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Developing a Writing Centre: Professional Development of Teachers

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Abstract
At a school for secondary education in the Netherlands teachers of Dutch language are developing and implementing a writing centre. Teachers from other school subjects appear to be interested. The development and implementation process is supported by an action research project, carried out by the Graduate School of Teacher Education (Radboud University, Nijmegen). The present contribution focuses on the first phase of the action research project, which before all aims at analysing the present state of writing instruction at the school, and before all the problems experienced by students and teachers. A clear problem analysis is necessary as starting point for innovation. The main idea in this contribution, as well as in the project, is that successful innovation demands the professional development of teachers. The contribution presents some first results.

Introduction

At a school for secondary education in the Netherlands teachers in Dutch language started a writing centre. Teachers of other school subjects appear to be interested, as well as the school administration. This commitment is an important prerequisite for a school wide writing instruction, which not only focuses on the writing process and/or the text, but also on the subject matter of the text (cfr. Hillocks, 2006). The whole enterprise is supported by the author of this contribution in a form of action research.

This contribution focuses on the first phase of the action research project, which before all aims at analysing the present state of writing instruction at the school, and before all the problems experienced by students and teachers. A clear problem analysis is necessary as starting point for innovation. The contribution starts with a short review on education in writing, indicating a theoretical framework as well. It continues with some thoughts about teachers' professional development, and a short description of the global design of the project, including research questions and data sampling. Then follow first research results and ideas for the next phase.

The main idea in this contribution, as well as in the project, is that successful innovation demands the professional development of teachers.

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Writing in secondary education

In 1998 the senior phase of Dutch secondary education (age 15/16–17/18) changed. In the new exam programs writing instruction is:

- instruction on ‹documented writing›, i. e. students have to write texts based upon data found in documents (books, articles, internet);
- aimed at three types of transactional text: Informative texts, argumentative texts, and a ‹consideration›, i. e. a text in which the writer considers social or ethic problems in order to support readers to form their own opinion. The possibility to write more expressive or poetic texts (Britton, 1983) is removed from the exams.
- concerned with not only the text but also the writing process itself, which means that – among other things – the instruction is aimed at the writing, writing strategies, discussion on the text, and subsequent re-writing of texts. Important is the awareness of writing as making choices (purposes, audience, structure, style, genre, …).

The goal of such instruction is to make independent writers out of students and thus writers who can reflect upon both the written product and the writing process. Such instruction reflects the objective of developing a «learn to learn» capacity, the stimulation of active and independent student learning, which is a main objective of the educational change for the senior phase.

In the Netherlands, like elsewhere, different approaches for writing instruction exist (Hillocks, 1995; Hoel, 2000; van de Ven, 2004). In the project the teachers of Dutch opt for a social-interactive approach. The epistemological orientation of such an approach is towards a social-constructivist definition of knowledge. For writing, this means that text conventions that are considered social constructions and that writing boils down to «entering a discourse» (Bruffee, 1986). Interaction serves to get acquainted with the rules of the discourse community. Collaborative learning is an important characteristic of the instructional methods associated with a social-interactive approach to the teaching of writing. Interaction can stimulate reflection and stimulate feedback by peers. According to Hoel (2000), writing, viewed from a social-interactive perspective, is a social act in which the writer negotiates with the reader to be understood. A starting assumption for the Dutch department was therefore that negotiation with the reader fits with instructional methods aimed at stimulation of active and independent student learning. The student writer receives feedback, which stimulates reflection and thereby helps the student writer get a better grip on his or her writing.

The project highlights three different dimensions of writing instruction: peer tutoring, writing across the curriculum and writing to learn.

Tutoring is understood to be a form of cooperation in which one student – the tutor – guides another student – the tutee. Both research and actual experience show the tutor and the tutee to learn from this process (Parr & Townsend, 2002; Van de Ven, Martens & Imants, 2005). The tutor learns because he or she must explain material and comprehend the learning problem; the tutor must be able to handle the learning task at a more abstract level. The tutee benefits from individual attention and specific help with any problems. Drawing on Vygotsky (1962) Bruffee (1984) posits that thinking – which he refers to as an «internal dialogue» – develops on the basis of an «external dialogue» with others. Language is, after all, not only transmission of thoughts, but also and foremost the shaper of thoughts. The use of language in social interaction supports the development of thoughts, the acquisition of knowledge, and the solution of problems (see also Hoel, 2000). On the basis of this reasoning, it can be posited that both tutor and tutee will benefit from external dialogue that leads them to think or, in other words, to an internal dialogue.

