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Higher education journals as didactic frameworks

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Abstract

During the last twenty years we have witnessed a growing interest in research in teaching, learning and educational development in higher education. The result is that 'Higher Education Didactics' has established itself as a research field in its own right. This article explores Higher Education Didactics as a framework for academics' professional reflection on teaching and learning, by mapping the didactic topics in all contributions in four journals in the period 2008-2015. Two of the journals are based in Scandinavia, where the European tradition of didactics (Didaktik) has been highly influential, while the others stem from the Anglo-Saxon curriculum tradition. The mapping shows that all journals are strongly occupied with teaching methods, especially methods grounded in theories of active and social learning. In contrast, didactic categories such as goal, content and assessment are rare topics. Students as participants and learners are a frequent topic in specially one journal, but receive little attention in the other journals. Also educational technologies receive a varying degree of attention across the journals. Based on the mapping, this article discusses Higher Education Didactics as a framework for professional reflection in higher education. It concludes that a broader range of research topics would be desirable and ask for future collaboration on the currently uncharted topics.

Keywords: Academic professionalism; didactics; higher education; scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)

Introduction: Higher Education Journals as Didactic Frameworks

The article investigates how the research on teaching and learning in higher education is recorded in four journals over an eight-year period. The aim is to explore what kind of framework the journals offer for academics' professional reflection on teaching and learning, as seen from a didactic perspective.

The article is based on three assumptions. First of all that the research object of contributions on teaching and learning emphasises specific didactic topics. Secondly, that the collected contributions by highlighting some didactic issues and ignoring others over time will form a distinctive didactic position. Thirdly, and in contrast to textbooks where key topics and underlying assumptions generally are easily identified, that the didactic position of a journal emerges gradually and so is far more opaque to the reader. One way to make the didactic position of a journal visible is through a systematic analysis of didactic issues across a number of volumes.

Researching Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

HE research has developed impressively during the last four decades. The development reflects the growing size and importance of higher education globally (e.g. Rumbley, Stanfield, & de Gayardon, 2014; Tight, 2012). The expansion of higher education has brought along an increased attention on the quality of teaching in higher education (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Shulman, 1999; Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, & Prosser, 2000).

One response to the demand for enhanced quality was the idea that university teaching should become a 'scholarly enterprise' formed by a scholarly approach not only to the disciplines, but also to the profession of teaching (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). Initially this led to the establishment of centres for teaching and learning, and to the development of formal teacher training programs (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Lueddeke, 2003; McCarthy, 2008;

Singer, 2002; Stierer, 2008). These initiatives were rapidly accompanied by several textbooks on the topic, for example Biggs (1999); Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall (1999); Race (2001); Ramsden (1992). Generally, these books were based on 'expert models', meaning that knowledge was produced by educational researchers and developers and conveyed to academics to use in their continuous improvement and reflection of their own practice. Owing to an increasing recognition of the gap between the instructional theories and guidelines promoted by the experts and academic practice, local innovation and development projects have become an increasingly important dimension. Gradually, academics turned from being 'consumers' to 'producers' of knowledge about teaching in higher education.

The shift in the role of academics entailed a change in the perception of teaching problems from being something that could and should be fixed, to problems needing systematic investigation and reflection. At the same time, the field of investigation was expanded from a one-sided focus on teaching and instruction to broader perspectives, including students' learning and experiences (Bass, 1999; Cranton & Kreber, 2000; Haigh, 2010; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Kreber & Kanuka, 2006; Shulman, 2000).

Despite a common object, we can identify at least one significant internal differentiation of the field, relating to the purpose of research and inquiry. In one area, the inquiries seem guided by the aim to produce new scientific insights and understandings of teaching and learning in higher education (Haigh, 2010; Qvortrup & Keiding, 2016). In the other area the inquiries are guided by the aim to improve students' learning. Often, these inquiries are closely linked to the disciplines and to practice. It is in this area we find what Hutchings and Huber (2008) call 'the big tent' of SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning).

The two areas are not mutually exclusive. A lot of research might conduct practice-based and practice-informing inquiries. Similarly, practice-informing inquiries might be more

or less ambitious, and more or less theoretically based (Hutchings & Huber, 2008, p. 241), and 'some of this work may eventually evolve into full-fledged pedagogical research' (Kreber, 2007, p. 6).

The emergence of teaching and learning in higher education as a new area for research and scholarly inquiry has been accompanied by a significant number of journals of both national and international character, as well as journals of generic and discipline-specific character (e.g. Rumbley et al., 2014; Tight, 2012). The inner differentiation of the research field is mirrored to some extent in the scope of the journals. Some journals seem to strictly follow the scientific branch, for example Teaching in Higher Education (THE, 2016), other journals explicitly connect with the SoTL idea that scholarly inquiries should improve student learning, for example International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ijSoTL, 2016), while for instance Higher Education Research & Development seems to embrace both dimensions by welcoming significant and original contribution to the theory, practice or research of higher education (HERD, 2016).

