

# Reflections on MA thesis work on Communication for Development

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## Abstract

This essay is a review of experiences with coordinating the final thesis or Degree Project course (15 ECTS) that completes the MA in Communication or Development at Malmö University, as well as a look into the future. The essay contains reflections on the particularities of ComDev 'trekking'. The program and the majority of the degree projects have a strong focus on communication interventions specifically in contexts of development/social change. This has given the new and interdisciplinary subject area a strong orientation leading to many innovative degree projects. However, some degree projects also struggle with how to handle an ambitious body of empirical field research material and reaching theoretical depth in the analysis.

## Trekking

The *journey* to a BA or MA in the humanities or social sciences is often completed with what many students would refer to as a hard but also a very enriching *trek* and learning experience on top of other more minor assignments or exams during an academic program. This essay engages with the final *degree project* (A 15 ECTS written thesis, around 17.000 words long) of the 2 year part time MA in Communication for Development taught at Malmö University in Sweden. The program can be studied as a distance program, though with a range of interactive and collaborative elements which make it very different from traditional distance learning, where the student often works as the lone learner throughout. However the program also offer traditional class room study: Four times a year Students of 'ComDev' (a common short hand for our program) also have the option to attend extensive weekend seminars, held in situ in Malmö or in other class/seminar venues. The seminars can also be followed online: distance students participate in interactive silent chat forums facilitated by a lecturer. This web interaction format and the variety of students from all over the world – many with various practical experience within the field - creates class rooms online that benefit both the program staff and the students in overall positive and enriching ways throughout. While the courses up until the degree project is based on smaller assignments, attending lectures (online or in situ), and group work, the thesis or degree project phase is dedicated to half a year of thesis writing. Students receive feedback on a brief project plan at the beginning of the term as on a midway process paper. A few seminars and facilitation is also offered on this course in addition to personal supervision.

I used the metaphors *journey* and *trek* to begin with. They came to me by accident, but I thought the accident proved to be interesting, for a few reasons: *Journey* may be a word that slips into our speech as a way of making sense of movement and travel as processes of an often demanding and unpredictable character. *Trekking* has a more specific usage. Allegedly from Afrikaans, to

pull or travel, it most often refers to journeys on foot of a particular challenging and adventurous character.

I also find the ‘footwork’ interesting here for other reasons. ComDev degree project workers have often literally walked up next to what they wanted to analyze and spent time in that particular community-, NGO- or project-context for a while. Degree project authors have not, however, tried to fulfill the ethos ‘don’t judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his moccasins’ - associated with the anthropologist Malinowski, but coming from a Sioux prayer<sup>2</sup>. Degree projects are however generally ambitious in terms of scope of empirical material. In relation to this dictum of trying to become part of, or at least for a while putting and projecting oneself into the rhythm and habits of other people’s lives (‘going native’), the degree projects have nevertheless, in addition to various forms of interviewing, often utilized participatory observation as one of the data collection techniques. The strong engagement with - or at least a declared adherence to - participatory approaches and a focus on horizontal means of communication and cultural exchange in a range of development communication schools of thought and practice may also have influenced the choice of data production on ComDev degree projects. The thesis authors have - surely affected by program syllabus and readings - found clusters of ethnographic methods suitable for the research questions and themes they engaged with. Wisely, these methods have been coupled with various forms of textual analysis where the media as a conduit for the communication practices have come under scrutiny, e.g. films, plays, policy documents, monuments or other, have been investigated in their specific synchronous or contemporary as well as asynchronous or historical contexts.

### **Australia, Tanzania, Ghana, Egypt, Cambodia...**

To give some examples of what a ComDev degree project can set out to do, I will briefly introduce some recent and successful degree projects. Casey McCarthy researched media development in transitional democratic Cambodia, and her main research questions were: “Have media development activities in Cambodia, as the country transitions toward democracy, been effective in enabling the media to operate as a ‘watchdog’? If so, in which ways?” In this degree project, interviews as well as policy documents were key empirical data.