In the reform of 1998 writing became very important in other school subjects as well, more than it used to be. For many subjects students have to carry out small inquiries that mostly result in reports. At the project school teachers of several school subjects asked for support from the department of Dutch, and opt for a joint writing instruction. From this perspective the project can be linked to the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, which developed in the USA in the 1970s. It is based upon the idea that writing is more than just transmitting ideas, it is developing and changing them. From this starting point the WAC movement have stressed the role of writing in learning (Bean, 1996; Bräuer, 1998; Doecke & Parr, 2005). In the 1980's the ideas of the movement were implemented in Dutch secondary education, but with hardly any substantial result in daily practice. Still the WAC ideas are important for the project. School subjects can be seen as different discourses, and learning these

disciplines can be seen as ‹entering the discourses›. Referring to geography education Butt (1997) posits; «The action of learning is closely associated with that of comprehending and using different forms of language» (154). Referring to the history of science, Sutton (1998) posits: «Communicative activities are central to the scientific endeavor. Experiment is a part of science, but so is writing and talk» (29).

Professional development

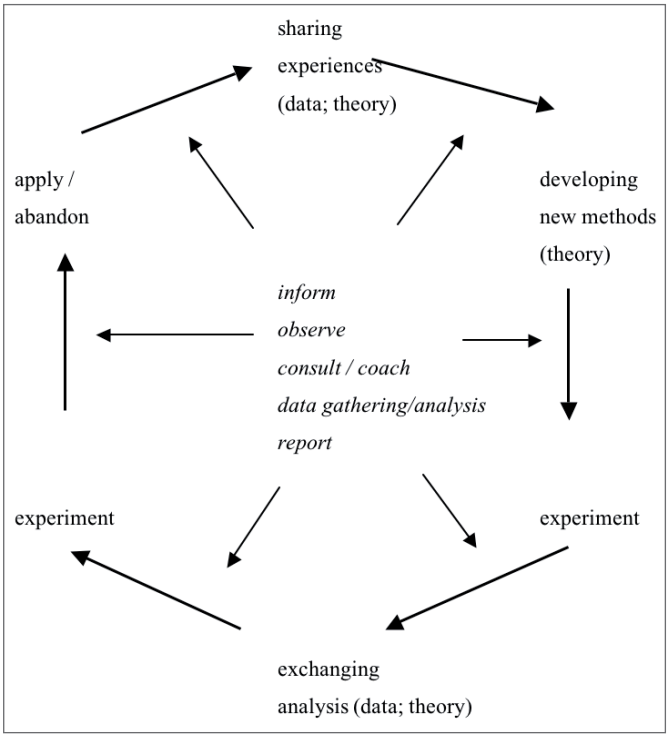
Introducing a writing centre and connected methods and beliefs like tutoring, writing as a process and writing to learn imply educational change. Educational innovation is a complex process that often fails (Calderhead, 2001). This failure is caused by several factors. Within the frame of this contribution I just mention one rather important factor: Teachers' professional development.

Hultman (1987) carried out a review study on educational change. He sees the lack of educational change caused by top down strategies that most times provoke resistance. A more successful strategy is the strategy of dialogue, in which the innovation becomes a joint (re)constructed, in which the innovation becomes meaningful for practice, because the theory becomes ‹adapted› to problems in practice. Imants (2003) shows that such a dialogue can stimulate teachers' learning, which appears to be an important condition for educational change. This dialogue can be seen as a Vygotskyan dialogue, in which teachers may discover their zone of proximal development. In such a dialogue teachers might enter the discourse of the innovation (Bruffee, 1986). Such a dialogue gives room for the teachers' voices, their concerns and problems. Such a dialogue accepts the teachers as subjects in the process of innovation, as well as in the process of innovation (action) research (Van de Ven 2007). Such a dialogue stimulates the participation by the teachers, and participation is an activity that is central in the development of knowledge (Walqui, 2008).

