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Task force writing – about people who write and who do not

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Abstract

The focus of the paper is to discuss possibilities for a significant contribution to the writing culture in the primary school system. Problems in this domain have been identified (e.g., PISA). Many of these problems can be seen as aspects of school cultures based on a verbal tradition. We will make a new proposal about how to change an old-fashioned verbal school culture – held by many teachers, their leaders and the school administrations – concerning teaching writing. The pupils already have many experiences from writing in their daily private practice at home: computers, internet, chat, SMS etc. These resources have to be used in their training. We think that writing skills are needed in the modern knowledge society – people with weak writing skills have problems acting socially and at the working place. Developing new policies for teaching writing will make it more up to date – according both to the experiences the pupils already have (from using technologies in their private lives) and to demands from the knowledge society. Writing skills contribute to pupils' development by improving their critical thinking and social behaviour as democratic individuals.

We will look at the development of new writing policies and strategies from a European perspective. Living in the modern world is no longer a national affair. By giving pupils better writing skills – and also giving the teachers better ways of practising and thinking writing – we can contribute to the pupils' behaviour not only in the social scene and the working place, but in many aspects of their cultural life.

The paper will address the following topics:

- 1) A discussion about the schools' systems approach to writing today
- 2) Indication of problems in teaching writing – a critical point of view
- 3) Discussion of the diverse cultures of talking and writing
- 4) A solution: a new strategy for teaching writing.

Keywords

Teaching writing, school cultures, new technologies

Introduction

A colleague of ours, also working with training and education of teachers, and specifically their writing skills, told one of us how difficult she found it to write herself. Recently she took some lessons herself – as she had to write a series of papers. She then saw and experienced in her own body and mind how hard it was to write. She said: "I have not been writing for years, and now I see how hard it is for my students." And then she added: "... but of course, I have been giving my students instructions in this topic for years without any problems, but to use

all my knowledge about writing for myself, that is far more difficult!” This comment was so surprising that it was difficult to see how to react to it. Since then we have been wondering how one can find something hard to do but on the other hand and without hesitation – state that you are an excellent teacher in the very same topic.

First of all, we will focus on some of the basic problems we have encountered when teaching children to write. We see this as an issue for school systems all over Europe, though some countries have better results in international tests than others. The story about the teacher above tells us something about the basic problems and indicates some of the challenges we have about teaching writing. It tells us that we are dealing with a cultural problem: We have a school culture where writing is presented in a very abstract perspective, where it is seen as a technique you can learn in the same manner as the bricklayer laying bricks “one by one”. All children are supposed to learn in the same way to structure writing in different modules – for instance brainstorming, making an outline of the paper, rapid writing, and proofreading – which together makes possible writing a paper, like in constructing a “building”. Thinking about writing in this way does not correspond to people’s needs for education in a modern knowledge society. It is similar to the laborer in early industrial societies: The work was abstract, fragmented and the laborer did not have knowledge of the overall fragmented process. We are not criticizing the idea of writing as a process itself – but we are questioning the school culture that sees writing as an abstract and fragmented process. We see this culture as a barrier to develop teaching writing to an up-to-date level where writing should be seen as basic competence closely connected with the person’s way of thinking, their way of reflection, their mental options and personality. This fragmented perspective on writing is prevalent in current school culture. In our story about the teacher who was not an accomplished writer herself, we saw how it was possible to talk about writing as a process cut off from aspects of thinking. Our question to the teacher would be: How can you be excellent in teaching writing if you can’t write yourself? We think that most teachers would not be astonished to hear that you can teach writing without being good at it yourself. We feel that this reductive perspective is quite widespread when talking about writing. It means that if we want to handle problems with pupils’ writing skills - problems we find evidence for in empirical work from PISA and from national tests around Europe - we have to address problems and contradictions in the perspective on writing in school culture.

