

# Positionings in an immature triad in teacher education

## Abstract

This article presents and discusses experiences from an intervention project in Norwegian teacher education focusing on a triadic collaboration between student teachers, mentors and lecturers. The aim of the project was to establish a written, digital meeting place supporting the student teachers' professional development. The question explored in this article is why some of the members in the triad virtually disappeared, and thus why the established digital meeting place collapsed. The findings are discussed through the lenses of positioning theory. Although the members positioned themselves differently, we identified three common traits in their stories: enhanced competition, preference of theory-informed writing, role confusion.

**Keywords:** Student teaching, triad, digital meeting place, positioning

## Introduction

'It was a heck of a lot of stress, but well worth it'

This was said by Stephen<sup>1</sup>, a second-year student teacher taking part in an intervention project in Norwegian teacher education for primary school. The aim of the project was to develop written online reflections as a meeting place for a triad consisting of six student teachers, two mentors and two lecturers during field practice. Stephen experienced the participation as hard, but highly beneficial. The student teachers enjoyed writing for, and receiving feedback from, multiple recipients. Both student teachers and mentors found the digital arena to be an informal place for discussion, thus creating a dynamic situation. The mentors and lecturers were generally positive to a closer collaboration supporting the student teachers' professional development. The analysis shows that the student teachers soon reached a relatively high level of awareness concerning their own teaching and the pupils' development in writing skills (Nilssen & Klemp, 2014). Throughout the first months of the project we thus had reason to be satisfied. Then suddenly the situation changed as the two mentors and three of the student teachers virtually disappeared from the discussion board.

As experienced teacher educators, we are not surprised that Norwegian teacher education is assessed (NOKUT, 2006) and documented (Damsgaard & Heggen, 2010; Hammerness, 2013) as fragmented and lacking a professional orientation. The subsequent call to bridge the gap between theory and practice is a recurrent and global one, and over decades, teacher educators worldwide have tried a variety of approaches to achieve this (e.g. Cheng, Cheng & Tang,

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<sup>1</sup> All names of student teachers and mentors in the article are pseudonyms.

2010; Dewey, 1904; Husebø, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). Recently, it has been suggested from some corners that we should acknowledge the differences between theory and practice as useful learning opportunities and concentrate on the creation of positive meeting places (Edwards, 2008; Terum & Heggen, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). Creating a new arena for the interplay between ‘a language and a culture built upon respect for what is different’ will enhance the ‘ability to deal with tensions and disagreement in a constructive way’ (Terum & Heggen, 2010, p. 93, our translation).

Reformers advocate and value partnership settings between student teachers, and school- and university-based teacher educators as a way of enhancing student teachers’ professional development (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Partnership models built on the assumption that universities and schools have distinct contributions to make are found, for example, in Scotland (Christie, Conlon, Gemmel, & Long, 2004), Sweden (Day, 1998) and Norway (Halvorsen, 2014). The professional knowledge of both parties is necessary and since neither can be reduced to the other, these different perspectives need to be brought into dialogue with each other (Furlong, McNamara, Campbell, Howson & Lewis, 2008).

Labelled as third spaces, the arenas for interaction assist student teachers in negotiating, bridging and navigating across differences, and help them to expand their abilities in linking discourses of practice with those of academic disciplines (Martin, Snow and Torrez, 2011; Moje, Ciechanowsky, Kramer, Ellis, Carrilo, & Collazo, 2004). According to Zeichner (2010), creating a third space implies a rejection of such binaries as practitioner and academic knowledge and of the hierarchical paradigm: ‘Creating third spaces in teacher education involves an equal and more dialectical relationship between academic and practitioner knowledge in support of student teacher learning’ (p. 92). What we often see as competing discourses are integrated in new ways – an either/or perspective is transformed into a both/and point of view.

