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Bridging discourses in a writing classroom

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to describe and analyse the writing discourse in one classroom and how students learn through studying a topic, i.e. the teaching and learning of written argument. The study takes its stance from a sociocultural perspective and is influenced by discourse analyses, new literacy studies and critical literacy (Fairclough 1989; Barton 2007; Janks 2010; Ivanič 2004). Data from year 6 in Sweden consist of observations, informal conversations, teachers' planning and students' written texts, i.e. letters to the editor. The results are presented in terms of four themes that became apparent during the reading of the data, viz.: (1) teaching for learning – deconstruction; (2) dialogue and scaffolding for learning – enabling access; (3) feedback and students' reflections for learning; and (4) writing to learn – reconstruction. The data are analysed and discussed on the basis of four concepts for developing critical literacy, viz. *access*, *deconstruction*, *reconstruction* and *domination* (cf. Janks 2010:21 – 32). The study indicates that explicit teaching of a written argument provides students with access to the dominating structure of the genre if they are given the time and tools to reflect and are given feedback from the teacher.

Keywords: literacy, critical literacy, written argument, response, teaching, learning, Swedish nine-year compulsory school

Intentions and regulations

The aim of this study is to describe and analyse the writing discourse in one classroom and how students learn through studying a topic, i.e. the teaching and learning of written argument. The questions I pose are to what extent the teaching gives students access to the structure and language of *"letters to a newspaper editor"*[1], and which opportunities, but also limitations, the teaching creates. The teacher planned the lesson(s) on the basis of the Swedish curriculum for the compulsory school system, the preschool class and the leisure-time centre (Lgr 11) and then taught the students to write a *letter to the editor* and given them feedback on their efforts. By describing the teaching processes with written argument in the subject of Swedish, my intention is to elucidate the students' access to the structure in this kind of writing situation.

I followed a number of teachers' classroom teaching of Swedish in years 5–7 of compulsory school over a two-year period. I watched teachers plan their teaching,

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organise interaction in the classroom so that learning can take place and how they find suitable literacy events to create learning. It is something of a challenge to teach a group of students on the basis of the Swedish curriculum (Lgr 11) where both general aims and guidelines as well as curriculum-specific aims, central content and knowledge requirements are included. The curricula for Swedish in compulsory school begin with an introductory paragraph describing the subject and its usefulness. Following this, the structure of all compulsory school curricula is as follows: *Rationale and aim of the subject*, *Central content* and *Required knowledge* (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011). In the central content section, the subject's distinguishing characteristics are emphasised alongside all the teaching elements to be taken up. The purpose of Swedish as a native language for years 1–9 is for the teaching to result in the students being able to express themselves, adapt their language to different aims, recipients and contexts, distinguish linguistic structures and evaluate information from different sources (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011:222-223).

What the teaching has to encompass is described in three blocks of three school years each. For years 4–6, for example, the teaching has to adopt the structure of the language and various strategies for writing different kinds of text (genres), which is intended to help students understand the message a text conveys. The teaching must also emphasise the fact that different kinds of text (genres) have specific linguistic characteristics and a typical construction. It is important that students can detect the structure of a particular genre to be able to write a text of their own (Gibbons 2006). Knowledge of these structures is, however, by itself not sufficient; the student also needs knowledge and insight about the content, purpose and typical linguistic traits of a genre (af Geijerstam 2009). Here, students need to know which words and concepts are appropriate and function in different genres.

Distinguishing a message that may not always be explicitly stated in a text may involve reading between the lines. On the basis of Janks' (2010) opinion of how we read a text, this means that the teaching should take a critical stance. What Janks says is that *reading against the text*, which reading between the lines may be, among other things means that "the readers recognise texts as selective versions of the world; they are not subject to them and they can imagine how texts can be transformed to represent a different set of interests" (Janks 2010:22). Such a stance may also be interpreted from central content since the teaching must enable the student to understand and use words' and concepts' shades of meaning in a functional, critical manner in producing texts (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011). Lgr 11 does not, however, state explicitly that the student must understand the underlying reasons for texts' different structures and uses of language. Central content also defines what the teaching is to take up as regards factual texts. Written arguments must be treated on the basis of the structure, typical linguistic characteristics and content of the text. In my opinion, this means that students must be able to develop their ability to write in a specific genre and for a specific purpose.

