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SILVIA Ettl-HUBER / MICHAEL ROITHER

Reflective Hybrids in University Continuing Education

Illustrated by using the Example of Communication and Management Education at the Danube University Krems (Austria)

Abstract

This article looks at the hybrid courses, teaching forms, teaching staff and tasks found in university continuing education (UCE) designed to provide people with education enabling them to deal with their constantly changing workplaces and meet the shifting challenges of their careers. A case study on communication and management education at the Danube University Krems in Austria is used to categorize different areas in which reflective hybrids help to address these challenges. It becomes evident that hybridity not only runs through all areas of UCE, it is also a key criterion in ensuring that UCE meets its basic objectives of providing people with high quality education on both an individual and a professional level for their roles in business and society.

I University Continuing Education – Definition and Impact

According to the definition adopted by the Austrian University Continuing Education and Staff Development Network (AUCEN), university continuing education (UCE) offers different courses and formats to different target groups to establish a fruitful exchange of scientifically founded, research-based ‘state of the art’ and practice-related requirements. Accordingly, UCE as encountered in the Austrian case study described in this article fulfills two important roles: it provides continuing education for graduates and also acts as a

gateway for new professions or for those professions for which there are as yet no academic qualifications (Pellert / Cendon 2009, 258). In this respect, it identifies new educational demands and requirements.

Different definitions can be found in other countries in Europe. In France, for example, the term ‘continuing education’ is used to designate all educational activities after the completion of initial compulsory education; no distinction is drawn here between general (academic) and vocational training (Dunkel / Le Mouillour 2009, 177–181). The case study presented in this article can however be described explicitly as academic UCE.

A number of parallels can be drawn here to activities in the United States. Röbbken (2009, 287) points out that while the use of the term ‘continuing higher education’ in the USA assumes that students have attained a general qualification needed for a place in higher education, UCE courses are in many cases geared to non-traditional students. In other words, the student meets at least two of the following criteria: working full-time or part-time, studying on a part-time or distance learning basis, aged 25 or over, married or a single parent, financially independent, returning to higher education following a period in work. Continuing higher education is compulsory in some professions, while in others its function is to allow human capital development (from the point of view of society and the economy), career development and personal development.

Alongside the different roles assigned to UCE in different countries, a number of shared core characteristics can also be identified. Since continuing education units are generally self-financing or even set up as profit centers, their link to practical educational needs is predefined (Lee / Fleming 2012, 354) they (by default) have to provide education in areas for which there is also a demand.

This linking of theory and practice has an impact on teaching. Pellert and Cendon (2009, 252) consider this link between theory and research practice and its own form of reflective thinking to be the key concept in UCE. Ultimately, it allows the non-academic perspective to be legitimately included in academic research, thus ena-

bling UCE to unfold its true potential above all in areas where it can be tied in with existing knowledge. A good and effective UCE program will draw on the current state of knowledge in research and transfer this to the related work practices (Schrittesser 2011, 37–38).

Németh (2011, 107) maintains that adult learning and education should be multidimensional and holistic in its design. European higher education institutions should provide adults with the qualifications they need to fulfill their complex role in society and the economy. This corresponds to the global UNESCO demands, which complement economic goals with social responsibility – the latter to be encouraged and advocated through lifelong learning. The Belém Framework for Action also calls on universities to work together to ensure proper justice is done to the holistic and multidimensional requirements. In doing so, it assigns a certain role to the interdisciplinarity of degree programs. In UCE in particular, this will help to remove the ‘silo mentality’ students bring with them from their first degrees into the world of work (Kokotovich 2007, 216).

As an overriding concept in UCE, governments also accord lifelong learning a key role in re-engineering the relationship between education and economic development (Lee / Fleming 2012, 349). Right from the very start of the debate, idealistic objectives like achieving economic advancement, democratic society and personal autonomy have been constantly linked with lifelong learning. In Asia, the notion of lifelong learning is often associated with frequent job changes and the need to retrain for a new position. Singh (2000) demonstrates the high value education can have for the informal labor market in developing countries, where social competencies and their translation into economic benefit are particularly crucial if you want to climb the career ladder. On a more general level, it should be noted that lifelong learning in the 1990s was strongly linked to the idea of learning a new skill (Lee / Fleming 2012, 351), while the current focus lies more on the personal development of the learners (an observation which possibly applies more to industrialized than developing nations).

