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In Denmark - just as everywhere else - competencies in writing for the digital New Media are very much in demand. The majority of today's web masters, net journalists, editors and information officers originally were trained in the use of conventional media. They have learned their new skills through on-the-job practise, and as a result quite often their conception of the digital media is deeply rooted in their educational and professional backgrounds. New programmes in Multimedia and Interactive Media are mushrooming everywhere in the educational system, and of course a great many of the long established programmes in journalism and media studies also offer courses in various aspects of the digital media. However, for some time to come the shortage of graduates with New Media qualifications makes necessary the reskilling of a great many people in the news and communication professions.

This at least is the assumption upon which the Department of Communication, Journalism and Computer Science at Roskilde University has developed a new master's programme in *Computer-mediated Communication.*[1] The Danish master's degree, an officially decreed misnomer, is a supplementary education on a high academic level open to applicants with some years of experience in the labour market and a B.A.-degree or relevant middle-range training.[2] It is offered as Open Education and usually involves two years of part-time study.

Master of CMC

Starting in August 2000 the master's-programme in Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) is being offered as distance education, drawing upon our department's experience with the *InterKomm+* programme.[3] InterKomm+ (Internet, Communication studies, plus much more) has been offered as a distance education programme since 1996. It is an Open University version of Roskilde University's highly popular Communication Studies programme, and it has been fairly successful both in terms of applications and graduates and in providing valuable insights on how to adapt to net based learning both the campus teaching environment and the problem oriented project based pedagogy which is the hallmark of Roskilde University.

The two basic assumptions upon which the new programme has been designed are that
1) in order to function well distance education must include face to face contact between teacher and student as well as among the students, and
2) distance education technology should be used to facilitate learning - and *not* merely as a teaching tool.

"Real life" learning and net based learning

As to the first point, both InterKomm+ and the new Master of CMC programme are hybrids between face to face teaching and net based learning. The programme structure is quite simple, but it has proven successful. The curriculum is divided into a number of courses, most of them lasting three to four weeks. Each course is launched with a conventional seminar requiring physical presence at a location so remote as to provide very few distractions.[4] Most of these intensive seminars last from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening (18 hours of class work), but a few of them are longer (four to six days). At the seminar the subject matter of the course is introduced through a series of lectures, exercises and workshops. Ample time is reserved for the formation of work groups and for the formulation of a research problem - Roskilde University pedagogy stipulates that the students themselves must formulate the problem to work on and suggest what theories and methods to apply (both of course subject to approval by the instructor). Groups usually consist of four to six students; individual work is not accepted in conjunction with the courses. The "real life" seminar is followed by a net seminar where the students organized into a number of groups collaborate in discussing their project, summarizing information searches and readings of relevant literature, exchanging files and writing a report or preparing a presentation. The process is monitored by the instructors who also act as mediators whenever neccessary. Finally, at the next real life seminar each group presents its project work for discussion with the instructors and fellow students.[5]

Parallel to the courses, in each of the two years of study for the CMC master's degree the students work (preferably in groups) on a larger project which, ideally, should be related to their ordinary work. In the first year of study the project is an exercise in using and combining the skills learned in the various courses. In the second year of study the project results in the writing of a thesis. To each project an instructor is assigned as tutor. The tutor will meet with the groups frequently either on the net or face to face at the weekend seminars. At each of these seminars time is allocated for progress reports and for discussions of the project work ahead. In the second term of each year the project work becomes the main activity.

The scheme as outlined above is highly "academic" in that it requires continuous and active student participation over a period of two years. Certainly there will be short intervals between courses, but you cannot just come and go as your interests and duties at work dictate. We are quite well aware that a series of short, intensive courses providing the students with some highly tangible just-in-time qualifications and a nice diploma would be much more palatable to employers everywhere in the public and private sectors. It is indeed going to be hard for the employers to have key personnel working part time for an extended period of time, and it will put great pressure on the students to keep their careers going while studying. This clash between the life styles of university and labour market is an issue that merits more attention than has been the case so far in the discussion of *life long learning* - supposedly the very foundation of the information society.

