

How to Become the Instructive Fool

Supervising Planning Students at a PBL University

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Abstract

This paper explores how the concept of “the facilitator as a fool” can be used as a guiding principle for supervising students at universities adhering to problem-based learning pedagogies. With the example of students enrolled at spatial planning studies, the paper argues that students should learn how to face uncertainty and take matters into their own hands. For this purpose, the paper proposes that supervisors act as “fools” in their conversations with students, mimicking a reflective practice. The paper reflects on how this concept fares when applied to a real-life situation of supervising planning students at both Bachelor's and Master's levels at Aalborg University in Denmark. In the end, the paper concludes that the applied concept can work to a certain degree, but it also requires a supervisor who is familiar with the theoretical and methodological “landscape” that students need to navigate in, and through, to become professional and reflective practitioners.

Keywords: Sustainable education, urban planning, wicked problems.

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Introduction

The idea of problem-based learning (PBL) at Aalborg University (AAU) is manifold, but some of the core ideas behind are student-directed learning through working collaboratively in groups with real problems (Askehave et al., 2015). Opposed to the idea of responsibility for own learning, there is, inherently at learning institutions, a natural process of cultivation and formation of students (Feilberg, 2018), towards becoming professionals within a specific field. The dichotomy between self-directed learning and intentional cultivation of “ways of thinking”, could be considered paradoxical. However, it seems natural for the lecturer to provide knowledge and guide learning through courses. During group work however, the roles shift so “the students are largely free to choose the content of their own projects, and thus to determine key elements of their study programme” (Askehave et al., 2015, p. 5). This also implies that the supervisor respects this responsibility that the students have, which then poses new dilemmas for the supervisor and raises questions of how to supervise someone who is responsible for their own learning and should essentially be free to choose their own path? In addition, a lecturing approach to supervision is often not appropriate in PBL situations as knowledge and answers are not necessarily given a priori. An approach to supervision that motivates students to take responsibility for their own learning seems to be needed.

In this paper, I will therefore consider the question of how the concept of “the facilitator as a fool” (Savin-Baden, 2020a) can work as a supervision metaphor. A fool can resist norms and conventions and create emergencies that mobilize thought and action (Stengers, 2005) amongst students. For this reason, the concept of the fool seems appropriate to explore. I explore this question on two groups of civil engineering students enrolled at spatial planning programmes at Aalborg University’s Department of Sustainability and Planning.

Theoretical Concepts and Metaphors

A fool, or court jester in the Shakespearean sense, is a wise fool. On the outset, fools might seem like a simple feat of satire but are rather pointed comments on society and present different world-views than the dominant (Ellis, 1968). The fool does not show true colours but rather shapes personality according to context, to challenge perspectives or stay silent when needed. To Savin-Baden (2020a, p. 9) the fool supervisor, prevents “the sanitation of pedagogy” by being “background noise” and is both absent and present, contesting knowledge claims and by that prompting the students to engage in imaginative and

rigorous problem-making. The concept of liminal tunnels can offer additional perspective on the role of the instructive fool.

The Idea of liminal tunnels as a pedagogical concept describes how threshold concepts can act as gateways to learning processes consisting of liminal space (Land et al., 2014; Savin-Baden, 2020b). The emergence from the tunnel represents how the learner comes out on the other side with a shift in perspective and even on a deeper level, a shift in subjectivity and thereby a shift in the learners' ontology and epistemological nature. Only when new concepts are understood and transferrable to the context in which the student works, can they change the knowledge regime and change perspective on the landscape that students see and operate in. The transition phase is essential in this concept, it proposes a phase – a liminal stage – in which uncertainty and confusion arise. Because existing knowledge regimes have been challenged and the landscape is blurred, students are forced to reflect and learn to see anew before they can emerge from the tunnel and see clearly again.

Various forms of planning have lately been described as socio-ecological practices involving the negotiation of value and knowledge through processes of implementing solutions (Forester, 2020). This line of thinking started with Rittel and Webber (1973) who proclaimed that “planning problems are wicked problems”. Among the main features of wicked problems, they find unique character, difficulty to define, symptoms of other problems and that there is no real solution. They contrast such problems to the “Newtonian mechanistic physics” which modus operandi is not readily adaptable to the planning arena, that is essentially social and political and consists of open systems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Such problems require reflective planners who can, when faced with uncertainty and wickedness, alter course and deter from what was the proscribed direction from the beginning. Schön (1983) described this as reflection-in-action, which is the competence of thinking about what you are doing while doing it.

