Kerstin Rydbeck

Research groups on masters level – a pedagogical experiment

*Paper for the IFLA satellite meeting, 8–9 August 2010, in Borås, Sweden*

**Introduction**

The two years master programme in ALM (archive, library and museum studies) is one of the programmes at the advanced level at Uppsala University with most students. About 70 to 75 pass on to the second year, where 50 percent of the time is reserved for the master thesis course. The majority (about 60 persons) are Library & Information Science-students.

For the Department of ALM, this masters thesis course means both a logistic and resource demanding challenge. We have to support the students in their search for interesting research topics and – of course most important of all – give individual tutorial to all the projects during the entire working process. The whole teaching staff at our quite small department is more or less constantly engaged as tutors for several students and we also have a group of external senior researchers or other persons with doctorate that we recurrently use for this.

Although the tutorial work is mostly considered both inspiring and rewarding by the tutors, it is also very demanding. And it ties them up during the whole academic year, since the masters thesis course goes on between September and May. This sometimes makes it complicated for our senior lecturers, associate professors and full professor to practice research, which is another important part of their duty. The time left for research becomes very fragmented. It is however also essential to give the students a good insight in the research going on at the department, especially when it – as in this case – is about education at the advanced level. This of course becomes more difficult if their teachers can not focus enough on their research activities. We have noticed that the students often choose quite traditional and unimaginative topics for their masters thesis work and we would like to change this. Finally we have in the Humanities (our department belongs to the Faculty of Arts) increasing demands for senior researchers not to work only with individual projects, but to create research groups and cooperate more with others in major joint research projects. This is also important in this context.

All these factors put together are the reason why we would like to implement a new working method in the masters thesis course, a method which 1) better integrates research and education at the department, 2) gives senior lecturers, associate professors and professors a chance to conduct research and get research merits also on the basis of their tutorial work, 3) stimulates research cooperation and 4) leads to more interesting masters thesis topics among our students.

**Working in research groups at masters level**

We decided to carry out an educational development project at the department during the coming academic year, a pedagogical experiment in which we will try working in research groups with some of our master students.
During their second year and the masters thesis work, the students have few other courses. Consequently they come to the university quite seldom and do not meet their course mates very often. Although they see their tutors regularly for individual tutorial, they have to spend most of the time working alone and very much relying on themselves in this working process. It is easy to feel alone in this situation. That is the reason why the department always organizes the students in small groups during their thesis work. These groups are supposed to meet without the tutors for the reading and commenting of the group members’ work in progress, before individual tutorial. Members of the same group often carry out studies of very different kinds and have different tutors. Despite that, our evaluations show that the students generally are very positive, especially when all group members have taken the cooperation seriously and felt their common responsibility. The groups often have been of great help to the students. In our experiment one could say that we take this cooperation one step further by putting the group much more in focus for the working process, with closer meetings where all members concentrate on a joint project, and where they all have the same tutor who also takes part in the meetings. Some of the individual tutorial accordingly gets replaced by the group discussions during these meetings.

What we want to do is in fact something similar to how research is usually conducted in medicine and in science; where a professor or another senior researcher leads a group of PhD-students; all connected to a joint research project but working with different sub studies and continuously in close contact with each other and the research leader during the whole research process. Our research groups will have 3–4 students, each one working with his or her individual study, but all of them parts of a larger joint research project – a masters project. Their tutor will be the research leader and the main responsible for this project. This senior researcher of course could contribute with sub studies too, but this is not necessary. It is however extremely important to be well familiar with the research field of this specific project. He or she must be the one writing the overall plan, setting the frames for this joint research project in which the different sub studies are to be formulates and carried out.

The result from this project work will be the participating students’ individual theses (which every one of course must meet the requirements we have on a masters thesis), where they present and describe their study and its results in relation to previous research and to the overall aim of the project. But an important thing is also the research leader’s responsibility to write a final report, a text where the most comprehensive conclusions of this joint research project will be drawn and discussed, based mainly on the results from the students’ work.

This final text is supposed to be published and here are different possibilities. It should be sent to an international scientific journal for peer reviewing and (hopefully) publication. The concluding results could also be presented by the research leader at some international scientific conference. But the results furthermore could be published (in Swedish) as a report from the department. The latter has the advantage of giving also the participating students a possibility to present their different sub studies in short articles, attached to the concluding text. This would probably be a better way to inform practitioners within a national library context, about this new research. For the participating students who are about to start their professional careers this possibility is of course of great importance.