On the basis of Lgr 11, teaching in Swedish is thus steered towards giving the students opportunities to understand dominant forms of linguistic usage in different types of text. For the students, it is important to understand the dominant linguistic usage in a particular genre to attain a pass grade in Swedish. Janks (2010) also says that knowledge of genres' specific characteristics is important in order not to be marginalised in a social context. Janks (2010:24) calls it "the access paradox" when students are generally given access to a genre through knowledge of what a genre contains, its linguistic usages and characteristics in order to be able to reproduce it in an assessment situation but are not given sufficient knowledge of how to critically appraise a text.

During the course of my visits to the different classrooms, teaching in reading and writing has tended to vary. In my opinion, it is important to study and visualise teachers' teaching. In this article I focus on teaching of the genre *letters to the editor* in year 6. The reason for choosing this particular genre is because the central content section of the Swedish syllabus for years 4–6 states that the teacher is to teach written argument and, more specifically, a letter to the editor. This explicit declaration of teaching how to write a letter to the editor does not appear in the previous curriculum, Lpo 94 (Swedish National Agency for Education 2000). This teaching element might therefore be new to the teacher.

This study is not about a teacher's teaching skills but about visualising what the teacher actually teaches for the students to be able to write a letter to the editor.

Theories

This article's point of departure is a sociocultural perspective and textual mediation (Wertsch 1985 & 1991). Within this perspective, language is the root of learning and teaching where interaction and scaffolding between teacher and students are crucial to construct processes of cognitive development (Gibbons 2006; Janks 2010). Within a sociocultural perspective, students' learning is not only the result of ability but also a product of the teachers' mediation and ability to interact with the student (Gibbons 2006).

One concept used to describe this mutual dependency between language and surroundings that is characterised by how we say something, how we act on the basis of specific ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing and structuring is *discourse* (Fairclough 1989; Gee 2011). Discourse includes firstly meaning-making as a social process, secondly language associated with a particular social praxis, and thirdly specific ways of constructing a social perspective, which can be described and analysed (Fairclough 2012). A discourse cannot be viewed as a unit with fixed boundaries since new discourses are created and influenced mutually among each other, within the individual and in the relationship with society (Gee 2011, 2012). In the same way as other discourses change, the school's literacy discourse and the classroom's writing discourse also vary. Literacy includes cognitive skills in and about text and social attitudes to and knowledge of a varying range of textual and symbolic characters (Christie & Derewianka 2008). With the literacy perspective as the starting point, reading and writing are considered to be a

social event, interaction and communication that are created in the relationship among the users, where text may be multimodal and not always linear (Kress 2003; Dalton & Proctor 2008). Literacy can be described on the basis of two concepts. The first is *literacy practice*, which is the social expectations and the assumptions associated with literacy (Barton 2007:35–36). It can also be expressed in terms of writing practices being abstractions created in a social context and influenced by power relationships, economy and values (Janks 2010:11). The second concept is *literacy events*, which are the observable phenomena and activities in daily life in both the time and space where the student uses text (Barton 2007:35–36; Janks 2010:118).

Fairclough says it is not sufficient to describe a discourse and its characteristics but that it must be described by relating it to different phenomena in social practice to be able to understand what controls, creates and determines the discourse's structure and mechanisms from a *critical perspective* (Fairclough 2012). Both Janks (2011) and Freire (1996) say that the term *critical* signals a questioning and reflective awareness of assumed truths and values. Within this view, *critical literacy* is problem posing to understand what is selected, emphasised or hidden between the lines of a text (Comber 2001; Janks 2010).