Facing this extensive and still growing range of journals, it is time to ask what type of didactic framework these journals offer, and hence how the research and inquiries communicated in these journals might provide a framework for academics' reflection on teaching and learning. The article therefore takes up a call made more than fifteen years ago by Hutchings and Shulman (1999, p. 15), saying that 'if the scholarship of teaching is to advance as a field, there must be inquiry into the process of inquiry itself'.

Previous Investigations in the Field

This article is not the first analysis of higher education journals. The most comprehensive investigations were made by Tight (2004, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2012). In Tight (2012) fifteen research-based, generalist journals dealing exclusively with HE and written in English are

analysed regarding topics, theoretical and methodological approaches and levels of analysis. Tight (2012, p. 20) concludes that 'The two dominant themes or issues represented are course design and the student experience'. In five of the fifteen journals, articles on the student experience constitute the largest proportion. In four journals, including Higher Education Research & Development (HERD), articles on course design lead the way (Tight, 2012, p. 21). In contrast it is 'uncommon to find higher education researchers (or practitioners) directly discussing the curriculum, something which is not the case at school level (Tight, 2012, p. 66).

The findings trigger two interesting questions: Would we see the same pattern in a discipline-specific journal, in which discussions on aim and content might be expected to be more frequent (e.g. Kansanen, 2009), and in journals from Scandinavia, which historically has been closely connected with the German tradition of 'Didaktik' characterised by a more pronounced focus on the aim and contents of education (Gundem & Hopmann, 1998; Westbury, Hopmann, & Riquarts, 2000).

Empirical Design

The article will address three questions: Which didactic positions emerge through the selection of topics in research in HE teaching and learning? How do they shape professional reflection? Do we find the same pattern in generalist and discipline-specific journals and are the different traditions (Curriculum and Didaktik) represented in the range of didactic topics in the journals? The questions are answered by mapping the didactic topics in articles from four journals.

Analytical Categories

To investigate possible patterns in research topics, we need a model that provides us with systematic categories covering a broad range of didactic issues. We find such a model in the

Berliner model, developed by the German educationalist Paul Heimann (Figure 1). The model is built around six categories, which grasp the 'holistic and timeless structure of teaching' (Heimann, 1961, p. 105). The categories are Intention (goals and outcomes), Content, Media, Methods, Students' prerequisites and Context. Similar categories are found in the broad concept of curriculum (e.g. Dillon, 2009).
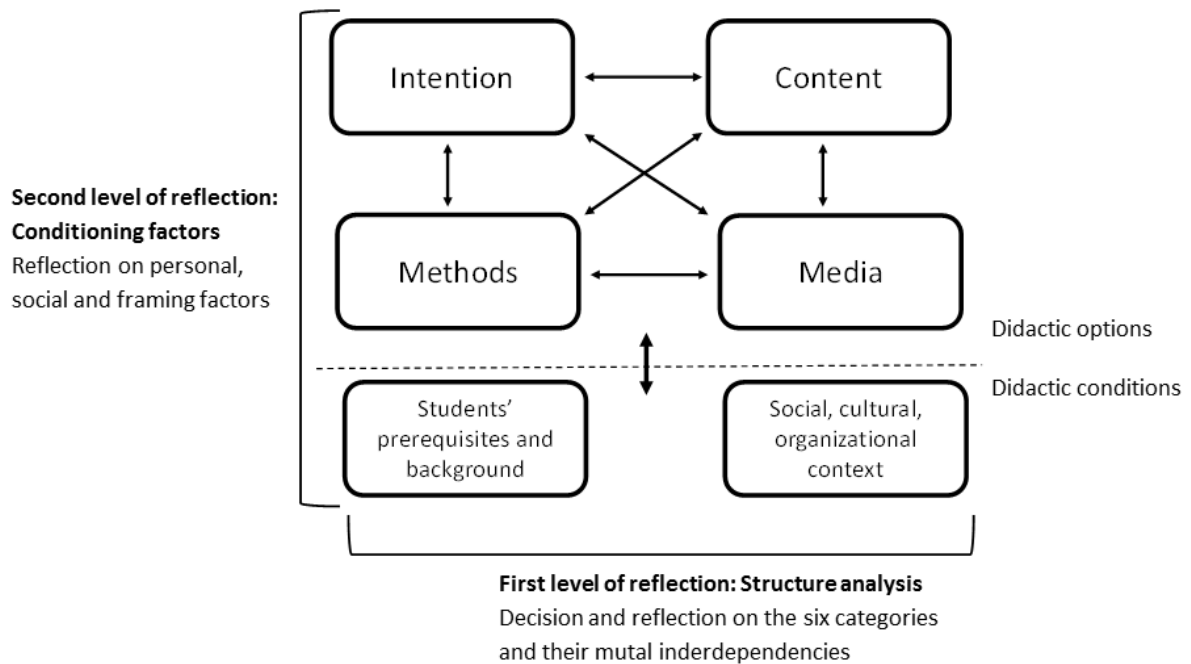

Figure 1: The Berliner model: Levels and topics in didactic reflection (Keiding, 2017, p. 52).

