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Academic personal essay as dynamic scientific writing: a research and developmental project for students studying to become teachers in finding their professional identities

Academic personal essay as dynamic scientific writing: a research and developmental project for students studying to become teachers in finding their professional identities

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to develop an exploratory approach, inspired by an interface between artistic and didactic research, and a productive methodology for academic personal essays. The article is about a research and developmental project within preschool teacher education. The students' ability to write academic research papers has proven problematic. They seem to have lost the joy of writing. This situation is known nationally and internationally, and has been documented through earlier research. The research question was: *How can the use of academic essays support students' identity and ability in and enjoyment of academic writing?* The preschool teachers explored their own experience in leadership and wrote essays about their leadership. Their own processes and methods in writing personal essays seemed to strengthen their identity. The academic personal essays worked like a tool for supporting their professional identities.

Keywords: dynamic writing; academic essay; artistic research; reflection protocols.

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Introduction

The introduction and the aim of the research and developmental project have been to develop an exploratory approach and a productive methodology regarding personal essay writing in teacher education. Exploratory research is research conducted for a problem that has not been studied more clearly, and is intended to establish priorities, develop definitions and improve later research designs and so on. Exploratory research, as the name implies, intends merely to explore the research questions and does not intend to offer final and conclusive solutions to the existing problems.

The aim of the article is to describe, analyze and report on an educational project aimed at getting students to enjoy academic essay writing and academic writing in

general. The aim is also to discuss the current methods in teaching academic writing to students in teacher's education programs.

The research question was: How to develop an alternative to ordinary scientific papers that support student's creativity and professional identity (Matre, & Hoel, 2007)? The teacher professional identity is described in the state curriculum and that is important to stress in the project (SOU 1999:63), but it is also described by other researchers (Sandin & Säljö, 2009, Alexandersson, 2005). Academic personal essay writing will be developed as an alternative, because they are not often in use in higher education, although essays has been well known since Montaigne proposed essay as a mode of presentation in the 16:th century. Academic personal essay writing support reflective critical thinking and they are not common prior to the university level. Academic writing was introduced in Teacher education in 1968 (SFS 1968:318) and 1977 (SFS 1977:263) and the teacher education program started to include ordinary scientific papers in 1977. Standards can also vary considerably between disciplines and sometimes within disciplines, but academic personal essays were not ~~in~~ used.

The students' ability to write academic research papers has been found problematic and it appears that the students have lost the joy in writing (Ask 2007). This situation is known both nationally and internationally, and has been documented through earlier research (Blückert 2010; Blåsjö, 2004, 2010; Hagström 2005; Hållsten 2008; Lindgren 2005; Lendahls, Rosendahl 1998). It is not only a problem in teacher education, it is also a problem in other programs at the universities and there are several reports from the National Boards of Universities, which illustrates the problems (Högskoleverket, 2005, 2006, 2009). Ordinary scientific papers are used in teacher education. The students seem to lose their motivation, which has an effect on their ability to write. Teacher student do not want to write at all after scientific courses, where they practice scientific writing. This is a problem for the teaching professions (SOU 1999:63). It is important for teachers to be able to write what should be written in their profession and also to write about their profession for instance in media.

The academic personal essay is a form of scientific writing that is different from ordinary scientific thesis.

Notes on an exploratory approach and a trial to discuss some theoretical aspects

The aim is also to try to develop an exploratory approach, inspired by a fruitful interface between artistic and didactic research and a productive methodology for academic personal essays, but also to study and to develop and support the academic writing process (Lindgren 2005). Such artistic practice based research uses academic essays to articulate different processes connected to the relation of theory, practice and experience. Artistic research looks at academic personal essay writing as a process, similar to an ordinary methodological process. The students have to stay within and

trust the process while taking one step after another. To write an academic personal essay is similar to an artistic research process. Even the mistakes are useful in the artistic process, which is different from traditional research processes in teacher education. The academic personal essay encourages the students to explore their professional practice and to develop the academic personal essay based on their own practical experiences, in this case regarding leadership (Svenaesus 2009). The academic personal essay methodology is a common genre in artistic research and is used in tests at the same time, as it is congenial with the artistic and reflective work. Therefore many artists choose the academic personal essay method.

