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The Didactics of Higher Education Didactics

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Introduction

“In the hierarchy of schools and educational establishments, the professional component declines from the bottom up through the hierarchy” (Luhmann 2002: 151).

We have chosen to begin with this quotation, since it brings us directly to the scope of this article: The emerging focus on professionalism in higher education and the knowledge base for this process. Until recently in higher education, content knowledge (as opposed to professional, i.e. pedagogical and didactical knowledge) was the only fundament for the teacher’s confidence in her or his meeting with students (ibid.). However, since the mid 1980s, an enhanced focus on pedagogical and didactical professionalization has arisen in higher education. At first, this expressed itself in the form of a nascent proposition and the demand for formalized teacher qualification programs; however, over time, the ‘scholarship of teaching in higher education’ (SoTL) has gradually emerged as a new research discipline. Confronted with an emerging research discipline, one might ask oneself the following questions: What is the content of the discipline? Does it contain topics of particular interest? What knowledge does it provide to teachers emerging professionalism?

The aim of this article is to examine and discuss how SoTL places itself at the disposal of the on-going didactical professionalization of teachers in higher education. In order to achieve this aim, this article analyses the contributions in three journals for research and development in higher education and discusses the significance of the results for general didactics and education research. Collectively, such studies provide a corpus of knowledge and concepts that can be used by teachers and educators to mirror their own experiences and understanding. Furthermore, through its focal points and blind spots, the corpus makes for its own didactical position.. In this sense, and with a concept from Hopmann (u.å), we refer to it as a *didactics of didactics*.

This type of meta-analysis is not new in higher education; for example, Tight (2004; 2007; 2008a; 2012) has conducted a number of analyses focussing on topics as well as theoretical and methodological approaches. However, our analysis contributes a new dimension to this tradition. Whereas Tight (2007; 2012) operates with course design as one category, our reconstruction of the didactics of didactics divides this category into various categories.

Didactics and the didactics of didactics

We use ‘didactics’ to mean “the art or science of teaching” and, hence, in accordance with the meaning of the German – and Scandinavian – word *didaktik*: “Didaktike techne or Didaktik would thus be the art of showing, of pointing and drawing attention, of allowing something which does not simply demonstrate itself, or cannot be understood, seen, perceived and recognized. In keeping with this original meaning of the word, Didaktik can be used to mean the science

of such actions of demonstrating, or more specifically, as a science of instruction – Didaktik as theory of instruction and the embodiment of knowledge about instruction” (Künzli 1998: 42).

Didactics can be described as one of three types of teaching knowledge: the science of teaching, didactics, and experience-based knowledge. These three types of knowledge are united by their object of interest (teaching and learning in the education system), yet they have different knowledge interests and accordingly use different criteria, or codes, to produce and distinguish between knowledge that belongs (or does not belong) to the specific type of knowledge.

Theoretical framework: German didaktik

To classify the journal contributions, we require a model that systematically provides us with analytical categories. This framework is found in German didactics, more specifically in the “Lernteoretische Didaktik, (learning theoretical didactics), as formulated in Heimann (1976).

This framework seems appropriate, since Heimann’s aim was to develop a practical relevant, analytical and holistic framework capable of grasping the fundamental complexity of teaching and the interdependence of choices and decisions. The model offers six categories at the first level of reflection (Structure analysis), which we use to categorize the contributions to the scholarship of education: Intention, Subject matter/content, Media, Methods, Students background and Context, which includes organizational conditions, resources etc. Assessment does not feature as an independent category in Heimann’s theory and model. However, research indicates that assessment has a significant influence on students’ behaviour and the interpretation of teaching (Biggs and Tang 2011). Therefore, we add assessment as an independent category in the classification. The distribution of the number of contributions across the eight categories creates a pattern of the didactical attention in SoTL: the didactics of didactics.

Heimann distinguishes between two different levels of didactic reflection. The first level concerns choices in relation to the six categories and their interdependence, which forms the overall structure of teaching. Accordingly, the first level of reflection is referred to as structure analysis. The second level of reflection, factor analysis, addresses the premises, norms, and values that frame choices at the structural level. Contributions questioning premises, concepts, norms and values of teaching are classified in one group, called “Factor analysis”.

Empirical data

The empirical data used in our analysis comprises three SoTL journals that share a common aim: to “publish scholarly articles that make a significant and original contribution to the theory, practice or research of higher education”. Hence, as the analysis of the generalist journals showed a very limited number of contributions on subject matter, we conducted a similar analysis on a discipline-specific journal to see whether the result was a consequence of a bias related to the election of journals, or it captured a general tendency in higher education didactics.

