Two students’ writer identities

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Introduction

Background

- Pilot project in Denmark
- Ongoing research project: Writing to Learn, Learning to Write [www.sdu.dk/wllw](http://www.sdu.dk/wllw)
- Two students: Martin og Amalie; What are the characteristics of their writer identities?
- Data sources:
  - Field notes from grade 9
  - Documents
  - Interviews with teachers and students
  - The ‘Acid report’ assignment in physics/chemistry from grade 8 – writing prompt and student texts

Student texts

![Student texts](image)

Findings

- Similarities and differences are found in the two students’ writer identities
- Differences are found in the construction of a ‘discoursal self’ among others, observed in the use of writing acts, style and multimodal resources
Theoretical framework, analytical concepts and tools

- Two theoretical perspectives
  - Socio-cultural writing theory and ‘the discursive turn’ in disciplinary didactics (Ongstad, 2006)
- Ivanič’ four aspects of writer identity (1998)
  - Possibilities of selfhood available in social context
  - Autobiographical self
  - Discoursal self
  - Self as author
- Prior (2004): participation structure
- Berge et al (2007); Togeby (in press): writing acts; style
- Kress (2003, 2010): Multimodal ressources; literacy
- Generation of new concepts and models in the project
What are the possibilities of selfhood made available in this social context?

- A focus on a variety of writing acts, genres and competencies related to subjects
- Writing used both for knowledge reproduction and knowledge development and for evaluative purposes
- In physics/chemistry students write reports continually
- A homogeneous subject writing culture

- Interested in literacy development, informed by R&D
- Teachers encouraged to reflect collaborative about literacy development
- Limited use of ICT
- A homogeneous school writing culture

- Students appropriated, to a large extent, school and subject writing cultures
- Students did not write the same quantity of text
- Nor did they identify in the same way with writing
- Homogeneous and heterogenous student writing culture
Amalie and Martin’s autobiographical selves – some observations

Amalie

- Makes notes for all subjects, and has organized notes in accessible ways
- Very systematic and thorough as a student in all subjects
- Writes the most in subjects she knows about beforehand, would like to be absorbed in, and that she expects to use in upper-secondary education – like chemistry/physics
- She has known for quite some time that she will apply for the higher technical examination in Denmark, and will choose the science-line, which is for ‘nerds like herself’
- An individual writer, a lonely rider
- Reflective about writing, acknowledges the importance of precise use of words and scientific notions

Martin

- A conscientious but not a very ambitious student
- School assignments are not that important to Martin; gymnastics is
- Focuses on inner motivation and functional use when approaching assignments
- A non-planner both before and during writing: writes his assignments spontaneously in one stroke each Tuesday while having earphones and music in his ears
- Knows that he will apply for the general upper-sec. system, choosing a music and English line
- It was difficult to make him reflect on writing; lacked words and concepts; low degree of conceptualization
Analysis of Amalie’s Report on Acid

- **Viewed as text** – form analysis: how is a ‘discoursal self’ constructed through a voice in the sense of ‘the way a student wants to sound’ (Ivanič) and look?

- **Viewed as discourse analysis** – how is a ‘self as author’ constructed in relation to the writer, including her autobiographical self?

- **Viewed as social-functional analysis** – how are readers and contexts addressed and addressing the writer, including her autobiographical self?

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- **Domination of expository writing**
- **Objective, non-personal style**
- **Verbally multimodal**
- ‘moderately discoursal’

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**Fysik rapport**

**1) Hvad er syrer?**

- **Domination of expository writing**
- **Objective, non-personal style**
- **Verbally multimodal**

- **Addresses the school, the subject, the teacher, and herself with a ‘serious’ and self-conscious autobiographical self**

- quite aware of the strategic function of this writing act for her later development in education

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**2) Hvor finder vi syrer i vores hverdag?**

- **Domination of expository writing**
- **Objective, non-personal style**
- **Verbally multimodal**

- **Addresses the school, the subject, the teacher, and herself with a ‘serious’ and self-conscious autobiographical self**

- quite aware of the strategic function of this writing act for her later development in education
Martin’s report

- **Viewed as text** – form analysis: how is a ‘discoursal self’ constructed through a voice in the sense of ‘the way a student wants to sound’ (Ivanič) and *look*?

- **Viewed as discourse** – content analysis: how is a ‘self as author’ constructed; i.e. ‘the writer’s position’, in relation to the discursive discourse?

- **Viewed as social act** – functional analysis: How are readers and contexts addressed and addressing the writer, including her autobiographical self?

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Use of several forms of writing acts, expository, explanatory, evaluative, and narrative. High(er) degree of multimodality, using pictures in science student discoursal self, looking/sounding like a ‘multivocal’ discoursal self, looking/sounding like a selves aesthetically and reflectively while also playing with the voice of other

Accomodates only to some extent the disciplinary discourse of the subject. Writing prompt and the subject. Writing suggestions that inner motivation uses personal interest, and functional criteria for writing on this topic. A George Curious-like self as author.

Addresses first and foremost himself and his everyday life in communicative ways
Conclusions – through comparisons

Similarities: Amalie and Martin
- appreciate writing in school
- realize possibilities for selfhood made available by school and subject teachers prompting them to act as disciplinary writers within subjects
- identify with science writing in particular, trying to accommodate the dominant writing practice in the science subject
- become bearers, or representatives, of the disciplinary discourse giving more or less authority to the scientific discourse of the subject

Differences: Amalie and Martin
- Use of writing acts (expository, explanatory, evaluative, narrative)
- Use of writing style (e.g. non-personal vs. personal)
- Use of multimodal resources
- The way they position themselves in writing (the importance and function assigned to writing)
- The construction of selves: discoursal self, self as author, and autobiographical self
Implications: Challenges concerning transition

Amalie’s challenges concerning writer identity and competence

- Among others, handling a shift in the participation structure – from being allowed to write individually to being demanded to write in collaborative processes
- “When it comes to school, I am somehow a loner, and I hate to work collaboratively with others. I have to improve that a lot, now that I know that everything is about collaboration in the three years to come.” (interview with Amalie, grade 9)

Martin’s challenges concerning writer identity and competence

- Among others, facing higher demands about disciplinary genre awareness
- ”It’s actually quite stupid that it is called a report [rapport]. It’s really just an assignment [opgave] we have written. We’ve made a lot of experiments, and then we are given some questions, and then we have to answer them in, like, a long essay [stil]. I really don’t know why we call it a report [rapport], that’s pretty stupid.” (interview with Martin, grade 9)
Implications for writing research

- Development of writing competence goes hand in hand with development of writer identity; and we need to understand better this relationship, developing new research designs and new analytical concepts and tools
- Writing acts and practices must be understood and analyzed in a multimodal perspective; moving beyond the linguistic paradigm
- Development of writer identity is a multimodal/social semiotic enterprise, and should be explored as such