The data consists of the written academic personal essays and student's reflections protocol, which were written during the process (Zeichner & Liston 1987). Their own practical experiences are important to make a discussion and a summary. The critical reflective attitude is important in academic personal essays and in all sorts of academic writing (Jarrick & Josephson 1996).

To sum up, the exploratory research framework is a productive interface between didactic theory and artistic theory. The project is also presented in a book "Academic essays: introduction and supervision" (Wallsten & Morberg, 2018). The book offers ideas to students who are going to write academic personal essays and it is also a support on how to write an academic personal essay. The book is a study guide and an introduction, but also an extended presentation of writing academic personal essays. There are also learning goals and criteria for examination (Wallsten & Morberg, 2018).

Research methodology

The research design consisted of two different parts: part one consisted of examination of a leadership course by personal academic essay and part two consisted of reflection protocols on their own writing process. The education in the course consisted of information of the theoretical and the methodological framework. The starting point for the research project on personal academic essays was a practical situation in a course in teacher education, where personal academic essays were used as a practical examination form in a leadership course in preschool education (Schön, 1983, 1987). The examination followed the degree program and the decided syllabus for the teacher education programme. The leadership was about how to be a successful leader as a preschool teacher for younger children. The examination was a seminar with opponents and respondents, but the students acted in groups. The data collected was the personal academic essays and the reflection protocols. Each student wrote one page with his or her reflections in a protocol and they wrote without detailed instructions about their own writing process. It gave them a possibility to view their own writing process. They

were expected to write about things that they found important in their writing process, which were invisible for the university teachers.

Academic personal essay writing gives the opportunities to support students' academic writing, as well as to strengthen their personal identity and professional development. Personal academic essay writing has been tested on 150 students totally within the framework of four research projects since 2012. One project for pre school teachers, two for vocational teacher teachers and one for continuing education for teachers.

The research project has been named "Essay as Thesis – Thesis as Essay, I-IV". In this article, part II, is presented and discussed. Part II consisted of 25 preschool teachers personal essay writing.

There were opportunities to develop students scientific writing and testing the academic personal essay as an examination form at the part "Leadership" in the course "Leadership and Values", 15 HP. The course "Leadership and Values" consisted of two separate parts, Values, and Leadership. The course was the last course of the pre-school teacher education program and the leadership aspect was already taught and described. The organization, the content and the examination form adapted to these conditions. The syllabus was not changed. The motivation to tackle a major writing assignment before the exam was somewhat problematic. They thought that the programme was already finished and then they had to do another exam. The written exam had been another alternative to academic personal essay writing. The traditional examination form was not attractive for the preschool teacher students. They unanimously preferred academic personal essay writing. The choice of academic essay as examination was discussed with the Course Director, as well as with the Examiner for the entire course. It was important that all relevant information was given so that all lecturers felt an involvement in the decision. The students also had the opportunity to give their comments on the decision to use academic personal essay writing as exam.

Students' participation in the research and developmental project

In the wider research project, the participating students came from ^{1/}the preschool teacher education program, ^{2/}the vocational teacher education program (two groups) as well as from ^{3/}the Arts and learning education. We only present the result from the preschool teacher group. This group consisted of 25 students and the course resulted in 22 published essays and 22 reflections protocols (all limited to one page). Data in the research project consists of reflection protocols (one page per student) together with an academic personal essay (Korp, 2003). Two students did not complete their academic personal essays on time, and one student has not yet written his academic personal essay. The completion rate is considered to be very good-

The students were informed that the academic personal essay might be presented outside the university and that their essays were an important part of the research project. One additional aim of the project was to gather material for our book in essay writing (Wallsten & Morberg, 2018). The students gave their written consent to their participation, i.e. they permitted participation and publication of works in whole or in part.

The student group stated that the aim of the project was good for other students. They also stated that it would have been very helpful if they had received this alternative academic personal essay training earlier in their teacher education and in several other contexts (Alexandersson, 2005). When the students had received the basic project information they accepted writing an academic personal essay and a process protocol as an examination assignment.

