One girl’s development of writer identity in science subjects from secondary to upper-sec. education

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Background

Ethnographic fieldwork

Following Amalie as a student participant for four years (cf. Krogh in symposium) in two contexts: Secondary education (grade 9, year 11 in UK) at the South West School and upper-secondary education at South West Htx (scientific-technical ‘gymnasium’/upper-secondary education, 3 years)

A ‘transitional study’

About a student’s development as writer over a longer time span in two school contexts, asking what kinds of meaning the student ascribes to school writing

Why focusing on Amalie’s writing in science subjects?

Interviews and observations suggest that Amalie “loves” science; she singles out a science report from grade 8 as ‘the best writing experience’; and has developed a strong ‘science writer identity’ at the end of secondary education
Research question and hypothesis

Question
- How does Amalie develop her writer identity in science subjects from secondary to upper-sec. education, and how could it be explained and interpreted?

Hypothesis, based on analyses of the longitudinal fieldwork
- A dramatic, but not a tragic development.
Data, analytical framework, and foci

- Data as explained by Krogh: the ethnographic multitude
- Analytical framework: ‘The triad’; ‘the constellation’; Ivanič
- Five analytical foci moving back and forth between contextual and textual analysis (cf. Lillis 2008)
  1. Writing culture at South West School at the end of sec. education (grade 8 and 9)
  2. Amalie writing a report in physics/chemistry on ‘Acid’ in grade 8
  3. Writing culture and Amalie’s reflections on writing in the first half of South West Htx
  4. Amalie writing a report in chemistry on ‘Changing a homogeneous Equipoise’
  5. Amalie’s reflections on writing in the second half of South West Htx
Focus 1: The South West School’s writing culture in year 9, class 9a?

- The South West School writing culture could be characterized as ‘literacy interested’
  - In terms of local school writing culture: development projects; reflection and transparency among school leaders and teachers on the potentials of writing to learn, and learning to write
  - In terms of instructionally transformed subject writing culture: extensive writing practices, including in physics/chemistry; differentiation in terms of feedback; development of teachers’ reflections on subject-related writing and writing across the curriculum
  - In terms of student writing culture: students identifying, in different ways, with a broad range of possibilities for selfhood through writing

‘Literacy interested ‘: Street’s ‘ideological’ understanding of literacy (1984)
Focus 2: Amalie’s construction of herself as a writer: The Acid Report

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

- **Viewed as discourse** – content analysis: how is a ‘self as author’ constructed in the writer’s position and the writer’s voice in relation to the disciplinary discourse?

- **Viewed as social act** – functional analysis: How are readers and contexts addressed and addressing the writer, including the autobiographical self?
Focus 3: Writing in the first half of South West Htx

- Interviews/Talk around texts (cf. Lillis 2009)
  - Beginning of first semester, 2010: Amalie is content about writing in chemistry and other science subjects
  - June 2011: ”Chemistry is like … you mix two liquids that look like water, and then it becomes a fire, but it does not?! Things like that, I cannot really relate to that. It is easier to relate to an egg falling and whether it cracks or does not crack, and why it does that. I find that exciting. I believe that there are actually a lot of differences between the two subjects physics and chemistry. But you do not find out about that until upper secondary education.”
Focus 4: Writing a report in chemistry on ‘Changing a homogeneous Equipoise’

Writing prompt page 1/3, autumn 2011, year 2, upper-sec., my translation
Stressing the importance of explanations in the student's writing acts. Exclamation marks may suggest that this is a problem among students.

Referring, intertextually, to a rigorist genre norm for reports.
Amalie hands in a text that looks almost the same as the writing prompt.

This is one interesting multimodal aspect in the analysis of how Amalie constructs a discoursal self in the subject.

I also note, among other things, that she does not answer all questions, and that she is not writing extensively (compared to the Acid report) about the questions.
Teacher feedback

Teacher acknowledges and appreciates, to some extent, Amalie’s ability to construe chemistry explanations, but also points out that there are some parts she does not explain at all.

This is but one aspect of the analysis of how Amalie is positioned by the teacher as a ‘self-as-author’ (cf. Ivanič), pointing out that she has trouble aligning with the disciplinary discourse of chemistry.
Teacher feedback

A standard response demonstrating ‘how a report should be written’, hence demonstrating how you could – or should – construct yourself as a discoursal self and a self-as-author acknowledged within the subject.
Focus 5: Talks about chemistry writing in second half of South West Htx

The theme of performing okay, but not receiving in depth feedback, which seems unsatisfying for Amalie's identification with the subject.

The theme of chemistry not making sense (any more).

The theme of "hating" and being "bad" at chemistry.

Student talk 171111
Interviewer: You are looking at chemistry now [on the computer screen showing the Learning Management System]
Amalie: Chemistry, yes. The last thing I got back was about acetic acid in household acetic, and he does not write much. He writes 'good job, you make a lot of good things, but some precision is lacking in the use of units'.
Interviewer: And the standard...?-
Amalie: And then the standard response, and the evaluation 10. And 'there are some small errors, which is the reason you do not get a top grade.' And, now, chemistry is not at all my strongest... I was rather surprised by 10, but...
Interviewer: Is that the only response you get, or is there something in the document?
Amalie: That is the only response we get.

Student talk 300112
Interviewer: You once said you were fond of chemistry
Amalie: No!
Interviewer: I must have misunderstood that then...
Amalie: It does not mean anything to me.

Student talk 270312
Amalie: I hate chemistry. I am really bad at chemistry. And physics. (...)

Student talk 140512
Amalie: Chemistry is shit! I don’t know how to... I hate it. We had a test last week, where I managed to get 02. So, it is passed.
Conclusion

- **Development:** In secondary education, Amalie identifies strongly with science subjects; in upper-secondary education she slowly, and in ambiguous ways, alters her identification with science subjects towards the negative.

- **Explanation(s)?** Epistemological problem of writing scientific explanations, and more generally, to theorize within the subject, which intensifies in upper-sec.; lack of scaffolding as an upper-sec. writing culture problem, especially in content subjects; change of context framing new constraints and possibilities

- **Interpretation?** A dramatic, but not a tragic development
  - Amalie stops identifying with chemistry writing, which is a dramatic loss for her ‘autobiographical self’.
  - On the other hand, she becomes aware of and chooses to engage in other possibilities for selfhood related to writing in other subjects and writing outside school.
Implications

- Understanding writer identity development in context
  - Amalie’s development is perhaps not an unusual development for adolescent upper-sec. writers? (cf. Also the case of Susan)
  - Writer identity is not a given ‘destiny’ in secondary and upper-secondary school contexts, rather adolescents writer identification is related to contextualization processes; identity (as a noun) could be reconstructed through a process (Ivanič 2006)
  - ‘Choice’ as main theme for learners in 21st Century education (Kress)
  - Difference compared to the development and dynamics of higher education writer identities? Is choice less an option?