

The Potential of Process Orientation

Rereading *Problem Orientation, Project Work and Report Writing* by Eva Hultengren (1976)

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Abstract

What Illeris' *Problem orientation and participant direction – A proposal for alternative didactics* (1974) signified for Roskilde University, Eva Hultengren's *Problem orientation, project work and report writing* (1976) signified for Aalborg University. Both books were soon published in a second edition, but only Hultengren (1976) focused specifically on higher education and the developing experimentation with group organized project work at Aalborg University (SSH faculty), which later introduced project work into the PBL-tradition. In this paper, I argue that *Problem-orientation, project work and report writing* (Hultengren, 1976) is not just of historical interest. On the contrary, it offers rich analysis and perspectives on issues which are still debated today internationally regarding the role of the supervisor with respect to process orientation, the degree of participant direction and the knowledge interest underpinning project work.

Keywords: Process orientation; Problem orientation; Project pedagogy; Supervision; Bildung

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Introduction and Who is Eva Hultengren?

Eva Hultengren is a psychologist and was associate professor and part of Aalborg University from its foundation in 1974. Hultengren taught and supervised within the basic year of the human sciences and the social sciences, specializing in pedagogy and social psychology. Hultengren is the author of several books on education, notably on project work in higher education (1976, 1979a), workers' education (Hultengren & Olesen, 1977) and on political and interdisciplinary education (1979b). In 2012 she was awarded an honorary membership of the Danish Psychological Association (Hultengren, 2012). As part of the 40th anniversary of Aalborg University, Hultengren was invited to reflect on the introduction and development of problem- and project-based learning at Aalborg University (Hultengren, 2014). The work and impact of Hultengren is discussed in *The construction of teaching roles at Aalborg university centre 1970–1980* (Servant-Miklos & Spliid, 2017) and more recently in *Forskellige forståelser af problemorientering* [Different understandings of problem orientation] (Dahl, 2022) and *Projektarbejdets Dannelsepotentialer* [The Bildung Potential of Project Work] (Feilberg et al., 2022, chap. 1). However, in this paper, we will focus on *Problem-orientation, project work and report writing* (1976, 2. ed. 1979a) and its contribution to current international discussions within the practice and tradition of problem-oriented project work: the role of the supervisor with respect to process orientation, the degree of participant direction and the knowledge interest underpinning project work.

Problem-orientation and Process-orientation

Problem-orientation and interdisciplinary inquiry were associated with project work from very early on in the Danish tradition of Project Pedagogy, dating back to the 1960s. But when Hultengren published her reflections on group organized project work in *Problem orientation, project work and report writing* (1976) she added process orientation as an integral part of project work and problem orientation. Let us revisit these fundamental concepts.

According to Hultengren, *problem orientation* is the process through which students learn relevant subject theory, methodology, methods and techniques in order for them to become able to prepare and carry out their specific investigation concerning an independently identified problem and answer their research question (problem formulation) (1979a, p. 7). All theoretical and methodical choices must relate to the specific problem and research question, and the process must produce something, often a report – hence Hultengren's urge to write a book on the art of developing a research report via problem-

oriented project work (1976). In the process of taking on a 'real problem' from the 'everyday life' as part of the problem orientation, students would often find it relevant to combine knowledge from different scientific disciplines, hence developing meaningful interdisciplinary work stemming from the problem itself - and not as a product of preestablished learning goals. This is a very demanding process that takes a lot of effort on the part of the students and the supervisor. According to Hultengren, process orientation conceptualises the important work done by the students and the supervisor in order to succeed in this endeavour. This early focus on process by Hultengren has been recognized by other scholars (e.g. Servant-Miklos & Spliid, 2017, p. 797; Dahl, 2022).

Hultengren defines *Process-orientation* as being oriented towards group processes, and as "being aware of the group psychological conditions that promote or hinder groups in their work" and in succeeding in their collective task (1979a, p. 20, my translation). There is no contradiction between process-orientation and product-orientation, argues Hultengren, as process-orientation is about advancing the processes that ensure the creation of the product or work which the group set out to accomplish. Thus, group organized project work is both about the *co-operative process* as well as about the *epistemological processes and the final product*.

