creating necessary cohesion between practice and theory. The main research question is: How can we further develop the practical and didactic education program¹ and our competency as teacher educators through pedagogical action research which focuses on guiding?

I conducted the research project which was carried out at the Department for Teaching and Teacher Education at the University of Life Sciences during the period 2005–2011. The research group was composed of teacher educators at the practical and didactic education (PDE) program and the 5-year master program for natural science teachers. PDE at the University of Life Sciences consists of modules at the university, practice periods in schools and three written assignments: two didactical assignments and a pedagogical development project. The guiding project was concentrated primarily on developing the first didactical assignment where the students are asked to describe, state the reason for and reflect on a lesson which they have taught in their school practice. Much time was used in guiding the students in the work with the assignment, but before the project we had little insight as to the effect of the guiding. Therefore a pilot study was carried out during the preparation phase to establish the effect of the assignment and the guiding connected to it. The pilot study showed that the students were satisfied with the guiding, but they also said that the most important thing they learned was how they should write such an assignment. The intention was that the students should be building up their competency as teachers. This gap between the experience of the students and our intention formed the point of departure for the action research project.

¹ This is a Post Graduate Teachers Education program of 60 credits

We followed a basic action research strategy through three school years (2005–2006, 2006–2007, 2007–2008) where we made plans for changes in our individual and joint practice of guiding, executed change measures in practice and reflected upon these both individually and together. The mutual reflections were done in research meetings before and after the guiding cycles. A joint reflection and analysis of stories from the guiding situations constituted the core of the research conversations. The stories were built on written logs and reflection memorandums. The empirical material in the project is: logs, reflection memorandums, plans for and minutes from the research meetings, written guiding texts, student assignments (didactical assignments, pedagogical development projects and pedagogical reflection memorandums), together with a yearly log where the students wrote about their benefits from the work with the first didactical assignment. The minutes of the meetings were sent to all the members of the group for comments and elaborations. Some meetings were video-recorded or sound-recorded. These were transcribed.

The project is inspired by four different action research approaches: i) Pragmatic action research which originates from the work of Elliott and Stenhouse – a British tradition of teachers as researchers. ii) Critical action research which has its origin in Australia and builds on Habermas' critical theory. This direction is developed by Carr and Kemmis and puts special emphasis on the emancipating potential of action research. iii) Living theory which is developed by Whitehead and McNiff emphasizes that the individual teacher or teacher educator documents the development of his/her own practice. iv) Co-operative action research which originates from a interdisciplinary action research community in Bath with Heron and Reason and builds on a holistic understanding of the human being and nature, where researchers search together to develop sustainable practices.

Guiding and co-operative action research occurs in encounters between people. Therefore Buber's philosophy of encounter has its place in the center for our practice, and it is an important aspect of the theory foundation. Guiding and teaching should contribute to the development of a broad specter of knowledge and competence in the students. A diverse concept of knowledge must also build the foundation for the project. Polanyi's concept of personal knowledge and the concepts of episteme, techne and phronesis from Aristotle are central in the discussion. In addition, the concepts of experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing of Heron and Reason are essential for understanding and analyzing the knowledge which has been developed through the research. A diverse content of knowledge requires that the learning processes are correspondingly diverse. Social theories for learning, with particular emphasis on experiential learning will be discussed. Dewey's theory of experiential learning is the basis for what we have called relation-based experiential learning. The core of the model is to make visible that the result of the learning process depends on the learners' ability to relate to the assignment through the start-up phase, action phase and the outcome phase. The concept of competence is discussed in light of Dreyfus and Dreyfus' theory of competence development and a corresponding theory developed by Reynolds. We chose to concentrate on the significance of the guiding for development of teacher competence, and therefore guiding-theory is also central. Here I have emphasized concepts such as dialogue and reflection, with their point of departure in Handal and Lauvås' model of action-reflection, gestalt orientation and critical theory. The concepts of single- and double-loop learning from Argyris and Schön, together with a social-cultural and a widened social-cultural understanding for learning in organizations, form the foundation for analysis of the organizational learning which occurred as a result of the action research project.

The research has been connected to two main areas: guiding and action research. Discussion and development of the theoretical foundation for our guiding and action research enterprise is one field of results in the project. The account of *how* we worked to develop our competence and our common practice within both of these main areas constitutes the second field of results. The development of the PDE-program is the third field of results. In this field the development of our guiding competence is also included. The changes in the education program are connected especially to the first didactical assignment in the following five areas:

- The text of the assignment was changed such that it clearly required a connection to practice in the school, in accord with the curriculum and the intentions for teaching.
- The instruction and lectures during the modules of the first semester were changed such that the students would be better prepared to meet such a demand in their practice.
- The frames for student co-operation on the assignment and their development of competence were further strengthened by improving the writing course and writing groups on the internet. The students received a better introduction in how to guide each other, and we started guiding groups instead of working with individual students. Also we made our guiding strategies explicit to the students. They developed guiding skills through model learning, theory presented in the actual guiding situation and through practice.
- Discussions concerning the balance between guiding with the head and with the heart became a core area for our reflections and analysis (more in the following).
- How we could strengthen the students' capacity to reflect on their practice in order to develop their competence as teachers was another core area (more in the following).

