Case Competitions:
An Opportunity for Building Knowledge about
Professional Translation

ANNE SCHJOLDAGER

Abstract

The paper presents and discusses a teaching project with case competitions for MA students of specialised translation at the Aarhus School of Business (ASB), Aarhus University. The project was intended as one way of helping participants to prepare for working life by giving them an opportunity for building knowledge about professional translation. The paper gives some background information about our MA of specialised translation and then sets out to discuss what sort of knowledge translation students are expected to acquire while still at university. It presents and discusses the aims and setup of two case competitions that were organised at the ASB. Drawing on the results of a series of online questionnaires, the paper ascertains how the project was evaluated by the participating students and what sort of knowledge they seem to have been building in connection with their participation.

1. Introduction

While all university programmes aim at giving students academic qualifications, some also intend to help students prepare for future careers within a particular profession. Our MA programme of specialised translation in the Department of Language and Business Communication at the Aarhus School of Business (ASB), Aarhus University, is an example of such a profession-oriented university programme. It is not always easy to make a connection between academic and professional qualifications, and relatively recently we have discovered that our programme might not meet students' career needs as well as it probably should. In 2008, we therefore launched a reformed MA programme of specialised translation, which includes a

professional development module. The reform draws in part on the results of and our experience with a teaching project that attempted to bridge the well-known gap between the academic world and professional practice. The project was carried out as two case competitions in collaboration with a couple of local translation companies, OVERSÆTTERHUSET and SCANTEXT OVERSÆTTELSER. We think that the project helped to accelerate students' learning curves by combining academic education with simulated on-the-job training, professional knowledge communication and a competitive element.

Section 2 gives some background information about the ASB and our MA programme of specialised translation. Section 3 will discuss what kind of knowledge our students are expected to have acquired when they graduate as specialised translators. Section 4 presents and discusses the aims and setup of the teaching project with case competitions. Section 5 draws on a series of online questionnaires to ascertain how the project was evaluated by the participating students and to discover what sort of knowledge they seem to have been building. Section 6 concludes the paper with a few reflections on case competitions as a teaching method.

2. Background

Defining ourselves as an international business university, we would like to think that we are good at helping students acquire those academic and professional competences that they will need in their future careers. The ASB website, for instance, mentions that our EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) accreditation guarantees a compliance with "strict quality criteria on education, internationalisation and cooperation with the corporate world" (Aarhus School of Business). In the Department of Language and Business Communication, we educate specialists in foreign languages and international business communication. In our BA programme, students obtain degrees in two foreign languages – English, German, French or Spanish – or in a foreign language and European or communication studies. To be eligible for our MA programme, students need a BA degree with the foreign language in

question. Many students enrol on the basis of a BA from the Department of Language and Business Communication, but students also come with other BA language degrees. The MA programme of specialised translation forms part of our MA (*cand.ling.merc.*) in a foreign language and international business communication. We offer English, German, French and Spanish as foreign languages. My own work lies mainly within the section that educates specialised translators (and interpreters) between Danish and English, but in the teaching project with case competitions I worked with students from all four language sections.

As mentioned in the introduction, we have rather recently become aware that our MA programme of specialised translation might not meet students' career needs as well as it probably should: Contacts in companies and the translation industry tend to complain that our graduates seem to lack a proper understanding of professional norms and working conditions, and former students, who have gone on to do all sorts of jobs, including translation, say that professional life is different from what they had been led to expect as students. This gap between the academic world and professional practice is not uncommon, but since our MA programme in specialised translation is supposed to prepare students for working life, we feel that our graduates *should* be given an opportunity for building profession-oriented knowledge. The teaching project with case competitions was our first attempt towards developing a specific component that would focus on profession-oriented knowledge building.

3. What do students need to know?

First of all, I would like to point out that knowledge is the result of a rather complex learning process – not merely a question of collecting data and gathering information, though this is part of the process too. Following Davenport and Prusak (1998), Kastberg (2007: 18ff) proposes a three-step model of knowledge building:

> *Data* (phenomena in the world) are registered.
> Data are compared and *information* is created.
> Information is evaluated, integrated and inferred on and *knowledge* is built.

