

Enhancing Academic Literacy among Students and Academic Staff: Seminars and Workshops

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Abstract: This paper presents studies conducted on Norwegian students' and lecturers' academic literacy. The studies reveal that students are struggling to meet the requirements for academic writing and that they benefit to a small extent from the ordinary writing instruction they receive. Students want tutorials that promotes learning and academic literacy, but the lecturers' own literacy does not seem to be sufficient to meet these needs. These findings form the basis for how the unit Diversity in Pedagogical Practices is working to develop the teaching staff's literacy so they are able to support the students' writing process and help students to write about knowledge and evidence based practice in an academic way. Two participant-centered offers are presented: a series of seminars for academic staff at the Department of Nursing, and a workshop with students, librarians and lecturers, all attending LATINA Post-IT Summer School 2013.

1 Introduction

Different studies of Norwegian undergraduate students reveal that students are struggling to meet the requirements for academic writing, and that they to a small extent benefit from the ordinary writing instruction they receive. This paper looks initially into two research projects on students' writing done at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway's largest state university college with a student body of approximately 17,000 students and 1,850 employees. It also presents results from a study on lecturers' literacy. The findings are compared and some conclusions on what kind of training programs lecturers need to upgrade their literacy are drawn.

2 Two Studies on Students' literacy

44 randomly selected first year students were in the academic year 2010/2011 informants in a study focusing on how new students relate to requirements for academic texts (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2012). The informants came from three different bachelor's degree programs. Common to all the programs was the emphasis on critical thinking and academic argumentation in students' texts. 36 semi-structured interviews based on a thematic interview guide were carried out. The first round of interviews was conducted as focus groups at semester start. They were followed by three individual interviews throughout the academic year, in addition to eight depth interviews focusing on texts the informants had written or were writing. The data was analysed thematically between each interview, and formed the basis for the next. In this way the researchers gained access to the informants' narratives about writing in an academic context.

A different project examined the students' experiences with writing their final bachelor thesis, and the instruction given to support the writing process. All second languages students in their third year of study at one of the University College's institutes were in the spring 2011 invited to participate in a case study. 13 informants signed up. The bachelor's degree program institute in question was not represented in the study of first year students, but had the same expectations and requirements to students' texts.

In this case study the informants participated in a specific writing arrangement consisting of three workshops and weekly supervision from fellow students (writing mentors), in addition they received regular guidance from their lecturers. The workshops were led by the researchers themselves, which provided valuable knowledge about the informants' literacy, their insight and ability to academic critical thinking. It was carried out 16 individual, semi-structured interviews. The emphasis of the interviews was on the informants' experiences with academic writing and instruction on written text, as well as their work with the bachelor thesis. The first interviews were held after the writing workshops and in the middle of the writing process. The last interviews

were conducted immediately after the submission of the bachelor thesis. A thematic analysis of the data was made.

3 Findings from the Studies on Students' literacy

Research data gained by studying first year students reveals that students tend to put aside previous knowledge from upper secondary education and/or professional life about subject oriented prose when they start studying. Every study program and work place have their own text culture, their own standards, but still all students have experience and knowledge about text and writing that may be appropriate to build on in higher education. However, it is striking that the lecturers do not seem to make use of this competence.

The informants in both of the studies considered it important to use references, have the right set-up, use accurate formulations and avoid being oral and "childish". The informants from the first year perceived following the guidelines for writing assignments as the most important and the most difficult. The narratives tell us that new students try to follow *all* the formal instructions even before they understand what the instructions entails and even before they have something to write about. Unfortunately, it also turned out that the requirements in the guidelines still were incomprehensible to most of the informants from the third year.

The first year informants considered written assignments as something that disrupted their reading of the literature set, and thought it were excessively time-consuming. They did not recognize the lecturers' pedagogical reasons for giving a specific assignment at a particular point in the semester, and they did not realize that the process of solving the assignment and the writing itself were a way of learning. These informants did not experience writing as a help to reading in a focused manner and with a definite aim. Neither did they find that the essence of what they were reading became more obvious. Instead the narratives revealed that first year students primarily write to communicate to the lecturer that they have read the literature, not that they understand the substance of it and are able to apply this new knowledge in an academic way. Apparently students rarely discover that writing is related to academic learning and future professional practice.

