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WRITING AS A TEXT-CULTURAL
COMPETENCE:
CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN DEFINING
WRITING AS A BASIC COMPETENCE IN THE
NEW NORWEGIAN CURRICULUM

Kjell Lars Berge
Oslo University

In 2006 a new national curriculum was introduced in the Norwegian school system, covering all levels from years 6–18. The basic idea of the national curriculum is that all learning, and consequently all subjects (from mother tongue education to science), is based on the so-called basic competences, amongst them reading, orality and writing. Literacy oriented writing researchers were invited by the school authorities to define how writing could and should be established as a basic tool for learning in all schools subjects and learning situations. This article illustrate the challenges faced both on an epistemological level – what is writing and/or how should it be defined – and on a practical level – how should writing be taught and assessed? The article discusses how the implementation of writing as a basic competence challenges both writing research and the practical teaching of writing.

Keywords: writing in schools, basic competences, literacy reform, language in education

On the 17th June, 2004, the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) unanimously supported the new Norwegian school curriculum. One of the fundamental ideas in this new curriculum is that learning as such, as well as in the subjects being taught, should be oriented towards the way language is used in oral and written communication in different fields. Together with reading, mathematics and oral communication, writing is defined as one of the so-called *basic competences* in Norwegian schools. These basic competences – or skills if you like (these terms are of course never epistemologically neutral) – are systematically assessed in national tests in grades 5, 8, 10 and 11, i.e. when the pupils are approximately 10, 13, 15 and 16 years old.

There has been very little public debate on this decision. The idea of basic competences is accepted by teachers and pupils. The issue that has been debated – quite strongly in fact – is whether the results of national tests should be made public or not. The competition between schools, classes, individual teachers and pupils that is stimulated by the publication of test results is for many very provocative, for others a healthy way of promoting higher goals. When the pedagogical goals of the tests in practical everyday teaching are emphasized, the tests themselves are more or less accepted by all groups in society. In other words, it is the use of the national tests of basic competences that are discussed, not the tests themselves nor the basic competences.

What are the constituting ideas that legitimize the decision that the basic competences in writing, reading and oral communication are fundamental for all forms of learning, as well as for learning as such? With the 2004 resolution the Norwegian parliament established the foundation for radical reform that extends to a reassessment of what learning is and how it develops. For the first time in Norwegian school history, the curriculum reflects the fact that it is impossible to differentiate between understanding, learning and practising a school subject, on the one hand, and meaning-making through language and other semiotic resources in the specific subject, on the other. The reform represents a

breakthrough for the view that one of the fundamental goals in any school subject is that pupils should be given the opportunity to practise subject-relevant writing, reading, and orality. Even subject-specific activities in the so-called “manual” professions, for instance, carpentry or car repairs, require that people speak together in a relevant and precise manner, that they are able to gain knowledge of the subject through reading professional books, and that they are able to write a report on or document what has been done during the work (Karlsson 2006).

Obviously, a subject or subject-based knowledge is not something that is located in the head, or can be treated as tacit knowledge that is practised unmediated through and with the help of the body. A discipline is something we have to practise for ourselves and together with others by articulating ourselves in and through language and other semiotic resources in spoken and written *texts*. To practise a discipline is to be able to talk, read, and write in a way that is relevant to the discipline. From this, it can be seen that the Norwegian reform is closely related to the ways of thinking that have permeated research and didactics of writing pedagogy in Norway and internationally since the 1970s (Hertzberg 2001), and has dominated Scandinavian *sakprosa*-research (the systematic research of subject-oriented or non-fictional texts) since the 1990s (Berge 2001). Interestingly, these recent developments also mean that the circle has closed: the present curriculum is reminiscent of the first pedagogy that we know of in the western culture, the *progymnasmata* or school rhetorical tradition. This pedagogy was based on the premise that talking and writing correctly, relevantly and well could not be understood independently of the theme or domain that one was supposed to talk and write correctly, relevantly and well *about* (Quintilian 2004).

The consequences of the Norwegian resolution to make writing one of the basic competences for all learning in different subjects is obvious: all teachers (including e.g. science and history teachers) and groups of professionals are being forced to consider how writing, oral communication and reading are used in activities

that are relevant to their subjects. What does it mean to write in the field of natural science? What is relevant oral communication in geography? What kind of texts should be created in the history classes? And so on. It was questions such as these that subject teachers were faced with when the national curriculum was developed. All subject-based curriculum groups had to give priority to specific reading, writing and oral activities on different levels. As a result, the “competence objectives” in the national curriculum are formulated in such a way that in addition to the subject content it is possible to determine the kinds of writing, oral communication and/or reading competences that a pupil must have in order to reach a specific competence goal or level.