Teaching from a critical literacy perspective endeavours to create opportunities for the students to detect dominant linguistic expressions and how these contribute to passing on different genres' values and norms (Comber 2001; Morrow & Torres, 2002; Janks 2010). With critical language and literacy competence it is possible for people to create knowledge of the society they live in as norms, values and democratic principles (Freire, 1996; Dewey, 1999). Understanding a rich variation of genres is crucial to students' ability to develop competence in literacy (Janks 2010). Janks' starting point is concepts such as *access*, *deconstruction*, *reconstruction* and *domination* in order to emphasise the critical perspective of literacy. *Access* focuses on *who* is given access to linguistic usage and variation in both genres as discourses but also *how* this takes place. *Deconstruction* means that the teaching analyses the type of text and identifies typical linguistic characteristics and structures, and *reconstruction* how the students can build their own texts. *Domination* is those structures, often underlying ones, that show who is allowed to write, what type of language is used and distinguishes a text, and what creates and distinguishes a prevailing custom (Janks 2010). In the classroom's writing discourse, the student seeks meaning in writing on the basis of previous experience, learning, knowledge, values and norms (Barton 2007). Writing in different contexts is formed in interaction and communication among people and in the space between an individual's thoughts and text (Barton 2007; Ivanič 2004).

Literacy studies in a sociocultural perspective have focused on students' production of text. In her study of students' production of written argument, Bergh Nestlog (2009) found that competence in writing is developed if the teacher teaches the students about the specific characteristics of written argument and if the texts are allowed to develop in an interactive teaching setting. Other studies focus explicitly on teaching students

how to write (Hoel 1995; Holmberg 2010a & b). In a study of two upper secondary school teachers, Holmberg (2010a) found that teaching in writing differed on the basis of a genre perspective. Holmberg also found that the two observed teachers were not aware of their attitude to theoretical perspectives for their teaching. In another study, Holmberg (2010b) found that letters to the editor, composed digitally, give students a functional view of the genre. The students come to realise that they can publish their letters instead of regarding them as a text practised in school. In a different study, Heath (1983) found that social context affects linguistic usage and learning. Students' previous knowledge of and attitude to literacy had their starting point in parents' opinions regarding reading and writing. Students who had been encouraged to speak, read and write in the home environment were closer to the school's language than students whose home environment distrusted the written word since it belongs to authorities who can manipulate people. Heath also found that explicit teaching in literacy is crucial to students' knowledge development and that teaching should take its starting point in the students' previous knowledge in the area of literacy. Teachers' teaching of writing has also been described from a genre perspective (Gibbons 2006; af Geijerstam 2009). Af Geijerstam's study of nature-oriented subjects shows that texts within this subject were generally orally based. There was no difference between low- and high-performing students. Yet the high-performing students had a higher degree of text mobility than the low-performing ones. In a study of two school classes' dialogue within nature-oriented subjects, Gibbons (2006) found that the dialogue between teacher and student is important for developing understanding and a subject language. From a critical literacy perspective, and on the basis of her study of South African children in pre-school class and years 1 and 2, Dixon (2011) says that teaching to write should involve meaning-making. She found, however, that teaching to write is often controlled by decision-makers at a higher level, who demand writing events in school that can be compared, classified and assessed on the basis of given norms and structures. Foley & Lee (2004) say that students need to understand the influence of linguistic usage and language construction which can vary depending on the aim, recipient and context. Students must be able to use and develop their own literacy competence in a varied range of genres.

In this article, literacy and critical literacy refer to how teaching handles structural prerequisites for learning a genre (letters to the editor), the players' possibilities for action (teachers' teaching and students' writing) and the social interaction that takes place among the players (teacher and students) (cf. Fairclough 1989; Janks 2010; Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999).

Study settings

This section highlights the method and the data collection. The research approach is ethnographic, which means studying a specific social phenomenon, in this case teaching and learning. This mostly involves studying a phenomenon in detail (Ham-

mersley & Atkinson, 1995). The article is based on teachers' lesson plans, students' texts, observations and informal dialogues. The lesson plans and student texts are collected artefacts used or produced in the teaching situations. The observations and informal dialogues take place in the setting to be studied and are collectively termed fieldwork (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994).

The empirics for the article are the interim results of my research project "Teaching and learning in the school subject Swedish as a First or Second Language" that I conducted in years 5–7 in two medium-size municipalities in Sweden. Another published article based on the research project is *Elvaåringars textbruk till vardags och i skolan [Eleven-year-olds' use of text in everyday life and in school]* (Lundgren 2012). Three schools with a total of 12 classes and 12 class teachers are participating in the research project.