Guidelines and professional criteria provide the students with useful information, and intend to remove uncertainty regarding the formal requirements for content and layout. When the formalities are understood, one can easily concentrate on the subject matter. But the findings from the study of first year students indicate that the guidelines may just as well interrupt and inhibit the students in their work grasping the subject matter (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2012). From a lecturer's point of view it is alarming when students do not focus on the substance. Both the first year and the third year informants seemed to have an untroubled attitude towards the subject matter. Questions on how to understand the curriculum were hardly an issue. They concentrated primarily on formal requirements. Involvement around knowledge and content seemed to be displaced by the requests on how academic texts are supposed to be written. The content is thus not a priority and the learning easily becomes superficial. When working with the assignments it seems that the students do not learn the subject matter, at least not the way it is intended by the lecturers. Relatively unprepared first year students try to "argue", "show critical thinking and critical reflection", "consider", "shed light on a theme", and "apply" etc. in an academic way. What kinds of support and instructions they receive during the writing process also impact how the students look upon written assignments and the writing process.

The findings from the studies at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences reveal that little attention is paid to the fact that the students need time to grasp and understand the subject matter they are supposed to learn, discuss and use. They need help understanding what the study program entails and which demands they are expected to meet. When the first year informants are writing their first academic texts they are trying to identify requirements, norms and rules and spend a lot of time trying to interpret what the lecturers say and what are emphasized. This becomes essential when the lecturer both introduces students to the dominant text culture and at the same time is the one who is grading their written work. We also know that the feedback on the first written thesis on a study program can be crucial to how students see themselves as academic writers in further studies (Hoel, 2008a; Rienecker, 2007). If the intention with tutorials is to help students to learn the discipline, the lecturer must free him- or herself from the products formalistic requirements and mainly concentrate on the content. In seeking to establish a professional understanding, students need positive and specific feedback on what works well, why it works and how it can be done better (Hoel, 2008a; Kjeldsen, 2006). If not, the student will continue to be uncertain next time he or she is asked to write a similar text.

The informants in the two studies demanded frequent responses during the writing process, and they wanted guidance from readers who managed to have a constructive dialogue with the texts. The informants

wanted tutorials that promote learning and academic literacy, but the lecturers' own literacy skills did not seem to be sufficient to meet these needs. The tutorial given neither helped the students increase their skills in academic writing nor in academic understanding. If this is a general tendency, it means that lecturers do not exploit the learning potential that is present in the students' text. If students are to experience academic writing as a stimulating and meaningful form of learning, they need to be in different writing stages, they must be aware of which stage they are in, and get response in relation to it (Hoel, 2008a; Dysthe & Samara, 2006). An unfinished text needs to be commented on as a text in progress. Guidance must be based on students' needs, how they are learning, the writing process and the potential and the challenges of the uncompleted text. Critical issues and discussions will provide students with assistance in pursuing their own ideas and develop them. Few of the informants experienced such a tutorial.

The narratives from the first year give the impression that lecturers spend a lot of time giving feedback. They comment layout, language, substance, large and small deficiencies in the text, and they comment a text in progress as if it was completed. This is the same results as Summer (1982) revealed in her studies 30 years earlier. The informants from Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences were satisfied with feedback that went directly into the text and pointed out everything that was "wrong". But they got frustrated by general comments containing few or no examples on how the text can be improved, and they requested explanation on what academic arguments are. They wanted feedback that enabled them to become better writers and helped them to increase professional understanding. According to the informants, writing is not used as a pedagogical tool to develop ideas, reflect, learn and build up arguments. Academic discussion with the lecturer about the content in the creative process was unheard of. The informants looked at tutorials as synonym to teaching, where the lecturer teach and explain – more or less the opposite of what higher education promotes. Norwegian higher education appreciate independent students with a critical attitude, however the students need to know where they stand academically before they are ready to apply knowledge in an autonomous way through academic argumentation and action in the field.

