Changing Pedagogical Practices: Are Development Projects the right Course to take?

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Abstract

The project entitled Good Pedagogical Practices at Oslo University College [2] was a pedagogical development project conducted by the Centre for Centre for Educational Research and Development and the Department of Nursing. The aim was to change practices to accommodate second-language students. The project was based on practice-oriented research and development, and on testing and systemising experience and knowledge. For this particular department the project contributed to new knowledge and increased awareness of language and acquisition of academic literacy as well as development of appropriate pedagogical approaches for the language development of students with a first language other than Norwegian. The authors of this paper have adopted a meta-perspective and make a critical evaluation of the process from project to a fixed, weekly course for students with Norwegian as their second language given at the Department of Nursing which is institutionalised and presented on the timetable as "Norwegian Language and Communication". The authors are researchers and were the project managers for Good Pedagogical Practices.

Introduction

For a long time now, the aim of Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Science (HiOA) has been to contribute to a multicultural teaching and learning environment, something which had also been emphasized in the 2008-2011 strategic plan for Oslo University College. The plan stated that it would provide, among other things: "a learning

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[2] Oslo University College and Akershus University College were merged in 2011 to become Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Science. The Faculty of Nursing is now known as the Department of Nursing. The new title is used in this paper.

environment that particularly emphasized the integration of students with minority backgrounds and exchange students".

The student body at the university college is characterised by great diversity, and if integration in a learning environment is to be realised, a pedagogical approach that provides good learning conditions for individuals regardless of background will define a good pedagogical practice. However, many teachers lack a relevant action repertoire to meet their students' needs. Combined with acknowledgement of the fact that many students lack the Norwegian language skills required for professional study, this became the starting point for the development project entitled Good Pedagogical Practices.

The project was established in the autumn of 2008 as a two-year cooperation project between academic staff (teachers) at the Department of Nursing and two researchers at the Centre for Centre for Educational Research and Development. Together they would design a course for students who found that their language and communication skills were inadequate for succeeding in their studies. The hypothesis was that this specific project would provide the project members with theoretical knowledge and theoretical and practical experience that could be transferred to ordinary teaching and supervisory practices. The aim for the project was twofold: to further develop a specific language support programme for students with Norwegian as a second language and to contribute to expanding the pedagogical action repertoire for teaching and supervising student groups characterised by diversity. The challenges that were encountered in the project and the results achieved will be discussed in this paper. Experiences gained from the project, minutes of meetings, weekly records of the project work, and an interview with the project staff on completion of the project constitute the data. This paper presents an analysis of a demanding but successful interdisciplinary cooperation project. The conclusion is that development projects as a work method are well suited to pedagogical innovation and further development of existing pedagogical practices.

Background for the project

Students taking higher education are in different phases of life, come from different social, cultural and language backgrounds and, not least, have different levels of Norwegian language skills. The Ministry of Education and Research points out that:

> *[T]here are minor social differences in our education system compared with those of other countries. Nevertheless, the Government finds that there are general social differences in the education system that are unacceptable. There are differences in learning outcomes in primary and lower secondary education, drop-outs in upper secondary education, and social disparities in recruitment to higher education* (Prop. 1 S (2009-2010), p. 17).

Differences therefore exist, and, given the growing diversity in higher education, there is no reason to believe that HiOA is an exception to the rule. A university college offering equal opportunities for everyone (NOU:3) implies that diversity should and must be upheld. According to the Ministry of Education and Research, key elements in this work comprise "new and more varied forms of teaching and assessment" (Prop. 1 S (2009–2010), p. 18). It is necessary to offer a variety of forms of teaching and assessment and to create pedagogical flexibility if there is a genuine desire to give all students a real chance to succeed.