Data for the article were collected in November–December 2011 and January 2012 in year 6 at Land School in Söderstad, a medium-size municipality in Sweden[2]. The school has approximately 400 students, most of whom have a monolingual Swedish background. Land School has three "tracks", A–C, each consisting of pre-school class (F) and years 1–9. Two years are integrated in each track, for example F–1 and 2–3. The studied class, years 6–7C, at Land School has seven boys (one of whom did not participate in the teaching during the period of the study) and five girls in year 6. The five observations, in total seven hours, that were made in the class were mainly non-participative although I walked around in the classroom making notes of the teacher's teaching and the students' work (cf. Merriam 1994). I also made a few interventions on occasion and one of these is described later in the article. Informal dialogues took place at the same time as the observations. The teacher's lesson plans consisted of letters to the editor, an advertisement and grammar practice. The literacy work concerning the advertisement is not reported here and the grammar exercises are only mentioned briefly. The material thus does not document the teacher's teaching as a whole but only a sequence in the written argument subject area. The 11 student texts consist of the letters written by the students themselves. All the texts were commented on by the teacher and then worked on by the students. The reason for choosing this school and this class is that the teacher has many years' experience of teaching and bases her teaching on Lgr 11.

Written information about the purpose and structure of my study was provided to the principal, teachers, parents/guardians and students. This information also described the prerequisites for participation and stated that I adhere to ethical rules as regards anonymity and voluntary participation (cf. Swedish Research Council 2012). The teachers and parents/guardians gave their permission for me to conduct my study in the class.

Approaches to the analysis

In my analysis I shifted between the lesson plans, student texts and my observation notes to ascertain both linkages and deviations. The observations have primarily

constituted the data for the analysis of the teaching from which a number of themes, described below, became clear. To understand the teaching of the written argument genre, I used some concepts in my analysis work which are related to each other and are based on Hilary Janks' model for critical literacy teaching, viz. *access*, *deconstruction*, *reconstruction* and *domination* (cf. Janks 2010:21–32).

The study

In this section I present the results of the study. I have chosen to emphasise the results on the basis of the four themes that formed in the analysis of the teaching process in the subject area: (1) teaching for learning – deconstruction; (2) dialogue and scaffolding for learning – to enable access; (3) feedback and students' reflections for learning; and (4) writing to learn – reconstruction. Each theme concludes with a brief analysis.

The students in year 6 are accustomed to writing both narrative texts and non-literary texts, which they have done since year 1. Since years F-5 generally have one teacher who teaches most subjects, it has been possible over the years to integrate for example Swedish and social studies. Another contributing reason for teachers in year 6 also collaborating is that the teachers are part of a functioning team for the respective track.

Teaching for learning – deconstruction

The teachers' planning for this subject area is done by the Swedish teachers in the three 6–9 tracks, A–C, as described above, and is based on Lgr 11. This means that all students in year 6 work with the same subject area. The teachers' individual lesson plans, however, vary to some degree. Below some literacy events are described that elucidate how the teacher selected works with the letters-to-the-editor type of text in an introductory phase.

The subject area begins with the teacher talking about the new subject area and distributing the plan. The plan contains quotes from the Swedish syllabus and the required knowledge in the subject area (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011). There are also some general linguistic expressions for types of writing, viz. letters to the editor, advertisement and grammar exercises. The lesson continues with a literacy event where the teacher talks to the students about what letters to the editor are and what one can write about since the students have not worked with this kind of text before. It becomes evident, however, that they had read letters to the editor in young people's magazines outside school. The students' suggestions as to *why* people write to newspapers vary between complaining, praising and stating an opinion. The content of letters to the editor can vary, the students say, and they suggest more areas of interest such as rules, work and school. When the teacher asks *what* they think people often write about, the following topics come up: buildings, nature, rats, rubbish and crows, and sport. Thereafter, the students are asked to open their exercise books on a fresh page to be able to note down *what* letters to the editor are, which the teacher

writes on the board at the same time as she, in interaction with the students, explains and defines some of the important concepts that characterise a letter to the editor, for example *publish*, *representative*, *opinion*, *anonymous* and *respond*. All the students copy down what she writes on the board.

The students also read letters to the editor from four Swedish daily newspapers. The students sit in groups of three and read together, sometimes aloud and sometimes silently. Three girls sit together and comment that they think letters to the editor are boring. One of the girls thinks it is more fun to read the letters in *Julia and Frida*, which is a Swedish Magazine for young people. While the students are reading, the teacher writes some more text on the board about *how* to write letters to the editor.