4 A Case Study on Lecturers' Literacy

The informants in the last study this paper refers to were all project team members in a pedagogical development project conducted by Diversity in Pedagogical Practices and the Department of Nursing in the period 2008 - 2011. Six lecturers from three different professional educations participated in the project. The project's aim was to change pedagogical practices to accommodate second language students in general at the Department of Nursing, and to establish a language course for second language students at the same department. In this development project writing was used with the intention to stimulate pedagogical reflection and to develop new knowledge. A case study focusing on the lecturers' literacy was conducted. The study was limited to the work related to a written report and academic articles. Submitted drafts, the supervisors' written comments and guidance on the drafts, and interviews with each project team member constitute the data, in addition to text analysis of the various stages of the report.

In order to aid the project team members' reflection and at the same time improve their writing skills with a view to future publications in the form of papers and participation at conferences, everyone collaborated on writing a report in the final phase of the project. The report was written on an ongoing basis and therefore rendered the actual process in the development project visible. Everyone took turns in writing the report and thereby had a stake in it. The idea was that reflections on actions, developments and theories should be included in the report and thereby contribute to systematic reflection. The report was intended to serve as a tool for general practice, for concept formation and analysis and for reuse and dissemination. This, however, did not come about. The report was characterised by detailed descriptions of the aims and content of the language course and lacked overall academic reflection.

Although the project managements' expectations for the report were not met, the project team members themselves derived considerable benefit from the writing process. They believe that this work has made them more confident in their written communication. Two of the project team members have presented their experiences at international conferences and two have since written their first scientific papers. The work on writing and the subsequent discussions have therefore had an impact on individual learning. One of them said: "You learned a way of thinking differently, you became receptive to other alternatives. You dared to say things in a setting where things were continually being developed and tested".

5 Findings from the Study on Lecturers' Literacy

The professional programs place high demands on the students' written academic dissemination, and the project team members themselves supervise the students in preparing their written papers. One would think that lecturers are familiar with academic writing but that is not always true. Academic writing is given little priority in the lecturers' working day and as some of them rarely are required to write, the threshold to do so is high.

Data from lecturers own text production indicates that many are as insecure as their students when it comes to academic writing, despite the fact that they have a lot to convey. Individual experiences, knowledge and opinions are not given space. The formal requirements are perceived as vague, but they still feel obligated to follow them. It seems that highly qualified professionals lose confidence in anxiety not to respond correctly to the formal requirements, and begin to doubt whether they have something of value to impart. Well-informed colleagues, who are highly structured and brilliant when they teach, try to be invisible in their writing. They are reluctant to share their own skilled opinions and valuable experiences, and thus fail to bring new perspectives into the subject matter. Endless explanations and accounts of theory and methods are results of the fear of making mistakes. Written texts primary function seems to be documentation of the "correct" knowledge, and thus something to be considered in relation to. With this in mind is not surprising that the first text drafts shown to colleagues consist of bullet points. Bullet points are safe pillars. With a word or a short phrase one can imply a theme. One can provide a sketch showing a rough thematic connection, without revealing the difficult thoughts, the linguistic fumbling or the loose ends that allow lines of reasoning to fall apart. It is hard to believe that the lecturers' uncertainty about their own writing and the fear of making mistakes do not affect their supervision on students writing.

The lecturers have words and concepts to teach and guide within their own discipline but lack the basic knowledge and understanding to talk about text and writing. The results reveal that the teaching staff needs to know about genres and literary techniques; they need to be aware of writing processes, to develop their proficiency in writing and to professionalize their tuition on students writing. They need to come together to discuss their writing supervision. Only then it will be possible to supervise students in a constructive way.

