

If the Bridge Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It

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‘If the bridge ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. The Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education Internationalization: Thoughts from Denmark

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Abstract

Denmark is among the world's most competitive nations. At the same time it has a strong tradition of citizenship-oriented tertiary education. Nevertheless, we are currently witnessing the erosion of this tradition, arguably as a result of neoliberal ideologies ushered in by globalization and internationalization processes. These processes have stirred domestic fears, evident in government reports, about the need to improve Danish higher education to 'meet the challenges of globalisation'. Concrete instances of possible erosion include recent directives to examine and grade group work on an individual basis, the abolition of the '13' grade for individual or group performance, and the introduction of measurable skills via "learning objectives," for all tertiary education courses.

We argue that these and other piecemeal changes may undermine the very traits that made the Danish higher education system effective at producing graduates with abilities that are highly suitable for today's globalized, knowledge-intensive society, where reflexivity, cooperation, trust and other intangible (and non-measurable), learning abilities play a key role. Given the well-known time-lag to assess the impact of education on a country's economic development, we hypothesize that the Danish education system was arguably doing the 'right thing' ten to 20 years ago by equipping graduates with the skills appropriate for today's global labour markets. The obvious danger is that the ongoing modifications to the current Danish tertiary curriculum may be ill advised because of their cumulative effects upon an otherwise successfully functioning tertiary educational system. Our paper illustrates these arguments using examples from a didactic model used at a Danish business school, which we call the Research Oriented Participatory Educational (ROPE) model.

Introduction

Tertiary education (TE) has long been widely acknowledged to be a key driver of knowledge-driven development strategies, economic growth and competitiveness. Yet knowledge alone is not enough: today's knowledge workers must possess tacit capabilities such as collaboration and communication skills as well as theoretical knowledge if they are to implement their knowledge in effective, creative, sustainable and responsible ways (Guile 2006: 365). There is increasing scholarly interest in the potentially transformative role played by TE in fomenting tacit abilities such as analytical, creative and innovative thinking, shaping the habits and practices of lifelong learning, and fomenting attitudes that underpin democratic citizenship, including trust, participation, flexibility and positive attitudes towards diversity (Ederer, Schuller & Willms 2008: 2; IBRD/World Bank 2002: xvii & xx). Other important tacit skills that have been singled out as particularly useful in the knowledge economy include collaboration and communication skills, as well as theoretical knowledge and an epistemological awareness which enable workers to implement their knowledge in effective, creative, valid sustainable and responsible ways (Guile 2006; Nonaka, 2005; Reich, 1991).

In 2008, Denmark was ranked as the most advanced knowledge economy in the world on the Knowledge Economy Index (KEI), scoring particularly highly on the education and training pillar (World Bank 2008). The other Nordic countries follow closely on Denmark's heels: Sweden (2nd place), Finland (3rd place) and Norway (5th place). The KEI attributes Denmark's high education score mainly to its increase in tertiary enrollment rates (World Bank 2008). We propose in this paper that Denmark's high score is not merely a result of high enrollment rates, but also of the *type* of tertiary education hitherto offered which, we suggest, is particularly apt to produce graduates with the above-mentioned tacit abilities required of today's knowledge worker's.

At the same time, we argue that Danish education is succumbing to globalization and internationalization pressures that are undermining the very competitive advantages that its tertiary education system offered. Specifically, these pressures have led to changes in teaching and assessment forms that are transforming the hidden curriculum, with the result that desirable tacit abilities such as collaborative skills, solidarity, independent thinking and the ability to cope with uncertainty are gradually being sidelined in favour of performable, explicit knowledge categories.

We contend that these developments may undermine the very competitive advantages that this tertiary education system has, until recently, successfully offered. Specifically, these pressures have already resulted in modifications of teaching and assessment forms that are transforming a previously established, if not particularly explicit, "Danish" hidden curriculum. We seek to show that this hidden curriculum has many positive features. This is a curriculum having a previously tacitly understood and accepted agenda aimed at educating citizens and ensuring good citizenship outcomes for the national context. In other words, its ends are not at all associated with the control and subjugation - normally major themes in hidden curriculum analysis. We consider that the current piecemeal reforms in tertiary education may be detrimental to the arguably rich educational activity and intersubjective educational dialogue occurring in Denmark (Lonergan, 1991; Tackney and Strömgen, 2009).

The paper is an extended essay based on research carried out by two faculty members employed at a Danish Business School. Neither is a Danish citizen, both have tenured teaching and research positions at the School. One is a British citizen (Blasco), the other has dual citizenship in the Republic of Ireland and the United States of America (Tackney). The background of both authors is important to note because they had to study, learn, and teach in the Danish educational model as participant-observers (arguably, participant-outsiders). This is a different trajectory of educational theory and practice acquisition from Danish citizens conducting research on their own nation's approach to educational theory and practice. In this instance, foreign faculty bring their own educational backgrounds, culture, and professional experience to bear on assessments of Danish educational theory and practice, with a view to advancing debates on current tertiary educational policy and practice.