We have chosen to be adamant on this point. The Roskilde University pedagogy requires the kind of intensive social interaction that is possible only if we can create community and a sense of collective responsibility. And community is not possible in a classroom as busy as a hotel lobby with a revolving door. We are very much in favour of opening the university towards society and serving its more immediate needs. But in doing so we must

not sacrifice the values upon which successful university training is based. Indeed there is also a quite practical reason for insisting on coordinated momentum. If you divide your programme into many small segments that can be taken independently of one another, you invite the students to prolong their studies indefinitely. This results in increased administration, additional expenses because you have to offer all courses on a regular basis, and added difficulties in course planning, because the students do not have an even level of attainment.

Keeping it simple

As to the second basic assumption in designing the Master of CMC-programme, that of the role of educational technology, we strongly believe that simplicity is very important. Neither the pedagogy that we practise nor the subjects that we teach are particularly well suited for a standard distance education software system. In fact, having tried out a number of such systems we would find it quite problematic to have to work with software designed for a cultural and educational tradition very different from our own. We do not need drills, tests, assignments and elaborate attemps to emulate the real life physical campus environment - including the registrar's office. What we do need is a system that supports computer-mediated communication and collaborative work. One of the qualifications we hope to impart to our students is the ability to work cooperatively in a virtual environment. This, we are convinced, will become one of the most important job qualifications in a not too distant future.

For these reasons, we have decided to launch the CMC programme using a simple adaption of the German BSCW system (Basic Support for Cooperative Work) as conference system and virtual work space.[6] It has a seamless WWW-interface, provides for threaded discussions, administration of document sharing, and it has facilities for viewing history of use, keeping track of participants and scheduling meetings. The technology is all quite simple and easy to use. When classes begin, the system is like a clean slate, and the challenge to students and instructors alike is to construct an efficient and pleasant virtual work space and to learn how to contribute and help others contribute to a productive and engaging collaborative work environment.

Curriculum

Curriculum-design for the CMC-programme has been based on the tenet that new competencies are required for the production and consumption of computer-based media. As mentioned above many of those who now produce material for computer-based media tend to view the new medium in terms of the conventional media that they are familiar with. Thus we are now experiencing a period of incunabula, as Janet Murray has aptly put it in her study of multimedia aesthetics and narrative.[7] This is true not only of narrative forms, however, but also of entire genres, professions and business models. A case in point are newspapers - certainly the most important intended target sector for the CMC-programme. The Internet not only requires new qualifications in researching and in writing news stories for the web, it also makes it neccessary to reconsider the role of the journalist and that of the newspaper as a medium.

The problem oriented project work approach makes it possible to use the student's own workplace as a point of departure. As far a possible we are studying technologically conditioned change in a context that is relevant and readily understandable to the students.

Typically, a CMC master's thesis will be dealing with changes to the workplace and its products neccessitated or made possible by knowledgeable use of information and communication technology (ICT). The courses cover a wide variety of subjects, and we employ faculty, academics as well as practicians, with a broad spectrum of competencies.[8] Today, few if indeed any can demonstrate of a full understanding of New Media and their social and cultural impact. So, we draw on experts with various approaches to the field, expecting that this kaleidoscopic exposure to theories, methods and practical experiences will further a truly interdisciplinary understanding of computer-based media as the students work on projects that can succeed only if they study, combine and apply elements from various relevant diciplines.

Getting down to business

The master's degree is a novel phenomenon in a country where education at all levels generally is free or available at a token fee (- it is paid over the taxes to be sure). In addition to a considerable tuition fee either the student or his or her employer will most likely have to arrange for a reduced workload for the employee for the duration of the programme.[9] Suddenly it becomes quite graphic that reskilling and life long education require major investments and that the academic programme is rapidly becoming a commodity.

When first opening for applications for the CMC-programme we were somewhat sceptical as to whether it would be possible to fill all 16 seats with qualified students. However, the number of applications came to nearly four times that number, and at least three quarters of the applicants were fully qualified for acceptance. In the end we decided to launch the programme with a class of 27 students, turning down with regret many highly qualified applicants simply because of lack of capacity.

