



# Teachers' talk on students' writing: Negotiating students' texts in interdisciplinary teacher teams

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how a team of teachers in a Norwegian upper secondary school responds to, negotiates, and evaluates students' writing in and across different disciplines. The purpose is to identify discourse strategies and professional development as the teachers discuss students' texts, and to explore how the teachers develop a shared understanding of how writing relates to students' learning. The findings show how the teachers' discourse reflects an emerging understanding of how writing is both a subject-specific and interdisciplinary skill conducive to learning, but also how institutional traditions and discipline-specific concerns together allow for and constrain teachers' learning.

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## 1. Introduction

The study presented in this paper examines how a team of experienced Norwegian teachers in an upper secondary school responds to, negotiates, and evaluates students' texts in and across different school subjects. The interdisciplinary team of teachers was established in order to develop professional knowledge about writing practices. The project, which is both a school development project and a research project, ran for two years (2007–2009) in close collaboration between the teachers, an expert on writing, and the principal of the school. The rationale for the school project is found in an increasing international interest in writing research across subjects (Bazerman, Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fouquette, & Garufis, 2005) and how such research can benefit teacher development (Troia, Shankland, & Heintz, 2010). One local example is the Norwegian Knowledge Promotion Curriculum from 2006 (K06) in which writing is defined as one of five basic skills to be integrated in all disciplines. This curriculum reflects an international trend where writing is regarded as a strategy for domain-specific learning and communication (Newell, 2006).

Developing professional learning about writing across the disciplines is a complex endeavor because it involves teachers traversing the boundaries between the specific school subjects they

teach. This represents a challenge because, as one language teacher in the Norwegian project put it in a response to a March 2009 questionnaire, "we found that teachers placed emphasis on very different things when they taught writing, and the students thought this was confusing."<sup>2</sup> In order to help develop a shared understanding of writing in and across disciplines, an expert on writing was invited to engage with and assist the team. Thus, the initiative came from the teachers, who recognized an opportunity for engaging an expert to take part in and assist them in their professional development. In this way, the project also gained a research dimension, as the expert brought research colleagues into the project to study how teachers advanced their learning while working with students' texts.

The purpose of the research project that forms the basis of this study was to identify teachers' emerging knowledge of writing and their discourse strategies when negotiating their perceptions of students' texts, and to explore the ways teachers cooperated as they developed a shared understanding of writing across school subjects. Teachers' learning was assumed, in turn, to increase their repertoire of instructional skills. The present paper examines how the practitioners, with the support from the expert, explored and developed their knowledge through talk in regular meetings where students' texts were discussed. In addition, we draw on interviews

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and teachers' reflection logs<sup>3</sup> in order to contextualize the moment-to-moment interactions.

In Section 1.1, we present our research questions before describing the context of the study. In Sections 2 and 3 we review relevant research literature before turning to the conceptual framework in Section 4. Next, we move on to the research design in Section 5 and the findings in Section 6. Finally, we discuss and conclude in Sections 7 and 8, where we address implications of the study.

### 1.1. Rationale and research questions

Support for teachers' professional development has been undergoing change from a typical short-course approach to a more longitudinal and collaborative approach related to workplace learning (Eraut, 2007; Schecter, 2010). However, much of the literature on this matter is still prescriptive or normative (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003). In particular, there is a lack of research that investigates what is going on 'inside' teacher communities and the interactions and dynamics through which professional communities constitute conditions for learning (Little, 2003; Meirink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2007; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007). Thus, the community might be overlooked as a dialogic resource for professional development. In addition, while many studies are based on teachers' self-reporting on what they say *about* their work, few studies focus closely on what teachers say *in* their work settings (Havnes, 2009; Little et al., 2003). In the present study, we focus on teachers' talk and analyze teachers' experiences as constituting professional learning. Hence, we address both what teachers say *in* and *about* their work.