While recognising that knowledge building occurs in interaction with other people and in certain environments (communities), Kastberg emphasises the cognitive change in people's minds. McDermott's (2000) definition mirrors the same approach: "Knowledge is the residue of thinking. Knowledge comes from experience. However, it is not just raw experience. It comes from experience that we have reflected on, made sense of, tested against other's experience" (McDermott 2000: 25). This approach to knowledge fits in very well with what we were trying to achieve in the teaching project reported on in this paper.

Presumably the aim of all education is to give students an opportunity for knowledge building. Some of this knowledge relates to the *academic* competences of reasoning and judgement. Like other university graduates, our students certainly need this kind of knowledge. Other knowledge relates to *specific* competences, and a third kind relates to *profession-oriented* knowledge. I shall now attempt to define first the specific knowledge and then the profession-oriented knowledge that we think our students of specialised translation need to build.

Emphasising that knowing languages is *not* enough, Schäffner (2000: 146f) lists six competences that are required for translation. I regard this list as representative of the specific knowledge that we are aiming at in our programme of specialised translation. The following presents Schäffner's competences in a paraphrased form and in knowledge terms (see also Schjoldager 2008: 20):

Linguistic knowledge: The translator needs proficiency in the languages that s/he is translating between.

Cultural knowledge: The translator needs to know the historical, political, economic, and other relevant background of the source-text sender(s) and the target-text receiver(s).

Textual knowledge: The translator needs to know about genre and register conventions and other textual regularities that are relevant for the assignment at hand.

Subject-specific knowledge: The translator needs relevant background knowledge about the topic or field in question.

Research knowledge: The translator needs to know how to search for and acquire relevant knowledge about the topic or field in question. S/he also needs to be critical of what s/he finds (especially on the web).

Transfer knowledge: The translator needs to know how to use a source text appropriately and to produce a target text that can fulfil target-language receivers' (readers' and listeners') needs and expectations. This integrates all the above-mentioned kinds of knowledge and is the only one that is specific to translation (Schäffner 2000: 148).

We assume that students who enrol in our MA programme already possess advanced linguistic, cultural and textual knowledge (though, admittedly, this is not always the case), and we assume that they have also started building some research and transfer knowledge. We therefore concentrate on giving students an opportunity for building subject-specific knowledge while also helping them to develop other kinds of academic and specific knowledge. Thus, it is compulsory for students of specialised translation to take translation courses within the fields of science & technology, finance & economics and law while also taking general courses within linguistics, translation studies and communication theory. In addition, all MA students have to write a final thesis based on a research project of their own choice. We encourage students of specialised translation to write their theses within translation studies.

As we see it, profession-oriented knowledge about translation may be of three kinds:

1. Knowledge about the translation *profession*: How is the profession organised? How does one become a professional translator? What are the working conditions? What are the working procedures? What kind of technology is required?
2. Knowledge about professional *ethics*: What characterises proper professional behaviour? Which rules are specific to the translation profession? Which professional norms prevail?

3. Knowledge about professional *strategies*: How does one decide on a general approach to a given translation assignment? In the course of the actual message transfer, how does one deal with a number of specific problems?

The question is then: How can students build this kind of knowledge while still at university? A traditional way is to teach students about translation theory and to make them apply this to practical examples taken from professional life. Such theoretical insights could be based on practice-oriented textbooks like Nord (1997), Samuelsson-Brown (2003) and (2006) and Schjoldager (2008). However, even if this theory is applied to (rather) authentic examples, we doubt that it is sufficient to help students build proper profession-oriented knowledge.

Another approach, which is becoming increasingly popular, at least in Denmark, is to allow students to leave their studies for a while to work as translator trainees. Samuelsson-Brown (2003: 8f) refers to this as work-experience placement. In work-experience placements, students are supposed to build the sort of knowledge that professional translators build in the course of their working lives, talking to and interacting with more experienced colleagues. Referring to university-based knowledge building as *education* and profession-based knowledge building as *training*, Brian Mossop, a well-known translation scholar and experienced head translator in the Canadian Government Translation Bureau, argues that university-based translation programmes "must uphold the traditional distinction between education and training" and must leave students' training to a translation company or a corporate or government translation department (Mossop (2000: 1).

