



## Supporting academic literacies: university teachers in collaboration for change

Lotta Bergman

To cite this article: Lotta Bergman (2016) Supporting academic literacies: university teachers in collaboration for change, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21:5, 516-531, DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2016.1160220](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1160220)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1160220>



Published online: 21 Mar 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 293



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## Supporting academic literacies: university teachers in collaboration for change

Lotta Bergman

Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

### ABSTRACT

This article deals with an action research project, where a group of university teachers from different disciplines reflected on and gradually extended their knowledge about how to support students' academic literacy development. The project was conducted within a 'research circle' [Bergman, L. 2014. "The Research Circle as a Resource in Challenging Academics' Perceptions of How to Support Students' Literacy Development in Higher Education." *Canadian Journal of Action Research* 15 (2): 3–20], in which the teachers engaged in a continuous dialogue where experience-based and research-based knowledge could meet. The two-year long process was divided into three phases: exchange of experiences and knowledge, small-scale empirical investigations in the participants own teaching, and presentations of the outcome of the research circle work. The main focus in this article is the second phase. The choice of small-scale-investigations, and how they were discussed and developed in the collaborative work, will be foregrounded as well as the changes that occurred in the participants' teaching practices and how the participants value the outcome of the research circle work.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 August 2015  
Accepted 29 January 2016

### KEYWORDS

Academic literacies; action research; collaboration; critical reflection; teaching practices

## Introduction

The work of the university teacher has changed rapidly during the last decades. This change can be explained by the increased number of students in mass educations and by a far larger heterogeneity in student groups in higher education of today (Hyland 2006; Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2001). Furthermore, the act of teaching has altered due to the comprehensive development of information technology, globalization, and the more far-reaching social responsibilities of universities in democratic societies (Kreber 2009). To give a greater proportion of the population access to higher education is seen as essential for societal and democratic development. Accordingly, there are new responsibilities as well as a variety of roles to play in supporting students' learning in different ways (Northhedge and McArthur 2009). This has made pedagogical training for all university teachers increasingly important. One of the most challenging responsibilities for teachers in higher education is to support students in gaining access to *academic literacies*: the ways of understanding, interpreting, and organizing knowledge that is practiced in the

subjects and disciplines of the academy (see e.g. Duff 2010; Hyland 2006; Ivanič 1998; Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Scott 2007; Wingate 2006).

However, teachers can be reluctant to take responsibility for students' learning and language development, in relation to disciplinary content (Haggis 2006; Wingate 2006). According to Bailey (2010) the reluctance can be due to lecturers' feelings of uncertainty as to how such support could be designed and whether or not their competencies as teachers are adequate. Bailey's study also shows that an increased number of students, overloaded curriculums, and time constraints limits teachers' willingness to take responsibility for students' learning development. Teachers' uncertainty and ambivalence due to similar circumstances are confirmed in my previous research (Bergman 2014).

Research aiming to understand the challenges teachers face, how they experience their situation, and what strategies they use to cope with changing circumstances and new roles are limited, as well as knowledge about how teachers' practices can be changed and developed. The aim of my research, concerning the role of teachers in supporting students' development of academic literacies, is to narrow this knowledge gap in order to create better prerequisites for teachers' professional development and thereby also students' language and knowledge development. In light of this aim, I explore how a group of experienced university teachers, representing different subjects and disciplines, collaboratively reflect on and gradually extend their knowledge on how to support students in their academic literacy development. The study is influenced by action research through its concern with changing and developing an activity and through its attempt to gain knowledge regarding how this change occurs and what happens during the process (Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson 2006; Somekh 2006). The process took place within a research circle (Bergman 2014), in which eight colleagues from Malmö University in Sweden engaged in a continuous dialogue where experience-based and research-based knowledge could meet. A research circle is a method and a meeting place for knowledge-building and professional development, and the object of study is the participants' own practice (Lindholm 2008; Persson 2009). It gives time and space for collective reflections and inquiry-based projects, opportunities that are not often given in sporadic workshops and credit courses for academic staff.

During the initial phase of the research circle, which coincided with the first semester of the two-year long project, important preconditions for the group's further work were created. A safe group climate evolved, characterized by mutual trust and a readiness to be challenged in critical reflections (Mälkki 2011; Mezirow 1998). Furthermore, a powerful resource was the participants' experience-based stories, which mediated a social reality that the participants could share. Thus, the stories enabled recognition, acknowledgment, and comparison between individual practices and disciplines, showing that things can be done and understood in different ways. Those preconditions remained significant, even though the group members' research circle work changed character over time. Therefore, a deeper analysis of the first phase of the process was conducted, with the aim of understanding how the research circle was employed as a resource to challenge participants' initial perceptions of how to support students' literacy development. The findings of this analysis have been presented in a previous article (Bergman 2014).

The main focus in this article is on the second phase of the work of the research circle, in which the participants carried out small-scale investigations into their own teaching or into other activities intended to support students' academic literacy development. The

choice of small-scale-investigations and how they developed in the collaborative work will be foregrounded. Furthermore, in relation to interviews conducted with all participants, I ask the following questions: What changes occur in the participants' teaching practices? How do participants value the outcome of the research circle work?