The teacher gives explicit instructions about how a letter to the editor must be structured. It must begin with a *heading* and the students are to "Find a heading where your opinion is evident", according to the teacher, who also reads aloud some headings from the newspapers that the students have been reading to give them a model, for example "Student doctors exploited by the state" and "Our elderly have to...". The teacher then tells them and writes on the board that they are to "describe the problem/praise/opinion" as clearly as they can under the *opinion* item. Item three on the board is *argument*, where the students are to write down why they have a particular opinion and to make the purpose clear. The students should also suggest a *solution* to the problem, in particular if the letter is a complaint. They can also try to "add a little twist at the end" as a summary or repetition of their opinion. They can also write "But in my opinion, to get the reader to think the same as you" according to the teacher. The students copy down the points that characterise a letter to the editor; heading, opinion, argument, suggested solution and summary and what the terms mean. The students also copy down that they are to think about "spelling, sentence construction and paragraphs" and that they are to "choose words that make the text sound pleasant".

Lesson two contains several literacy events. The teacher revises the structure of a letter to the editor by conversing about the concepts, for example *opinion*, with the students. In groups the students read letters to the editor from *Kamratposten*, which is a popular Swedish magazine for children. The students talk about the content and laugh together. Then the students begin writing letters to the editor on their own while the teacher walks round giving them oral support in their work. The students are responsible for completing the task even if the teacher has a responsibility to create opportunities for learning.

Analysis of the teaching for learning

The introductory dialogue between the teacher and students about a letter to the editor during the first lessons and the students' group work on reading letters creates a situation-bound language linked to both the reading and the students' own experiences (cf. Gibbons 2006). Reading letters to the editor, dialogue about the letters and explicit instructions about how to write a letter to the editor all aim to enable the

students to understand the function of the genre. When the teacher asks about what a letter to the editor can contain and the purpose of it, the teacher is using the students' diversity of knowledge to relate their knowledge to what is to be studied (cf. Janks 2010). The teacher thereby takes the students' understanding as her starting point and activates it in an everyday practice and then leads the students into the school's concept system (cf. Barton 2007). Reading letters to the editor in *Kamratposten* also sets out from the students' pre-understanding and everyday language. We might say that the teacher deconstructs the *what* and the *why* of the letters to the editor. The students are also given support so they can understand what a letter to the editor is, and the specific terminology it uses to create a structure (cf. Gibbons 2006; Hajer & Meestringa 2009). Through explicit teaching the teacher is thereby trying to both give the students a meta-language to be able to talk together about the genre and unpack (deconstruct) a model for writing letters to the editor and thus open up for understanding and later reconstruction of letters to the editor (cf. Janks 2010). The teacher emphasises important building blocks for the students to be able to complete the task. The students get access to the text's dominant structure, *how* this specific text is built up. There is also an implicit assumption that the instructions are to be learnt (cf. Hajer & Meestringa 2009; Gibbons 2006). The instructions are part of the teacher's teaching process and reappear in all the lessons.

Dialogue and scaffolding for learning – enabling access

The students are accustomed to being active and doing things themselves but they are also accustomed to listening to a review and discussing it, as described above. During the course of a dialogue between the teacher and three of the students it becomes clear that the length of the text affects the students' willingness to write. The amount of text in some of the letters to the editor that the students have read is overwhelming. The importance of understanding how to begin a letter to the editor is quite evident from the dialogue between teacher and students below.

1. Teacher: … a whole A4 sheet? That's quite unusual.
2. Student 1: mmm
3. Teacher: Shorter letters are really more common, that's the way it is.
4. Student 1: Should it…
5. Teacher: So it's not, the one you looked at and said 'oh is this a letter to the editor?', when there was a full page – they're not the most common kind I can tell you.
6. Student 1: So I found one down there or
7. Teacher: Yes, they can be like this sometimes. And sometimes they are almost better. Because then everyone can read it; everyone has the time and interest to read a letter that's this long (pointing to a short letter). And they are, sort of, we might think…

8. Student 1: This is the kind of letter we read. It's Kamratposten, not Afton-bladet[3] or the local paper.
9. Teacher: Myself, ... And that was how it came to me that you should see these from Kamratposten that were written by children of your own age.
10. Student 2: It was tiresome to read them. It was ... sort of just text text text.
11. Teacher: Yes, exactly. This is not the way you should think that your letters should look. Oh no, Oh no.