However, though our MA students of specialised translation *are* allowed to apply for work-experience placements, it is our impression that these are rather time-consuming and that they vary greatly in terms of students' learning outcomes. Therefore, as a supplement to practice-oriented theoretical insights, which we think are useful but insufficient, and as an alternative to work-experience placements, which we fear may not be the best method after all, we came up with the idea of organising case competitions. By combining academic education with simulated on-the job training,

professional knowledge communication and a competitive element, we hoped that the case competitions would help students to learn about professional translation in an interesting and efficient way.

4. Case competitions

In this section, I shall explain the background and setup of our case competitions. We were inspired by the international case competitions that have been held by the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) for teams of selected business students from many universities since 2002, when case competitions were a mainly North American phenomenon. The aim of the CBS Case Competition is cited on its official website: "to offer the participants a chance to experience the kind of challenges they will be facing after graduating" (CBS Case Competition). An additional – and quite legitimate – aim is to promote the CBS and its business students. Each year, the CBS Case Competition is organised around a theme and a case representing a real problem faced by the case company. (In 2008, the theme of the CBS Case Competition was excellence, and the company was Bang and Olufsen.)

Our case competitions were probably the first to be organised by a language department, and we know of no other case competitions in translation. The general aim mirrored that of the CBS Case Competition, emphasising the professional element:

> To give students of specialised translation an opportunity to build and demonstrate knowledge required by the translation profession.

A more specific aim emphasised the competitive element:

> To give students of specialised translation an opportunity to compete with each other, thereby encouraging them to strive for excellence.

In addition, we tried to use the project to enhance the visibility of our MA programme and make potential employers more aware of the qualifications (employability) of our graduates. Thus, for instance, news articles about the various stages of the case competitions, especially the finals, were published on the ASB

website and sent out in newsletters to the local press by our marketing department. We also hoped that the attention given to our case competitions would boost our translation students' awareness of and pride in belonging to a profession.

The project was designed to fit our teaching reality: The case competitions were held internally in our department, involving all language sections, in collaboration with professional partners in two translation companies, OVERSÆTTERHUSET and SCANTEXT OVERSÆTTELSER, and with our own students forming the competing teams. The two translation companies were chosen simply because they were willing to help us and to seize the opportunity for meeting and influencing future members of their profession. The role of the professional partners was to provide us with an authentic translation situation, to act as evaluators in the judiciary committee and to provide us with professional feedback on students' work.

Each case competition was divided into three parts:

The Meeting
The Translation Game
The Reality Competition.

The Meeting and the Translation Game formed an integral part of regular translation classes, one from each language section, and all students from these classes were expected to participate. Only those groups who were selected by the judiciary committee could participate in the Reality Competition, the final part of the case competition.

In the Meeting, our professional partners talked to students about the translation profession itself, what it is like and what is required to survive financially on the translation market as well as some practical and ethical issues that were raised by the partners themselves or the students. We saw the Meeting as an opportunity for experienced practitioners to share their professional knowledge with novices. In fact, we hoped that students would feel that they

were allowed to participate in the professional partners' respective communities of practice[1].

As already mentioned, the Meeting and the Translation Game formed an integral part of regular classes of specialised translation. These classes were all described as 5-ECTS[2] courses. The courses were chosen simply because instructors[3] were willing to take part in the project and to let their students participate in the case competitions. The genres (fields) of the courses are presented in table 1, under the language sections that offered the courses. The number of participating students from each language section is given in brackets, and the total number for each case competition is given in the final column.

Table 1: Courses and No. of students

Year	English	German	French	Spanish	Total No.
2006	Science & technology (16)	Law (9)	Law (4)	Finance & economics (4)	(33)

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[1] According to Wenger (e.g. 2000), knowledge communication is best stimulated when people interact in informal, social structures, which he calls communities of practice. See also McDermott (2000) and Kampf (2006).

[2] The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a credit system used to describe courses and programmes. Its implementation in European universities is one of the key aims of the Bologna process, which started in 1999. At the ASB, we follow the Bologna recommendations and measure the workload of a full-time student during one academic year as 60 ECTS. See the website of the European Commission - Education & Training for more details about the system.

