THE RESEARCH CIRCLE AS A RESOURCE IN CHALLENGING ACADEMICS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with an action research project in which a group of academics from different disciplines reflect on and gradually extend their knowledge on how to support students' academic literacy development. The aim of this research is to understand how the collaborative work becomes a resource in challenging participants' initial perceptions. The results show that participants' experience-based stories play a significant role alongside research-based knowledge. The participants' conversations change character from focusing on approaches to remedy students' failings to focusing on participants' individual teaching practices and institutional responsibilities. Accordingly, a basis for change and development is created.

INTRODUCTION

Research and experience show that many students find it difficult to understand the literacy requirements in transition to higher education (Duff, 2010; Hyland, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998). According to several studies, students do not get adequate support to gain access to the new ways of understanding, interpreting, and organizing knowledge to succeed in their studies (Hoel, 2010; Lea & Street, 1998). Further, the difficulties students experience are not limited to initial problems; they have a tendency to inhibit progress to more advanced levels of study, in which there is a greater demand for a more developed academic language.

The view that students' difficulties can be 'fixed' in separate courses or through extra-curricular support in writing centers has been questioned (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2006). Instead, there are strong arguments that the teaching of writing should be an

integral part of disciplinary learning and, consequently, should include all students (Mitchell & Evison, 2006; Monroe, 2003). Embedded approaches have the advantage of being discipline- and context-specific: "the more they are linked to the teaching of subject content, the greater is their potential to raise students' awareness of the discipline's communicative and social practices" (Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

A reluctance to take responsibility for students' literacy development can exist among academics who exclusively want the role of subject experts and who feel the problems can be addressed in parallel activities (Bailey, 2010; Haggis, 2006). Other academics seek to give students support in an embedded way but may be uncertain as to how such support can be designed and whether or not their competencies as teachers are adequate (Bailey, 2010; Blythman & Orr, 2002).

Research is limited in understanding the challenges those teachers face, how they experience their situation, and which strategies they use to support students' academic literacy development. There is also limited research concerning how teachers' practices can be changed and developed. A greater understanding of these issues can support teacher development and thereby create better prerequisites for students' language and knowledge development. Furthermore, an improved understanding could serve as an incentive for a change in beliefs and attitudes, as well as changes in practice.

In this article, I will present findings from the first phase of a research project in which I explore how a group of university teachers, from different disciplines, collaboratively reflect on and gradually extend their knowledge on how to support students in their academic literacy development. The study is influenced by action research not only through its concern with developing and changing an activity but also through its attempt to gain knowledge regarding how this change occurs and what happens during the process (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006; Somekh, 2006).

The process I explore took place within a research circle (Persson, 2009) in which colleagues from various disciplines in a southern Swedish university had the opportunity to engage in a continuing dialogue where experience-based and research-based knowledge could meet. Important preconditions for the group's further work were created in the participants' interactions during the initial phase, which coincided with the first semester of the two-year long project. Even though the research circle work changed character over time, those preconditions remain significant. Accordingly, a deeper analysis of the initial phase of the process is necessary for understanding the research circle as a resource for change and development. Consequently, I will use data only from the first phase in this article. My aim is to understand how the research circle is employed as a resource to challenge participants' initial perceptions of how to support students' literacy development.

During the second phase of the research circle, the participants carried out a small-scale investigation of their own teaching by examining different methods to support students. In a forthcoming article, these investigations will be foregrounded, as will questions

concerning how the participants valued the potential for students' literacy development in the projects implemented.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The overarching theoretical perspective of the research project and the research circle work is sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1980). From a sociocultural perspective, learning has both a social and a cognitive side, where the social needs to come first. Humans learn in *interaction* with others, where they also contribute with something new. What we learn and the *cultural tools* we employ are socially and historically situated and have the potential either to enable or to constrain our actions (Wertsch, 1991). The most important cultural tool both for participating in social practices and for thinking and learning is *language* (Vygotsky, 1980; Wertsch, 1991; 1998).