## Theoretical and conceptual framework

The research project has an overarching sociocultural theoretical perspective. According to this perspective, learning has both a social and a cognitive side, of which the social needs to come first (Vygotsky 1978). A fundamental premise is that humans learn in *interaction* with others and in doing so contribute with something new. The learning and the *mediational tools* we use are culturally, socially and historically situated and have the potential to either enable or constrain our actions (Wertsch 1991). The most important cultural tool for participation in social practices and for thinking and learning is *language* (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1991, 1998).

To understand the interaction in the research circle, I have employed the concepts of *inter-subjectivity* and *temporarily shared social reality* (Rommetveit 1974). Inter-subjectivity but also *alterity* (Bakhtin 1984) is characteristic of social interaction (Wertsch 1998, 111). The phenomena behind the concepts are described as two forces dynamically integrated but difficult to balance. Alterity, the relationship of 'I' and 'Other', is linked to the 'dialogic function' of language, fundamental to all meaning making (Bakhtin 1984). It represents the divergent perspectives and potential conflicts that arise in the tension between multiple voices. Differences in perspectives and opinions, *multivoicedness* (Bakhtin 1984), can become *thinking devices* (Lotman 1990) for the development of new knowledge and understanding.

The concept *collaboration* (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011; Capobianco 2007) is used for the joint work, on equal grounds, carried out in the team of university teachers. The participants, including me as both tutor and researcher, 'co-labored' over things we thought were difficult, and, occasionally, found the journey uncomfortable, which, according to Somekh (2006), can lead to deeper levels of collaboration. Lycke and Handal (2012) see collaborative reflections among colleagues as essential to catch sight of the silent premises that govern our actions. Of particular value for university teachers are the reflections that take place in interactions between colleagues across disciplines.

I regard *critical reflection* as a crucial element in professional development and quality improvements. The concept will be used with the following definition: 'becoming aware and assessing or questioning the assumptions that orient our thinking, feeling and acting' (Mälkki 2011, 5), which can be linked to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Mezirow and Associates 2000). Mezirow (1991) distinguishes three kinds of reflections; reflections on *content*, *processes* and *premises*. Kreber (2005) shows that university teachers' reflections, mostly concern content and processes, and that little attention is given to the underlying premises for their thinking and acting. Critical reflections are often triggered by discontent and have the potential to lead to a reformulation of an old meaning structure (Mezirow 1998), a process whereby critical reflection is regarded as necessary but not a sufficient condition for change (see e.g. Taylor 2007). Mälkki (2011, 6–7) argues that Mezirow's view of reflection as a rational and cognitive process needs to be complemented with emotional and social dimensions.

To give teachers a key role in developing and implementing new ways of supporting students is crucial (Quinn 2012), as is taking ‘the culture of academic staff’ into account in this work (Blythman and Orr 2002). However, university teachers’ reflections are affected by the larger institutional context. Curricular structures and organizational conditions may constitute *barriers* that do not allow for changes in practices on individual level (Mälkki and Lindholm-Yläne 2012). Therefore, it is crucial that the institutional culture stimulates, expect and reward critical reflection and innovative thinking (Lycke and Handal 2012). With reference to Argyris (1993) and his theory of *double-loop learning*, Somekh (2006) argues that groups need to ‘work interactively and reflectively to go beyond their personal learning and aim for a broader impact on improving working methods and practices across their whole workplace’ (Somekh 2006, 21).

## Design and methods

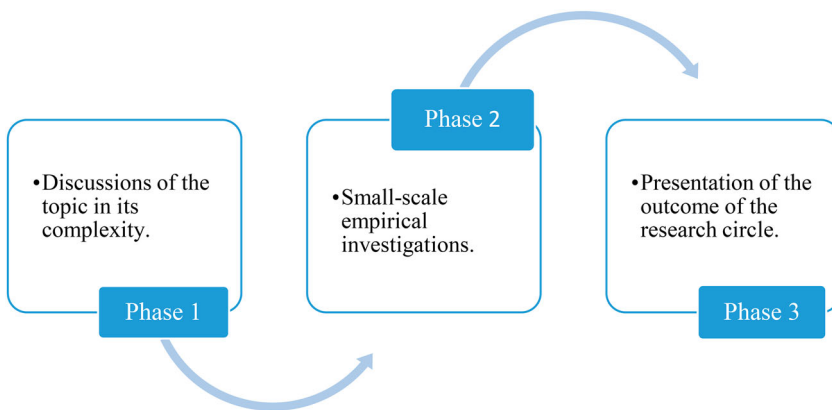
My research was conducted in close relation to the research circle work and is based on the participants’ experiences and knowledge, as well as their reflections and actions. The main ideas of a research circle are to give participants possibilities to reflect on a specific issue or problem in their professional practice and to examine this practice in dialogue with other participants. A characteristic feature in a research circle, as well as in action research in general, is also that knowledge development is expected to lead to some kind of action

(Persson 2009; Somekh 2006). A basis for change and development is provided through the mutual exchange of experiences, knowledge, and ideas (Bergman 2014; Persson 2009).

The current research circle was planned to last for three semesters, with five meetings during each semester, basically coinciding with the three different phases of the research circle work. However, as shown in Figure 1, each phase tended to overlap the next.

