

Argumentation in and Across Disciplines: Two Norwegian Cases

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Abstract This paper aims at exploring the challenges arising when teachers at secondary school level decide to cooperate about students' argumentative writing. Two teams of teachers and researchers have met regularly during the school year, discussing students' texts from a variety of disciplines. Going into two writing tasks in detail, the authors discuss the importance of *scaffolding* (support) in the teaching of argument. The paper includes a discussion of some specific textual features that are often touched upon in the meetings.

Keywords Writing in the disciplines · Assessment of writing · Argument at secondary school level · Teacher learning communities

1 Introduction: The Norwegian Context

In 2006, *literacy* in the broadest sense of the word was made a key part of the Norwegian National Curriculum (LK 2006). Writing, reading, arithmetic, oral skills and digital skills were to be integrated in all disciplines from 1st through 13th grade, and each teacher is now supposed to work with these skills in ways that are relevant in their own discipline. The political rationale can be found in OECD framework *Developing Selected Competencies* (DeSeCo), a comprehensive project aiming to

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introduce general competencies across national borders.¹ In the Norwegian case there are also local reasons. One is the public concern caused by the mediocre PISA results, where Norway scored below the average OECD level. Moreover, in the case of writing, a large-scale evaluation of lower secondary school-leaving exam (the QAL project²) revealed that Norwegian 16 year-olds are good at writing personal narratives, but avoid assignments requiring general reasoning skills. For instance, from 1998 to 2001 the overwhelming majority of students chose genres like short stories, diary entries, personal narratives, fantasy tales etc., whereas only 15% chose non-fictional assignments. In the latter case, the two most popular genres appeared to be “opinion letters” and what is called a *causerie* (a short essayistic text where a question of general interest is discussed in a humorous and often ironic manner). As both genres open up for an expressive and even polemic tone, and as none of them requires formal reasoning, there was reason to believe that Norwegian youngsters are not well prepared to handle argumentative writing (Berge et al. 2005).

The response led to the introduction of the five basic competencies mentioned above, but also to the introduction of a national writing test (Hertzberg 2008). The test for 10th graders (15–16 year olds) contained two tasks: a pro-et-contra argumentation about possible life on Mars (on the basis of relevant sources available to all students) and a more philosophical, reflective text. The obvious intention was to introduce argumentation to all Norwegian youngsters.³

This system of selected competencies and the introduction of writing tests have one thing in common; making writing a responsibility of all teachers. Needless to say, this part of the reform has evoked reactions, especially at the secondary school level. Teachers of History, Sociology, Chemistry or Sports do not regard themselves as writing teachers, and suggestions for cooperation across disciplines are met with scepticism because of tight time schedules. Still, the reform has led to interesting staff development projects in several schools, and this article presents data from two such schools, one at lower and the other at upper secondary level.⁴ The overall aim of the projects is to explore what counts as good writing in the various disciplines, and in both cases it includes argumentation.

Our own motivation for exploring argument in and across disciplines has at least two roots. First, we are interested in school development in general, and by participating in the two groups we were able to study curriculum implementation in practice. Our second motivation is connected to the ongoing debate of how to teach argument. During the two last decades, a wide-spread attitude among educational researchers has been that the teaching of argumentative genres should not be restricted to the English/Mother Tongue lessons (Freedman and Pringle 1984, 1989;

¹ The three main competencies are *functioning in socially heterogeneous groups, acting autonomously and using tools interactively* (Rychen and Salganik 2002). It is the third one that points towards literacy.

² QAL = Quality Assurance of Learning Outcome in Written Norwegian (see Berge et al. 2005).

³ Due to reasons that we will not go into here, the national writing test has been run only once (in 2005), but it will be revived in 2010 in the form of a test for a limited sample of the student cohort.

⁴ In Norway, primary school finishes at grade 7, lower secondary at grade 10 and upper secondary at grade 13. As lower and upper secondary are separated with only the first being compulsory, there is a school-leaving exam after lower secondary. However, most students continue to upper secondary, where they can choose between academic and vocational programs.

Crowhurst 1990; Halliday and Martin 1993; Andrews 1995; Andrews et al. 2006, 2009). Inspired by the Australian genre school in particular, interesting development projects have been initiated with the aim of exploiting the possibilities for teaching argumentation in disciplines like Social science and Natural science (see for instance Cope and Kalantzis 1993). Also in Scandinavia this view is widely supported (Knain 2005; Knain and Flyum 2003; Ongstad 2004; Berge 2005; af Gejerstam 2006; Hertzberg 2006; Liberg 2007; Lorentzen and Smidt 2008). The two school projects have allowed us to study in detail the kind of challenges that arise when teachers from different disciplines cooperate about writing.