In the presented project, we established a digital meeting place as a third space where school- and university-based teacher educators work in tandem, offering teacher candidates explicit opportunities to discuss issues of practice with others in the community. Thus, our project addressed the call in Norway to strengthen the triadic collaboration as laid down in a government white paper (KD, 2009). The question we explore in this article is why some of

the members in our triad virtually disappeared and thus why the digital meeting place collapsed.

## Previous research

Valencia, Martin, Place and Grossmann (2009) assert that student teaching is a poorly understood cornerstone of teacher preparation, in part because most studies fail to examine the experience as a triadic interaction situated in a particular context. Hence, their own study adds to the field by highlighting the complexities and challenges inherent in the triad interaction. They identified significant tensions between the members regarding the teaching, the mentoring and the goal of field practice. The evidence in their study suggests that the student teachers had both the ability and inclination to think analytically about the specifics of teaching language arts, and consequently, to deepen their understanding of teaching and learning. Yet they rarely engaged in productive, substantive critique and discussions with either the cooperating teacher or the university supervisor. Valencia et al. argue that it will be necessary to understand the inherent tensions between the multiple roles each member has and the need for each person to balance them while simultaneously participating in the triad.

In making sense of what they call ‘a failed triad’, Bullough and Draper (2004) examined the tension between a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor who had different views on how one student teacher should teach algebra. The cooperating teacher found the supervisor to be out of touch with school, while the supervisor viewed the cooperating teacher as resistant to change. Caught in the middle, the student teacher sided with the cooperating teacher, and the university supervisor pulled back. Bullough and Draper’s conclusion is similar to that of Valencia et al. (2009):

The politics of mentoring, particularly within the triadic relationship that is common to teacher education, reveals a much more complicated story than is typically told: a tale of power negotiation and of positioning and being positioned to influence learning, preserve one’s sense of self, and achieve or maintain a measure of control over one’s situation (p. 418).

Bullough and Draper (2004) maintain that the lack of communication is a surface explanation for understanding the tensions. Differences need to be recognised as a prerequisite for earnest, honest and respectful talks in a common space. They further argue that conditions for good communication across such differences need to be created beforehand. Martin, Snow and Torrez (2011) support the need for a proactive and conscious effort in the development of collaborative and trusting relationships. In a collaborative self-study of their work as liaisons,

they found that navigating relationships in university-school partnerships entailed far more complexity than they expected.

In a Norwegian study, Halvorsen (2014) finds that each teacher educator's identification with the idea of partnership depends on their tolerance and willingness to take risks when their established values, ideals and professional competences are put into play in an unfamiliar and unknown world. They risk losing control and experiencing failure. In an evaluation of a partnership programme, Magolda (2001) concludes, 'At the heart of successful border crossings are strategies to assist all stakeholders to recognize and engage in dialogue about their discomfort and difference' (p. 357). To be more comfortable with difference and conflict, collaborators must have the capacity not only to understand their own culture but also the culture of others.

Due to dialogues based on mutual respect between university- and school-based teacher educators, successful partnership stories have emerged supporting student teachers' professional development in a dynamic way (Baumfield & Buterworth, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Halvorsen, 2014). Common aspects of the processes in well-developed partnerships are mutual respect, confidence and a common inquiry-oriented attitude towards professional development (Cochran-Smith, 2003). The partnership between schools and teacher education institutions is acknowledged as time-consuming (Lemke & Sabelli, 2008). There are no quick solutions across the two cultures (Magolda, 2001), and the lack of time for collaboration restricts the development of the partnership (Hess, 2000). Richardson-Koehler (1988) discusses how the lack of time constrains the development of a trust level in the triad necessary for the "rigorous analysis of teaching" (p. 33). It may take three to five years to develop a fruitful partnership and five to ten years before it becomes sustainable (Lemke & Sabelli, 2008).