To understand the interaction in the research circle, I have employed the concepts of *inter-subjectivity* and *temporarily shared social reality* (Rommetveit, 1974). Inter-subjectivity represents a shared perspective that humans in collaboration need to find. It is preliminary and is continually built on in meaning making processes. Wertsch (1998) argues that inter-subjectivity, as well as *alterity* (from Bakhtin), is characteristic of social interaction (p. 111). The phenomena behind the concepts are described as two forces dynamically integrated but difficult to balance. Alterity is linked to the dialogic function of language, fundamental to all meaning making; it represents the divergent perspectives and potential conflicts that arise in the tension between different voices (Bakhtin, 1984). Differences in the way people think can become *thinking devices* (Lotman, 1990) for the development of new knowledge and understanding.

I use the concept *collaboration* for the joint work, on equal grounds, carried out by the team of university teachers (Bruce, Flynn, & Stagg-Peterson, 2011; Capobianco, 2007). The participants, including me as tutor and as researcher, 'co-labored' over things we found difficult, and the journey occasionally was uncomfortable, which, according to Somekh (2006), can lead to deeper levels of collaboration.

Furthermore, I use the concept *reflection*, an important element in professional development and quality improvement, especially in the field of education (Lycke & Handal, 2012). When I discuss critical reflection, I will use the following definition: "becoming aware of and questioning the assumptions that orient our thinking, feeling, and acting" (Mälkki, 2011, p. 9). Such reflections are often triggered by a dilemma or a dissatisfaction and have the potential to lead to a reformulation of an old meaning structure (Mezirow, 1998), a process by which reflection is regarded as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for change (see also Mälkki & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012; Taylor, 2007). Mälkki (2011) argues that Mezirow's view of reflection as a rational and cognitive process needs to be complemented with emotional and social dimensions. He also emphasizes "counterforce or resistance to reflection" that enables us to maintain "feelings of comfort and security," "coherent worldview," and feelings of "acceptance in reference to significant others" (Mälkki, 2011, p. 35).

I see reflection as a meaning making activity, in which experiences and knowledge are used to interpret, understand, and explain events and experiences. The collaborative reflections among colleagues are essential to recognize the silent premises that govern our actions (Lycke & Handal, 2012).

DESIGN AND METHODS

The research was conducted in close relation to a research circle and its participants. The method of investigation was participant-oriented as it was based on the participants' experiences and knowledge, as well as their reflections and actions. A research circle is a method and a meeting place for knowledge-building and professional development and change, and the object of study is the participants' own practice (Lindholm, 2008; Persson, 2009). Research circles have been used in Swedish universities since the late 1970s, initially to promote the exchange of knowledge between researchers and people who were active in unions. Today, research circles are common as a method for development of teacher competences and school development (Holmstrand & Hernsten, 2003).

The main ideas of a research circle are to give professionals the time and space to reflect on a specific issue or problem in their professional practice and to examine this practice in dialogue with other participants. To develop knowledge expected to lead to some kind of action, a constructive dialogue between the participants is a characteristic feature in a research circle as well as in action research in general (Persson, 2009; Somekh, 2006). The dialogue also includes reflections and discussions concerning theories and research literature both on the chosen problem and on the relationship between practice and theory. The mutual exchange of experiences, knowledge, and ideas can provide the basis for the development of the professional's own practice (Persson, 2009). In the current research circle, this basis was provided during the first phase.

