

**Johannes Fibiger, Inger Maibom & Søren Søgaard 2009. *Skriftens Veje*. Aarhus: Academica, 285 pages. ISBN 978-87-7675-519-5. – The ways of writing – a recursive perspective on writing, or how not to write into the world**

### **First impression of the book**

This heavy book, containing 285 pages devoted to the study of writing, should be suitable for everyone who teaches writing. In particular, it addresses those students in university colleges in Denmark who aim to become teachers of Danish in Danish primary and lower secondary school. According to its authors, the publication could also be of interest to a writer “who wants to master the many ways of writing”.

The publication contains 14 chapters dealing with such issues as the history of language, the cultural history of writing, writing as a product and as a process, genres, writing fiction, the writing of assignments, journalism, writing on the Internet, the didactics of writing, evaluation, and the development of writing skills. The book also touches upon such aspects of writing as handwriting vs. computer writing, and the influence of new technology on the writing process. It also features a detailed index section. The impressive list of references comprises over 200 references of both acknowledged and lesser known scholars in the fields of writing, philosophy and linguistics, such as J.L. Austin, G. Bateson, J. Bruner, U. Eco, P. Elbow, W. Iser, Plato and L. Wittgenstein, as well as such Danish scholars of both local and international renown as: V. Hetmar, C. Kock, M. Jørgensen, O. Pedersen, L. Qvortrup, L. Rienecker, P.S. Jørgensen and B. Steffensen.

This is an ambitious book about writing, no doubt. Judging by its sheer form and volume, one should think of it as a valuable contribution to the development of both theory and practice in the field of writing studies. As the authors state on the very first pages: “In recent years, we have been witnessing the establishment of new pedagogical perspectives on the teaching of Danish, but an up-to-date book on writing has yet to appear.” This publication is supposedly meant to fill this gap, but unfortunately, it falls short of the mark. It is sad to see the outcome of all the efforts put in the making of the book. So much planning of all the carefully worded pages was unfortunately not accompanied by any pedagogic orientation. Despite the fact that the authors had recourse to a wealth of relevant research, it is hard to discern the genuine purpose of their publication. But perhaps that was the authors’ intention. This assumption may sound rather bold. However, following it sheds light on the prevalent perspective on writing and on teaching Danish and demonstrates how deeply this perspective is entrenched in Danish educational culture.

### **Writing, but for what purpose? The Danish tradition of teaching writing**

The title of the book is *Skriftens Veje*, which could be rendered in English as *The Ways of Writing*. By means of this title the authors claim that there are many ways to good writing, and that these are intersected by numerous crossroads. Actually, there are too many ways to writing in this book, and what is even worse, the authors do not seem to acknowledge the fact that writing is a goal-driven activity. Apparently, people write because they just have to. Living in a writing culture, with widespread use of computers and the Internet, necessitates both writing as such and the development of writing skills (p.17). This applies to all members of the essentially literate society, not least schoolchildren, whose writing education is strictly governed by official regulations (pp. 144ff.)

But what is the genuine purpose of writing? The purpose of writing seems vague to the authors. Writing is often and primarily seen from a perspective based on formal arguments: we just have to write.

I regularly discuss the purposes of writing with my students, who never get away with stating purely formal reasons for both learning and teaching writing. They are asked to think of more convincing, individual reasons. They have to find their way of writing, so that that *their* pupils

know where to go. My students, for instance, could claim that the purpose of writing is to be part of human self-development. Nobody knows what one means before one expresses it, or before one *writes* it. One can have a vague idea of what one thinks, but the idea is only realised through verbal expression. The overarching purpose of writing could be to become aware of one's perspective on oneself, on culture, and on the world. If writing is communication, it cannot take place without this awareness. This is indeed the genuine purpose of teaching writing – revealing the *way* of writing, to use the authors' own metaphor. Yet in this book it is difficult to see any *way* of writing that would be worth following. What the book simply states is: we write because we have to, as the section title "the necessity of writing" clearly indicates (p. 17).

