Writing roles: a model for understanding students' digital writing and the positions that they adopt as writers[☆]

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Abstract

Previous research in the field of written composition has mainly studied planning and revision. Nonetheless, the understanding of formulation is still poorly understood. This article elaborates the *Writing roles* model to elucidate challenges in digital writing in the research and pedagogy domains. Writing roles are based on empirical ethnographic data from Swedish lessons at upper secondary schools to create understandings of how digital writing and text processing in school affect students' writing and the positions that they take as writers. The results show that the use of computers changes writing in school from individual projects to complex collective writing projects. Writing digital school texts thus becomes a literacy project in an ecology of communication with different levels of collaborative writing. Writing is linked to the relationships between students' writing in interaction with reading, listening and talking, in addition to transitions to the school environment and how students position themselves and others in writing roles in relation to their use of computers. In the classroom, there is continuous negotiation and interplay through social media, both inside and outside the school. The capacity to participate in social activities is central for both giving and obtaining scaffolding in digital formulation processes.
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1. Introduction

Currently, the use of computers and other digital tools in school is taken for granted, as is access to the Internet and social media. Digital media are part of everyday practice with regard to information, communication and entertainment, which draws attention to the need for knowledge about *how* students compose digital texts at school and what doing so entails in a learning environment that is strongly influenced by social media. The report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) titled *Students, Computers and Learning. Making the Connection* (OECD, 2015) states that the use of computers for activities in school is increasing, particularly the use of the Internet

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and students' use of school computers to complete their homework. In 2012, the OECD estimated that 70% of students made use of computers in school. In a survey conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2013), it was found that at the upper secondary school level, nine out of ten students consider that they often or always use computers for their written compositions and assignments. Furthermore, students mostly use computers in the subjects of Swedish and civics. A 2016 survey by the Swedish National Agency for Education highlighted that 28% of students in upper secondary school perceive that they become distracted in their school work on a daily basis due to their use of social media or texting and that 16% of students are distracted on a daily basis by others' use. Two-thirds of all teachers report that classroom work is disrupted on a daily basis due to students' use of social media and texting. The report concludes, "To lead the work of technology-intensive classroom, the teachers clearly face some new problems. Therefore, one of the future important tasks of the school is to understand and manage when and how to use digital tools" (p. 11, author's translation). David Buckingham (2007) argues for a critical approach to the use of technology in education to bridge the "new digital divide" between students' experience of technology outside school and their experience in the classroom. He means that students need access to technology, skills, and cultural forms of expression and communication. Thus, students must learn how to use digital media and transform this learning into knowledge. Julian Sefton-Green, Helen Nixon, and Ola Erstad (2009) discuss the need to challenge traditional conceptions of a "digital divide" (p. 121), for example, in "formal" versus "informal" learning and "in school" versus "at home". They emphasise that one challenge is to explore the transferability of underlying skills, competences and knowledge from one domain to another.

As an institution, the school is responsible for shaping and scaffolding students in developing writing skills. Arthur N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer (2009) emphasise that the context of schooling has changed, having been "Given a focus on reading, rather than writing or literacy more generally" (p. 18). They argue for the need to examine writing in terms of how students are taught to write and how they develop their writing: "Process-oriented writing instruction has dominated teachers' reports at least since 1992, but what teachers mean by this and how it is implemented in their classroom remains unclear" (p. 26). The teacher's role and dialogues between teachers and students are key in process-oriented writing pedagogy. Gunther Kress et al. (2005) maintain that knowledge about students' meaning-making and how they develop their writing is important so that they do not simply send texts to their teachers for assessment as a "delivery" (p. 14). This type of focus will emphasises the simple product of writing, not literary processes, content and perspectives in the pedagogy of writing.

Writing is central in the teaching of Swedish; furthermore, writing is a tool for developing thinking and learning. In the syllabus for Swedish A (Lpf 94), the "writing process" is formulated in terms of both subject content and ability content. Students are supposed to have both knowledge about and the ability to apply the writing process. Digital writing is emphasised in Swedish, and after completing their Swedish course, students must be able to use computers for writing and communication. The shift from paper to screen has involved changing writing approaches in Swedish at the upper secondary school level. School writing has shifted from an individualistic orientation, under the supervision of an instructor, to different forms of collaborative approaches. Writing with pen and paper was also a way for the student to show individual mastery in writing skills. The shift has also impacted teaching about the writing process, moving the pedagogical interest from product to process, particularly with regard to how writers plan their composition and responses to written text. Instead, when using digital tools, the focus is on the complex writing that occurs on a screen that enables an enormous digital writing phase of simultaneous writing, revision and planning in an environment of constant negotiation in the classroom and on the Internet. The use of digital tools makes it easy to write, save and send a text at different places and times across, in and out of school and to deliver to the instructor for evaluation.

The *Writing roles* model highlights the dynamics of writing processes that link digital writing to student identity in classrooms that use technology. Writer identities that are present in the environment are in continuous negotiation in fields of tension between relationships in collective and individual writing and the tensions between more experienced writers and less experienced writers. There is also a need to analyse the relationships among the students' writing, the school environment in which the writing occurs, and how the pupils position themselves and others in writing roles in relation to their use of artefacts and norms in classrooms. The findings from this study can further our exploration of how digital writing is linked to writing identity and suggest strategies to focus on the very complex formulation phase in the digital writing process to develop the quality of student writing.