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Supervisors' Support – Some Specific Challenges

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Introduction

This paper was contributed by Nina Malterud from the Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme and is based on a workshop that was held at the second SHARE conference in London in 2012. This section helps to identify the organisational challenges presented by the project of developing supervisors' capacities as doctoral-level educators and project advisors. While based on the specifics of the Norwegian operational context – marked by a high level of public investment in artistic research – the paper provides ideas and reflections that will be helpful in many other contexts as well.

Background

In the Norwegian Law for Higher Education, artistic research has been considered equivalent to scientific research since 1995. This made it possible for Norwegian institutions of higher art education to establish the Artistic Research Fellowship Programme, which was developed as an artistic alternative to the scientific PhD programmes with a dedicated support from the Ministry of Education and Research in 2003. The programme was one of the first in Europe to offer a three-year research education explicitly based on artistic goals and methods.

The fellowship programme was established for the ten main higher art education institutions in Norway, covering the fields of design, film, music, performative arts and visual art. In an international perspective, all these institutions are rather small, and one of the reasons for establishing a common programme was to ensure a critical mass for the fellows. Relations between the institutions and the programme are regulated through various documents and, subsequently, through years of practice.

In the first year, the Ministry granted a few three-year fellowships which were continued for other candidates in subsequent years. PhD projects in Norway are normally funded like this, so the economic framework consolidated the equality that had been inscribed into law. Institutions may also fund additional fellows from their own budgets, and all applicants go through the same procedure in having the quality of their project description assessed before being accepted into the programme.

In order to pass the final assessment, a fellow needs to present one work or a body of works of art of a high international quality and to deliver a critical reflection upon the work. Within the Norwegian Qualification Framework from 2011, the fellowship programme is defined within the third cycle, corresponding to the PhD level, but it does not yet give the official PhD title to fellows who have passed. The programme qualifies fellows for employment at the level of associate professors in the Norwegian system of higher education.

Six research fellows started in 2003. In 2012, about 80 research fellows have been attached to the programme over the years of its operation to date. About 30 have passed the final assessment, and a few have failed. The research fellow is considered to be an employee at one of the institutions, and is based in the local environment to accomplish her or his project. Fellows also take part in seminars

and courses arranged by the programme, focusing on themes such as the understanding of artistic research, methodologies, critical reflection, ethics, etc. During the period of study, each fellow must have one main supervisor with competence based on artistic merits (the supervisor doesn't have to hold a PhD title), and one or more co-supervisors, whose main field may also be theoretical. One of the supervisors should be closely connected to the fellow's home institution. All supervisors must be professors or associate professors or have unquestionable competence on one of those levels.

To date, more than 140 people have been involved as supervisors – a few of them for several fellows, but many related only to one. About 60 percent of supervisors are employees in Norwegian institutions of art education (but not all are Norwegian nationals); the rest are recruited from abroad, mainly Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, Denmark, France and Italy. Most of these are professors within higher education, but some are also freelance artists, curators, producers or researchers.

Challenges

When establishing the programme, there was a clear intention that the art education institutions involved should take responsibility for developing a third cycle relevant to the arts. The insistence on the primary supervisor having an artistic background has been crucial in this context. However, few of these supervisors were familiar with the PhD level from their own educational background, as the artistic PhD is a rather new phenomenon. The programme framework raised a lot of questions among the supervisors involved. Many supervisors' experience of teaching at BA and MA level had to be expanded in order to construct a new role for the third cycle. This could not be done only individually, but needed a community, and it could not be done in a day, but required a lot of endurance on the part of participants.

Because Norwegian art education environments are small, it was considered necessary to closely connect the programme and its projects to international discourses. The programme board recommended that one of the two supervisors should be non-Norwegian, and it is a formal demand in the regulations that assessment committees should have at least one member from abroad. Over the years, many resourceful experts with a foreign background have made valuable contributions to the development of the programme, both as supervisors and as assessment committee members. However, this huge diversity also represents a continuing challenge in the sense that supervisors and assessors may find it difficult to adjust their own preconceptions to the specific conditions. Some of them undertake this task only once and cannot draw on a longer experience, and some of them are not otherwise involved in educational affairs.

