Important factors in building students' writing competence

Some findings from my own research and experience 1990-2010

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" Academic Writing from Bachelor to PhD, Solstrand, Oct 8. 2010

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Organizing principle:
Macro – meso - micro level

Macro level:

Policy decisions at national, institutional (university/college) or faculty level (create frames for what can be decided lower down)

Meso level:

Study programme and study design (i.e. writing intensive courses, assessment & feedback decisions, peer involvement, LMS)

Micro level:

What students and teachers do (i.e. assignments, feedback and grading practices, direct instruction in aspects of writing)

My main message: it is important to understand how the 3 levels interact in order to build writing competence

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Overview of lecture

The student

- **Macro** level factors
  - I.   The Quality Reform in Norway – effect on student writing?
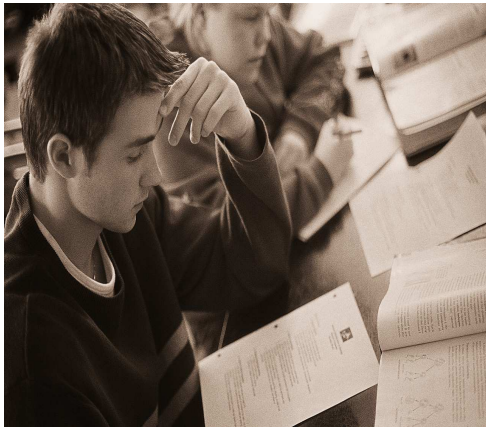 - II.   Other examples

- **Meso** level factors (Departments, Study Programmes)
  - I. Examples from UoBergen: Law - History - Education

- **Micro** level factors
  - I. Knowledge domains – what students need to write well

The teacher

- Macro: QR + technology: Changes in how teachers spend time
- Micro: What to prioritize?
- Close-up view of meso/micro: One of my latest research studies

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STUDENTS

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How the Bologna inspired Quality Reform changed student writing in HE

Changes in
- study structure: modularization
- pedagogy: 'activize students'
- assessment (reported by 71 %) led to

More writing at bachelor level
- Portfolio assessment: 37 %
- Small written assignments: 32 %
- Project work 12 %

Compulsory writing (reported by 81 %)

More follow-up from teachers

Improved quality of writing?

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Sources: NFR Research evaluation of the of QR

Dysthe, Raaheim, Lima & Bygstad (2006): Delrap.6 *Undervisnings- og vurderingsformer. Pedagogiske konsekvenser av KR*

Dysthe (2007) How a reform affects writing in higher education

Dysthe & Engelsen (2008) Portfolios in Norwegian higher education. Report from a national survey.

Survey among study programme leaders

"Has the use of portfolios influenced students' writing skills?"

	Portfolios and disciplinary writing skills		
	Worse	Better	No change-don't know
Humanities and Social Sciences	0	65	35
Natural Sciences	4	37	60
Medicine	0	80	20
Teacher education	2	67	32
Health and social professions	0	74	26
Engineering	0	56	44
Economic and administrative subjects	0	63	37

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Unintended consequences of the increase in compulsory writing

- Students' strategic prioritization of written assigments
  - Read less – and narrower
  - Attend fewer lectures & seminars
    - "*My time is structured by assignments*"
- Increased workload: reduced text quality?
  - "I just do the minimum needed to pass"
  - "No time for experiments. You play safe"

  Conclusion:

- **Quantity is an important factor in stud writing dev.**
  When is it too much?

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Other macro level decisions that influence conditions for student writing development

- Establishment of Research Schools

- Establishment of Writing Centres & Language Centres
  - Centre for Language and Communication Chalmers TU
  - Writing Centre in Humanities and in Social Science Copenhagen U
  - Writing centre at DPU, Århus U
  - Professional service offering writing courses (ILS, UoOslo)