The research circle was planned to last for three semesters, with five meetings during each semester, basically coinciding with the three different phases of the research circle work. However, as shown in Figure 1, each phase tended to overlap the next.
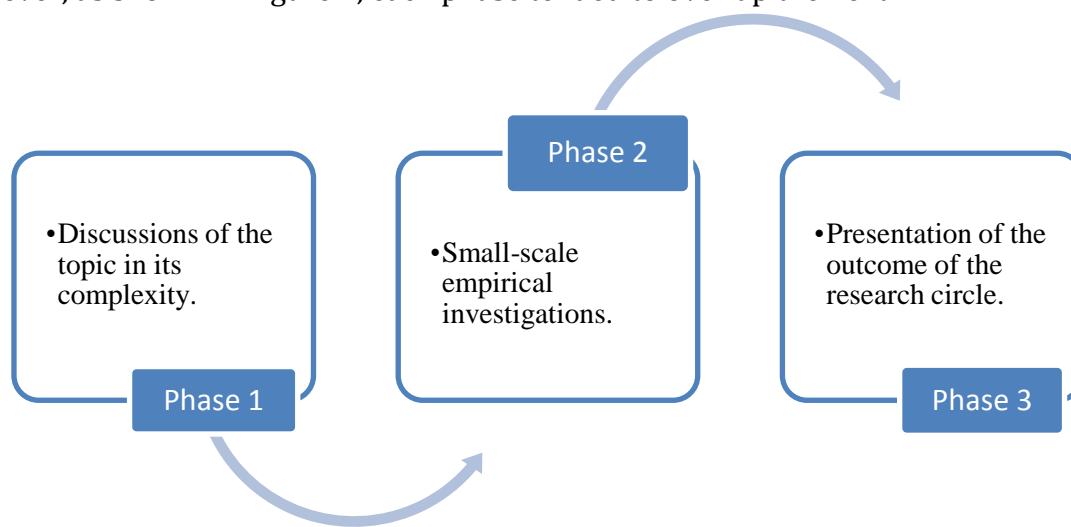

Figure 1. The three phases in a research circle.

During the first phase, which the focus is on here, the participants discussed the topic in its complexity based on their experiences and practices; they also discussed research literature linked to the issues raised. At the end of the phase, the participants wrote their first draft for a small-scale empirical investigation. The investigations were collaboratively discussed and designed at the beginning of the second phase of the research circle and, subsequently, carried out in the participants' individual teaching. Consequently, the investigations were based on the continuous knowledge-building that took place through the interactions and readings. Finally, during the third phase, the outcome of the research circle was discussed, and the participants wrote essays on their investigations for a report to be published. Reflective dialogue continued through the three phases, including discussions on methods for documentation and analysis and on concepts and theories that could be used to understand the participants' empirical data.

My role in this process was both to provide theoretical knowledge and devices for analysis and to ask questions that encouraged the participants to discuss and to give thought to problems. Depending on the needs of the group, I shifted between various roles, such as questioning and challenging, or listening and confirming. My role was also to connect practice with theories and concepts (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006). Furthermore, I continuously provided the participants with research-based literature from the field of academic writing and research methodology. The literature I chose was not just in-line with the issues that emerged during the meetings, it could also lead to questions that promoted critical reflection on perceptions and values. Eventually, suggestions concerning the literature also came from the participants.

My ambition was twofold: "to carry out research together with—not *on*—the participants" (Svensson, 2002, p. 10-11) and to use them as informants in order to understand processes of change and development. The participants' needs, not mine as the researcher, were put at the forefront. Nevertheless, my role as tutor and researcher still gave me a superior position. The major part of my research is on a meta-level in relation to the exploratory work the participants conducted both during sessions and in small-scale investigations. The research project has required continuous reflection regarding my choices and my role as tutor and as researcher and owing to me being a part of the social world being studied (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

The research circle was announced on the university website as an optional course for academic staff. It was described as an opportunity, together with colleagues, to explore various ways to support students in their reading and writing development. The research circle started in January 2012, with eight participants from a range of faculties and disciplines at the university. Five of the participants hold a PhD degree and three hold a master's degree; they are all experienced university teachers and supervisors of student essays.

The subjects the participants teach are literature, psychology, and business. Five of the participants teach teacher education, teaching pedagogy, history and learning, sciences and learning, children's literacy, and special needs education, respectively. The last two

mentioned are specialized in the field of children's learning and literacy development. They were sometimes familiar with theories and concepts new to the other participants, allowing them to take an expert role in the discussions. The other participants had no education in language or language development. There were other significant differences between the participants, for example, experiences of the topics discussed, attitudes and assumptions, and previous research experience. In this article those differences will be dealt with in the context in which they become apparent. The research project was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the humanities and social sciences (http://codex.vr.se/). Accordingly, I will not refer to individual participants when I refer to quotations.

The data gathered from the initial phase of the research circle includes five audio-recorded meetings that lasted approximately two hours each and the reflections and self-reflections I wrote in proximity to the meetings. Furthermore, the data includes one semi-structured interview, conducted before the research circle started, with each participant. The main focus of this interview was on the participant's practice, views, and experiences (Alvesson, 2011; Kvale, 2009). The interviews have been used as background data and, accordingly, are not quoted.