In its strategic plans, HiOA recognizes that the diversity of its student body calls for changes to be made to its pedagogical practices. However, public documents and action plans do not necessarily imply concrete action. HiOA is a complex organisation with many actors in a hierarchical system comprising different programmes and communities of practice. Such an organisation will harbour many different understandings of reality, ideals and interpretations of the institution's strategies and aims. The greater the distance between those who have developed the plans and the individual teachers who must translate the aims into concrete action, the greater the scope for divergent interpretations. Also, as Vike maintains, it may well be that an organisation's formal documents, strategies and aims are perhaps more an expression of an institution's desired self-image rather than an indicator of what is actually going on (Vike, 2007, p. 223). If the gap between the symbolic value of strategic plans and the ways in which individual teachers interact with their students is wide, it will also prove difficult to implement something new and succeed with pedagogical

development. This gap must be narrowed if any fundamental changes in an organisation are to be achieved. The development-oriented aspect of the Good Pedagogical Practices project has to do with transforming the traditional learning environment into a multicultural learning environment by expanding the teachers' pedagogical action competence. By challenging, problematising and questioning a given reality, one can view one's own practice in a new light.

For a long time the Department of Nursing had harboured a desire to improve study conditions for students with Norwegian as a second language. Students' preparedness for professional programmes of study is a key factor in learning. For many students with Norwegian as their second language, this means being able to deal with the linguistic realities they encounter. Possessing an adequate linguistic and communicative action repertoire is vital if one is to be an active participant in a learning environment. This became particularly evident after the introduction of the quality reform in higher education, which placed emphasis on a stronger sense of community through learning in cooperation with others (Report to the Storting No. 27 (2000-2001).

A pedagogical development project

The project was intended to expand teachers' pedagogical action competence and thereby develop new pedagogical practices at the Department of Nursing by developing a language and communication course adapted to the needs of the department's students with Norwegian as their second language. The project was interdisciplinary in nature, and required expertise in the fields of linguistics, language didactics, and pedagogy. The researchers' respective professional qualifications as philologist and educator were therefore necessary for achieving a successful result. The project team members from the Department of Nursing all had nursing backgrounds and represented different areas of nursing practice. This secured the relevance of the content with respect to the programme's language skills requirement.

Achieving the aims of the project demanded change and renewal of theoretical knowledge as well as of the practical pedagogical actions of individual teachers. The project can thus be characterised as a development project. The concepts of 'change', 'renewal' and

'development' are often used interchangeably in everyday language, and all of them essentially express some kind of transformation. In the context of a pedagogical development project, however, 'development' entails more than that. It has a normative subtext that implicitly requires structure, where content and methods are viewed in relation to the defined goals for the work on improving pedagogical practice. In NOU 1995:6, a development project is defined as: "[S]ystematic work that applies new materials and products to introduce new processes, systems or services or to improve those that already exist." (p. 491). Good Pedagogical Practices involved precisely such systematic work. In the autumn of 2009 and the spring of 2010 fixed days were allocated to systematically testing the content of the language course and pedagogical approaches on a pilot group. The pilot group was recruited from the department and comprised students with Norwegian as their second language who sought language support. The data were collected and analysed on an ongoing basis in light of subject didactics, disciplinary knowledge, and the linguistic and communicative requirements that are set for bachelor students of nursing. The requirement for systematic work was thus fulfilled.

The project was intended to contribute to resolving an existing problem at the department, namely the fact that students fall outside the learning community due to inadequate Norwegian language skills. The work can thus also be viewed as a form of action research. Learning and change in the organisation are key elements in all action research. The results that are generated are expected to benefit the practitioners, something that was a key principle in Good Pedagogical Practices. Action research is interactive, and the researcher collaborates with actors in the practice. This demands collaboration with practitioners who experience the challenges first-hand (Brannick & Coghlan, 2001; Tiller, 1999). The practice field was the Department of Nursing, and the actors were academic staff in that department. The focus was placed on the learning environment. Through methodical work, the teachers and researchers in the project were to build a bridge between research-based knowledge and practical experience, and to contribute to improved practice and thereby to a good learning environment.