- Worth while to lobby for such investments at institutional or departmental level
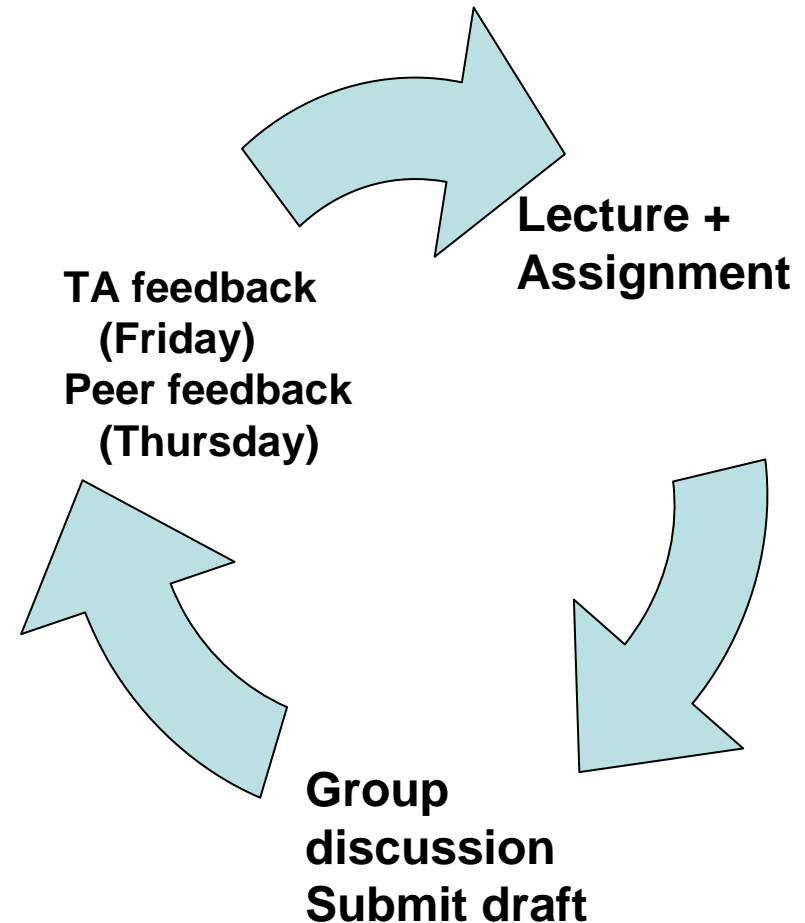
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Meso level factors influencing stud writing

- **Faculty / department decisions**
  - "Strategic Plan for Writing from Ba to PhD" (Hum/UoB)
    - Article by Dysthe & Hertzberg 2006
  - Use of LMS (KARK, It's Learning)
- **Study programme decisions**
  - Use of resources
  - Assessment
- **How the study design affects students' writing**
  - 1. Law - strict structuring
  - 2. History - portfolios
  - 3. Education – 'writing-to-learn'

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Change of study design that directly affected student writing: Faculty of Law, UoB

- Before the QR: High failure rate, low student satisfaction
- **Major change**
  - **From very loose structure (self study + exams) to strictly structured bachelor, including regular compulsory writing**
  - **First 3 years: Weekly cycles**

- **Effect** on failure rate, grades, students' writing competence

- **Research studies by Arne Vines**

Lecture + Assignment

TA feedback (Friday)
Peer feedback (Thursday)

Group discussion Submit draft

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Another example: History, UoB

Assesement, technology, pedagogy, use of resources

Regular writing and electronic feedback built into course:
- Portfolio framework for regular student writing
- Open access
- Compulsory peer comments
- TAs & teacher feedback
- Only final text graded