The authors first began meeting in 2004, forming – along with a few other colleagues in their department – an “Education Irregulars” series of informal meetings designed to share and advance research on education being conducted in the department. An initial inventory session was held to capture all aspects of education research current to that time. Thereafter, meetings were held to review educational work being done by anyone in Irregulars group. The paper thus derives from several years of informal collaboration and consultation, both in actual teaching of the educational model described below, but also in reference to ongoing research themes as they have developed (see e.g. Blasco 2006, 2009a, 2009b & forthcoming 2010 & Tackney, C., Sato, T., Strömngren 2007a, b), Tackney, C., Strömngren, O., 2009). While the praxis centers on curriculum and courses in a business school, the issues should be of interest to anyone involved in tertiary education. As an extended essay, the authors have tried to bring their teaching, research, and practical administrative experience to bear on the political trends evident in current Danish educational praxis. There is reference to prior research papers and unique survey data the authors have written, collaborated in authoring, and conducted.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of our major theoretical concepts: tacit skills, symbolic analysts and the hidden curriculum. We then review current changes in Danish tertiary education, and finally we juxtapose these changes with a Danish tertiary education model which we term the *Research Oriented Participatory Education* (ROPE) model, exemplified by two cases of its use at study programmes at Copenhagen Business School.

Tacit skills and symbolic analysts: Harnessing the hidden curriculum

A sizeable literature has developed regarding the type of person needed for successful organizations in modern, knowledge-based economies and the educational skills they are expected to possess (Tackney et al. 2007). Robert B. Reich and Ikujiro Nonaka offer two interesting perspectives, both of which appear particularly appropriate for business school educational goals.

Reich (1991) wrote of the three categories of work services emerging in the global labour market: routine production services, in-person services, and symbolic-analytic services. Of these, he identified the symbolic-analytic service, and the educational training to enable successful service performance, as an emerging category of critical importance. For this service, “The bulk of the time and cost (and, the real value) comes in conceptualizing the problem, devising a solution, and planning its execution” (p. 179). Individuals with such service skills are presumed in the literature to be university graduates, at a minimum. They are expected to possess team-work competencies,

advanced mathematical skills, and a talent to “solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols” (p. 178).

Despite the obvious need for formal education, Reich noted that the successful education of such an analyst necessarily breaks the mold of “traditional” education; “Rather than teach students how to solve a problem that is presented to them, they are taught to examine why the problem arises and how it is connected to other problems” (p. 230). Reich, working within the U.S. tertiary educational horizon, wrote that America’s best schools empower students by providing such instruction.

The field of knowledge management, inspired by the work of Ikujiro Nonaka and others, is a comprehensive, theoretical and methodological path to begin evaluating personal competencies that are expected in the skills education of a symbolic analyst. This is because the knowledge management genre clearly distinguishes between explicit and tacit skills dimensions. The bulk of knowledge management writings are directed at issues related to the workplace, whether corporate or public sector.¹ To date, the literature appears to have overlooked how the successful knowledge manager is herself or himself educated to these skilled levels – particularly skills capacities of the tacit dimension.

The knowledge management literature appears theoretically robust to ground assertions of comparative educational values even at the tacit level. This opens the way to consider national educational policies in a comparative perspective and relate these to emerging labor market needs. As Steyn (2004), wrote, “Instead of inventing a new paradigm, the significant level of KM activities in higher education institutions, which should be used as foundation for further development should be acknowledged”.

The knowledge management literature explores the very site wherein valued knowledge is exchanged. Nonaka wrote:

the theory of knowledge creation is based on the assumption that humans are not just imperfect parts of such an information-processing machine, but are existences who have a potential to grow together through the process of knowledge creation. Instead of being static, human nature and action evolve through environmental dialectics (2005, p. 378).

Nonaka uses the Japanese noun of “place” (場, *ba*) to locate the “site” wherein knowledge-creating activity occurs; “The essence of *ba* is the contexts and the meanings that are shared and created through interactions that occur at a specific time and place, rather than a space itself” (2005, p. 380). It is precisely in such educational “moments” that individuals transcend strict subjectivity – and this through human interaction. Nonaka describes knowledge acquisition as a continuing upward spiral of:

- a. Socialization
- b. Externalization

¹ For example, the eight articles collected and published in [Harvard Business Review on Knowledge Management](#) (1998) focus on knowledge management and the organization. The skills needed for success are specified to varying degrees, but nothing is said how these skills are conveyed in higher education.

- c. Combination, and
- d. Internalization (Nonaka, 2005, p. 384).

The socialization step obliges, “empathizing with others and the environment” (Ibid.). It is an inter-subjective exchange that contributes to acquisition of knowledge – explicit as well as tacit: “By discarding preconceived notions and “living in” or “indwelling” the world, individuals accumulate and share tacit knowledge about the world about them” (p. 383). Leadership, in turn, becomes an improvisational, dynamic outcome, inhering in certain individuals or particular groups, arising from human interactions within bounded environments and the accumulated insight of intelligent, inspiring individuals.