With reference to Wittgenstein (1953) and Hansson (1958), I consider data as always theory-laden and the seeing as inseparable from the perspective. Thus, the research process is a process in which theoretical pre-conceptions affect interpretations. The transcribed recordings of meetings and interviews, as well as the written reflections, were analyzed through a process of repeated readings. The aim was to discover patterns and construct themes that could contribute to the understanding of how the research circle was used as a resource to challenge participants' initial perceptions of how to support students' literacy development. The analytical work was pursued throughout the first phase and involved new material successively. As I gained a better overall picture of the material, individual parts could be understood in different ways, which, in turn, shed new light on the whole. In this hermeneutic process, interpretation has evolved through *abduction*, a continuous alternation between empirical data and theory, in which theories have been used to illuminate possible new understandings of a theme's meaning content (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

FINDINGS

In the first part of this section, I describe the initial perceptions and approaches the participants communicated in Interview 1 (I. 1), before the research circle begins, and in Meeting 1 (M. 1). I give a picture of how the participants experience students' difficulties, the challenges they face in their everyday teaching, and the supportive strategies they use. Thus, the first part provides a background to the understanding of other results. I then analyse how the research circle was employed as a resource to challenge participants' initial perceptions of how to support students' literacy development. For this purpose, I use the following themes: Reflecting and building knowledge in interaction with colleagues, reading research literature, and emergent action.

INITIAL PERCEPTIONS AND APPROACHES

Students' learning difficulties are commonly described as deficiencies concerning surface features in language, such as spelling or constructing sentences. However, when students find it difficult to understand instructions and "to read and understand texts in depth, to reason, reflect and analyze," these difficulties are considered more serious problems (M. 1). A reluctance to read is noticed by several participants, and it is sometimes expressed as an obstacle to students' intellectual development or to the development of scientific thinking (M. 1).

The causes of students' difficulties are discussed as a matter of deficiencies in previous training, especially in high school: "They seem unaccustomed to read and write and to edit their writing" (M. 1). However, students' difficulties also become related to aspects that concern changes in higher education: "It must be due to increasing demands but also the wider recruitment [of students]" (M. 1). The focus shifts between deficiencies in students and previous education and changes in education and society. The two discourses co-exist in the dialogue and in individuals.

Students' approaches to knowledge are described as an obstacle in their encounters with academic discourse. The participants shared their experience of students who memorize and reproduce but neither think independently and critically nor produce knowledge. On the one hand, the problem is linked to issues related to a lack of motivation for the reading and writing practices within the academy. On the other hand, it is discussed as a matter of students feeling insecure and uncomfortable in a new language environment; they need support to gradually socialize into the new ways of knowledge-building, thinking, speaking, and writing. Initially, the latter explanation came more often from the two participants who are educated in the field of children's literacy.

When the participants discussed their strategies to support students, it most often concerned the practice of giving feedback on student texts. One of the participants, who sometimes have more than one hundred students in her groups, provided extensive feedback on students' writing during the first three semesters of the program. Despite all efforts, she expressed that the strategy of correcting students' language errors often has a limited effect (M. 1). Similar worries were expressed by others: "My comments became a kind of teaching process with the individual student. Not even then did I feel I had reached them" (M. 1).

The importance of progression in writing through education is highlighted. A couple of the participants, in collaboration with colleagues, have begun to develop structures for this progression: "How can we get better pass-rates? We seek the solution in supporting students in their language development" (M. 1). In connection to the stories of the extensive response work they perform, as well as other forms of support, the participants pointed to a lack of time as the greatest barrier to meeting students' needs.

Uncertainty concerning how to support students was expressed in many ways: "I think a lot about how to do this in my own teaching" (M. 1). The uncertainty was often referred to as expressed by colleagues: "There is a large uncertainty among supervisors" (M. 1);

"Colleagues feel that they lack the competence needed" (M. 1); and "We don't know how to handle it" (M. 1). The uncertainty, which can be expressed as a "disorienting dilemma that triggers reflection" (Mezirow, 1998), concerns both how support can be designed and whether or not teachers' competencies are adequate. The participants' motives for taking part in the research circle seem to emanate from this uncertainty.