The topic in its complexity was discussed during the first phase. During the second phase, the small-scale investigations were collaboratively discussed, designed and, subsequently, carried out individually. The third phase was devoted to discussion of the outcome of the research circle work and the writing of texts for a report to be published.

In this process, I provided theoretical knowledge, research-based literature, and tools for analysis. Eventually, literature suggestions also came from the participants.



**Figure 1.** The three phases of the research circle.

Furthermore, I asked questions that encouraged the participants to reflect on problems, and I tried to shift between different roles: questioning/challenging and listening/confirming, depending on the needs of the group. In supporting the participants, their needs, not mine as a researcher, were put at the forefront, but I also used them as informants in order to understand processes of change and development. The major part of my research is on a meta-level in relation to the exploratory work the participants conducted during sessions and in small-scale investigations. The research project has required continuous reflection regarding my choices and my dual role as tutor and researcher (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007).

The research circle was announced on the university website as an optional course for academic staff. It was described as an opportunity to explore various ways to support students in their reading and writing development, in collaboration with colleagues. The circle started in January 2012, with eight participants from a range of faculties and disciplines. All the participants have more than five years of experience from academic teaching and supervision and two of them have more than 10. The subjects they teach are literature, psychology, and business. Furthermore, five of them work with teacher education, teaching pedagogy, history and learning, sciences and learning, children's literacy, and special needs education, respectively. The last two mentioned are specialized in the field of children's learning and literacy development, which gave them somewhat other prerequisites for their participation than the others. They could take an expert role in discussions since they often were familiar with theories and concepts, new to the other participants. Other significant differences between the participants regarded experiences of the topics discussed, attitudes and assumptions, and previous research experience. A more equal relationship was gradually established as confidence in the group grew and as a safe climate evolved. The eight lecturers attended the research circle of their own interest and without receiving any compensation for their participation. It is likely that a high motivation for professional development, and the shared area of interest affected the group as a collaborative entity. Another cohort of teachers from a different mix of faculties would probably have performed in a similar way.

The source of the data used in this article includes meeting 5 (M5) from the first phase, where the participants presented their first written draft of a small-scale investigation, five meetings from the second phase (M6–M10) and participants drafts from meeting 5 and onwards. All the meetings were audio-recorded and lasted approximately two hours each. The data also includes the reflections and self-reflections I wrote in proximity to the meetings and two semi-structured interviews (Alvesson 2011; Kvale 2009) with each participant, one conducted after the second phase (I2) and one after the third phase (I3). The last interview is included because some of the participants were not finished with their investigation by the time of the second interview. The main focus of the interviews is to gain insight into the participants' experiences of the research circle work. The research project was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the humanities and social sciences (Vetenskapsrådet [Swedish Research Council] 2015). Accordingly, I will not refer to individual participants when I use quotations.

Transcribed recordings of the meetings, interviews, drafts and written reflections have been analyzed through a process of repeated readings. The aim was to construct themes that could contribute to the understanding of the research circle work and its potential. The analytical work was pursued throughout the research circle work and involved new

material successively. As I gained a better overall picture of the material, individual parts could be understood in different ways, which, in turn, shed new light on the whole. In this hermeneutic process, interpretation has evolved through *abduction*, a continuous alternation between empirical data and theory, in which theories have been used to illuminate possible new understandings of a theme's meaning content (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009). A researcher's disciplinary affiliation and ideological stance affect not only the choice of subject and problem but also the interactions with people involved in the research process, how the material is constructed, and the way to interpret and write. My personal approach to the participants, together with the fact that I was a part of the social world I investigated, has demanded a continuous self-critical work, concerning my own values and approaches.

## Findings

In the first parts of this section, I analyze the participants' choice of small-scale investigation, their individual and collaborative considerations in relation to these investigations, and how they are developed in collaboration. This is followed by the results concerning participants' views about the research circle work and potentials for change and development.

### *Participants' first draft of small-scale investigations*

During the first phase of the research circle work, the participants became important resources for each other through their common interest in the particular issue, their mutual involvement, and the sharing of experiences and perspectives across disciplines. The participants' experience-based stories and discussions of research literature lead to critical reflection (Mälkki 2011) about different ways to understand students' difficulties in gaining access to the reading, writing, and thinking practices of higher education. Eventually, the conversation changed character from a deficiency discourse to a focus on the possibilities for change in teaching practices, and a foundation for the continued collaborative work was laid (Bergman 2014).

The discussions and readings during the first phase concerned a vast array of topics related to readings and discussions: the need for clarity about concepts and instructions for assignments (Chanock 2000), writing to learn and communicate (Dysthe, Hertzberg, and Hoel 2011; Hoel 2010), reading and writing practices in the academy and text conversations (Hyland 2004; Lea and Street 1998), tutoring of students' writing essays (Burke and Pieterick 2010; Dysthe, Samara, and Westrheim 2006; Hoel and Haugaløkken 2004), peer tutoring (Hoel and Haugaløkken 2004; Topping 2009), and the importance of student participation and interaction in disciplinary discourses (Bläsjö 2004; Haggis 2006; Hyland 2004; Lea and Street 1998). Furthermore, the participants discussed different views of knowledge and how they affect the premises for language and knowledge development (Kreber 2005) and, not least, the fundamental importance of language in all knowledge-building processes (Gee and Hayes 2011; Hyland 2006).