## **The Study**

The current study deals with the first year of a three-year intervention project developed in collaboration with participating mentors and student teachers. As stated above, the goal is to establish a digital meeting place where mentors, lecturers and fellow student teachers respond to and discuss the student teachers' written reflections. In a discussion board, the participants reflect on teaching with a special focus on early writing. The written digital format was chosen according to theories on writing to learn (Vygotsky, 1987). Vygotsky claims writing to be an important mediating tool in learning processes, because "[w]ritten speech is the most

expanded form of speech” (p. 204). Writing forces us to act more intellectually than oral speech. When reflecting in writing, we use more words and precise concepts to establish a joint understanding of the situation. The digital format gave the lecturers the possibility to have continuous access to the student teachers’ reflections during field practice.

### **Setting and participants**

Norwegian teacher education for primary school is a four-year integrated programme. Each year the student teachers have six weeks of field practice in groups and parallel studies in education and different subject matter. According to official documents (KD, 2009), field practice and theoretical studies are equal arenas for learning and professional development, and mentors are regarded as teacher educators. The headteacher recruits the mentors from amongst the teaching staff in a contracted school. Mentors are paid for this work and are allotted time for mentoring the student teachers, approximately two hours each day. They are obliged to attend a special course for mentors (15 credits ECTS), but a substantial number have not yet attended this course. Mentors and lecturers assess student teachers in collaboration. In this project, the mentors were expected to engage in the written arena in addition to the regular oral mentoring conversations.

The mentors, Martin and Maya, were selected as participants due to their schools’ special emphasis on literacy and Martin’s interest in log writing in teacher education. As a first-year mentor, Maya, an experienced teacher, is happy to team with the experienced and trained mentor Martin. He has previously participated in a R&D project managed by one of the lecturers in this project. Both participating lecturers are experienced teachers and teacher educators, respectively teaching the participating student teachers early literacy and pedagogy. One of the lecturers and an additional researcher are the authors of this article.

The participating student teachers are Sandra, Simon, Sarah, Sophie, Stephen and Susan. Simon is a qualified cook and a few years older than the other five, who are in their early twenties. Before entering teacher education, Sophie and Susan studied pedagogy and psychology (one year), respectively. The student teachers are all in their second year studying early literacy, mathematics and education. The original two groups of three student teachers were merged into one collaborating group with their field practice focusing on first graders.

### **The digital meeting place**

At our institution, it is mandatory to write reflective logs every day during field practice. The mentors are obliged to give written response once a week. Normally the lecturers’

involvement in field practice is limited to two visits a year. They may have access to logs but rarely read or respond to them. In this project, each of the student teachers was expected to write daily during their six weeks of field practice, either by posting a new theme, called logs, and/or by responding to previous postings. Normally the student teachers choose their own subject, initiating up to five new log discussions each week. However, the log discussions in weeks five and six deviate from this pattern (see Figure 1). Two days in week five the student teachers posted their contributions in a joint discussion initiated by the mentors, and thus the number of log discussions is lower. In week six, they were all instructed to write one log answering questions from one of the lecturers regarding literacy, and one log on their experiences teaching early literacy.

### **Data material**

We have three kinds of data material: 72 log discussions of variable length and with a varying number of respondents from four weeks of field practice,<sup>2</sup> two group discussions with mentors and two with student teachers carried out during the project year, and individual semi-structured interviews with the two mentors and the six student teachers carried out at the end of the year. The group discussions and individual interviews have been audiotaped and transcribed.

### **Analysis**

We registered the discussion-board activity in a form, noting per week the number of log discussions initiated by each of the student teachers, as well as the number of given and received responses from each of the parties. The activity level is presented in Figures 1 and 2, whilst the communication pattern is part of a qualitative analysis. The registration shows a sudden change in the activity level in weeks four to five as the two mentors and three of the student teachers virtually disappeared from the board. This distinct change led us to our research question: Why did the triadic meeting place collapse?