Process orientation addresses all the processes that the students *and* the supervisor must reflect on and address to succeed in their scientific inquiry, with respect to the supervisor, the student and the project group. Hultengren lists these processes specifically:

- Verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Decision-making processes (eg. maintaining a critical-constructive discussion culture: handling different perspectives and developing new understanding).
- Domination, submission, manipulation (power relations and other unconscious processes).
- Leadership and organizing functions (taking initiative, information sharing, supporting each other, evaluating and discussing the work of each other).
- Cooperation and maintaining an effective division of labour (while reflecting the psychological processes at play with respect to this).
- Listening to others, understanding and receiving information. (Hultengren, 1979a, p. 20)

The list shows that Hultengren puts an emphasis on both group dynamics, power relations and manipulative behavior of students and supervisor (1979a, pp. 22-38, 64, 119-120; see also Dahl, 2022).

As an example of manipulative behavior, Hultengren takes the supervisor who pushes her own ideological or theoretical agenda to the students, undercutting their autonomy:

“When the supervisor, under the guise of a problem-oriented pedagogy—and maintaining the subject-object roles—sets a series of learning objectives (data, theories, methods) for themselves and pushes the group in this direction, I would call it manipulation. This is regardless of which data, theories, and methods are involved.”
(Hultengren, 1979a, p. 64, my translation)

Instead, Hultengren promotes what can also be conceptualized as a self-reflective and understanding habitus in students as well as the supervisor, with a high level of awareness of roles and responsibilities (Feilberg, 2022a). Student-direction entails the stepping back of the supervisor, but not letting students on their own. According to Dahl (2022, p. 20), Hultengren strikes an importance balance between supporting the autonomy of the students while at the same time honoring the scientific and pedagogical responsibility of the supervisor.

The role of the supervisor

This dual-focus of the project group must also be supported by the supervisor’s dual attention toward the scientific process and the cooperative process and end result (e.g. a written report). The supervisor is both consultant of the scientific inquiry as well as consultant of the processes of the group and their internal and external cooperation with supervisor, project partners and/or respondents. Through case examples, Hultengren (1976) presents her pedagogical vision of the project supervisor. The attitude of the supervisor is one of continuously striving to *understand* the students and their group processes even better, and what is holding them back. Hultengren (1976) describes the practice of process analysis, i.e. when a supervisor writes a report to students on her observations of group processes, and how she goes into dialogue with students about their process problems in order to help them work more efficiently and creatively together.

What strikes me is the principal discussion of the role of the supervisor that Hultengren presents: should the process aspect be addressed by a ‘process supervisor’ or by a non-scientific support unit (e.g. counselor), or is it the responsibility of the supervisor as part of the dual-focus of supervision? This is still up for debate (see e.g. Jensen & Lund, 2016). According to Hultengren, the responsibility of the process must not be taken away from the scientific supervisor, as she is the only one with the needed intimate understanding of

the scientific processes of the group. And splitting this responsibility off from the supervisor would also mean that the supervisor is not 'pressured' to learn about processes and her own role as a supervisor (1976).

It is important to emphasise that students' individual and private problems should be distinguished from epistemological and pedagogical issues, as only the latter fall under the supervisor's responsibility. For personal issues, students can find assistance from the student counselling services.

The knowledge interests of problem-oriented project work

The 'alternative didactic' that Illeris (1974) develops to support and substantiate problem-oriented project work as an educational activity is following an emancipatory knowledge interest (Habermas 1968 cf. Illeris, 1974, p. 18). The aim of his alternative didactic is to give:

“...participants of educational institutions the opportunity and preconditions to realize the societal function of their education and thus the objective conditions necessary to follow their own, societally conditioned, and in the final analysis class conditioned interests.”
(Illeris, 1974, p. 18, my translation)

This general aim of education to emancipate students in order for them to be able to pursue their own interests with respect to, for example, societal change (individually or class-collectively), evolves later in the book into an expectation that students doing problem-oriented project work must choose “societally exemplary” problems *and* analyze them in a “societally exemplary” way in order to uncover “general societal structures” (Illeris 1974, p. 253; see also Hultengren, 1979a, p. 75). What does Illeris mean by exemplary? Illeris is inspired by the exemplary principle of Oskar Negt (1971) who identified the emancipation of the worker as the aim of the workers' education (Illeris, 1974, pp. 178-187). Negt took his own experiences with workers' education in Germany as the contextual starting point of his influential book *Sociological Imagination and Exemplary Learning* (Negt, 1971, German original).