According to Dinevski / Vesenjak Dinevski (2004, 231), the role of UCE in the European Union can be summarized as follows:

- Provider and supporter of professional development
- Developer and organizer of degree education
- Distributer of university level knowledge
- Developer of methods of knowledge dissemination
- Developer of e-learning and virtual university concepts

In short, the social role and function of UCE differs from those of traditional university education in numerous points:

1. Teaching is interdisciplinary and based on applied research. Regardless of the subject, it focuses on social competences and the personal development of the students. A key aspect is the provision of particularly high quality teaching and learning – e.g. through small groups – and comprehensive services for the ‘part-time students’.
2. Educators and learners are equals.
3. The social function of UCE is clearly defined: it serves the deliberate aim of preparing people for their roles in society and the economy.
4. UCE students also have a clearly defined profile: they are usually financially independent, already in work, over the age of 25 and have defined education goals.
5. UCE in Europe is the epitome of social permeability in the education system and serves to link or “re-link” education and business should this link have become lost or minimized in some areas.

In short, the case study presented in this article cannot be accorded any specific geographic reach. However, by virtue of its location in Austria, an EU Member State, the case of this university, which is dedicated solely to the provision of UCE, is part of the European UCE debate. Some characteristics of American UCE, such as the profile of students, also support an application of the findings to the United States as well.

2 Reflective Hybrids in University Continuing Education – The Case of the Center for Journalism and Communication Management

The Center for Journalism and Communication Management is part of the Department for Knowledge and Communication Management, one of 14 Departments at the Danube University Krems. Similar to the Open University in the UK, the Danube University Krems focuses solely on the provision of continuing education (Dinevski / Vesenjaj Dinevski 2004, 230). It is located 90 kilometers west of Vienna, currently has some 6,000 students and – despite being an Austrian state university – is 77 percent self-financing. Course fees per student range between 11,000 and 21,000 euro. All courses at the university are offered on a part-time basis.

The Danube University Krems was founded in 1995. At that time, as Németh (2011, 111) points out, numerous activities were being carried out by UNESCO to promote UCE and encourage a close and regular exchange between the universities and work practices.

The Center for Journalism and Communication Management was one of the university's founding centers. Its staff comprises 15 members, who are in charge of about 350 students on 15 academic courses, 13 of which are Master programs (Master of Arts – MA, Master of Science – MSc, Master of Business Administration – MBA). Two thirds of these courses take place in Austria, the remainder in Germany and Greece. The center is currently preparing to extend its activities to South East Europe.

Its mission is to provide continuing education and applied research in the field of communication – journalism, public relations/integrated communication, management communication (courses for managers with a focus on communication and business). The center's Master degree courses include “Quality Journalism and New Technologies (MA)” in Krems and Athens (Greece), “Communication and Leadership (Communications MBA)” in Krems, or “Public Relations and Integrated Communication (Communications MSc)” in Krems, Heidelberg and Cologne (Germany). Its courses are certified by various professional associations and are state-recognized.

On average, 88 percent of teaching takes place in a classroom format which requires student attendance. The remainder is carried out via distance learning. While the proportion of distance learning is being successively raised, the number of class attendance days is expected to remain high, particularly given the nature of education in the field of communication. For those courses not held primarily on site in Krems, students must attend their alma mater for at least 15 percent of the stipulated classroom time. For each Master program (90 or 120 ECTS points – European Credit Transfer System) students must attend classes for around 60 to 65 days. Around 70 percent of teaching is provided by external lecturers from science and industry, with the remaining 30 percent covered by internal lecturers. At present, 69 percent of lecturers come from Austria, 21 percent from Germany and the remaining 10 percent from six other countries. Despite the fact that lecturers are evaluated on a daily basis, the fluctuation rate among external lecturers lies only at around 11 percent per year. Students, currently with an average age of about 34 (the trend here is slightly downward), are very disciplined: despite having the option to extend the duration of the course at their own discretion (as long as the curriculum remains the same), only 12 percent of students are overstayers.

Research and teaching activities adopt an applied focus, a fact that is clearly reflected in the center's current research projects. These include research into data journalism (journalism research), social media in corporate communication (public relations research) and the use of the case study as an effective method of educating managers (management communication research).

Considering Pellert's and Cendon's categorization (2009, 249) of UCE courses in Austria into short courses, academic university courses and Master programs, the center focuses primarily on its Master programs, although it does also offer both other course forms to a limited extent.

