



Book Review

Martin Malmström
*Synen på skrivande: Föreställningar
om skrivande i mediadebatter och
gymnasieskolans läroplaner*

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Perceptions of school children's poor writing skills have a long history. Already in 1948, this flaw was noted in the School Commissions' report (SOU 1948:27). When the time came to stake out a path for the future, the Swedish subject curriculum was important, and to motivate school reform a mild version of crisis rhetoric was employed. Perceived crisis regarding various basic skills in different subjects is also a recurring international theme in the history of schooling. A case in point is the alleged lack of history knowledge in the U.S. after World War II, which was discussed in terms of a crisis perspective and, then as now, modern pedagogy was blamed for the decline (Evans 2004). It is also apparent that debaters and politicians tend to resort to crisis rhetoric in connection with proposed reforms as a means to legitimize changes, which was the case in the U.S. revision of history curricula subsequent to the "Sputnik shock" (Evans 2012).

Recently, a doctoral thesis in educational science on the phenomenon of "education crisis" in relation to students' writing skills has been published, namely Martin Malmström's *Views on Writing: Perceptions of Writing in Media Debates and Upper Secondary School Curricula*. The thesis analyses Swedish

debates and mainly curricula from 1970 to the early 2010 decade, and includes a glance at the U.S. debate.

Malmström's thesis is posited in the middle of a current debate on inadequate basic skills among Swedish university students, but as indicated in the example above, and as clearly shown in the thesis, crisis rhetoric has more or less been a constant theme in media debates in the past 70 years, if not longer.

From the perspective of educational history, the thesis is interesting since it examines the development over time. More specifically, the aim of the thesis is twofold: a) to analyse and critically review discursive continuity and change in the view of writing in media debates and curricula, and b) to show how the discursive battle over the views of writing emerges and develops. As the aim indicates, it is a relatively broad and comprehensive study both in chronology and geography since debates in the U.S. are treated. The overriding theoretical approach rests on modernization theories and critical discourse analysis. The latter is also used as a tool of analysis and Malmström points to the precariousness of separating theory and method regarding critical discourse analysis.

Methodologically, the critical discourse theory is used in terms of three levels of analysis. The first level involves the text itself, the second the "practical level", which has a focus on the production, distribution and consumption of the text. The third level is the social practice context, which means that the texts and their distribution are related to a wider societal context. Malmström mainly analyses how the perceptions of

writing were articulated in newspapers, investigations and curricula. When debates in the U.S. are analysed, Malmström primarily centres on two articles. Above all, his focus is on the years 1970 to 2013, and different selection criteria were used. One debate article, for example, was written by a group historians, warning about knowledge flaws, and the subsequent debate is analysed in the thesis. Close reading was applied to the issue of dissemination and consumption of the text. In this case, Malmström used "various search word combinations on Google" (p. 42). The selection of debates in the 1970s was carried out through the register of Swedish journal articles (*Svenska tidningsartiklar*) from 1970 to 1979. The debates in the 1990s were identified through the media archive "Retriever Research" and a number of listed search words.

In general, Malmström has proceeded systematically in collecting material, but clearer specifications of Google search words would have been helpful. A further objection is that the material has not been divided into op-ed texts and other kinds of texts, but this possible deficiency is noted and discussed by the author. The absence of systematic selection of texts on the 2013 debate is also noteworthy. In this case it is hard, if not impossible, to follow the logic in what was chosen for analysis. When curricula are analysed, the focus is on curricular and syllabus texts.

The thesis starts in the present, as the first empirical chapter, titled "Students who do not know Swedish", revolves around an op-ed article, titled "Our Students do not Know Swedish", published in 2013, in which several historians sounded the alarm about history students' lack of writing skills and knowledge of history. Malmström demonstrates how the article becomes

a kind of "hypotext" or original text, which is thereafter recontextualized in new contexts. In the recontextualization process, the crisis is reinforced and the writing crisis becomes an established truth. The article was thereby transformed into a myth of decline, describing the state of affairs in schools as urgent and in need of renovation. According to Malmström, some statements in the article build on "anecdotal evidence" based on the authors' experiences, a phenomenon that he returns to in various contexts.

Malmström views the debate in relation to a major social practice, impelled by new mechanisms demanding publication in English-speaking journals, which especially affects humanities subjects such as history, thus the reason for the debaters' frustration.

The contemporary beginning is followed by a traditional, chronological presentation in the Chapter titled "A Lost World", which provides a brief and interesting background to historical crisis debates. Malmström refers to a hand-writing debate in the 1930s, for example, and a "spelling crisis" in the 1950s.