In our own approach we will examine both the process of how pupils write and also the products, the pupils’ papers. If we don’t want to maintain the widespread fragmented perspective on writing, we have to find out how the pupils relate to their own writing, how teachers relate to and practice writing themselves and how they reflect on their ways of writing and reflect on the relation between their own writing and teaching writing. This will give us some indication about the writing culture in practice and be a step to reorganizing teaching writing – the practice, the planning and the overall approach or culture.

Our modern knowledge society requires extended writing skills. Modern citizens can’t handle their private and working lives or their social obligations without interacting with up to date information technology. Earlier it was sufficient to have a telephone, but today there are many layers of technological equipment involved in communication between people. “Knowledge technology” may be a more appropriate term than “information technology” because today the technology is not restricted to sending and receiving information. Today these technologies – for instance computers connected to the Internet, written messages on cell phones – are mostly used to formulate thoughts and ideas and maintain and extend social relations. Citizens in the modern world require an ongoing mental adaptation to ongoing changes in society – and these changes in society are faster than ever. Citizens can develop their mental capacities by talking about and discussing various subjects. The problem is that verbal communication is a restricted code: For instance many people in the very same room

can't communicate simultaneously, and listening takes more time than reading. On the contrary written language is an elaborated code, and people can communicate – and develop their thoughts – with many people in the same room (e.g., the Internet) at the same time.

In the knowledge society writing is a must. In many essential parts of modern life writing skills are fundamentally for success. To be someone - you need to belong to the living race of writers. Earlier we could categorize people into social categories as workers, academics or office workers, or into higher or lower social classes. Today an essential way of categorizing people is into people who write and people who do not write.

People in our education system are already aware of the importance of writing. At least pupils know. There is empirical evidence that pupils often use “knowledge technologies” in their everyday life more than their teachers. This shows that there could be an abyss between the official school culture and the pupils’ culture. These cultures could be described as: A school culture with teachers who don't write and a pupils’ writing culture with pupils using modern writing technologies. This could also be presented as an abstract culture versus an authentic culture: In the school culture, pupils write papers for teachers, and the communication is abstract (papers matter only in terms of marks obtained); in the pupils’ culture the communication is authentic and has consequences for their group membership.

The first step for the education system could be to incorporate pupils’ experience of writing outside school. School culture assumes that you learn by being spoken to. So, the school culture is primary a verbal culture: We talk and somebody learns. Children’s experiences do not match that rule. They know that they learn when they talk and write themselves. Most of the time the teacher speaks in the classroom – so pupils know that they mostly learn when they write. We will formulate it this way: The more pupils write, the more they learn.

There are many consequences to this way of thinking. One of them would be a radical change in the teacher’s working day. Today the teacher is behind the desk in the classroom. Tomorrow’s teacher will be dealing with pupils writing their work using new technologies, and there will be much more interacting between teachers and pupils and between pupils and pupils in the classroom. Though new technologies allow teachers and pupils to send videos and voices to each other, this aspect will not be essential for the interaction: video and voice are still more restricted codes than writing, and using these forms will limit the interaction process. So to summarize, changes are needed also in the school administration: Teachers nowadays are paid mainly for their contact time with pupils. If teachers have a specified amount of working time in a week – and teachers have to use much more of their time dealing with making comments, interacting with pupils and following up on pupils’ writing – there will be less time left for the classroom. The classroom is not longer restricted to the physical – and the concept of “contact time” is changed too.

We think a new approach to writing will need the support of teachers who are good writers. Writing will be an integral part of the teacher’s job. The teacher will be an authentic part of the group in modern society that writes, just like pupils are part of this culture. In this way they will be authentic guides to pupils.