The desire for improved pedagogical practice implies changing the established order and thereby also changing attitudes and personal practices. This constituted the project's

greatest challenge. Changing attitudes and practices takes time, and usually only comes about when individuals experience a need and desire for change. Research-based knowledge can lead to understanding and reflection, but change only comes about once that understanding is linked to one's own personal experiences (Meirink, Meijer & Verloop, 2007). Since change entails personal costs, the change must be perceived as profitable, in other words it must satisfy the needs of the individual.

Choice of actors and organisation

One prerequisite for the success of the project was collaboration with academic staff who saw project management as an opportunity for personal development and changed practice. The researchers who led the project did not belong to the department and lacked the knowledge that was necessary for evaluating the content and methods in relation to the requirements that are set for nursing students. It was therefore vital to have project team members who encountered pedagogical challenges associated with a specific student group in their everyday work.

The academic management at the department selected three project team members who represented different subject areas in the bachelor's degree programme. The participants were highly motivated. One of them expressed this as follows: "Are you crazy? Of course I wanted to!" Another member said that she said yes because her interest was aroused and because it was an opportunity to collaborate with new people and to develop as a teacher. All of the members had a 20 per cent position in the project, while the remainder of their teaching positions was spent on the bachelor programme. The project team members were thus part of the ongoing pedagogical development project at the same time as they were members of the teaching staff at the Department of Nursing. This was a conscious choice on the part of the researchers.

The fact that the project team members had satellite functions within their own department meant that the pedagogical development project would have spin-off effects on their respective professional communities. At the same time as they would identify the pedagogical needs of their colleagues at the department and draw these into the project, they would paper knowledge and experiences gained from the development project to their

colleagues through collaboration and discussion at meetings, seminars and staff gatherings. The intention was that ideas and alternative pedagogical approaches would slowly but surely be introduced to the programme as a result of making them the topic of discussion in various settings where the colleagues were gathered together.

In the start-up phase of the project at lot of attention was given to the collaboration aspect. The challenge was to establish and then sustain fruitful collaboration based on equality and complementarity between the researchers and the project team members for the entire duration of the project. From a professional perspective, the researchers could not work exclusively on their own terms. The project team members represented the practical and theoretical dimensions of nursing practice, while the researchers contributed with competence in language, language development, adult education, and knowledge of pedagogical development.

In close collaboration with the researchers, the project team members had responsibility for the concrete development and testing of the language and communication course that served as a pedagogical laboratory during the project period. Many teachers consider it irresponsible to experiment with new methods single-handedly. This is due partly to a sense of loyalty to what is regarded as the 'correct' pedagogical method and partly to a sense of insecurity about trying out something new and unfamiliar. Some teachers would also consider it to be bordering on irresponsibility because they could not know for sure that their students – instead of learning more – might end up achieving lower learning outcomes. Some would even deny that there is a need for new pedagogical methods. One of the team members said that her loyalty to plans adopted by the department made it difficult for her to change her own everyday teaching practice. It was therefore important that the project team members felt that the work they did in the project was defensible by, for example, making sure that they had the time for gaining professional insight and for reflection, that they had the support of their superiors during the project, and that the students were aware of the fact that the course they attended was being tested. Together the project team members and researchers conducted methodical work on developing methods that enhanced the students' own resources and expanded their linguistic and communicative repertoires. Methods were tested, evaluated, rejected or further developed.

The researchers aided reflection by asking critical questions and offering professional guidance as the work progressed. This meant that content and pedagogical methods were based on conscious choices made on the basis of didactic considerations.

Level of success of the development project

In many cases goal achievement is decisive to the success or failure of a project. Did the teachers' pedagogical action competence improve, and were new pedagogical practices introduced at the Department of Nursing? The answer to both questions is yes. Nonetheless, although the work was innovative and enjoyable, it was a strenuous and challenging process that lasted two years and that put the team members' enthusiasm, interest and endurance to the test. Any development demands change, change demands action, and action demands resolve. Any changes that are made will affect everyone. Is a project group consisting of three academic staff members of a department and two researchers enough to initiate such a comprehensive overhaul of a professional programme? Probably not, but the results from this pedagogical development project show that it is possible to sow the seeds and allow them to grow within an organisation. The course has now been implemented permanently as part of the department's programme portfolio and is being offered in the autumn semester of 2012 for the fourth time. While it must be said that two of the former project team members continue to have sole responsibility for the course, the rest of the academic staff are slowly but surely gaining awareness about the course, the pedagogical principles and the work methods that are used.

