

Learning through practice: Literary writing as a discreet process

Introduction

Literary writing is a process encompassing various experiences and cognitive aspects that are partly discreet and implicit, that is to say, not fully conscious or articulated. However, they are present simultaneously with distinct conceptions of text production. Our research project concentrated on the micro-structures of the creative process and on the role of experiences which in the long term lead to the formation of literary writing competence. The term “competence” is evaluative, but we do not relate it to a particular literary theory, nor to the commercial success of a publication. "Competence" in our study refers to a heightened ability to cope with the specific problems and demands of the writing process. It results from practical knowledge that manifests itself in the writing process. This practical knowledge, however, is not what is commonly known as procedural knowledge, since literary works are non-standardised, creative products.

Literary knowledge about the shaping of characters, choice of narrative tone, creation and use of metaphors, congruence or deliberate dissonance between form and content, but also finding one's personal most productive way of working – all this forms part of practical knowledge, it is practical know-how. In epistemology, practical knowledge is often contrasted with theoretical or fully articulated conceptual knowledge, such as knowledge about history of literature, theory of narrative discourse, philosophy of art. All this is knowledge from which the authors' mental activities proceed without, however, explicitly thinking of it. Knowledge of this kind is relevant, but is it not practical. Put differently, one will not become a writer by studying literary theory. The same applies to a person's reading experiences. They may yield some knowledge about literary traditions, give access to shared knowledge, provide or stimulate new ideas etc., but just by reading one will not learn how to write. Writing is learned through the practice of writing, by accumulating writing experience and by intensive confrontation with different important aspects of the writing process.

Empirical method

It was a great methodological challenge to obtain data relevant to the ineffable nature of practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is almost inaccessible to an external observer and

an author is rarely able to tell us what is happening when he or she writes. Authors are so intensively involved in text creation that they are mostly not aware how they proceed during the writing process, how they apply their literary competence while proceeding with their work. Also, when they acquire practical knowledge through learning-by-doing, this includes experiences of which they are aware – for instance, perceiving the sound of a narrative text or the congruence between form and content – but about which they cannot say very much. *Gestalt* perceptions and acts of experience have, in general, no clear-cut rational and linguistic structure, which explains why acts of experience cannot be fully put into words.

For the above reasons, we chose the following research strategy:

- (a) From December 2006 to July 2007, we followed the work of four young authors aged 28-35 years, each one working on prose texts, to obtain four case studies. The authors regularly sent us successive versions of their texts, which we compiled. After individual writing episodes, the authors recorded on audio tapes their remarks and descriptions of their experiences while writing (i.e. oral diaries). Every second month, we also conducted lengthy interviews with each author.
- (b) We asked each of the four young authors to name one older or more experienced author, who would be their partner in a conversation about writing. We contacted those older authors and, in summer 2007, when the four young authors had finished their prose texts, the conversations took place and were recorded.
- (c) Apart from those four case studies, we conducted 20 interviews with different, mostly older authors, in which they told us about their writing processes, learning experiences and changes in their working methods.

The collected text material is about 700 pages of transcribed interviews and oral diaries, and about 4,000 pages of text versions. For the content analysis we used a computer programme for qualitative analysis. We first classified the material according to a classification system consisting of approximately 50 codes. As a second step, in the following months, we summarised the content and analysed it with reference to theoretical assumptions about the emergence, accumulation, as well as the use or actualisation of practical knowledge.

Some research findings

Our study, different from earlier approaches, does not conceive the writing process as a targeted activity with temporally distinct successive phases; we rather assume that there is constant interplay between the generation of ideas, text composition and the elaboration of a

target. This is a common characteristic of creative processes: they are deliberately structured and target-oriented, and yet they cannot be fully planned to occur or be rationally directed towards a certain target. It is only in the course of working that a successively clearer *Gestalt* takes shape and crystallises into an idea of the work's final form, which then increasingly guides the subsequent stages of production.

Research on the chosen topic and the generation of ideas are indeed not restricted to the time when work on a given project starts; rather, we observe recurrent time windows when there is "receptiveness". There are phases during which writers open up to new ideas and content, alternating with other phases during which they withdraw and shut themselves off in order to cope with what there is already. The length of the time intervals between those alternating phases of opening-up and encapsulation differs. Opening-up involves creating situations favourable to the occurrence of new ideas – nevertheless without any clear direction or target. These situations differ individually and they may – to a certain extent - be systematic, in accordance with the aim of the respective writing project.

Authors are often confronted with the fact that they are simultaneously pursuing differing and competing aims, which they must evaluate, in order to successfully balance, for example, literary aesthetics and readability of a text. They are driven by personal interests, preferences and emotional concerns, respectively, while all the time also keeping a watchful eye on certain formal aspects of "craftsmanship": mastering various aspects of narrative technique such as the construction of dialogues, linkage of sub-plots, description of a particular character, the temporal structure of a story, building up tension.) The authors' confrontation with and modification of their targets does not always happen through conscious reflection. Thinking and evaluating may take place in the back of the author's mind, simultaneously with other actions like text composition, reading, doing background research. In general, ideas about the basic form of the work in progress or about the appropriateness of certain formal decisions are difficult to articulate. Writers, after all, are not labouring to find reasons or justifications for their thoughts: what they are really concerned with is probing ideas, and finding out whether and how those ideas can be unfolded in the text.