To obtain an answer to our question we conducted an inductive qualitative analysis of the data material inspired by the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), where we used questions and comparisons as analytical tools. We questioned if the utterances in the interviews were consistent with the factual writing and response behaviour. We compared utterances across the different participants, as well as across the different data material,

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<sup>2</sup> Postings from the two first weeks in the autumn term were not used as data material in this project.

identified themes and developed codes. Themes emerging in one discussion served as ‘lenses’ into the analysis of the next discussion – going back and forth.

As one of us was both the student teachers’ lecturer and directly involved in the discussion board, it was important to be constantly aware of how these relationships might colour our analysis and interpretation. We are well aware of the pitfalls ‘studying ourselves’ and strived to monitor our different subjective I’s (Peshkin, 1988). To balance one of the author’s double roles as educator and researcher each authors made the analysis on their own and then compared their findings. Looking back, we realise that for a while the impressive academic writing of some student teachers overshadowed the silence of others.

Emerging codes and themes as competition, lack of time, status, use of theory and insecurity, and how these may interrelate, compelled us to look for relevant theory that could help us understand these relations. As inductive researchers, we searched for theories that can explain or interpret our data (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), and we have subsequently found it meaningful to interpret our analysis through the lenses of positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Davies & Harré, 1990) and the concept of the ‘discoursal self’ (Goffman, 1990). Thus, we gained a deeper understanding of the constitutive force of the written meeting place as a discursive practice.

### **Theoretical lenses**

‘Positioning’ can be understood as the way in which people dynamically produce and explain the everyday behaviour of themselves and others through different modes of communication (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Through this social interaction both the individual’s subjectivity and the social relations are generated (Davies & Harré, 1990). Positioning theory is a theory for studying ‘discoursal practices’ through which competing discourses create different versions of the reality. Davies and Harré argue that the ‘positioning’ concept focuses on dynamic aspects of encounters, an alternative to the use of ‘role’, which highlights static and formal aspects.

Reflective writing during field practice is one such discursive practice, where the student teachers account for their observations and actions in the classroom and thereby negotiate their version of the reality in question (Klemp, 2012). Succeeding in the negotiation is essential to their identities as prospective teachers and subsequently to their relationships to their mentor and fellow student teachers. At the same time, the student teachers are struggling to create their identities as writers and their ‘discoursal selves’ (Goffman, 1990), and to

satisfy the sociocultural expectations of them as adequate students in teacher education. According to Davies and Harré (1990), who one is, and subsequently what relations one will develop, is ‘an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one’s and other’s discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our lives’ (p. 46).

Van Langenhove & Harré (1999) present several modes of positioning which can occur as a discursive practice, the distinction between *self and other positioning*, and *tacit and intentional positioning* being the most relevant in this study. The first of the two distinctions points to the fact that positioning as a discursive practice has a dual result. Simultaneously, as a person positions another person, the person will position oneself. Regarding the second distinction, most positioning of self and others will be of a tacit kind, neither intentional nor even conscious. The tacit and implicit nature of the positioning processes makes it difficult to deal with certain situations. The positions may be seen by the involved persons in terms of known ‘roles’ and involve shifts in power and open or close access to a desired identity (Davies & Harré, 1990).

According to van Langenhove and Harré (1999), intentional positioning of self or others might happen deliberately or might be forced in given situations. When people deliberately position themselves, it often implies that they are trying to achieve something. Building on Goffman’s conception of ‘strategic interaction’ (Goffman, 1969), van Langenhove and Harré call this process ‘strategic positioning’ (p. 25). In reflective academic writing, intentional positioning is often the case (taking a stand on a theory or problem). The Norwegian tradition of reflective writing during field practice asks the student teachers to account for their behaviour in the classroom and where the student teachers are required to position themselves as agents (Klemp, 2010).

## Findings

As mentioned above, analysis of the activity and communication pattern in the digital meeting place shows weeks of positive development and involvement from all parties. In week five, we realised the change illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

(Figure 1)

As indicated in Figure 1, Sarah virtually disappears from the meeting place already in week four, only delivering single postings on special request throughout the remaining weeks.