The case study in this article is limited to continuing education in communication and management. In their study of the Austrian UCE landscape, Pellert and Cendon (2009, 283) conclude that man-

agement education is an area in which there is a particularly high number of UCE programs. Accordingly, our case study reflects a very typical field in continuing education. The focus on the management approach to communication issues is, however, specific to this course.

The term ‘reflective hybrids’ refers above all to the field of learning – where reflection is one of the core elements. At the same time, we also reflect on the hybrid forms in individual elements of the case in the sections below.

2.1 Hybrid Organization

The fact that the Center for Journalism and Communication Management is embedded in the Department for Knowledge and Communication Management in itself already produces a hybrid. The 33 members of staff in the department come from a wide range of academic backgrounds – from communication science, linguistics, economics, political science, drama, psychology and sociology to landscape architecture. So the organization itself already draws on multi-disciplinary sources. In addition, the complete staff assumes different roles and tasks. Some of them are thoroughbred researchers, some are course managers, and others assume both a teaching and a research role.

This multi-disciplinary, multi-role and multi-tasking approach is particularly evident in the development of the academic tutoring process, which was introduced by the center as a ‘Working Group on Teaching’ and subsequently extended to the whole department. Intensive discussions were held to set Master Thesis requirements. These discussions also demonstrated the manifold differences in demands in various disciplines like social and economic sciences both on a general level and with regard to research practices (for example in social sciences). Details regarding issues like the representativeness of research results were turned into practical guidelines, discussed and collated into new student handbooks.

2.2 Hybrid Organizational Tasks

While UCE's key tasks are teaching and applied research, they are not the only tasks covered by the Center for Journalism and Communication Management at the Danube University Krems. Hybrid forms are also on the increase outside these two areas. For example, when a tool to evaluate the launch of a new communication instrument is developed for an Austrian government ministry, teaching and evaluation concepts, research and consulting elements all have to come together to produce it. In such cases, the university acts simultaneously as agent, researcher and service provider – and makes sure that the results have a direct influence on professional practice. The insights gained through these activities in turn flow back into teaching – to the benefit of the students.

Public relations students are another good example of this hybridity. When they practice designing PR concepts, they do so not only using real-life examples, but also new, concrete communication problems that have been brought to the university's attention or have been identified in its business network. The results are generally of a very high practical value for the students who are mostly aged 34 and not only receive intensive coaching and training at university but additionally have practical experience in the field. Many such projects are later implemented in the proposed form.

2.3 Hybrid University Courses

While classic universities offer degree courses in subjects with names like “Communication Science”, “Political Science” or “Business Studies”, the Danube University Krems offers specialized university courses on subjects like “Communication and Management”, “Quality Journalism and New Technologies” or “Media and Leadership”. The university adopts the approach that UCE no longer needs to involve broad basic degree level education (in the Bachelor degree sense), but should instead focus on specialization. This corresponds in some ways to the demands put forward by Priddat (2009, 371), who advocates the closure of university campuses and the ‘decompo-

sition' of large universities into many smaller institutions. According to Priddat, each seminar should have its own building, to allow students to work in a more concentrated, universal and contemplative setting.

While a university course in “PR and Integrated Communication” clearly covers a communication science subject, the program is carefully designed to include teaching by communication scientists, political scientists, legal practitioners or economists (see also section on Hybrid Teaching Content). However, in other cases, courses cannot always be unambiguously assigned to a particular subject area. The “Communication and Leadership” or “Communication and Management” programs, for example, already demonstrate their hybridity in their course titles, which reflect a marriage between management and communication sciences.

The collaboration between course leaders, scientists and practitioners in the course development activities is a good example of the hybridity of theory and practice. Course leaders involve members of the scientific and professional communities in the course development process. Professional associations and groups also often contact the center to draw attention to potential gaps in the curriculum. Furthermore, there is an Advisory Committee, which meets once a year to go through the existing curriculum. The seven members of this committee are drawn from academia and professional practice.

2.4 Hybrid Teaching Content

The specialization reflected in the course titles is accompanied by a despecialization on a disciplinary level. Teaching staff and teaching content are deliberately chosen for their interdisciplinarity. In doing so, an instrumental interdisciplinarity perspective (many disciplines working to resolve a problem) is chosen over synoptic interdisciplinarity (finding common ground across all disciplines). The instrumental perspective primarily serves to solve practical problems (van Baalen / Karsten 2012, 222). Experts from different disciplines teach together to provide students with maximum effect and maximum solutions to their own practical problems.