As evident from Interview 1 and Meeting 1, the participants make efforts to support students in different ways, aware that academic literacy practices—reading, writing, and critical thinking—are crucially important for a student's success in the academy. The participants expressed a need both to comprehend the background to students' difficulties and to develop and deepen their knowledge of how they can help and support students.

REFLECTING AND BUILDING KNOWLEDGE IN INTERACTION WITH COLLEAGUES

The participants' willingness and desire to share experiences result in an empirical material that includes many stories not only concerning both failed and successful attempts to support students but also regarding how things are done in their respective institutions and disciplines. Bruner (1986) writes that "a good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds" (p. 11). Stories have a plot that transforms an event into a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Using this simple definition of a plot makes it possible to separate stories from other utterances in empirical material. A narrative is a construction made afterwards, as we understand the event in the light of reflection (Jamissen, 2011). Furthermore, a narrative can make us aware of the experience-based knowledge we have and enable us to interpret and understand events together with others. The connection to emotions (Mälkki, 2011) is sometimes evident in this reflective work, as in the following example:

> When I first came here, my comments in the margin was a kind of lesson with the student. My comments were often long and gave suggestions or explanations, not just to tell that this was not good. My comments became a kind of individual teaching process with the student, ... [but] not even then did I feel that I reached all of them. Then, I started to prepare them for the text they were going to write throughout the course: how to formulate such a text and look at the text's various parts.... I would like to develop that but it costs a lot of time.... I almost cry sometimes when I have 45 texts and 35 of them are disasters, after all the time I spent to prepare them. You get so tired (M. 1).

Stories become important resources in the group's critical reflections, in which taken-for-granted assumptions and practices can be questioned (Mälkki, 2011). The stories are often the basis for comparisons of things like epistemological beliefs, feedback strategies, and requirements in the disciplines represented. In this process, conflicting values sometimes become visible.

For example, it appears that the participants have different opinions about the importance of writing scientific papers. The issue reveals conflicting values and assumptions on diverse

student groups and their future professions. When one participant asks, "Academic writing may never be needed in professional practice or have I … got it wrong?" (M. 3), the answer, already anticipated in the closing hesitation, comes quickly and firmly from the nursing-education teacher: "I would say that writing is a form of socialization into a particular way of thinking, a way of behaving" (M. 3). She argued that writing is important not only for aspiring nurses' future professions but also because nurses, like other academic groups, have the opportunity to apply for a graduate program. The shared social reality (Rommetveit, 1974) is disrupted by divergent perspectives. The arising alterity (Wertsch, 1998) is balanced by reflections on how we look at things differently depending on one's discipline or on academic culture. The assumption that writing is more important for some students than others is challenged.

In the research circle, stories often recurred in subsequent meetings but in a modified form, told in other words and by utilizing other concepts, with different explanations and theories added as the knowledge-building process proceeded. Through the stories, the participants' experiences may have been given other meanings as they were processed with the help both of other participants' stories and of the literature read. As a consequence, assumptions and values can change. The stories should not be taken as truths but as reflections of how we want both to be understood by others and to understand ourselves (Bruner, 2002). The stories of the self, in this case, of our professional lives and identities, are constructed reflexively: they are in motion and change as new events are integrated and become connected to future projects (Giddens, 1991). These changing stories can be viewed as an indication of emergent doubts towards or a change in the participants' previous understandings of the issues discussed. However, the stories can also be seen as an adaptation to a discourse formulated by other members of the group (Silverman, 2006), now significant others, and may not yet be fully understood and appropriated (Wertsch, 1998).

A common trend is the participants recognizing themselves in each other's stories and utterances; as a result, they can acknowledge each other's experiences and ways of understanding. In this manner, the stories become an important cultural tool in the creation of inter-subjectivity in the group. The following statement marks the border between the end of one story and the beginning of another: "Yes, it is exciting to listen, and I recognize myself in almost everything" (M. 2). Recognition is an important acknowledgment in and of itself, both for the speaker and for the listeners. Acknowledgment also comes from being heard and taken seriously, for example, when there are many follow-up questions, but it can also be expressed more explicitly: "I would say that what X said is very important" (M. 5).

