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Introduction

This anthology is the outcome of a Nordic literacy-conference held at Umeå University in Sweden, 13–15 June 2012, “Vernacular Literacies—Past, Present and Future.” The conference was hosted and organised by the Nordic network Vernacular Literacies, in cooperation with the Nordic project Reading and Writing from Below.¹

Vernacular literacy practices have become increasingly prominent features in everyday life, especially in social media through digital technologies. However, vernacular literacy is not a new phenomenon. The written word has been used for everyday purposes throughout history, in other media and using different technologies. Whether historical or modern, vernacular literacy practices have arisen out of everyday needs and are learned informally, where literacy learning rarely is separated from the practice itself.

The conference aimed at bringing together Nordic researchers from different disciplines, who study either contemporary or historical literacy, in the hope that the different perspectives would enrich each other and new research questions and theoretical approaches could be discussed. The overall aim was reached, since many researchers participated with issues on vernacular literacies from an interdisciplinary angle: didactic, historical, ethnological, linguistic and literary aspects of literacy were regarded. The distribution between historical and contemporary studies was also just about even.

The conference was honoured to present three internationally well-known plenary speakers. Professor David Barton, Lancaster University, gave insights into contemporary vernacular literacy practices in his lecture “From Local Literacies to Digital Literacies. Tracing Changes as Vernacular Practices go Online.” Professor Deborah, Brandt, University of Wisconsin-Madison, reflected on mass literacy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the heading “Taking Writing Seriously. New Directions in Mass Literacy.” Professor Wim Vandenbussche, Vrije Universiteit, Brussels, contributed a historical perspective on literacy: “From Letter Drawing to Writing Letters—a Look at Historical Literacy from Below.”

A total of 77 participants took part in the conference, where 57 papers were given. During the three days of conference there were four parallel paper

¹ The Nordic network Vernacular Literacies (’Vardagligt skriftbruk. Diakrona perspektiv på literacy i Sverige och övriga Norden”) was funded by Stiftelsen Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (’The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences’), coordinated from Umeå University. The conference completed the activities of the three-year lasting network (2009–2012). The Nordic project Reading and Writing from Below. Toward a New Social History of Literacy in the Nordic Sphere During the Long Nineteenth Century was funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences 2011–2014, coordinated from Helsinki University.
sessions with contributions in English and Scandinavian languages. Researchers were represented from Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Finland and Estonia.

Twenty papers from the conference are presented in this multi-lingual volume. There is an equal distribution between articles in English and in the Scandinavian languages, mainly articles in Swedish, one in Danish and one in Norwegian. The articles written in Swedish, Danish or Norwegian are accompanied by abstracts in English. The volume is divided into two sections: Vernacular Literacies in the Present, and Vernacular Literacies in the Past. Some of the articles in the sections touch upon the future of vernacular literacies.

Vernacular Literacies in the Present
The section Vernacular Literacies in the Present includes six articles and starts with the article “Deep Writing, New Directions in Mass Literacy” by the plenary speaker Deborah Brandt. New models of literacy development, based primarily on writing, are explored in the article. Previously mass literacy was almost exclusively described from the reading perspective, but we are now entering an era of deep writing due to shifts in the nature of work and the affordances of digital communication. Writing has become the critical skill of consequence in everyday life in this second stage of mass literacy.

Workplace literacies in a Swedish-speaking context are dealt with in two articles. Writing practices in elder care are the focus of study in the article by Anna-Malin Karlsson: “Writing in Your own Voice? Managing Interpersonal Meanings in Elder Care Literacy Practices.” The article explores the discursive dilemmas in elder care literacy practices where the personal work-identity of care workers is suppressed in writing since the texts are supposed to be neutral. The focus is on interpersonal meaning and how personal and subjective stances are taken or avoided in writing and in an oral meeting. The study reveals “how the use of heterogloss, i.e. invoking other voices, makes it possible to convey relevant information without breaking the institutional rules of neutral writing.” Practices drawn upon by machine operators in a car factory in Sweden are presented by Zoe Nikolaidou in “Dominant Workplace Literacies in Vernacular Disguise: Disputable Discourses on the Production Floor.” The main aim of the article is to show that the concepts of vernacular and dominant literacy practices are problematic in a workplace setting. It is argued that a focus should instead be placed on the distinction between institutional and professional discourse. The car factory in this ethnographic study has introduced a total quality system and is highly textualized. The institutional discourse is evident in all documentation practices. By exercising a professional discourse, the workers resist the dominant nature of these texts, a resistance that is based upon their professional experience and their everyday social practices at the workplace.
Two articles are concerned with digital literacies in a Swedish-speaking context. Theres Bellander presents a study of elderly people engaged in vernacular literacy practices using digital tools, such as the computer. Her contribution is entitled “The Old Meets the New—an Analysis of Elderly People’s Digital Literacy Practices.” The purpose is to identify and describe the literacy practices via participant logs and interviews with the participants. The study shows that digital and non-digital tools are used simultaneously. New practices have emerged due to digitalization, and long-time practices have taken new forms. The focus of the next study is the comments sections on a Swedish newspaper website, Aftonbladet, dealing with digital literacies, by Karin Hagren Idevall, “‘Give me your Sources for that Before I Believe it, Until then, I Will Laugh at that Statement.’ A Linguistic Study of Relations in Comments Sections Online.” An Actor–Network perspective is applied in this study of the online interaction. The analysis shows that there are two competing aims of the comments section. The regulations of the content are challenged by comments that advocate freedom of speech and racist discourses are justified through a discourse on objectivity.