Journal	Year	Total number of contributions/number of abstracts categorized
Higher Education Research & Development (HERD) http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cher20/current#.UlfD-1DlaCq	2013-2008	219/162
Uniped (Norway) http://www.unipedtidsskrift.net/index.php/uniped	2013-2008	127/116
Dansk Universitetspædagogisk Tidsskrift/Danish Journal for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. DUT http://www.dun-net.dk/tidsskrift/	2013-2006	121/115
Journal of Geography in Higher Education (GHE). http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjgh20/current#.U47Vd_I_THU	2013-2008	159/143

Findings: The didactics of didactics

Fig. 1 shows the distribution of the contributions on each of the seven categories at the first level of reflection, i.e. the structural analysis

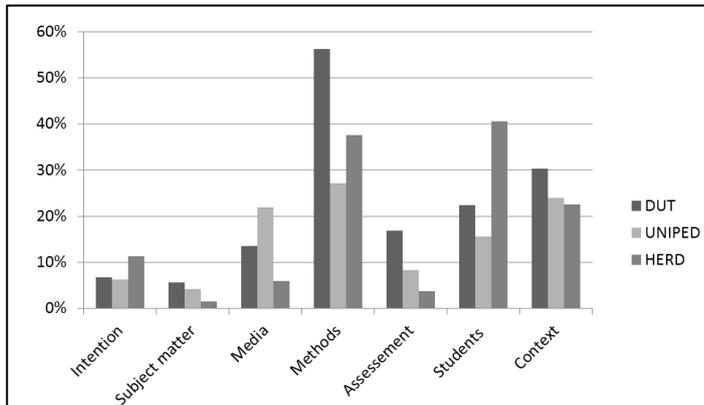


Fig. 1 The relative distribution of didactical topics based on categorization of contributions to DUT (2013-2006), UNIPED (2013-2008) and HERD (2013-2008)

According to our analysis of DUT, UNIPED and HERD, the didactics of higher education didactics has a number of distinctive characteristics. One of the most striking characteristics is a strong orientation towards methods. Seen as a whole, methods are the key topic in 40% of the contributions. Another distinctive result is that the category “subject matter” barely exists as research topic in its own right, and that also the categories “intention”, i.e. learning objectives, and “assessment” receive only minor attention. The context for teaching and learning is a frequently occurring topic. The latter is not surprising, as context is a broad category including a variety of topics, e.g. organizational conditions, curriculum development, teacher collaboration and impacts of reforms.

To test for a bias in the results based on election of journals that address SoTL from a generalist point of view, the findings were compared with the distributions of topics in a journal devoted to a specific discipline. The result is shown in Fig. 2.

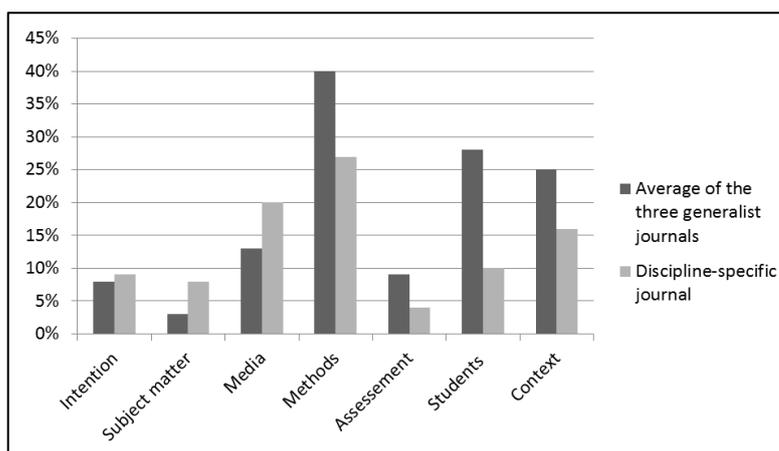


Fig. 2 The relative distribution of didactical topics based on categorization of contributions to in the generalist journals (DUT, UNIPED and HERD) and in the discipline-specific Journal of Geography in Higher Education (GHE).

Fig. 2 points out two interesting perspectives. The number of contributions dealing with subject matter is significantly higher in the discipline-specific journal. This confirms the general assumption that subject matter discussions are more frequent in discipline-specific didactics. Nevertheless, the tendency to a strong orientation towards teaching methods and media is also recognized in the discipline-specific journal (GHE). More than a fourth of the contributions have

teaching methods as the key topic. In total, approximately 45% of the contributions in both the generalist and discipline-specific journals deal with methods or media.

An interesting variation between the three generalist journals is that the students' background, expectations and experiences are much more common subjects in HERD than in DUT and UNIPED. At least 15 contributions from HERD deal explicitly with questions related to cultural heterogeneity, whereas none of the contributions from Uniped and DUT address this topic.

It could be argued that the enhanced focus on students in HERD is a consequence of large international student communities in universities in Australia and South-east Asia, compared to universities in Norway and Denmark, where most contributions in Uniped and DUT find their empirical basis. However, the topic of internationalization cannot level out the difference between HERD and DUT/Uniped in contributions dealing with students' background and participation in teaching as even in countries without a large international student community, the current student population is the most heterogeneous it has ever been.

As mentioned Heimann distinguishes between two levels of didactic reflection. The structure analysis concerns decisions in relation to the six categories that form the overall structure of teaching. The second level of reflection, the factor analysis, addresses the premises, norms, and values that frame decisions made at the structural level. Fig. 3 shows the distribution between the two levels of didactic reflection.