The dialogue continues. After the teacher has emphasised that the students' letters do not have to be as long as one in a daily paper, one student asks how to begin a letter to the editor.

12. Student: How should we begin such a letter to the editor?
13. Teacher: Well...
14. Student 1: I'm very tired of this. You have to wait.
15. Teacher: You definitely can begin one like that. Yes you can. You know, you can begin a letter to the editor almost any way you like, in fact. As long as you have your main heading and you've already written one (Land School, 16 November 2011, translated into English from Swedish).

Analysis of the dialogue and scaffolding for learning

With the interactive dialogue the teacher is scaffolding and thereby creates a shared understanding of what a letter to the editor means in different contexts (1–9). Scaffolding is defined here as the help that makes students complete a task that they cannot yet manage on their own (Wertsch 1985 & 1991; Gibbons 2006). During the dialogue it also becomes clear that students are telling the teacher of the diversity that exists between the students' everyday reading of letters to the editor in young people's magazines and the school task letters to the editor published in daily news-papers. The teacher shows that she has listened and understood this discrepancy and then included material that is both student-authentic and from their daily world (cf. Ivanic 2004). At one point, the teacher emphasises the distance to the students when she talks about "children of your own age" (9). When she talks about letters to the editor in newspapers she uses the words *everybody* and *we*, which creates a feeling that knowledge is universal (7, 15). In the same way, the students use *we* to show that the knowledge is general (8, 12). The concept of *we* appears in contexts where knowledge is spoken about rather than emotions or experiences. The teacher tries to focus students' attention on letter to the editor models that can be perceived as fairly simple and thus easier for them to strive for. It may well be that the contributions in the daily papers can largely be regarded as Op-Ed articles written by driven writers with a content that is of public interest.

Student 1 asks a question about how to begin a letter to the editor (12). The teacher's model for writing a letter to the editor must contain a clearly projected opinion. For the student, it is not fully clear what that means. In the student's suggestion "I'm very tired of this. You have to wait" (14), *what* she intends to argue for does not come out. The teacher's feedback consists of positive reinforcement: "You definitely can begin one like that" (15), and says that a letter to the editor can begin with anything at all. The teacher refers to the student's heading "Well done SJ"[4]. The text that the student later hands in for response does not include the introduction suggested above (14). But student 2, who writes about waiting for the school bus, has taken the fellow student's suggestion that it is boring to wait and writes: "It's not much fun to just stand and wait". It is characteristic of the teacher to create a continuous line of reasoning, as visualised in her own statements (1, 5, 7, 9, 11). The teacher's elucidation concerning the length of a letter to the editor maintains the dialogue (6, 8, 10, 12). The teacher tries to explicitly visualise both her and the students' thinking and reasoning (cf. Janks (2010).

In the next lesson, the teacher revises the points that were previously on the board by once again teaching at a meta-level about the structure of a letter to the editor. The writing continues, advances and leads to a product.

Feedback and students' reflections for learning

As the students complete the task, the teacher gives them an encouraging oral response. The teacher reads the texts aloud and the students stand beside her, listening. In four of the texts the teacher corrects misspellings and points out a number of other incorrectly written constructions and expressions. A student, who has written about a stable, wonders if she can write the name of the stable. She is advised by the teacher that it is "absolutely fine". Some of the girls wonder if they can send in some letters to the editor of the local paper, which they are not to do, "not at the present time at least" the teacher replies. The teacher praises one student for her signature, "Angry Water Heater", since it both symbolises an angry person heating water and personifies a water heater.

The students then write their texts on computers and hand in their printed out letters with their names on the reverse side. I read all the texts and observe that characteristic elements are missing for the texts to be classified as letters to the editor according to the teacher's instructions. Some of the students' letters lack an argument and others lack an opinion or a conclusion. After I discuss this phenomenon with the teacher, the texts are returned to the students. The teacher once again revises what characterises a letter to the editor and the students are told to read their own efforts and try to see if all the elements are present. The students use coloured pens to mark the different elements. Every student can see quite clearly what is present in their text and what is missing. One of the students exclaims: "I haven't got any arguments". Another student discovers that he has not suggested a solution. His heading is "Too

big price differences". The student has written about visiting two sports equipment shops to compare prices.