Composing a text is not the same as taking down notes; rather, it is a form of searching and groping, a way of (mental or actual) testing of possibilities in the course of author's search for a final *Gestalt*. Until it has taken shape, the writing process needs a certain flexibility, and sometimes also deviation from original conceptions. If we recognise a certain structure when analysing a final text, it by no means implies that the particular structure was "planned" like

this by the author; rather, it is the result of multiple trying out.

A specific experience mentioned by several authors in connection with text creation is being in a state of “writing-in-a-flow”. The expression “writing-of-itself” (“*es schreibt sich*”) describes moments in which the writer, propelled by an inspiring idea, is lifted into a state in which his or her attention is not outward-directed or reflectively focused on the act of writing, but in which, rather, his or her focus of attention completely coincides with the writing act. Perceptions, conclusions and evaluations forming part of the act of writing remain implicit, so that later the authors can hardly tell why they had done something in the particular way it happened.

Writers not only draw on their own knowledge, they also use the knowledge of other persons. Collecting feedback is a conscious step taken to gain concrete insights on specific aspects of the respective text. Some writers read their text out loud; others submit their manuscript to readers. The function of feedback with respect to an author’s learning process varies, i.e. the readers’ reactions are processed in differing ways. The feedback may influence the author’s target, or it may lead to changes in specific text passages. The latter effect was frequently observed when the evaluation was formulated by readers whom the authors knew and trusted personally, particularly if the readers were able to articulate, for example, what they felt was missing in the text.

Experience is important in any professional activity. In our present inquiry, “experience” does not refer to fleeting impressions, i.e. events appearing in the flow of life and then disappearing again, leaving no trace. Experiences that we undergo will shape us; they mark what we know, what we are able to do and, finally, what we are. Knowledge that stems from experience is always tied to the person who went through the respective experience. Many interviewed authors mentioned that, over the years, they became increasingly open to intuitions and professionally self-confident. To quickly grasp some *Gestalt*, to introduce imaginative anticipation at an early stage, to develop a feeling for what “fits” and what “goes with” something else, to heighten one’s sensitivity for the effects of language, to enlarge one’s technical repertoire – all this depends on experience. One characteristic feature of successful action is thus a certain calmness while acting. Self-confidence and self-assurance, in this connection, do not refer to any psychological state of – perhaps uncritical – self-affirmation, rather they are the result of experienced success, i.e. of being conscious of the fact that one was successful in other projects and that one can therefore “trust one’s feelings”.

“Undergoing an experience” is closely related to a certain concept of learning. In our interviews, learning was rarely mentioned. It most often surfaced when an explicit question was asked about it. One possible explanation is that, generally, learning processes are an integral part of experience. Learning often happens on the side, unnoticed, implicitly and without intention. When learning processes are organised in an institutional framework (a school, a university), they are usually more conscious. Writers in a teaching position will view learning from a different angle: teaching means organising the learning processes of third parties. The writers are then directly confronted with the problem of transmission. Experiences of failure are often remembered much longer because confrontation with them is a recurrent activity. The interviewed authors were able to tell us more about this kind of learning experience.

Organising the setting in which the writing process is to take place plays an important part in reaching one’s aim as a writer, i.e. to complete a literary work. Even if it may sound trivial, this includes taking care of one’s own emotional balance. We call this “emotional self-management”. The writer tries to create and sustain an emotional disposition that will support the generation of ideas and promote concentrated writing. If, for example, the writing process is temporarily blocked, if the writer has the feeling that he or she is not advancing, then it may sometimes be better not to give up, but on other occasions it may be preferable not to persist. To appraise the situation correctly, to know oneself sufficiently, to be self-confident and flexible – all this is important in preventing extended periods of writing blockade. What is needed is the appropriate balance between persistence and indifference, between putting oneself under pressure and allowing oneself time. There is no formula for this balance, which is invariably specific to the respective person and the particular situation. It is this dimension that forms part of the concepts “practical insight” or “practical knowledge”, respectively.

Thus, in some way, learning through practice necessitates efforts at self-development. This includes both, knowledge of one’s personal strengths and weaknesses as well as handling criticism. Self-development, in turn, will directly influence a writer’s professional ethos and actual working process. The writer’s efforts of self-development cannot be characterised as purely contemplative reflection, they are not rationally directed, nor are they straightforwardly therapeutic. They constitute a practical process, which, although being clearly structured through acts of linguistic articulation, mainly consists of what is not said and cannot be expressed with words, above all, acting and general behaviour.

It follows that “competence” is an integrated total of practical, theoretical, implicit and explicit knowledge resulting in some ability or in successfully performed action. “Mastery”,

“being able to do something” refers to concrete requirements or tasks, respectively, and has to do with recognition of certain specific kinds of competence. The concept of “successful action”, however, is more complex still, since it implies evaluation. Evaluations are based on conglomerates of criteria that are often contested, or whose constituent elements are not uniformly recognised as important. Art and literature are normally directed at the general public, which implies that they claim recognition. Aesthetic evaluations are inherent in artistic practice. In the framework of our study, the concept of “competent” or “successful action” referred not so much to results but rather to learning experiences and activation of knowledge to meet concrete challenges.