We can see from the literature on symbolic analysts and knowledge managers an emergence of a primarily workplace analytic that recognizes the need for, and the critically important role of, the intersubjective dimension of knowledge exchange. Business schools should be able to purposefully train their students to do no less.

The question of tacit skills acquisition in business school curricula may be usefully linked to the concept of the hidden curriculum, originally coined by Jackson (1991). This concept has been much used by educational scholars with a view to revealing the ideological character of the apparently neutral knowledge taught in schools, both in terms of the content of what is taught and in the way that the knowledge is transmitted. Research using the concept has aimed to expose ‘how the overt and hidden curricula of schools legitimise specific forms of cultural capital; i.e. those modes of knowing, styles, tastes, dispositions, linguistic competences, and behaviour that the dominant society considers the most valued’ (Giroux 1981: 102). Studies have, for instance, used the concept to explore class, race and gender bias in school textbooks and classroom interaction (Young 1998: 44; Apple 1990).

The ‘hidden curriculum’ is thus normally seen as the means by which dominant ideology is naturalised and legitimised in schools. Scholars working within this approach have worked mainly with Gramsci’s notion of *hegemony*. Apple defines the concept of hegemony in relation to schooling as: ‘fundamental patterns in society held together by ideological assumptions ... which are not usually conscious, as well as economic control and power’. The hidden curriculum serves to reinforce these assumptions (Apple 1990: 87). Central to hegemony is the naturalisation of power relations to the point where they are no longer recognised (Morley and Rassool 1999: 127), or indeed where they ‘become transformed in the subject’s mind into “freedom”’ (Vaughan 1997: 189).

We engage with the concept of hidden curriculum in two ways in this paper. First, we propose that the hidden curriculum of Danish tertiary education has, until recently, helped to further positive citizenship attitudes through the tacit abilities it fostered through pedagogies designed to foster collaborative learning, and assessment techniques that allowed room for the evaluation of tacit abilities. In this way, we invert the way in which the concept has hitherto been deployed in educational research, while still accepting its fundamental premise: that the hidden curriculum is an expression of power relations and ideological agendas beyond the education system. However while in other cultural contexts these ideologies have typically been viewed as antithetical to equity and citizenship goals, in the Danish case we contend that they have been conducive to

furthering such goals. Second, we argue that this positive hidden curriculum has recently been eroded due to changes in the dominant political ideologies in Denmark, resulting in the incursion of market-oriented, individualistic tendencies in tertiary education. We discuss these changes in greater detail in the following section.

Internationalisation or standardisation? Challenges to the ‘Danish model’²

The role of higher education today, both in Denmark and elsewhere, is currently under scrutiny due to two tendencies: the rise of the knowledge society, described above; and the incursion of neoliberal ideology into its ethos and activities. Knowledge societies are characterized by the apparent democratization of knowledge, so that the university is no longer the ‘primary site of knowledge production’ in society, but one among many. As Delanty (2001: 46) points out, this return of knowledge to society is a radical shift away from Humboldt’s notion of *Bildung*, which rested on a distinction between culture, in the sense of high culture, and society. This shift has resulted in a crisis of legitimacy among universities in the knowledge society (Delanty 2001: 3), often expressed in accusations of elitism, obsolescence and the absence of social usefulness or a practical purpose. In practice, this crisis has been widely addressed by universities legitimizing their existence with reference to performance benchmarks and their ability to cater to societal/labour market needs – a mission that has little to do with the university’s traditional self-understanding (see Egholm Feldt & Egholm Feldt 2009). The neoliberal turn in education, for its part, is characterized by a market logic characterized by efficiency and accountability, which manifests itself primarily as an *anti-waste* ethos. Waste may be understood in terms of time, money or effort, and indeed angst about waste in all three areas is palpable in current discourse about the role of the university, e.g. in benchmarking endeavours, in moves to sanction students who take longer to finish their studies, and in concerns about the labour market relevance of purportedly minority disciplines.

In Denmark, changes have recently been ushered into Danish HE which reflect both these tendencies, and which have arguably driven several major changes in the role and ethos of HE. We see a clear shift towards a market logic, expressed in various ways. For instance, universities now receive money not for how many students they enroll but how many that graduate: so-called ‘output funding’ (Jakobs & Van der Ploeg 2006: 545), creating strong incentives to get students through the system, resulting in initiatives such as a recent law that which made it mandatory for Master’s students to finish their thesis within 6 months.³ We also see this market logic at play in the currently beleaguered situation of disciplines with a large component of ‘small-class teaching’ (*småholdsundervisning*) such as languages and Area Studies, whose existence is under threat since the low student-teacher ratio is considered to render them non-profitable. And we find the same logic embedded in the expectation that universities must be internationally competitive. This expectation has led to initiatives to harmonize various aspects of HE study programmes within the framework of the Bologna Declaration, including initiatives to standardize course size and structure across European HE institutions via the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); the

² This section is based on Blasco (forthcoming 2010) and Tackney, C., Strömberg, O., (2009).