[3] I would like to thank Birger Andersen, Tina Paulsen Christensen, Anne Lise Laursen, Birthe Mousten and Kirsten W. Rasmussen for their enthusiastic and helpful contributions to the case competitions of 2006 and 2007. It was Anne Lise Laursen who first suggested that we organise case competitions.

2007	Finance & economics (15)	Law (9)	Law (4)	Finance & economics (4)	(30)

Students were divided into teams of three or four students, which meant that a total of ten groups competed in both 2006 and 2007. The assignments were both similar to and different from regular assignments given in the classes involved. The fields (see table 1) and length (one or two pages) of the source texts were similar to what the classes would usually offer. The directionality of the assignments, from the foreign language into Danish, was also in line with normal practice in the classes, which work both from and into the foreign language. However, the format of the assignments differed in two ways from what students were used to: The students were given more explicit instructions for the translation than they were used to, and they were asked to write a rather elaborate analysis (of approximately three pages) of their working processes, which they had not done before. I shall now give an overview of the instructions that students were given for the two tasks of the Translation Game:

1. The *translation* was presented as being commissioned by one of the translation companies. Students were to act as teams of freelance translators (three or four students). They were given specific information that comprised realistic (if not entirely authentic) details about the client, the communicative situation and the intended readers of the translation. They were given a fixed deadline, which was the following week at 12 noon. As in the real world, the deadline could not be exceeded. Students were encouraged to contact the relevant translation company with any clarifying questions that a professional freelancer might have to ask. As is the case with professional translation, students' translations were expected to meet the designated needs and wishes of the target readers as well as of the client, and the language of the translation (Danish) was expected to be well formed and clear. These expectations were formulated in collaboration with the professional partners and given to students as explicit assessment criteria for the competition.

2. For the *analysis*, students were instructed to write approximately three pages reflecting on their work, with a particular view to explaining their thinking in connection with both macro-level and micro-level decisions. As is generally the case with academic papers, the analysis was expected to be clear and to the point. In

addition, students were told that the analysis should reflect a professional approach to translation. This analytical framework followed closely what is recommended within functional translation studies, especially Vermeer's (e.g. 1989/2000) skopos theory. (See also Nord 1997 and Schjoldager 2008.)

A judiciary committee comprising both professional partners and ASB instructors assessed students' work, and two teams were selected for the Reality Competition. In the adjudication process, we emphasised the quality of the translations, whereas the analyses were used to check whether students approached the task in a professional way. Based on the discussion in the committee, all teams were given oral feedback on their work by their respective instructors, and the two selected teams were given written assessments, which were published.

The selected teams were invited to participate in the Reality Competition. For this part, the teams were to work as translators for one day (from 9 am to 3 pm) in the translation companies. They were given a similar set of instructions to those of the translation for the Translation Game and they were again encouraged to ask any clarifying questions that a professional translator might have to ask. At the end of the day, the teams were to hand in a translation that could be passed on directly to the client in question. In collaboration with the professional partners, we formulated the following assessment criteria for the Reality Competition: The translation was to live up to professional standards regarding both form and contents. Its language and style should be flawless. The text should fully meet the designated needs and wishes of the target readers as well as of the client. Students were not required to write an analysis for the Reality Competition.

The judiciary committee selected the team that best fulfilled the above-mentioned criteria of the Reality Competition. At a reception held by our department, the winners were awarded sponsored prizes and both teams were given certificates evaluating and recommending their professional translation skills.

5. What did students think?

In the course of the case competitions and afterwards, students were asked to evaluate and comment on the project by means of online questionnaires, which contained a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. The mid-project evaluations were to help us improve the project while it was still running and to make us understand students' knowledge building. The aim of the final evaluations was to learn how students liked the whole project.

For each case competition, the questionnaires were given the same structure. All questionnaires asked students to give us some background knowledge about their studies (basically, their year of enrolment and their languages). For the mid-project questionnaires, students were asked to comment on various aspects of the project (the idea, the setup, the timing, their expectations, etc.), to make an overall assessment, to tell us what they liked and did not like and to write any additional views that they would like to share with us. For the final evaluations, students were asked to assess the whole project and to tell us what they liked and did not like as well as to offer some general views. Specifically, students were asked if they would recommend that we continue organising case competitions and if they might be interested in participating again.