At this point it needs to be added, and at the same time stated very clearly, that basic competences are also meant to apply to tasks that may not necessarily be incorporated in subjects represented in the school curriculum. The development of basic competences in writing, reading and oral communication is of course something that needs to be done from the first day at school. This type of development and activity does not only happen inside already defined disciplines. Being able to read, speak and write well and relevantly is a precondition for participation in all forms of democratic activity: in political, ideological or other voluntary organisations. These skills also establish the preconditions for learning in general, particularly in a world where working life is very dynamic and there are increasing demands for complex reading and writing skills. And last but not least, speaking, reading, and writing are important for and in the personal development of all human beings. The history of literature provides us with a lot of examples. As Jury Lotman and Niklas Luhmann have taught us, modern fictional literature has developed through autopoiesis (Luhmann 1986, Lotman 1990). The same is true when we study 15 and 16 years old pupils writing personal texts in Norwegian classes. In a comprehensive research project on how Norwegian pupils created meaning through written texts in their final examinations in the mother tongue in lower secondary school (Berge

2005a), it was shown how pupils use narrative as a tool for contemplating self-communication of their experiences. The pupils establish themselves as model readers. Consequently, writing, reading, and oral competences cannot be reduced to writing, reading, and oral communication in the disciplines. The implementation of basic competences must be based on the understanding that basic competencies exist both across and in the disciplines.

In the international scholarly context, writing and reading competences are called “literacy” (Goody 1986). The English concept covers some of the semantic field of the German “Bildung” and the Dano-Norwegian “dannelse”, however, the concept “literacy” is both narrower and broader than these concepts. The term literacy explicitly points to the written language as well as other written resource as a possible foundation for human intellectual and emotional development, i.e. “Bildung”. The term “literacy” also refers to learning resources that assume and use all possible meaning-making resources, not only everyday language but also mathematical formulas as well as visual representations. The semantic field of “literacy” includes all the meaning-making activities we take part in when we construe meaning with and in texts, and it covers the influence of literacy on our way of thinking. A relevant understanding of the Norwegian curriculum reform is to realize that it is a *literacy-reform*. It is a reform where literacy is openly being declared as the foundation for forms of advanced learning for which schools and curricula have been established.

By emphasizing the influence of literacy on learning, the Norwegian reform is in many ways a break with traditional pedagogical thinking and curriculum ideology. However, it is necessary to point out that the reform was built on insights and views that are well known and accepted in international educational policy and research. Literacy research is well established internationally (Barton 1994), and the link between this research tradition and education and educational policy is very strong. Most Norwegian political and administrative documents acknowledge that enormous changes in working life imply a radical “literacisation” of so-

ciety. In post-industrial societies there does not exist professions where language and other semiotic resources are not used in advanced ways. A modern society, then, is a society characterized by complex literacies. Most of the workforce spends most of the day reading and writing in front of a data screen. In relatively few jobs in occupations such as farming and fisheries, the traditional industry has been automatised and/or moved to low-cost societies. There are not many craftsmen left. Yet, while reflecting on the development of society characterized by advanced literacies, it should not be forgotten that traditional occupations such as farming, fishing and craft have had a rich and distinctive written culture on their own for a long time. This has not been very well studied, and therefore not reflected upon very often. Journals at the beginning of the 19th century contained mostly texts that helped farmers, fishermen and craftsmen to greater insights in how they might improve their work and increase the profit (Ledin 1997). Without such texts neither modern newspaper and journal culture nor a modern working life would be possible.

The increasing demands on literacy, as well as complex language skills in all sectors of society, are a part of modernity. Without advanced uses of language in speech and in writing, it is not possible to develop complex societies, nor is it possible to understand them (Goody 1986). For a large part, the foundation for the school as an institution is that generations growing up today should learn basic competences or skills in advanced language-mediated activities. At school pupils learn to put into use the textual norms of the disciplines. By being part of the school project, a pupil is taking part, so to speak, in a text-cultural formation journey from the homely, naïve and natural to the alien, complex and cultural. Schooling is from the start, first and foremost, a literacy-based project of modernity. When the Norwegian parliament decided to implement basic competences, politicians were simply taking this tradition seriously and relating it in a realistic way to the fact that, in more or less all sectors, modern society presupposes that all citizens acquire advanced and demanding competences in writing,

reading, and oral communication. People without access to these literacy resources cannot develop into empowered participants in the society outside the school system.

In the remainder of this article I will show how writing competence is defined in the National curriculum and I will show how national writing tests have been developed on the basis of this definition.

1 WRITING AS A BASIC COMPETENCE – THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The parliamentary bill, as well as the official documents on which it is based, does not define writing at all. The bill states that writing is a basic competence and that national tests should be developed to document the competence levels of every pupil in Norway. The research community was worried that politicians did not have the necessary knowledge to establish a solid epistemologically based understanding of the complexity of defining writing as a basic competence and that consequently there would be naïve expectations of how national tests in writing might be constructed. It was obvious that the reading tests developed by PISA and other international assessment organisations were the testing model that most politicians had in mind, especially the minister for education and politicians in the political party she represented. These reading tests were considered by the international research community to be valid and reliable instruments for the documentation of reading skills, and it was expected that national tests in writing could be developed in a similar way. Of course, the community of writing researchers in Norway knew that this was not the case. IEA¹ had tried to develop standardised international writing tests as early as the 1970s and 80s but had failed (Purves 1992). Consequently, it was accepted by the international testing community that writing

1 The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

tests had to be constructed differently than reading tests. However, there did not exist widely accepted models.