Simon, who was a slow starter in the digital meeting place, keeps on writing for one more week, but then limits his participation substantially in the same way as Sarah. Sandra keeps writing logs throughout the project, but the amount decreases. The drop from week three to week four indicates the triad's failure in trying to establish a response culture amongst the student teachers.

(Figure 2)

Figure 2 shows a change from a balanced situation to lecturer dominance. During the last two weeks, the mentors only make single comments. The two common log discussions in week five initiated by the mentors can only partly explain the low number of responses during this week.

We will begin by analysing the mentors' dispositions and behaviour as we see the student teachers' behaviour in part as a function of the mentors' behaviour.

### *Maya*

Having a special interest in early literacy, Maya speaks proudly about her school's remarkable achievements in early writing. This pride colours her response to Susan:

As I mentioned earlier, many of our pupils have better skills in writing than in reading. Moreover, as you have expressed, the pupils' development is both impressive and surprising. I think this is something special for you to take part in as student teacher.

In early responses, Maya stands out as a skilled subject teacher, sharing both her theory-based and her experience-based knowledge in literacy. However, in later responses we find that she repeatedly writes, 'We'll talk more about this in the mentoring conversations'. Sandra comments:

After a while, I only got feedback from fellow students and from the lecturers, and then I think the mentors felt, or they *said*, that they didn't have anything more to add. Instead, we touched on it in the mentoring conversations.

Sophie explains the mentors' disappearance from the discussion board as being due to the lack of theory:

It seemed like the mentors felt that we who read these things and the lecturers remember more theory, or know it better. Of course, they have also read theory, but that's a long time ago. So perhaps they go more on experience from practice (...) Actually, I think they said they didn't feel competent discussing theory.

Talking seems to be more convenient to the mentors than writing, having little to add to the theory. Thus, they also restrict the lecturers' insight into their theories and practice of teaching and mentoring, and avoid further discussions.

Maya confirms the drop in the mentors' activity in the discussion board: 'We read a lot and commented orally with the student teachers, but we didn't always answer in writing. We (...) handled it in the mentoring conversations.' Reading theory would have enabled her to give a reasonable response, but due to the lecturers' good responses, Maya did not prioritise such reading. She comments: 'Thus, both Martin and I felt we were being pushed to the back'.

Maya admits that she took the role of an observer in the triad, but repeats that she learned a lot both from Martin's way of guiding the writing, and from the lecturers' responses. Having said this, however, Maya raises her voice and states that she does not always agree with what the lecturers write. Sometimes she 'knows that it doesn't function like this 'here-and-now', (...) in the 'reality' of schools'.

We find that Maya deliberately positions herself (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) as a primary teacher with genuine knowledge that the student teachers need. However, we do not find the accentuation of her expertise as a sign of positioning as an equal teacher educator. On the contrary, we find the way she moves her responses to the mentoring conversations, an area closed to the lecturers, as a sign of insecurity in the role. Thus, she both avoids challenges to her theories of practice and the possibility of being positioned by others as a teacher educator with limited skills and insight. The mentoring conversations are to her the 'strategic interaction' (Goffman, 1969) which allows her to position herself as a skilled teacher. Simultaneously, she tends to position the lecturers as irrelevant for practice.

### *Martin*

Martin strongly expresses his responsibility regarding the student teachers' theory-informed log writing. The oral mentoring session is for him a place to reflect upon 'how to act', whilst reflective writing is the place for bridging the gap between theory and practice. He says:

The written reflection, I think it is there you can help them to get a grip on the theory. It is there you manage to see the connection between practice and theory, because then you have to sit down, you have to think, you have to turn some pages in the books, and then do some surfing on the net. You can't do that when you're in an oral "there-and-then" setting.

Stephen noticed Martin's concern, as he provided him with theory and professional language, whilst Maya mostly focused on practical questions like: 'This is school, and this is what it's like to be a teacher'.

