

Eli Ottesen

Department of Teacher Education and School Development,

University of Oslo

Dilemmas of Mentoring in Teacher Education: Constructing the object.

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Eli Ottesen

Department of Teacher Education and School Development,

University of Oslo

eli.ottesen@ils.uio.no

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Abstract

In most countries, teacher education is organised as a joint effort between Higher Education Institutions and local schools. Studies report tensions between the two, often focussing on the so-called theory/practice gap in teacher education. Other studies indicate tensions within the internship, between mentors' roles and responsibilities towards their pupils and their roles and responsibilities as teacher educators. In this paper I use Activity Theory to analyse mentors' and student teachers talk in internship. In internship several needs and motives work on the construction of objects of activity. Based on empirical evidence I identify how pupils' need for continuity and stable routines, the mentors' need to be accountable deliverers of curriculum, and the student teachers need to experiment and try out their ideas may lead to a continuous construction and reconstruction of objects.

In earlier work (Ottesen, 2006), I have discussed how mentors' and student teachers' talk is emergent and serendipitous, and that mentors often close rather than expand objects of inquiry. In this paper I investigate objects of inquiry as objects under construction, and show how the mentors' discursive actions connect to needs and motives of the school, rather than teacher education. In conclusion, I argue that we need to think of internship in teacher

education as a design process, paying attention to how objects of inquiry balance motives, promote inspiration, and provide sufficient stability and flexibility (cf. Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

Introduction

The University of Oslo recently initiated a project to follow up former student teachers in their first year of teaching. In a web-based discussion within the project, one new teacher posted the following message:

“What can I do?

I have an EFL-class where

- Some pupils find the textbook too difficult
- Some pupils do not find the textbook challenging enough
- Some pupils do not want to work
- Some pupils are dyslectic
- Some pupils do not know the alphabet in English
- Some pupils do not understand why they need to write the essay themselves, if they must give their sources
- Some pupils are energetic workers in need of challenges
- Some pupils are on the same level, but work at different paces
- Some pupils seriously overestimate their knowledge of English
- Some pupils have low self-esteem.

(...) I have tried to give the pupils choice between tasks on different levels. But it takes so much work to construct tasks, copy texts etc, and unfortunately, I am just one

person who is not able to cope as well as I want to reach all 26 pupils with the instruction, support, help and challenges they need.”

The new teacher raises a serious concern in teaching: how can one teacher help 26 pupils in a class learn? In Norway, every teacher is committed to “adapted learning”: the pupils have a *right* by law to education that matches their needs and potentials (Bachmann & Haug, 2006). Trying to meet this requirement, the new teacher (as well as most “old” teachers) struggle to cope, balancing their time and effort as best they can. In the wake of international league-tables the Government and the public are concerned about the results of schooling, frequently blaming teachers for not being capable. There seems to be a general consent that teacher education in Norway, in spite of three reforms having been implemented during the last 10 years, continues to fail in producing teachers with the necessary competence. However, there is less agreement about exactly *what* the weaknesses are. Is the problem that there is not enough emphasis on subject knowledge, that there is too much emphasis on science of education, too little pedagogy, are teachers in teacher education ignorant of what really goes on in schools, is teacher education too short, is it too theoretical, do students need extended periods of internship? In a press release 28.01.08, the Ministry of Education and Research writes: “The Government has decided to present a White Paper on teachers and teacher education around the turn of the year 2008 - 2009.(...) The role of the teacher needs to be strengthened, and a White Paper that focus on the role of teachers and teacher education is part of our work to raise the status of the teaching profession. In the White Paper we will discuss the length of teacher education, the organisation and the content”. Recent evaluations of teacher education in Norway¹ have indicated that one problem might be the relationship between the theoretical (higher institution based) part and the practical (school based) part of teacher education. A survey for the Ministry of Education and Research

¹ Norgesnettrådet, 2002; NOKUT, 2006

(Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007) follows up this issue and promotes a range of success-criteria for the school-based part of teacher education. A central conclusion is that there is a need for a closer cooperation between schools and HEIs to better exploit the structures and intentions behind the national framework for teacher education (UFD, 2003).