Assessment does not figure as an independent category in the model, but as research shows that assessment has a significant influence on students' behaviour, assessment has become included as an additional category (e.g. Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 169; Ramsden, 1992, p. 187).

Heimann distinguishes between two different levels of reflection (Figure 1). The first level, called the structure analysis, concerns decisions in relation to didactic issues and conditions. The second level addresses the conditions framing the reflection and decisions at the first level, such as teachers' pedagogical beliefs, assumptions about learning and values. The analytical distinction between the first level category 'didactic conditions' and the

second level category 'conditioning factors' is that didactic conditions address both students as learners and participants (e.g. prior knowledge) and also organisational contexts (e.g. study programmes), while reflections on conditioning factors are concerned with, how the teacher observes and thinks about teaching, students and context. 'The purpose of such an aloof analysis is not to dissolve all ideological relationships [...], but to uncover these and involve them through controlled consciousness' (Heimann, 1962, p. 164).

We can use the concept of 'alignment' to illustrate the difference between the two levels of didactic reflection. At the first level (structure analysis) the concept of alignment urges teachers to think thoroughly about the interplay between outcomes, activities and final assessment to avoid contradictions between the categories Dealing with alignment at the second level (conditioning factors) might for instance involve inquiries into the underlying assumptions of the concept and the impact on our understanding of quality teaching.

Heimann (1962) divides the second level of reflection into three dimensions: Reflections addressing personal and ideological beliefs such as who am I as a teacher; reflections addressing organisational factors, for example how the teacher thinks about the organisational context and what he/she takes for granted, and finally, reflections addressing teachers' professional knowledge and didactic repertoire. In the analysis the three dimensions are compiled in the category 'conditioning factors'.

Table 1 gives an overview of the journals that form the basis of the analysis. Not all contributions in the journals deal with didactic issues. Abstracts dealing with issues that fall outside the eight analytical categories, for instance educational policy or educational sociology, are categorised as 'other issues' and excluded from further analysis. The third column in Table 1 shows the total number of abstracts scrutinised and the number of abstracts within the eight analytical categories.

Journal	Year	Number of abstracts (total/didactic issues)
Higher Education Research & Development (HERD)	2008-2015	371/256
Uniped (Norway)	2008-2015	179/161
Danish Journal for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (DUT)	2006-2015	154/127
Journal of Geography in Higher Education (JGHE).	2008-2015	224/175

Table 1. Four journals form the empirical basis for the analysis. Due to the relatively small number of articles per volume, all volumes of DUT are included.

Selection of Journals

Realising the significant number of journals within HE (Tight, 2012, p. 229) an analysis based on four journals can serve as no more than an illustrative case. Nevertheless, it is our hope that it will serve as an invitation to future discussion of research and inquiry in teaching and learning, both as a field of research and as a framework for professional reflection.

The four journals are selected on the basis of a set of criteria. First of all, journals explicitly describing themselves as SoTL journals were deselected. The reason is that, due to SoTL's explicit ambition to improve students' learning and transform academic culture, these journals might produce a preselection of specific didactic issues, such as students' learning, students' experiences as learners and student-centred teaching methods. Secondly, as we are interested in didactic issues and patterns, the journals should have course design as a key

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topic. According to Tight (2012), both Higher Education Research & Development (HERD) and Teaching in Higher Education (THE) meet these criteria. HERD was chosen in favour of THE, because it deals with both research and development problems and hence resembles the Scandinavian journals that we wanted to be included in the analysis. A sub-classification of the last 50 articles published in 2014 in HERD and THE showed that both journals had many contributions on teaching methods (respectively 10/50 and 14/50) and students as participants (both 7/50) and few contributions on goals (respectively 4/50 and 1/50) and content (respectively 3/50 and 0/50). Hence, no critical information about didactic patterns seems lost by focusing on only one generic journal from a non-Scandinavian context.

As mentioned, we wanted to include Scandinavian journals in the analysis. The curiosity regarding possible differences in didactic research questions across journals from different educational traditions was roused by Gundem and Hopmann (1998) and Westbury et al. (2000), who explore commonalities and differences between the German Didaktik tradition and the Anglo-Saxon Curriculum tradition. Both traditions are concerned with a parallel set of questions: teaching and learning goals, content, methods and media, assessment of learning and students' prerequisites (Hamilton, 1998; Westbury, 1998). Nevertheless the way that these questions are posed and answered is very different. According to Westbury (1998), to a wide extent the differences express differences in the relationship between state, school and teacher. The space does not allow for an elaborate description, but summarising Hopmann and Gundem (1998), Reid (1998) and Westbury (1998), the Curriculum-tradition has emerged in a context of having an authoritative state curriculum defining aims, content and methods, which the teachers are expected to *implement* in the classroom.