2 Two Schools, Two Projects

The two schools, “Granli” lower secondary (students aged 13–16) and “Fagerbakken” upper secondary (students aged 16–19) are located in regions with high socioeconomic status.⁵ Both have a well educated staff and a school principal who stresses the importance of professional leadership. In both projects the writing teams have volunteered to work with writing in their respective disciplines, and in both cases they receive support from their leaders as allocated meeting time. The Granli team consists of 13 teachers and a researcher (Øgreid), the Fagerbakken team of 11 teachers and three researchers (Hertzberg, a university lecturer and a PhD student). In both cases the teams cover most disciplines in the National Curriculum.

The centerpiece of each of the projects is the regular meetings where samples of students’ writing are discussed. In these discussions all participate on the condition that the discipline teacher is considered expert on his or her students’ writing. The researchers’ role is to contribute on a par with the rest of the group, although they often highlight textual aspects not immediately visible to the teachers themselves. Occasionally they arrange workshops to demonstrate writing exercises that can be implemented in classrooms or follow up one or two particular teachers. Thus, both projects have the character of action research.

Both groups started out with the desire to improve writing instruction in general, and both groups agreed to focus on argumentation. There were at least two reasons for this. The first was that argumentation turned out to be common for all disciplines. Whereas narrative writing would have favoured languages, and descriptive texts would have favoured Natural science, argumentation was relevant for all disciplines in some form or other. In History students might be asked to discuss a particular topic on the basis of contradicting historical sources, in Sports to give their opinion on “burning” topics like elite sports for children, and in Natural science to discuss questions concerning the ethics of gene manipulation etc. Next, it was generally recognised that argumentation was “difficult”. The students complained about it, and many of the team members felt they did not master argumentation themselves and wanted to learn more about it in order to improve their teaching.

The Fagerbakken teachers had an additional aim. Being more preoccupied with discipline specific differences than the Granli teachers, they were aware of the

⁵ The names of the schools and the teachers are pseudonyms.

confusion that diverging norms might create for the students. Although these norms might be rooted in academic traditions, there was a feeling that at least some of them could be the result of individual teachers' private opinions. One of the teachers at a meeting mentioned that it was confusing for the students that they were expected "to argue in one way in History and another in Norwegian". Thus, if not to abolish these diverging norms completely, the ambition was to arrive at *some* common principles that could be taught to all students.

To give an idea of the types of writing that were exposed at the meetings, we will look into two tasks in further detail, one from lower and the other from upper secondary level.

3 Argumentation in Social Science and Norwegian: The Case of Global Injustice

In two 10th grade classes (age 15–16) at Granli the students had worked for two months with the topic *global injustice*. During a number of Social science lessons they explored the topic through reading, watching films, taking part in discussions and solving minor assignments. Per, the Social science teacher, had two goals with the project: students were to acquire thorough knowledge about the topic and develop an ethical attitude to the problem. Finally, towards the end of the period, the class was given this assignment: *Write an article or an opinion paper⁶ about the topic global injustice.*

It was clear from the start that the students' papers were to be assessed both by Per and the Norwegian teacher Karen, but with separate grading. The class was familiar with this practice from earlier projects. As preparation Karen had made the students work with the two genres in question—article and opinion paper—both of which belong to the core repertoire of exam genres in Norwegian. The actual writing was carried out without aids and during a 120-min lesson. However, in order to give the students an opportunity to prepare themselves properly, the teachers had announced the wording of the assignment a few days before.

4 The Two Teachers' Preferences

The next team meeting was devoted to the global injustice project. On the request of the researcher, Karen (Norwegian) and Per (Social science) had selected one paper each as an example of what they judged as "a good text". Karen presented her choice first. It starts like this⁷:

⁶ An opinion paper is a newspaper genre similar to "letter to the editor". According to the criteria developed by The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, in an opinion paper one does not expect claims to be supported to the same degree as in an article. An opinion paper allows the student to show strong personal involvement and spontaneity, and the argumentation may be one-sided. According to Freedman and Pringle (1989) it would be classified as a typical persuasive text.

⁷ The translations of all text extracts are done by the researchers. Spelling mistakes are difficult to translate, but we have tried to keep the original punctuation and word parsing.

The world is nuts!

Hi!

Today I thought I'd let out some frustration and what is more suited than the local newspaper.

Yes, because I feel frustrated, frustrated that the world is so stupid and frustrated over the super powers in it!

America, the only country in the world counted as a "Super Power", and yes, I have to say, they have lots of power, money and always had a say.

