Rigor AND Relevance
Challenges of Master Thesis Writing at the Copenhagen Business School

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<u>Presenter Symposium</u>

CURRICULUM AT THE INTERFACE: THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

AREA AND COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Potential Sponsor Divisions: Management Education and Development, International Management, and the Social Issues in Management Divisions.

The Symposium organizers, Mette Zølner and Charles T. Tackney, have received the statements from all intended participants agreeing to participate in the entire Symposium and stating that they are not in violation of the Rule of Three + Three.

(We request consideration for MED Best Symposium in Management Education and Development Award.)

Presentation Titles and Presenters:

1. Teaching the EU using plurilingual content based teaching and cooperative learning

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2. At the interface of disciplines: Interdisciplinarity as a driver of curriculum innovation

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4. Institutional Entrepreneurs and Curriculum Innovation

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5. Insight-based critical realism: a Trans-cultural Epistemology for a European Higher Education Area

Charles T. Tackney, Ph.D.

6. Teaching in foreign languages at the interface of business disciplines

Mette Zølner, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This Symposium presents curriculum design and content issues in a Scandinavian business school at its Centenary. The aim is an exploration of an educational institution at the interface of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) within the historical trends of the European Union. We hope this step will empirically document how the goals of the European Higher Education Area are functionally linked with the entrepreneurial sensibilities of administration, faculty, and administrative staff during the concrete operations of work. The series of presentations are framed between trans-cultural epistemological foundations in insight-based critical realism and inquiry into how the institutional entrepreneurs – the program directors – negotiate opportunities, risks, and tensions in curriculum and program implementation. Detailed case presentations take up curriculum effort to successfully engage issues of interdisciplinarity, use of text production as a tool in support of project and thesis writing, and the use of plurilingual content based teaching in a cooperative learning model for European studies. The history of one curriculum model initiated to educate better citizens, combining interdisciplinary methods with language instruction, whose features have endured and diffused throughout the business school, ends the presentation set. Symposium discussion will be designed to invite participants, from within the EU and beyond, to join in collaborative practitioner research for the EHEA future.

Keywords: European Higher Education Area, Curriculum innovation, Scandinavian higher education.

Rigor AND relevance: Challenges of Master thesis writing at the Copenhagen Business School
Karl-Heinz Pogner and Vibeke Ankersborg

For the past four years, we have offered Master students a variety of teaching and learning activities to support graduate students' knowledge and text production. The activities include lectures, seminars, and workshops spanning from generating ideas to understanding and fulfilling academic requirements seen as expectations and requirements of academic discourse communities and communities of practice (Author 1 2003 and 2012, Lave & Wenger 1991, Swales 1990). The activities include cognitive and social genre knowledge (Hylland 2007, Bruce 2008), different stakeholder perspectives and expectations (of supervisor, peers, institutions, job market; academic rigor and societal / organizational relevance), methodology issues and academic writing in general. In the workshops the students work individually and in groups with tools and tasks facilitated by instructors – the authors of this presentation and study.

Methodology

We have monitored students of an interdisciplinary study program at a Copenhagen Business School and documented the students' discussions and sense-making in a series of qualitative pilot studies: We have video-recorded plenary sessions, audio-recorded students' group discussions and coproduction, and we have photographed mind maps produced by the students. In addition, we have conducted in-depth research interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009) with six students (four theses) at the time when they were approximately half way through their thesis project. Before the interviews, we had read their texts written to that point in time (approx. 20 pages per thesis in draft quality). During these discourse-based interviews (Goswami et al. 1983), we asked in detail how the text parts were produced and why there were gaps in the draft.

Furthermore, as part of the European Literacy Network's working group on academic and thesis writing, we have conducted seven in-depth interviews with ten students (seven theses) shortly after graduation. We asked individual students and groups of students to visualize their 'thesis journey' by plotting important periods and spots onto a time line, relating their emotional experiences to the spots, and to draw a timeline of their 'learning experiences' resulting in learning curves reporting the intensity of their learning. We used these time line and plot techniques as "boundary objects" (Star & Griesemer 1989) and 'catalysts' for the students' reflection on their experiences and strategies – and to get insights into the ups and downs in the students' knowledge and text production and about how the students managed to get through the thesis process.

We have analyzed the collected data by means of thematic content analyses (Guest et al. 2012, NVivo software) using Thematic Network Analysis (Attride-Sterling 2001) and Critical Discourse Analyses (Fairclough 2003, Jäger 2001) of texts, discursive and social practices as framework for analyzing 'Master thesis Writing' in order to be able to describe how students struggle with, negotiate and balance the sometimes contradictive expectations, norms and rules, which they feel are imposed on them.

The preliminary results and insights of our exploratory pilot studies feed back into the teaching and learning activities and contribute to the incremental change process of our teaching practice. How these processes are integrated into the CBS curriculum design and larger process of the EHEA will be themes of interest for this presentation and paper.

Preliminary results

For some students, the ultimate eye opener was realizing that they were expected to do "some kind of academic / scientific research" (Master student) in a delineated but still complex

'problem area' where the definition of "ill-defined" (Schön 1983) or "wicked" (Rittel 1984) problems is a time consuming, but crucial process. The other important discovery the students focused on concerns the insight that they had to negotiate many different expectations, norms and rules/ regulations in order to be able to contribute to "imagined" (Anderson 1991) academic / scientific and professional communities.