I shall now try to ascertain what students thought about the project and to present the kind of knowledge that they seem to have been building as a result of their participation. Drawing on students' answers to the mid-project evaluations, I shall concentrate on the following points:

1. Students' overall assessment of the project.
2. What they liked.
3. What they disliked.

Drawing on the final evaluations, I shall concentrate on the following points:

1. If students would recommend more case competitions.
2. If they would like to participate again.
3. What they liked.
4. What they disliked.

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Following a few basic facts about the evaluations, tables 2 and 3, below, give an overview of students' comments to the above-mentioned points. I have to emphasise that these overviews do not present students' actual words and cannot be taken as statistical facts. Rather, the tables represent my interpretation of students' answers to open-ended questions. For the final points (points 2 and 3 and 3 and 4, respectively), I have divided students' comments into themes and allocated keywords to each theme. The questionnaires were filled in in Danish, but all student quotes below are rendered in my (direct) translation.

Table 2: Mid-project evaluations

Years	2006	2007
No. of students	33	30
No. of respondents	23	18
Rate of response	70%	60%
(1) Overall assessment:		
Liked the project	23	17
Did not like it	-	-
Did not know	-	1
(2) What students liked:		
Professional insight	16	10
Partners	10	8
Competing	3	4
Knowledge of the EU	2	1
Theory	1	1
Preparing for careers	-	1
(3) What students disliked:		
Timing/workload	7	2
Theory	2	-
Partner presentations	2	1
Group work	1	2

Table 3: Final evaluations

Case Competitions	2006	2007
Total no. of students	33	30
No. of respondents	20	10
Rate of response	61%	33%
(1) If recommendable:		
Yes	19	10
No	-	-
Perhaps	1	-
(2) If participate again:		
Yes	17	10
No	-	-
Perhaps	3	-
(3) What students liked:		
The professional insight	15	3
Involving and meeting the partners	2	-
Competing	1	-
Theory	1	-
Timing	-	3
Using Danish	-	1
(4) What students disliked:		
Timing/workload	12	3
Unfairness	5	-
Theory	1	-

I regard the response rates of the mid-project evaluations (70 % and 60 %, respectively) as sufficient for us to draw conclusions concerning students' overall assessment of the project. The response rate of the 2006 final evaluation (61 %) is also sufficient for such conclusions. However, as it turned out, the response rate of the 2007 final evaluation (33 %) is significantly lower. Based on the contents of students' answers, I think I can safely say that seven out of the 10 final-evaluation questionnaires in 2007 were filled in by students who participated in the Reality Competition. Perhaps the remaining 20 students, who participated in the Meeting and the Translation Game, felt that the project was finished on their parts and that the final-evaluation questionnaires were not relevant.

The evaluations make it clear that students were able to enjoy the project. As shown by table 2, 23 out of 23 respondents said that they liked the project in 2006, and 17 out of 18 said so in 2007. As shown

by table 3, in 2006, 19 out of 20 respondents said that they would recommend that we organise more case competitions, and 17 of these said that they would like to participate again. In 2007, 10 out of 10 respondents said that they would recommend more case competitions and that they would like to participate.

The project seems to have stimulated students' motivation for learning in several ways. Many students mention the professional insight that they were able to gain from their participation, and many suggest that a key to the success of the project lies with the presence and collaboration of the professional partners. Here is a rather typical student response (from the 2007 mid-project evaluation, my translation):

> I think that it is a really good initiative. After almost four years without much contact with the world outside, this competition offers a really good opportunity for trying to cope with 'the real world' and also for applying the skills that one has acquired so far. And it is also exciting that translators look at one's work.

In particular, students emphasise that they liked meeting the professional partners. Here is an example (from the 2007 mid-project evaluation):

> The meeting that was held gave us some useful insight into what it is like to work for a translation company, and it was good that they [the partners] were there so early in the project.