Then we have Africa, few reflect on the fact that Africa is a continent at all, most think of Africa as the place where there are lots of poor people, but that is all they do.

Sometimes I wonder why things are the way they are, why do we never give Africa a thought at all? [...]

The student goes on to complain about how people ignore Africa and how they spend money on useless things. He obviously talks to people his own age and gives examples like the girls' use of cosmetics and the boys' PC-games. The text ends like this:

But no one is willing to give away a privilege that big, when you eat dinner, when you buy a chocolate for 20 kr., consider what those twenty kroner could have done for a small boy some place.

We need to learn to give priority to values, do you want a chocolate, or should a little boy die?

For that is the question, but still...

Who cares?

Regards, confused tenth-grader

Karen gave several reasons for her choice: the text is written in a catchy and appealing style, it shows emotional commitment, it uses contrasts efficiently and there is consistency between the heading ("The world is nuts") and the signature ("Confused tenth-grader"). In her opinion it meets all the criteria of an opinion paper. Per on his part immediately noted the total absence of scientific terms and factual knowledge. According to him, the text bears no trace of the work that had been going on in the lessons, and it gives an oversimplified and naïve treatment of a complicated theme. As a Social science teacher he could not give this text a high mark.

Next, Per introduces *his* preferred text, which started like this:

It is unfair!

Here in West Europe, and especially in Norway we live in abundance while a fifth of the world's population have to fight for their lives every single day.

I don't think it's fair that we in the industrial countries, who have so much money and food, should be the ones to decides over the world market. Over who is to live and to die! The UN's millennium goals, that were made in 2000 are a good idea, but what does that help if they cannot be carried through. [...]

Next, the writer underlines the fact that the millennium goals have not been followed up—half of the time has already passed without any actions. He claims that it is not enough just to send money and food, we must help with health and education, and if the prices for raw materials increase, the developing countries would earn more and “their HDI⁸ perhaps become higher”. The signature is “One who REALLY cares”.

Per’s evaluation is that the text contains a fair amount of relevant points. Although some of the arguments might have been elaborated further, the text as a whole indicates a good understanding of the curriculum. Karen, however, points out that the dry and boring style is improper for an opinion letter and that the compilation of facts makes the text hard to understand for a young reader: “They will give up half way”, she said.

During this session it became clear that the two teachers had started out with diverging goals from the very beginning. While Karen wanted to focus on writing for a specific audience (readers of a teenage magazine), Per’s intention was to give the students an opportunity to show involvement based on factual knowledge. These expectations had not been explicitly formulated at any stage, neither between the two of them nor to the students.

The students, however, were not all that unaware. After years of schooling they knew that writing in Norwegian and writing in the Social sciences are two different things. When being interviewed, the author of “The world is nuts” pointed at the dilemma he was confronted with by having to combine the two disciplines:

S: Yes, cause you see — there’s no good balance between writing and facts, unless you write a book of facts, but that’s completely different, that’s not what I was going to write. Neither in an article nor an opinion letter or anything you get, you can’t present enough facts and don’t manage to make it function naturally as writing.

I: Does this mean that you feel that you have to choose to write within the subject of Norwegian or within Social science?

S: Yes, that’s how I feel, doubt about it.

He knew that he did not include “enough facts” to get a good grade from Per, but he had to make a choice, and in this case he chose to write an opinion essay the way the Norwegian teacher wanted it. He certainly disliked the assignment, and said it was “nonsense” to make the class write a combination of a Social science factual text and an opinion paper.

5 The Global Injustice Texts in General

The text extracts cited above are by no means unique. Our material consists of 37 papers, of which 10 are articles and 24 opinion papers (3 of the students had not indicated their choice of genre). A quick glance tells us that the “Confused tenth-grader” and “One who really cares” can be regarded as prototypical examples of

⁸ The student uses the English abbreviation for Human Development Index.

the structure and style of the texts in general. This applies equally to the articles and the opinion papers; in fact the students do not seem to have a clear understanding of the differences between the two. Apart from that, there are a number of common characteristics that are worth noticing.

First, the majority of the essays reveal a naïve understanding of the North-South issue. When describing poverty in Africa, students tend to use exaggerations like “Children in Ethiopia have no more than weeds to eat the whole day through. They work all day, get almost nothing to eat and still they keep working”. The suggested solutions are typically oversimplified and moralistic: “This is the problem for UN, they talk but don’t act. One has to be willing to risk a bit! Only then can the unfairness in Africa come to an end”. Besides, instead of basing their examples on documented facts, students tend to personalise the conflict by using themselves as examples:

I buy lots of unnecessary things. When I get tired of my clothes, I get new ones. I buy make-up about once a week, whereas in Uganda they certainly don't even know what it is. It is unfair, and I know it. But I have pulled myself together and I am going to get myself a child to sponsor and do everything I possibly can.

