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## **Literacies for academic and professional purposes: Two collaboration projects with the University Library**

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### **Abstract:**

*Academic literacies among high school students and university students have been a highly discussed topic for several years in Sweden as well as other countries. Results of PISA show that high school students' reading skills deteriorate and university teachers have given alarming reports on students' decreasing abilities on the critical assessment of sources and academic writing. In Sweden the new curriculum for high schools sharpens the demands on students to develop a critical and scientific approach and a main learning outcome is that high school students shall 'have the ability to critically examine and assess what they see, hear and read' and that they 'can use books, library resources and modern technology as a tool in the search for knowledge, communication, creativity and learning' (Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School 2011, p. 8f). The new curriculum is also a concern for Higher Education (HE) since it is of great importance that high school students are well prepared for University studies. The fact that more heterogenous groups of students coming from different linguistic and socio-cultural contexts get access to HE, has meant that teachers need to design new pedagogical approaches that take socially situated circumstances into account. In this paper we will present two projects conducted at Södertörn University where the University Library has been involved in focusing both on students' academic literacies and the connection between academic and professional practice. One project is an Introduction to academic writing and concerns new students. The other one concerns teacher candidates and aims to prepare them for their future professions as high school teachers. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the University Library can*

*collaborate with other institutions to support students to develop academic literacies that are useful for both their studies and for their future professional practice.*

**Keywords:** academic literacies, information literacy, education, university libraries

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## 1. Background

A common feature in the official debate about students' falling literacy standards is the 'deficit thinking' model (Smit, 2012), where the main focus is students' lack of reading and writing skills and their lack of ability to independently seek and critically evaluate information. An *academic literacies approach* on the other hand, is an opposite view that problematises and contests the 'deficit thinking' model (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis 2001, 2003; Lillis & Scott 2007). The academic literacies approach takes into account the social dimensions of power and identity and the tension between the often inexplicit expectations from HE staff and how these are interpreted by the students. According to this approach, academic writing is regarded as part of more general academic meaning-making, where reading and writing texts as well as seeking and critically evaluating information are included. These are all discourses that are seen as social practices that reflect certain values and that are best acquired in the very contexts where they are used (Gee 2012). Developing academic literacies thus implies developing control over the various discourses used in HE settings, i.e. acquiring the different social practices used in different discourse communities of academia.

Gee (2012) distinguishes between *primary* and *secondary discourse*, where primary discourse is acquired during the first years' socialisation in a familiar setting. Secondary discourses are used in different official institutions of the society connected to for example authorities, work places, education and religion. Gee defines literacy as the 'mastery of a secondary discourse' (Gee, 2012, p. 173). Academia is a typical context where the mastery of several secondary discourses is required, i.e. control of the social practices used in HE settings. Social practices are best practically acquired in functional and meaningful contexts, within the very discourse communities where they are used. This could be compared to the acquisition of a new language, where both explicit instruction and many opportunities to practice the new language in meaningful contexts are required (Gee 2012). Likewise, new secondary discourses such as academic writing and information-seeking is best acquired in authentic contexts, i.e. integrated in the compulsory curriculum, with many opportunities to practice the various discourses and focusing on authentic tasks and making the expectations very clear to the students rather than assuming 'that they will somehow *pick it up*' (Lillis 2001, p. 158). It is an advantage if the secondary discourse to be acquired shares features with other secondary discourses that the students already master (Gee 2012). This implies that it is important to design new pedagogical literacy practices that can be transferred into the students' future professional practices (Rai & Lillis 2013).

The secondary discourses or social practices are socially and institutionally situated acts of identity (Lillis 2001, p. 31). From the students' point of view it means that they have to acquire a repertoire of different secondary discourses suitable for different contexts and deal with the identities that are connected to the different practices. In order to develop the right 'voice' it is important to feel as if one's identity belongs to the discourse community (Ivanič 1998). Focusing

on the students' future identities as academic writers (members of academia) and their future professional identities as teachers means that the students are recognized as members of the discourse communities in a pedagogical practice that may contribute to an inclusive and empowering education. Acquiring the secondary discourses of academia is a challenge for all students, but may be particularly challenging for the so called non-traditional students, who may not have had access to these kind of discourses. It is therefore important to create spaces for dialogue where students' can discuss and reflect on the literacy practices of HE and their future profession, (Burke 2008; Northedge 2003)

In the development of the two different projects the following points of departure relating to the theoretical assumptions presented above, were considered.