Martin also stresses his role as motivator, 'my job was to get them going as writers'. He 'hunts' for the good points in the student teacher's writing and comments on them to avoid giving them a feeling of being poor writers. Due to Martin's strong commitment to bridging the gap through log writing, his role as mentor seems to change dramatically when the lecturers enter the arena. He explains:

When the lecturers weren't there we were supposed to get the student teachers going and challenge them on theory. When the lecturers came in they took that part, and then there was less for us. (...) My part became more "how to be a teacher for the pupils", and less "how to get them to focus on theory".

However, the analysis does not show any greater focus on local or experience-based knowledge in Martin's responses throughout the year. As shown in Figure 2, he disappeared from the meeting place in step with the lecturers' increased activity. To some extent he kept on giving emotional support, but mostly he was replaced. Because the lecturers' responses were good, Martin says, he was 'spared from' inquiring about the theory. The student teachers imply that being busy, the mentors might have communicated that they welcomed less work. Sophie comments: '[The mentors] didn't take so much responsibility may be?' Stephen makes a similar comment, but explains the behaviour due to a feeling of inadequacy:

The mentors actually expressed that they felt odd commenting on the lecturers' comments. The lecturers raised many important concepts and, you know, they gave us extremely good responses on our logs, they really did. Then, the mentors probably felt what they could provide wasn't good enough.

Repeatedly, Martin underpins the importance of the project and the joy he feels working together with the lecturers. Nevertheless, the situation also scared him, giving a feeling of being under surveillance: 'You're a little on your toes when you know that super clever teacher educators are watching your mentoring'. In one of the conversations, Martin explains the imbalance in the triad as being due to the lecturers' double role as teacher educators and researchers: 'You're not response givers, you're analysers'.

The mentors' responses, especially Martin's, are brimming with positive feedback, the superlatives increasing both in number and force in the theory-informed log discussions. A posting from Susan on early writing informed by theories on thought, language and motivation is given this typical response: 'Yet another good log, Susan. You are clever at

including important theories in your log. That's good!' Postings assessed in this way mostly have the character of 'writing to present', not of 'writing to learn'. The student teachers are not encouraged to ask questions, and follow-ups from fellow student teachers are not highlighted. Thus, as we see it, both mentors show a limited understanding of writing and reflecting to learn, the main idea of the project. Martin's compassion about postings 'exposed to 3, 4, 5 teacher educators' might be a sign of this limited understanding. Contrary to this, the lecturers saw as many discussants as possible as a success.

Unlike Maya, Martin deliberately positions himself (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) as a teacher educator. His mission is to bridge the learning in the two arenas with log writing as the mediating tool. When the lecturers take on 'his' task, Martin feels redundant and backs out. The fact that Martin only displays his local and experienced-based knowledge in the board to a little extent makes us ask if he really values his special expertise as teacher educator. Data from the mentoring conversations would have given a more complete picture of both Martin's and Maya's positionings. Regardless any oral responses, the created third space did not offer the motivation needed to keep Martin in the dialogue.

### *Sarah*

Figure 1 shows that Sarah was the first student teacher to disappear from the board. She prefers the oral mentoring conversations, she says, but adds quickly that this has nothing to do with fear of sharing her writings. She actually liked writing logs in her first year of student teaching, but the written format developed in this project left her with a sense of unease:

Last year I felt that I wrote to reflect and develop myself, but this year the purpose is to show something to them. They stressed the value of theory a lot. Susan writes a lot of theory, that's good, but not everyone likes to write like that. I feel I *must* bring in a lot of theory to satisfy them.