In former research projects with teachers carried out in my institute we explored, based on the described assumptions, several research activities that contributed to successful small scale educational change. It appeared to be important for the participating teachers to be able to dialoguing, to discussing and exchanging their practices and problems. Mutual trust, accepting and using each other's different expertises and accepting different interests stimulated reflection on and experimenting with new methods. Sometimes the need for more theory has been formulated, theory for understanding the problems at hand and for searching for solutions. Reflection and discussion were strongly sustained by systematically documenting and discussing each other's classroom activities, students' results and experiences. These discussions appeared to be important sources for feedback for the teachers (and the researchers) and thus for their learning.

Project design

Based upon the ideas formulated above, the project was designed as a form of action research (Ponte, 2002, Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). A key thought in this approach is that the development and research activities should be directly aimed at and derived from daily class and school practices, on the one hand, and that the development and research activities should be an integral part of the design and testing of new instructional methods. Based upon theory and our experiences we explored a development and research cycle for co-operative professional development in which sharing experiences, developing new methods, trying out these, evaluating them and decisions to apply (or to reject) them is a process supported by data sampling and analysis, by coaching and observing try outs, by theory and by a growing understanding of the problems and their possible solutions:



In previous research (Van de Ven, Martens & Imants, 2005) we explored this cycle and discovered that the cycle might be passed few times. Before all a first cycle of joint problem analysis proved to be important.
In the present project we are in the midst of this first cycle of problem analysis.
Our preliminary research questions are:

- What beliefs and practices do teachers of different school subjects articulate on writing and writing instruction?
- What problems do teachers perceive in writing instruction and what might cause these problems??
- What beliefs do students articulate on writing and writing instruction?
- What problems do students perceive in their writing and what might cause these problems??

The answers on these questions will be used to set out a line of professional development. Therefore we sampled and analysed rather usual data like:

- Interviews with individual teachers, and with students
- Focus group interviews with teachers, and with students
- Observing , documenting and recording teachers' meetings
- Students' logs, students' texts

But we will do more. First of all we already started with training student tutors. We already are used to train student tutors at other schools (e.g. Van de Ven, Martens & Imants, 2005), and we discovered that those tutors presented very good feedback to the teachers on the writing tasks these teachers formulated for their students. Furthermore, we want to document for several school subjects the whole instruction cycle from creating a task by the teacher till the final student's result and its evaluation by the teacher. That's why we started with some extra project activities that we consider crucial. We started to analyse the written tasks as texts, because «When teachers give children a writing task they must therefore be fully aware of its implied purpose and function, and the audience for which it is being prepared» (Butt 1997, 162). We are also carrying out writing conferences with the writers of these texts, the teachers. And we are planning writing conferences between teachers of different school subjects on their respective tasks/texts. Also teachers should enter the discourse of writing.
Data analysis will be done conform the methodology of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) combined with data triangulation and if possible with researchers' triangulation, in any case respondent validation. The above-mentioned theory on writing and professional development functions as a bundle of sensitizing concepts for the analysis.

First results

To answer the questions on students' beliefs and their problems we took some focus group interviews with students from the project school. Other data consist of field notes from informal interaction with students.
Students see writing as a typical school activity – the long relation between «script and schooling» (Erixon 2007, 11) still exists, but seems to be separated from daily life. Students experience writing as filling in a form, they find a structure for the demanded genre in their textbook, copy this and fill the gaps with arguments or other information found on Internet. They do not see writing as communication, or as reasoning. They have a lot of problems in distinguishing genres, especially the distinction between argumentation and consideration is a difficult one.
They are hardly able to report on results from writing education in previous school year. They utter something like «A text on holidays» or «We once had to write about a book». There are very few if any learning experiences they are able to articulate. Writing seems «learning by doing», students hardly show any declarative knowledge on writing.
They report to have many difficulties with the writing tasks they have to fulfil for the different school subjects. They do not understand why a report for natural sciences apparently must differ from a report on e.g. history. A very important result is that students have not any idea about the quality of their written work – not until the teacher does mark it.
After their tutor training the participating students (15) wrote learner reports. They became motivated to act like tutors for their peers in the writing for school. They liked the idea that tutoring focuses on ‹sharply› reading instead of evaluating texts. They liked the idea of questioning texts instead of commenting. They tried to formulate open questions in their training (in which their own texts were used). They reported becoming

more critical to their own texts; they are more able to read these ‹with another's eyes›. They understood that misunderstandings between writer and reader might belong on the writer, but on the reader as well. They reported to have more understanding of what is meant by ‹rhetorical situation› (texts goal, audience, positioning of the writer etc.). They were able to articulate questions not only at the local level of the text, but on the global level as well. They are convinced of writing conferences leading to revision proposals.