Also the solutions are personalised (“If you have faith and think positively the impossible could be attained, no matter what.”).

Second, the texts lack elaborations of the arguments used. The claims are of a “common sense” character (“Certainly the Norwegian state has a lot of money that they are holding on to, which they actually could spend on food and clean water”), and there are hardly any examples of counterarguments, let alone rebuttals of counterarguments. In general, argumentation is operating on a level of good/bad and black/white.

Third, the style is expressive and appellative, often explicitly dialogic:

At this stage you perhaps can't see hope for all these children? UN and SCF try to do their best, but more aid could always be needed. Would you help? Look at reddbarna.no⁹ for more information.

Closely connected to this are frequent emotional appeals, as in these extracts from two different students:

A child born in Norway is scared to lose the schoolbus, a child in Africa is scared to die. This is unfair. How could two people living so different lives still be so identical; they are both flesh and blood human beings. They could smile, laugh, cry, love and hate, and although they do not speak the same language they understand each other.

Imagine all of the 1,2 billion people living in absolute poverty in U-countries in the world, and with an average monthly salary of less than 200 kr they can hardly afford food! Engage yourselves! What if you lived in a tin shack without furniture, only a carpet that you stole from the neighbour down in the

⁹ Save the Children’s Norwegian web site.

valley? What if you had to work from sunrise to late at night, just to get enough food for the family. [...] That would certainly have been unfair!

Some students start out with a specific event or a personal experience that has made them aware of issue, like this student referring to a discussion in the mathematic class:

In our class we often talk about unfairness. For example when our parallel class is allowed to bring along their rule books at a math test and we are not! But could this really be described as unfairness when we observe how other people suffer and have to reflect on that each day could be the last in their life?

Fourth, there are few examples of scientific terms. Words and concept are from everyday domains:

Norway is a country with 2000 billion on “savings account”. This means that the money just is there, we don’t use them. Why can’t we give away some of the money, do we really need so much money?

These four features—oversimplification, lack of elaboration of arguments, expressive style and lack of scientific terms—constitute general tendencies in the material.

What we see, must be explained as a clash between two writing cultures: students are asked to discuss an important problem from their Social science curriculum, but through genres leading them into an emotionally based argumentation. These genres are familiar to them after years of Norwegian lessons, where involvement and a personal style is often more rewarded than the use of factual sources. In Social science there is no tradition for explicit focus on genres, and in this case there was no scaffolding on how to produce a debate article with an adequate amount of factual information. Consequently, the students fall back on the typical writing culture that is so well documented through the QAL project. This is even more understandable as the topic of global justice easily evokes emotions and indignation.

6 Argumentation in Law—The Trampoline Task

When students continue to upper secondary school, around age 16–17, debate articles and opinion papers are no longer the dominant genres. Both in Norwegian and Social science they are replaced by longer essays asking for comprehensive discussions of syllabus topics. In other disciplines there are specialised genres such as the field reports in Biology, training journals in Sports, the discussion of ethic issues in Natural science or the so-called “empathy text” in History (where the writer is asked to take the role of a person from a particular period of history). However, in upper secondary there are also important differences between Norwegian and the other disciplines. Assignments in Norwegian still include genres like short stories and personal narratives, and also argumentative essays may be answered in a personal

and expressive form. Emotionally based arguments are appreciated as long as they are well formulated. This separates Norwegian from all other disciplines.

There are differences among the other disciplines as well. On the extreme side of a scale ranging from expressive to completely de-personalised writing we can find the Law assignments. Law is an option for students who choose Social science as an in-depth study, and the prototypical assignment is a problem-solving text connected to a legal case. The discussion is to relate strictly to the law text, and no personal reflections are asked for. How then, do students respond to these rather rigid text norms?

To find out we collected texts from a class with 24 13th grade students (aged 18–19) who had been introduced to the following fictional case: *Truls Gran* had become invalided after a jump on a trampoline in a camp site. As it was discovered that the trampoline had not been set up according to instructions, the man filed a damage suit against the owner of the site, *Per Ask*. He, on his side, had delegated the setting up of the trampoline to the two young assistants *Roar Vik* and *Katrine Holm*, who had not followed the set up instruction. The students were asked to discuss the question of liability of (a) the owner, (b) the two assistants and (c) the parents of the two assistants.