Throughout the first phase, I reflected on how important my feedback was to the participants; it should not only provide acknowledgment but also challenge. The balance between these two is difficult to maintain: Is there too much politeness? Is there too much searching for coherence in how we view things? Or is there too much staying in a comfort zone? I want to trust the process, but there is a need to emphasize the common responsibility in order for our work to proceed. Every time we met, we discussed and

evaluated our approach. The importance of a critical stance and an ability to both give and take criticism was stressed. We also discussed the importance of trust within the group and of being good listeners and critical friends (Handal, 1999), factors which influenced how the participants perceived themselves to be acknowledged and challenged by the group.

READING RESEARCH LITERATURE

The possibility of recognition and acknowledgment exists also through reading and discussing research literature. To provide space for the participants' views, experiences, and knowledge, research literature was not introduced until after the first meeting. The texts read concern the issues discussed during the first meeting and were chosen to deepen the participants' understanding and to give other perspectives. The thesis *Students' Writing in Two Knowledge-Constructing Settings* (Blåsjö, 2004) and the article 'Students Writing in Higher Education' (Lea & Street, 1998) both challenge common assumptions concerning students' writing. In those texts, the participants faced a new discourse in which the framing of the problem is shifted from a 'study skills' or a deficit model of the individual student to a model where aspects of the academic institutions—and their practices and discourses—are viewed as the cause of the problem (Lea & Street, 1998).

In my initial analysis, I wrote that the second meeting became "unfocused and messy." I felt that the participants constantly slipped away from the discussion of the texts. Instead, they wished to continue sharing experiences and repeating all the obstacles to change in terms of time, resources, and large student groups. In my notes, I expressed a need to "bring them back to the texts." My reflections concerned whether or not the texts were too abstract and difficult to grasp, but the changing atmosphere was also interpreted as being due to the new discourse, which triggered doubt and feelings of discomfort. However, after looking more closely, I can see other things, as well. The conversation shifts between texts and practice, with a continued focus on the latter.

The participants recognized themselves in the texts' reasoning and descriptions but were constantly using their own practice and experience to understand the texts' more theoretical parts. They also used the texts, especially Blåsjö's (2004) text, to critically reflect on institutional and individual practices as well as premises for teaching (Kreber, 2005). For example, they discussed how conceptions of knowledge determine the degree to which teaching and examinations steer students towards becoming passive recipients of knowledge or active participants in a knowledge-building work together with others (M. 2). Another example is the participants criticizing the lack of cooperation among academics concerning how to support students' language development as students progress through the education system (M. 2).

The interaction became intense and involved reflections on a number of issues central to the participants, such as the importance both of interaction in student groups and of clarity in teacher instructions. Furthermore, they discussed the gaps between different levels of education, the relation between the reproduction and production of knowledge, and how students read and understand texts. The introduced texts were mentioned in several of the meetings that followed; they could then be discussed from the extended frames of

reference built in the research circle. The understanding of the texts gradually brought into the collaborative work deepened in light of the group's continuous knowledge-building and reflective practice.

During the first phase, I chose literature according to issues that the participants seemed most interested in or expressed a wish to know more about. One such issue is feedback on students' texts, a task that all participants struggle significantly with. Prior to the third meeting, they read the article 'Comments on Essays: Do the Students Understand what Tutors Write?' (Chanock, 2000), which deals with the problem of students often misunderstanding what tutors write in their essays. The importance of clarity, explanations, and examples are stressed. Participants also read parts of the book *Writing at Universities and Colleges: A Book for Teachers and Students* (Hoel, 2010), which provides concrete examples on how to support students' writing; the book became highly appreciated by the participants.

An important resource in the research circle work is the participants gaining access to words and concepts as tools for their thinking (Lotman, 1990): "I understand those things but now I got words for it," one participant said. Some terms were learned from the literature; some were introduced by me or by the participants. Words that remained and deepened their meanings through the entire process included text conversation, academic literacies, literacy practice, and cultural tools.