In contrast, the German state curriculum describes a selection of traditions and values that must be *embedded* in the classroom by the teachers' decisions on all didactic issues,

including aims and content. Due to the extensive self-determination of the teacher in relation to how the state curriculum is realised, the German Didaktik tradition is deeply concerned about 'models for teacher thinking', that is to enable the teachers to make decisions and to argue professionally for their decisions on all didactic issues. The Didaktik tradition has been very influential in Scandinavia in relation to primary education. The question whether the influence can be traced at the level of higher education research is the reason for including a Norwegian (Uniped) and a Danish (DUT) journal in the analysis.

The criteria for selecting JGHE as the discipline-specific journal were pragmatic and biased by the fact that it was a part of Tight's first meta-analysis, which was the direct offspring of our interest in didactic patterns in HE research (Tight, 2004, 2008a),. Furthermore it is a journal where we as non-specialists have a fair chance to understand the problems described in the abstracts. Other discipline specific journals of which many are listed in Tight (2012, p. 229ff) might have been equally suitable for our purpose.

Analytical Strategy

The mapping of didactic issues is based on the abstract of each article. This entails the risk of overlooking didactic issues addressed in the text, but omitted from the abstract. However, we assume that the main research object is generally communicated in the abstract and full texts were read only if the aim and the focus of the article were vaguely described in the abstract.

The abstracts are categorised using the eight analytical categories: intention, content, media, methods, assessment, students' background, context and conditioning factors. Some abstracts deal with several didactic issues and then count in all relevant categories. Accordingly, the number of indications exceeds the number of abstracts.

The condition for indication is that the category is the main research object of the contribution. We use the distinction between the 'object of observation', that is the didactic topic researched in the article, and the 'point of observation'. For instance, a contribution

might explore the use of new media (object of observation) based on students' experiences (point of observation). It is the object of observation that defines the category. Table 2 provides an example of the operationalisation of each category.

First level of reflection (structure analysis)
Goal: <u>Building evidence-based insights on graduate outcomes plays a particularly important role in shaping planning and practice.</u> (Edwards & Coates, 2011)
Content: Rural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) <u>health contents in undergraduate health science curricula</u> in Western Australia has been limited. (Durey, Lin, & Thompson, 2013)
Media: In recent years there have been technological advances that have paved the way for <u>blended-learning</u> environments (Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011).
Methods, including supervision: This article <u>explores</u> the use of <u>group work strategies</u> to increase student interaction and learning (Cruickshank, Chen, & Warren, 2012).
Assessment: The Faculty of Law and Management developed an approach to map the teaching <u>and assessment of eight graduate capabilities</u> across the first year of the faculty's degree programmes (Spencer, Riddle, & Knewstubb, 2011).
Students: We expected <u>a student's prior learning</u> to be important (Bone & Reid, 2011).
Context: A number of Australian universities have established and sponsored <u>interdisciplinary communities of practice (CoPs) to develop teaching and learning</u>. (Ryan, 2015)

Second level of reflection (conditioning factors)
The 'journey' metaphor has come to the fore as a way of conveying the student's experience of change, difficulty and progress in doctoral studies. <u>The use of this metaphor is critically assessed</u> (Hughes & Tight, 2013)

Table 2. Examples of the operationalisation of analytical categories. The section that defines the classification is underlined.

Both authors participated in the categorisation. The first issues of DUT were categorised together in order to develop a common understanding of the analytical framework and the conditions of indication. Afterwards, the journals were divided between us and categorised individually. The results were compiled in one data sheet and cross checked. In cases of disagreement, the categorisation was discussed until a common understanding was reached.

Deconstruction of Methods

Well into the analysis, it seemed that many articles dealing with methods were referring to theories of active learning and/or social learning. To test this impression we subjected all contributions in the category 'methods' to further analysis. The analytical framework was found in Rudolf Künzli's (1998) interpretation of the didactic triangle.
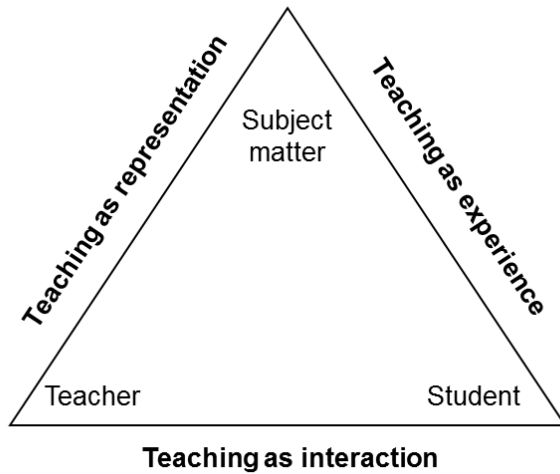
Figure 2. The Didactic triangle, based on Künzli (1998).

