

# Teaching Literature:

*From a teacher's viewpoint to a researcher's*

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## INTRODUCTION

Prior to my doctoral studies in educational research, I taught English as a foreign language and L1 Swedish in upper secondary school. School in Sweden is viewed as a formal teaching and learning setting, providing a community in which organized education may be described as a social process (Dewey 1897) under the direction of teachers. Education, then, aims to foster critical thinking, knowledge advancement, and students' control over their own learning (Bielaczyc & Collins 1999).

A considerable part of my teaching was literature, which holds a central position in the subject syllabus for Swedish (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2012). To understand the function of the subject syllabus, it is helpful to know that the Swedish school system is governed by a number of legal documents that operate on different levels. Ultimately, classroom instruction is determined by the Education Act (Ministry of Education and Research 2010a), under which the Upper Secondary School Ordinance (Ministry of Education and Research 2010b) is in effect. The level beneath the Upper Secondary School Ordinance is the curriculum (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2013), for which goals are stipulated on a subject-specific level by the respective subject syllabus. Each subject syllabus, then, describes the courses included in the subject and regulates the teaching in relation to national goals and guidelines.

Within the Swedish L1 framework – which is where this article is positioned – teaching can be divided into

two main subject areas: Swedish language and literature. Since the stipulations in the subject syllabi are vague regarding details, they leave room for professional interpretations, which may vary according to individual teacher's age, conceptual tradition, and experience. Students are expected to acquire knowledge of literary works and authors, as well as the ability to contextualize them. Furthermore, reading literature in school is intended to instill knowledge of genres, literary devices, and fiction from different cultures and historical periods.

During my pre-service teacher training, these curricular goals formed the discursive foundation for how I theoretically approached content and form, and, thus, of my understanding of the subject. As an in-service teacher, I soon came to realize that the teaching and learning of literature was more complex in practice, involving a number of parameters that were not accounted for in the curriculum. Finally, as a doctoral student examining literary studies, I have once again had to redefine my appreciation of the concept of literature in the L1 classroom.

In the following, I will give a concise description of respective viewpoints of L1 literary studies, starting with the circumstances of the pre-service teacher. From there, I will continue to present the subject matter from an in-service teacher's point of view and, then, as the topic presents itself in a research context. Finally, I will discuss the implications of the discrepancies between different viewpoints upon the same concept.

#### LITERARY STUDIES FROM A PRE-SERVICE TEACHER'S POINT OF VIEW

To pre-service teachers, the understanding of a subject is primarily theoretical

and, to a great extent, grounded in curricular texts. The way in which learning objectives are defined in these texts determines – in part – the pre-service teacher's overall view of the subject. Likewise, the manner in which teaching rationales are discussed during seminars among peers affects how they interpret the prescribed. In the current national curriculum (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2013), Swedish is a foundation subject – that is, a core component common to all national programs in upper secondary school – composed of language studies and literary studies (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2012).

A closer look at how the literary part is framed reveals the aim to develop students' ability to work with different kinds of texts, their understanding of the distinctive as well as the temporally and spatially universal values and characteristics of literature. Literature is regarded as a prompt both for self-reflection and understanding of other perspectives, that is, as a way to approach and adopt new viewpoints (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2012).

Furthermore, the subject syllabus prescribes literary texts that reflect different cultures and historical periods, written by both female and male authors. It also promotes multimodality, relating the fictive that the students encounter in the classroom with surrounding societal development. In addition, the subject syllabus for Swedish mentions literary analysis and the use of literary devices. This prescriptive list establishes a pedagogical framework for classroom instructions that is characterized by measurability and, thus, forms a discrepancy between the subject syllabus for Swedish and the less quantifiable fundamental values and guidelines

for democracy that are expressed in the curriculum (Lundström et al. 2011). While the overarching national curriculum stipulates elements of a more abstract nature, it is contradicted by the requisites of the subject syllabus. In line with the focus on measurability, there is also an absence of aesthetic aspects and the experiential, in relation to literary studies (Dahlbäck & Lyngfelt 2017; Widhe 2018).

Rationales for reading fiction as a part of Swedish L1 study are often related to the development of common cultural and historical references (Smidt 2016). Another rationale commonly found in analyses is the acquisition of democratic abilities (Langer 1995; Nussbaum 1997). In the current subject syllabus, the aspiration to achieve common references is represented in a number of learning objectives. However, like Lundström et al. (2011) assert, the aspect of democracy through literary studies is missing, and so is the one of aesthetic experiences. Thus, in conclusion, using the way in which the current subject syllabus specifies the curriculum as a point of departure, pre-service teachers develop a view of literary studies that is characterized by the acquisition of tangible and measurable skills. How does this compare to the classroom experience of an in-service teacher?

#### THE SWEDISH L1 LITERARY CLASSROOM

As an in-service teacher of L1 Swedish, a considerable part of my teaching was literature, of which a considerable part consisted in getting students to actually read what they were assigned. While the understanding of the concept of literature in the L1 classroom from a pre-service teacher's point of view is primarily theoretic,

addressing those theoretical objectives in the classroom generates a more complex view that involves parameters not foreseen from a subject syllabus point of view. I crudely group the parameters that define teaching and learning in the literary classroom in three categories: curricular factors, student-related factors, and external factors.