While there is great interest among policy makers and in the general public connected to teacher education, research on teacher education in Norway is sparse and diverse. Haug (2003, p. 164) argues that an additional problem is that teacher education has not been able to use research based knowledge in their constructions of practice, “leaving them built up around experience and conventions that are developed within the profession, are practice based and determined by societal and institutional traditions”. In the absence of robust research to build on, reform efforts and development work focus on structures, such as formal agreements between partner schools and the university, available resources, mentors, cooperating teachers and HEI-teachers’ competence. One issue that is heatedly debated is the role and quality of the students’ internship. While training has “always” been a part of education for the professions, there is little understanding of what happens, what is learned, and how. To prepare student for future work in schools, and diminish the effects of the “practice shock” (Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003), we need to develop better understanding of the initiation phase of teachers’ work. The initiation starts when the student first enters a school as a trainee teacher, supported by e.g. by a mentor, a supervisor or a coach.

Little (1990) argues that while the mentors in initial teacher education or in the first year of teaching are often formally allocated, the interpretation of the role of mentor is interpreted personally. One result of the extended cooperation between partner schools and university

may be that the range of warranted interpretations is narrowed down e.g. through the agreements and documents assigning targets and procedures for internship (Edwards & Mutton, 2007; Haug, 2003; cf. Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007). Admittedly, this may contribute to making the practice of mentoring student teachers more transparent. However, there is the danger that mentoring becomes more instrumental, since regulations may obscure our understanding of what really counts in teaching.

In this paper, I will use Activity Theory to “unpack” the practice of mentoring in a Norwegian upper secondary school. Initially, I briefly argue for the potential for using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a theoretical tool in the analysis. I then briefly describe the methodology of study from which data are collected. I analyse the discussions of mentors and student teachers to throw light on the discursive practice of constructing, expanding and closing down objects of inquiry during internship. In conclusion, I discuss collaborative design as fruitful approach to developing the practices of teacher education in schools and in HEIs.

Activity Theory’s potential as research approach in teacher education

A person becomes a teacher or a mentor by participating in collective activities and through such actions she transforms the objective environment and her subjective sense of being in the world (Ottesen, 2006). This is the process through which the cultural and historical is appropriated by the individual, who concomitantly work on and possibly change the environment; action folds back and “transforms the psychological operations to higher and qualitatively new forms (...)” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 40). However, persons are not mindless drifters among social practices that in turn determine their psychology or sense of being. Persons are agents, acting in social worlds as individuals and collectives with intentions and

purposes. Their activities are object-oriented (Leont'ev, 1978), that is, social activity are processes of object transformation where people by their actions and operations change their environments and themselves. Such processes are dynamic and shifting as the object is acted on (Stetsenko, 2005) and transformed. In the living processes of mentoring, the object signifies a horizon of possibilities (Engeström, 2001). By investigating the processes through which objects are instantiated in local activities (Nardi, 2005) we are able to discern how practices are made up by real people as they pursue their goals. Such inquiries may help us delineate the horizons within which objects of inquiry emerge, and allow us to design trajectories for learning that better serve to advance the knowledge development of student teachers.

Learning to teach can be understood in terms of the movement from peripheral to full participation in social and cultural practices of schools (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through participation, the competences, knowledge, values and beliefs of the practice is internalised and shapes the teachers actions, skills and identities. For the practice of mentoring, this approach would suggest a careful structuring of events and situations to allow student teachers to participate in key situations of the practice (cf. Edwards, 2005). This is consonant with the current framework for teacher education (UFD, 2003) which states: “ The institutions should offer varied practical experiences to give a wide-ranging introduction to the work.” A result is the institutional development of lists of situations that the students should be *introduced* to (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007), and the ticking off the list as evaluation of the internship.

CHAT, on the other hand, compels us to understand learning in terms of the ongoing transformations of objects as people take part in social activities. Thus, attention is shifted

towards the *potential* of events for expanding objects of inquiry. Rather than being accountable for the arrangements of a diversity of situations, the role of mentors would be to help the student teachers to focus on specific aspects of experienced events; to help them *open* objects for inquiry, and to give help them develop tools to expand the objects. In the analysis below I show how objects of inquiry are discursively constructed and closed down in discussions of mentors and student teachers during internship.

