

Tove Berg, Associate Professor  
Akershus College, Bekkestua, Norway

Profession, learning traditions and text. An analysis of some textbooks in vocational subjects in upper secondary school in Norway.

My project has emerged from an interest in how the participants in so-called vocational programs in upper secondary school (i.e. 11 programs ranging from mechanics and hairdressing to pre-nursing) go about using text as material - literally speaking - in their training. By participants I mean students as well as teachers, and I include to some extent textbook writers and their publishers - in my investigation. I focus on textbooks for a number of practical subjects and programs, e.g. building and construction, health- and social studies, nature and agriculture.

The recent school reform in secondary education in Norway, «Reform -94», has streamlined the practical/vocational programs so that most of them now have two basic years in school and two years of organized training in the workplace. One of the effects of the reform is that the theory load is heavier for most of the programs, and for two reasons: 1) The number of general subjects has increased as well as the number of lessons in some of the general subjects- 2) The theory proportion of the practical subjects themselves has increased. Hence the increasing importance of textbooks as study material in vocational subjects is evident. When practical and oral-based training programs in the workplace become school programs a resocialization takes place among the members. The oral discourse of the practice field has to adapt to or find a room within the school discourse, basically a written one. One of my aims has been to investigate how - and whether - the linguistic practices of the training situation in the workplace are reflected in the written discourse of the school, e.g. textbooks.

One of my presumptions is that many teachers in practical subjects, due to lack of emphasis on "textual awareness and competence" in their teacher training programs, have insufficient strategies as to handling text - textbooks included. It is also a fact that some of the vocational programs in school have a larger number of students with reading and writing disabilities. One would expect, therefore, that textbooks for these programs would show some awareness of this fact - along with an awareness of the traditions in the practice field, as mentioned above.

In a pilot study in 1966 I investigated a number of textbooks for vocational subjects and found, somewhat to my surprise, that many of these books were theoretic and linguistically advanced and "academic" to an extent that is not to be seen in modern textbooks for the general (pre-university) programs in the upper secondary school. Two examples may illustrate this: A textbook for the most advanced physics course (third year) in the general (preuniversity) program is far more accessible to the reader than a book for the first-year course in electronics in one of the vocational programs.

In my presentation I will focus on some of my findings as well as methodological approaches to textbook studies.