In the context of professional development, the work of the teachers in this study may be seen as an example of what is referred to as a *teacher learning community*, a concept which rests on the premise that students' learning can be improved through the development of teachers' deeper insights about their own practices (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2009) emphasized the role of accomplished, experienced teachers in teacher learning communities and claimed that lasting professional development must begin with what teachers already know and do, as is the case in our study. In this paper, we draw on data from the project period (2007–2009) in order to capture development, while the empirical focus is on selected episodes from one of a total of 13 team meetings during the project period in order to capture and analyze seminal moments of discourse and interactions among the participants.

Together, the longitudinal nature of the writing project and the specific episodes we captured with more interactional detail allowed us to pursue the following research questions:

- In what ways are subject-specific student texts perceived, negotiated, and evaluated by an interdisciplinary team of teachers?
- What are the implications for teachers' professional development?

In order to respond to these questions, we examine negotiations that emerge in a learning community where the teachers hold different subject-specific perspectives. We do this by analyzing the dynamics of the talk and how artifacts such as students' texts open

new horizons for observations and actions (Edwards, 2005; Little, 2003). While the focus of the analysis is on micro-level interactions, we seek to understand these in their context in order to visualize the institutional aspects of talk (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002).

### 1.2. Context of the study

Fagerbakken is a Norwegian upper secondary school with 60 teachers and approximately 600 students. The school enjoys a good reputation, the teachers are highly qualified, and the student results are above national average. Previously, there have been only a few attempts at collaboration across disciplines; generally, teachers have been organized in subject-centered units. However, some of the teachers wanted their work to be more student-centered and interdisciplinary. With support from the principal, they took the initiative to cooperate with a university expert. This resulted in establishing a writing team consisting of 11 experienced teachers and the expert. The writing team met regularly, at least once a month, to discuss students' texts and issues of writing across the disciplines. The subject domains of Norwegian as a first language, foreign languages, history, and natural sciences were represented in the teacher team.

## 2. Teachers' work in upper secondary schools

Secondary schools are organizations where teachers generally are subject specialists organized in subject-centered departments. Recently, many upper secondary schools have introduced interdisciplinary teams alongside subject-centered teams (Crow & Pounder, 2000; Havnes, 2009; Svedberg, 2009). The Norwegian project on writing across the curriculum is one example of such a trend. However, adopting such an approach challenges some of the traditional, subject-specific aspects of schooling.

On an institutional level, the teachers' work is related to local rules and regulations, as well as to national education acts. In a less formal but nevertheless institutional way, teachers' daily work is also closely related to that of their colleagues, even though the traditions for collaborating on learning issues in upper secondary schools are weak (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Thus while doing similar work, upper secondary teachers belong to distinctive *subject cultures* characterized by different norms and practices. Grossman and Stodolsky (1995) emphasized that an understanding of subject-matter differences is crucial in the analysis and reform of secondary schools, since subject-matter shapes professional identity, and the distinctive features of each school subject create a conceptual context within which teachers work. The present study shares this position.

Despite the fact that the Norwegian K06 curriculum makes all teachers responsible for improving students' writing, the teachers do not necessarily regard themselves as writing teachers. Although the teachers in the present study are experts on their own subjects, they are unfamiliar with subject content and writing traditions in other fields, which offer different empirical as well as conceptual contexts. While cooperation across disciplines is rare in upper secondary schools, it is often met with skepticism (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Øgreid & Hertzberg, 2009).

## 3. Interdisciplinary teacher teams

Teacher teams in and across subject departments are examples of teacher collaboration forms established with the intention of transforming the traditional, individualized structure of teaching in which teachers are accustomed to teaching each a school subject as an isolated field (Shulman & Sherin, 2004). Hence in many countries, teacher team structures have been implemented as part of

<sup>3</sup> Teachers' reflection logs refer to teachers' responses to questions raised by the researcher via e-mail after meetings in the interdisciplinary group.

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