The pair of concepts "the loving and the critical gaze" were anchored in the project as tools to reflect on the quality of guiding. This was understood as finding a balance between guiding with the head, which was characterized by critical analysis, and guiding with the heart which was distinguished by a more empathic approach. We wanted the guiding to contribute to the development of the students' inherent potential. Both dimensions were therefore necessary. The discussions led to the recognition that the aspect of love includes also giving resistance – resistance which is necessary for growth. Towards the end of the project-period the concept of critique was therefore replaced by the concept of resistance. Thus it was no longer a question about finding a balance between the loving and the critical view in guiding, but rather to become conscious of how the different qualities come to expression in the encounter with the students. We emphasized particularly how we could encounter students in the I–Thou-relationship in the guiding of the assignment which occurred on internet. We discovered that the critical-analytic view dominated in the first reading of the text. If we read once more, it was clearer how we could give recognition and support to the intentions of the student. The pair of concepts led to a consciousness which created changes in my practice, such as giving me more courage to go into difficult guiding situations and offer resistance. We all became aware that the support had to be just as concrete as the critique, and we noticed that the students wanted greater challenge.

The research made it clear that productive reflections demand concrete descriptions from practice. A good basis for helping the students with concrete descriptions was prepared through sharing

experience from practice. Therefore it became a goal that we visit the students during their practice before they write the assignment, and we advised them to write about the same lesson that they taught during the visit. This contributed to more holistic guiding. We also challenged the students to reflect upon the values underpinning their practice.

One result of the research is a model for relation-based experiential guiding. The core of the model is that guiding builds on I-Thou relationships, and that guiding, through support and resistance, seeks to contribute to development of competence by stimulating reflection for instance tied to the phases of the model for relation-based experiential learning.

The fact that we researched into our own practice, resulted in changes of the pedagogical development projects. Many students chose to do their project as research in their own practice based on action research principles. We also developed a model where the whole PDE-program could be seen as a continuous development work. The model shows connections between the different elements in the study program. This helped both us and the students to see connections between theory and practice.

The fourth field of results originates from the research into our common action research practice, the other main area of the research. I developed a model of the action research process, that includes the cycles of planning, acting and reflecting, the preliminary analyses following each cycle (which I have called 1. order analysis), the analysis of all the cycles included in the inquiry (called 2. order analysis) and the phase of theorizing. We researched the question as to what co-operative action research is, which I have also called "co-research". Co-research demands democracy and democracy can be developed through co-research. The research has led to the recognition that a clear democracy demands clear leadership with emphasis on acknowledgement and utilization of differences as a resource for research. The leader must also initiate meta-reflections over the research process such that a choice and development of approaches in research can occur consciously. With this background in our common research, I have developed five principles for democratic co-research:

- Common foundation. This can mean to clarify mutual and individual values concerning education and research, developing a common theory basis for action research, developing criteria for judging change and common ownership to the research questions.
- Interplay between research in one's own and in the common practice. Action research which develops a common practice will necessarily imply that each one also develops his/her own practice.
- Clarification of roles and levels of participation. Co-researching can either imply that all researchers participate as equals at all levels in the research, from planning to publishing of results, or that the involvement differs. A consciousness concerning the different degrees of participation forms a basis for conscious choice of roles in the research.
- Time and room for exploratory research conversations. The research meeting forms the frame for sharing of experience, reflections and analysis. The analysis has brought forth six criteria for research conversations:
 - Development of strategies for the conversations together

- The conversations take their point of departure in experience which is written
 - Relevant theory comes into the reflections
 - Differences are recognized as a recourse for co-creativity
 - Meta-conversations about how the discussion functioned in relationship to the intentions, with emphasis on listening skills
 - A mutual conclusion of the results of the conversation and possible consequences
- Co-analysis. The research group must develop analysis competence together. This project has shown that the pre-requisites for succeeding with such a co-analysis are: a certain distance to that which is analyzed, a clear frame for analysis which means having a planned structure for individual and mutual analysis and a common understanding of a chosen analysis method.

One aim of action research is that it marks a lasting change. In our group of teacher-educators, we developed a common research platform and a practice for guiding which was transparent.

This dissertation is composed of five parts. In Part I, the project, as well as the justification of the project according to personal interests and societal needs, is presented. The research group and the context are also described. In Part II, the theoretical basis for the dissertation is elaborated. In Part III I describe and discuss the first investigations which formed the motives for the change process and the three year research process. In Part IV, I discuss how the cooperation in the project and the guiding which I received has led to learning and development primarily of research competency. In the appendix to the dissertation is an article which documents the development of my competence in guiding. The article prepared the way for several discussions and occurrences in the project which are discussed in Part IV. Part V is composed of a concluding analysis and a summing up of the results in the project.