³ The law entered into force on 1 September 2007, and stipulated that if students fail to deliver their Master’s thesis within six months, they officially fail and must deliver a new research question and sign a new thesis contract. Students have three attempts to complete the process.

harmonization of the grading system, notably the abolition of the Danish 13-point grade scale⁴; standardization of exam forms, notably the abolition of the group exam; standardized descriptions of learning outcomes; and in many cases even standardization of language, so that English is fast becoming a kind of academic lingua franca on many university courses; and the restructuring of degree programmes in line with the Bologna Bachelor-Master-PhD degree structure (Jakobs & Van der Ploeg 2006). This competitiveness expectation has also spurred a tendency towards performance benchmarking, both in research and teaching, where universities are ranked according to how well they perform on a variety of parameters, e.g. student through-put rates. Alongside these developments is a parallel trend towards maximizing study flexibility to enhance students' freedom to design their own individual course of study: teaching is thus increasingly organized into elective-style modules that the students can mix and match to create their own particular profile.

While these changes have been implemented in an incremental manner, and underpinned by a technical rationale of improving access to HE and the labour market and facilitating student mobility (CIRIUS 2006) and choice, their cumulative impact over time on the ideology and practice of Danish university pedagogy is palpable. In Denmark, higher education has been characterized by an emphasis on *discovery, independent thinking, active participation, initiative, communication with others* and *critical thinking* (www.ciriusonline.dk), promoted through particular pedagogic approaches, including group- and project- work, interdisciplinarity, an ethos of equality, and informal teacher-student relations. This approach has – some might say serendipitously - proven extremely successful at producing graduates with abilities that enable them to function optimally in the knowledge economy (Tackney et al., 2007a, 2007b). While it is not relevant here to explore all the implications of the above-mentioned tendencies on these particular features of Danish HE, some general observations are in order.

Specific features of the Danish TE model – Research-Oriented Participatory Education (ROPE)

A defining feature of Danish tertiary education is “Problem-oriented Project Work”. As stated in a recent English translation of a Danish educational text on the subject [*Problemorienteret Projektarbejde*], “Lectures and seminars used to be the norm in Danish educational institutions. This is no longer the case. Project work has become the norm at almost all Danish educational institutions, from primary schools to universities” (Pedersen, 2005, p. 9).

Pedersen also distinguishes between “subject-oriented project work” and “problem-oriented project work” (Ibid, p. 10-11). The latter is different “from subject-oriented project work mainly in that it is more focused on knowledge” (p. 11). In particular, the knowledge focus concerns a specific research issue, obliging definition, analysis, and the selection of an appropriate method to resolve the issue. Roskilde University was at the forefront of educational innovations in Denmark regarding “Problem-Oriented Project Work”. Illeris (2002)⁵ writes that this experiential pedagogy

⁴ The Danish 13-grade scale was abolished in 2007, along with its almost mythical top grade, 13, which was “given for exceptionally independent and excellent performance. Rarely Given.” (DBS website definition).

⁵ The Danish educational tradition enjoys a fascinating history of what may politely be termed “reciprocal borrowings” throughout the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-reformation – centered, even then, on excellence in education and proper care of students. The 16th century Jesuit instructional plan for its many schools was published in

emerged in the 1970s and crystallized after about 1980. The common slogan was to “use the experiences of the participants as a starting point.”⁶ Citing his 1984 Danish text on the subject, Illeris wrote, “ideal experiential pedagogic processes must be about the pupils’ important, subjectively perceived problem areas, that are to be elaborated in a continuing experiential process based on their existing patterns of experiences and governed by a forward-pointing action perspective” (Illeris, 2002, p. 156). Implementation of this experiential pedagogy required attention to fundamental principles of problem orientation, participation direction, exemplarity and solidarity – and when it was to take place within the framework of institutional education it could typically be done through the application of the pedagogical work pattern developed under the name *project work* (Ibid., p. 156).

In terms of educational theory, the theoretical grounds for this defining feature may be traced to the Danish educational tradition. Illeris (2002) summarized the basic conception; “Learning always consists of two integrated processes of interaction and internalization, respectively, and that *learning simultaneously comprises a cognitive, an emotional and psychodynamic, and a social and societal dimension*” (p. 19). In his text, Illeris relates the respective points – cognition, emotion, and society - to the works of Piaget, Freud, and Marx. He then reviews key contributors to educational theory, situating them within a triangulation of “Positions in the learning theoretical tension field”. Acknowledging similarities to the “reflective practitioner” and “reflection-in-action” constructs developed by Donald Schön, for example, it becomes apparent that the Danish educational approach (of which the DBS ROPE model is one variant) departs from Schön’s emphasis on apprentice and internships.