- Academic reading and writing, as well as seeking and critically evaluating information are activities that belong to more general academic meaning-making or academic literacies. These activities are social practices or discourses that are used in different discourse communities.
- Literacy means mastery of a secondary discourse and these social practices are best acquired in a meaningful and functional context within the discourse communities where they are used, i.e. integrated in the curriculum rather than in separated support structures.
- When acquiring a secondary discourse, it is helpful if the new discourse shares features with previously acquired discourses. It is therefore important that the academic literacy practices that the students engage in are pedagogically designed to prepare them for their future professional practice.
- Identity is an important factor in the development of discourses as social practices. It is therefore important to focus on the students' identities as academic writers and their future professional identities, in order to support their literacy development.

## **2. The projects**

In the following sections we describe the two literacy projects that the University Library has contributed to, starting with the Introduction to academic writing for new students. Next we describe the collaborative project Teacher candidates' investigation of the high school library as a pedagogical resource.

### **Introduction to academic writing**

The first project is a pilot collaborative project between the Library, the Study Workshop, the Development Unit for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and teachers from different subjects. The aim of this project is to introduce students to the academic context by letting them practice information seeking, reading and writing academic texts so they can master this secondary discourse and transfer it on a professional context after graduation. The introduction occurs in two seminars, the first of which emphasises discussion about different kinds of academic genres, how they differ concerning level of style, how they are structured and the use of different kinds of texts or genres such as textbooks, and scholarly and popular journals. This practice should also be a practice and preparation for students writing in different genres as professionals, for example guiding high school students in doing different kinds of tasks or

assignments that include information-seeking and writing. The high school student writing could be a report, a review or an essay and it requires a teacher's skills aligned with information-seeking and these kinds of writing if the students are to be successfully guided and their tasks correctly examined. The students' summary on what they have learned on information-seeking, reading and writing academic texts is partly generic:

- search for articles in different databases;
- write correct references;
- use abstract markers;
- formulate a self-supporting headline and introduction;
- understand the difference on "Oxford" and "Harvard" systems;
- know different ways of reading and writing academic texts;
- know the difference between different kinds of texts; and
- give and take constructive feedback.

These academic skills may also be transferred to other secondary discourses or professional practices such as writing policy documents, reports or journalistic articles where it can be useful to know where to search for certain kinds of texts, how to structure a text and how to formulate a self-supporting introduction that summarises your intention and main questions.

Between the two seminars the students write a short summary on an article from the mandatory literature in the course. A part of the task is also to write a personal analysis of a current event and support or argue against this point of view by using another academic source. Guided by the librarian and using academic search tools, the students are supposed to seek and evaluate this other academic source on their own. Further instructions for the assignment include the following paragraph:

In your introductory paragraph, give full bibliographic information about the source texts and introduce the aim of your text, normally the last sentence of the first paragraph. Use topic sentences and supporting sentences. Use summary reminder phrases at key moments in your text. Demonstrate mastery of source reference by including a works cited list or references on a separate page.

The assignment is not only a way for the students to practice academic writing, but also an exercise in giving their own thoughts a voice and including a dialogue with another academic writer's voice, as well as writing a list of references. Seminar two is devoted mainly to giving and retrieving constructive feedback with help from guidelines. After this seminar the students are supposed to revise their texts before handing them in for examination.

Examples from student writing:

... gives an insight to feminist moves within the academy during 1970s and 1990s where she [the author] highlights the lack of lesbians in the academy during 1970s and 1990s.

... on lesbianism you can find parallels to other texts discussing the same subject; feeling excluded in a context where you should feel included. ... is one of many gender

researchers that discuss the subject matter of intersectionality and mainly pinpoint racialisation and the fact that many feminists and discussions on feminism 'forget' to put things in a proper context and to see their own privileges.

The first example above shows an ability to summarize the main thoughts of the article in a topic sentence. The second example shows an ability to use information by extracting a substance from two sources, connecting two points of view to one another and draw a conclusion from one's own analysis.

