ENCULTURATION TO INSTITUTIONAL WRITING

Meaning Making in a Triadic Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract. The project *Genre, positionings, and task ideologies* studied primary school students' task positionings. The basic aim of this chapter is to outline parts of the triadic semiotic framework used in this project and illustrate how this relates to a specific text and its context. This study focuses on second grade students in a Norwegian primary school, where a physical workshop ("verksted") was used to stimulate writing. The theoretical framework functions as a basis for interpretations of a text written by René (aged 8). Videotaped incidents and the final version of the written text René produced allow for a problematizing of school writing as a context for meaning making. The semiotic and communicative approach advocated draws from the work of Bakhtin (1986), Bühler (1934), Habermas (1984), and Halliday (1978). The main idea is that communicators, while uttering, are positioning themselves by and between the mutual dynamics of *expressivity*, which is connected to form, *referentiality*, which is connected to content, and *addressivity*, which is connected to action. René's text is interpreted in detail from these different positionings. Thus, the close dynamics of a text's form, content and use (or more precisely structure, reference and action) becomes the main focus. The text is interpreted in detail from different positionings. The analyses reveal that writing should be seen as a delicate, simultaneous interplay between expressing, referring and acting, as well as between utterance and genre. The student, René, when writing, is seen as searching for ways to mean by positioning himself between these major aspects. Finally, the notion of validity is problematized in order to relate more adequately to the openness of an interpretative approach. It is suggested that to avoid disciplinary onesidedness, research on writing should validate itself by making explicit its own ideological positionings within this triadic, semiotic communicative framework.

Keywords: genre expectations, school writing, self-positioning, semiotic meaning, writing tasks, triadic theories

1 INTRODUCTION: POSITIONING THE RESEARCH

This chapter problematizes a student’s positioning vis-à-vis a general writing task given in a primary school that implemented a process-oriented writing pedagogy. A play-like workshop (Norwegian: "verksted") was used as an activity to stimulate writing. The specific text under investigation is written by René, aged 8, and can be seen as the result of outspoken and implicit task expectations that give a scope for making meaning in the school culture.
In carrying out the interpretations, the discussion positions itself deliberately above the traditional choice between an inductive or a deductive inquiry. Writing research is often squeezed between induction or deduction as ways of reasoning. These two regimes, which are established by scientific disciplines, may obstruct the possibilities for developing a more holistic or general understanding of the many aspects involved in writing. The discussion in this chapter, rather than starting from a given theory applied to prove empirical data or vice versa, follows, partly, the Peircean idea of abduction. This implies giving priority to hypotheses and balances between theoretical and empirical aspects in the processes of reasoning rather than assigning priority to either induction or deduction. The point is not to present conclusive results, but to advocate for, and exemplify how a communicative and semiotic framework could be an explicit part of the research conducted on writing. This approach is chosen because it seems closer to teachers' everyday situation and experiences, while at the same time being anchored in theory.

In light of the above, this chapter, methodologically aims, on one hand, to outline a triadic, social-semiotic perspective within which I situate detailed interpretations of a specific text and its context. On the other hand, on a meta-level the discussion addresses a more overarching issue, as I present a theoretical framework that can clarify and exemplify the dynamic relationship between utterance/text and genre/context. Hence, this chapter tries to illustrate how such a shift in research positionings and the teachers' reading of students' texts could be materialized. A short text produced by a student, its contexts and the framework used for the analysis of the text-context interaction are analyzed via the concept of discursive positioning, which is outlined in detail in various sections of this chapter. In the last part of this chapter, I interpret and exemplify, ending with a brief evaluation of the framework.

2 CONTEXTUALIZING THE TEXT AND THE CONTEXT

2.1 School Writing or Meaning Making?

The text analyzed in this chapter comes from a larger project entitled Genre, positionings and task ideologies, which set out to investigate Norwegian students' task positioning(s) in a primary school in Oslo, Norway (Ongstad, 1996, 1997). The school teachers had decided to offer a workshop to their second-graders every second Tuesday. 25 students were placed on five different "stations" in an activity-room working with clay, fabrics, sandbox, woodwork, and wooden bricks.

We should note that these children came from play and everyday activity in families and kindergartens to be rather rapidly socialized to school, lessons, and classrooms. That writing could follow activity and could actually be about it was for some children beyond their imagination. The first day the following sceptical reaction was videotaped when teachers explained to the children what to do: You can't [possibly] write about something you have made! Connecting the two was unthinkable.