The sides of the triangle represent three methodological archetypes: (1)Teaching as representation of contents, focusing on the teacher as the communicator of contents to the students, (2) Teaching as interaction, focusing on the interplay, roles and relations between teacher and student, and (3) Teaching as experience, focusing on students' engagement with contents. Table 3 provides an example of the operationalisation of each principle.

Teaching as representation	This paper investigates the oracy (listening/speaking) genres enacted in an undergraduate entry point unit (Doherty, 2010)
Teaching as interaction	Peer assessment can be important in developing active and independent learners (Snowball & Mostert, 2013)
Teaching as experience	Situated learning theory underpinned the programme's design, which prioritised context and participation in the construction of knowledge: academics lived 'on country' and participated in the lived experience (Durey et al., 2013)

Table 3. Examples of the operationalisation of the categorisation of methods. The section that defines the classification is underlined.

The Journals as Didactic Frameworks

Figure 3 shows how the didactic topics are divided in the seven categories at the first level of reflection.
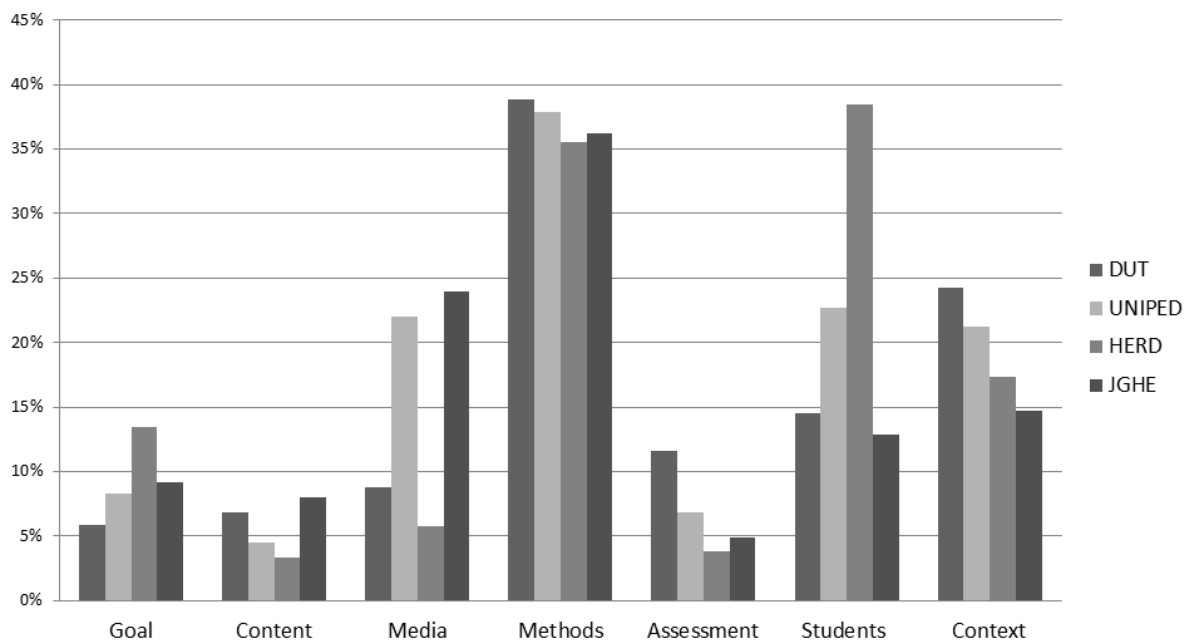

Figure 3. The distribution of didactic topics. Percentage of the total number of abstracts dealing with structure analysis.

The figure shows that the research into teaching and learning, as it is presented in the four journals, has a number of distinctive characteristics. One of the most striking is the distinctive focus on teaching methods. The context for teaching and learning is also a frequently occurring topic. This might be less surprising as the category 'Context' covers a wide range of topics, for example organisational conditions, curriculum innovation, teacher collaboration and impacts of reforms.

Another distinctive feature is that the categories 'goal', 'content' and 'assessment' receive only little attention as research topics. As mentioned earlier, we expected that contributions on goal and content might have been more frequent in the discipline-specific journal (JGHE) than in the generalist journals (HERD, UNIPED and DUT). The analysis does not confirm this expectation. In contrast, contributions on the category goal are slightly more common in HERD. Neither does the tradition of 'Didaktik' show an increased focus on goal and content in the Scandinavian journals.