How do the teachers evaluate this introduction and have they noticed any progress in the students' academic writing skills? When looking at the students' final written assignments, the teachers participating in the project noticed that the students had made progress, especially their referencing and in structuring a text. One of the teachers has implemented the seminar model for discussion on the structure of an academic text and found that the students have been better prepared for the literature seminars and displayed a better understanding of the text, thus enhancing the quality of the discussion during the seminar. This result shows that with quite a small effort, teachers can teach academic literacies by using the model for reading academic texts used during the first seminar of the Introduction to academic writing.

### **Teacher candidates' investigation of a high school library**

The other project the Library at Södertörn University has been involved in focuses mainly on information literacy and the connection between academic learning and professional performance among teacher candidates. The project is a collaboration between the Library and the Teacher Education faculty at Södertörn University, Nacka High School and the Regional Library in Stockholm. It is financed by the Royal Library which aims to prepare teacher candidates for practical work with high school students' information literacy. During their education the teacher candidates practice different kinds of secondary discourses such as academic writing and information seeking that they can transfer to their later professional practices (Rai & Lillis 2013, p. 356).

An unexpected outcome of this project was the achievement of a learning outcome in the high school in-service training curriculum where the teacher candidates examined ways of cooperating with the high school library as a pedagogical resource in order for the students to practice information-seeking, evaluating and using information. Before the teacher candidates started their in-service training an introductory lecture was presented by a high school and university librarian that included a discussion on the ways high school libraries can serve as pedagogical resources in teaching. The following guiding questions were used for the teacher candidates' examination of the possibilities for cooperation between librarians and teachers:

- What education/competency do the library staff have?
- How does school management view the function of the high school library?
- How do teachers cooperate with the high school library in their teaching?
- How would you like to cooperate as a teacher with the high school library in order to strengthen students' information literacy?

Almost two months later the teacher candidates shared their experiences and the results of their examinations at a seminar. So what experiences did the teacher candidates draw from this investigation which was designed and practiced in both the academic and professional context? What use do they think they can include in their professional practice having performed this investigation? The investigation was partly performed as interviews with the librarians, teachers and in some cases school management (not all teacher candidates were able to get in contact with them). The results of these investigations indicate there were significant differences between independent and public high schools in how the high school library can serve as a pedagogical resource. According to Swedish law all schools must have a library, but one of the independent high schools had no library at all and some of them had only a small room mainly filled with a restricted amount of fiction and encyclopedias. The public high schools all had libraries that were open most of the day and with one or two staff. Staff in one of the libraries have formulated four goals for the work done in the library in cooperation with the high school management. These goals are shared on their website. The library is an integrated part of the high school curriculum and helps high school students to develop a critical approach to information. Another high school library has a bank of exercises on a blog for teachers to use in teaching the development of student information literacy skills. During their examination the students found that library resources and the conditions for cooperation between the library and other staff differed significantly according to policies, resources and attitudes among the librarians as well as the teachers.

Another interesting result is that during the introductory lectures the teacher candidates mainly shared views on the high school library as a resource for promoting reading and as a space free from teaching requirements. One explanation of the vivid discussion on the matter of literacy during this seminar is surely due to the decreasing results in PISA that has been recently highlighted and is a topic that concerns and bothers teachers. It is also obvious that the teacher candidates base their picture on what a high school library might be and what function it serves, on their own experiences as pupils and students on different levels. Since the students' thoughts during the first lecture mainly focused on the question of literacy, the lecturer had to bring up the question on how the high school library can serve as a pedagogical resource in teaching students' information literacy. After the teacher candidates' examination of the high school library during in-service training several teacher candidates mentioned they had gained a wider insight into how the high school library might serve as a pedagogical resource and indicated how they might later transfer these experiences into their professional practice as high school teachers. Some of them also had ideas on how they might cooperate with the librarian as teachers to support high school students' information literacy. One of the teacher candidates had suggestions on how to develop the ongoing activities on information seeking in the library to provide a progression in what you might call "informed learning" (Bruce, 2008).