That there are no “fixed” or “right” solutions to a wicked problem, also reveals that supervision of planning students, or other students concerned with socio-ecological problems, should not and cannot be about telling students what to do, when to do it, how to do it, or why they should do it. These arguments should be put together by the students themselves, but the students need the supervisor to guide them in how to learn, and how to reflect-in-action. Being a fool means to question the students' approaches, make them reflect and to lead them towards threshold concepts. The approach is nevertheless unstructured in contrast to other questioning approaches. E.g. Wichmann-Hansen and Jensen (2015) propose a questioning approach structured through phases of clarifying, exploring, challenging, and evaluating. In their approach, supervisors need to

be clear academic authorities by among other correcting, arguing, and making use of clear scientific criteria and advice, when needed. Such “authority” would contrast the ambition of a facilitator as a fool, as it should rather confuse, spark reflection, instigate discussions and make students act as the authority. As wicked problems do not have fixed solutions, the right question of the fool is therefore not necessarily an invitation to dialogue in which the supervisor lecture or eventually give answers, but to make students question their own approach and discuss amongst themselves, forcing them to make their own decisions.

Method

During spring 2022, I supervised two groups, one group of four, writing their bachelor thesis in the Urban, Energy and Environmental Planning programme and another group of three, writing their second semester report on the master’s programme in Urban Planning and Management. Both programmes are located at Aalborg University. On these two groups, I experimented with the concept of the supervisor as a fool. Both groups were made aware of the experiment at the start of the semester.

The experiment entailed a consciousness about being the fool, which in practice resulted in asking reflective questions rather than giving answers. Likewise, the idea of liminal tunnels was a background and something that I could rely on in supervision sessions – knowing that students would experience uncertainty and confusion in learning situations when grappling with and applying new gateway concepts (Land et al., 2014). After each supervision session, I wrote down my own reflections on how the approach fared.

After the project exam, the students were by email sent a questionnaire with open-ended questions, to make them reflect individually on the supervision process. This allowed the students to respond more freely and without fearing repercussions during the exam and thereby it heightened the quality of the data, and the quality of the data is thereby considered good. Seven students had the opportunity to answer and six returned the questionnaire. By asking questions related to students’ opinions on being asked questions rather than given answers and how the uncertainty that might arise amongst students was experienced, the purpose of the questionnaire was to know more about how students perceived of this style of supervision.

Results

First, the results will be presented as a reconstruction of supervision sessions. The aim is to give a condensed example of how I acted in supervision sessions. The example should be considered “second-best” as I do not have recordings of supervision sessions. Length limits only allows me to include one reconstructed example. Second, some of the responses from the students will be shown.

Reconstruction of Supervision

Student: We are thinking about doing a project where we want to investigate the new Limfjord connection (road bridge across the local fjord). There has been a lot of debate about the crossing and many people really seem to be upset about it finally being approved, they complain about the loss of nature and increased car traffic and noise, but the politicians do not seem to be listening to these voices. It seems like a predetermined process. The politicians use these traffic models that tell of the need for the crossing, in terms of congestion and it also shows that the construction will be economic viable. The citizens can then complain through the official hearing period, but the politicians do not need to consider the complaints or the voices of the people. We even found some people that argue that the traffic models and socio-economic calculations are not right because they do not take into account CO2 emissions in a correct way and that it leaves out some consequences to nature, some of these arguments even come from experts, like there was a professor and also a road engineer who used facts to argue against the connection. So, do you think it is possible to write a project about this?

Supervisor: But what is it exactly that you want to write about? What do you consider to be the main problem?

Student: Well, we think there is something about the power relations between the citizens and the politicians or the different actors that are in favour of the new connection – this is mainly the businesses and there is also a business network set up by the municipality that are also in favour of the connection. So, it is mainly about the power relations...

Supervisor: Great, what is it that you think is at stake here, when we talk about power relations in planning?

Student: ... ehm, well we think that.... it is a really complex case.... There are many actors who seem to argue against the connection, why are they not heard? And the planners seem to just follow what is decided by the politicians...

Student: Yeah, so maybe it is a democratic problem if the planners just decide something that people do not want.... ...

Supervisor: You say it is a democratic problem, but since the politicians who are in favour of the connection, they are elected by the people, and I guess that they follow the regular procedures of planning, so I'm still a bit in doubt about what the problem actually is?

Student: It just seems like the politicians took the decision a long time ago and then they build their arguments to support this decision, disregarding other peoples' or even experts' arguments, based on facts...

Supervisor: Facts are the first victims in conflict! What does the planner do with facts in a democratic process?

Student: Well, I guess we need to think on this until next time we meet.

In the above reconstructed first supervision session, the students try to explain to the supervisor, what problem they are working with. It is often the case during the first supervision session(s) that the students are confused about the topic. They just started a new semester and are introduced to many new concepts, themes, methods, etc. and they struggle to grasp problems that should be defined or explained in concepts that are new to them. In this sense, they are already inside a liminal tunnel when the supervisor meets them the first time.

During the first sessions, the main task for the supervisor is to make the students think about what type of problem they are working with. Being students at a PBL university, the problem needs to be defined/described as it will be the guiding principle throughout the project. This might result in a feeling of uncertainty by the students, but the result will be that if they feel uncertain, and if they are ambitious students, they will try to resolve this uncertainty, by finding the answers through the project work.