To answer the questions on teachers' beliefs and problems we interviewed teachers from several school subjects individually. They represented subjects like Dutch, history, geography, mathematics, philosophy, arts, chemistry, and physics. They appear really strongly committed to their students and their students' writing problems. The group of teachers shows a broad ‹conceptual variety›. They use the same labels for different genres, or use different labels for more or less the same genres. They use the word ‹text› similar to a ‹report›, or a ‹story›, an ‹essay›, a ‹argumentation›, a ‹piece of work›, a ‹paper›. Some of them talk about ‹essays› and explain that that is a argumentative text, while other colleagues see an essay mainly as consideration, or just as ‹text›. The teachers express rather unclear conceptions on language and communication. Most of them define language and communication as transmitting ideas; they see writing and reading as coding and decoding of existing ideas. They hardly perceive writing as a process; they are very product oriented. They have a rather instrumental view of writing as a «tool of communication and handling ‹knowledge› on the other» (Smidt 2008, 1). If there is any feedback at all, then they most times comment on the students' texts with feedback on the topic of the text, not on structure, style, coherence, personal voice, audience directedness etc. They emphasize the role of writing for reporting, and thus controlling and evaluating students. Some of them articulate the role of language for learning, but do not know how to use that insight. But they are eager to improve.

The teachers wrote several tasks for their students, task for experimenting in chemistry, task for a historical research, etc. In the project we consider these tasks as texts written by the teacher with the students as the audience. These are instructional texts, which should present clear guidelines for the activities asked for, and should be clear on goals, audience, criteria etc. An analysis of these tasks carried out by the researcher and a group of starting teachers in Dutch, shows that they often lack substantial clarity and transparency. They are unclear about the learning objectives, about the genres to be written, about the audience for the text (Teacher? Peers? Parents?). They do not distinguish between different discourse functions like ‹describing›, ‹explaining›, ‹argumentation›, ‹proving›, ‹concluding›, ‹evaluating› etc. (cfr. Vollmer et al. 2007). They use subject specific language that might be difficult to understand for students. The tasks do not support the students in finding «enough»(when is it enough?) and before all reliable sources. The tasks demand an impersonal writer's role, there is no room for the voice of the writer, their «device is to use the passive voice» (Sutton 1998, 32). The tasks' hidden criteria reveal «a way of writing which separates the opinions of the writer from the ‹matters of fact› reported» (Sutton 1998, 31).

In my role of supporting researcher I have writing conferences with some of the teachers. At the beginning of these conferences we had two students who demonstrated such a writing conference, a tutor session, for the front of the teachers' assembly, in order to get the teachers acquainted with this method. My writing conferences share the same objective, but at the same time I consider them as writers who might need support to write a good text. And I tell them about the positive results by the tutor training. In these conferences teachers discover(ed) what the analysis of the tasks already had brought into light: a lot of unclearness. But also how difficult it is to articulate what they wanted to achieve with the tasks. Many tasks are based upon their tacit knowledge and their teaching traditions. They were surprised to experience the difficulty to explain what they considered to be self-evident. And so they also experienced the problems students face while writing and discussing texts.

Next phase

Based upon these first outcomes, the department of Dutch is creating guidelines for writing tasks for their colleagues. If needed, we will present the teachers involved some theory on writing, writing across the curriculum, tutoring and the like. In the next phase of the project we will try out the rewritten tasks. We will generate, sample and analyse data on their use in teaching-learning situations: the teachers' rewritten tasks, students working with them, the reports written by students, their writing conferences on and revisions

of these reports, the evaluation by the teachers (their feedback). The data will concern new teacher meetings in which these data (and their analysis) have to function as feedback for the teachers. In new teacher interviews I'll try to discover what the teachers are learning from the project. At some moment I also will deal with the learning by students, asking them if writing functions for their learning. I'll deal with the quality of the texts written by the students.

And during this phase we also have to further develop the writing centre, the information and the assignments for the digital learning environment connected to the centre. And by that time the focus on writing should be broadened to that of reading (which of course already is present in tutoring and writing conferences), and to writing hyper texts and other texts connected to mass media (cfr. Erixon 2007). Educational innovation takes its time.

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