During the second phase of the research circle work, the participants were supposed to design, implement, and evaluate a small-scale investigation in their own practice. The first

drafts of these investigations were presented and discussed already in meeting 5. In brief, the drafts present the following projects:

Four of the proposed projects concern tutoring and feedback on students writing, a task which all found burdensome. In the first, different forms of peer tutoring in response groups will be explored. In the second, questions about how first-year students read, understand, and use feedback on assignments are asked. The participant will compare two different ways of providing feedback. The third participant wants to improve her tutoring of students in writing essays. 'I want to be a better tutor, and I want to know how my feedback works' (M5). Instead of individual guidance, she wants to try tutoring in small groups and peer tutoring. The fourth project also concerns feedback on writing assignments, but is later replaced by an investigation where literature students write to learn.

Another interest is in *mediational tools* (Wertsch 1998) used in the education of nurses. Mediation tools are expressed as resources that the future nurses need to participate in social practices like academic writing. The aim is to understand which tools are causing problems for students and why, in order to develop a teaching better suited to students' needs. Furthermore, there is one project concerning source criticism, an important method and practice used by historians. When introducing future history teachers to source-critical studies, she wants to get students to take a deep approach to reading and to improve the quality of their writing.

One of the participants is offered a position in The Language Workshop at Malmö University, where students can get support in their writing of research papers or shorter assignments. This opens up the possibility to conduct a small-scale investigation about students who visit this environment and their experiences of university studies. Finally, reading is the main focus for one participant. The idea is to explore different student-activating ways to support students' reading in various academic genres. The aim is to understand in more detail what problems students face in their reading of course literature. She motivates her choice in the following words: 'I think that if we get to know what confuses them and what they do not understand, then we could support them better' (M5).

### ***Participants' considerations***

At the time of the first draft-presentations, most of the project ideas were vague and open to change, and the group's dialogue revealed expressions of uncertainty. On the one hand, there was a fear of an excessive workload, and several participants questioned whether their proposed projects were realistic given the time frames. They had no reduction in their job responsibilities in order to participate in the circle and often commented on the heavy workload during meetings. On the other hand, they were worried that their proposed projects were not 'good enough' or 'too simple' (M5). However, it turns out that the main problem was that the projects were overly extensive, and the group devoted a great deal of time at the successive meetings to helping each other delimit the projects.

The participant's personal experiences of difficulties in solving problems related to students' academic literacy development influenced their choice of project. This is evident, for example, in the drafts concerning feedback on students' texts. Half of the group showed an interest in investigating feedback strategies, tutoring, and peer tutoring. Giving feedback on students' text is a topic the participants had extensive experience with and all found



both time-consuming and difficult. The topic is highlighted in several of the texts the group read (see e.g. Chanock 2000; Hoel 2010) and always gave rise to intense discussions. The particular interest in improving feedback strategies, and in finding out how students receive tutor feedback, can be explained by the common notion that providing good feedback is important and highly valued by students (Hyland 2006). However, research shows that there is a great deal of uncertainty among university teachers about what to communicate and how (Chanock 2000; Ivanič, Clark, and Rimmershaw 2000). Both the belief in providing good feedback and the uncertainty of their own competencies is expressed in the groups' critical reflections.

One recurring topic during the first phase was students' difficulties in reading educational texts (Bergman 2014). The participants showed a keen interest in working together with students to support them in reading practices, to gain a deeper understanding of texts, and to determine why texts look like they do. Consequently, several of the projects were somehow related to reading; nevertheless, surprisingly, there was only one participant whose main focus was students' reading. A plausible reason for not choosing reading as a main focus, is that approaches like the use of reading journals and a more careful follow-up of students' reading had already been integrated as a part of the participants' teaching during the first phase. The same applies to the introduction of text conversations, where students explore texts collaboratively or reflect on what strategies they use to understand texts. Experiences from the use of text conversations were continually shared throughout the three phases of the research circle work:

I have adopted text conversations this semester. It is too early to evaluate them yet, but they were much appreciated by the students (M8). The students analyzed three different types of introductions to essays.

I'm interested in the students' experiences of the working method, so I asked them to reflect on the conversation with the support of three questions: how they experienced the working method, whether the collaborative work on the text changed their thinking about academic writing, and whether the conversation can be beneficial for their own writing. (M8)

Besides reading, there are other practices that the participants found useful and possible to implement quite promptly. These practices are already an integral part of their teaching and therefore were not subject to investigation. Such practices are, for example, non-formal short writing, or explorative writing, in which the purpose is to examine ideas and thoughts on an issue under discussion, and the use of sources with divergent perspectives to stimulate interaction in student groups (Bergman 2014). The participants also emphasized that they had become more explicit and clear in their teaching and in instructions to assignments.

Several participants worried about investigating their own practices. This background can apply to considerations about the project's reliability. The teacher in science and learning, trained in quantitative research, expressed her concern with the following words: 'I am worried about whether it is wise to examine something I'm so involved in. At the same time, it's so real, and I like it' (M5). In other cases, the doubts or reluctance can be due to a fear of exposing one's teaching approaches, feedback strategies, or instructions, but also that it does not fit the project. The latter is the case in the language workshop project that has a narrative approach where the focus is entirely on students and their stories.