Analysis of the feedback and students' reflections

The teacher's response is first and foremost focused on the students' correct spelling of words, which is also included in the plan for the work area. There is no meaningful response on the basis of the teacher's explicit teaching of how a letter to the editor should be written, i.e. its structure (cf. Dixon 2011). The intervention I make as a researcher in this literacy event is to inform the teacher of the importance of having the students study their own completed work and use the meta-language that the teacher has taught them. By reviewing their own efforts, the students discover both what their own writing communicates and what is lacking for the text to reproduce the dominant structure for writing a letter to the editor. The situation creates prerequisites for thinking rather than learning by rote (cf. Gibbons 2006; Janks 2010; Foley & Lee 2004; Barton 2007). In previous lessons the students had mechanically memorised what the teacher said, but without reflection they have been unable to translate the new knowledge into the creation of a letter to the editor (Janks 2010). According to the Janks model, the students do not have access to the structure before they consider and analyse their own texts.

Writing to learn – reconstruction

The final product, the goal of the teaching, is brought out, i.e. the texts the students handed in for response and assessment. The texts are for the most part fairly short, consisting of fewer than 90 words. All the texts have a heading, an opinion and a signature. Nine take up a problem, one expresses praise for a tennis player and one recommends a book.

I have chosen two of the texts I consider to be representative of this literacy event. The texts are divided into the basic elements contained in a letter to the editor. The analysis of the texts is based on the fundamental elements the teacher has taught the students about as a model for writing a letter to the editor. My interpretation has largely been guided by the headings but also by other elements of a structural character.

Letters to the editor	Structural characteristics
1. Team Sportia[5]	Heading
2. I think the gear at Team Sportia in XXX is too expensive.	Opinion
3. They have a hockey helmet that costs 2,500 kronor and at E-Sport in XXX it only costs 1,400.	Argument
4. Team Sportia have an ice hockey stick for 1,999 kronor and at E-Sport it only costs 1,499.	Argument
5. I think Team Sportia should lower the price.	Suggested solution
6. They might get more customers then.	Development of a suggested solution
7. A customer	Signature

Figure 1. Letters to the editor; Robert, year 6

Letters to the editor	Structural characteristics
1. Well done SJ![6]	Heading
2. I think it's really well done by SJ that the trains were not so delayed during the first two weeks of November.	Opinion
3. When the cold weather arrives,	Context
4. I hope they'll be better at putting on buses instead.	Suggested solution
5. Preferably a lot earlier than in previous years.	Development of a suggested solution
6. SJ should have buses waiting at the station, ready to go if delays occur.	Development of a suggested solution
7. A happy train passenger	Signature

Figure 2. Letters to the editor; Maria, year 6

Analysis of writing to learn – reconstruction

Letters to the editor are subjectively written arguments, which is evident from the students' use of phrases such as *I think* and evaluating words like *too expensive*, *very good* and *happy*, which also give emphasis to the text (cf. Bergh Nestlog 2009). The texts are based on the students' understanding of how to write (structure) and what they are writing about (content), which the teacher has been teaching them about. The students' strength is that they find topical content and try to convince an imaginary reader. Some of the students have mastered the structure but none has mastered both the structure and the specific language of a letter to the editor. Robert's (Figure 1) main argument is "I think the gear at Team Sportia in XXX is too expensive" (1), which is paraphrased in the next two arguments: "They have a hockey helmet that costs 2,500 kronor and at E-sport in XXX it only costs 1,400" (3). His stance is thus visualised by his arguments. The sentences in this particular text are bound together more as a narrative than with connectives that are characteristic of written arguments. The student also suggests a solution, "I think Team Sportia should lower the price" (5), which he then also develops, "They might get more customers then" (6).