Methodology

The data analysed in this paper were collected as part of a larger study of student teachers' learning in internship (Ottesen, 2006). The data consists of audio files from the mentoring discussions of four student teachers and two mentors during the 12-weeks of internship in a medium-sized upper secondary school.² A central methodological challenge in this paper has been to study the interactional formation of objects of inquiry; i.e. how aspects of events during internship were made into objects to be expanded, opening up possibilities for new understanding and action (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005). Of special interest in this paper is the agency of the mentors in initiating object-forming processes, directing attention, and what kinds of objects that are emerging from the activity. The analysis focuses on the tools that students and mentors use to develop reasonable accounts of events (cf. Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002) , and on the dynamics of the formation of objects of inquiry. For the purpose of this paper, I have selected one instance that is transparent enough to illustrate in a good way the process of object formation.

² For further descriptions, see Ottesen (2006).

Co-constructing objects of inquiry

Discussions between mentors and student teachers commonly take place prior to the students' teaching, and/or after the lessons. Within the everyday bustling life of schools it is difficult to find enough time. The Ministry's survey (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007) disclosed that 30 minutes to one hour was the average length of mentoring sessions. In my study, the students and mentors met regularly for a longer session (up to two hours) once a week, while the before and after- sessions were irregular and often constrained by students' or teachers' schedules. Frequently, after a lesson was completed, the mentor or a student would voice some issue that "we need to talk about on Thursday".

On the way out of the classroom, Siri (student teacher, midway in second part of internship) commented that two of the pupils always had trouble when she wanted to change tasks during the lesson. Tom (mentor) suggested making this a theme in the Thursday meeting, adding that generally, the change of tasks during lessons are critical points for inexperienced teachers. In the students' peer counselling sessions, the students discussed the problem:

Extract 1

Siri: I find it really annoying that Petter and Patrik always make fuzz when they are told to do something

Stein: (laughs) That's for being a girl. A deeper voice, maybe and some muscles...
(they all laugh)

Siri: Be serious! This happens for you, too!

Sindre: Yeah, but well. It is a question of authority. They must know that you mean it.
Don't be so soft with them, Siri!

Siri: I'm not

Stein (interrupts): We are, we all are. It's like, well they play with us, don't they?

Or...But it would help if we were stricter with them I think.

Siri: What do you mean? We are strict. I am... Well, I guess that's what we will

discuss on Thursday. Learn the tricks!

The students' object-motive in the discursive activity is the need for smooth and uninterrupted trajectories in their lessons. In the short sequence they try out various objects of inquiry (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005): Does the sex of the teacher have something to do with the problem? Is it a problem of authority, and if it is, should it be seen as a problem on the part of the student teacher (who may not know the tricks of the trade), with the pupils (who may be playing with the student teachers, or who may be ill-mannered), or as problematic regarding the nature of the task? We notice that the students construct a *problem space* (Engeström, 1993; Lave, 1993) which may be expanded in a number of ways.

The Thursday meeting takes place two days after the lesson and the students' peer counselling session. About 30 minutes into the meeting, the following exchange takes place:

Extract 2

Tom	Well, that's that then [summing up the previous discussion]. Is there ehh do you have something...	
Siri:	Well we have been talking about you know, on Tuesday, Petter and...	<i>Starting to define a problem space</i>
Tom:	Oh yes, I remember. You had some trouble with them, right?	<i>Catching up on Siri's problem. Invites her to elaborate</i>
Siri:	Yes, and we talked about it, I don't know,	<i>Uses experiential knowledge to</i>

	it's like something with authority with them. And others, too. It takes so long, it takes time from the other pupils, like, when one always has to argue persuade and in the end get angry to get some of the pupils to start on the tasks.	<i>define the problem as her problem: she does not have sufficient authority. Potential object: lack of authority for student teachers</i>
Tom:	This is a serious issue that is not just a problem for student teachers. We all struggle a bit. You know, not all the pupils are motivated to do their best.	<i>Redefines the object as the general problem of low motivation for pupils</i>
Stein	Yeah, but it's so more difficult for us, I think. Because to them, we are not real teachers. So they...	<i>Argues for her version of the object</i>
Tom	[interrupts] Of course, it's easier when you know the pupils better. But it is a problem for all teachers! It is well a signal to you as a teacher that you need to work more on... That you need to plan carefully for the transitions between tasks. And the tasks themselves, perhaps, to make them interesting for those pupils. Let's look at exactly what happened in the lesson, Siri.	<i>Negotiating the object. Uses his position as expert to expand the problem space: it could be a problem of planning, of designing relevant and motivating tasks. The tool for further expansion of the object is to study experience.</i>