Within the ROPE model, the student group (each individual bearing and sharing collective responsibility) is the functional unit and, as we shall see below, the teacher/mentoring role is deliberately restricted to that of an advisor. Illeris’ learning theory review situates this model as proximate to contributions made by Peter Jarvis. Illeris wrote,

Without making a clear distinction between inner acquisition processes and social interaction processes, Jarvis strives to put it all into a social perspective with emphasis on the active role played by the learner. In this way he represents a trend to incorporate the internal processes into the perspective of the social processes...while imitation has more or less slipped out of sight (p. 124).

An assessment of Illeris’ theoretical model in reference to the DBS program context would note that the ROPE student experience more fully acknowledges inner acquisition processes of knowledge acquisition, understanding and insight through application – evidenced both by explicit coursework and by the need to achieve both individual and group insight in order to succeed. This is highly holistic in the sense that all three dimensions of learning are valued: cognitive, emotive, and societal. Student groups must take on, and relate to, the same challenges: producing

1592, known as the “Ratio studiorum” (“The Course of Studies”). It emphasized humane treatment of students, along with individual and student-based group review of taught material. Jensen wrote, “If the Jesuits had learned from the Melancthonian schools, the Lutherans were just as quick to learn from the Catholic competitors” (Jensen, K. March, 1990). By 1619, Christian IV obliged substantial Danish university reforms, “perhaps as a result of the much-feared but hopelessly abortive Jesuit *missio Danica*” (Ibid.).

⁶ In contrast, the EU-ROPE approach may be characterized as “Using the individual’s experience in participatory educational groups as the site for insight and learning.

competently researched, well written, and publicly defensible group projects that are consistent with social science methodological expectations of validity.⁷

Having considered the Danish ROPE model in some detail, we can now address how these changes have affected ROPE at two study programmes at a Danish business school.

ROPE and the piecemeal erosion of a Danish business school pedagogic model

The Roskilde project work approach was adopted at Danish business schools about 20 years ago, notably at one particular program,⁸ where the model was adapted in three noteworthy ways:

1. Research oriented participatory education (ROPE) is explicitly grounded in **business school themes**, although these remain comparatively broad; that is, student groups are expected to design and address carefully delineated research issues of relevance to business and society.
2. The ROPE model, in the programs of DBS, includes foreign language acquisition as part and parcel of the overall *project work* educational experience. This dimension is required in group project output: i.e. presentations and research reports that draw on data from students' language and region of study.
3. Third-year project work frequently entails actual consulting research arrangements with businesses and organizations.

Course instruction at any of the 20 or so Programs offered at the DBS are, moreover, grounded in the overall educational philosophy of the Business School. This philosophy was articulated in the "Pedagogical Principles" of CBS, adopted by the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration on June 24, 1998. These state, "The overall objective of all the Faculty's degree programs is to enable students to:

1. take responsibility for their own learning processes and how to structure them;
2. apply theories analytically to business-related issues;
3. work methodically with the problem areas of the discipline;
4. reflect critically on the basis and relevance of the theory;
5. develop their personal and interpersonal competences."

In the particular programs we have studied at the DBS, the tacit skilling process has been broken down by one of the authors into identifiable steps and benchmarks based upon a knowledge

⁷ In this respect, EU-ROPE student educational experience finds parallels with work involving the studied, guided entry into specific discourse communities of practice (Pogner, 2005).

⁸ This was the SPRØK Program. SPRØK is an acronym for the Danish words "language" and "economics". The Program offered a research-oriented participatory educational experience that integrated foreign language study with an interdisciplinary business undergraduate education. Its Asian language variant, the Asian Studies Program, began as JAPØK in 1992: Japanese and economics.

management analytic that is grounded in the student's perspective of proceeding through the curriculum. A first year analysis is given in Table 1 (See Tackney, Sato, and Strömngren, 2007).

Table 1 here.

The series of tacit skilling benchmarks that students encounter in the ROPE style programs at the DBS in question may be summarized as follows:

- 1: Study Board and Program Governance: egalitarian and student-empowering governance participation in the key Program features.
2. Approximately one-third of each year's academic work is devoted to group-based research projects, along with specialized courses to ensure student have acquired the necessary methods skills to conduct research.
3. Project advisors, not instructors: faculty facilitate student group project research in the capacity of advisors, not instructors. Thus, they do not evaluate projects as they proceed, instead offering advisement to the degree that the student group seeks it out.
4. Synopsis-based oral examinations: this examination form provides a unique opportunity for students to engage in an intersubjective dialogue with an examiner (frequently the course coordinator and instructor) regarding course content. The synopsis, which has no bearing on the oral grade outcome, serves as an aid to student reflection and intellectual integration of complex course material.

This exam format is deployed at DBS in courses "that teach an eclectic mix of theory, method, and empirical content, often with different instructors in same course. In that situation, the opportunity of writing a synopsis enables and inspires the student to work towards creating some coherence across the different perspectives while accepting the legitimacy of differences."⁹ Approximately one-third of all courses at this school use this examination format.