The curricular factors are the same regardless of the viewpoint from which they are studied. What the different viewpoints entail is how the curricular factors may be interpreted, as well as how factors beyond the subject syllabus affect the position held by the curriculum as a prescriptive document, in relation to actual teaching practice. To give a drastic, if not unfounded, example, one can discuss the experience of a student working with and reflecting upon a literary text written in a certain historical and cultural context, and the bearing that the gender of the writer might have in such context – all according to the subject syllabus – when the much more immediate context for that student is a family background marked by domestic violence and substance abuse. This example illustrates how the learning objectives in the subject syllabus may be more or less feasible, or even relevant, when approached outside of the strictly theoretical realm.

However, student-related factors do not have to be that drastic or personal. Studies on adolescent and young adult reading habits have shown steady and distinct negative development (Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson 2006; Tveit 2012), a trend that is often related to the level of reading comprehension and overall academic achievement (OECD 2010b). As an in-service teacher, this decline and its entailing learning difficulties inevitably affects how

the theoretical understanding of the subject adapts to the reality of the literary classroom. Having to dedicate class time to introduce essential components that the subject syllabus assumes are already established with the students, and having to spend disproportionate class time to review reading assignments also affects the extent to which a teacher can adhere to the prescribed.

The third unit of factors, external to the classroom, comprises a diverse group of actors that may be more or less directly related to actors within the school context. Parents and news media are two external factors whose relation to the classroom is very different in nature, but which nonetheless have an impact on curricular activities. On a larger scale, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), with their respective international assessment, are two organizations that influence teachers and teaching, both on a daily operational level and on an organizational one. For instance, consistently declining results in Sweden over the first five cycles of OECD's triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD 2004, 2007, 2010a, 2014) generated measures by the Swedish National Agency of Education to improve reading habits and proficiency, which had direct repercussions on both content and form of curricular instructions in the literary classroom.

Thus, the concept of literary studies to an in-service teacher cannot be based solely on the theoretical stance of their pre-service training. In the literary classroom, that idealistic viewpoint has to encounter and adapt to a reality shaped by students and their needs and abilities. Furthermore, ex-

ternal factors such as the OECD and news media's focus on results and ranking in international assessments add to what literary studies needs to be, and how the curricular intentions may be operationalized. In my own experience, both as a teacher and through my research (Wintersparv et al. 2019), the current reality of literary studies is constituted by measurability, accountability, grade-oriented checklists, and tangible, short-term goals. This can be linked to a general demand for the combination of smaller, cheaper, and more effective government on the one hand, and better public services and more professionalism on the other (Hanlon 1998; McLaughlin et al. 2002), which has resulted in New Public Management and measures to be more productive and performance-oriented (Evetts 2009). Are these tendencies reflected when researching the literary classroom?

#### RESEARCHING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF LITERATURE

In researching the teaching and learning of literature, I have grounded my examination mainly in four theorists. Felski (2015) has informed my understanding of literature as textual reverberations of readers' passions, histories, and memories. Rather than viewing the reading of fiction as simply a matter of cognitive and analytical decoding, she involves an emotional and experiential dimension. In line with this experiential stance, she explores four aspects of reading fiction: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock (Felski 2008).

This emphasis on the role of passion and biographical elements as a part of reading is shared by Dewey (1934/2005),

who, in addition, promotes a holistic character of reading as an aesthetic experience. The quality of the experience, he maintains, is defined by the amount of reflection and emotions involved, as well as the level of fulfillment in the reading process. Without cohesion and conclusion, reading a literary text may offer experience, but not *an* experience. To achieve *an* experience, the reader needs to access both the before, the after, and intratextual elements – a conception that Dewey shares with (Kant 1790/1987), who asserted that aesthetic value may be found in the interplay among art components. The whole does not only offer the reader *an* experience, but further assures that that experience is not misrepresented by an incomplete account of components (Dewey 1934/2005).

When further exploring the encounter between the literary text and the reader as a productive element, Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory – inspired by Dewey and Bentley (1949) – plays a crucial role. According to Transactional Theory, knowledge is considered the result of the encounter, the transaction. Thus, understanding the interaction between the reader and the literary text is informative to determining classroom instructions for literary studies.

Another key concept of Rosenblatt (1938) concerns efferent and aesthetic reading – different modes in which we read, depending on the nature of the text and the reader's objective. Efferent reading is denotative, focusing mainly on the informational message of the text, whereas aesthetic reading is connotative and focused on the exploration of the literary work and one's own reactions and emotions, examining features such as images, choice of word, and rhythms. The differ-

ent modes of reading can be related to Langer's five stances of reading (Langer 1995, 2011), with which she emphasizes the role of the process to meaning-making. The five stances, which are not necessarily linear, consist of learning to read and understand a text; obtaining a deeper and more developed understanding of a text; relating the understanding of a text to existing knowledge and experiences; distancing oneself from perceptions to reflect on them; and contextualizing the literary text outside the fictional realm. The product of meaning-making is, then, contextual and connected to the conflation of the reader's subjective experiences and the objectivity of the literary text, echoing the fundamentals of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory.