As a matter of fact, not only the authors' perspective on writing but also their view of language is rather problematic. In Denmark, teaching traditionally takes place through and focuses upon the oral medium of communication. Speech is primary. Writing is secondary. In fact, however, there are reasons to believe that the opposite is true: From the philosophical point of view, speech and writing can be seen as two equal aspects of language and of thinking – and of learning, too. However, the Danish writing tradition often views writing as an inferior aspect of teaching. This view is upheld in the publication under review. The authors speak about encoding spoken language into written text (p. 47). They also claim that speech is primary and based on experiences and feeling, whereas writing often devitalizes spoken language and makes speech colourless (p. 23). Moreover, in written language, sender characteristics are unknown, and text is independent of the situation. A similar perspective on oral and written language can be observed as the authors contrast the intense, concrete and meaningful oral culture with the abstract and mediated written language (p. 39). It seems that the authors are actually making an effort to depreciate the importance of their own subject: the written language. This approach reflects the predominant Danish paradigm of thinking and learning as an oral activity and provides an excuse for not thinking substantive purposes into the teaching of writing. The emerging concept of writing is clear: as writing is like a foreign language, learning to write is like second language learning (p. 17, 62). If this observation is correct, this book merely upholds a reactionary and recursive perspective on writing.

The perspective on language and thinking adopted in the book also deserves a comment. The relation between language and thought is a profound topic; what is important here is what it reveals about the deeper and basic implications for the conceptualisation of learning and teaching writing. In constructivism, language use can be conceptualised as a thinking activity. A good writer would most likely be a good thinker with a good learning aptitude and a good ability to reflect on any matter. Therefore, teachers intend to make their pupils good at writing, so that the pupils will be able to construct own views of the ever changing world. This, however, is far from being the main perspective in this book. The authors talk about reality as one thing and writing as another one, as is exemplified by their discussion about the conception of and access to reality (p. 43). In line with the modern approach to writing the authors admit that one might be a better thinker by being a better writer (p. 17). However, the concept of being a better thinker is left unspecified.

In Chapter 4 of the publication, one learns about the "way of writing" and the writing process. Here the authors claim that the best way to learn writing is to divide the process into parts (p. 61). This is the traditional conception of text production as a writing process. A central aspect of this way of teaching writing is "finding something to write about". This approach is rather problematic, as pupils at school discover quickly that they have nothing to write about. The writing instructions lead the pupils to perceive writing as an abstract and meaningless activity. A modern view of writing, one that would stress the importance of the purpose of writing, is badly needed, but, unfortunately, has yet to be developed.

The title of Chapter 5 is "The text as a house – on text construction". Hereby the authors imply that every writer needs to handle the bricks that make up the text building. The writer should know everything in detail before they can write. Words are the stones that the house of language is made of (p. 75). Throughout the chapter, the authors demonstrate their impressive knowledge

about the structure of sentences. However, as relevant Anglo-American studies revealed already half a century ago, such knowledge does not help one to construct better texts. The reverse is often true. Knowing structures of language is not equivalent to mastering the structure of writing. This thesis is confirmed by the fact that schoolchildren's ability to transfer grammar rules to their own text production is nearly non-existent. The authors make extensive use of the metaphor BUILDING A HOUSE IS BUILDING A TEXT. The metaphor itself is not inappropriate for the authors' purpose, but it sounds more reasonable to ask: When building the house, where would you put the windows? Having made the right choice, the residents will be rewarded with a nice view. This is important. In our everyday life we do not care about bricks – but a nice view, an appropriate point of view from the windows will have influence on our lives. Using the author's metaphor again one could ask: Which quality of life do you intend to achieve or enhance by building a given house, i.e. by writing the particular text? What do you want the pupils or the students to see, which impact from their lives or experience do you want them to focus on? Unfortunately, neither asking such questions nor providing the appropriate instructions for the writing teacher seems to attract the authors' attention.