Literacy practices in the educational domain are in focus in Anna Malmbjer’s article “Administrative Literacy Practices in the Teaching Practice Own Work.” The study is conducted in a Swedish comprehensive school in lower secondary classroom settings, through observations and interviews. Two common literacy practices were examined in the teaching practice independent work (eget arbete)—a common teaching practice where the students are expected to assume responsibility for their own learning process. The practices were found to be highly complex and thereby some students are excluded from this learning practice.

Vernacular Literacies in the Past
The section Vernacular Literacies in the Past embraces literacy practices through the Viking Age to the beginning of the twentieth century and includes 14 articles in total. Runic literacy in the Viking Age and nineteenth century in Norway and Sweden, is studied in two articles by Magnus Källström and Jan Ragnar Hagland respectively. The first contribution, Källström’s “Birka, Sigtuna and Medelpad—Glimpses of Three Writing Environments in the Viking Age,” discusses aspects of vernacular literacy by analysing the material from different places in Viking Age Sweden. In Birka the runic inscriptions representing the first two centuries of the Viking Age show that different variants of the runic alphabet were used, though the so called short-twig runes probably dominated. In Sigtuna, where the inscriptions are often connected to specific settings and dated fairly closely, the study of the runic material indicates a change in the literary practices with
more people learning how to write and read runes. In Medelpad the traditional memorial inscriptions in stone may show how runes were used for more practical needs in everyday life.

Hagland’s article under the title “Runic Writing in the Post-Reformation Era and Everyday Writing in Nineteenth Century Norway and Sweden,” deals with the use of post-reformatorical runes (‘the youngest runes’) in a Swedish and Norwegian context from the second half of the nineteenth century. The discussion takes its point of departure from traditions of writing in runes in a small Western Norwegian community ca. 1850–1880, a tradition that could be seen as an expression of ‘literacy from below,’ independent of the schooling system. The Swedish runes from the same period are discussed, as well as the American Mid-West use from the 1870s and 1880s. To a large extent, runic usage of this kind seems to have served the purpose of secret script, displaying an advanced level of local literacy of ‘the youngest runes.’

The contribution presented in the conference volume by Ivar Berg, “Rural Literacy in Sixteenth Century Norway,” discusses how the importance of literacy in the beginning of the early Modern era affected the common man in Norway. People were members of communities that relied on written testimonies, they were accustomed to hearing charters read out loud, and they knew how they were supposed to sound. The charters are evaluated as sources of our understanding of the literary or textual culture in this article.

Rut Boström’s contribution has the title “‘Då hågen leker på örterna utanför’ ['When One’s Mind is Full of Pleasant Thoughts of the Herbs Outside']. Components of Everyday Language in Eighteenth-Century Scientific Letters.” The author discusses the letters to Carolus Linnaeus in the 1770s from his disciple Anders Sparrman where Sparrman presents his scientific discoveries but also delivers personal reflections. The turn from scientific issues to personal thoughts leads to linguistic and stylistic changes. When, for example, emotional and sentimental issues are in focus, the vernacular character seems more prominent. The letters by other disciples show the same variation. The degree of vernacular language also seems to vary depending on the individual’s relationship to Linnaeus. Through such a close reading, the thoughts and feelings in a text could bring forth the image of a person in specific contexts. Some methodological problems with such interpretative stylistics are touched upon.

The main part of this section of vernacular literacy practices in the past consists of articles concerned with the nineteenth century, with a specific focus on handwritten documents by ordinary people in Finland and Iceland. Three articles deal with literacy practices in a Finnish-speaking context during the nineteenth century. In the article “‘I Can Sing Hallelujah!’ Hymn as Non-Elite Women’s Genre in Nineteenth-Century Finland” Anna
Kuismin focuses on women and hymns in nineteenth-century Finland. This case study takes as its point of departure an interesting notebook written by Kaisa Juhantytär (1782–1856). The notebook consists of a preface and eleven hymns. It shows Kaisa Juhantytär’s need for self-assertion and must also be seen in the context of revivalism. However, it is not clear if Kaisa wrote to be published, for a more selected audience or for her own pleasure.

The path to functional literacy for Finnish-speaking commoners through letters to newspapers, is presented by Laura Stark in the article “The Rise of Finnish-Language Popular Literacy Viewed through Correspondence to Newspapers 1856–1870.” The rise of Finnish-language newspapers in the 1860s gave Finnish-speaking commoners a reason to write for the first time. At the time, the press represented the only forum for political debate where the commoners could participate. The article presents how and why the non-elite writers began to write to newspapers and the social tensions that arose when the rural writers entered the public sphere. The letters to the press provide important information on the self-educated writers’ motives.