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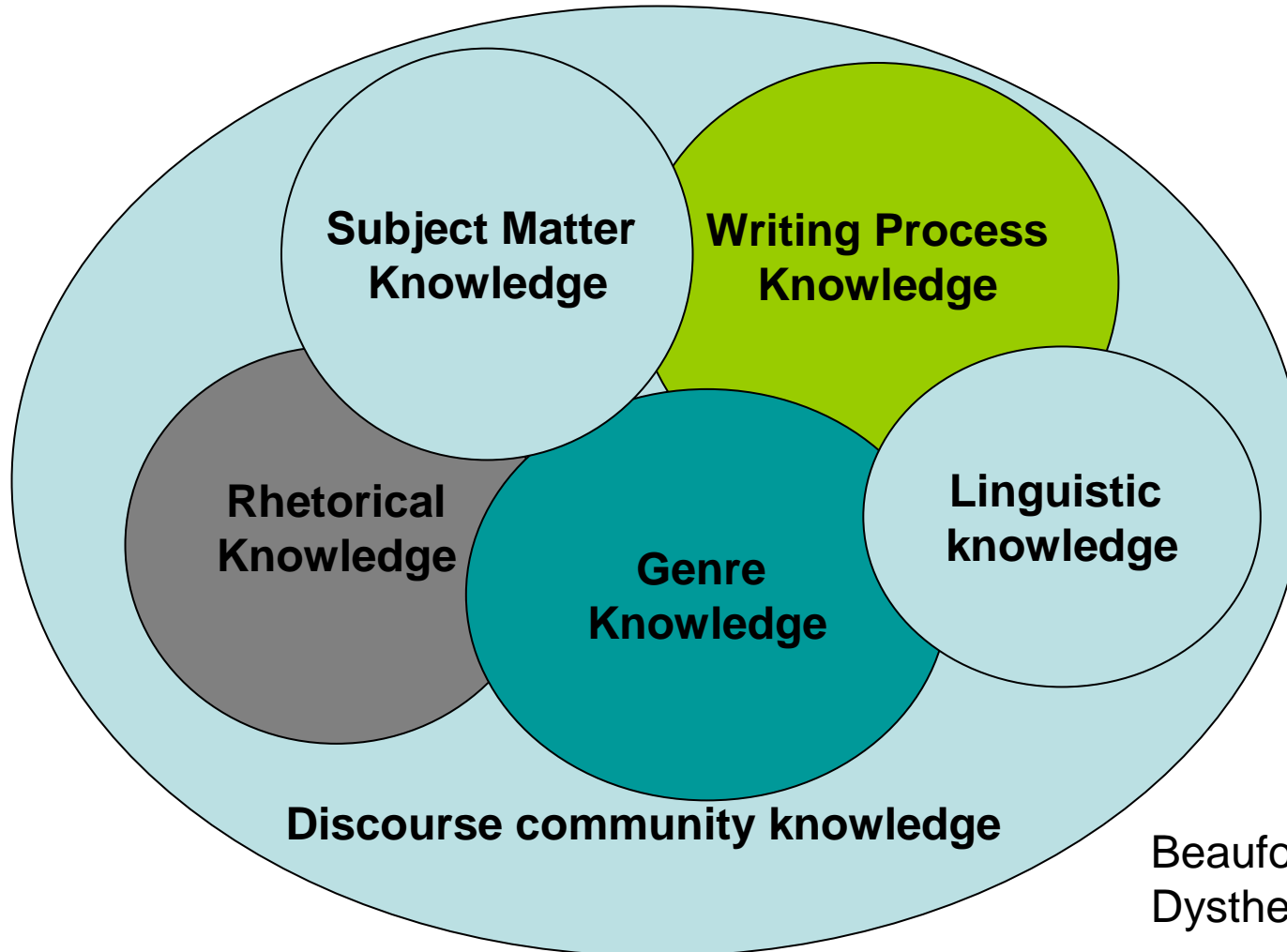Dysthe, O. & Tolo, A. (2007) Digital portfolios and feedback practices in a traditional university course

Wake, J. D., Dysthe, O., & Mjelstad, S. (2007) New and changing teacher roles in a digital age. *Educational Technology & Society*

MICRO LEVEL
What students need to know to improve their writing competence
'Trouble spots'

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Knowledge areas in disciplinary writing

Subject Matter Knowledge

Writing Process Knowledge

Rhetorical Knowledge

Genre Knowledge

Linguistic knowledge

Discourse community knowledge

Beaufort (2004)
Dysthe (2010)

Writing Process in Norway

- NB 1. Norwegian process writing includes rhetorical and genre knowledge (cf Hertzberg, Ongstad)

- NB 2. Process writing is disappering from our schools!
  Cf the "Fager" project

- What are key elements
  - **Strategies for different stages in the writing process**
  - **Writing-to-think, writing-to-learn**
  - **Feedback *in* the process**
  - **Use of peers**
  - **Revision**
  - **…**

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Higher Ed: No alternative to process approach

Why?

- **This is how we write for publication**

- **Meets student reported needs**
  - start writing
  - find problem formulation
  - structure text
  - build argumentation
  - deal with writer's block   …

- **Makes students more confident as writers**
  - "I am an oral thinker"
  - 'Planners' and 'Revisors' (chaos-writers) (Torrance & Torrance)

  - *Ord på nye spor (1987/1993) Skrive for å lære (2010)*

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Genre competence

- **Recent debate about 'IMRaD'**
- **Increased genre variety in Norw. HE (Dysthe/Engelsen 2004)**

Two approaches:
- **Academic article focus**
- **Broad genre approach**

Conclusion:
Students need to be taught *explicitly* the genres they are expected to hand in

Portfolio genres	Hum/Sam (Teach.)	MS
Expository & argumentative texts	**66 (77)**	**31**
Reflective texts	**16 (63)**	**7**
Case & project assigments	**28 (64)**	**38**
Factual tests	**8 (11)**	**38**
Practice related assignments	**36 (64)**	**11**
Lab. assignm.	**7 (13)**	**29**

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My first study of *students' experience* of what helped their writing:

Master students' request to teachers:

Make sure we start to **write early**

Give us clear **assigments**

Organise **writing groups**

Give us constructive and rapid **feedback**

Be in **dialogue** with us

Teach us **revision**

Give us insight in how you yourself write"
  (be **personal**)

Dysthe/Kjeldsen/ Breistein/Lie:

Fagskriving og rettleiing i tre fagdisipliner på universitetet (99, 01)

Studentperspektiv på veiledning (2006)

Dysthe, O. (2002): Professors as mediators of academic text culture.