The starting point of the next text comes from personal travel experiences but also knowledge of train delays which travellers often suffer. Maria's text (Figure 2) has a heading that might be perceived as ironic praise since the student praises SJ in the heading "Well done SJ!" (1) and in her opinion complains about delays. The student's suggested solution clearly brings out the value of using relief buses early on, "I hope they'll be better at putting on buses instead" (4), which is paraphrased in the development of the suggested solution, "Preferably a lot earlier than in previous years" (5). The student signs her letter "A happy train passenger", linking back to the heading, which signals SJ's capacity or rather perhaps shortage of capacity. Both students write in a specific style and try to keep to the model the teacher has taught them but Maria has not understood how the structure should be built up and her letter lacks an argument.

Reflection

This article, the aim of which has been to describe and analyse the writing discourse in one classroom and how students learn through studying a topic, i.e. the teaching and learning of written argument, has looked at a teaching practice in a literacy field. Both the process and product have been studied. The process comprises the teacher's literacy teaching and dialogues between the teacher and students. The product, which does not have an actual recipient, is the students' letters to the editor, which in its final form was written on a computer. This study shows that a full reconstruction of a letter to the editor was not possible. What, then, is it in the text product or the teaching process that reveals this?

As regards the extent to which the teaching gives the students access to the structure and language of a letter to the editor, the study shows that the teacher explicitly teaches about letters to the editor on the basis of the didactic interrogatives *why*, *how* and *what*. The structure of the teaching with deconstruction, enabling access for the students, reconstruction of a letter to the editor, feedback and students' reflections, emphasises the teacher's role as a gatekeeper. As a gatekeeper, the teacher hands over the building blocks that a letter to the editor consists of. The teacher's scaffolding, as in the reproduced dialogue, proves to be necessary for understanding (cf. Gibbons 2006). It is the reading of letters to the editor from youth magazines and the dialogues about them that bridge different discourses, visualise and deconstruct the building blocks (cf. Bergh-Nestlog 2009). When the students then read their own letters they have knowledge of some of the building blocks that are to be included. For some students, however, it was only after a mega-cognitive activity that they were able to reconstruct and write a letter to the editor of their own with all the building blocks. It was in the concluding task, where the students talk together about their texts to detect shortcomings and development opportunities in the texts, that the knowledge can be said to have been internalised.

The study thus shows that both opportunities and limitations arise from the perspective of the writing discourse. One limitation emerges when the teaching only demonstrates and describes how to write a letter to the editor. This preserves the dominant structures that the students have not been given tools to understand and develop (cf. Bergh Nestlog 2009). According to the Swedish syllabus, the teaching should result in the students being able to express themselves, adapt the language to different aims, recipients and contexts and distinguish linguistic structures, i.e. understand a genre's dominant expressions. The students should also be able to appraise a text and critically review it (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011). Literacy competence can give the student access to and knowledge of a genre that makes it possible to reproduce it while a critical attitude also means that the student learns that texts are constructed by a person for a particular aim and in a specific context (Janks 2010). The teaching about letters to the editor creates or can create a considerable difference for the student between copying down, understanding and

reflecting and, by extension, being able to switch perspective to recipient. According to Janks (2010), teaching is not a neutral activity since the teaching is influenced by political, time-specific codes of practice and teachers' knowledge of a genre and the teacher's possibilities to choose and decide on content in teaching situations. If the student is given encouragement and the opportunity to reflect, they can begin their development towards critical literacy. But for this to happen, the student also needs access to the language and its grammar in order to write argumentative texts. This access is not given to the students solely by means of a limited correction of misspellings.

In conclusion, it is clear from this and similar studies (Heath 1983; Berg Nestlog 2009; Janks 2010) that the teaching needs to act as a bridge between giving the students access to a genre's language and structure and possibilities to reconstruct a text from a critical perspective. The teaching should also be based on the students' mixed previous knowledge and values, their pre-understanding, in a varied range of literacy events to bridge between different discourses of writing. In the study, productive and relational situations such as the reproduced dialogue and reflections on texts have contributed to a critical awareness of how to write a letter to the editor.

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Notes

1 Henceforth referred to as "letter to an editor", or "a letter" for abbreviation purposes

2 All names of the people, schools and towns in this article are fictitious.

3 A Swedish evening tabloid

4 SJ (Statens Järnvägar) is the Swedish State Railways

5 A Swedish sports store

6 SJ is the Swedish state railway

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