Prominent Norwegian writing researchers wrote a letter to the minister and the department in charge of the resolutions and presented their understanding, their concerns as well as their opinions on the matter (Berge, Evensen & Hertzberg 2003). This letter warned the education authorities that the establishment of valid and reliable writing tests was not an uncomplicated matter. The writers of the letter pointed out that straightforward individual comparisons on a yearly basis are considered to be unrealistic. They also presented their experiences of IEA writing tests. More significantly, they outlined the basic requirements for writing tests. The letter stated that, first and foremost, writing competence is a complex phenomenon and that its assessment would require considerable resources. Assessment presupposes knowledge of the textual norms of teachers, and external examination needs to be developed and be based on a systematic interpretative community. Since textual norms are unstable and are changing rapidly, the development of an interpretative community has to go on continuously. The writers of the letter referred to the experiences, observations and findings of a huge Norwegian research project where 15–16 year-old pupils' writing competence was studied (the KAL-project, Berge 2005b) to show that it was possible to develop interpretative communities amongst mother tongue teachers in lower secondary schools. Thus, it was important to take into account this specific assessment culture when national writing tests were to be developed.

The letter written to the minister for education resulted in the establishment of a research team with a broad academic background. The team had an academic background in disciplines as varied as special education, dyslexia research, textual sciences, writing research, assessment research, applied linguistics, as well as media research. It was a precondition that the members of the team had special competence and commitment to the teaching of writing. The team was supported by a resource group of experi-

enced teachers at all relevant school levels and an advice group with expert knowledge of fields such as writing assessment, natural science didactics and literacy research.

The research team was given the task of developing the writing tests. This was done in order to develop a sound epistemological basis for the test, and consequently for the definition of writing competence. In fact, the understanding of writing competence as developed by this research team was accepted as the definition of writing as a basic competence in the national curriculum, which points to the fact that the national tests were considered to be the hidden curriculum of the national curriculum. Besides defining writing competence in tests and the curriculum – generally as well as in the disciplines – the research team presented their definition and understanding of writing competence for text publishers and authors, teachers' colleges and universities, education organisations, schools, and teachers.

What kinds of intellectual challenges confronted the research team when they attempted to define writing as a basic competence? The following were some of the more important challenges:

- To understand writing both as a cognitive and a socio-cultural phenomenon. A fundamental understanding of writing has to consider the kinds of cognitive and motor factors involved in writing as a process. This insight has to be coordinated with an understanding of writing as a cultural phenomenon widely understood: What do we use writing for? How decisive is it for participation in different parts of society and in a complex and dynamic working life to develop a varied writing competence?
- To define how writing competence is to be understood. Writing competence should be understood as a complex phenomenon. It should never be generalized from just one or a few types of writing. To write involves participating in a number of activities demanding very different strategies. Mastering fictional narrative does not necessarily imply that

a writer is capable of producing a well-written letter to the editor for a newspaper. How complex should writing competence be defined? What kind of selections should be done in this complexity?

- How does writing competence develop? Is there a general model for how writing competence develops individually and in groups? Does writing competence need to be qualified as a competence that first and foremost has to be understood culturally and in situations?
- How is writing taught? What kind of teaching strategies are most suited to the teaching of writing?
- How can writing be assessed and tested? What kinds of validity and reliability demands should be made on writing tests? How might these demands be attended to in actual writing tests?

This short list presents some of the most important problems. The list clearly indicates the huge challenges that the research team were faced with. It was a premise for the research team that the solutions to the challenges had to be based on a combination of research-based insights on the one hand and knowledge of the experiences of competent and committed writing teachers on the other. Writing research nationally as well as internationally is not very well developed (Igland & Ongstad 2003). The IEA writing study (Gorman, Purves & Degenhart 1988; Purves 1992) and many different research projects in different countries have established a slight basis. Because the foundation for empirical writing research was and is vague, it was necessary to start with the teachers' practical experiences and insights into what pupils could be normally expected to master at different ages and developmental stages.²

2 In comparison, reading research is more solidly established. For one reason or another reading research is a more comprehensive research discipline than writing research.

The state of international writing research meant that the research team was forced to develop for themselves the foundation for the understanding of writing underlying curriculum work and work with national writing tests.

The research team wrote draft definitions of writing competence, a so-called “level objective”, which was supposed to clarify the requirements of writing skills at different levels. They also wrote drafts for assessment criteria at different levels. It is not possible to present these texts in this article, but it seems to me that some important definitions should be presented and quoted. A text that was used to help the specialist curriculum groups to understand what was meant by basic writing competence was the following. The text was negotiated in meetings between representatives of the research team and administrators representing the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training:

“Basic writing competence

Writing has several basic functions: With the help of written language it is possible to communicate with people who are not present. We can also use writing to deal with and sort out our thoughts, and to imagine the realities of today and yesterday as well as things that have not yet happened.