---

1 The department has a manual for the masters thesis work in which the working process and the grading criteria are thoroughly described (in Swedish only), see Rydbeck, K. (2010), *Manual för uppsatsskrivare: Råd och anvisningar för examensarbeten och uppsatser inom ABM-ämnena*: [http://www.abm.uu.se/divdokument/ABM-uppsatshandledning.pdf](http://www.abm.uu.se/divdokument/ABM-uppsatshandledning.pdf)
Three research groups
Which types of research could then be suitable for this pedagogical experiment? An important aim is to set up masters projects with quite close connections to library practice, since that gives it one further dimension: bridging the gap between LIS research and library practice.

This coming year, when trying this for the first time, we are going to organize three different research groups, three masters projects. One will relate to public library work and focuses on reading groups in a public library context. Reading groups have been commonly occurring in Sweden since the beginning of the 20th Century. During the last years however, there has been a massive increase in the number of groups; sometimes these activities in Sweden are now referred to as a new “popular movement” because of the massive popularity. There are of course reading groups of many different kinds. But on many places the public libraries have made use of this new interest for social reading in their programmes for reading promotion and started reading groups. The overall aim of the masters project, which I am going to lead myself, is simply to find out more about these specifically library-related groups. How common are reading groups in public libraries? How are they organized? What type of literature is selected and by whom? What can be said about the participants in relation to class, gender and age? What do they get out of their reading groups activities? Etc… Up till now almost no research at all have been done about reading groups in Sweden and this masters project will be a part of a research project about reading groups in contemporary Sweden from a more general perspective, which I am going to start during the autumn of 2010.2

The second masters project will concentrate on research library work. The concepts of Open Access, Open Education and Open Scholarship all aim at developing new forms for scholarly communication in educational and research contexts. In this project different aspects of these initiatives will be studied, for example: What is the library’s role in this? How does it affect the user seeking for information? Which effects can a researcher observe from publishing in Open access? Etc… The leader of this research group will be Urban Ericsson, PhD and research librarian with special responsibility for digital publication at the library of the Swedish University for Agriculture in Uppsala.

The third masters project will be lead by Isto Huvila, PhD and research fellow at the Department of ALM. It differs a bit from the two others, in focussing not only on library work but on the whole ALM-sector. The overall aim is to study the roles and positions of the cultural heritage institutions today and in tomorrow’s society and to identify attitudes towards them; for example concerning their roles and importance in information retrieval and access to information. From the archive and museum students at our masters program still quite few pass on to the second year and the masters thesis work (most of them graduate with a one year’s master). But from those who actually do pass on to the second year, this project of course could be of interest. It is also a chance for LIS, archive and museum students to work and create something together and the project consequently contributes to an integration of those three educations and supports a common perspective on the three practice fields. Those interested in this third project however must be willing to write in English, since it also has a more international profile than the other two. A similar masters project group, focussing on the same general issues, will simultaneously be set up by Dr Sanjica Faletar Tanackovic at the Osijek University in Croatia and the aim is to

organize a communication between the two groups, to continuously discuss the work in progress and to compare the results between Sweden and Croatia.

A base for cooperation
We believe masters thesis work in research groups will work out well because of the students’ experience in Problem Based Learning (PBL), which always strongly has influenced the teaching of LIS in Uppsala. Our students are used to problem solving in collaborative groups. The leading of a masters project group will, I guess, not be very different from the role I get as a tutor of a group of students working with a PBL-case. To this must be added that masters thesis work in research groups also has a lot in common with how work is pursued in a research circle, something which we have experience from at the department. During the last years I have been leading a project about research circles as a method for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP). In a research circle practitioners from a certain working field and an academic researcher meet to study an issue or a problem together which they all find important, and carry out small but scientifically based studies. In this particular project two circles have been put to work. The first one focused on school library work and the participating librarians conducted five small studies in connection to the general theme about the possible importance of school libraries for children’s knowledge and language development. The second circle focuses on research librarians’ work and the main theme is how to achieve better collaboration between the university departments and the library, concerning collection development and information literacy.3

The first research circles were put to work in the 1970s and the method’s historical and ideological roots are to be found in the Swedish popular education in the beginning of the 20th Century. But it is also regarded as type of action research called Participatory Action Research (PAR). There is no reason why our masters projects could not also be organized as action research. This is a way of conducting research that involves the practitioners in a scale which makes the research process quite different from how researchers “normally” work. In action research the researchers and the practitioners work closely together; it transforms the practitioners from objects of the study to subjects in the research process, taking part in the designing of the project, in the collecting of data and – most important – in the analysis. Important for action research is also its empowering dimension. It puts an emphasis on change and the action researchers’ aims are not simply to observe and to describe, they are concerned with doing things that make a difference for the practitioners.4

Action research can not be considered a theory in the way we normally speak about theories in the Social sciences and the Humanities. It should rather be described as an attitude towards the research process which includes an active and close collaboration with those whom the research focuses on (in this case the practitioners work). Also in action research a project consequently needs a theoretical base and the researchers have to formulate research questions and choose methods in a usual manner.