With these conceptions as a starting point, literature studies take on a different appearance compared to the approach of both the pre-service and the in-service teacher. The presented four theorists represent a view of literature with focus on the experiential, and examining the subject matter using other theorists would likely generate a different outcome. What may be said in general is that applying a researcher's viewpoint to any educational aspect results in a theorized understanding of a reality whose prescriptive elements do not apply to the researcher.

## DISCUSSION

In the above, I have shown how the perspective on literary studies varies depending on the viewer's role, the prerequisites presented, and circumstantial conditions. While a pre-service teacher is offered a theoretical understanding that is pedagogically idealistic and rooted in curricular

intentions and objectives, the researcher's theoretical view is rooted in conceptual constructs of how a literary text may be approached. In between these two types of theoretical understandings, attempts are made by the in-service teacher to merge the curricular reality with pedagogical philosophy, while adapting to prominent forces external to the immediate teaching context.

The example with the student from a family background with domestic violence and substance abuse illustrates how learning objectives in the subject syllabus may be more or less feasible – or even relevant – when approached outside of the strictly curricular realm, but it also illustrates the complexity in following the curriculum and subject syllabus when we account for the students and for factors external to the classroom. What seems suitable and necessary from a school authority's and/or educational researcher's point of view may appear improbable in reality.

From the comparison of viewpoints and their respective entailments, it is evident that discrepancies arise due to circumstantial factors. However, these gaps in the understanding of a common subject matter do not have to be impediments. Rather, taking into account the differences in how literary studies and its possibilities, as well as its limitations, may manifest in different perspectives can help broadening the understanding of its conceptual implications. Thus, the awareness of these differences caused by the shift in viewpoints can be beneficial to both the perceptual construct of the concept of literary studies and to the transition from theory to classroom practice.

While this article focuses on the teaching and learning of literature, the relation between the different viewpoints may be

applied to the school context in general. The differences, whether they be in the specific case of literature studies or more generally, lie in the intentions of what education could and should be, in contrast to what circumstances in the classroom allow it to be. This is not to say that the reality of the literary classroom could not draw nearer to curricular intentions and conceptual constructs stemming from pedagogy and philosophy – or that researchers cannot take into account more aspects to represent a reality that is both relevant and helpful to the study subjects. Neither is it to say that these discrepancies are permanent. The question is how we may close this gap between academia and the world it studies. This is a question that exceeds the scope of this article, but it does provide a point of departure for further research. The key question is whether educational research is an end in itself or whether it is a means to ends beyond seminars, impact factors, and research conferences, through which professionals and lay actors not only contribute to findings, but also benefit from them.

The third mission of Swedish universities refers to social enterprise and disseminative activities that researchers undertake in addition to teaching and research tasks (Zomer & Benneworth 2011). Perhaps this third mission does not start with the final dissemination, with the researcher being the sender and the surrounding community the receiver. Perhaps the third mission extends to include the optimization of what is, in the end, disseminated by closing the gap between sender and receiver. By bringing the different viewpoints of literary studies closer to each other, we may make research findings more relevant to pre-service and in-service teachers. By closing the perceptual

gap, we may make the reality depicted one that actors in the school context can relate to, rather than being alienated by. Thus, if in-service teachers were given the option to adapt less to pragmatic imperatives, while research was more grounded in the conditions of the classroom, the different realms and viewpoints could move closer, and the research on the teaching and learning of literature could appear less like fiction to teachers.

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## SUMMARY

*Teaching literature – from a teacher's viewpoint to a researcher's*

*(Att undervisa skönlitteratur – från ett lärar- till ett forskarperspektiv)*

How literature studies are perceived varies depending on viewer, given prerequisites, and prevailing circumstances. Pre-service teachers approach literature studies from a theoretical understanding, with ideal conditions and rooted in curricular stipulations. The educational researcher's perspective is rather rooted in conceptual constructions about how readers approach texts. It is between these two perspectives that Swedish L1 teachers combine curricular requisites with pedagogical ideas while considering factors beyond the teaching context. What from a researcher's viewpoint seems appropriate and necessary may be difficult to operationalize. The comparison between the three perspectives shows a discrepancy in how literature studies may be perceived. These differences do not, however, need to be an impediment, but knowledge of the differences in possibilities and limitations may contribute to further understanding. Awareness about the discrepancy, thus, may be advantageous both to how literature studies are viewed and to the transition from theory to practice. By letting the different perspectives draw nearer to each other, research findings can be made more relevant to both pre-service and in-service teachers. By reducing the distance between the different entities, teachers could more easily relate to the reality that is described as theirs, and research about literature studies would appear more relevant.

*Keywords: teaching, literature studies, education, educational research*

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