Learning outcomes for the individual project team members

The learning curve for the individual project team members was steep. They gained valuable experience and learning. The project team members said they gained greater awareness and that they used other and new methods in their everyday pedagogical practice in order to reach *all* their students. Their encounters with the pilot group gave them a valuable opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practices and to acquire a cognitive understanding of the connection between pedagogy/didactics and language development in a professional context. The researchers ensured professional breadth and depth in discussions by drawing on different perspectives, objections and disciplinary knowledge.

Together the project team members and the researchers reflected on forms of tuition as well as on different forms of assessment, communication and collaboration. Key questions relating to nursing practice, pedagogy and linguistics were discussed, and topics ranged from general issues to concrete methods.

Due to the fact that the development project was linked to authentic teaching and supervisory situations with the pilot group throughout the entire process, the team members had the opportunity to continually try out new ideas and teaching methods. This gave them valuable experience in teaching and supervising students with Norwegian as their second language and greater awareness of the didactics involved in another discipline. The project team members therefore gained new experiences in the process. They saw the results of their changed practiced and acknowledged the need for knowledge from other disciplinary fields. The intention of contributing to cognitive development and change in the individual teachers by means of an active process was therefore fulfilled.

New knowledge and new experiences gained from the development project have led the project team members to continue to explore and develop their own pedagogical practice in their regular teaching duties. They have subsequently adopted elements from the different methods and developed them so that they are now able to deal with their own real-life situations in a new way. For example, one of them has conducted a study in cooperation with an assistant professor/associate professor from the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Oslo. Together they have tested cooperative learning as a teaching method in the bachelor programme in nursing at HiOA. Another team member has conducted a trial in which one of the learning methods was tested in connection with supervising bachelor students in psychiatric practice. This was done in cooperation with nurses in the practice field. The aim in both cases was to improve the supervision of students by means of alternative learning methods.

Competence and Preparedness

It became clear at an early stage that the project team members' preparedness was not what the researchers had expected, both in terms of concrete knowledge and in terms of having a systematic and research-based approach. It was difficult for the team members to

distance themselves from the role of experts in nursing education and reflect instead on pedagogical principles. This was clearly demonstrated when their reflections were expressed in written form.

In order to aid reflection by the project team members and at the same time improve their writing skills with a view to sfuture publication in the form of papers and participation at conferences, everyone collaborated on writing a report in the final phase of the project. The report was written on an ongoing basis and therefore rendered the actual process in the development project visible. This gave the project managers (the researchers) control over how the work was progressing at all times. Everyone took turns in writing the report and thereby had a stake in it. The idea was that reflections on actions, developments and theories should be included in the report and thereby contribute to systematic reflection. The report was intended to serve as a tool for general practice, for concept formation and analysis, for reuse and dissemination. This, however, did not come about. The report was characterised by detailed descriptions of the aims and content of the course and lacked overall academic reflection.

The professional programmes place high demands on the students' written academic dissemination, and the project team members themselves supervise the students in preparing their written papers. The researchers therefore assumed that the teachers would be familiar with academic writing. Once again, they were wrong. Academic writing is given little priority in the teachers' working day. Some of them rarely write, and the threshold to do so was high. Another oversight on the part of the researchers was that they were not sufficiently explicit in formulating the expectations they had for the reports, and it soon became evident that the project team members had widely divergent ideas about the form and content. The researchers wanted to avoid reflections that were overly focused on action, yet they did little to guide the project team members on what they should reflect on, and how and why. Had they done so, they could have avoided considerable frustration along the way.