Refusing to state who she is talking about, Sarah is quite critical about the dynamics of the digital meeting place. In her experience, some student teachers are more valued than others, and the inconvenience in the situation pushes Sarah to position herself as a talker rather than a writer and as one who likes to reflect on teaching rather than present theory. Thus, she removes herself from a competitive situation she disagrees with. It is impossible to see any negative trends in her postings and the received responses at the time she backs out. Her writing complied with the expectations. Even if she does not say so herself, we find an element of insecurity in Sarah's behaviour, one sign being the fact that she and Sandra read each other's writings before posting them. By backing out, she avoids being positioned (van

Langenhove & Harré, 1999) by the other student teachers and the teacher educators, a parallel to Maya's strategic move.

### *Sandra*

Sandra expresses very much the same thoughts as Sarah. The one-sided stress on theory and an experienced underestimation of their teaching competence gave her a feeling of being less competent. Unlike Sarah, Sandra chooses to be present for a while longer (see Figure 1) with the result that she was positioned by the others in the known role (Davies & Harré, 1990) of a less competent log writer. This is also her own understanding: 'No, I'm not at all a clever log writer. I'm nowhere as good as Susan, so what's the point in writing?' Sandra got significantly fewer responses from the mentors, and the responses from all parties are short. She receives empathy and encouraging words for her observations, but her postings are never valued as good logs. Stephen thematises Sandra's position as a poor writer: 'But when Sandra has posted a log, even if she has written about something very interesting, there's nothing to comment on.' Stephen sees the different response-pattern as a source of spinning thoughts and indirectly offers his sympathy, he says: 'Then you start wondering if your logs are satisfying? Even if you feel like "Hey, this is a good log. I've written about something very interesting!" Then, why didn't I get any response?' In Stephen's opinion, the assessing responses are the reason why some of his co-participants reduced their writing efforts.

The experience is obviously tough on Sandra. One interpretation is that she gives up and accepts the role as a poor student teacher. However, neglecting the demands for theory-informed logs, to some extent she is protecting herself from criticism, leading to an alternative interpretation that she tries for a while to establish her discorsal self (Goffman, 1990) based on an alternative written discourse that focuses on what happens in the classroom. Then she realises the situation, gives up and takes the same way out as Sarah. Sandra prefers a more private room where she can share her thoughts with her mentor and lecturers.

### *Simon*

In his own words, Simon disappears from the discussion board due to the same reasons as Sandra and Sarah. Even if Simon's writing was irregular from the beginning, we found that he got profound responses from all parties. This, and the fact that his disappearance coincided with the mentors make his explanation unlikely. We understand Simon as having difficulties

fulfilling his obligations as a student teacher, even though he receives continuous encouragement. Statements from student teachers and mentors support our interpretation.

## Discussion

We have identified three common traits in the positioning stories: enhanced competition, preference of theory-informed writing, role confusion.

As described above, both Maya and Martin withdraw from the meeting place due to a feeling of inadequacy and insecurity. Our interpretation is that their experiences were due to an *enhanced competition* between the two different knowledge bases represented by the mentors and lecturers. Maya does not want to compete and therefore deliberately positions herself more as a teacher than teacher educator and thereby avoids confronting the lecturers' theory-informed knowledge. She rather advocates her own teaching practice in the oral mentoring sessions based on experiences and theories she partly knows. Martin seems to find the same competition but as described above, he hands the arena over to the more competent lecturers. As his mission was to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the competitive situation left him with no role.

The competitive situation between the student teachers is more overtly expressed. Sandra points to the writing competition with Susan when she explains her withdrawal, 'I'm nowhere as good as Susan'. Sarah points directly to what she sees as a one-sided focus on theory, a competition she refuses to take part in.

As Sarah articulates, we find the enhanced competition closely connected to the *preference of theory-informed writing*. Reflection seems to correspond to 'use of theory', strongly advocated by Martin. Through Martin's utterances we understand that both he and the lecturers have a theory-driven focus in their responses. As shown above, the student teachers confirm this. Moreover, our analysis shows that the student teachers skilled in theory-based reflection received more profound responses from all parties.