Jake Hunter & Patrik Jonasson investigated ICT4D in Ghana, focusing on the role of video conferencing projects for cultural exchange and development. Their primary research questions were these: “How can ICT video conferencing projects in Ghana be a useful tool in achieving sustainable development, knowledge and cultural exchange, and what can they tell us about the current state of efforts involving ICT projects with similar purposes?”. One degree project done collaboratively by a pair of students is rare. It is most commonly a one person trek.

In another rare case, Cassandra Doyle and Karen Thulstrup wrote one degree project each, but conceptually, methodologically and also in terms of the theme of choice, they conducted the study as a close collaboration. They were both concerned with the use of participatory photography to stimulate critical thinking among youth. Doyle’s work *Do You See What I See* engaged with youth in central Australia, while Thulstrup’s *At Risk* focused on youth in northern Tanzania. Doyle and Thulstrup both stayed in the chosen communities for weeks, worked with them to develop a trustful relationship, handed out cameras and instructions and so forth. They

had the same supervisor (me) and often had supervision meetings together (via Skype, connecting Australia, Tanzania and Denmark). A comparison of results was also part of their work. Maurizio Rontani addressed children's drawings, a type of media not often researched on ComDev, in a particular project (entitled 'Patrimonio') about youth and their relation to heritage and development. The degree project became a work about visual storytelling in different places in the world and the potential of heritage education *from* and *for* children. Narrative and semiotic theory were utilized in the analysis of drawings.

The projects mentioned above have been approved during 2010-2012. A recently examined project (Jan 2013) by Rebecca Bengtsson follows a not surprising trend in media studies: scrutinizing the use of the internet in times of crisis. Her work weaves the themes of social media, democracy, activism and social movements. Bengtsson addressed the use of live streaming for citizen journalism in Syria and Egypt.

All of the projects mentioned above engaged to a varied extent with interviews as empirical data. More classical projects on radio, which were among the first I examined on ComDev (2004), are still produced at present. At least 3 have been produced since 2009.

144 works have been completed in total by July 2013 (the first batch was finished in 2001, and all in degree projects were written and examined in English from 2004 and onwards). In recent years, with a higher student in-take (and still many being rejected due to large numbers applying), the number of degree projects passed has been higher. In 2012 it was 23 projects. We have, however, also seen more projects either not completed in time, or not passed at the exam. This surely challenge's the staff: how to respond to help the students to perform better – and how to handle the larger number of students and projects?

The degree projects mentioned are available through [MUEP](#). In addition, several of the authors have written shorter articles about their works in previous issues of [Glocal Times](#). See also the articles by Rebecca Bengtsson, Erliza Lopez Pedersen and Carolin Törnqvist in in this issue.

## Other ways of trekking

Returning to the metaphor of trekking and the empirical field research that most degree projects focus upon (although with other forms of work and data included), the new coordinator Tobias Denskus recently asked raised this question: "How can we make traditional, 'boring', indoors research more attractive for students?" Denskus thought that more "traditional research in libraries, archives, organizational repositories" could play a stronger role in future ComDev degree projects. "In short, material that is not available online and older than 5 or so years", he wrote. Denskus, a development anthropologist, would also like to see more thorough literature reviews in future work: "to find the right balance between action research and the academic rigor that a thesis requires". The importance of literature reviews is related to Denskus' point on indoors work.

Denskus note on the need of 'in doors' or desk top research may, in my view, be seen as a needed compass helping the explorative ComDev trekker in the field It may not compromise the field work to conduct a more thorough literature review. As noted, it may in fact strengthen the focus of the field work. A closer engagement with related empirical research in the field may also help

students to allow for a narrower selection of field material and more attention to detail in the analysis? Looking back, there are however obvious strengths in terms of the new territories of research that so many students have explored not only empirically but also theoretically, by interestingly not only combining but also creating a new form cultural and communication studies merging with development and ethnography/anthropology (i.e. a hybrid understood as third and new position/creation, not just a mixture of elements 1 and 2 etc).