Written Communication

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"It is the teacher's responsibility to give students the tools they need to succeed"

(Joan Cone 1992)

TEACHERS

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QR: Changes in what teachers spend time on

	University colleges			Universities			
69 % in the national QR survey reported great or medium changes in their teaching activities. These were asked about time spent on different teaching acitivites (percentage) [National Survey 2004]							
	Clearly more %	About the same %	**Clearly less %**	**Clearly more %**	About the same %	**Clearly less %**	
Written feedback to students	77	21	2	68	31	2	
Supervision	79	19	3	60	19	3	
Exam related work	53	39	8	64	32	4	
Seminars	24	68	9	47	50	4	
Plenary lectures	10	55	35	16	73	12	

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Increased workload: Teachers must prioritize

Writing tasks/assignments

- "*We spend much more time on formulating writing tasks than earlier and we often work together. When we use portfolios, the assignments tend to structure students' reading and learning, and we have to make sure that they focus on core issues*" (History teacher)

Feedback

- The clearest finding in educational research: feedback is crucial for student learning + & - (Black & Wiliam 1998, Shute 2006, Hattie 2009)

The 1000 $ question:

- **How to give cost-effective and 'productive' feedback?**

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Close-up: a recent research study
"What's the purpose of feedback when revision is not expected?"

A case study of feedback practices and study design in a first year master programme showing the interdependence of meso and micro

5th EATAW Conference, Coventry, GB
June 30. - July 2. 2009

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Research questions

Quality of feedback

- Characteristic traits of teacher feedback?

Use of feedback

- To what extent and how is the feedback information being used by students?

Learning from feedback

- How does the *study design* influence student learning?

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Framework for analysing teacher feedback
Feedback is evidence about:

- Where am I going? FEED UP
- How am I going?   FEED BACK
- Where to next?   FEED FORWARD

Hattie & Timperley 2008

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Findings 1

Mostly *implicit* feed-forward

Implicit:

>"Your conclusion is 'common sense' "

>"Who talks in the text,- you or the literature?"

>"Where is your argument"

>Do students recognize what to do? Know how to?

Explicit:

- "formulate your own controling questions"
- "present your own viewpoint"
- "write in your own voice"

>Does feed-forward mean just 'what to' do or also 'how to'?

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Findings 2

Clear, personal, confrontational, dialogic feedback + feed forward function best for students

Examples of dialogic & personal fb:

- "I think this is unnecessary, - but you may disagree?"
- "In my view … What do you think?"

Cf Stanford study (Rogers, 2010): Students: we need dialogue and discussion with teacher and peers

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Findings 3

- **Too much feedback**
  - **"Fewer comments & expect students to deal with them"**

- **What did the students do with feedback**?
- **Not much!!**
  - Why? The study design counteracted teacher's efforts
    Students were not asked to revise

  - Teachers spent a lot of their time giving feedback that was not used
  - Do you?

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Practical implications of this study:
Changes made in our study programme

- **More direct teaching of writing**
- **Goals**
  - **More presise goals for writing assignments**
    - **Distinguish more clearly between 'writing-to-learn' assignments and writing in acad genres**
- **Criteria**
  - **Work on criteria with students**
- **Feedback**
  - **Seminar for teachers about quality fb**
  - **Combine written and oral fb**
  - **Systematic use of peer feedback**
- **Revision**
  - **Fewer assignments - revision expected**
  - **Revision competence – part of writing courses**

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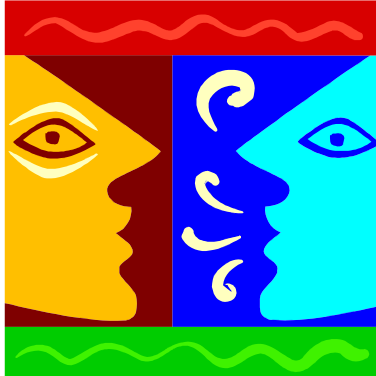
in groups of 3

- What changes will you prioritize after this conference? (meso / micro level)

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