Letters to the Russian imperial administration from Finnish-speaking rural people are presented as fruitful historical sources in Sami Suodenjoki’s article “Whistleblowing from Below: Finnish Rural Inhabitants’ Letters to the Imperial Power at the Turn of the Twentieth Century.” The letters are here called “whistleblowing from below” since there are letters of petitions, complaints and denunciations demanding authoritative interventions. The letters were sent to the Governor-General of Finland in 1898–1905 by unschooled tenants, farmers and agriculture labourers, sometimes with the aid of intermediaries. In the letters the rural senders fashioned their political identity, and they can thus be called performative texts, the author argues. The study shows that the letters, however, rarely changed their senders’ status.

Three articles deal with literacy practices in Iceland, exercised in the manuscript culture and in letter writing. The features of a handwritten manuscript owned by an ordinary woman in mid-century Iceland is compared with the features of contemporary social media by Bragi Þorgrímur Ólafsson in the article “Manuscripts and Social Media: The Case of Ragnheiður and Andrés.” The author argues that the manuscript was to a certain extent a type of social media: the content is user-generated, it had a wide reach since it was circulated from one farm to another and there was an interactive dialogue on the flyleaf, where the readers stated their opinions of the manuscript.

In her article “Manuscript Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northern Iceland. The Case of Porsteinn Porsteinsson á Heiði,” Tereza Lansing studies the manuscript network of the unschooled farmer and scribe Porsteinn Porsteinsson (1791–1863) from the farm Heiði in the Skagafjörður region
in northern Iceland. Through this investigation, some important themes could be illustrated: the interaction between learned and popular cultures, the social stratification of the rural manuscript community, and the function of literacy. Due to the influence of the Hólar bishopric, the literacy and book-culture seem to have developed in Skagafjörður. Folk-genres and learned genres seem to have crossed traditional social strata, and reading material was exchanged and copied within different social groups. The farmers who copied books also had other occupations that required writing skills. Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson was obviously part of a rural elite, according to the author.

“Don’t you Forget your Always Loving Sister’. Writing as a Social and Cultural Capital” is the title of the contribution presented by Erla Hulda Halldórssdóttir. It has been argued that separation plays a vital role in correspondences in times past, and may even start a correspondence; letters become a substitute for the one not present. So may be the case with the epistolarium of Sigríður Pálsdóttir’s (1809–1871) family. But according to the author the correspondence also offers “a venue for self-expression and networking and even of manipulation.” Erla Hulda Halldórssdóttir also argues for the importance for women to be able to write for themselves.

Loftur Guttormsson’s article “From Gothic to Roman Print Type. Evidence from 19th Century Iceland” throws light on the change from the Gothic to the Roman type in the print culture of nineteenth century Iceland compared with the situation in Denmark and Norway. Religious literature proved to be the most resistant to change from Gothic to Roman print. Special attention is given to the role that ABC books played in the change process. The change that took place between 1830 and 1880 was rapid due to the role of the Icelandic literary society and the influence that Icelandic literary tradition had on Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen. Roman print became the expression of a national identity.

“Mitt liv skall jag förtälja för eder uti sång’ ['Let Me Tell You My Life in a Song']. On the Relationship Between Life and Lyrics in Beggar Verses of the Blind” is the title of the contribution by Karin Strand, where printed texts are also in focus. Beggar verses by blind people have been largely neglected within research. Little is known about the creation process of the songs, as well as the life contexts of their protagonists. In this article we can find arguments that these verses are an interesting source material in a number of respects. Two case studies discuss in great detail the aspects of the relationship between life and song, including matters of the life of the songs themselves, are discussed in great detail.

Folklore collecting as vernacular literacy practices is discussed in an Estonian and Finland-Swedish context. In Estonia, folklore collecting campaigns
were organized at the latter half of the nineteenth century where thousands of common people participated. In the contribution entitled “Folklore Collecting as Vernacular Literacy. Establishing a Social Position for Writing in 1890s Estonia” Katre Kikas discusses the literacy practices of the collectors and how they position themselves as writers. The framework of folklore collecting is used by many writers as a social resource or as an entrance into the public literacy space. Through folklore collecting, the abstract idea of ‘nation’ also becomes more real and local for the writers. “Writing for the Archive as a Finland-Swedish Vernacular Literacy Practice in the Twentieth Century” is the title of Linda Huldén’s article. Questionnaires sent from the Archives of Folk Culture at The Society of Swedish Literature in Finland have offered people with little experience of writing in non-private contexts an opportunity to write for a larger audience. In this article, these non-professional writers’ views of writing are studied and compared with texts written by correspondents with more experience of writing. Responses from three decades are compared, and as a result it is demonstrated how the general changes in literacy practices in society have affected the writers’ ways of dealing with the assignment.

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Main Editor