The teacher candidates also concluded that the utmost responsibility for cooperation rests with the teachers since it is necessary for the teachers to be interested first. A necessary condition for cooperation to occur is good communication between the librarians and teachers. One teacher candidate found the librarian a bit withdrawn and waiting to be contacted, and concluded that communication from both parties is important. Another teacher candidate felt that participation in this examination might also have an impact on the teachers already working at the high schools who do not or rarely use the high school library for the critical assessment of resources

and information-seeking in connection with the student tasks. So the teacher candidates' examination also helped to introduce these teachers to the library and how library resources might be used in their teaching. Focusing on their future identity as teacher should also enable the teacher candidates to develop a range of literacies they can transfer to secondary high school discourses. Hence, the project may have an impact on the teacher candidates, help to prepare them for professional practice and to develop their identity as teachers as part of a teaching team in high schools.

### **3. Discussion**

The Project participants evaluated the results together. These evaluations are based on the experiences from the staff involved in the projects, together with experiences from the students, teacher candidates and teachers. Did we succeed in making a well-integrated, authentic and functional context? Did the teacher candidates find their investigation of the high school library as a pedagogical resource during in-service training useful for their future professional practice? And what did we learn for the future that is useful for our project, as well as other, similar projects?

In the first project, *Introduction to academic writing*, we found a great variation in the outcomes and success between the different subjects involved. Some student groups displayed a very high level of involvement and attended the seminars well prepared and very motivated. Other student groups obviously regarded the seminars as separate from their compulsory course and did not seem to appreciate the value of the different tasks. This variation could be explained by the way the Introduction was presented in the subjects and referred to by the teachers. In addition, if the text examined in the seminar and the information seeking task were a compulsory part of the curriculum and the examination, students' motivation was enhanced.

In the second project (teacher candidates), one of the most important results are a revision of the curriculum and a learning outcome concerning the ability of the participants to investigate collaborations with the high school library on information seeking, critical assessment and the interpretation of information. This investigation is a compulsory part of in-service training and is thereby perceived as an important part of the course by both teachers and teacher candidates. Another result is that the teacher candidates expanded their perception of the pedagogical functions provided by the high school library. This aspect demonstrated the practical applications of the in-service training. This project also led to an interest among other universities on how to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to examine how the high school library can serve as a pedagogical resource.

#### **Practical implications**

Based on our experiences during the projects a check list of essential conditions (presented below) necessary to create a well-integrated and functional context for acquiring academic literacies was compiled.

- The information about the Introduction must be very clear in the course manual and other written documents. It is important that it is introduced as an essential component of the course. Therefore, the information in the Introduction must be composed in collaboration with the teachers of the subject.
- It is important that the teachers of the subject introduce the Introduction as an integrated part of the course and do not refer to it as something separate from the rest of the course.
- The tasks completed in the seminars, both the written text and the information seeking task, are included in the curriculum and the examination of the course.
- It is also important the investigation of the high school library as a pedagogical resource is a part of the curriculum during pre-service training.
- The opportunity to investigate collaborations with the high school library in an authentic environment among high school students helps the teacher candidates to develop their identities as teachers and promotes their own literacy development.

The Projects confirmed the above conditions are crucial when designing new pedagogical approaches for the development of students' and teacher candidates' academic literacies. However, further evaluation and research on this topic needs to be undertaken in order to confirm these initial results.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, our evaluation appears to confirm the theoretical assumptions. The projects worked best when we managed to create a meaningful and functional context (Gee, 2012). When academic writing was introduced as a social practice including reading, writing, discussing texts and searching for and evaluating academic information, rather than as a separate skill (Lillis 2001), a meaningful context was created (Gee 2012) that enhanced the students' motivation and active participation in the instruction. In addition, the use of an authentic task seemed to promote the students' motivation (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003). This indicates that a productive way to meet the needs of the new, more heterogeneous student groups is to design the instruction with a range of opportunities to develop academic literacies. These opportunities should be ongoing and progressive, and expectations should be very explicit and integrated in the compulsory subject studies rather than in separate support structures. The fact that the teacher candidates' investigation was a compulsory learning outcome in the curriculum made it possible for them to develop their future identity as teachers in a practical and authentic context. This implies that the teacher candidates will be prepared to collaborate with the high school library in order to support their future students' information literacy. Results from these projects support Theresa Lillis view that teachers should focus on design for finding new ways of meaningful academic practices and have student writing in mind while developing new pedagogical approaches (Lillis, 2003, p. 194f).



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