One participant changed her plans entirely. In meeting 6, she presented a new idea which connected her project to the profile of her department, where traditional theoretical studies are combined with artistic approaches and practical parts. She had long pondered over how her subject, literature, could develop by becoming more creative and practically oriented, but she dared not try something new. However, with support from the group, she felt more confident. Her idea is to examine whether the writing of fictional texts can increase students' knowledge and understanding of narrative concepts, such as narrative modes. Besides the idea of writing to learn, she uses short writing and peer review to develop students' writing and narratological knowledge.

To a large extent though, the participants proved to be faithful to their initial ideas. However, their ideas developed and changed due, more or less, to the collaborative work in elaborating the projects. The participants' projects differ but also overlap each other due to the shared area of interest and the fact that they had influence on each other's final projects. Both similarities and differences fueled the continued dialogue about the projects and about academic literacy in general.

### ***Developing and implementing the investigations***

At the beginning of the second phase, it is decided, that the meetings shall be devoted to helping each other to design the projects and to support each other through the whole investigation and writing process. I stressed the importance of keeping a trustful atmosphere in which it feels safe to both give and take criticism in order to create the best conditions possible for the development of both the collaborative and individual work. The concept of *critical friends* (Handal 1999), familiar to a majority of the participants, was put forward to deepen the discussion. The concept is a useful thinking device in practices whereby people invite each other to take part in each other's work, which sometimes can be delicate. The participants' approach was that they had things to learn from each other and a common desire to change something for the better. Such an approach was applied already during the first phase, but it became more critical and challenging in the groups' subsequent work with the investigations, not the least with the writing of reports in the third phase.

The groups' reflective dialogue includes, for example, discussions of how to delimit projects that are too extensive, methods for documentation, and, further, concepts and theories that can be used to understand the participants' empirical data. 'I feel I got a lot of help today. Now I'm so much more confident about what questions I shall ask' (M7). Acknowledgement from the group was essential: 'The most important thing was that you thought it was exciting to do an investigation in the language workshop' (M7). The participants were resources for each other through their different knowledge and experience. By listening to each other's plans they caught sight of how they could carry out their own projects: 'I'm sitting here listening, and it's so exciting because I intend to do something similar but with the first-year students' (M6). 'Yes, it is a very good idea; maybe I'll steal it' (M7).

Some projects were well elaborated when the investigation started, while others were more tentative and open to change over the course of the investigation. 'You cannot know everything from the beginning; the ideas will emerge gradually', says one of the participants, referring to the central stages of action research: plan, act, observe, and reflect

(Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). There were uncertainties about the research process, what questions to ask, and what methods to use. A recurring feature through the second phase was requesting help to progress. Feelings of unease and uncertainty were met by proposals, arguments, and acknowledgement.

In most cases, the projects were gradually delimited and sharpened in the group's interactions, and some could start and were even conducted, as far as finishing the documentation, during the second phase. However, a few participants had trouble choosing between different options. They changed plans from meeting to meeting and did not get started until the third phase. This is one of the reasons the research circle work was prolonged. Another reason was that the projects did not progress as expected. One example of the latter is the project about first year students' reading. The investigation was started early; the first step was to let students write logs of what they experienced when they read, what they did or did not understand, and their reflections on how they read the text. The teacher discovered that the students pretended to understand the text and asked the research circle group to help her proceed.

I want them to be sincere, dare to say, 'this I do not understand'. I ask them to relate to the text, to reflect on it, to write a reading log, but they don't know what they are expected to do. Someone thought it concerned writing a literature review. How can I help them to read in a different way, not to remember everything in order to reproduce it in an examination? (M9)

Her frustration was increased by the fact that time was running out. The course was soon finished, and she would not see the students until their second year of education. The other participants tried to convince her that the result she already had was perhaps enough for a small-scale investigation. However, she thought that the material was insufficient, and the investigation eventually ran out of steam. She was one of the two participants who never finished the report. According to the third interview, time constraints was the main reason for both of them.

### ***Participants' voices about the process and potentials for change and development***

According to the interviews, the most valued part of the research circle work was the interaction and collaboration with other participants. This appreciation is expressed in various ways: 'The input you get from all the others is invaluable' (I2). 'It's so stimulating to be part of a conversation about something you are committed to. You catch sight of yourself, your knowledge and your ignorance' (I2). To share experiences with colleagues from other faculties and disciplines is highlighted as particularly fruitful. 'We think and do a little different but still have much in common' (I2). The discovery that others have the same problem as oneself gives strength: 'I am not alone in this' (I2). 'It is not just our teacher students who have these difficulties' (I3). For most of the participants, the joint work, which also includes readings and discussions of research literature, leads to new perspectives and energy: 'Our readings opened new worlds and also confirmed things' (I2). 'I could feel tired when I went to the meeting and thought how I will manage, but instead it gave energy' (I2). One of the participants who is educated in the teaching and learning of language describes how strengthening the collaboration has been: 'Although I was aware of it before, the importance of language was confirmed; language is everything,

and I now feel a fighting spirit in this' (I2). 'To come to realize' and 'to become aware' are common expressions in the interview material.

