Supermentoring' of Assistant Professors' Teaching

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Supermentoring

— formative supervision of young faculty’s teaching practice: an important SoTL focus point
Presentation

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1 minute break:

Check your notes – you might want to briefly discuss some topics with the person sitting next to you.

Rest your brain.

Stretch your arms / legs.

Stand up – move around.
Outline

1. Problem statement and research question.
2. What is meant by ‘supermentoring’?
   – Conceptual background: supervision – pros and cons.
3. The concept of ‘supermentoring’
   a) The framework.
   b) ‘Supermentoring’ *per se*: before, during, and after.
5. Problems of ‘supermentoring’.
6. Why this is a SoTL issue and a future research topic.
1. Problem statement and research question
Problem statement

• Even though young faculty members to a large extent understand and approve of the theoretical constructivist framework offered in the mandatory (practice oriented) pedagogical program, many of them
  – face **problems putting the theory into practice**
  and
  – can’t give **reasons for their didactic choices**.
Problem statement

• Thus, many young colleagues deliver mere ‘hypodermic needle teaching’ – one way communication (even in seminars) which hampers the learning process of the students.

• Many of the young colleagues are not aware of the crucial role of the teacher’s performance for the learning outcome.
Research question for a future research

• Given that young faculty members in many respects are left to their own devices in the classroom, research should be conducted to examine the effect of ‘supermentoring’ (brief formative supervision).

– Does ‘supermentoring’ strengthen young faculty’s teaching practice with better student learning outcomes as a result?
2. What is meant by ‘supermentoring’?

Conceptual background: supervision – pros and cons
Supervision

- Focused on teaching performance, supervision is not a new concept in the teaching world.
- In principle, we can differentiate between:
Expert Supervision

• A superior evaluates a young teacher:
  – Roughly, a summative assessment that might have, and often has, some formative elements as well.

• A well-established part of quality assurance:
  – Widely used in schools K–12, in some countries based on national or federal guidelines.
  – Used at universities worldwide in connection with the work of GTAs.
Expert Supervision

Advantages:

• The institution signals that quality in teaching is a core issue.

• Even though the Expert Supervision is part of an evaluation as such, it can deliver central input of importance for the development of the supervisee’s teaching practice.
Expert Supervision

Potential problems:

- As a quality assurance tool the Expert Supervision might have negative consequences for the supervisee:
  - less work, less money,
  - no raise,
  - no contract prolongation,
  - no tenure,
  - ....
Expert Supervision

(Potential problems, cont'd):

• This and the fact that
  – the Expert Supervision operates within a hierarchically unequal structure,
  – it has a primarily summative character, and
  – due to this, it can be anxiety provoking or at least stressful,

  can mean that Expert Supervision doesn’t really support the development of the supervisee.
Peer Supervision

• Teachers at the same career level mutually supervise and advise one another,
  – to a large extent based on certain guidelines and within a formative framework.
• First and foremost used among new teachers who need to process their teaching experiences and to focus on crucial elements of teaching.
• Also used among experienced teachers who don’t feel they can learn more through courses, etc.
Peer Supervision

Advantages:

• Supervisor and supervisee are at a **hierarchically equal level** which means that:
  – Peer Supervision is a **dialogical learning process** / an egalitarian dialogue based on the axiom ‘same level, same problems’.
  – Peer Supervision is **less anxiety provoking**.
Peer Supervision

Potential problems:

• The participants don’t have
  – a ‘seasoned’ knowledge of learning theory,
  – a meta language / a common language on learning and teaching at their disposal,
  – as often as not tend to teach the way they have been taught themselves (also in spite of their having taken courses).

• The result can be that the blind leads the deaf.
3. The concept of ‘Supermentoring’
‘Supermentoring’

• Realizing that the concept of supervision has strong sides, but implies problems as the ones listed, CUL has developed a half-way house between supervision and mentoring, ‘supermentoring’.

• The concept is conceived as
  – a ‘qualified mirror’ held up to the supervisee,
  – a starting point for reflection and further development.
‘Supermentoring’

• It is not classical supervision:
  – not a formal intervention based on a hierarchically unequal structure with potential negative consequences,
  – not an evaluation as such.

• It is not classical mentoring:
  – not an ongoing relationship based on dialogue and discussion,
  – but advice based on research and experience.
‘Supermentoring’

• ‘Supermentoring’ is based on the Danish concept ‘vejledning’.

• Directly translated ‘vejledning’ means – “leading (someone) on (his/her) way”.

• ‘Vejledning’ holds a strong element of guidance / mentoring and has only a touch of monitoring.
THINK – PAIR - SHARE

• For 48 secs everybody thinks of two items that he / she finds stupid, interesting, new...

• Share your two items with the person sitting next to you: Talk for 2 minutes.
3a. ‘Supermentoring’ – the framework.
Supermentoring at CUL - the framework

• All assistant professors who plan to apply for a tenured position at a Danish university must have completed a pedagogical training program.
• All Danish universities offer such programs.
• At Aarhus University it comprises 150 working hours:
  – General learning theory (constructive alignment)
  – Program and lesson planning
  – Lecturing
  – Seminar teaching
  – Educational IT
  – Teaching in the multicultural and multilingual classroom
  – Writing a teaching portfolio (with feedback)
Supermentoring at CUL - the framework

• All supervision is voluntary, offered to assistant professors who have completed the mandatory pedagogical training program at Aarhus University.