5. Self-selection for academic and life-path success: Research groups are not assigned. Thus, evidence indicates that students tend to self-select in a manner conducive to efficient and successful project outcomes.

Research Project work takes up most of the spring semester experience for undergraduate students throughout their years in two DBS Programs: Business, Language and Culture (BLC) and the Asian Studies Program (ASP). Fully one-third of the total credits needed to graduate are

⁹ According to S.B., SBS Undergraduate Dean, January 4, 2009.

derived from ROPE experience.¹⁰ Fall courses are intended to inform and enhance each year's effort and may include lectures, case-based exercises, and guided discussions.

Thus, the defining features of undergraduate education at this business school programme is based on the ROPE model.

Changes to ROPE at the business school: From tacit to performed abilities

Although many of the ROPE features described above have been retained, several significant recent changes may be observed which arguably prioritise *performed* – i.e. visible measurable – forms of knowledge over *tacit abilities* such as collaboration, participation and collective responsibility. We briefly mention here four examples that illustrate this in different ways.

The first example is the abolition of the group examination, which is possibly the most overt challenge to the existing ethos of the Danish university system to date. As Hermansen (2007: 56) points out, 'gruppeeksamen har ... givet anledning til, at man har kunnet udprøve kompetencer, som ellers ikke har kunnet testes. Det gælder især områder, hvor kompetencen har med styring, ledelse, social afstemthed, udfordring af andres synspunkter og reelt samspil at gøre'. While such competences may not always have been explicit in course descriptions, they became explicit in the exam assessment negotiations between examiner and censor. The perception of the group project as a *collective* endeavour, where each group member must take responsibility for the collective product for better or worse, also disappears. This is a clear case of government ideology impacting assessment towards more individualized procedures. Practitioners – those who advise, conduct the examinations, and give the grades – were almost uniformly opposed to this peculiar "modernization". Both authors witnessed such reactions at meeting held to introduce the new guidelines. In nations where educational policy is relatively independent from term changes in elected politicians, this recent Danish political intervention into education seems anachronistic.

Related to this, the second example is the abolition of the uniquely Danish 13-grade scale, whose almost mythical top grade, 13, enabled examiners to reward abilities that did not lend themselves readily to measurement.

A third example is the funding of universities according to how many students graduate, rather than how many enroll, leading to enormous pressure to 'get students through' their studies as quickly as possible (Wells & Ball 2008).

A fourth example involves the shift in the rationale of course learning objectives, from descriptions of course content, to descriptions of the learning that should result (Staunæs 2006) right down to concrete descriptions of what students ought to be able to *do* by the end of the course. Nowhere is this change more evident than in the move to learning objectives (LO) based instruction, and

¹⁰ ECTS, the European Credit Transfer System, is defined as "a student-centred system based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme, objectives preferably specified in terms of the learning outcomes and competences to be acquired" One ECTS unit is equivalent to 30 student work hours (Education and Training, 2007).

particularly its application to the above-mentioned synopsis-based oral examinations. This examination form has been studied as an example of how instructors can assess learning in dialogue (Tackney, C.T., and Strömngren, O., 2007). A particular set of course learning objectives may be the following:

At the end of the course students should be able to

- a. Describe the main historical themes of international management theory.
- b. Account for recent theoretical developments in the field, especially concerning the construct of “innovation” and its business management across international borders.
- c. Compare and contrast the theories in question and apply them on specific cases, drawing on lectures and discussions with managers active in the process of organizing international business.” (From Appendix 1)

Each learning objective is phrased in a manner consistent with correlated cognitive skills (Biggs & Tang, 1999). These range from simple retention and recitation of facts to the ability to theorize, generalize, hypothesize, and reflect. There is an implicit progression in cognitive skills from a. to c. in the stated objectives.

The language employed in the cognitive-skills based learning objectives and grade explanation is wholly directed at the student performance. This is, of course, as it should be. However, from an intersubjective perspective, this is a very constrained and restricted ‘view’ of student performance. Thus, while these assessment measures help to provide objective terms and assurance of learning outcomes, they represent minimum threshold normative evaluations of an individual examination process that is, in fact, dramatically rich and potentially rewarding.

At its best, the S-BOE format does far more than assess one individual. It involves examiner and censor as collaborative hosts to a student presentation and dialogue that dramatically obliges the student to engage the audience with the student’s presently known, self-understood, and dynamically structured insight(s) into complex course material. Neither presentation nor subsequent dialogue can be totally memorized, prepared, or anticipated. There is a lively dialogue of data, facts, history, and theory (often competing and/or complementary) between and among three individuals.

In form, the synopsis-based oral examination most closely resembles a theatric encounter, moving among and between knowledge of facts, concepts, understanding, insight and an intersubjective performance dialogue. However, it also goes beyond art education and theatrical constructs of “dramatic knowing” (Rasmussen & Wright, 2001). Rasmussen and Wright state, “In linguistic terms, dramatic knowing highlights a certain intentional, interactive, creative, and context-situated production of meaning.”

