



# Learning from and about writing: A case study of the learning trajectories of student teachers



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## ABSTRACT

Writing is an elaborate performance that connects student teachers' learning trajectories with their associated professional and disciplinary cultures. In this article, we highlight the role of writing in two related aspects: how writing works as a learning tool for a group of students in an educational training programme and how they plan to use writing in their own classrooms as future mother tongue teachers. To unpack the complexity of student learning regarding writing, we need to take into account the institutional relationships of authority that surround students' trajectories and how they mediate learning. Our theoretical approach holds three elements as central. The first is the concept of personal trajectories of learning (Dreier, 1999), which addresses students' processes of meaning-making as they participate in different writing activities, elaborate, learn, and position themselves. The second element is the concept of mediation (Wertsch, 2007), which refers to how contextual resources mediate collective and individual processes of learning and how these constitute opportunities and affordances for meaning-making. The third element in our analytical framework is a typology developed by Graue (2006), which suggests four different metaphors of writing. We argue that our analytical approach is proper for the purpose of investigating the complexity of student trajectories of learning from and about writing. Our empirical findings show that some resources explicitly and intentionally introduced to the students had little impact on their trajectories of learning. We argue that students benefit from writing in different genres, for the purpose of reporting as well as for interpretation and constitution. The final assessment has a particularly great impact on students' conceptualisations of writing. By deciding what counts for the final exam, important signals are given about the institutional relationships of authority; these are signals that act as a crucial mediational resource in the processes of learning.

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## 1. Introduction

Written products have been embraced as powerful objects in a scientific research context, beginning when Wilhelm Humboldt designed the foundation of the first university (Kruse, 2006) and continuing into our present-day concept of universities as places for the production of written knowledge. However, written texts do not merely serve the function of objectifying knowledge in higher education. Writing can also have the functions of interpretation and constitution (Graue, 2006), something we will return to in Section 2. The different functions of writing will often be tightly intertwined in practice; however, in this article, we try to explore the possible functions of writing in the context of initial teacher education in Norway. Our investigation addresses how student teachers of their mother tongue appropriate the resources to which they are introduced within different discourses of writing and through interaction with different partners.

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‘Writing for learning’ is being implemented in new educational programmes and has been encouraged by educational policy makers for several years. Writing is typically heralded as an educational tool with great potential to enhance learning (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Carter, 2007; Flower & Hayes, 1981). A famous article by Emig (1977) describes in detail how writing uniquely corresponds to certain powerful learning strategies. More recent studies have also concluded that writing can serve as a powerful tool for learning (e.g., Dysthe, 2002; Krampetz, 2005; Lerner, 2007). In activities such as producing assignment drafts, giving and getting feedback, and rewriting existing drafts, there is a powerful potential for learning (Linell, 2009), because the possibilities for learning that are socially available in any social space will transcend such activities (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). Burgess and Ivanič go so far as to say that ‘writing is an act of identity’ (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010, p. 256). They follow up with stating that when we (as teachers) ask a person to write a particular type of text, using particular media, materials, and resources, and particular discursive and generic features, in a particular context, we require that person to identify with other people who write this way and interpret resources in a certain way.

Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes give training ahead of professional work. These programmes are typically characterised by their multi-disciplinary approaches and theory–practice dimensions. Thus, *learning to write* as well as *learning from writing* takes place within and across different disciplinary traditions and subjects in both campus and internship schools. Additionally, in ITE, each school subject creates a conceptual context within which teachers work (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995). The different positions concerning writing will typically form a *nexus of writing practices*. Thus, ITE students are expected to act within a nexus of writing practices and communicate with a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes in different school subjects; also in different social contexts such as seminars, internships, and peer groups. In their encounters with lecturers and internship supervisors, student teachers therefore have to learn how to navigate within and between different disciplinary discourses that are often experienced as a ‘battlefield’ of academic disciplines and writing cultures (Macken-Horarik, Devereux, Trimmingham-Jack, & Wilson, 2006). Students must also relate to the distinctive features of each school subject, which create a conceptual context within which teachers work (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995).

Internationally, much research has focused on how writing is a way of doing and knowing a discipline (e.g., Carter, 2007). There is an international trend within writing research where writing is regarded as a strategy for domain-specific learning and communication (Newell, 2006). In this article, our focus is on students’ meaning-making about writing in the discipline of mother tongue didactics, but as the empirical part will demonstrate, students also draw lines across their disciplinary writing experiences.

In this article, we suggest an approach to the rich, complex, and mysterious activities of writing and the functions that writing can have in students’ trajectories of learning. As Graue (2006) states, ‘Few tasks in academia are as mysterious, emotional, or culturally important as writing. And few are as private and quirky’ (p. 516). Research on writing in higher education has traditionally focused on identifying ‘problems’ with individual students; however, such an approach is insufficient within an academic literacy methodology (Lea & Street, 1998). We argue that research should be concerned with a wider institutional approach and must ‘move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and consider the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at the degree level in universities’ (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 1), and with the fact that new academic identities are being reconstructed in a shifting academic workplace (Lea & Stierer, 2011, p. 605). Furthermore, there has been a democratisation of the academy in a mass Higher Education system. New writers and readers might contribute to change, along with new spaces in which to publish, with the help of new technologies (Hamilton & Pitt, 2009).

Research in the field of writing as a learning resource (‘learning across the curriculum’) has shifted the focus from strictly cognitive accounts of learning to the social influences on cognitive activity (Smagorinsky, 1994). According to Lea and Street (1998), educational research on student writing in higher education can be represented along three main lines. The first is the *study skills approach*, which assumes that literacy is a set of atomised skills, ‘which students have to learn and which are treated as a kind of pathology’ (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 3). The second is the *academic socialisation approach*, which assumes that students learn what and how to write because the university instructor inducts students into the academic culture of the discipline or profession. The third model, *academic literacies*, originates from the so-called ‘new literacy studies’ (Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Lea & Street, 2006). Student writing and learning are regarded as issues at the epistemological level and as identities rather than skills or student socialisation, even though skills and socialisation will always be involved in writing.

Our interest in this article is to explore in depth how student teachers solve writing tasks by asking questions and creating tools that may be used to transcend constraints within different programme-related contexts. Our research questions are:

- How do student teachers experience writing during initial teacher training?
- How do different writing activities mediate learning from and about writing?
- In what ways do the different writing experiences mediate meaning-making regarding the use of writing as future teachers of the mother tongue subject?

The study was conducted within a large-scale Norwegian study entitled ‘Learning resources and writing in educational textual cultures’. The primary goals of the project were to research textual cultures in upper secondary schools and in teacher training through an examination of the design and use of learning resources. This article reports solely on one of the case studies included in the project; namely a one-year initial teacher programme in a Norwegian university.

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