Program head and initiator of the original ComDev course (the course became a program in 2011<sup>3</sup>), Oscar Hemer, also notices the importance of the focus on *culture* in the program: “I think it is important to maintain the balance between Communication, Culture and Development. ComDev has a strong Cultural Analysis element, which I find the more important now that MKV seems to be moving in a more Media-centered direction and Cultural Studies in general are being weakened at MAH.” Hemer is here referring to changes on BA on MA level with Media and Communication Studies (MKV) at Malmö University (MAH). I would add to this that the BA program in Media and Communication Studies has the subtitle ‘Strategy, Activism and Entrepreneurship’ (my translation), themes also of strong concern on ComDev, which also makes it crucial for ComDev to continue to develop its program. Hemer also suggests an equal emphasis towards ‘development’ as well as the possibility of extending the program to a 2 year MA degree: “...to equally strengthen the Development part, in order to secure ComDev's position as a subject in its own right. As a consequence I believe we should strive for a closer – yet critical – connection to the field of development cooperation, that is, to ComDev as a practice. And a crucial concern is to establish the 2 year degree – which will mean a second DP, which automatically will imply improvement by giving students who proceed to the two-year Master the chance to learn from the mistakes on the first DP and refine the methods and analytical tools.”

### **Crossroads, arguments and libraries**

In addition to the proposed developments reflected upon above by Denskus, Hemer and myself, the program could be further improved in the light of the present weaknesses and challenges. The one year MA, though studied over 2 years half time (importantly, catering for students who possibly already works in the field or have a related job), has tended to become very ambitious for a one year MA, and has introduced a range of themes and assignment formats that creates a sense of ‘trying many things one time’. This makes life harder for those who prefer more repetition, or practicing certain skills to refine them. The 2 year MA option, which Hemer mentioned, would provide such an avenue. As the MA is now, we see students that do not manage, or who are not trained well enough yet, to gain an in depth focus in their particular interdisciplinary journey. In ComDev, interdisciplinarity is not necessarily width, but a particular sort of depth that can be hard to manage, since tradition is not so well established. There is – particularly in recent examinations - a handful of F (Fail), as well as unfinished and not submitted works. Many students do not manage to finish in time. Although only 15 ECTS and part time, in scope the degree project almost looks like a 30 ECTS master thesis. Student’s ambitions (in between doing work, since many work professionally part time or full time) also lead to delays.

In our guidance and course syllabus formulations, we may have encouraged authors to conceive many unpredictable projects, carving out new territory of data that other researchers have not 'trekked' and produced their account of earlier. Our frame and program format may however also be challenging for students who work besides their part time stud. Not all students manage to pull through the necessary literature reviews, which again makes analysis weak. An argument against being cautious about advocating for very extensive literature reviews is that a thesis should build an argument and not a library, in Rudestam and Newton's words (2002: 59).

In the future, staff should aim to help degree project workers not to strand at field 'crossroads'. It is important that students do not get stuck with the ComDev 'blues': a particular form of frustration characterized by the unclear positioning of the work in terms of strands of inspiration (literature review) and direction and depth (theories and analysis). This is particularly important in the academic ComDev field which advocates a width of opportunity in terms of themes, theories and empirical focus. The width is however complemented with depth by the focus towards processes of social change (whether its inspiration is educational communication, media studies, visual ethnography or/and a combination). A ComDev degree project is a trek into something new, to some extent, one could argue. The 'map' of the syllabus is one thing. The territory of thesis writing and material is another. Only a dozen programs teaching communication for development exist worldwide, and many of those are not more than a few years or a decade old. It is still new territory, though now also a confident and settled field where many Malmö candidates in ComDev at this time are writing is writing up their PhD thesis.

