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INTRODUCTION



The struggle for the text – on teacher students’ meetings and negotiations with different academic writing traditions on their way towards a passed paper

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In this thematic section of Education Inquiry, we report five articles from a research project called “The Struggle for the Text – On Teacher Students’ Meetings and Negotiations with Different Academic Writing Traditions on their Way Towards a Passed Paper” (Swedish Research Council 2012–2016). The project’s point of departure is the fact that the written product constitutes the primary artefact in a scientific research context; from the time when Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) designed the foundation of the first research university, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 1810, to our present-day understanding of universities as a place for *written* knowledge production (Kruse, 2006).

Another point of departure is that universities do not consist of uniform language environments with shared requirements on what characterises a good scientific text and how the relationship between scientific activities and writing is conceived. Different disciplines or “tribes”, which Becher (1994) compares them to, have sets of implicit assumptions or *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1980) that define what is taken for granted and what is important for their outlook on the relationship between scientific activities and writing. Disciplines are the lifeblood of higher education and the basis for its organisation, and all the tribes have their own names and territories, manage their own business and make war against each other, have a distinct language or at least a distinct ‘dialect’ and a set of symbolic ways for showing how they differ from others. Sullivan (1996) talks about the internal rhetoric or scientific “bardic voice” (p. 223) researchers use when talking to each other within a discipline or area.

Traditional academic writing has been both challenged and developed in different ways. In the last 50–60 years, several different ‘crises’ or ‘turns’ have affected the sciences and scientific writing, e.g. “the linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967) and the “crisis of representation” (Marcus, G. E. & Fisher, M. M., 1986; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994). The linguistic turn implies a kind of relativisation and distrust in the objectivity of language. The turn is also linked to the idea that we cannot position ourselves outside language. Language is necessary for our thinking. The crisis of representation implies that the authority of e.g. the scientifically educated and writing researcher is being challenged.

As a consequence, these turns and crises have led to what might be called a post-modern attitude or a ‘post-modern turn’ as regards language’s relationship to the world and to science (Hassan, 1987) in certain scientific areas, chiefly the arts and social

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sciences (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). The core of the postmodern turn is the hesitation about any method, theory, discourse or genre being able to claim to be the right one or an incontestable form of reliable knowledge (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005). Hyland (2002) puts it as follows:

Language is not just a means of self-expression then, it is how we construct and sustain reality, and we do this as members of communities, using the language of those communities (p. 41).

When language is related to students' writing, our interest is not to capture static writing but to view the students as participants in dynamic writing traditions, or scientific discourses, which may still be described as fairly stable at a given moment.

Many disciplinary norms, including those expressed through language, are shown to be implicit and therefore be learned by tacit means (Gerholm, 1990). Bazerman (1981) addressed the nature of writing conventions and norms in the science, social science and humanities disciplines. He shows that writers have to identify implicit norms in order to meet the audience's expectations in their respective disciplinary contexts. Further, he crystallises differences in writing conventions as being attributable to: the nature of knowledge and its boundaries; the traditions for relating new knowledge to existing literature; the extent to which language is decipherable to the outsider, the nature of technical terminology; the need for methodological and theoretical justification; and the tone and style of the writing in relation to how new knowledge claims are made. Bazerman's (1981) study provides empirical evidence of key epistemological and cultural differences in the expression of disciplinary knowledge which are tacit in nature, for example: science writing assumes that major facts are already embedded, such is the accretive nature of knowledge, social science writing must persuade the audience to accept a particular interpretation because scholars do not necessarily share methodological or theoretical frameworks. Writing in the humanities requires that phenomena must be established as consequential within a personal perspective so that the audience can be persuaded to accept a new insight.

From a dialogical perspective, written texts are not inert objects, complete in themselves as bearers of abstract meanings. They are "emergent, multiform, negotiated in the process, meaningful in the uptake, accomplishing social acts" (Bazerman & Prior, 2004, p. 1). The student's path when bringing different aspects together into a new sense of 'meaning' is dialogic in its nature.