In practice, the examiner can be thought to proxy for the informed critic. The censor stands in for the public-at-large. The student, as performer, enacts a role that, while possible to rehearse, invariably becomes challenged, occasionally being overwhelmed, by the sheer set and setting of the examination encounter.

In function, the S-BOE format is an intersubjective educational encounter consisting of three distinct parties. For students, it has a striking impact, as indicated by the informal exchange student comments recorded in December 2008. In fact, it is a dramatic intersubjective encounter (Buber, 1971, Lonergan, 1991). And, once this function is apprehended in all its richness, the abject undersight of the grading process is starkly revealed.¹¹ As Rasmussen and Wright wrote, dramatic knowing “tends to be poorly organised outside of the arts curriculum itself.”

Introduced as a corrective to facilitate normative assessments that meet with approval from international accreditation councils, the learning objectives grading standards simultaneously ‘objectifies’ grading criteria while reducing the intellectual horizon of what is and what may be assessed. This is true for both examiner and student; the student, in particular, is no longer oriented towards the intersubjective dialogue – at least not for grading purposes. A learning objectives-based assessment format strikes at the heart of the dramatic knowing process by reducing knowledge to the clearly performable and demonstrable.

Of itself, the twofold “corrective loss” that follows from the introduction of learning objectives may not be a critically significant development. However, considered in conjunction with the prohibition against group-examinations for group projects, the apparent weight of change in the Danish case appears to be rapidly heading towards a critical mass that will undermine, or permanently modify, long-implicit skilling goals of a largely successful approach to curriculum.

Discussion

Taken together, these examples of policy change in Danish tertiary education policy denote a clear shift in emphasis from the *learning inputs and process*, towards *learning outputs*, notably in the form of *performable* results. In theoretical terms, this shift is an expression of a move away from a constructivist view of learning based on the student’s perspective and development, and towards a behaviourist view oriented towards objective learning criteria. These tendencies in Danish HE arguably have broader consequences both for the type of learning that is prioritized, both by students and teachers, and for how it is taught. In terms of the university’s role in society, the tendencies described above have led to an emphasis on producing knowledge that is suitable for *application* to concrete societal situations or problems. This has normative implications, so that good knowledge becomes readily applicable or socially useful knowledge: *knowing how* is prioritized over *knowing that*. Knowledge is, thus, ‘reduced to its uses’ (Delanty 2001: vii). The university’s role also changes, so that it becomes one among many market institutions producing commodities (knowledge, graduates) *for* society, rather than an autonomous institution that dispassionately studies what kind of society and what kind of knowledge and needs all the other institutions are producing and satisfying, and questions to what uses that knowledge is put. Underpinning this trend also lies a rarely questioned assumption that universities *can* actually produce graduates with the particular skills required by the market. Rather than interrogating and transforming social and cultural values and hegemonic ideologies, then, the university plays a supporting role in reproducing them – (Delanty 2001: 10) - fully in line with the theory of the hidden curriculum.

¹¹ The use of ‘undersight’ is deliberate, informed by the epistemology of Bernard J.F. Lonergan (1991); assessments based strictly on cognitive skills fail to capture the exam format’s richness. While not a fatal flaw for grading purposes this certainly cannot be an oversight, so it appears to be an institutionalized oversight.

At the epistemological level, the combination of these two tendencies as they are currently playing out in Danish HE signals a shift towards a positivist view of knowledge that privileges *certainty over uncertainty*. In other words, the risk - of the unknown and unpredictable, of not understanding, of studying a lot of things that cannot be directly applied to the assignment at hand, and even of not passing - is removed from learning. Within this mind-set, to 'know' no longer bears an obligation to question either the nature of the knowledge attained or the way it is applied. When transposed into teaching, this approach to knowledge also has a normative impact on pedagogy and learning: good pedagogy delivers certainties and clear solutions, with a minimum of waste. Bad pedagogy, conversely, unsettles through the questions it raises and the uncertainties it creates, and is not readily converted into applicable solutions to social problems. Bad pedagogy is waste: wasted time, wasted effort, wasted investment. This is not to say that university teachers necessarily share a certainty-oriented view of learning, in fact teachers are likely to have many and varied assumptions about what constitutes good teaching (Cranton 1994: 138). But if such a view is endorsed by the authorities – government, university management – it provides incentives for particular types of teaching behavior, normalizing certain teaching styles while delegitimizing others, with implications for teachers' self-perception, professional identity and not least their classroom practices.