Other students mention specific insights – such as what it is like to work as a translator for the EU and the realisation that translators can and tend to work together and help each other. Here is an interesting example of such a response (from the 2006 mid-project evaluation):

> Got much knowledge about working in the EU and on how much is required when Annette from Oversætterhuset gave her presentation. Learned more about how translators specifically work when Kirsten from Scantext told us about her own work. Was surprised how much you can use your network and ask questions in connection with an assignment.

We were somewhat worried that students might object to the competitive element of the project, but most students appear simply

to have found it stimulating. To a question about their expectations, one student said for instance (from the 2007 mid-project evaluation):

> I hope to have my skills tested and to get a lot of constructive feedback on the assignment. Of course it would also be nice if we do a good job and live up to our own expectations. I hope also to have confirmed that I am able to do a professional job.

Another student said that s/he enjoyed participating and that the competitive element made her focus more on linguistic correctness (from the 2007 mid-project evaluation):

> Think that participating has been fun. You start focussing more on correctness than you do with other assignments because of the competition.

This comment reflects on the professional partners' insistence that translators must deliver a linguistically correct target text, a point that was also made explicit in the assessment criteria that students were given for the case competitions (see section 4, above). The reflection on correctness is particularly interesting because it illustrates how case competitions can hammer in a point that instructors may fail to make in ordinary classes: Prior to their participation in the case competitions, many students appear to have seen translation instructors' insistence on linguistic correctness as pedantic and unnecessary, but now they willingly accepted as a basic condition for winning that their translations must be flawless and clear.

Other positive aspects were mentioned: A few students praised the theoretical insights that they were given in the background material (represented as "theory" in the tables), and one pointed out that s/he now felt better prepared for working life ("preparing for careers"). In 2007, a few praised the timing of the project, one liked the competitive element in particular, and one praised the fact that all assignments involved translation into Danish, which s/he felt had been neglected in his/her studies so far.

The negative comments that we received related mostly to practical and/or personal issues, but one was more serious because it criticised the fairness of the competition and definitely had to be addressed before the next case competition. The following is a brief

summary of the critical points that we received in 2006 (structured in accordance with the themes of the tables, above).

A number of students complained that they could not cope with the extra workload that the project required and that the timing of the project was inappropriate (represented as "timing/workload" in the tables).
A few students criticised our approach to theory ("theory").
A few students criticised the informal style of the Meeting – mainly the fact that there were no Power Point presentations ("partner presentations").
A few students complained about the enforced group work ("group work").
A number of students felt that their assignment was more difficult than that of other students ("unfairness" in table 2).

As shown by tables 2 and 3, most of this critique was either absent or less frequent the following year (even if only the mid-project evaluations have comparable rates of response). As we managed to address most of the above-mentioned critical points from 2006 when we organised the case competition in 2007, I conclude that we were able to make good use of the student surveys and therefore regard the survey method as a useful means of student-instructor knowledge communication.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I hope to have documented that students who participate in case competitions find it useful and enjoyable and that case competitions may stimulate students' learning in several ways, especially because of the presence and participation of professional partners. I also hope to have shown that a competitive element tends to boost students' knowledge building rather than frighten them.

I would like to suggest two other benefits that may inspire other educators. Firstly, we found that student surveys in the form of online questionnaires – both in the middle of a project and afterwards – tend to facilitate knowledge communication between students and instructors. Secondly, we have a feeling that our teaching project, which evaluated not only the quality of students' products (the translations) but also the professionalism of their working processes, helped us to counteract an unfortunate tendency within the Danish educational system, which tends to focus too much on students'

products. This tendency is pointed out by Kampf (2009: 53), who puts it like this about the Danish students in her study of knowledge communication processes in a project-management course: "[...] the Aarhus students came from a system which rewards the final exam product rather than the process".

Finally, though our project relates to students' knowledge building about professional translation, I would like to suggest that the teaching model of combining academic education with simulated on-the-job training, professional knowledge communication and a competitive element may also be used by other language programmes, including perhaps those that are less profession-oriented than our MA programme of specialised translation. In other words, I hope that my paper may serve as a source of inspiration for future case competitions in translation and other language-related tasks.

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