Students' need for tools to discuss and critically examine educational texts was a topic of discussion already during the first meeting. One of the participants, who has an education in children's literacy, told of encounters with students who experienced large gaps, in the knowledge and language required, between previous education and higher education. These students need support to develop their writing, but the participant's view was that writing support is not enough. She asked the following questions:

> Can they read the texts they are expected to read, and do they read them? Do they ever talk and listen to people's thoughts about the texts so that it becomes an intellectual activity? Reading and conversation precede writing, but we take reading for granted (M. 2).

One way of supporting students' reading, and by extension their writing, is to let them analyze scientific texts as part of the curriculum, in interaction with fellow students and teachers. The participants found this issue very important and discussed different ways to implement such text seminars in their own practices. Since research on reading is limited, it is difficult to find scientific texts about the subject in the academy. The article 'The Importance of Teaching Academic Reading Skills in First-Year University Courses' (Hermida, 2009) recommends the use of reading guides to support students to improve their reading. This article was subjected to critical scrutiny by the participants, using a guide similar to the one the author recommends for students. Several questions were raised, concerning taken-for-granted assumptions, definitions, and views of knowledge in the article. In this work, the participants used the frames of reference they now shared, and

they often referred to previously read literature (M. 4). During the first phase, the literature was common to all participants; however, the choice of literature became more individual as the participants began to design their projects. As time progressed, the participants increasingly recommended literature to one another.

EMERGENT ACTION

The research circle meetings were full of innovative ideas. Participants followed up stories from practice by asking for more detailed descriptions: "It is so good to listen to everyone, and I'm learning a lot. I wrote this down" (M 4), one participant said. Meeting 4 was devoted to a discussion both on students' reading and the use of reading guides (provided by the teacher) and on reading journals written by students in preparation for a text seminar. One participant had extensive experience in working with reading journals and took an expert role. Based on other participants' questions, she gave practical examples on how reading journals can be used to support students' reading. The questions from other participants were many and varied: "I want to use reading journals, but is there a risk that they get superficial and that students still do not read?" In the discussion that followed, the text seminar was highlighted as crucial for the development of students' understanding of both the text and the point of writing a reading journal. A new and deeper understanding of a text can be created in the interaction between the students. Participants compared this with the work they undertook in the circle: "Sure, an added value is created in interaction with you" (M. 4). The importance of interaction in student groups was emphasized and linked to the interactions in the research circle on several occasions: "When you come together and talk, the thoughts grow, and this is possible to practice; everyone should have that opportunity" (M. 3).

The use of reading journals is an example of how the participants' knowledge and experience have the potential to be used as resources for implementations in other participants' practices. It is also an example of reflections on the reflective practice of the research circle as something that can be transferred to their own teaching; such meta reflections are recurring.

In the empirical material, there are several examples of participants promptly trying approaches discussed or read about in the research circles: "I have ideas that I would like to try in a group," "It raises ideas from the articles we read," and "I want to try" (M. 3). The search for innovative ideas that can immediately be put into action appear frequently in the material throughout the first phase of the research circle work and in phase 2. On several occasions, I reflected on how positive it was that participants inspired each other to try new approaches, but I also reflected on the risks of implementing activities without a clear purpose. My concerns were that changes in practice need to be carefully thought out, theoretically grounded, and fit into a coherent whole. The changes must also be made visible and explained to the students. It is important to know what to do and why, both for teachers and students. I have reason to be self-critical when it comes to this; I affirmed the participants' enthusiasm, but I could have encouraged them more to ask why a certain approach should be implemented.

However, there were many occasions when various options were discussed thoroughly and linked to theories available in the texts read. This work leads to critical reflections, which have the potential to change assumptions and actions in a more profound way (Mälkki, 2011). This is done, for example, when it comes to different types of text seminars (Hoel, 2010; Blåsjö 2004), non-formal short writing, or explorative writing in which the purpose is to explore ideas and thoughts concerning an issue under discussion (Hoel, 2010), feedback (Chanock, 2000), or the use of sources with divergent perspectives to stimulate interaction in student groups (Blåsjö, 2004). The implementations of new practices continued through Phase 2, in which participants designed their projects collaboratively.