Media is a frequent research topic in UNIPED and JGHE compared to HERD and DUT. An explanation of the Norwegian interest in media may be found in the physical distances in the country and a long tradition for using ICT to enhance the access to higher education (Nordkvelle, Fossland, & Netteland, 2013, p. 7). However, one might expect a similar interest in distance education in and around Australia. Whether the modest interest in media found in HERD stems from different traditions for the use of ICT or this type of research is published in other journals cannot be answered on the basis of our analysis. In JGHE the interest in media seems closely linked to new opportunities for analysis, visualisation and fieldwork (e.g. Philips et al., 2015; Welsh et al., 2015).

An interesting difference is that the students' background, expectations and experiences are much more frequent topics in HERD than in the other journals. The articles deal with questions related to internationalisation (e.g. Warner & Miller, 2015), cultural heterogeneity (e.g. McMurchy-Pilkington, 2011) and specific challenges for indigenous students (e.g. Barney, 2013). It could be argued that the enhanced focus on students in HERD is merely a consequence of larger 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 have their empirical basis. Nevertheless, enhanced diversity in the student population is a general phenomenon and not exclusively related to

strong traditions for internationalisation (e.g. Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 2). Accordingly, it seems unlikely that the difference is merely a consequence of geographical differences.

Deconstruction of the Category Methods

The second phase of the analysis categorises the contributions in the category 'methods' into three methodological archetypes: teaching as representation, teaching as interaction, and teaching as experience. The result is shown in Figure 4.
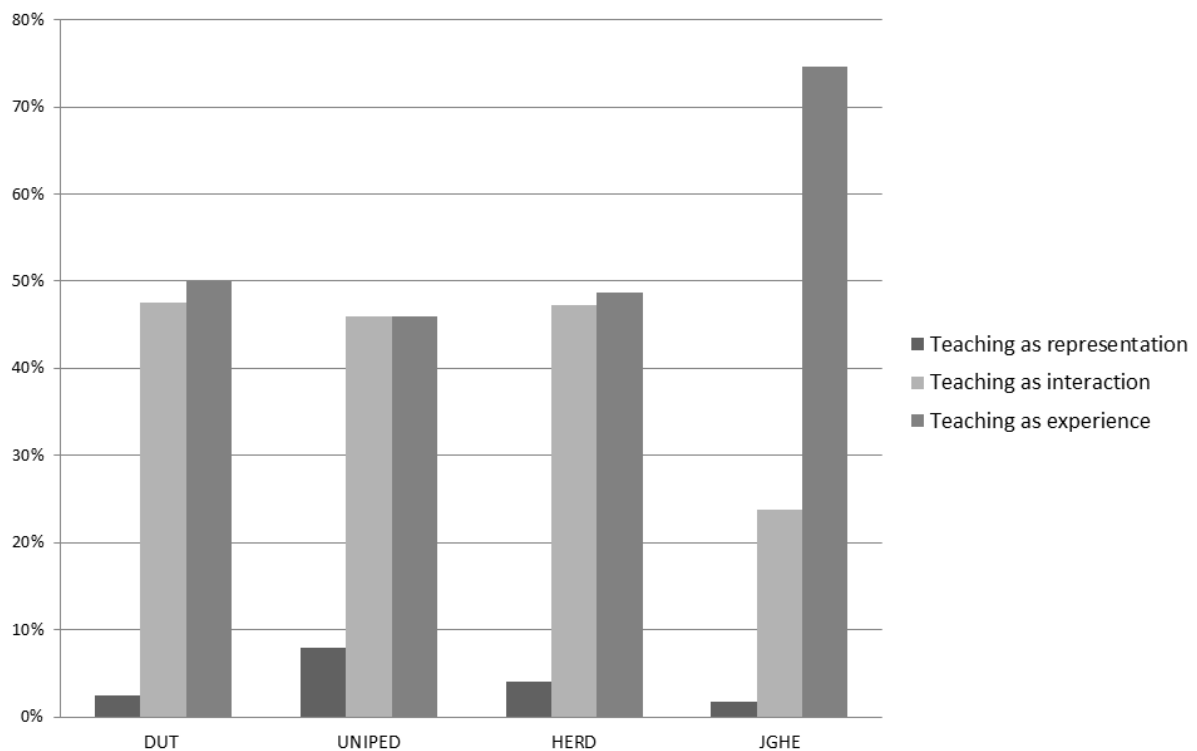

Figure 4. Distribution of contributions on methods across the three archetypes of teaching methods. Percentage of the total number of contributions on methods in the single journal.