The modern management sector in particular demands a strong interdisciplinary focus on continuing education. While scientific domain conflicts and monopolizing strategies dominated the stage in the early days of management education before the two World Wars, the focus shifted to associative strategies between engineers, business economists, psychologists, sociologists and representatives of industries after World War II (van Baalen / Karsten 2012). Nowadays, management education also focuses all the more on the personal needs and demands of its 'students'.

Many of the tools used are developed (further) in a practice-based setting. We now increasingly see risk experts developing or influencing crisis plans and the associated crisis communication. Indeed, they are often the people around whom communication centers in times of crisis. While communication training and education is clearly essential to allow them to do their jobs, their insights into risk management are also crucial for teaching in the risk and crisis communication sector. This requires a rigorous exchange between theory and practice, with UCE serving as an ideal neutral platform. It is thus also the motor behind the ongoing development in both areas.

The international nature of its UCE programs is also a source of hybrid teaching content at the center. Its "Quality Journalism and New Technologies" program, for example, integrates regional and national requirements regarding teaching and course content into an existing degree program. Based on the Austrian curriculum for the "Quality Journalism" course, a hybrid was developed in cooperation with the "Athena Foundation" in Greece. This hybrid focuses in particular on integrating new technologies into the degree program. The module plan was changed, and the teaching units and hours adapted to Greek customs. An Austrian course was thus turned into an Austro-Greek course, which integrates the qualities of both partners and countries to provide the best possible education to students.

2.5 Hybrid Lecturer Résumés

A further example of hybridity can be found at the level of individual lecturers. The center's teaching staff frequently holds degrees in subjects with little relevance to their current field of activity. One of the staff members, for example, originally studied Mechanical Engineering at Vienna University of Technology, went on to read Business Administration and Law at postgraduate level and also completed selected parts of a Philosophy degree in Scientific Theory and Epistemology. As Professor for Industrial Engineering and Management he currently lectures in Corporate and Change Management at the Center for Journalism and Communication Management.

It is the sum of all his/her practical experience and previous degrees that makes up a lecturer's experience and qualification and should in turn ideally be applied to his/her teaching activities. The average profile for a member of the center's teaching staff includes a first degree, at least 10 years work experience and numerous examples of lifelong teaching experience. This also corresponds to the demand that UCE-courses should be geared particularly towards practitioners (Pellert / Cendon 2009, 253).

The center rarely uses teaching staff who work solely as university lecturers or professors, and instead favors practitioners with the ability to reflect and communicate. Ultimately, these are also the lecturers who receive the best assessments from students. This trend can also be seen in other countries, as several national reports on continuing education confirm. In a survey of continuing education institutions in the USA, two of the participating institutions indicated that they recruited 100 percent of their teaching staff from outside the university, seven recruited over 90 percent from external sources, while a further four said this figure lay at over 75 percent (Röbken 2009, 301). Only those institutions offering doctorates recruited the majority of their teaching staff internally.

2.6 Teacher/Student Hybrids

Given the need for continuing education units to be self-financing (as mentioned above), their programs and course content have to be tailored from the outset to student needs. Only programs that are of practical use will attract students and thus become financially viable.

But the ‘membrane’ between teaching staff and students is thin. Graduates sometimes become members of the teaching faculty. There have also been cases of lecturers later opting to register for a course at the center. In the teaching process itself, animated discussions unfold from the comparison of the different practices used by different students in their own workplaces. Accordingly, the role of other students as teachers also merits a mention.

Students often praise the course organizers for the careful composition of their year/class. The inclusion of students from diverse industries with different areas of specialization and varying amounts of work experience is seen as particularly beneficial. The different points raised by each different member of the class clearly help individual students to drop their silo mentality and see problems from a new perspective.

In his reflections on the university of the third millennium, Pridat (2009, 371) advocates that teaching should give way to encouraging thinking. Accordingly, in future, thinking should replace teaching. Students should not be taught, but rather encouraged to think. Teachers and students are partners in the UCE teaching process (Pellert and Cendon 2009, 252). But the creation of close links between academic staff and people working in the given field has other advantages as well. These contacts with professional practice allow the university to update its knowledge of its own field. This in turn creates opportunities to attract research funding and enables the university to play a larger role in the region (Dinevski / Vesenjask Dinevski 2004, 230).