Seeing our analysis through the lenses of positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), Maya and Martin position themselves in two different ways in the project. Though acting differently, both mentors act as though their knowledge is unimportant and withdraw their professional knowledge from the written meeting place. We interpret their actions as *role confusion*, wherein their experience of being assessed as professionals is, in an odd way, easy to understand. We see similar confusion amongst the student teachers when it comes to what

kind of writing they were supposed to share in the meeting place. As it turned out, the writing became more similar to knowledge presentation than writing to learn. As we see it, theory was given priority by both mentors and student teachers, and this is why the intended open room ended up being closed to some of the members of the triad.

Hence, our study sustains findings made in earlier studies: triad relationships are difficult due to the lack of clarity of roles and communication problems among the members, and the dynamics are complicated and challenging (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Valencia, et al., 2009). Collaboration in triads turns out to also be difficult on a small scale, even when the participants are taking part in such development work voluntarily. In the Norwegian context, the mentor has a formal status as teacher educator (KD, 2009) and time allotted for mentoring. Still, we experienced that there is a need to repeatedly negotiate the different roles in the triad (Slick, 1997; Valencia et al., 2009) and use the time needed for creating a triadic partnership as documented in previous research internationally (Hess, 2000; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Magolda, 2001).

Our study adds to the field throwing light on the inherent tensions in a partnership in teacher education (Valencia et al., 2009) and how these can grow in an immature triad. Using positioning theory, it becomes clear what is at stake for the different parties and what might cause discomfort and consequently must be addressed through dialogue (Magolda, 2001). The close relations mislead us to believe that the lecturers, the mentors and the student teachers had a shared view on essential aspects in our intervention project such as theory on writing and learning, the complexity of teacher's knowledge and the mentor as a teacher educator. The analysis has proved us wrong. The enhanced competition between the student teachers signals that the connection between writing and learning either is not understood or is overshadowed by other needs in the situation, such as the need for assessment as a good student. Analysis of the mentors' and the lecturers' responses indicates that there was a lack of shared view on how to scaffold and take part in a written dialogue. The responses are both unequally dimensioned and of an assessing character, all the time with a tendency to favour presentation of theory. Lack of co-planning and unclear division of labour can partly explain the fact that initiatives to discuss observations in practice were neglected both by the mentors and the lecturers. At the same time our findings gives reason to pay more attention to how to establish the dialectical relationship between academic and practitioner knowledge as proposed by Zeichner (2010)., The consequence was that practitioner knowledge was made

unimportant to the student teachers and the situation provided little positive feedback on the mentors' expertise. To sum up, our triad was far from the situation of a well-developed partnership where mutual respect, confidence and a common inquiry-oriented attitude towards professional development are common aspects (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

In contrast to other studies (e.g. Bullogh & Draper, 2004) we do not regard the professional development of all the student teachers as disappointing (Nilssen & Klemp, 2014). Although the triadic meeting place collapsed, all the participants experienced the potential of the project, as Stephen expresses in the opening quotation. At its best the dialogue between the student teachers, the mentors and the lecturers meets a high standard compared to the documented standard of the Norwegian teacher education as fragmented and lacking professional orientation (Damsgaard & Heggen, 201; Hammerness, 2013). However, if we had been more aware of how the mentors' established values, ideals and professional competence were put into play, we could have been more cautious moving the mentors and the student teachers into an unfamiliar and unpredictable way of communicating (Halvorsen, 2014). The digital format exposed both mentors and student teachers in an unfamiliar way and made them vulnerable. The insecurity connected to the written digital format added to the problems of the immature triad. In this situation, it was difficult to facilitate a professional dialogue including all participants. We still believe in the potential of the written digital format as a meeting place for the different teacher educators and the student teachers. The knowledge learned through our study will hopefully enable us to avoid the pitfalls of an immature triad.



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## Figures

Figure 1: The students' postings, amount including initiating logs and responses to fellow students.

Figure 2: The teacher educators' responses.