The participants related several of the discussed ways to support students' literacy development to the limited time teachers have together with their students; however, some of the ideas and suggestions raised are unrealistic within current time-frames. Yet, many of the questions raised during the first semester have become of great interest for the research circle participants since, in the second phase of the circle, they will design and implement a small-scale investigation in their own teaching. A first draft was presented and discussed in Meeting 5, but the projects were still vague and open to change.

DISCUSSION

The knowledge-building process in the research circle was characterized by dialogic interaction and collaborative reflection, in which the participants became important resources for one another. In the reciprocal exchange of experiences and knowledge during the first phase, multiple factors interplayed to challenge participants' initial perceptions on how students' literacy can be developed. Accordingly, a basis for change and development was created. A powerful resource in this process was the participants' experience-based stories, which mediated a social reality that the participants shared. Thus, the stories enabled recognition, acknowledgment, and comparison between individual practices and disciplines, showing that things can be done and understood in different ways. Personal reflections in meetings between colleagues from various disciplines have a particular value since they provide access to a richness of arguments and perspectives. Thus, such reflections have a greater potential to become critical (Lycke & Handal, 2012). However, the relation between reflection and action is complicated, and changes in ways of thinking do not necessarily lead to changes in practice (Mälkki & Lindholm-Ylänne, 2012). In an analysis including Phases 2 and 3, the relationship between the research circle work and changes in participants' practices will be further investigated.

In my role as tutor, I was an important resource as the organizer of the research circle work. Continuously, my written reflections were the basis for discussions on the content and direction of our joint-work as well as on responsibility and trust in the group. I could also contribute with my knowledge of various theories and perspectives on issues of literacy in higher education. However, I was not the only one who had the role of expert; the work had its base in the participants' experience and knowledge, which often gave them an expert role. A more equal relationship was gradually established as confidence in the group grew and as a safe climate evolved.

The participants' stories changed over time as they affected each other and as the frames of reference were extended in the knowledge-building process, and the changing stories can be interpreted and explained in different ways. The participants have varied backgrounds and affiliations that affect how they perceive the process. On the one hand, the two participants who are trained in language and language-development experienced more confirmation than challenge. On the other hand, the other participants were challenged, but they doubted and questioned in varying degrees. How persons present their views and understanding is influenced by what is normative and accepted in a group (Silverman, 2006). However, the changing stories can be regarded as an attempt to formulate a new understanding and self-understanding reflexively (Giddens 1991).

Both stories and literature provided new insights and generated discussions on different ways of understanding students' difficulties. With inspiration from discussions and research literature, the conversation eventually changed character from focusing on approaches to remedy students' failings to focusing on the participants' individual teaching practices and institutional responsibilities. More attention was paid not only to activities, patterns of interaction, and processes that students need to be involved in, but also to activities that promote their collaborative exploration of ways of thinking, reading, and writing in the disciplinary context. Teachers' responsibility for creating pedagogical situations that can lead to these processes of engagement (Haggis, 2006; Hyland, 2006) was highlighted. The participants developed a broader view of what literacy is and an increased awareness of the importance of language in all knowledge-building processes. The interaction and the reflective practice of the research circle was occasionally discussed as a model for their own teaching.

Attention was also given to premises for teaching (Kreber, 2005), for example, to one's view of knowledge and how it affects the premises for knowledge-building. There were occasions when the participants reverted to a deficiency discourse, in which students' difficulties were described as due to individual shortcomings and school failings. The difference being that it was discussed as a powerful discourse, with some relevance, and with an understanding that different discourses lead to dissimilar conclusions concerning the roles and responsibilities of academics.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

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Dr. Lotta Bergman is an Associate Professor of the Faculty of Learning and Society at Malmö University, Sweden. Her research concerns how young people and adults develop their language in knowledge-building contexts. Her recent research focuses on academic literacies, particularly how university teachers can support students in their reading and writing development, integrated with course content. Furthermore, she is interested in how fiction and other media can be integrated into problem-oriented and exploratory approaches, as well as the dialogic classroom and its potentials. A central issue is how choice of content and questions can encourage students to participate actively in interaction with others, provide them with opportunities to examine critically and take a stand on cultural and social matters. A related question of interest is: What communicative, critical and democratic competencies are important in a society characterized by medialization and multiculturalism?

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