Although the researchers' expectations for the report were not met, the project team members themselves derived considerable benefit from the writing process. They believe

that this work has made them more confident in their written communication. Two of the project team members have presented their experiences at international conferences and two have since written their first scientific papers. The work on writing and the subsequent discussions have therefore had an impact on individual learning. One of them said:

> *You learned a way of thinking differently, you became receptive to other alternatives. You dared to say things in a setting where things were continually being developed and tested. Not much testing goes on in a such a big department where everyone is supposed to pull in the same direction.*

The report also provided the researchers with vital information on the levels of competence and reflection of the project team members. This made it possible to change course along the way, to stand back and make sure that there was a common understanding for the project and offer professional input before the work proceeded.

The researchers wanted to strengthen the individual team members' creativity, innovative thinking and belief that it was possible to succeed when faced with a highly heterogeneous group of students. They therefore took the team members' individual experiences and teaching ideals as their basis and focused on the possibilities rather than the problems. This, however, proved to be quite challenging, as the discussions always reverted to imaginary or authentic problems with or in the student groups. Moreover, two of the project team members had very little experience in or awareness and knowledge of how to reach students with Norwegian as their second language. If the project team members had possessed more competence related to teaching and second-language users in higher education, the work would probably have gone more smoothly. At the same time, the project would have been further removed from the department's teaching staff and would thereby have lost some of its transfer value.

Collaboration and equality

While one of the main tasks of the researchers was to lead the project, the project team members had, as already mentioned, only 20 per cent of their positions allocated to the project, the rest being allocated to teaching duties in the bachelor's degree programme in

nursing. This was a conscious decision, based on the hypothesis that this would create optimal conditions for transferring new knowledge to their students and colleagues. The project team members represented 'ordinary' academic staff members and, consequently, the area of impact for renewed teaching practice. Moreover, they had credibility and legitimacy in their professional community, and were not experts in an area which many of their colleagues would perceive as alien and irrelevant to the study programme. This point has proven to be important for the outcome. The project team members have spread the word in their own department, and believe that to a certain extent they have succeeded in doing so. One of them said: "We discuss things, and they are delighted when I make suggestions on how things could be done in order to include everyone [the students]." Another member told of how colleagues are now "asking and looking for answers... it wasn't like that at the start. Then it was more like ... well, they wouldn't even talk about it then." They have also found that their colleagues are attempting to change their own practices with their students. This would hardly have been possible without their colleagues' expertise in the culture in that particular professional programme.

Early on in the process it became apparent that the 20 per cent position allocation was a drawback to collaboration in the project. Despite the team members' engagement and desire to participate, working on the project became a balancing item for the teachers in their busy everyday lives. They mentioned this issue in their interviews. Nonetheless, they perceived their progression in the project to be good. "The progression was very good. People knew what they had to do and [...] they enjoyed doing it." They believe that their contributions were appreciated and enjoyed trying them out with the students.

The researchers, however, saw things in a different light. The work schedule had to be repeatedly revised due to slow progression, particularly in the initial phase of the project. At times the first year was characterised by confusion on the part of the team members about what was expected of them, and by recurrent discussions with little purpose which – to the researchers' minds – did not drive the project forward. This can, in part, be attributed to the different expectations of the researchers and the team members regarding the nature of the work and that the researchers did not have sufficient insight into or understanding of the project team members' preparedness when planning the project. The researchers must

perhaps acknowledge that the time schedule was overly optimistic, though some of the blame must also be attributed to the teachers themselves and poor to arrangement of the work situation on the part of the department. Participation in a pedagogical development project requires more than concrete action once a week. Professional insight and reflection are key elements in a systematic development project. Because insufficient time was allocated, it took an inordinately long time before the teachers reached an adequately theoretical level of professional reflection and analysis. The general professional discussion repeatedly spiralled down to the individual level and dealt with personal experiences or specific actions. Shifting the teachers' attention from concrete problem-solving to a more general analysis often proved difficult. The discussions quickly lost course, something that can be attributed to the project team members' divergent focus and aims. If the discussions that took place were to contribute to knowledge development, they had to be systemised and not distracted by momentary challenges and problems.