Basic writing competence is the capacity to use these functions through written meaning-making and in written art and handicraft. Through written meaning-making we communicate for different purposes in different situations: through text, composition, sentences, words, spelling, drawing as well as other signs. Through written handicraft we co-ordinate mental, motor and formal parts of skills that, for instance, provide us with a legible written document and well-written presentation.

Writing situations are often related to professional activities. Consequently, the ways of writing in different disciplines reflect the discipline’s specific character, internal logic and work traditions. In some disciplines the description of the technical

equipment and procedures is important. In others, it is the capacity to give an account of feelings that is important. Therefore, a special quality of writing competence is that it is a precondition of most disciplines; but at the same time it is especially critical in the mother tongue discipline. What is new is the emphasis on the importance of the teaching of writing in all disciplines.

At the elementary level writing competence means approaching others through simple messages that are read and answered. The development of writing competence from an elementary level happens when children understand that writing is something that they need in more and more situations and they are exposed to writing that empowers them with the tools they need for these activities. The capacity to use such tools is strengthened through relevant training at all levels of the school system, across borders established by school subjects, both manually and electronically. In the beginning, this development is tied to the pupils' immediate everyday experiences. At a later stage, it is more oriented to society and specific disciplines. Through the competence objectives of the curriculum, writing competence is developed in each individual subject.”

As this text shows, the definition of writing had to fulfil the Norwegian parliament's as well as the ministry's expectations: the understanding of writing had to be related to the disciplines and the objectives of the disciplines. These rather heavy demands had the unfortunate consequence that school writing was exclusively understood as writing in the disciplines. For this reason, the research team felt that it was necessary to clarify how the basic competences are implemented in the curricula of different disciplines. The competences had to be implemented in a way that made it explicit that writing competence is more than writing in the disciplines on the premises of the disciplines. The next text, which I will quote in its entirety, was written as a draft for an introduction to the curriculum as a whole:

“The basic competences – reading, writing, oral communication, mathematics and digital competence – are a relevant part of every school subject. On the one hand, the basic competences do not constitute a discipline by themselves, but are an important part of the discipline. On the other hand, the basic competences have a value of their own outside and across the disciplines. The basic competences together constitute resources for the mastering of complex learning and co-operative situations in education, in professional work, in society and in private life. Mastery of the basic competences is the prerequisite for the confidence and authority of every individual. In this way the basic competences constitute resources for the formation work of schools.

As the foundation for the schools’ formation work, the basic competences are integrated in the curriculum in three ways:

The basic competences support and help learning in the subjects taught in schools. They are implemented in the objectives of specific subjects, and are related to the content of the subject. They make explicit the ways one speaks, reads, writes, and calculates in a particular field, and how digital tools are used in them.

The basic competences give access to resources for participation in a creative and developing way in working life, and in non-political as well as political organisations. In this way the basic competences constitute resources for democratic citizenship.

The basic competences establish the foundations for the co-operation between human beings. They are the tools for the self-development of every human being.

Schoolteachers are responsible for the development and the teaching of the basic competencies. All pupils should meet the challenges of different learning situations in a way that enables them to master the basic competencies at a satisfactory level.”

In their work developing the national curriculum and the national tests, the research team had to be more precise than it was in these texts. In particular, it was important to be as explicit as possible about the test objectives in the national tests. Relevant presentations of a problem were: which types of writing and genres were to be preferred, and which writing dimensions should be assessed in particular? The answers to these questions would be used to establish the frames for the disciplines' understanding of writing in a way that could be expressed in the specific curriculum. When the different curricula were finished, the national tests could be based on the curriculum learning objectives. In this way, the curriculum objectives and the content of the national tests might be coherent in a way that was predictable for both teachers and pupils.

In the official project plan presented for the ministry, the following guidelines were dominant:

- *Writing is fundamental in all disciplines.*

Text cultures and writing traditions in all school disciplines should be incorporated in the notion of writing competence. This understanding of writing competence was not only to be used in curriculum development but also in the national tests. The tests should be based on and should take into account the different text cultures when the discipline-specific curricula were completed. Consequently, the tests should both use topics from the pupils' experience or general themes as well as topics from specific disciplines. The result was that the research team had to collect information on which text cultures were prioritised by specialist teachers in a given subject. When working with the first national writing test, the team chose to give priority to text cultures of natural science. The topic was scientific, and to a certain extent the pupils were tested in scientifically relevant ways of writing and genres.