Siri	Well, they had been doing the discussions two and two and	<i>In the following interaction, the problem space is defined, based on the actual experiences of teaching in the classroom. By exploiting details of what happened, the problem space is narrowed down to a problem of getting the pupils attention before giving instructions.</i>
Tom	They were really engaged, weren't they?	
Siri	Yes, from the noise they made, I guess you could say...[they all laugh]. And then I capped my hands I think to get their attention. And told them to look at... But perhaps I shouldn't give these kinds of tasks to them, when it's so difficult to...	
Tom	Was the noise down when you told them?	
Siri	Well, I think...perhaps not	
Tom	It is important to make sure you have their attention before you give new instructions.	<i>Gives advice on how to master the problem</i>
Siri	But that's exactly the point! How long can you wait	<i>Argues to redefine the object: the pace of learning processes is hampered by a few pupils lagging behind</i>
Tom:	If you want to give collective instructions,	<i>Closes the problem space. You just</i>

	well then you must make sure you have their attention, Siri. But let's go back to...What did you say when you started the discussions in pairs? I mean, did you say anything about how long, and what they were going to do next?	<i>have to wait. Returns to framing object as a problem of motivation</i>
Siri	No, I don't think	<i>Co-constructing the event</i>
Stein	As I remember, you said "a few minutes"	
Tom	How could you	
Stein	Perhaps giving them an outline of the lesson in the beginning? Yes, that's what I will do.	<i>Stein suggests a tool: making sure the pupils know what to expect</i>
Tom	Just don't think that solves <i>everything</i> . When you know the pupils better, you know who needs special attention, and you can talk directly to them. Or pay attention to where you stand in the classroom when you give instructions. But it is a problem you have to work on again and again – even when you've been a teacher for 20 years.	<i>The object as classroom management. "Tricks of the trade" as tools for solving the problem.</i>

The excerpts show how objects of inquiry *may* be collaboratively constructed. It builds on the perceived needs of the student teachers to control the pupils' learning trajectories so that they may deliver the curriculum efficiently and at a swift pace (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004; Ottesen, 2006). In their negotiations of the object, the participants touch on a number of issues in teaching, e.g. problems of motivation, the role of planning, the need to understand the pupils, the problems of adaptive teaching, the role of the tasks and assignment, issues of communication and attention, teacher authority. The object of inquiry is being worked on in a multitude of directions, and is never defined and expanded, reflecting the serendipitous nature of mentor-student discussions during internship (cf. Ottesen, 2006).

The mentor is wary of the student teachers' needs and allows generous space for student voices. He builds on and takes seriously the students' experiences. In CHAT, objects are seen emergent, constructed by the participants in on-going activities (Hauge, Lund, & Vestøl, 2007). However, objects of activities have a dual character: it is concomitantly ideational, giving direction to the activity, and an emergent instantiation in current activities (Nardi, 2005). Internship in teacher education is a "between" activity. As a part of teacher education, its purpose is for students to learn, as teachers in actual classrooms, the purpose is for the pupils to learn (cf. Ottesen, 2006). By following processes of knowledge building to see how emerging objects the conflicting motive-objects are at work on and in the local negotiation of objects of inquiry. In the excerpts presented above, it becomes evident that the institutional demands of the school warrants solutions to the problem of making pupils responds to the demands of teachers or student teachers. Thus, cultural tools for control (better plans, relevant tasks or procedures for classroom management) are "delivered" to the student teacher, to be tried out in subsequent situations (cf. Stein's comment in excerpt 2 above).