Some new strategies for thinking about writing are needed. It is hard to think about writing in a new way: We are ourselves part of school culture, a discourse limiting our way of thinking about schools and writing. If we want to develop an innovative writing culture in the school system, we have to analyze how culture restricts or how to make new writing practices possible in an appropriate way. The responsibility for pupils’ skills in writing is not restricted to the pupils themselves. The way pupils write is a consequence of the teachers’ writing skills

and practices and also of the school culture in their specific country. International tests show big differences in pupils' skills, and it seems evident that school systems can learn from each other in a trans-European approach to teaching writing. It is true that there are cultural differences between approaches in European countries, and we believe that by studying writing carefully in different microcultures we can use these differences to understand the ways culture influences education at the macro level and at the micro level, that is with varying cultural influences from the school system, to the school, to the classroom, and finally to the pupils' ways of engaging with writing. In other words, different national approaches can contribute to the development of more general strategies for learning writing in today's globalized knowledge society.

A new approach to writing could be, as mentioned above: To write is to learn. Today we want to motivate pupils to write. But we may be mistaken. In their everyday lives pupils already write a lot – and they also read a lot: They write and read hundreds of messages on the Internet and cell phones. Nobody in school seems to take this into account. We have to take into account that they do this on their own - willingly, and not because a teacher is “motivating them”. We do not need to motivate pupils to write: They can't help writing. A colleague providing Internet in-service classes to school teachers, reported that they were inactive. Nothing happened in the classes on the Internet. The course teacher said that he did not require participants to write in respect for their integrity and felt they could write of their own free will, if they wanted to! This type of respect has its origin in the verbal school culture of talking. In a writing culture, teachers would tell their students that they would learn by writing (especially in an Internet based class). This was not obvious to the school teachers, so demanding that they write would have been helpful. Such a requirement would have changed the silent inactive Internet classroom into an interactive one.

We must change the way we think about learning and writing. We believe such a change could lead to a move away from a receptive school culture towards a productive learning culture in which all the participants – pupils and teachers - were wholly engaged with writing and learning.

We propose a “design” experiment approach to investigate these issues in the context of a European research initiative. Anthony Kelly at George Mason University has pioneered “design research” as a method of examining how slight changes in teaching activities affect outcomes in classrooms. He was guest editor of a special issue of *Educational Researcher* (2003) on *The Role of Design in Educational Research*. He has called this “design research” because it is often small scale but with careful analysis of the classroom innovations and interventions one can gain insight into the processes involved in successful teaching. Design research is essentially about understanding teaching and learning when the researcher is involved as the educator (Kelly, 2003). In our project we have the opportunity to examine how teaching writing works in our partner countries more powerfully because of the ways that the writing culture is taught in each country differs.

Cobb et al (2003) identify five intersecting features of design research that lend themselves to our proposed study of the European writing cultures. The first feature is to develop a set of theories about ways of supporting learning at different levels, from the individual student to the classroom to the school itself and on to the school system. A second feature arises from the novel features of the research that are likely to derive from the research teams' analysis of the research so the classroom interventions typically differ strongly from prior normal practice in the school culture. Hence there is a need to study normal practice and to be as clear as possible about the elements of the innovation and the conditions of their implementation. A third feature is that in design research initial ideas about learning and instruction that are being tested may be refined or rejected easily during the process. This

leads to a fourth feature, iterative design with cycles of invention and revision. Finally, the essential requirement of good design research is not testing a grand theory but rather making sure that the intervention does the job it is intended to do in the school culture in which it is being applied.

Design experiments may be criticized for being small scale, because the data arise from different small samples in different schools, with different teachers, with different content and in our case even different countries. These concerns clearly lead to issues concerning the validity of the findings. One way to acknowledge these concerns about the validity and generalizability of the research is to concentrate on model building (Sloane & Gorard, 2003). Another way is to concentrate on causal questions as a key part of the assessment of the research. Key questions that are recommended by Shavelson et al (2003) are what is happening?; is there a systematic effect?; and why or how is it happening? Our hope is to change the overall dominating verbal culture in the school system and to engage the learners in the writing culture.

By having a European consortium on teaching writing in the education of young people we will have opportunities to understand not only differences in the ways we teach writing in our schools, but also opportunities to understand differences in partner countries in ways globalization is impacting on our cultures and specifically on our writing culture.

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