The assignment has all the characteristics of an authentic law case, and the questions are to be debated from a strictly legal point of view. However, the case also contains elements that might point in other directions. All teenagers have heard stories about fatal trampoline accidents, and in this case, when the careless work of two youngsters of their own age was to be held up against the irresponsibility of the owner, the students could easily be led into emotional argumentation and moral judgements.

What we found was interesting. Although the papers vary in quality, they are miles away from the kind of personal, expressive writing that Norwegian students produce under other conditions. They are neutral in style, they have a clear and logical structure and there are no traces of personal associations or emotion-laded arguments. The sources are interpreted professionally and the conclusions are in accordance with legal reasoning. In general they all meet the basic criteria for argumentative law texts. The following two extracts can be seen as typical. The first one is from an introductory part¹⁰:

In order for Truls Gran to obtain compensation all four conditions of liability must be met. An economic loss must have occurred as a consequence of the incident. The fact that Truls Gran got injuries in neck and back and became 100% disabled after the trampoline accident led to a big economic loss for him and his family. Causal connection is the second condition for compensation. There must be a connection between an act and the loss for which compensation is claimed. Another condition is foreseeability, which means that it should be possible to predict the consequences of the action. Taking into consideration that two youngsters without any experience got the job of putting up the trampoline, the owner of the camping site should have checked

¹⁰ We would like to thank professor in Law Jon T. Johnsen for helping us translate these two extracts.

the condition of the trampoline more thoroughly before it was put into use. The last condition is the basis of liability. This condition I shall discuss below. (Student 4).

The second example deals with the liability of the parents of the two assistants:

Strict (no fault) liability applies to parents for injuries caused willfully or by negligence by their children under 18 provided the parents possess physical custody and live with them, cf. Sect. 1-2 no 2 [in the Norwegian statute on compensation]. The regulation excludes liability for Roar Vik's parents, as he is not under 18. One must only take into consideration the liability of Katrine Holm's parents. The conditions for no fault liability means that the injury is caused by negligence or intent and that the parents live with and have physical custody over the actual child (youth). From earlier considerations connected to Katrine Holm's considerations on negligence, Holm's faulty mounting job is defined as an act of negligence. The assignment gives no information on Katrine's housing conditions or parental custody. Therefore her parents are liable to pay damages for the negligent act of their daughter Katrine Holm, cf. Sect. 1-1. (Student 18)

We find no examples of disorganized text structure and only a few incidents of the kind of sloppy, oral style that is frequently found in texts produced by students at this level. This does not mean that the texts are flawless. In the above extract, for instance, one could question the conclusion that Katrine Holm's parents are liable *because* the assignment does not give information enough. These are minor details, however, and all in all the texts leave the impression of students taking the task seriously, almost seeing themselves as future lawyers.

Any explanation of this phenomenon must take into consideration that we are dealing with a particular group of students—Paul, their teacher, can confirm that students choosing Law as an in-depth option are not representative of secondary students as a whole. However, both he and his colleagues would argue that the style of the Law papers differs considerably from other papers written by the same individuals. This became particularly noticeable at a meeting where Paul presented examples of Law texts to the rest of the writing group. Consequently one must look for additional explanations. In the following we present some suggestions.

First, the assignment itself has an easily observable structure. It is shaped as a narrative in four clearly divided paragraphs, starting with “Per Ask owns a camp site at the outskirts of Kristiansand. He decided to set up a trampoline to be used by the visitors....” The second paragraph introduces “Truls Gran”, who tried the trampoline with the fatal result, the third tells about the unprofessional mounting of the trampoline and the fourth and last paragraph of Truls Gran filing a damage suit against Per Ask and his two young assistants. Finally the questions are spelled out clearly one after another in the form of (a), (b) and (c) (see above). All in all, the assignment covers nearly one whole page in the textbook.

Second, the students had the opportunity to discuss the substantial elements of the case in peer groups before writing. During this session Paul was circulating in the classroom ready to assist at any time.

Third, Paul introduced the students to the standard procedure for solving juridical cases. As a preparation he gave a brief whole-class lecture identifying four stages: the first stage is to define the legal parties, the second to identify the legal authority to be applied (which includes identifying and distraining the relevant paragraph and discussing the procedure), the third to discuss each of the law questions separately and fourth and the final stage to conclude. As this procedure was supposed to be mirrored through the text structure, it also served as a writing frame for the text itself. For example, Paul informed the students that the conclusion should, preferably, be formulated in one single sentence.