- *All texts are multimodal*

The research team wanted to dispel the delusion that the only useful writing technology in a school is a pen and pencil. Digital competencies were defined as one of the basic competencies in the Norwegian parliament's proposal. Thus the team wanted to develop an understanding of writing that IT-based writing technology was accustomed to. Consequently the curriculum and the national tests should be based on and simulate the development of complex writing competence in different modalities. An important part of writing competence is the control of semiotic resources other than verbal language, i.e. layout, illustrations, tables, figures, and graphs. The result is that the notion of a text on which the curriculum and the national tests are based is *multimodal* (Kress 2001). The understanding of writing competence that the research team developed meant the final breakthrough of the extended notion of a text in Norwegian schools; this extended notion of text had already been an obvious part of the text cultures in the natural and social sciences. The extended notion of text is also implemented in the national reading tests. In addition most of the textbooks are multimodal. The one exception is mother tongue education: in this subject the notion of text has traditionally been narrower than in other disciplines. The mother tongue teacher's understanding of text and writing has, in a peculiar way, been rooted in old fashioned writing technology. It was based on an understanding of how texts are construed that is only superficially concerned with the fact that texts in every day life mediate meaning through a number of semiotic resources. In the traditional school essay there were neither headings nor subtitles, and, even in more modern writing tasks, illustrations are not used at all. The tradition is that the pupils are writing by hand, using a pencil or pen. Nevertheless, in the mother tongue (i.e. Norwegian) curriculum that was developed in co-operation with the research team, multimodality was swiftly established as a relevant and constitutive feature of texts.

- *Different ways of writing are different ways of meaning (i.e. to argue, to narrate, to explain, to describe)*

An important professional precondition for the team's work was that to write implies to carry out many different acts in different situations. Variation in writing is probably greater than variation in oral activities. Through and with the help of writing we convey knowledge that has already been invented, we invent new knowledge, we develop theories and imagine alternative worlds. And we use writing to relate to each other and to maintain interpersonal relationships. These different ways of writing are also different ways of meaning. The contexts where we are using writing may be institutionalised situations with formal rules, for instance, a bureaucratic procedure in the public service or a newspaper article. Now and then, the context might allow us to write as we like, for instance, when we are keeping a diary for ourselves or writing a personal letter. The norms of writing are not necessarily represented as formalised genres.

The research team was aware that this composite writing variation made it very difficult to infer anything about general writing competence on the basis of one type of writing. Moreover, there was documented research that had shown that it is not possible to conclude that a competence to narrate personal experiences necessarily correlated with a competence to explain historical events or argue for a better budget at schools. Authorities wanting to develop as low-cost assessment systems as possible had often commissioned such studies: The fewer tests and assessment situations, the lower the costs for the authorities. Especially in the United States, with its overdeveloped test culture (Hillocks 2002), there exist several reports of this kind. A good example is a study by Breland et al. (1987) carried out for the State of New York. The report documents that competence in one way of writing, e.g. arguing, could not necessarily be generalised to competence in another way of writing, e.g. narrating. Something similar was observed in the IEA study of writing mentioned earlier in this article

(Purves 1992). Any serious writing test should of course be developed on the basis of the findings of scientific studies such as these. If this were not the case, one of the most decisive preconditions for the validity and reliability of a writing test would be violated. Consequently, the research team insisted that pupils should be assessed in as many ways of writing as was practically possible. This insistence resulted in the constitutive qualities of the assessment design, a combination of yearly national tests together with what were called “text compilations”. I shall return to the assessment design later on in this article.

- *Writing competence is a complex competence – a G-factor does not exist*

As we have seen, one of the basic premises of a writing assignment is that pupils should be challenged in different ways of writing. In addition, the writing situations should be representative both of established institutionalised cultural contexts as well as more open situational contexts. The pupils should write in a way relevant to a professional setting (e.g. a scientific description in nature study) and should also tackle a situation where the challenge is to achieve the reader acceptance of the view represented in a text (e.g. a letter to the editor in a newspaper). All texts should be assessed according to a finite number of assessment criteria. The five assessment criteria the research team decided to use were: *communicative quality*, *text structure*, *content*, *language use*, *spelling*, and *the use of writing technology*. These assessment criteria reflect the complexity of writing competence. This inventory is not original: more or less the same criteria appear in the majority of the assessment schemes used in writing tests (cf. Berge 2005a for an overview of different schemes).

The criterion *communicative quality* is relevant for the writer’s competence in writing in a way that is relevant to the context in question; it also refers to the skills the writer shows in convincing the reader to accept the perspective and the understanding the wri-

ter develops *through* the text. Therefore, communicative quality captures both the skills involved in writing according to the formal demands of a certain cultural context and the skills involved in seizing the moment and being master of the situation throughout the text.

The criterion *text structure* follows up on the demands for communicative quality. The writer is supposed to create a coherent text with a configuration that provides the reader with an experience of what the text is and what the text tries to achieve. The text should have a developed structure, which compromises both the global composition and the local structure. If the text is supposed to contribute to an institutionalised context, it may require that the writer adheres to certain formal genre schemes, eventually the writer may be required to create a novel structure. The text structure might realize different text types such as argumentation, causality, narrativity and description. The way they are realized in the text, and how they are developed in the text in relation to each other, contributes to the way in which a writer controls the qualities of the text. The same applies to the use of voices in the text.