The primary focus of the masters projects always has to be the research skills of our students, this project work being a part of their education. But hopefully an active collaboration with practitioners can provide input also to the development of library practice and therefore indirectly supports the practitioners in their professional roles.

---

4 For a general discussion about the concept of action research, see for example Greenwood, D.J. & Levin, M. (2007), Introduction to action research: Social Research for Social Change.
How to select the participants

Every year we meet the students already in May for what could be described as a "kick off" for the masters thesis course, where we give some general information about how this work will be organized during the coming academic year. The purpose is also to give some initial inspiration to the students, encourage them first of all to find out which their general research interests are but also to identify possible research areas for their coming work, having some ideas about this when the course starts in September.

This year we also presented the pedagogical experiment at this meeting and explained our intentions. We invited interested students to contact the project leaders by e-mail and write short about: 1) Why they wish to work in a particular project and 2) why they would like to be a part of a research group and why they think they would fit into this working method. We told them we are looking for those genuinely interested in research work (as there are students also regarding the thesis work mainly as something negative they have to get through in order to get their masters degree) and that they must be prepared to focus one hundred percent on their thesis work, being in a masters project. Someone often unable to attend project meetings or who gets seriously delayed with his or her part of the work affects the whole project negatively. Concretely it means that students working a lot in addition to their studies (which is quite common especially at the advanced level) probably are not suited for participation in this experiment. We also declared we need to have some sort of selection process if we get many applicants, and that it is the project leaders’ right and responsibility to pick out their group members and to decide whether they will accept a particular applicant or not.

How to carry out the work in the groups

The research groups start to meet in September and their meetings will go on until the end of the course, in May 2011. Although the project leader in the project plan defined the general aims of the project and presented ideas concerning for example relevant sub studies, a common theoretical base and workable methods, there must be some possibilities for the students also to influence the outline of the project and have ideas about their individual studies. The department always puts high demands on the students’ ability in their masters theses to independently formulate workable research questions based on the general aims of their studies and related to a clearly defined theoretical base, and to find their methods. It is important that we make the same demands on the students working in research groups. They cannot be fed like baby birds, with pre formulated tasks, since this would affect their intended learning outcomes negatively and consequently be disadvantageous to them in the grading process.

It would be a good idea to organize the first project meetings as seminars focussed on the reading and discussing of previous research connected to this project, as a common base for the collaboration and for the creation of a team spirit. In my own reading group project I will furthermore arrange a virtual seminar with at Dutch PhD-student working with a similar research project in Holland, in order to let her present her study to my students. This would hopefully bring insights to them about the necessity in a research process of localizing ongoing projects and getting in contact with international research networks.

When the students are working on their individual studies the group is supposed to have quite frequent but informal meetings – maybe every second week. The purpose of those meetings is to keep the whole project together. They will focus on the collaboration as a resource in research work, help to keep up the team spirit and the working pace and aim at keeping a focus on the general object of this whole project.
But as was already mentioned, the main part of the tutorial also takes place during the meetings. The students are expected to continuously report about their work in progress, to present texts at different stages which they have written and to discuss problems they are facing.

The discussions of course have to be kept in a dialogue also with the practitioners involved, and sometimes it would no doubt be important to have the practitioners present at the project meetings.

**Is it expensive?**

Working in research groups does not necessarily mean increasing costs for the department. The teachers involved already have time reserved for their tutorial work which can be used for the project meetings and for the reading of texts produced by the students. The research leader will need time for the writing of the concluding text, which however could be taken from his or her research time since it aims at presenting new research. What cannot be financed by the department’s normal budget is the practitioners’ work. Consequently it is of great importance that their employers see the value of the project and are prepared from the beginning to reserve some time for their commitment.

If the results from the projects are to be published as reports from the department, this of course costs some money. And we need to evaluate the working method carefully especially this first time, when it takes the form of a pedagogical experiment. Some resources will be needed for this evaluation. Meetings have to be arranged with all the students and project leaders involved and also with the practitioners at a few times, in order to get their opinions and reflexions during the working process. It is also important for the project leaders to stay in contact for the discussing of pedagogical matters related to this experiment. The final evaluation has to be implemented in June 2011, when the course is completed and the masters theses presented, comparing the opinions and results from the students working in projects, with those working alone in the “traditional” way. If the evaluation comes to the conclusion that this was a successful experiment and research groups worth making a normal working method in the masters thesis course, future research leaders probably would be helped by some sort of written manual, based on our experiences and results from this first year.