As the authors talk about the *way* of writing, the reader would expect them to focus on the vital issue of where to go. One can imagine a similar reflection with regard to biking. Biking is nice, you enjoy the ride, you get some fresh air in your lungs, and you come to new destinations. The publication under review, however, focuses on the handlebars, on how the handbrake functions, on how to change gears, on the technical data concerning the chrome (or aluminium) frame, etc. But it says nothing about where to ride and what to experience as you bike! Having read the book, I ask myself then: What is interesting about biking, if anything at all?

The authors also report on the fact that the Danish Government has recently taken initiative on a new perspective of learning in the primary and secondary school. The efforts materialized in the amendments to the Education Act, which came to include a set of regulations known as Common Objectives (Fælles Mål)<sup>1</sup>. The regulations, applicable to all public schools in Denmark, oblige teachers to state the purpose of their classes clearly to the pupils. Every pupil in Denmark should know what to learn and why. The book under review contains a subchapter about Common Objectives, included in the chapter concerning the teaching of writing (Chapter 10, p. 185 ff). Such a chapter is necessary in a book aimed at students who aim to become writing teachers. Moreover, in Chapter 8, which deals with writing assignments, the authors put forward further desiderata. For instance, pupils should know how to write clearly, they should write personally, with variation, they should be able to express themselves precisely in coherent paragraphs etc. However, the reader does not learn much about how to follow the authors' intentions. In order to do this one has to know *why* one would want the pupils to write personally, with variation and, so on. In other words, such common objectives require a purpose. If pupils should write correctly (in accordance with point made by the authors on p. 156), then there has to be some very good *reasons* for that. Certainly, one could claim that reason for writing correctly and with variation is to enhance the clarity of the text and of one's thoughts, too. This would facilitate the process of understanding oneself. However, this point is not made by in the book. It seems that the writing teacher is left with only one argument to give to their pupils: You have to write correctly and with variation because you just have to, because the law says so, and because that is the way we do it. The obvious risk caused by such argumentation is that the pupils will not understand the meaning of writing, because their teachers apparently have no purpose for it.

The publication would be much better if the advice it offers about how to teach writing was more up-to-date. Its treatment of the relations between speech and writing, and between language and thought could be more up-to-date, too. But perhaps this book does not intend to be up-to-date. Many teachers in Danish public schools simply follow the established Danish teaching tradition, which perceives teaching as primarily an oral process or activity. Within this tradition, teachers

1 The website of the Danish Ministry of Education [online]. <http://www.uvm.dk>

are paradoxically sceptical about writing as well as about formal purposes for writing. If the book under review is used to instruct new teachers about how to teach writing, the problem will persist. Then the old paradigm for teaching writing in Denmark will not be changed.

There are many new good books about writing. The findings of modern Anglo-American writing studies have been accommodated in new paradigms for teaching writing, in which the purposes of writing are clearly explicated. Many of these thoughts are also adapted in other Scandinavian countries, especially Norway (by such writing scholars as e.g., Olga Dysthe). Unfortunately, such modern writing experience and practice has not had decisive influence on the Danish educational system yet. This book, with its *way* of writing and its perspective on writing, does not provide much incentive to rethink a widespread and resistant way of teaching writing rooted in the Danish educational tradition. If the intentions specified in Common Objectives are ever to be followed up by good books about thinking and practicing writing, it will not be done by means of this book.

In the book, the authors claim that they not only intend to make the pupil to “know what”, but also to “know how” (p. 9). This goal is hardly reached. There are many good intentions but the instructions provided are too abstract. The intention of the book is also that the reader should experience the fascinating experience of writing (p. 11). This aim is hardly reached, too. The failure to reach these objectives can be ascribed to the problems concerning both the conception and the purpose for writing. If the authors of the book perceive speech as creative, innovative and metaphorical, and writing as devoid of all these features, the perspective on writing will never be that writing is learning to know about ourselves, about our culture and about the world; that writing is writing oneself into the world.

*Carlo Grevy*

### **Literature**

Dysthe, Olga/Hertzberg, Frøydis/Løkensgard Hoel, Torlaug 2001: *Skrive for at lære*. Klim.