Discussion

Historically, the division of labour between schools and HEI's in Norway has been that HEI's are places for learning *about* teaching, while schools are places for *practicing or training*. (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004; Kvalbein, 2003). Indeed, the Norwegian word for internship is *praksis* (practice), and a common word for mentor is *øvingslærer* (practice teacher). Lately, this has been construed as a central problematic of teacher education, leading to e.g. the formation of partnership agreements between schools and HEIs, a requirement for HEIs and schools to collaboratively plan internship periods, and the provision of assignments for the students during internship. However, the Ministry's survey (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007) indicates a gap between intentions and practice. For instance, the frameworks for the universities' teacher education (UFD, 2003) state that HEIs must develop a plan for internship. But according to the survey, such plans are developed by the HEIs without much cooperation with schools. The survey also indicates that the preparation for students before internship periods also is first and foremost the task of teachers in HEI. HEI-teachers infrequently visit schools, and meetings between schools and the university are few. *During* internship, mentors take responsibility for nearly all aspects of the practice: planning, organisation, accomplishment. The occasional contact there is between HEI and the school is most often on the initiative of HEI.

The survey indicates that the division of labour between schools and the university has not changed significantly as a result of the new political intentions. There are few established arenas for the development of a common discourse on student teachers learning. Schools and universities remain to different worlds (Sundli, 2003). In CHAT-terminology, they are activities motivated by different objects (cf. Edwards & Mutton, 2007). Student teachers are boundary crossers (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003), while mentors and HEI-teachers only

incidentally cross the boundaries. Artefacts (plans, lesson plan forms etc) are designed in the university to be implemented in the school, and in neither activity system is there any attention to how or if they work to help student teachers learn. Student teachers need to work on complex problems, and the entangled issues require knowledge that may be conjointly developed by HEIs and schools; expansive learning requires the expertise of both activity systems. There is an imperative to construct spaces for collective, horizontal knowledge building are required (Tuomi-Gröhn, 2003). Edwards and Mutton (2007, p. 509) suggest that “we think more about self-organising networks of mutual co-operation which are geared pedagogically at producing rounded professionals”. In the context of teacher education in Norway, however, a central impediment is a lack of resources. The Ministry’s survey (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007, p. 82) indicates that there are not sufficient resources to insure the quality of internship, to set up schemes for collaboration between HEI and partnership schools, or for HEI-teachers to visit schools during or outside internship periods. Consequently, it is not to be expected that networks for collaboration happen on their own, they need to be designed.

The excerpts above, indicate the serendipitous nature of learning opportunity and the tight connection of such opportunities to the cultural practice of the school (cf. Edwards & Protheroe, 2004; Ottesen, 2006). To intentionally design for learning would mean making decisions about the organisation, selections of content and working procedures (Hauge et al., 2007). This requires collaborative construction of objects of inquiry, making available tools for expanding the object, and building structures to support learning. The development of designs for learning warrants creation of boundary zones (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003) where the relations and tensions between practices can be renegotiated. Such boundary zones are detailed in the research literature e.g. as constructed through student participation in

developmental projects in the schools, supported by teams consisting of students, teachers form HEI and mentors (Tuomi-Gröhn, 2003), by development work research interventions as described by Ellis and Edwards (2007), or by using learning studios as scenes for boundary crossing (Lambert, 2003). The main point is to exploit the expertise of HEI and school experts to collaboratively develop the “core ideas which drive forward practices” (Edwards & Mutton, 2007, p. 516). By working with issues, such as those negotiated in the excerpts presented above, practitioners from both activity systems may be able to discern what core issues are, and how they can be made into objects of inquiry in internship *and* on campus. Although the university’s teacher education and internship in schools are different types of cultural practices (Jahreie & Ludvigsen, 2007), neither must be given authoritative status in the development of a design for student teachers’ learning. In developing designs for learning, HEI-teachers and mentors open up the objects of inquiry, and helps give the learning processes of student teachers direction and intention, and tie together the activities in university and schools. As a result of collaborative activity focussed on emergent core issues, designs would be open and flexible enough to allow for improvisation and serendipity, while concomitantly being stable enough to supply the necessary direction to the student teaches’ learning trajectories.

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