These two main challenges – the potential difficulty of adjusting to the programme framework and supervisors' lack of previous experience of the third cycle – presented an obvious need to bring supervisors together to establish a common understanding. Given the busy schedules of the people involved, it was not considered feasible to demand participation in a mandatory foundation course of 'supervisors' school – the occasions for meeting between the stakeholders in the Programme should be compact and build on attraction, not obligation.

Two regular spaces for developing a culture and building competence have been established:

- The Artistic Research Forum, twice a year since 2003 (19 gatherings to date);
- The Supervisors' Seminar, once a year since 2011 (two so far).

The Artistic Research Forum

This is a two-day gathering of all active fellows, supervisors and institutional representatives 'to focus on the understanding of artistic research from a national and international perspective, on the interdisciplinary dimensions in the programme, on the fellows' competence to present their project in an interdisciplinary setting, on relevant ways of communicating and discussing the projects' main

aspects'. (Statement for the Artistic Research Forum autumn 2012) During the first years, keynote speakers were invited to address specific themes, but the content of the forum has more recently been largely based upon the actual fellowship projects and the people present as supervisors and fellows, with a focus on the professional exchange. Expanding over the years from a gathering of 20-30 to 80-90 people, care had to be taken to enhance active participation, by arranging more group discussions than plenary sessions. As a means of facilitating social interaction, the forum was held in a conference hotel just outside Oslo, and, in order to get closer to the art environment, every autumn forum now takes place at one of the art education premises around the country.

The forum has been the main meeting place for everybody involved in the programme, and it serves as a landmark. It continues to be a challenge to engage all participants from different fields of art and to find fruitful ways of stimulating productive discussions, but the forum soon proved to offer great academic potential and a stimulating experience that far exceeded the practical level. Within the forum, we have witnessed new networks being built up and an unexpected exchange of resources.

The Supervisors' Seminar

From the outset, supervisors' meetings were included as a small part of the Artistic Research Forum. In 2011, it became necessary to establish a separate and more focused meeting place. Each time, there have been about 40 participants, including a large contingent of active supervisors.

For the first seminar, the following issues were elaborated, to be discussed in small groups:

- Ownership of the fellow's project – the degree to which the supervisor is involved.
- Supervision in connection with the reflective process. Artist as supervisor – a challenge when it comes to the demand for critical reflection?
- Relationship between supervisor and fellow. Maintain a critical distance – a challenge?
- Project failures – supervisor's failure as well?

All the issues generated strong engagement, and were followed up in the next seminar with these two points on the agenda:

- Focus on the supervisor's own experience of the relationship between artistic practice, theory and reflection – exemplified by two of the supervisors who described their own reflection related to practice;
- Focus on clarification of the supervisor's individual, often unspoken, attitudes to supervising, regarding essential artistic/research questions as well as practical conditions, and how these positions may be communicated to the fellow.

None of these questions have found final answers, but they have been opened up to an ongoing discourse. Feedback from participants has been very positive and generated demand for additional activities. By building this up as a regular meeting place, the seminar may also serve as a socialising community for new supervisors. The third seminar took place in March 2013 and focused more closely on the issues of critical reflection, both format and content.

Further Perspectives

Most of the pertinent questions concerning the supervisor's role are, at their core, both artistic and academic, and, therefore, of great interest to the art education environment as a whole. When supervisors are invited to share aspects of their role, some basic principles emerge as crucial:

- Create an environment for sharing by setting up small groups and focused agendas;
- Make the exchange relevant to the supervisor's own professional development;
- Respect the supervisor's competencies; meet as specialists, not as beginners;
- Concentrate on core challenges, not general discussions on programme profile and regulations;
- Separate practical problems from principal academic issues.

The positive energies among supervisors are generated by their professional interest in a demanding task and by the positive experience of breaking new ground together. By putting the above issues on the agenda in an open environment and by making specialists from very different corners of the art fields talk to each other about these questions, the supervisors' meetings may, in the longer run, become an important factor in developing new discourses within the arts.

Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme
<http://artistic-research.no/>