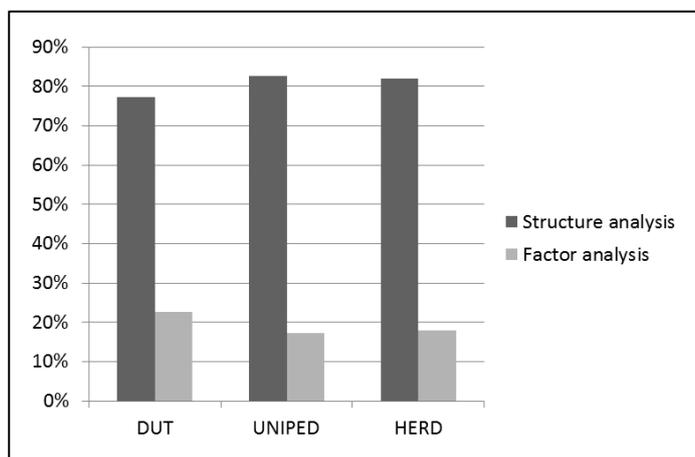


Fig. 3 Distribution of contributions dealing with structure analysis (first level of didactic reflection) and factor analysis (second level of didactic reflection) in DUT, UNIPED and HERD.

Fig. 3 shows that the vast majority of the contributions deal with structure analysis. Only approximately one fifth of all contributions address underlying norms, assumptions and terms of practical, organisational and theoretical character. In the light of the fact that higher education research is a relatively new discipline, we expected to see more recurrent discussion of basic assumptions and theoretical positions. However, this result seems consistent with Tight's conclusion that most researchers in higher education do not consider it necessary to engage in theoretical debates (Tight 2004: 409). A similar distribution is found in the discipline-specific journal, where only 27 of 143 contributions (18%) concern factor analysis. This indicates that the lack of scholarly discussions of underlying norms and values is a general phenomenon in SoTL.

Higher Education didactics as teaching methodology

One of the most distinctive results of the classification of the contributions from the three journals is the strong focus on teaching methods. Approximately one third (126 out of 318) of the total number of contributions dealing with structure analysis has a methodological question as its main topic. This means that the didactics of higher education didactics is leaning towards methodology and *how* teaching can be organized. If we consult textbooks for higher education, this result seems to mirror a more general pattern. Biggs and Tang (2011) focus on the three categories that constitute the

authors' concept of constructive alignment learning objectives, teaching and learning activities, i.e. methods, and assessment. Compared to Heimann's description of teaching as phenomenon and his six categories derived from practical experience (Table 2, Fig. 1), it becomes clear that Biggs and Tang concentrate on a small section of the total horizon of didactic decisions. Biggs & Tang are very explicit when they claim that constructive alignment must lead to an enhanced focus on "what and how students are to learn, rather than on what topics the teacher is to teach" (Biggs & Tang, 2011: 52). A similar focus on methods can be identified in Barr and Tagg (1995), since they invite teachers to "create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems". Ramsden (1992) also concentrates almost exclusively on the methodological dimension. He emphasizes that questions of subject matter are fundamental, yet he does not investigate this particular issue in greater depth. Also Terhart (2003) and Richardson (2003) see 'methodification of didactics' as a general trend. They interpret the trend as a product of the constructivist paradigm, which is the dominant epistemological position in pedagogics and didactics.

As such, this meta-analysis and the resulting didactics of higher education didactics empirically confirm Terhart (2003) and Richardson (2003) conclusions: Didactics as research on and theories for reflection on teaching has been reduced to methodology with barely no reflections on subject matter.

The category that is addressed noticeably less is subject matter. Only 11 of the 318 contributions (i.e. less than 5%) deal with this issue. From this perspective, the didactics of higher education didactics appears to be an empirical imprint of Biggs and Tang's (2011: 52) request to focus on how the students should learn at the expense of reflections on which topics the teacher should teach. But what does the absent discussion on subject matter mean for higher education didactics? As teachers, we always teach in and through subject matter. Subject matter is an independent category in Heimann's model and, if one follows Terhart (2003), content is a constituent aspect of teaching and is thus deserving of reflection as a category of teaching (p. 26). This idea resembles the work of the German educationalist Wolfgang Klafki (2000a: 140), who describes didactics as "the theory of contents and curriculum", and for whom subject matter is a key topic in his work (e.g. Klafki (1998, 2000a, 2000b).

Furthermore, when education research and higher education didactics neglect certain topics – for example, students' perspectives and the criteria for selecting subject matter – one might ask where teachers might find support and inspiration to develop professionally in these areas. Returning to the domains of pedagogical knowledge described in Table 1, our conclusion is that, if teachers adhere to the higher education didactics, they are still referred to experience and tradition as regards understanding of the students, selection of subject matter and lecturing.

The relevance of enhanced attention on subject matter in higher education didactics is indicated in Keiding and Hansen (2012), where Klafki's categories are used to classify teachers' arguments for the selection of subject matter. The findings reveal that, on the one hand, teachers in higher education are mindful about the selection of content and, hence, confirm what Terhart (2003: 38) emphasizes: "In school matters matter". However, on the other hand, the findings shows that teachers argue in broad and general categories closely related to experience and tradition, e.g. basic knowledge and fundamental topics (Keiding & Hansen, 2012).

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