The writing of papers in an education quite often tends to be a stumbling block for many students. Meyer & Land (2005) introduced the basic idea that in certain disciplines, and here we would add certain stages in the course of education such as essay writing, there are "conceptual gateways" or "portals" that lead to a previously inaccessible and initially perhaps "troublesome" way of thinking about something.

Our project encompassed teacher education at three Swedish universities: Stockholm University, Umeå University, and Örebro University. In order to enable a comparative perspective, studies were also conducted at a Norwegian university college. Teacher education (TE) is a broad vocational education that may cover several faculty areas with their different traditions. The more general parts of the education, which are aimed at teacher knowledge, derive their practices from a social science research tradition with its specific writing traditions. The more subject-oriented parts may involve writing

traditions in science, social science and arts subjects. We should add to this the fact that teacher education in the form of a vocational education aims to constitute an application of the knowledge content in the education.

As a vocational field, not as a pure academic discipline, the TE programmes therefore do not represent an academic “tribe” (Becher 1994). Since the subject contents draw on a multiplicity of disciplines, within different scientific faculty areas of various traditions, and are taught by teachers with dissimilar disciplinary backgrounds, TE is to be understood as an interdisciplinary field or “reservoir” (Wolff 2013). Therefore, TE students do not have one unique “bardic voice” (Sullivan 1996) to conform to, but several competing voices to listen to and imitate. Further, in vocational fields such as TE knowledge develops by adding on segments of differing topic areas, which Bernstein (2000) calls horizontal knowledge structures that are related to a specific social context, and not necessarily of relevance in other contexts. The more the meaning of knowledge is situated in a social and cultural context of acquisition and use, the stronger its semantic gravity (Maton 2009). Horizontal knowledge structures do not encourage gap-spotting and gap-filling as in the traditional disciplinary way (cf. Alvesson and Sandberg 2013). Segmented knowledge-building requires contextualising to be intelligible, i.e. the social context needs to be described and explained, which demands longer texts. Such texts can be judged as more descriptive than shorter texts which, similarly, can be judged as more analytical.

Our study has a longitudinal design and is based on three different types of data and methods, namely interviews, text analyses and observations: (1) interviews with teacher students and their lecturers about the relationship between writing in an academic context and the view of knowledge; (2) analysis of a selection of texts that the teacher students produce in different text worlds in the course of the education; and (3) observations of interactions in the education, such as information meetings, supervision meetings, seminars and digital media interaction.

In our interviews with the teacher students and lecturers, we tried to find out about their more fundamental conceptions of the norms, position and function of writing in a scientific context at a more rhetorical level; about considerations and negotiations taking place in connection with written assignments due to different disciplinary writing traditions and epistemological requirements on the way towards a passed paper. In the observations, we studied the rules and conceptions communicated in different teaching situations such as introductions (oral/written), individual supervision and examinations, along with the interaction between lecturers and students.

Theoretically, our project’s point of departure is theories of social practices and of different academic literacies representing various discourses, intimately connected to the social practice in the academic community (Lea & Street, 1998). The perspective encompasses a view of institutions and academic practices as being constituted by discourses and power, requiring a set of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. Academic literacies are objectified by a range of different tools and set into play when groups of people interpret and use them in specific discourses. During writing activities in higher education, tools such as theories, concepts, cultural and professional norms for language use are set into play, and these can be studied through both the requirements for writing and students’ assignments. Writing as a learning resource will be examined as a specific communicative practice so as to

uncover signs of social identities, institutions and norms as well as the means by which these social formations are established, negotiated, enacted and changed through communicative practice (Bakhtin 1981).

In the branch of research on which our research is based called *academic literacies research* (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Scott 2007), a fundamental idea is that it is not only the student but also academia (the education, teachers, demands, textual norms) that ought to adapt these practices. Only then can the students' academic writing really develop instead of being a superficial, strategic way of acting. The students must be given an opportunity to not only assimilate the academic knowledge but to also question it. Methodologically, our studies are based on ethnography (Lillis, 2001; 2008).

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