As we see it, the combination of these elements helped the students with content as well as language. The group collaboration, assisted by Paul on students' request, served as an insurance against conclusions that were not in accordance with legal thinking. The wording of the assignment, together with Paul's procedural instructions, helped students formulate their texts with a clear structure and in an appropriate style. This last element reminds us of Aviva Freedman's well-known study of how six Law students learnt to write "like lawyers". In spite of the fact that there was neither explicit instruction from teachers nor appropriate text models, all six acquired the new genre "Law essay" in the course of the first year. According to Freedman, one of the factors that seem to have contributed to this, is the language and the persuasive strategies students were exposed to by the professor, the teaching assistant and "the textbook's treatment of Law in general and the topic to be discussed in particular" (Freedman 1987, p. 104). We think the same explanation can be used for the trampoline case.

7 Argumentation Under Different Conditions

If the definition of a good argument is "one that is organized, elaborated, and supported by evidence or personal experience" (Nussbaum and Schraw 2007, p. 59), only one of our two cases meets this requirement. In spite of the fact that the first class had been working with global injustice for weeks, the texts were characterised by few substantial references to the topic and by lack of elaboration of arguments. Conversely, the second class produced texts that more or less met the basic requirements for argumentation. What—apart from the age difference and different school levels—are the circumstances that can explain this?

Let us start by comparing the circumstances under which the two texts were written in Table 1.

As can be seen from the comparison in Table 1, the conditions for the two assignments differ considerably. The global injustice assignment involves a designated audience, a genre known to the writer and a topic meant to engage—all three factors that are considered favourable in argumentative writing. The pretended reader of a teenage magazine is meant to make writing more inspiring, the letter of opinion has been selected because this genre is expected to appeal to teenagers and the topic is close to a "burning" topic. The trampoline texts have the teacher as the sole recipient, the genre is new to the students and the problem raised is purely judicial and far from the students' everyday way of reasoning. All these

Table 1 Comparison of the two assignments

Global injustice	The trampoline case
Writing as collaboration between two disciplines	Writing within one discipline
Lack of clarity as to purpose, genre conventions and assessment criteria	High degree of clarity as to purpose, genre conventions and assessment criteria
Writing for teenagers	Writing for the teacher
Topic meant to engage	Topic meant to demonstrate reasoning in law
Genre supposed to appeal to youngsters, regularly appearing in newspapers and journals	Genre unknown to youngsters, rarely met outside of the legal profession
Assignment only orally instructed	Assignment given through detailed case description and instruction for writing
No fixed text structure, no writing frames offered by teachers	Fixed text structure, writing frames offered by teacher
No peer collaboration	Peer collaboration
No scaffolding during writing	Scaffolding during writing

elements can easily be seen as problematic. When the task turned out so well, it must be due to the amount of scaffolding involved. The teacher helped the students sort out the dimensions of the legal case, he organised discussions in peer groups, he modeled the various stages of the writing process and he pointed at expressions and phrases to be used in law. As to the global injustice assignment all this was literally absent, due to the fact that the text was produced under test conditions with no opportunities for consultation during writing. Although the students were well prepared for the topic through reading and class discussions, this was not sufficient as scaffold for writing. They had repeated the main characteristics of the genre ‘opinion paper’, but as we have seen, this genre appeared to be counter-productive to the expectations of the Social science teacher. From the point of view of the teacher of Norwegian, however, the task offered an opportunity to train persuasive writing for a specific audience.

An aspect that cannot be read from the table, however, is the difference in motivation. When observing and interviewing the Law students we were struck by the enthusiasm with which they took to the task. Here it must be kept in mind that they had chosen Law among several disciplines, partly because they expected it to be interesting, partly because they wanted to study Law at the university. When asked directly about their attitudes to writing in Law, they said they “liked” it. They definitely preferred that to writing in Norwegian. When asked why, they pointed at the fixed structure of the Law texts and the fact that there was a “right” answer to the questions. Some said explicitly that they disliked the expectation of being “creative” in Norwegian. All in all they found the Law discipline very fascinating.

A final point has to do with the difference in the complexity of the topics. In education it is generally recommended to give students “real world” topics for their assignment. The global injustice issue is a “real world” topic, but that does not automatically make it easy. Compared to the small and well-defined trampoline case it is extremely large and complex, containing dimensions that are nearly

unmanageable. Also the trampoline case is a “real world” issue, even if it does not involve a problem that students ever deal with in their daily life. In this assignment, however, there is a fair chance of arriving at a reasonable solution.

8 Diverging Versus Common Norms—Returning Issues in Teachers’ Discussions

The writing tasks described above were introduced by the teachers themselves to colleagues in their respective writing groups. In both cases they provided good points of departure for discussions. At Granli, the global injustice texts made the members aware of the latent conflict between writing a good persuasive text and demonstrating factual knowledge. At Fagerbakken, the Law texts functioned as a demonstration of a type of argument where the interpretation of given sources meant all and everything.