In terms of study progression, university programmes are increasingly structured as a 'buffet' of study options – students are nowadays free, so to speak, to begin with dessert, finish off with a starter and skip the main course altogether, or even mix everything on their plate at the same time if they so wish. While this doubtless gives students the opportunity to create a unique profile for themselves, it has consequences for learning. Two issues in particular stand out. First, teachers no longer have much idea of their students' academic antecedents: what have they studied, with whom, and how was it taught? This makes it challenging to target teaching so that it leads students out of their comfort zone and into the risk zone that is necessary for learning. Second, it becomes difficult to build progression into study programmes when few course elements are compulsory. This means that courses take on the form of isolated interventions rather than building blocks in a learning process. Where learning involves fomenting tacit abilities like collaborative skills, reflexivity and epistemological awareness that have a *transformative* dimension and hence take time, this lack of continuity robs teachers of the opportunity to work consistently with the same students over a longer period.

Finally, an approach to knowledge and learning that prioritises performance, efficiency and proficiency will necessarily have an impact on the learner's motivation for and engagement in the learning process. Students are rewarded who display proficiency rather than curiosity, and who are highly targeted and focused rather than driven by a will to explore. Thus, forms of learning are prioritized that are *appended* rather than *transformative*, so that we see a shift in emphasis from *Bildung* – learning as personal transformation – to 'rucksack learning', as Staunæs (2006: 111) aptly puts it, where learning is attached but not really absorbed. In this way, knowledge thus becomes delinked from the self – instrumentally oriented rather than transformatively oriented.

We have argued that current reforms – and, perhaps of greater import, the piecemeal process these exhibit -to Danish tertiary education risk undermining students' acquisition of tacit abilities, which we consider have been instrumental in propelling the Danish economy towards its current highly competitive global position. We observe changes in the hidden curriculum in Danish tertiary

education, following government ideology, which manifest themselves at classroom level in changes in the types of tacit skills that are prioritized.

We recognize that educational approaches in other nations may reach the same ends as the recent Danish model, or even be more successful. There may be programs and policies in large and small, developed and developing nations that similarly – unexpectedly - anticipate future labour market needs.

Further comparative research is needed to explore how key tacit abilities and skills are produced in these different educational and cultural contexts. Benchmarks in student appropriation of essential tacit skills within a tertiary curriculum would seem a helpful place to start. These measures would open an educational discourse context that might complicate, in a positive and progressive manner, pressures to ‘internationalize’ educational policies. They would also aid research, reflection, and specification of policy aims in respect to school-to-work transition analysis¹²

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¹² For the role of student to work transition in a flexicurity regime, see Schömann, K., Geerdes, S. and Siarov, L. 2007.

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Table 1: Explicit and Tacit Knowledge Skills Indexed to Specific Program Activities (Primarily First Year Undergraduate)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Event / Experience</u>	<u>Nature of staffing</u>	<u>Instructional Mode</u>	<u>Explicit skill goals:</u>	<u>Tacit skilling intent:</u>
From applicant status until graduation	Student Guidance Counselor	Undergraduates: following standard position posting, screening and hiring.	Individual, personal encounter.	Applicant information, ongoing counseling resource for all aspects of undergraduate study, academic as well as private.	Participatory-membership: The immediate and continually reinforced perception of a particular student role model: undergraduates as compensated Program staff employed by a national university.
Orientation Program, First Year	One week of School and Program Introduction, entirely run by students in Program following Orientation content and budget approval from Program Study Board.	Undergraduates: determined at the Program level. They are responsible for providing essential informational regarding welcome, informational orientation to Denmark, Copehagen, Copenhagen Business School, and their particular Program.	Group experience, with individual presentations by faculty and staff.	Program and CBS information in vast quantities.	Admitted students are encouraged to view themselves as organizationally responsible Program participants. Too, first exposure, by students - to students, of the co-governance nature of a Program Study Board.
First Year	Program Study Board	Program Board consists of half faculty and half elected student representatives. Faculty representatives are elected for three-year terms by a properly constituted Board. The faculty Board chair is elected by a duly constituted Study Board for three years.	Ongoing, public forum governance process.	Program governance responsibilities inhere in the elected student representatives.	Each student, individually and personally, shares responsibility for Program success. The elected undergraduate representatives signify this Program responsibility, as is obligated by national university regulations. Student representatives are decided by a transparent electoral process.
First Year	Pilot Project	Pilot project coordinator (tenured faculty). Pilot project advisor coordinator (Master's student), Pilot project advisors - all CBS Master's students with prior project undergraduate experience.	European Undergraduate - Research Oriented Participator Education (EU-ROPE)	Social science method, research cycle, group work process, attention to deadline.	Personal responsibility for group success, interpersonal consensus-based leadership skills.
Synopsis-based Oral Examinations	Various courses over a three-year period.	Course Examiner and censor. The role of censor is to ensure fairness in the process and content of the observed examination.	Synopsis, student presentation, and discussion.	Examination of explicit course knowledge in a test approach that encourages a range of tacit knowledge skills. These include: listening, reflection, the capacity for intelligent discourse, and – of course – an element of dramatic presentation skills.	Demonstrable knowledge of specific course work, where demonstration success is facilitated by tacit skills acquired in information organization, comprehension, and presentation delivery competence.