Individual background and affiliation affected how the process was perceived. According to the interviews six of the participants felt challenged and there was a notable change in their perception of what academic literacy is and how it can be developed. The two participants who are trained in language and language development, however, experienced more acknowledgement and recognition than challenge. Still they expressed a predominantly positive attitude to the research circle work, attended all meetings and continued to be prominent in the group when the discussions concerned issues related to their subjects. The participants also have different opinions as regards the small-scale investigations. One of the participants says she believes the research circle would have been fine without the projects. She is satisfied with her own investigation but would have preferred to spend more time deepening the discussions of research literature.

I would have liked to read more texts and have more detailed discussions about them and hear the differences between us and our experiences. To document our work, we could have written more reflective texts about our own processes and what we did together in the circle. (I3)

Correspondingly, the significance of the projects are downplayed by this participant:

The goal is not the projects, really; it is the knowledge we create together. We all contribute with something, putting our puzzle pieces on the table, and in the end, we have learned pretty much about academic writing. (M9)

Conversely, some of the participants highlight the importance of the projects. 'It gave possibilities to process something in depth' (I3). 'To do a project and write about it means a lot even if it has been interesting and instructive to read and discuss. It provides added values' (I3). The small-scale investigation can be seen as a beginning of something larger: 'I feel that this project is only a small trampoline' (I3). Furthermore, there are plans for further investigations after the circle: 'I will review the writing tasks we give, what kind of writing is expected, how the instructions look, and how we assess them' (I3). An issue that arises in these contexts and is continually returned to during meetings and in interviews, is lack of time. Time constraint is seen as a barrier not only for research, response work, and teaching but also for the research circle work: reading, reflecting, planning, investigating and writing.

Through the continuous exchange of experiences, the participants realized the size and complexity of the common issue. 'This is a bigger problem than I thought, and I realize that we must work over the long-term and with different means' (I3). The insight that students' literacy concerned so many parts of university teachers' work were expressed both in interviews and during meetings:

To support students' reading and writing concerns a vast problem area related to our teaching and the whole education. (I2)

It's very exciting to be involved in this research circle, and there is a great deal that opened up for me. And for me, it is linked to so many things: educational issues, course development, lecture content, the guide about writing and even curriculum development. (M9)

The valuable intellectual exchanges that have taken place in the circle, and how it led to gradual shifts in attitudes and approaches, can be expressed in the following way: ‘There are elements in this I have never thought of, which became openings. ... You have to go outside yourself and roam in directions you could not anticipate’ (I3). During the process of the research circle work, all the participants have changed as regards approaches, attitudes, ways of thinking, planning, and carrying out teaching and tutoring in their subjects. As mentioned earlier, there are practices that quite promptly became an integral part of their teaching. In interview 3, it becomes clear that the participants have made permanent changes in their work and express that the research circle work has affected both their students and themselves. ‘While students develop their writing and thinking, they also develop their identities’ (I3). The most frequently reported change in practices is that they have become more explicit and clear in teaching and assignment instructions. Furthermore, text conversations are now common in the participants’ teaching; they use peer tutoring and have made changes in their own tutoring. ‘In response I search for possibilities and solutions instead of problems, and there are more comments than before with an encouraging tone’ (I3). They also experience changes in their own identity and roles: ‘it affects me as seminar leader, lecturer, and tutor’ (I3). There are several examples of transfer from the collaborative work within the research circle to participants’ teaching. The interaction and the reflective practice of the research circle were occasionally discussed as a model for teaching. The participant who investigated her tutoring of students’ essays have, among other things, brought the concept critical friends into her response groups, and she also changed her way of relating to the students: ‘I am more explicit and careful in my feedback and also more humble, more relaxed together with the student. I speak openly about my own troubles with writing, and that I always let others review my texts’ (I3).

The interviews show that the participants did not receive much support from their institutions during the process of action research. Still, in various ways, they have become change agents in their respective workplaces. This may involve collaboration with colleagues to make changes in the curriculum to allow more space for writing processes, peer response, and text seminars, integrated with subject content. It can also concern raising their voices in the coffee room about issues related to students’ academic literacy development. One of the participants is now continually cooperating with a teacher from the language workshop. Presentations of small-scale investigations will be done in other departments, and one project will be presented at an international conference in Canada. The final example concerns getting a special assignment at the department level. This teacher reports that she realizes the importance of professional development in how to support students reading and writing and that all staff must be part of the change process and take responsibility for the progression of literacy through educational programs. She also realizes that it was necessary to get the head of the department to support these efforts and was successful in doing so. ‘I want to tell you that I’ve got a special assignment. I’ve been asked to submit proposals about actions that can be done at different levels’ (I3).

## Discussion

The participants’ individual choice of a small-scale investigation was influenced by several interrelated factors. Firstly, they had experiences from trying to solve problems related to

students' academic literacy development which influenced their choice. Secondly, the research circle work recognized and confirmed the importance and relevance of their experiences and knowledge and provided them with a shared repertoire of stories, concepts and values. This had an emancipating impact and gave the participants courage to hold on to their ideas, which was most common, but also courage to change project. In the latter case, input from supportive group interaction and literature was crucial. Finally, participants had to take into account what possibilities they had within their current teaching as well as time constraints.