When the students get stuck, as they are asked about how it is a problem that relates to power, the supervisor returns to the more commonly known problems about democracy but also about different opinions in a debate, or rather how different arguments are put forth by different actors in a planning process. In this project, the students will work with the concepts of power and discourse as gateway concepts. The supervisor might have an agenda of leading the students towards working with the problem of how planners deal with or create visibility of diverging discourses and agonistic agendas coming from different actors. It might not be the case that the students will choose this problem, but the supervisor knows this is "a way out".

Feedback from Students

In this section, I turn to the feedback that students were asked to do after they had their project exams. The purpose of this section is to better understand how students perceive of the style of supervision.

Much of the feedback revolves around the dilemma between having to take responsibility to answer your own questions, to solve your own problems and then the desire of having a supervisor who can give you the answers. Below is a quote that show this dilemma.

“A supervisor who does not give answers can give more space for reflections and give the group a greater degree of independence because you realize that you cannot lean on the supervisor and therefore the group begins to carry and shape the project itself. On the other hand, it can be quite frustrating to work with because you don't get any real answers to your questions, I feel that it can sometimes seem more confusing than clarifying. Which may also be the point, but it's a frustrating way to work when you expect otherwise anyway.”

As indicated in the above quote, some of the students also reflect on whether such supervision strategy is positive to their own learning process.

“Yes, at the beginning it was ok since you had not defined the project, but as the project progressed and you felt that you as a group needed to make a choice between 2 directions and got questions back on your own questions, it was quite frustrating. In the end, I felt that the supervision meetings were a waste of time. Perhaps it is good because you have become more independent, which was probably the aim of the supervisor.”

The students see the supervision where a question is met with a question as ambiguous. In the end, they seem to appreciate that this type of supervision might force them to take more responsibility towards their own project and learning. It nevertheless feels frustrating to some of the students and some even decide that the supervision sessions might not be very helpful.

“Significantly less guidance than I have been used to before. This may be because the supervision style may have influenced our understanding and strategy in relation to how we intended to use our supervisor. As we did not receive concrete answers to our concrete questions, we agreed in the group that we had to try to answer these ourselves, which had both advantages and disadvantages. It would have been an advantage if we in the group had discussed and agreed on how

the selected guidance style could best complement our project – instead, we down-prioritized guidance and had more internal discussions.”

The above quote reveals that if the right premise about the supervision style were given from the start, it might have led the students to not expect a supervisor that gives the answers, and they might have utilised it more.

To some extent, the students also feel that the supervision leaves them insecure about what they must do. During the supervision sessions, they might feel “well dressed” but by the time they must follow up on the supervision, they again can feel confused, because there was no right direction given.

“I don't think that you were left without being well dressed after the supervision meeting, but there were times when the guidance ‘forced’ us to reassess our material ourselves.”

“I think that you can feel a little uncertain about how to proceed. Often you come up with specific problems that prevent you from being able to continue in the project and an unspecific answer is of limited help. You often think in the supervisor meetings when you get these questions, it makes good sense, but when you have returned to the group, you become unsure of what it actually meant, and you end up in the same situation and have to test yourself.”

Discussion and conclusion

Students who are faced with a “facilitator as a fool” seem to react with ambiguity in two ways. One is the fact that they must learn and take responsibility themselves, they must act as professional reflective practitioners. The students grow with their new role and their perceptions of being students and what it takes to become independent professionals are challenging and uncertain. This uncertainty additionally links to the idea of liminal tunnels, where concepts or problems are, at first, considered as dark places that might not lead anywhere, but, as the supervisor knows, the students will eventually find their way towards the light and define challenges, learn new concepts, and resolve problems. This type of frustration should therefore be considered positive and necessary. The second aspect is that this style of supervision is not clearly defined, and their own role is not clear to them. This might be considered as a negative frustration and should be dealt with by the supervisor by being clearer about this division of roles.

There might be different phases to supervision when the supervisor as a fool is more suitable than others. During the first semester of the Bachelor, some basic

concepts need to be learned and therefore the same intensity of the supervisor as a fool, as can be enacted at a later stage of the education, might not be possible. Likewise, this should also be considered during the semester from start to finish. At the beginning of the semester, when the problem is less well defined it might be suitable to question everything, which might not be the case a few weeks before hand-in.

By asking questions and forcing the students to take responsibility of their own thinking and choices, this type of supervision also serves as a formattable exercise towards the exam, when the students will have to defend their project and be able to answer the exam questions. However, it also requires a supervisor that is familiar with the theoretical and methodological curriculum that students need to navigate in, and through. Having a supervisor who forces the students to continuously work with and improving answering stupid questions, is a facilitation of the formation process towards becoming professional reflective practitioners who are comfortable and experienced in liminal tunnels.

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