The criterion *content* includes the pupil's skills in using the knowledge needed to develop the text in a relevant way. The pupil's acquired knowledge and/or experience-based awareness can never be fully separated from how this knowledge and awareness is communicated in writing. Two potentially difficult questions related to the implementation of the content criterion are 1) the extent to which the facts presented are correct, and 2) whether or not the experiences and values are acceptable. The latter question emerged in the development of mother tongue writing education based on the latest national curriculum reforms (the so-called M87 and L97): external examiners felt that challenging pupils' values should be considered negatively. Research in the KAL-project (Anderson & Hertzberg 2005) has documented that an open, symmetrical and negotiation-oriented assessment approach has been the norm amongst external examiners in Norwegian senior compulsory schools, and studies of the pupils' texts in 10th grade

substantiated clearly that there was no reason to fear moral chaos as a result of this flexibility with attitudes. The texts collected in the KAL-project document quite evidently that Norwegian pupils almost without exception are responsible young people with sound attitudes and values.

A greater challenge to assessment is faced when the content criterion is used on texts simulating professional texts. Since professional writing was given priority in the curriculum reform, it is obvious that an external examiner has to take into consideration whether or not the knowledge conveyed in the text is more or less correct. A professional text in natural studies in which a pupil argues in favour of the idea that the sun circulates the earth could not be assessed as a relevant text. Propositions like are not acceptable in a science text and, consequently, texts with propositions like would fail in the national writing test.

The criteria *language use* and *spelling* were neither very controversial nor problematic. The criterion language use is concerned with how a pupil uses the resources of language, words and syntax, in a manner that is relevant for the way of writing, the genre, as well as for the situation that the text relates to. Consequently, the demand for language use is directly relevant for style and register. As reported by many studies of pupils' language use and development of pupils' language use, it is challenging for pupils to discard language use that is patterned on oral registers and adopt the use of language in specialised registers based on the written language. It is of course impossible to write as one talks. The KAL-study documented that even very weak pupils do not quite simply write in an oral way when they are writing narratives (Berge 2005a). They adapt the language to the situation and mode, and they try to write in a way that makes it possible to interpret the meaning of the text in a relevant way even in situations where the author may not be identified. This sensitivity to context appears to be almost an instinct.

The most original, and possibly the only controversial, assessment criterion was *the use of writing technology*. As mentio-

ned, the understanding of writing in the national tests is multi-modal. The definition of writing therefore includes both verbal language and graphical forms such as layout and illustrations. As a result, included in the definition of competence was the idea that the texts should be composed in a way that invites the teachers to care about the texts. The visual aesthetic qualities of texts had to be assessed. Consequently it was also important that a pupil's text demonstrated that the handwriting was functional and possible to read. Anybody who has read texts written by pupils knows that a lot of pupils have acquired handwriting that makes it difficult to understand what is actually written. Beyond doubt, the extensive use of computers and various sorts of data programs has contributed to an increased awareness of the aesthetic qualities of texts. In addition, the access of writing-oriented software has made it possible for people not acquainted with graphic design to develop aesthetic dimensions in their texts at a fairly advanced level. Many children and young people experience and play around with these forms of technology, and outside the schools' text cultures, they attach great importance to the aesthetic qualities of the texts they create. It was easy for the research team to appeal to these interests when the national tests were being developed and implemented.

This set of assessment criteria would not be the same for each test or for each genre. Every assessment criterion needs to be adjusted to the distinctive features of the writing strategy chosen. The demands of communicative quality, text structure, content, language use, spelling, and writing technology would not be the same in a personal letter and in a text in which a pupil is expected to explain how a historical event, such as the German attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, was possible.

- *The wheel of writing competence illustrates the complexity*

The foundation for the different ways of writing is summarized and represented in the so-called “wheel of writing” (figure 1), which is presented in an extremely simplified version.