Hultengren (1976) also stresses the emancipatory potential when students undertake problem-oriented project work within higher education. But as opposed to Illeris, Hultengren distinguishes between several research interests and not only an emancipatory knowledge interest as in the case of Illeris (Hultengren, 1979a, pp. 75, 85-92). Hultengren (1979a, p. 75) specifically criticizes Illeris when he argues that students in higher education should approach their problem-orientation and the scientific project work in an “societally exemplary” way in order to uncover “general societal structures”. According to Hultengren demanding this of the students is problematic,

because Illeris does not consider 1) that the experiences and background of the working-class workers that are the context of Negt (1971) are very different from those of the Danish students in higher education, and 2) that the students often view groups within society (e.g. employer and worker) as enjoying equal status and possibilities, and fundamentally sharing the same interests (Hultengren 1979a, p. 76). Hence there is often no awareness in new students concerning potential differences in interests, objectives and values across groups in society such as between worker and employer. But from such a point of view, argues Hultengren, “all cats are grey in the dark” and an exemplary approach to the problem is not possible.

Instead, higher education must meet and address the students considering their context, background and lifeworld and educate them in a non-indoctrinating way to become able to ‘understand society’ based on good teaching and curriculum (1979a, pp. 80, 82). There are several possible theoretical traditions to choose from within social theory, but the personal favorite of Hultengren is some version of Marxism. According to Hultengren, however, a Marxist ideology (or any other) cannot be expected to be accepted by students in their problem-oriented project work; instead Hultengren highlights that indoctrination only leads the student to take on the way of thinking “as an external quality of the subject” (1979a, p. 82). Teaching, not least problem-oriented teaching, must give the students a firm understanding of society that actually makes sense to the individual student, according to Hultengren.

According to my analysis (Feilberg, 2022a), Hultengren presents here a very early example of practicing ontological and epistemological awareness of the assumptions that a project group of students must express in their scientific report to pursue emancipation as an interest. Though Hultengren (1976, 1979a) does not refer to Habermas’ distinction between three knowledge interests – a practical understanding, a technical and an emancipatory knowledge interest (Habermas, 1968) – she distinguishes between a wondering or understanding interest (e.g. problems “that one wonders at”) from a critical interest (e.g. problems “one is outraged about”) for instance (Hultengren, 1979a, p. 85). I argue that Hultengren thus differentiates herself from the position of Illeris and sets problem-oriented project work free and up to the participant-direction of the students and their choice of guiding interest. Just as the students are free to identify their own research interest, in the case of an emancipatory interest, the choice of social theory is also free and up to the students (today we could mention, besides Marxist historical materialism, Weberian antipositivism and a version of post-modernism as other examples of social theories) (Feilberg, 2022b).

Inspired by the work of Hultengren, I have argued (Feilberg, 2022b, pp. 86-87), that students of higher education within SSH faculty contexts always (as part of their participant-direction) can choose between at least two knowledge interests during their project work (practical-understanding or emancipatory, or technical or emancipatory) thus highlighting their freedom to direct and identify the knowledge interest of their project work, as well as the social-theoretical, ontological and epistemological assumptions, depending on the thematic framework and the study regulation of the specific project module.

Participant-direction and Bildung

To a greater extent than in much other literature at the time on students' project work in higher education, Hultengren describes and is sensitive to the frustration and insecurity that the "Freedom of choice of project/problem complex" arises in many students (1979a, p. 38). According to the observations and experience of Hultengren as a supervisor herself, the "freedom of choice of problem" often evokes insecurity in students due to the unknown character of the present possibilities within the project process, the lack of overview, insecurity due to the unclear goals of education and the goals of one's own, insecurity due to the lack of insight into the intentions and wishes of the other members of the project group (1979a, p. 38). This and other sources of insecurity and frustration in the individual and in the project group more times than not lead to "an appeal to the supervisor" to decide on the research question, the problem complex, the choice of theory and methodology and so on (1979a, p. 39). This is still true of students today (Jensen & Lund, 2016). But participant-direction is not only about giving students the opportunity to follow their personal motivation within the thematic frame of the project, "the goal of the supervisor must be to support the independence of the project group's choice of problem" according to Hultengren (1979a, p. 39). The aim of the supervisor is to help students over time to become able to independently inquire into questions and identify and learn the new knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the inquiry or the practical intervention.