The average age of the applicants is forty, the two youngest being in their late twenties and the seven oldest being in their fifties. Typically the younger applicants are well under way in their careers, and they see the CMC-programme as a promising means for advancement and in some cases also for changing the course of their careers. To the older applicants, as one might expect, it is more a matter of not loosing pace altogether. One interesting motivation offered by a manager of an information department in a large public institution is, that it is quite worrying to be in charge an office which is being completely dominated by young people performing tasks and speaking a language that you do not understand at all. Employees and managers alike feel the need for reskilling in this period of swift transition to the networked society.

As mentioned, the general level of qualifications is surprisingly high, considering that the Danish master's degree primarily is meant as an academic supplementary education for people with middle-range training. 27 of the applicants already have a full university degree (in law, political science, engineering, humanities, communication studies, social sciences), 22 can document middle-range training (journalists, teachers, librarians, B.A.s), and the remaining 11 have some shorter non-academic education (programmer, secretary, business college, mechanic). Nearly all applicants are fully employed, have many years of work experience, and several are quite senior - editors, office managers, and a few self-employed information consultants.

Will it last? - and should it?

Our initial success in attracting students demonstrates that indeed there is a demand for the kind of education provided by the CMC-programme. But will the success last? - No, probably not! We are experiencing what is popularly known as the ketchup-effect - give the bottle a good shake, and it all comes out at once. The market, on a national level, is quite small and of course we expect to have fewer Danish applicants after a few years. However, in terms of curriculum it should be entirely possible to internationalize the CMC-programme, giving it a new lease of life and opening up for new partnerships with universities abroad.

However, becoming superfluous is not neccessarily a catastrophe. We do tend to think of it that way in the traditional university system. From a scholarly point of view, if a discipline is not viable in the long run, it may not be worthwhile dealing with in the first instance. From an economic point of view, today, as funding increasingly is based on the number of students passing exams, it is ruinous to try to maintain a broad range subjects that do not attract students. - Of course this is not to say that scholarly traditions and cultural considerations should be sacrificed to profitability.

In our case we are dealing with an Open Education which is an addition to the regular activities of the department, but by no means an indispensable one. The returns of our investment in planning and running the programme should be measured neither in Euro nor prestige, but in experiences gained. Developing a new academic programme provides opportunity for experimenting rather freely with form and content, and this is bound to give us inspiration for the eventual updating of the department's regular programmes. Experimenting with net based learning and computer supported collaborative work provides material for research and for improving our pedagogical practices.

In his opening statement to the ECN 2000 conference, Michael Dawney made the appeal not to let media studies be institutionalized into fossilization. Media studies started out as a subject area of great experimentation and innovation. It was created by scholars coming from numerous different disciplines, and diversification was indeed fruitful. Innovation and change should remain one of the characteristics of media studies. Open Education, as part of the new life long learning policy, suggests itself as a useful way of providing both the funding and a framework for realizing such ideas.

When, after some years our master's programme has become routine to us and also fails to attract sufficiently many students (whether because the market is saturated or the curriculum is outdated) it will have to be replaced. Arguably it would be better to modernize it. Certainly a programme in New Media has to be updated continuously - five years from now the technologies and the theoretical issues will be significantly different from today's. But there is a limit to just how much change can be introduced without violating the departmental order which is its legal basis for offering the education. The trend in Danish educational policy is for increasingly detailed governmental regulation of university programmes. It is quite reasonable that the tax payers should be guaranteed value for their money, but tight regulation unfortunately tends to stifle innovation. It would seem that neither the universities nor the Ministry of Education are geared to handle rapidly changing demands. And this is another important area where academic life clashes with the information society's need for just-in-time qualifications.

The predictions made by the US National Learning Infrastructure Initiative of a completely liberalized market for education may be overly dystopian.[10] But surely, if the universities are to assume a major role in the market for life long education, we have to come to grips with the needs of our "customers" - the public and private sectors investing in supplementary education for their employees. It's a balance on the knife's edge, for on the one hand we must insist that university education requires room for absorption and reflection, and on the other we must recognize the continuous and urgent need for just-in-time qualifications. Offering academically sound Open Education programmes with a fairly short life-cycle may be one way to solve this problem.