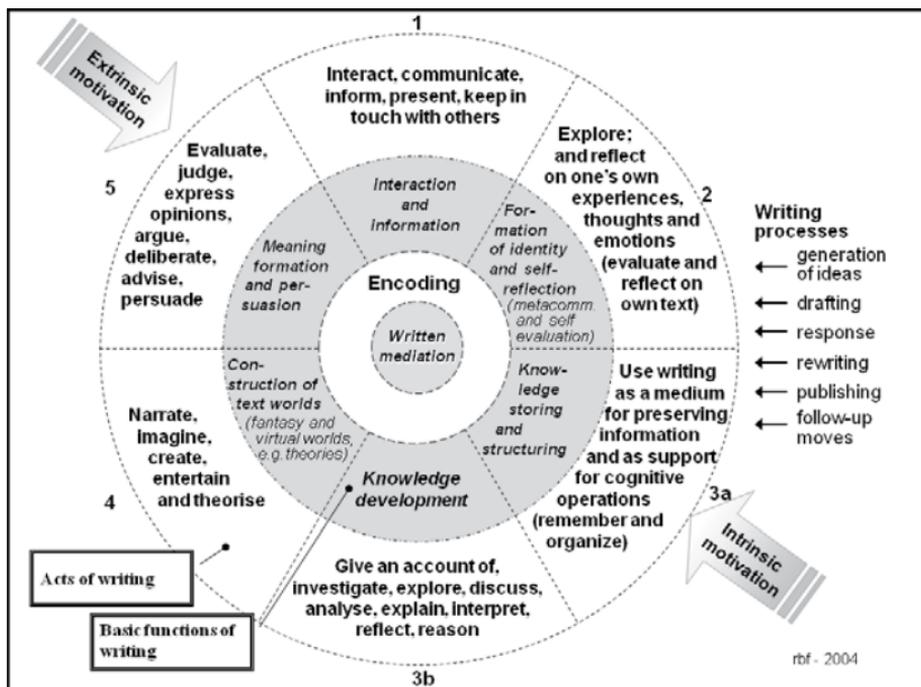


FIGURE 1. The wheel of writing.

The inner circle includes the relevant cultural tasks that writing has to accomplish, i.e. “the cultural functions” or “competencies”: *co-operation, identity formation, knowledge organization, knowledge development, creation of textual worlds, and persuasion/influence*. The outer circle includes types of writing as acts in a situation, i.e. as utterances: *to keep in contact, to ponder, to describe, to explore, to imagine, to convince*. In this way a finite set of meaning-making competencies (i.e. the cultural functions) are related to use (i.e. the acts or utterances). The writing wheel is meant as a generalization of everything we use writing for. It neither excludes nor includes specific genres or other more or less conventionalized ways of writing. The relation between the two circles may be motivated, for instance, we can “organize knowledge” (the cultural function) of an object by describing it for an audience (the act in a situation). But the relation may be arbitrary: we can organize knowledge (the cultural function) to convince an audience (the act in a situation)

that knowledge organization provides a better understanding of an object than an alternative conception.

The writing wheel has been developed to differentiate everything we use writing for in a systematic way. In particular, it was developed to establish a specific writing orientation as well as an assessment focus in the national writing tests. If we want a pupil to describe photosynthesis, it might be the development of knowledge we want to stimulate and assess. In this way the research team was not tied to the notion that writing is generally tied up with specific culturally conditioned textual norms, for instance formal genre rules.

I will end this article with a closer look at the national tests. The national tests are supposed to make explicit and present examples of how “basic competences” in the curriculum should be understood and defined. The national tests are therefore going to be important and powerful instruments to control how writing is going to be taught in Norwegian schools. It will not be possible for schools to ignore writing as a basic competence.

2 THE NATIONAL TESTS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE TEST CONSTRUCTION

When the research team developed the national tests in writing, we took into consideration the fact that a test that is supposed to provide information to the pupils, the parents or guardians, the teacher and school, as well as the society, something general about the pupils’ writing competence, cannot be based on only one assessment of only one text written by the pupil in only one situation in only one genre or way of writing. If the test was to be considered valid, and – consequently – reliable, the pupils had to write more texts in different ways of writing, genres, and situations. In addition, every text written by the same pupil had to be assessed several times by different and independent external examiners. Only by following this strategy is it possible to form a picture of a pupil’s writing

competence that is valid when the pupil's writing development is being stimulated through teaching. As far as possible, the variation represented in the writing wheel should be accounted for when the pupils' texts are assessed. To comply with these demands, the research team chose to split the national test in two parts.

The first part is called "the central assignment". In this part the pupils are expected to write two different texts in different ways of writing and with different themes. This part of the test was originally meant to be arranged once a year at four different school levels. Two independent external examiners assess this assignment.

The second part consists of a collection of texts. These texts are a sample of the pupil's writing collected in a specific time period and document the breath of the pupils' writing education during that period. All the basic functions indicated in (the relevant section of) the writing wheel have to be represented. This text collection is also assessed by independent expert examiners.

In addition, information on how pupils and teachers experience the teaching of writing is collected. All pupils who are tested are asked about how motivated they are when writing, what they enjoy writing about the most, which types of writing they prefer etc. In this way, outsiders can get an overall impression of how the teaching of writing works in Norwegian schools and what kind of challenges are faced by the schools in the teaching of writing.

3 PEDAGOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE NATIONAL TESTS

The national tests are worthless if the schools and the teachers do not follow them up. The ultimate goal of the tests is, of course, that every single pupil receives the best writing education possible. Ideally the teaching should be adjusted to the pupils' competence level. The tests should help the teachers to provide training that contributes to giving pupils the kind of writing education that

is successful in its objectives, The research team has outlined different strategies to reach this goal.

Firstly, a comprehensive assessment manual is produced every time a central assignment is arranged. The assessment manual specifies the types of competences that are assessed in the tests and how the assessment criteria are employed in the different texts that are written in response to the tasks. The assessment manual includes many authentic examples of writing that are responses to the different writing tasks, so-called “benchmark texts”. The benchmark texts will also serve as examples of different quality levels; they are authentic texts collected during a pilot study of the whole of the central assignment.