A number of studies show that students consider lecturers' text response as crucial to acquire an academic writing style (Hoel, 2008b; Ask, 2007; Kjeldsen, 2006). Narratives from first year students show that the text response given differs in quality and issues. Some lecturers commented mainly on the substance, others on formal errors and some comments on everything. Our findings show that lecturers are insecure writers and writing lecturers. They do not necessarily know *if* or *how* students can learn through writing and how writing best can be learned. Our informants base their writing instructions on their own experiences and understanding of text and text production, a personal and thus relatively casual affair that has a great impact on the students writing. Hoel's proposal to offer lecturers in higher education training in improving students' literacy skills seems therefore highly relevant (Hoel, 2008a, p 114).

The findings from these three studies form the basis for how the unit Diversity in Pedagogical Practices g is working to develop the teaching staffs' literacy so they are able to support the students in their writing and learning process and help students to write about knowledge and evidence based practice in an academic way.

6 Skills Development among Academic Staff

The unit Diversity in Pedagogical Practices is involved in is a skills development project among academic staff at Department of Nursing during the period May 2013 - March 2014. The project focuses on academic literacy – academic writing and writing guidance. The department owns the project, but the unit is responsible for the substance, and organizes a series of seminars for the academic staff working with first year students. The students are offered courses in academic writing, in addition to support from the Academic Skills Center and tutorials given by their lecturers. The lecturers themselves must attend these academic writing courses and participate in planning and implementing student support. In this way students will receive a comprehensive, coherent and structured training in academic writing and critical thinking. The aim is to help the students to master writing for academic purposes – to acquire the discipline by writing and to be successful in their written assignments.

The case study on third year students revealed that students need to systematically develop their academic writing skills. Writing should be an incorporated part of the subject matter, an activity that leads to academic understanding and proficiency. If this is to happen the lecturers have an important role. They have to be able to make use of the students' literacy (earlier knowledge and experiences), be in dialogue with the

students about texts the students are writing and lecturers have to be authentic readers and challenge students through questions. The content has to be in focus rather than formalistic requirements and language deficiencies (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2013a). To do so, the academic staff's literacy has to improve. We know colleagues benefit from discussing best practices, text cultures, written assignments and instruction in addition to having access to an expert/facilitator who gives relevant input and helps them to focus on the goal of improving their own practice (Helstad, K. & A. Lund, 2012).

In the spring 2013 two seminars were arranged and the feedback was very positive. The seminar themes were "what are the lecturers' challenges", "what are the students' challenges", writing processes, genre and "what pedagogical reasons do the lecturers have for giving a specific assignment". The lecturers feel that their academic literacy already have improved. They want to continue to develop their writing tuition, they want to look more critical on what kind of written assignments they are giving, and they want to follow the students more closely in their writing process. Not to mention they want to collaborate on feedback. What impact this work will have on the students' literacy is too early to say.

In June 2013 the unit Diversity in Pedagogical Practices was involved in another project aiming to improve the academic staff's literacy. The unit had planned a highly participant-centered event at LATINA Post-IT Summer School 2013. The participants at the Summer School were mostly librarians and lecturers in higher education. They had different first languages, represented different disciplines and countries. Latina Post-IT focused on free web resources and communication on web, and the participants had made various oral presentations of what they had worked on at the Summer School. LATINA Post-IT arranged a two-day writing workshop where the participants should work with draft papers and the experiences and inputs from the summer school. The workshop was an optional module. In the workshop different academic text cultures should meet and emerge and contribute to enhanced academic literacy. When the workshop was to start suddenly no one was interested. We do not know why, but I have some assumptions.

Those who participated at LATINA Post-IT Summer School 2013 were in quite a similar situation as the lecturers in the third study. All the participants had a pressure on them to publish academic papers and articles. I would argue that all writers can benefit from readers' response. But the fear of being evaluated as unskilled by colleagues is profound. The same mechanism troubling the lecturers in the third study may have been applicable for these participants too. To put it in the strongest terms: it appears that one must either be stupid or brave to write voluntarily for a colleague to read, or preferably both. To attend a writing workshop one has to be a confident writer or have confidence in the participants and the learning environment. To write is to expose. Many find it hard to show their imperfection and insecurity. A text in process is a threat to their self-image. We all want to be looked upon as someone who knows, does and manages.

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