In this particular case study at the Danube University Krems, the knowledge comes both from the work experience of the students and from the teaching staff. Meetings to discuss course content with

students are organized on a regular basis. All lecturers meet with the course organizer on a one-to-one basis to prepare the course in advance and evaluate the results after the event. Much of the discussion also takes place on a more informal level during course blocks (e.g. in breaks).

2.7 Hybrid Teaching Forms

A customary Master program at the Center for Journalism and Communication Management consists of around 60 to 65 days in class, corresponding practice-oriented and applied examinations, a group project (approx. 60 pages) and an individual Master Thesis (approx. 100 pages).

Classroom teaching is made up in equal parts of unidimensional knowledge transfer, case studies and simulation exercises. Teaching days are frequently rounded off with debates and discussion sessions with course organizers. Additional practical input is also provided at these debates. Course discussion sessions are used to determine how the program is going and to assess learning progress. Students are also encouraged to form learning groups and work together outside class on the Moodle platform.

UCE is often closely linked to e-higher education. In Korea, for example, 151 of the 376 universities were already offering e-learning courses in 2006 (Lee 2006). In the case described in this article, the lack of time available to students who are also in full-time employment and the demand for efficient teaching methods are the main drivers for the use of e-learning.

To address these demands, the center has developed proprietary course formats (like its 'Distance Learning Public Relations' course) based predominantly on e-learning assisted distance learning. The system combines an almost archaic approach with a modern solution: course materials and correspondence are sent to students by regular mail, but exercises and feedback are completed and submitted online.

Nonetheless, there is clearly scope to extend the integration of e-learning in the present case study. The main reasons why this has

not yet been done are organizational in nature and include issues relating to content quality management, rapidly changing content and a lack of in-house resources to develop e-learning. Students are instead encouraged above all to think, and the center feels that this can still be best achieved in class and through face-to-face discussion.

2.8 Hybrid Research

For a long time, integrating research into a program for working students whose teaching staff consists mainly of practitioners posed a challenge. External teaching staff proved unsuitable as Master Thesis tutors. Students frequently selected a topic related to their place of employment and regularly failed to adequately address a topic concerning their professional sphere from a scientific perspective.

The solution to the problem lay in a rigorous focus on the requirements for Master Theses and scientific papers. Each approach used in a project and each demand for practical application should be covered and addressed specifically in the project report after the second semester. For the Master Thesis, the scientific community should be seen as the client; all other stakeholders should be blocked out during the writing of the thesis and only brought back into play at a later stage.

Unlike in the classic university scenario, tutors serve less as representatives of a specific – often narrow – research field, and more as scientific coaches, who are also willing to embrace topics that are frequently very new. They bundle topics, identify future research requirements and transmit these in the form of Master Thesis topics to the next generation of students.

The primary focus on classic university practice produces a hybrid between theory and practice, which has ultimately proved far more effective than any attempt to allow first-stage hybrid forms of Master Theses and project reports. It allows the transfer of practical knowledge to science through high quality access to data and experts for empirical research. Since the students are already well established in their companies and professions, experimental settings

and survey panels are also easy to set up. Introductory scientific seminars, an elaborate seminar and an e-feedback system accompany the Master Thesis process, which produces over 70 Master Theses each year, half of which contain useable findings.

The research results in turn find their way back into practice and thus also at times to the student's employer. Very often they result in practical recommendations for action. Academic publications and presentations at non-scientific symposia serve to transfer the insights gained into practice and into theory. The question of whether research is really ahead of practice thus becomes superfluous and is replaced by a vigorous exchange between the two. In this way, knowledge that is originally non-formal is formalized in UCE in the sense intended by Lee and Fleming (2012, 369). This formalization functions as a bridge between professional practice and academia.

3 Conclusions

Nowadays, knowledge loses its relevance at an ever-increasing rate. A good number of the professions taken up by university graduates probably didn't even exist when they first started university. Accordingly, there is a growing demand for lifelong learning concepts – not just to cope with the challenges raised by these changes, but also to reflect on, categorize and continue developing what is going on in practice.