Secondly, the tests are quality proofed during a systematic exploration of reliability and validity. Do the external examiners agree on how the texts should be ranked, and do they agree on which quality level the texts are to be placed? Do the external examiners agree on what is to be assessed, and do they assess in the same way when the assessment criteria are used? Questions like these are necessary in order to clarify how good the tests are. Huge differences in the assessment pattern of external examiners will result in the tests not being considered trustworthy; they will not serve as indicators of the pupils’ writing competence. Huge differences in the assessment pattern may be a sign that the external examiners have developed different text norms, and consequently that they do not belong to the same interpretive community. An interpretive community sharing common text norms is a precondition for the development of valid and reliable tests. Therefore, it is decisive that all teachers who serve as external examiners are properly trained. This quality protection is a huge challenge in the development of the national writing test. This challenge was documented in the first Norwegian national writing tests carried out in 2005. The reliability in this test was very low, even by the standards of writing tests (Berge, Evensen, Fasting & Thygesen 2007), and the test could not be used as an indication of the qualities in Norwegian pupils’ writing.

One of the purposes of the writing test is that the assessment of the external examiners can be translated into profiles of a pupil's competences according to the different assessment criteria. The ambition is that a competence profile is made for every tested pupil. It is neither unproblematic nor uncontroversial that the tests divide the competence in different skills in this way. This assessment strategy is a fundamental break with a strong holistic assessment tradition in Norway. The assessment method preferred in the Norwegian national tests is not analytic, but based on the primary trait method. For every task a primary trait is chosen. All assessment criteria are defined in relation to the relevant trait in every task. In one of the tasks in the 2005 test, 7th grade pupils were asked to “*describe the planet Mars*”. The pupils were supposed to write a text that according to the writing wheel has the functions “knowledge organization and development”: the primary trait, i.e. the focus of the test, was *to give a professional description of an object or phenomenon*. The assignment asked the pupils “to describe the planet Mars to someone who does not have much knowledge of Mars, in a way that they can learn about the planet”. The external examiners were unfamiliar with this assessment method. Every text had to be read several times. Furthermore, the text had to be graded for every assessment criterion in a way relevant for the primary trait. A potentially encouraging consequence of this assessment strategy is that teachers may have access to qualified documentation of a pupil's competence covered in the assessment criteria, for instance, a pupil may have problems with spelling but not with creating a well-composed text that demonstrates an acceptable knowledge level and a clear purpose.

Pupils are not supposed to be given marks in the national writing tests. The assessment of the external examiners is supposed to tell pupils, teachers and parents whether the pupil has achieved a writing competence level that is *much better* than expected at this age, *as expected* of the age or *much lower* than expected. The expectation level of every task is defined in the assessment manual. The definitions of the expectation levels are not based on a gene-

ral and descriptive theoretically based model, but on a normative model relevant for the annual test. The model gives priority to the types of writing that we – on behalf of the Norwegian society – want the pupils to achieve competence in and indicates the levels of mastering that we expect pupils to reach at different age levels. This normative model is based on information from three different sources:

- Experience-based knowledge on the writing activities and genres that teachers expect children of different ages to master.
- The ways of writing and genres that are common in different school subjects at different age levels.
- The ways of writing and genres that pupils should command at different age levels given the demands for professional writing in school subjects.

Consequently, no pupil will face writing tasks that are well above or below the level they are expected to master. Pupils will not be forced to write texts they are not qualified for. Each year, the national writing test will indicate as precisely as possible what these realistic expectations are.

It is important to underline that this approach to the teaching and assessment of writing implies an individual understanding of the writing development of the child or teenager. The purpose of the tests is to provide a diagnosis of each individual pupil. The complex understanding of writing competence is developed on basis of documented variation in skills between children of the same age. The test should support, help and challenge the individual pupil in his or her development.

After the tests are carried out and the experiences systematically collected, the research team expects teaching aids to be developed. Varied teaching material for especially gifted pupils should be available; for pupils writing well below the expected level there should be diagnostic tools that will make it possible to

determine the reason for low achievement and possible strategies to improve the writing skills of low achievers.

It is obvious that the challenges for the teachers as a consequence of the reform are huge. Specific national and local competence networks need to be established. The research team has been committed to the position that the national writing tests should be considered relevant for and deeply rooted in teaching practice in schools and in the classroom. For many teachers the national tests are only of interest if they help to improve their teaching and their pupils' writing skills and competence. Nevertheless, the teachers teaching habits have to be challenged, at the very least the quality of assessment must be higher. As mentioned, the reliability level of the writing test is alarmingly low (Berge, Evensen, Fasting & Thygesen 2007). The test should lead to more established assessment norms and to the improvement of the interpretive community amongst teachers. All these activities and challenges demand coordination at a national level. Consequently, the Norwegian writing researchers launched the idea of a national centre for the teaching of writing and writing research. This idea was met with interest and support from politicians. The centre, opened in August 2009, clearly signals a new era for the teaching and research of writing in Norway.

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