Chapter 8
Boundless Writing:
Applying a Transactional Approach to Design of a Thesis Course in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the application of a transactional approach to educational design. Its purpose is to describe how such an approach could be applied to a thesis course. To fulfill this purpose the chapter unfolds by indicating that the practice of supervision faces challenges from changes in society. Technology-enhanced participation in supervision is one answer to these challenges. Inspired by scholars such as Bakhtin, Dewey, and Vygotsky the applied transactional approach expands on ideas such as dialogues and educational settings. The implementation of these ideas into the educational design intersects within two principles, group-work, and open and public exchanges of information. The transactional approach is then illustrated with the help of a first-year undergraduate thesis course in the discipline of Education.

INTRODUCTION

A general content of all higher education programs is that they include practices which aim to develop the academic writing of students. The general character of academic writing makes it a phenomenon that is accountable to all practices or situations of educational design in higher education. The design of such practices should include increasing requirements that will help students to become skilled academic writers. This growth in skills could be designed into and examined through tasks throughout their education, for example in

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terms of writing short papers or performing extended thesis-work. Usually thesis-work is located at the end of students' education. The educational design of thesis courses usually involves lectures on research methods and supervision of students work.

In thesis courses supervisors are expected to execute expertise-quality as well as embrace support for the student and help them balance between creativity and criticism (Fraser & Mathews, 1999). In this practice, various pedagogical philosophies are applied (Dysthe, 2002b), particularly with respect to the aim of supervision and what kind of action it should foster. Among other points, this means that the degree of symmetry in the relationship between the supervisor and the student differs. Students could be treated as equal to the supervisor or be placed at various levels of subordination. Furthermore, feedback could include comments from the supervisor as well as from co-students and/or external organizations (e.g., Dysthe, 2002b; Frankland, 1999; Högberg, Eriksson, Bäcklund, & Gustafsson, 1999; Kolmos, Kofoed, & Du, 2008; Parker, 2009; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007).

Design of thesis courses usually embraces models of supervision that include the performance of one-to-one participation between a single student and a teacher (de Beer & Mason, 2009). Such design emphasizes the close geographical relation between the student and the supervisor, in other words one-to-one supervision on campus (Mac Keogh, 2006). Usually, this is the way the practice of supervision is executed in the humanities and social sciences (Dysthe, Samara, & Westrheim, 2006). This design could include supervision as a physically located process at the university or be a distributed process supported by educational technologies, such as e-mail or telephones. Nevertheless, the application of such model in educational design constrains supervision within the limitations offered by the communication between the single student and the single supervisor. However, applying one-to-one models in educational design of thesis courses limits the potential of the single student. At least this is the case if we believe that learning about academic writing occurs both under the guidance of supervisors and together with peers (Vygotsky, 1934/1987). If we develop that idea, the practice of educational design needs to apply thinking that goes beyond the performance of the student-supervisor-dyad.

This chapter shows that transactional approaches to educational design embrace ideas that go beyond the above mentioned dyad. Its purpose is to describe how such an approach could be applied in a thesis course. This approach builds on ideas of how participation within educational settings is inseparable from cultural, ecological, historical, and social aspects of the surrounding environment.

The background section starts with a discussion of how changes in society impact the practice of supervision. The second paragraph in the background starts with a discussion of technology-enhanced participation and ends by linking this idea to the practice of supervision. Thereafter follows the main focus of the chapter, the application of a transactional approach in the practice of supervision. First this section discusses assumptions taken within transactional approaches and how these assumptions differ from interactional approaches. Then follows this chapter's conceptualization of the transactional approach; embracing the two concepts of educational settings and dialogues. Following that section is a case study, an educational setting that illustrates how the design approach unfolds. To give the reader a sense of context and show how the educational design of the thesis course goes beyond the traditional limits of thesis courses this section starts with a description of the program and its first year. This description focuses on aspects of academic writing that are designed into the program. The following section shows how the two design principles, *group work* and *open and public exchange of information* are applied into dialogues in a nine-step working-process in