However, the main focus of the chapter is on the debates in the 1970s. In the professional journal *Svenskläraren* (Teachers of Swedish) a recurring theme was pupils' poor writing skills. Also the "unruly classroom" (my quotation marks) surfaces as an example of crisis in education. In addition, there were texts from the Language Council of Sweden (in the journal *Språkvård* [Language Care]) and the Swedish Academy (in a so-called director's speech) on the shortcomings of modern education and pupils' lack of basic skills. This deficiency was assumed to jeopardise the national cultural legacy and in particular the importance of grammar, which was

described as an example of "the crown of Western cultivation" (p. 90). Language was the tool enabling the survival of the cultural legacy. The written language was the cohesive glue and when language was in danger of falling apart, so was national community. Comprehensive education and progressive pedagogy were blamed for the linguistic decline, and the "equality craze" (p. 90) was seen as a threat to the traditional content of the Swedish subject.

Malmström regards the crises mentioned above as examples of typical crisis rhetoric. The crisis rhetoric includes the notion that something is "worse than usual", which renders debaters unable to "keep quiet". Skills training and basic knowledge are presented as the solution to the problem. The crisis discourse can often be seen as a form of value conservative reflex, reacting to modern comprehensive education, according to Malmström.

Social practice can be seen as an explanation to the crisis discourse in this context, and here it involves the failure of the modern project, a project promising progress and a better society, which failed and resulted in disappointment and crisis symptoms.

In the Chapter "Världens mått" (The Measure of the World), dealing with the 1990s, many of the previous crisis debate themes recur. At this time there was also a rhetorical figure, clearly linking crisis with comprehensive education through a chain of links consisting of academic pedagogues, school bureaucrats and naive equality zealots. But even if crisis rhetoric derives from a conservative ideology, there was considerable criticism levelled from left-wing debaters associated with the knowledge movement (*Kunskapsrörelsen*). As before, the emphasis was on pupils' and university students' lack of basic skills. The decline

rhetoric also included a theme of "Sweden lagging behind", as well as the perception of the threat to our national cultural legacy and the danger this posed for our national uniqueness.

In Malmström's thesis, we are introduced to education debaters still active, such as Inger Enkvist and Jan Björklund, who represent what can be called conservative school reformers (term not used by Malmström) in the sense that they advocate/d a return to a focus on basic skills and a greater degree of differentiation. The new element in the debate of the 1990s is the repeated referencing to various kinds of international and national tests and studies. Apparently, the evidence-based discourse was beginning to make its mark on the debate although the use of international studies was characterised by a creative selectivity.

The conservative school reformers were also granted a new forum, namely the op-ed space in the major Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (DN). On Björklund's initiative, Stockholm City carried out a study of school-leavers' (school year 9) writing skills in 1999. On the same day as the result of the study was presented in Stockholm, DN published an article by Björklund, who commented on the results in a dire tone, and, as expected, the results received attention in all other media.

Even if the crisis rhetoric was predominant, there were some counter discourses. The linguist Olle Josephson, for example, claimed in *Svenska Dagbladet* that "Swedish pupils' writing skills have improved considerably in recent years" (p. 113).

The Chapter "Nation at Risk" offers an international comparison opportunity as the U.S. is treated. The chapter has a slightly different character since the analysis is more based on previous

research than the previous chapters. Malmström notes that the U.S., like Sweden, has witnessed writing crises throughout the twentieth century and the universities have similarly paid attention to students' poor writing skills. Malmström tries to understand this in relation to broader recruitment to higher education and writing crisis myths propagating the notion that "it is worse than ever" and the belief that "right now there's a crisis" is a recurring element.

The part of the Malmström's thesis dealing with the debate on writing skills is concluded with a discussion summarising several of the explanations already made. The comparison between Sweden and the U.S. is, however, an addition. Despite considerable differences in the two nations' societal and education systems, Malmström discerns significant similarities. The debates on poor writing skills can be seen to constitute a genre of its own. There are similar debaters, often (but not always) persons with a conservative value bias concerned about poor skills that will lead to the decline of the nation. The genre also includes the notion that the temporary deterioration is happening now and the notion that there has been a "golden age". Also the guilt of progressivism, not least academic pedagogues' role in undermining basic skills, was a recurring theme. Similarly, the political project of comprehensive education is blamed for the writing skills crisis.

Leaving the debate, Malmström then turns to the status of writing in upper secondary school curricula from 1970 to 2011. The analytical perspective applied is partly different as concepts in writing theory are added (Ivanic), including concepts such as skills-oriented, genre-oriented and creativity-oriented teaching approaches.

In Lgy 70 curriculum, the upper

secondary three-year programmes had considerable elements of traditional skills-oriented writing, but combined with an emphasis on more progressive student-oriented and genre-oriented perspectives on writing. The two-year programmes, however, had a stronger emphasis on traditional skills-oriented teaching. It is also noteworthy that there is a striking focus on poor writing skills in the two-year programme curricula, as these students were assumed to have substantially poor language skills and prior knowledge. This "general syntactic inadequacy" (p. 209) required early diagnosis and grammar exercises, according to the curricula.