## **Tradition and Invention**

Stability and tradition can provide a route to an academic life of safety, but also predictability and standstill. As an end reflection, I also develop here arguments relating to the academic journey that leads up to the degree project. In the past 2-3 years, my time as coordinator, we have seen a stronger concern with New Media as focus as well as a strong awareness of Research Methodology in many of the works. Hemer also notices the stronger attention to research methodology, in his comments. The term that leads up to the Degree Project includes the courses 'New media, ICT and Development' and then 'Research Methodology'. It may be natural that projects relate to what is closely experienced. Yet, the nitty-gritty textual analysis that students engaged with in the last module on the first year term (Culture and Media Analysis) may be one of the next aspects to focus on in particular – which leads me back to Hemer's point on the importance of cultural analysis.

A second issue I want to address is a strength and weakness at the same time. I have always found it intriguing that ComDev, have differently arranged exams or end assignments in each module or course throughout the two years. Not two assignments are quite alike. I am here returning to the issue of variation but also lack of repetition and refinement in the program, addressed earlier. New inventions have been introduced, yet tradition and stability have provided ground for development. However, as noticed each new assignment has a format differing from former formats – and this also influences how students are equipped when reaching the Degree Project phase. My point is more easily clarified by going through the different assignment

formats one by one: The course Media, Globalization and Development has a module called Globalization and Communication. The assignment here has a three step structure; an introduction, then peer commenting, then conclusion writing. An interactive peer-to-peer format. The second module on this course, 'Culture and Development', has a literature review home exam and a relatively free essay. The first half of the second term (which however also can be studied as first term) is dedicated to the study of key players/NGOs organizational mandate and approaches to ComDev. Recently a book review has been introduced. The second half of this term is followed by key approaches to textual analysis. This leads to the second year with a focus on blog production and analysis on the New Media, ICT and Development course and then a testing of field methods on Research Methodology where students select two data collection techniques and try them out on particular questions. And finally: the degree project.

Students are in this way challenged throughout with different approaches to writing, learning and being assessed, but then again a particular format of writing longer critical analysis in the same way, many times, is not the focus of the program. In my own MA program (cultural studies) in England in the late 1990s we wrote the same length academic essay analysis each month, but each time with a new theme, new sets of questions and new literature. We became accustomed to a very specific form of writing which could be refined throughout - and then transferred to an MA degree project proposal and afterwards a final and more expansive paper, the thesis. We did however also a book review and oral presentations. However, it is here a particular style of writing and rigour was trained. The ComDev degree project workers can, and should, obviously rely on literature and topic matters engaged with on their MA, but may have to go back to their bachelor thesis to find a similar sort of thesis writing.

As a way of ending the reflections, a crucial step forward for the ComDev program could be a flexible model where a 1 year MA as well as an extend 2 year MA is possible. The extension could introduce courses that may engage a in a refined manner with cultural analysis as well as with development in practice – including more extensive 'in door' / desk top research (to pick from the comments by Hemer, Denskus and myself). Importantly, all students will complete the 1 year MA first, and then they may take a break or begin direct studying the extended MA, which also would involve a new DP or similar. There is no plan to dismantle the existing 1 year MA. It will remain a shorter and faster MA for students that work besides their studies, or want to do postgraduate study in steps. The one year MA (2 years Part Time) ending with the present Degree Project is still a demanding and adventurous 'trek'.

## References

Rudestam, Kjell Erik and Newton, Rae R. (2007) *Surviving Your Dissertation* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). London: Sage

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Development. He did his PhD on alternative education for youth in Israel and his research has continued to be concerned with issues of communal memory and change in artistic, educational and social activity.

<sup>2</sup> "Oh Great Spirit, keep me from ever judging a man until I have walked a mile in his moccasins". Sioux prayer. See e.g. S Bloom (2005) 'Lessons of a Lifetime' *Smithsonian Magazine*. Online at [http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/lesson\\_lifetime.html](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/lesson_lifetime.html)

<sup>3</sup> Communication for Development was a postgraduate course consisting of modules only until 2009, when it became an MA program consisting of a range of independent courses. The total ECTS is still 60, as it was before 2009.