The group discussions often touched upon the question of clear and understandable criteria. Generally, we observed that the teachers were unaccustomed to talking about students’ texts to anyone outside of their own discipline. When asked to explain why an argumentative text was “good”, even the most experienced teachers tended to give vague and general reasons, and they rarely focused on global aspects like text structure and genre specific conventions. Thus, an important part of the project was to make tacit textual knowledge explicit. A powerful element in this process appeared to be what we could call *disagreement over specific text features*. Over time there were aspects that more often than others tended to provoke discussions—some purely formal, others more substantial. Below we indicate some fields that appeared to be recurring topics in the discussions among the teachers: the use of semiotic resources, the question of personal elements in writing and the role of sources in argumentation.

8.1 Semiotic Resources

According the new National curriculum, ICT (Information and communication technology) is to be integrated in all disciplines at all levels, and in the subject of Norwegian multimodality is a main issue from grade 1 through grade 13. This has led to a strengthened focus not only on the use of digital media, but also on textual aspects that have traditionally been ignored in students’ writing. With a term taken from social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis (cf Kress and van Leuwen 2001) we are talking about *semiotic resources*, i.e. all kinds of devices used to convey meaning. In the texts we are dealing with in the writing groups, these devices range from the graphic organisation of the text on the page to the use of non-verbal elements like drawings and photos. We soon discovered that there were different attitudes among the teachers as to how these resources were to be evaluated.

A concrete example is the use of subtitles. In the discipline of Norwegian subtitles are disregarded, probably due to a century-long tradition of training students to conduct a lengthy and comprehensive argumentation. Since text norms

in Norwegian essays have a tendency to be transferred to essays in other disciplines as well, there is an ambivalence about subtitles in school writing altogether (with an exception for report genres). Not even the introduction of the genre *article* into the exam essays in the 1980s seems to have altered this. So deep-rooted is this attitude that the Directorate for Education and Training now warns the examiners in Norwegian to not automatically punish the candidate for using subtitles “if the text is organised in a way that makes it natural” (Assessment criteria 2006).

Indeed, what is said about subtitles also applies to other semiotic devices such as drawing, graphs and tables. These are examples of textual elements that were assessed very differently by the teachers. In both groups we noticed that the Natural science teachers considered illustrations part of the argumentation and assessed them accordingly, while in most other disciplines illustrations were either ignored or even discouraged. When a lower secondary student had included a self-made drawing to explain a specific aspect of Japanese *Manga* cartoons in a Norwegian essay, the teachers of Norwegian did not consider the drawing part of what was to be assessed. Social science would be somehow in between, as tables and graphs would be considered an integral part of a text. However, the Social science teachers were more ambivalent to drawings. In a spontaneous discussion at Fagerbakken the following hypothetical question was raised: If a description of the different political and federal institutions in Norway were illustrated by a visual chart with boxes and arrows, how would the drawing be assessed? The teachers argued that even if such an illustration would “not hurt”, it would scarcely be considered an advantage.

8.2 “Personal Voice”

Another difference found concerned the attitude toward the phenomenon of “personal voice”. While a personal style is highly appreciated in the discipline of Norwegian—especially in primary and lower secondary school—the same cannot be said of other disciplines. This means different attitudes not only to the use of the pronoun “I”, but also to elements like expressive language and the use of rhetorical devices rooted in literary fiction. In Norwegian, humour, irony and free associations may be accepted even in argumentative texts, much due to the tradition of writing *causeries* and literary essays. In other disciplines these devices are considered inappropriate. This does not mean that a personal voice is altogether discouraged. When asked about the use of “I”, most teachers (including those from Natural science) answered “it depends”. Interesting enough, one of the very first texts presented to the Fagerbakken group was a diary text brought along by the History teacher. The fictional diary writer—a person of high rank from the middle ages—was able to convey very interesting information about the period, and no one in the group objected to the style.

8.3 The Role of Sources in Argumentation

A question often raised in the groups concerned the role of sources. On what basis do students argue, and what role does reference to sources play? How are references to sources—or the lack of such references—to be assessed? Especially at

Fagerbakken these questions were strongly related to the question of evidence in argumentation, and also here different attitudes were revealed. Social science teachers required their students to demonstrate the mastery of central discipline specific concepts and ways of reasoning, including the handling of sources. Historians highlight the critical discussion of sources as a principal aim, and in Law the interpretation of sources belongs to the very core of the discipline. In Natural science, on the other hand, evidence is more often taken from lab experiments and field work, not from texts, and in Norwegian and languages an argument may function very well without reference to sources.