With hindsight, the researchers acknowledge that their expectations of the project team members were too high and that the ambitions of the respective parties differed. As project managers, they sometimes felt that the project was failing due to the slow progression, whereas the teachers had the opposite impression: "I think it's been thoroughly enjoyable because it has made me move forward." Another member says: "We gradually changed as we gained experience about what paid off and what didn't work [...]. I didn't think that you were too strong." A pedagogical development project is time-consuming, and perhaps constantly recurring discussions and slow progression are sometimes necessary for good goal achievement. The quality of the discussions and, consequently, of the work steadily improved as the members of the project group got to know each other and the project team members acquired more knowledge about language and language development.

One clear goal for the researchers was to take the needs and wants of the project team members as their basis and that their professional input should be attributed as much weight as the researchers' knowledge and experience. This proved impossible to do, partly due to individual work situations and partly due to the researchers' professional competence and experience. The theme of the project is the researchers' field of study; they have spent years researching and studying pedagogy, multicultural learning

environments and students with Norwegian as their second language. Consequently, they took control over most of the academic content of the project, despite their desire for professional equality. The role of the researcher soon became the role of the expert, a development which proved to be impossible to reverse during the course of the project. At times they felt that they probably took over complete control of the project. Once again, however, the researchers and the project team members saw things in a different light. The team members themselves said that they acquired a sense of ownership in the project and that they felt they were treated equally in academic discussions. They did not (contrary to what the researchers had suspected) feel they had been disregarded by the project management; on the contrary, they felt they genuinely had some say in the project. One team member said: "I owned it, too ... it was fun to present [the project] and show it to people, and … yes, I thought so. Because gradually it became like a real ... well, ownership, in a way."

A meeting of cultures and lack of meetings

The idea to use a pedagogical development project as a method of goal achievement proved to be a good choice. The researchers and project team members represented different disciplines and, therefore, different worlds of ideas to which they loyally adhered in their interpretations and expectations. The meetings between the individual project team members and between them and the researchers can be described as meetings of different cultures at which the conditions for broadening perspectives and inspiring change were optimal. The teachers *have* gained greater awareness of language and acquisition of academic literacy, they *have* developed professionally, and they *have* acquired a broader pedagogical action repertoire. For their own part, they say they have learnt a lot: "You learned to think in a different way, you became more receptive to other possibilities." One of the project team members said: "[W]e came up with new ideas, and we gradually changed. And that's what development projects are about, to my mind. We gradually changed as we gained experience about what paid off and what didn't work." The project team members also believe they have become more aware, and they use new methods in their teaching and supervision in attempts to reach *all* their students, both those with good and weak Norwegian language skills.

The teachers also felt that, to some extent, they have had an influence on the environment at the Department of Nursing, particularly among their closest colleagues. However, the management at the Department of Nursing did little to follow up the development project, despite an expressed desire to improve the students' learning environment; cf. Vike. In other words, efforts to improve the learning situation for students with weak language skills and to strengthen diversity were not given high priority. Dissemination of knowledge and competence has therefore had less reach than it could have had if the management had put these issues on the agenda. There is still some way to go before diversity among the students is seen as a genuine resource and before all the department teaching staff see the need to renew their own practices to align with the changes in student groups. Change takes time; sometimes it takes more time than first envisaged, and it comes about in small doses. In the wake of Good Pedagogical Practices, however, changes are coming about, albeit in small steps.

What is needed to achieve success: a checklist

It is impossible to give a formula for a successful pedagogical development project. The criteria will vary according to the purpose, aims and background for the project, as well as the financial and human resources and organisational set-up. Nonetheless, based on experiences gained from Good Pedagogical Practices, we have produced a checklist that can be used when initiating similar projects:

- Is the development project institutionally entrenched?
- Has the purpose, aim and scope for the development project been understood by everyone involved?
- Do the parties involved possess the necessary interest and competence?
- Have the ambitions and expectations of the parties involved been clarified, and do they want change?
- Has a system for assuring the quality of the work processes been established?
- Has sufficient time been allocated?
- Has flexibility been allowed for?

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