My study confirms results from previous research (Bailey 2010) that teachers feel uncertain about how they can support students' learning. However, it also shows that uncertainty can be replaced by self-confidence in giving students access to the broader repertoire of communicative practices (Lea and Street 1998) that they need to succeed in their studies. The highly valued collaborative work provided access to multiple voices (Bakhtin 1984) from colleagues and literature and, in some respects, became a model for the participants' teaching. The dialogue resulted in a richness of ideas and different perspectives that could become tools for collaborative reflections, beneficial for the development of new knowledge and understanding. Such collaborative reflections have a greater potential to become critical (Lycke and Handal 2012) and thus promote changes in old meaning structures (Mezirow and Associates 2000). Mälkki and Lindblom-Ylänne stress that the relation between reflection and action is complicated and that changes in ways of thinking do not always lead to changes in practice. However, in this study there are indications of changes in the practices of the research circle participants. They make several changes already during the first phase. In the following phases, all participants report about new practices that have become a part of their regular teaching. How can this be explained? The shift in perceptions and attitudes that took place during the first phase is an important prerequisite for more lasting change (Bergman 2014). For permanent change to happen, it is essential that the process is allowed to take time. Therefore, when three semesters was not enough, the process was prolonged. Experiences from action research show that continuity, and long-time involvement give the best effects (Persson 2009). With reference to Mälkki (2011) and to my research Bergman (2014), it is also important that the reflective process involves people in depth: intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

Another explanation is that the participants carried a desire for change, triggered by the dilemmas and dissatisfaction (Mezirow 1998) they experienced in their teaching. Furthermore, the research circle work drew extensively on participants' experiences and gave them a key role in the change process, which, according to Blythman and Orr (2002), Somekh (2006) and Quinn (2012), are important prerequisites for sustainable changes and development. The implementation of the small-scale investigations and the writing of articles seems to have had a reinforcing effect for the majority of participants. An indication that the research circle work will have an impact outside the participants' own teaching is the dissemination of knowledge that is now taking place through the participants: during coffee breaks and through cooperation, lectures, and special assignments. Nevertheless, it is too early to say with certainty, how this model of professional development will affect the individual participants' practices, and in particular, the organizational prerequisites for their work, in the longer term. Questions about students' knowledge- and language development concern all levels of the university and the need for changes in

teachers' approaches and practices requires strategic priorities, cross-departmental collaboration and organizational change. To get answers to these questions, follow-up study will be conducted during 2016.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by generous grants from the Postdoctoral Program for Quality Development in Higher Education at Malmö University, Sweden.

## References

- Aagaard Nielsen, K., and L. Svensson, eds. 2006. *Action and Interactive Research: Beyond Practice and Theory*. Maastricht: Shaker.
- Alvesson, M. 2011. *Interpreting Interviews*. London: Sage.
- Alvesson, M., and K. Sköldböck. 2009. *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.
- Argyris, C. 1993. *Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bailey, R. 2010. "The Role and Efficacy of Generic Learning and Study Support: What Is the Experience and Perspective of Academic Staff?" *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* 2: 1–14.
- Bakhtin, M. M. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated and edited by C. Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bergman, L. 2014. "The Research Circle as a Resource in Challenging Academics' Perceptions of How to Support Students' Literacy Development in Higher Education." *Canadian Journal of Action Research* 15 (2): 3–20.
- Blåsjö, M. 2004. *Studenters skrivande i två kunskapsbyggande miljöer* [Students' Writing in Two Knowledge Constructing Settings]. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Blythman, M., and S. Orr. 2002. "A Joined-up Policy Approach to Student Support." In *Failing Students in Higher Education*, edited by M. Peelo and T. Wareham, 45–55. Buckingham: Open University Press and the Society for Research in Higher Education.
- Bruce, C. D., T. Flynn, and S. Stagg-Peterson. 2011. "Examining What We Mean by Collaboration in Collaborative Action Research: A Cross Case Analysis." *Educational Action Research* 19 (4): 433–452. doi:10.1080/09650792.2011.625667.
- Burke, D., and J. Pieterick. 2010. *Giving Students Effective Feedback*. London: Open University Press.
- Capobianco, B. M. 2007. "Science Teachers' Attempts at Integrating Feminist Pedagogy Through Collaborative Action Research." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 44 (1): 1–32. doi:10.1002/tea.20120.
- Chanock, K. 2000. "Comments on Essays: Do Students Understand What Tutors Write?" *Teaching in Higher Education* 5 (1): 95–105. doi:10.1080/135625100114984.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion, and K. Morrison. 2007. *Research Methods in Education*. 6th ed. London: Routledge.
- Duff, P. 2010. "Language Socialization into Academic Discourse Communities." *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 30: 169–192. doi:10.1017/S0267190510000048.
- Dysthe, O., F. Hertzberg, and T. L. Hoel. 2011. *Skriva för att lära* [Writing to Learn]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