In this sense, the UCE concept already incorporates a modern understanding of lifelong learning – one that addresses the need for personal as well as professional skills. This is a totally new challenge for the university sector, which had originally only specialized in scientific reflection.

Nowhere other than in UCE do so many different types of knowledge cannon into each other (practical knowledge, scientific insights, student knowledge, teacher knowledge, ...). In UCE, knowledge of everyday practices is basically a matter of course and cannons in the classroom into best practices, object theory and philosophies. This makes it a particularly good setting for studying reflective hybrids.

The communication and management courses offered at the Danube University Krems in Austria provide an interesting case to think about such reflective hybrids. Hybrids are apparent everywhere: from the conception to the design of the courses, the choice of teaching staff to the choice of students, the forms of teaching to the research forms, and the design to the allocation of tasks across the organization. These serve in particular to bind theory to practice and facilitate mutual exchange.

Although the description of this case study (see Chapter 2) includes a total of eight fields of hybridity in the course activities, these can be summarized into three main fields:

1. organizational hybrids,
2. teaching hybrids, and
3. research hybrids.

The location of the center in question in the Department for Knowledge and Communication Management, whose staff is made up of communication scientists, political scientists, theater scientists, linguists, economists, psychologists and sociologists, leads to an organizational hybrid (presented in 2.1–2.3). Some members of the department's staff are researchers, others are pure course leaders. Both collaborate and share ideas on teaching formats and course content. The courses also adopt a corresponding multi-disciplinary design. They link disciplines which in a traditional university environment are often located in different faculties or even in separate universities (like communication sciences and business studies in this case study described in this article). Practitioners and academics work together to develop and implement the courses and programs. A hybrid attitude that combines theory and practice also guarantees consulting projects. The need to generate financial resources has also often resulted in the direct linking and involvement of departmental staff with the requirements of professional practice.

Just as the courses and staff are multi-disciplinary and multi-functional, so also are the teaching content, teachers, students and teaching formats (see 2.4–2.7). Teaching content circulates from science and academia via the students to their employers. Practical knowl-

edge from the corporate and institutional worlds is in turn transmitted back to the teachers and the university via the students. Teaching staff have not followed classic academic careers, but are instead reflective practitioners who incorporate their own degrees, their own publications and their own professional practices into their teaching. Students become teachers themselves when they share their experiences with the other members of their group. Finally, students with full-time jobs set UCE the challenge of providing the most efficient form of teaching for a particular topic or subject. These can range from e-learning concepts to case study learning or simulations.

The third field of hybridity in UCE is research (2.8). Nowadays the link between teaching and research is detaching itself from the old hierarchical format in which a Department Chair carries out research with his/her staff. The students propose and research topics themselves. Tutoring this work can uncover other very new topics, which are in turn bundled, formed into subject blocks and used to encourage further research. The students thus play an active role in the institute's research activities – both in identifying and working on research topics. They bring topics and insights into the center, while the center provides them with know-how in return. Topics of practical relevance are addressed and worked through on a scientific/academic level. The insights gained frequently find practical application.

In short, UCE creates manifold hybrids between professional practice and academia. Their use takes place partly on a subconscious level and only becomes apparent when presented in cumulated form as is the case here. The conscious use of reflective hybrids encourages the creation of new hybrids – as can already be seen in summits between industry and academia or the deliberate evaluation of courses from both a practitioner and an academic perspective.

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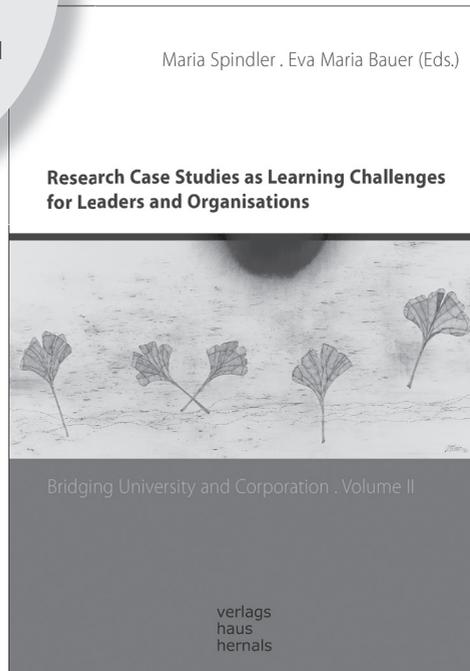
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