Figure 4 shows a similar pattern across the four journals. Research on teaching methods deals unilaterally with student-centred teaching methods, either in the form of dialogue-based methods (e.g. feed-back, peer-assessment and cooperative learning) or as various types of student-centred activities (e.g. PBL, fieldwork and practice-based learning). The discipline-

specific journal stands out from the rest through a stronger interest in research on students'

interaction with contents (teaching as experience). One reason might be that fieldwork plays a

significant role in the curriculum of Geography. More than thirty articles deal with various

types of fieldwork, for example Golubchikov (2015) and Owens, Sotoudehnia, and Erickson-

McGee (2015).

Levels of Didactic Reflection

As mentioned, Heimann distinguishes between two levels of didactic reflection. The structure

analysis concerns decisions in relation to the categories that form the overall structure of

teaching. The second level of reflection, the analysis of organising factors, addresses the

underlying premises, norms and values that frame decisions made at the structural level.

Figure 5 shows the distribution between the two levels of didactic reflection. The pattern is

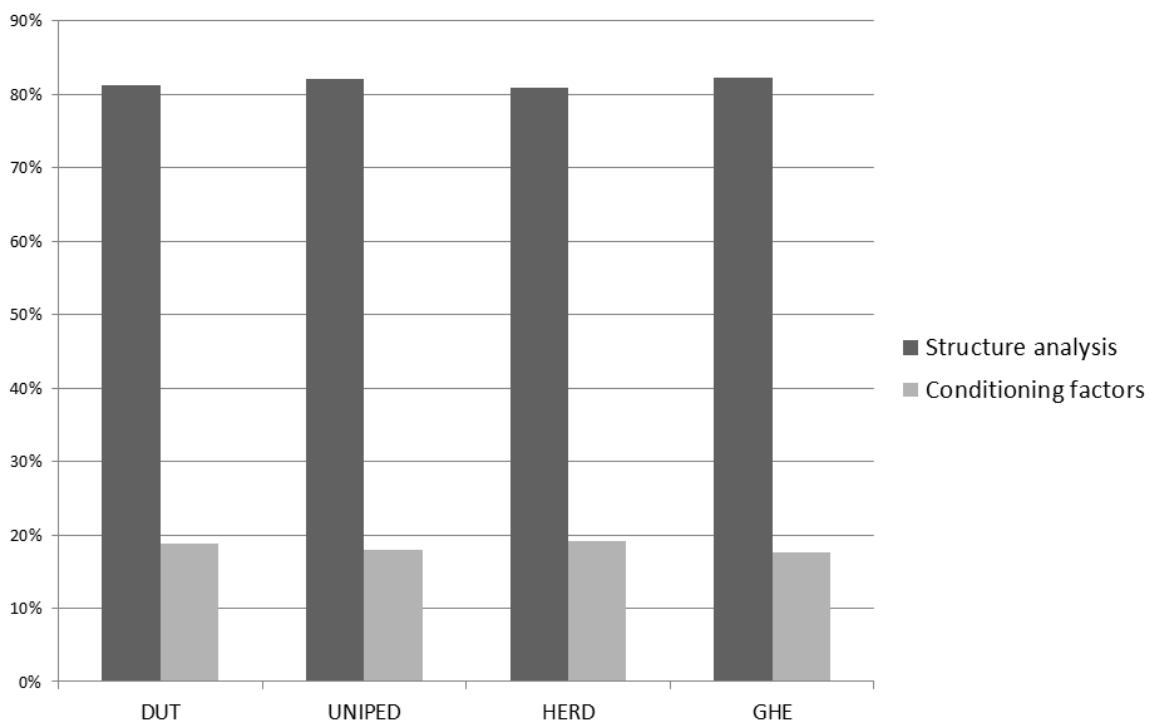almost surprisingly uniform across the four journals.

Figure 5. Distribution of abstracts on the level of didactic analysis. Percentage of the total number on didactic analysis.

We see that the majority of the abstracts deal with research directly linked to the structure of teaching (i.e. the first level of didactic reflection). Approximately one fifth of all contributions address conditioning factors (the second level of didactic reflection) such as underlying norms, assumptions and conceptual frameworks.

Discussion: What happens if research reduces didactics to methodology?

In this section we return to the question about the inherent didactic perspective of the journals. We concentrate on two distinctive characteristics across the four journals: That the vast majority of contributions deal with methods and that goal and content are rare research topics in all four journals.

The analysis shows that the majority of contributions deal with teaching methods, predominantly methods based in constructivism, social learning and active learning theory. If we consult textbooks for higher education, this seems to mirror a general pattern. Neither Biggs and Tang (2011), Fry et al. (1999) Race (2001, 2014) or Ramsden (1992) pay much attention to educational goals, contents and different theoretic approaches. According to Terhart (2003, p. 42), the immense focus on teaching methods entails the risk of ending up with 'some kind of process-didactics largely stripped of any concern for contents'. In contrast Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 52) 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'. We find a similar focus on methods in Barr and Tagg (1995, p. 15), who 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'. Hence the didactic perspective in the four journals appears to be an imprint of a general pattern.