In connection with the major reforms in the 1990s and in the wake of the municipalization of education and "a school for education", approaches such as NPM and economism put their marks on education. The principles of freedom to choose a school and decentralization were also implemented, and a pronounced sociocultural view of knowledge became predominant. However, the views of writing included different perspectives as before. Vocational courses mostly involved skills training, while other aspects of writing were prominent in the academic programmes. Although the syllabi for the Swedish A and B courses were identical, the different perspectives were indicated in the programme aims, which were expected to impact on the courses. According to Malmström, there were conservative as well as progressive components in the Swedish language syllabi. The progressive perspective was evident in student-active teaching approaches whereas the conservative perspective emerged in the emphasis on literary texts.

The 2011 curriculum involved a number of changes but the view of

knowledge remained. A clearer distinction between academic and vocational programmes was introduced and the role and function of writing became programme-dependent and writing skills were more emphasised in the vocational programmes, while process writing was emphasized in the academic programmes.

In his final discussion, Malmström argues that the decline discourse has been a recurrent theme in debates since the 1970s, which indicates that student writing has been in a chronic state of crisis, following a certain dramaturgy. The discursive writing crises pick up momentum through some form of original or hypertext, such as a critical op-ed article, a teacher's testimony, or the result of an international test. The hypertext functions as a point of reference for the ensuing debate. Often statements in the hypertext are viewed as objective truths when recontextualized and the perceived crisis is reinforced in the recontextualization.

This crisis rhetoric is characterized by certain features: a considerable knowledge decline has taken place when the text was written, primarily in terms of basic skills and usually hints that the nation is threatened. This is combined with a passion for a perceived and lost golden age. A suggested measure is mostly a greater focus on skills training. The rhetoric involves labelling debaters who question the actuality of the crisis anti-knowledge progressivism proponents and lately also post-modernists. Crisis rhetoric, according to Malmström, constitutes a genre of its own, and can be understood and explained in relation to societal changes, the frustrated future hope of modernity, broadened university admission, which means that teachers used to teaching the future elite now encounter pupils

and students from all classes with uncertain futures.

In many ways, Malmström has written an exciting and relevant contemporary study in the field of history of education. Some results deserve to be highlighted. The discussion on writing crises as a genre is empirically well supported, theoretically related and contributes to conceptual development. Also discussions on different "myths" such as *the myth of the guilt of progressivism*, *the decline myth* and *the golden age myth* contribute to our understanding of Swedish history of education, and can usefully apply in the analysis of other school subjects.

Malmström demonstrates how different myths can be linked to a major education debate, for instance, in the analysis of how the "decline myth" is connected to a form of renovation discourse in which the skills aspect is emphasised and also to a political criticism of comprehensive education. He shows, in addition, how public debates on writing become a resource for justifying reforms and how the debates spill over into the curricula. The latter is particularly relevant since the current debate centres on the need for more emphasis on fact in the present curricula, an issue that was first introduced in an op-ed article and is now being addressed by leading school politicians holding out a promise of a change.

There are interesting results regarding how poor writing skills are assumed to threaten the national education legacy and by extension the survival of the nation. In this context, Malmström could have referred to and used the extensive research on the so-called "history wars" and "culture wars" to a greater extent. Symcox (2002) and Evans (2012), for example, show how battles on the content of the history subject are

part of a "culture war" in which progressivism and relativism are linked to a lack of skills and knowledge decline. It is noteworthy that history and cultural legacy in these debates are also seen as a kind of national cultural grammar enabling members to be socialized into the nation. The use of language in these debates borrow concepts from the writing discourse, for example, when Björklund in 2001 sounded the alarm on pupils' lack of history knowledge in an article titled "Skolan skapar Historiska analfabeter" (Schools Create History Illiterates).

This leads to some objections to the study. One question is how well the social practice level can contribute to the understanding/explanation of writing perspectives. It is partly different cases that are studied, writing in the U.S., university students' writing, debates on writing in school, and how writing is presented in curricula. Malmström has used different theories with the modernisation theory as the overriding approach while other approaches seem closer to the empirical chapters. (See, e.g. the use of Ivancic's perspective on writing and thinking about PMC, "The professional-managerial class"). When the writing crisis genre is to be explained or understood, different relevant theories and perspectives are certainly used, but a more stringent, clearer and sharper bridge between levels would have been preferable.

It would also have been appropriate with a more concise review of previous research and a clearer initial presentation of the central analytical concepts used, instead of introducing them at different points in the chapters of this thesis. An early discussion of the education philosophy concepts of *progressivism*, *reconstructivism*, *essentialism* and *perennialism* would have sharpened the

analysis and strengthened the thesis' argument.

Although some objections can be made to Malmström's thesis, it is on the whole a theoretically and empirically well conducted study, providing new concepts and perspectives on the phenomenon of "education in crisis".

References

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