The main finding is that - regardless of the students' choice of research approach and design, of methodology, or even the student's positioning concerning philosophy of science paradigms - students c/should utilize writing / text production more as a tool for thinking, structuring and producing knowledge. Even talented students do not necessarily grasp the productive epistemological and heuristic contribution (Bereiter 1986, Hermanns 1988, Molitor 1984) of writing and text production to knowledge transformation and production (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987) - even though they see the point of other aspects, such as methodological and academic rigor. This conclusion has led us to developing "The Vicious Circle of No Writing-No-Research" in Figure 1, which we want to investigate in more depth in our further research.

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Figure 1 about here.

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Further research and contribution

Our further research will combine the mentioned methods employed and tested in the pilot studies, in diachronic case studies following master thesis writers (= knowledge and text producers) and their learning processes during the whole process from searching a topic to submitting and 'defending' the thesis at the oral exam. We shall use the tested methods of data collection and analysis together with the method of reconstructing the thesis' text genesis
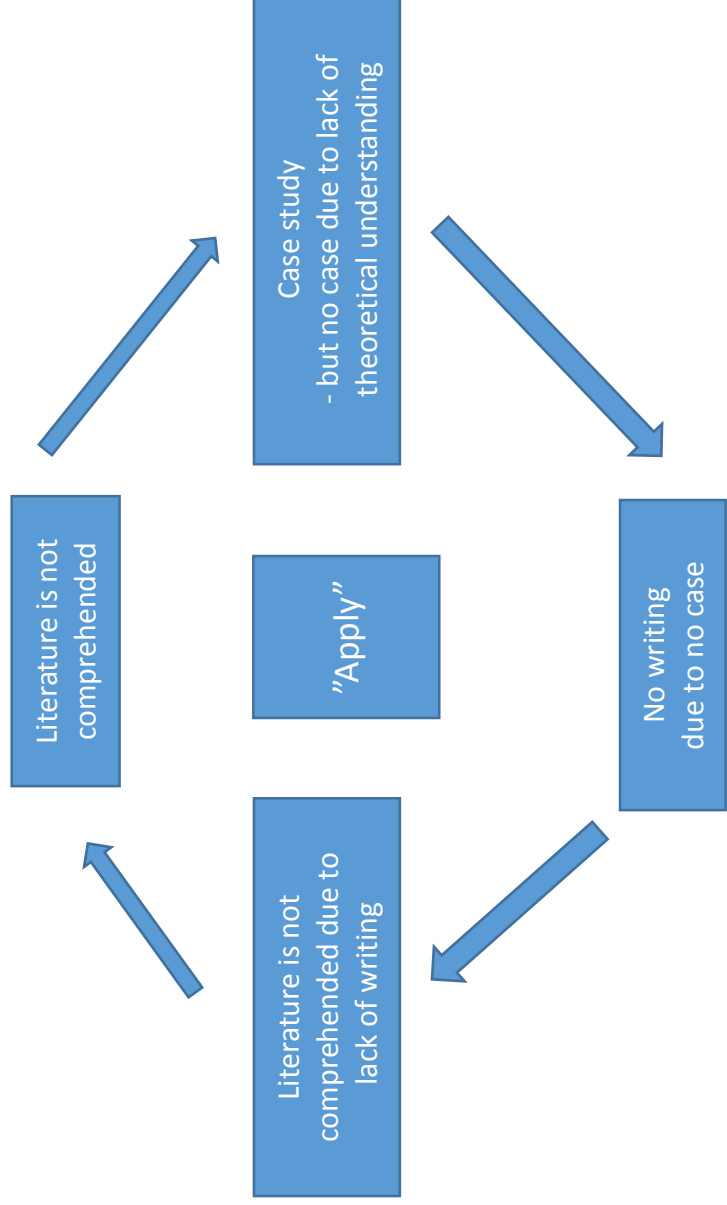
(Author 1 2003) at significant points in the students' master thesis processes. Furthermore, we want to include additional developmental aspects (Bazerman 2015) in longitudinal studies, also investigating bachelor thesis writing and other writing tasks and assignments of master students.

Our research contributes to the social perspective (Nystrand 1989, Dyste 2010) on academic writing by investigating and analyzing the "Discourse and Action Space" (Knorr & Author 1 2015) as the most important social context of the students' struggling and negotiating both with the genre 'Master Thesis' as a problem-oriented project and the "peripheral membership" (Lave & Wenger 1991) in academic Discourse Communities and academic and professional, 'imagined' Communities of Practice. In these negotiations students balance organizational, societal, and professional relevance and academic rigor at a business university with many interdisciplinary study programs and negotiate different identities (Castelló et al. 2013) and literacies (Lillis & Scott 2007). In this endeavor, we primarily focus on the experienced-based learning of the students as the most important stakeholders when it comes to the Master Thesis.

Figure 1: Visualizing the Vicious Circle

The Vicious Circle of no-writing-no-research

Case study
- but no case due to lack of theoretical understanding

Literature is not comprehended

"Apply"

No writing due to no case

Literature is not comprehended due to lack of writing

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