• The supervisor is generally not an expert in the field taught and concentrates only on the teaching practice.

• The supervision comprises 1 – 2 sessions 1 – 2 times within a semester.

• If the teacher holds both lectures and seminars, both types of classroom sessions are supervised.
3b.
‘Supermentoring’ *per se*
– before, during and after.
The Supervision *per se* (1)

- **Before the supervision** the supervisee is contacted and made familiar with the objectives and procedure:
  - The supervision is based on the contents of the pedagogical training program:
    - To which extent are the theories introduced put into practice?
    - To which extent are the teaching methods taught being used?
    - Do the didactic choices seem well-founded?
The Supervision *per se* (2)

- **During the supervision** the supervisor writes the feedback document that comprises the following items:
  - A summary
  - The presentation of the subject matter (PPP)
  - Other technologies used (video, visualizer, OHP, Web 2.0 etc.)
  - Use of blackboard
  - Use of gestures and facial expression – ‘performance’
  - Voice and language (the quality of Danish / of English as a foreign language in teaching)
  - The structure of the lecture including timing
  - Creating attention among the students
  - Interaction with the students and active learning
The Supervision Document

• The tenor of the Supervision Document is characterized by the fact that the supervisor sees himself as a coach, a facilitator, a ‘mid-wife’ (see attached prototype).

• The Supervision Document is the private property of the supervisee.
  – It can be filed and never revisited.
  – It can be used as a part of the teaching portfolio of the supervisee required when he/she applies for a tenured position.
The Supervision *per se* (3)

- Immediately after the supervision the supervisee gets the Supervision Document.
- It is entirely up to the supervisee to ask for further advice, comment on the Supervision Document, ask clarifying questions, etc.
- Due to the voluntary character of the supervision the supervisor doesn’t urge the supervisee to take further contact – the supervisor has done his duty, the supervisor can leave.
Anecdotal evidence

• Many supervisees report that they did not understand the full impact of the pedagogical principles delivered at the training course until after the supervision.

• Many realize that their teaching can be improved through only minor changes.

• All the supervisees that have given feedback stress that they feel more competent and confident after the supervision.
5. Problems of ‘supermentoring’.
Problems of ‘supermentoring’

• So far no thorough evaluation – only anecdotal evidence that ‘supermentoring’ makes a difference combined with the fact that 4 out of 10 (2011-2012) ask for supervision.
  – But: We need to know if this short and one off intervention really makes a long time difference – and which difference.

• The supervisees are very often very nervous and this frequently has a negative influence on their teaching – to some the mere thought of supervision make them reluctant to sign up.

• Supervision is cost intensive.
6. Why ‘supermentoring’ 
is a SoTL issue. 
Future research.
Future research: research question

Does ‘supermentoring’ strengthen young faculty’s teaching practice with better student learning outcomes as a result?
Why ‘supermentoring’ is a SoTL issue

Political / societal reasons:

• New segments of students > new (and constant) pedagogical challenges > new teacher roles, new ways of teaching,

• Constant cuts > larger classes and/or less teaching > new teacher roles, new ways of teaching,

• Mergers, internationalization of study programs, ever increasing administrative tasks, too little time for the research requested (not in all cases).

• But: the quality requirements don’t follow suit – on the contrary.
Teachers of today

• Hard-working people in a more and more demanding environment:
• Perpetual change > stress > less energy resources, less self-efficacy.
• Less or no time for development > stress > less energy resources, less self-efficacy.
• Therefore: an intervention like ‘supermentoring’ might to some extent / a large extent – remedy this imbalance,
  – smooth the path, not least for young faculty members with limited teaching experience.
Who should be in charge

• Colleagues with
  – an updated knowledge on
    • learning theory,
    • teaching practice,
  – teaching experience (for better or for worse),
  – empathy,
  – a wish to make a difference,
  – ...

The SoTL Community
Future research

• **General problems**
  
  – First and foremost: What can we in fact research?

  – **Quantitative research**: student evaluations before and after, grades before and after?

    • Hardly possible, but if so, what would this show?

  – **Qualitative research**: interviews with ‘supermentees’?

    • Absolutely possible, but what should be researched?
Future research: teacher efficacy

• Teachers’ confidence in their professional abilities, specifically teachers’ expectations that they will be able to perform the actions that lead to student learning.

• (Three substantive narrative reviews) The evidence (of the third) is consistent: few teacher characteristics have as much impact on instructional practice and student outcomes as teacher efficacy.

Ross 2012
Invitation

• Join a cross cultural and cross institutional research group that **first** discusses the potentials of ‘supermentoring’ in terms of teacher efficacy,

• **second**, prepares a formal setup that leads to a regular SoTL developmental / research project,

• **third**, conducts this development / research.