**Possible risks and problems**

Given that only some of the students in the masters programme will be working in research groups, it is important that their tutorial resource not considerably goes beyond what is offered to the other students. That would not be fair and could cause negative reactions. If many declare an interest in participating in this experiment, we will have to pick out the best and some applicants consequently will not be accepted. This could result in disappointment and in discussions about how the selection was carried out. We have to bear this in mind and clearly justify our decisions.

But the opposite situation could also occur. What happens if we do not get any students? Maybe the research areas we have chosen to focus on are not interesting enough from their perspective. Luckily we quite quickly realized this is not the case. 13 students declared their interest in our three projects directly after the May meeting, which means the projects can all start in September.

If one or more students do not complete the thesis work during normal course time, it delays the whole project and the research leader can not write the final report. As was mentioned above, we consequently need to pick out those prepared to focus totally on their thesis work during the project time. It however has to be mentioned that the great majority of our students always get ready in time with their masters theses.
It is also important to state that even if this pedagogical experiment turns out to be a success, masters thesis work in research groups will always be an attractive working method only for some students. Many see this course as a welcome opportunity to immerse themselves in something totally independently from their course mates, after having worked so much in collaborative groups during the rest of their education. There is also a risk that we are not able to create new, fresh projects every year, given the fact that the senior researchers working as tutors at the department all have their special research interests and if they are going into new research areas they will need a lot of time for preparation.

Finally, the publishing of a project report also including short articles by the students would give them one more thing to do, very soon after the completion and presentation of the thesis work. At this moment their master’s education has come to its end and they often feel tired. It could be difficult for the research leader to motivate the students to finish their articles.

Concluding remarks
Since this pedagogical experiment recently started, we will have to wait until next summer before there are any final results to present.

In the Humanities, research is still conducted generally as individual projects both at masters and PhD levels but also when it comes to senior researchers. Hopefully this pedagogical experiment will show that research groups could be another attractive way of working, and that this experiment consequently has a value also for the other disciplines and departments at the Faculty of Arts. Many of our sister disciplines however have only a few active students on masters level – in fact the Department of ALM every year produces the same number of masters diplomas as all the other departments together. We hope that this experiment will form a model for research collaboration which works also for departments with a large number of students at masters level. By turning our interest towards master projects focused on cooperation between research and library practice we also hope this experiment could contribute to a general strengthening of this cooperation.
Abstract:

Purpose
This paper is about a pedagogical experiment which will be implemented at Uppsala University, with research groups at masters level. The aim is to better integrate research and education at the department, give the tutors a chance to conduct research and get research merits also on the basis of their tutorial work, stimulate research cooperation and create more interesting master thesis topics for the students.

Methodology
The groups will have 3–4 students, working with individual sub studies connected to a major joint research project. Their tutor will be the leader and the main responsible for this project and has to write a final report where the conclusions are drawn. This report is supposed to be published and presented at an international conference. An important aim is also to create projects with close connections to library practice in order to bridge the gap between LIS research and library practice.

Findings
Since this experiment has just started, nothing can be said about final results. 13 students have declared their interest in participating and three research groups will start working in September 2010. The work will be completed in June 2011.

Value
In Uppsala LIS is a part of the Faculty of Arts. In the Humanities research is still conducted generally as individual projects, both at masters and PhD levels, but also when it comes to senior researchers. Hopefully this experiment will show that research groups can be another fruitful way of working. Hopefully it will also result in a strengthening of the ties between LIS research and library practice.
Kerstin Rydbeck
Associate Professor in Library and Information Science
Dept of ALM (Archive, Library and Museum Studies), Uppsala University
Box: 625, SE-751 26 Uppsala, Sweden
Phone: +46 18 471 79 78, Fax: +46 18 471 15 89
kerstin.rydbeck@abm.uu.se

Kerstin Rydbeck is associate professor in library and information science and has also been head of the Dept of ALM (Archive, Library and Museum Studies) at Uppsala University, Sweden, between 2001 and 2010. The doctoral dissertation (1995) was a study in sociology of literature about the use of literature within the Swedish temperance movement at the turn of the 20th century. Later the research has focused upon the history of popular education from a gender perspective. For the moment she is working with a project about the research circle as a method for evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP) and preparing a research project about reading groups.