The spirit of this thinking can perhaps be expressed as a personal-professional embodiment of a habitus by each individual student, each with their unique variation of the general habitus of the profession or academic group, a process in which independence is a key aspect. Elsewhere I have also highlighted the democratic, process-oriented and group-sensitive approach of Hultengren as a contributor to the political Bildung of students (Feilberg, 2022a).

Inspirational ideas in the work of Hultengren for the future of the world

In few words, the work of Hultengren carries within it a strong belief in two fundamental forces of development and education:

- **Strong Professional-Scientific Communities** (*The Collective level*)
(This takes many different forms: The project group, the semester group of students, and after graduation the work groups, being a member of society as a citizen)
- **The formation of independent thinking and a Personal-professional habitus** (*The Individual level*)
(Where do I stand in relation to this question or scientific discussion, or that professional field and situation?)

Both the power of the collective and the responsibility and formation of the individual are dependent on each other, and in the work of Hultengren (1976) you find a push to cultivate these forces because our shared social world depends on it. This is a collective responsibility according to Hultengren. Returning to the question, who is responsible for the group processes and the epistemological processes and products, Hultengren answers: both supervisor and students have a responsibility for process and product. But their responsibilities differ:

- The supervisor is a scientific and process-oriented consultant for the students with an understanding of and overview of the entire process, and ongoing feedback on process and product.
- The students identify the problem and choose and justify the investigation of it, and they are responsible for both process and product.

Hultengren (1976) argues that within Higher Education you keep the scientific and procedural responsibility with those who really have a chance to understand them, because they are close to them and a part of them: the students *and* the project supervisor. This would also bring the greatest potential for development. “Necessity is the mother of invention”, an old proverb goes, and this can also apply here, meaning, having the responsibility as students and as supervisor also motivate to understanding the problems. In contrast, if the responsibility for process-orientation is relegated to an outside consultancy unit outside the student-supervisor relation, how would it benefit the supervisor or the students? Instead, Hultengren (1976) argues that project supervisors should be offered all the training and supervision they need regarding process orientation, conflict management and group processes and the supervisor's role.

The positive side effect? It would contribute to cultivate a better world by making more supervisors aware of the importance of individual and group processes in a pedagogical and professional context. To strive to understand the process aspects, the situation of others, the group life, one's role as a supervisor and so on in an infinite process of part and the whole – that is the aim of process-orientation.

A process-orientation focus in supervisors and lecturers supports a culture of understanding (the other, power relations, own role etc.) and a practice of setting boundaries of for instance destructive behavior and communication. Process-orientation is therefore a contributing factor in supporting:

- Students' well-being and the integration of new students academically and socially into higher education institutions.
- Students' positive experience with larger project groups (4+ students)
- Professional development with respect to process-orientation aspects as a competence and as a Bildung value
- Students' belief in and ability to contribute to and realize the strength of professional groups and communities such as
 - the project group
 - the working groups and initiatives within the larger groups and organizations
 - the future working life and as a citizen of a democratic society.

In all these instances and many others, there is a need for independent individuals who can cooperate with others within well-functioning and successful project organizations.

Conclusion

Hultengren (1976) can help us re-imagine the power of group work, when it is able to function as a collective and at the same time respect the individual. We need this in all kinds of current problems that we face.

Hultengren must also be commended for highlighting what today can be called a sensitivity toward the social theoretical, the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of a scientific and empirical project work as well as her emphasis on the potential of interdisciplinarity in project work. Within SSH today this is still widely discussed in theory and practice and the work of Hultengren presents her experiences with and reflections on the aspects of project work that still stimulate discussion.

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