- Dysthe, O., A. Samara, and K. Westrheim. 2006. "Multivoiced Supervision of Master's Students: A Case Study of Alternative Supervision Practices in Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 31 (3): 299–318. doi:10.1080/03075070600680562.
- Gee, J. P., and E. R. Hayes. 2011. *Language and Learning in the Digital Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Haggis, T. 2006. "Pedagogies for Diversity. Retaining Critical Challenge Amidst Fears of 'Dumbing Down'." *Studies in Higher Education* 31 (5): 521–535. doi:10.1080/03075070600922709.
- Handal, G. 1999. *Kritiske venner: Bruk av interkollegial kritik innen universitetet* [Critical Friends: The Use of Intercollegiate Critique Within the University]. NyIng. Rapport nr. 9. Linköping: Linköping University.
- Hoel, T. L. 2010. *Skriwa på universitet och högskolor: En bok för lärare och studenter* [Writing in Higher Education: A Book for Teachers and Students]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Hoel, T. L., and O. K. Haugaløkken. 2004. "Response Groups as Learning Resources When Working with Portfolios." *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy* 30 (3): 225–241. doi:10.1080/0260747042000309466.
- Hyland, K. 2004. *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. London: Longman/University of Michigan Press.
- Hyland, K. 2006. *English for Academic Purposes*. New York: Routledge.
- Ivanič, R. 1998. *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Ivanič, R., R. Clark, and R. Rimmershaw. 2000. "What Am I Supposed to Make of This? The Message Conveyed to Students by Tutors' Written Comments." In *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts*, edited by M. Lea and B. Steirer, 47–65. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Kreber, C. 2005. "Reflection on Teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching: Focus on Science Instructors." *Higher Education* 50 (2): 323–359. doi:10.1007/s10734-004-6360-2.
- Kreber, C. 2009. "Supporting Students Learning in the Context of Diversity, Complexity and Uncertainty." In *The University and its Disciplines. Teaching and Learning Within and Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries*, edited by C. Kreber, 3–18. New York: Routledge.
- Kvale, S. 2009. *Interviews. Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Lea, M. R., and B. V. Street. 1998. "Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach." *Studies in Higher Education* 23 (2): 157–172. doi:10.1080/03075079812331380364.
- Lillis, T. M. 2001. *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*. London: Routledge.
- Lillis, T. M., and M. Scott. 2007. "Defining Academic Literacies' Research: Issues of Epistemology, Ideology and Strategy." *Journal of Applied Linguistics* 4 (1): 5–32. doi:10.1558/japl.v4i1.5.
- Lindholm, Y. 2008. *Mötesplats skolutveckling: Om hur samverkan med forskare kan bidra till att utveckla pedagogers kompetens att bedriva utvecklingsarbete* [Meetingplace School Development: How Collaboration with Researchers May Contribute to Developing Educators' Competence for Developmental Work]. Stockholm: Stockholm University.
- Lotman, J. M. 1990. *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lycke, H. K., and G. Handal. 2012. "Refleksjon over egen undervisningspraksis – et ledd i kvalitet-sutvikling?" ["Reflections on Teaching Practice – A Part of Quality Improvement?"]. In *Utdanningskvalitet og undervisningskvalitet under press? Spenninger i høyere utdanning*, edited by T. L. Hoel, B. Hanssen, and D. Husebø, 157–183. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.
- Mälkki, K. 2011. *Theorizing the Nature of Reflection*. Helsinki: University Print.
- Mälkki, K., and S. Lindholm-Yläne. 2012. "From Reflection to Action? Barriers and Bridges Between Higher Education Teachers' Thoughts and Actions." *Studies in Higher Education* 37 (1): 33–50.
- Mezirow, J. 1991. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. 1998. "On Critical Reflection." *Adult Education Quarterly* 48 (3): 185–198. doi:10.1177/074171369804800305.
- Mezirow, J., and Associates. 2000. *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



- Northhedge, A., and J. McArthur. 2009. "Guiding Students into a Discipline: The Significance of the Teacher." In *The University and Its Disciplines. Teaching and Learning Within and Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries*, edited by C. Kreber, 107–118. New York: Routledge.
- Persson, S. 2009. *Research Circles – A Guide*. Malmö: Centre for Diversity in Education.
- Quinn, L. 2012. "Understanding Resistance: An Analysis of Discourses in Academic Staff Development." *Studies in Higher Education* 37 (1): 69–83. doi:10.1080/03075079.2010.497837.
- Rommetveit, R. 1974. *On Message Structure: A Framework for the Study of Language and Communication*. London: Wiley.
- Somekh, B. 2006. *Action Research: A Methodology for Change and Development*. New York: Open University Press.
- Taylor, E. W. 2007. "An Update of Transformative Learning Theory: A Critical Review of the Empirical Research (1999–2005)." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 26 (2): 173–191. doi:10.1080/02601370701219475.
- Topping, K. 2009. "Peer Assessment." *Theory Into Practice* 48 (1): 20–27. doi:10.1080/00405840802577569.
- Vetenskapsrådet [Swedish Research Council]. 2015. *CODEX - regler och riktlinjer för forskning* [CODEX - Rules and Guidelines for Research]. July 20. <http://codex.vr.se/>.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J. 1991. *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J. 1998. *Mind as Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wingate, U. 2006. "Doing Away with 'Study Skills'." *Teaching in Higher Education* 11 (4): 457–469. doi:10.1080/13562510600874268.