One argument for not dealing with contents could be that the subject matter is seen merely as a means to achieve more formal learning objectives, as we have seen, for instance, with the competence orientation and in the 'learning to learn' paradigm, e.g. Novak and Gowin (1984). However, competence orientation does not eliminate the question of the selection of contents. Viewing contents merely as a means to an end does not exempt teachers from selecting something. It merely underlines that we must pay attention to both the selection of the contents and the significance of the contents. As Terhart (2003, p. 38) puts it: 'In school, matters matter'. We find a similar argument in Barnett and Coate (2005, p. 13), who describe curriculum as a 'missing term'. Also Biesta (2012) questions the current neglect of curricula issues.

We do not imply that the absence of research on the goals and contents of higher education mirrors the attention given to the topics at the practical level. The point is that neither the four journals investigated in this article, nor a selection of the dominant textbooks, provide a framework for systematic professional reflections on goal and contents. The consequence is that analytical concepts as well as new ideas on these issues currently must be found outside the journals.

According to Terhart (2003) and Richardson (2003), the 'methodification of didactics' is a general trend and a product of the constructivist paradigm, which is also the dominant epistemological position in higher education pedagogy and didactics (Auhtors 2016) The constructivist paradigm and its constant henchman 'active learning' have led to an enhanced attention towards student-centred methods, that is methods with an explorative approach to learning and methods focusing on the social dimensions of learning and learning communities (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Richardson, 2003; Terhart, 2003). This is confirmed by the

construction of the profile of the teaching methods discussed in the journals investigated in this article (Figure 4).

Our aim is not to question the relevance of the focus on student-centred activities. Nevertheless, lectures are still a significant element in the methodological repertoire and the relevance of professional discussions of this part of the curriculum has not disappeared, even though the focus on student-centred methods that evolved in the slipstream of the 'from-teaching-to-learning' paradigm has left the lecture as an unfashionable antithesis to 'active learning'. Nevertheless, the question of the function of the lecture, the interplay between lectures and other teaching activities, and not least the use of new media, are as relevant as ever (Gudjons, 2011).

Despite the focus on student-centred methods, the student perspective is not a common topic, especially in JGHE and DUT. Hence, and quite paradoxically, to a wide extent teaching is still seen through the eyes of the teacher, rather than through the eyes of the students as recommended by Hattie (2009). From a critical perspective, it seems that the impact of the 'from teaching to learning paradigm' in these journals is restricted to an enhanced focus on student-centred methods rather than a genuine interest in the students as co-producers of teaching and learning.

The majority of the contributions in the journals deal with questions directly linked to didactic decisions (first level of reflection/structure analysis). Contributions researching organising factors, such as conceptual frameworks, norms and values, are not common. The pattern might give the impression of a research driven predominantly by practical interests and problems. This does not say anything about whether didactic decisions at the practical level are embedded in theory or not. Only that underlying norms and values are uncommon research topics.

Due to rapid development of the research field, we expected to see more vivid discussions of fundamental assumptions and theoretical positions. However, even Tight (2004, p. 409) found a modest theoretical engagement in research on teaching and learning in HE. Terhart (2003, p. 25-26) more generally claims that 'genuine theoretical discussion has been largely replaced by the development and defence of certain teaching methods on a more practical level'. An imminent risk is that we end up in what Tight (2008a) describes as self-evident and self-justifying communities, inhabited by educators and teachers who are unable to reflect critically on the premises of their didactic position. The relevance of investigating conditioning factors and how they shape teachers' practice is confirmed, for instance, by OECD (2009).

Whatever is the reason, the findings indicate that there is room for scholarly discussions of underlying concepts, norms and values in higher education. An example on an urgent topic is the increasing tendency to replace 'teaching' with 'learning' and 'didactics' with 'learning theory' (Qvortrup & Keiding, 2016)

Conclusion

The analysis of around 700 abstracts from four journals shows that research on teaching and learning in higher education is strongly occupied with teaching methods, especially methods grounded in theories of active and social learning. Didactic categories such as goal, content and assessment are rare topics. Also underlying norms and values are quite uncommon topics. This might give the impression of a scholarship driven predominantly by practical interests and problems and based on a strong common ground. Nevertheless discussions of fundamental assumptions and theoretical positions seem important, especially in a relatively young research discipline. If one agrees with Tight (2008b, p. 64) that one of the main purposes of research in higher education is to sharpen the educators' mind, one could argue

that the current trend to prioritize methods makes the research on teaching and learning in higher education a somewhat one-sided sharpening tool. Further we might ask where academics find support and inspiration to develop professionally in these areas.

The findings outline several didactic topics for future research. For example regarding the intention and content of HE, seen from both academics' and students' perspective: Why are we doing this and why should exactly this content be taught and learned? Questions like this will allow for examination of common understandings and tensions in the HE-curricula.

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