Notes

1. For detailed information on the Master of Computer-mediated Communication programme, see http://www.cmc.ruc.dk. For general information on Roskilde University's Department of Communication, Journalism and Computer Science and its academic programmes, see: http://www.komm.ruc.dk. For a position paper on the needs for innovation in news media education, see: Robin Cheesman & Simon Heilesen: Master of Multimedia Arts - educating for the new news media. Proceedings of NIMRES2, Helsinki, May 28-30, 1999. Online: http://mlab.uiah.fi/nordic-interactive/nimres2/html/cheesman_heilesen.html. (Links validated July 2000).
2. The Master of Computer Mediated Communication degree equals 60 ECTS points. The Danish academic degree equal to an American master's degree is the candidatus-degree (e.g. cand.mag. is an MA degree, cand.comm. is a degree is Communication Studies at Roskilde University).
3. For a detailed description of InterKomm+ and the pedagogical issues involved in combining net based learning with a pedagogy based upon problem oriented project work, see: Robin Cheesman & Simon Heilesen: Supporting Problem-based Learning in Groups in a Net Environment. In: Computer Support for Collaborative Learning (CSCL) 1999 (Jeremy Rochelle ed.) Stanford University, Menlo Park 1999. Available online: http://kn.cilt.org/cscl99/A27/A27.HTM (link validated July 2000).
4. Initially InterKomm+ was based at the small town of Svaneke on the east coast of the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea. This is also now the venue of the Master of CMC seminars. InterKomm+ later moved to Roenne, also on Bornholm, and in 1999 it was moved to Roskilde University. The move was neccessary for reasons of economy. InterKomm+ and now Master of CMC both have been supported with generous start-up grants for regional development. However, the choice of Bornholm, just about the remotest island in Denmark, was not just a matter of funding. In our experience it is quite important both for academic work and for the social interaction within the group that the students truly break away from their daily routines.
5. Even if project reports may be submitted collectively, each student is evaluated individually based upon active participation in the net seminar and performance at the oral presentation and discussion of the project. Grading is the joint responsibility of the instructors and external examiners.
6. BSCW has been developed by the German National Reasearch Center for Information Technology (see: bscw.gmd.de/) . BSCW has provided inspiration for a number of other collaborative work systems including the Danish TeamNow (www.teamnow.dk) and the Finnish FLE system (Future Learning Environment) developed at the MediaLab at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki (http://mlab.uiah.fi/fle/).

Eventually we may migrate to one of these more advanced systems. (Links validated July 2000).

7. Janet H. Murray: Hamlet on the Holodeck. The future of Narrative in Cyberspace. MIT Press 1997, p. 66 ff.

8. Key elements of the CMC-programme are: media history, media sociology and communication theory; communication to the general public of professional, scholarly and scientific information and research; hypertext theory, narrative forms and the aesthetics of multimedia; journalistic reasearch techniques; elementary computer science as related to the production of computer media products; design of user interfaces; target group analysis and usability studies; New Media in culture and society; management of computer media products; research techniques and copyright in electronic media. In a addition a number of workshops will provide hands-on experience with writing for net media and producing multimedia prototypes.

9. In the year 2000 the CMC-programme is priced in the mid-range of the Danish master's-programmes currently offered, costing Dkr. 40.000 a year (€ 5.360) - Dkr. 80.000 for the entire programme. The State subsidizes the programme with a total of some Dkr. 36.000 (€ 4.825) for each student. To the expenses of the students should be added travel, board, books, hardware, software and ISP-fees, totaling perhaps another Dkr. 40.000 for the two years of study.

10. See for instance: Robert C. Heterick, Jr., James R. Mingle, & Carol A. Twigg: The Public Policy Implications of a Global Learning Infrastructure. A Report from a Joint NLII-SHEEO Symposium, Denver, Colorado, November 13-14, 1997. Available online: http://www.educause.edu/nlii/keydocs/policy.html and Carol A. Twigg and Diana G. Oblinger: The Virtual University. A Report from a Joint Educom/IBM Roundtable, Washington, D.C. November 5-6, 1996. Available online: http://www.educause.edu/nlii/VU.html. (Links validated July 2000).