As the National Curriculum had made informational skills a concern for all teachers, the question of how and when to use sources were frequently touched upon in the two writing groups. An obvious motivation for this focus was the replacement of traditional exams with so-called open books-exams.¹¹ When students are allowed to use sources, they are also expected to handle them professionally. According to an instruction from the Directorate (2008), all sources are to be noted in such a way that the reader is able to look up the source. Prints or quotations from web pages must be followed by complete address and date of downloading; it is not sufficient with “www.wikipedia.no”. This is more important than technical details as to how the references are given, according to the Directorate.¹²

At Fagerbakken, where the exam is of great importance for the student’s further career, the question of sources became a main concern for the group. The discussions touched on a number of topics ranging from plagiarism to mere technicalities, and many of the teachers expressed a lack of experience with this part of writing instruction. Finally they agreed to work out an instruction sheet to be handed out to colleagues and students. This task turned out to be a real challenge. A recurring topic was related to the question of how detailed the list should be. What would the students be able to understand, and—not less important—what were staff members willing to accept? During these discussions it became evident that even “mere technicalities” could be value-laden. When historians prefer references given in foot-notes and most others use parentheses in the unfolding text, it is not a trivial detail, but a question of academic norms that should not be ignored.

9 Message to be Learnt

As researchers we had two aims with these projects. First, we saw an opportunity to study curriculum implementation and staff development in practice. Second, we wanted to explore the possibilities and challenges connected to teaching argument in and across disciplines. Here we will concentrate on this last aim.

¹¹ In a typical open book-exam students receive a topic 48 h in advance, and on the day of the exam they are allowed to bring along all sources except for Internet and translation programmes.

¹²

http://udir.no/upload/Eksamen/Videregaende/V2008/sensorveiledningerV08/FS1544_Forsk_Norsk_Oppgavekommentarer_og_vurderingsrettleiing.pdf (18.06.09).

As a basis for the two projects lay the idea of “teacher as expert”. This turned out to be fruitful. All topics that evolved during the meetings were brought up by the teachers themselves, and always in connection with specific texts. According to the team members, the meetings allowed them to reflect on their own practices and to widen their personal repertoire of teaching activities. By participating in discussions over student texts they were led to revise part of their own assessment practices, not to say feedback-practices. This has been uttered very explicitly by the teachers.

As we see it, the two writing groups are good examples of what is often referred to as *teacher learning communities*. In such communities members work collaboratively “to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their class” (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006, p. 4). As such, the projects meet five critical criteria for successful learning communities:

Researchers agree that teachers learn best when they are involved in activities that: (a) focus on instruction and student learning specific to the settings in which they teach; (b) are sustained and continuous, rather than episodic; (c) provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues inside and outside the school, (d) reflect teachers' influence about what and how they learn; and (e) help teachers develop theoretical understanding of the skills and knowledge they need to learn. (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006, p. 9)

However, the importance of support from above should not be underestimated. The school principals attended the meetings as often as they could, and they supported the groups in various ways from mere appraisal to allocation of resources. Without this the projects might have fallen apart after a short time. Similarly, the participation of the researchers contributed to an air of enthusiasm all through the project.

Apart from gaining deeper insight into argumentative writing, the Fagerbakken group had the additional goal of trying to harmonise conflicting criteria in order to help the students. In the course of time the teachers got a somewhat more nuanced view on this ambition. Diverging criteria, it turns out, can be two things. If they are symptom of an assessment culture characterised by unclear, tacit norms, there are good reasons for scrutinizing them critically. However, they can also be seen as an expansion of professional norms rooted in separate academic cultures, something that has been thoroughly documented by e.g. Bazerman (1988), Swales (1998), Hyland (2000) and the Norwegian corpus based project *Cultural Identity in Academic Prose*¹³ (Fløttum et al. 2006). In that case the best strategy could be to highlight the differences and explain the reason for their existence. Being able to handle diverging norms may be seen as a good preparation not only to academic studies, but also to professional careers.

Last, the two assignments described above illuminate some important conditions for successful teaching of argument summarised in Andrews et al. 2006 and 2009. Based on a review of effect studies, the authors recommend that the teaching of

¹³ For the main findings see <http://kiap.uib.no/index-e.htm>.

argument should include explicit explanations of the processes to be learnt, planning which is extensive, elaborated and hierarchical, the identification of explicit goals for writing, and the scaffolding of structures and devices that aid the composition of argumentative writing. Our study supports this. A strive for “real world issues” is a good, but not a sufficient condition for effective argument.

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