Academic personal essay writing

Introduction to examination in the form of academic personal essays was given when the course on leadership and management started. Here are some important facts from the presentation: The academic personal essay is a shorter written text. An academic personal essay is not a fiction, but it should be designed so that it clearly carries the author's characteristic style and retain its originality. The language is more personal than characterized by factual prose that is objective and more aloof in its rhythm. The academic personal essay can be seen as an attempt to explain in writing a test or an examination of a phenomenon or a concept. In the work of the academic personal essays, it is important to explore their practical experience with the theme of an academic personal essay (Svenaeus 2009). Leadership needs to be discussed from the perspective of the student's experiences. The Academic personal essayist decides the perspective, based on her/his personal view, even though the topic can be trivial or irrelevant to life. Sources and other references are used just as they come.

The characteristic of an academic personal essay is in brief as follows:

- The academic personal essay often has an introduction that presents the topic of the academic personal essay and the author's starting points in writing.
- Characteristics of the academic personal essay are that it should be of "moderate length" In our research that meant 3-5 pages.
- The academic personal essay's paragraph divisions are clear and with smooth transitions between the different parts. If subheadings are used they should be used with care.
- The academic personal essay takes up literary or scientific reference to emphasize an independent reasoning.
- The academic personal essay has a stylish and qualitatively good language. The academic personal essays will be written with using sources.
- In an academic personal essay literary excursions such as metaphorical language and repetition can often occur.
- The academic personal essay quotations are accurate and smooth.

To sum up, an academic personal essay is associative, reflective and educational. A rhythm is created in the essay being the anchor with various references, while at the same time will be critical to the references through the author's important and necessary own reflections. It will be easy to find an idea behind the text. The text must hang together and can advance in both winding and staggering ways.

Findings

"Entangled in an unproductive pattern" and "Difficulties to get out of a pattern"

The result of this research and developmental project is positive and the students produced good quality academic personal essays. The relevance of the chosen topics that were taken from their own experience of practice and the way the students wrote were considered the keys to this success. The conclusion of this research is that this type of academic personal essay may be considered to be a positive alternative or a complement to writing scientific papers in teacher education.

At first the students expressed their uneasiness in various ways regarding writing an academic personal essay even before they received our basic information and instructions. They also expressed clear uneasiness to write at all. It is unfortunate that such an important professional function as writing causes worries among soon-to-graduate preschool teachers. They will have to be able to write in their profession as preschool teachers.

They received the information on essay writing and then they had an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the issue. The student's views can be summed up as: "you feel that you run in an unproductive pattern". One of the students summarizes this as follows:

"Even though Åsa and Lasse said that we shouldn't think about what was right or wrong, it felt just like when we signed our years at high school, after a template where we learned what should be included and that we shouldn't include anything of our own opinions without the support of literature. I felt that it was difficult to get out of the pattern."

Similar reflections were given by others in the group and one of the students talked about "3, 5 years of indoctrination" and also "loss of feeling the lust in writing". It was a sad experience for the teachers to listen to the students' attitudes towards writing. One student expresses the problem in a slightly different way:

"The difficulties I experienced in writing have been to associate, to develop and make the digressions, when I'm used to stick to the topic and not expanding out too much. I understand the idea of freedom, which this form enables, but after three years of indoctrination in writing after high school's template, I could not feel the joy ~~lust~~ in writing. I'm probably brainwashed to always stick to the rules and templates, which meant that I felt a great fear when suddenly ~~øf~~ I had no template or rule to stick to".

One student develops the sense of getting an examination assignment that involves writing an academic essay slightly different:

"I would have liked to have this kind of writing assignment at the beginning of the training so that you could get a different view on different ways to write, you might have seen several opportunities in the thesis then also, perhaps it could have been turning in a different direction. I hope that the essay will occur as a more common form in the university, because it gives a lot and it's very free and very fun way to write, it's not the feeling that we had in the thesis and it would not create write cramps where everything just freezes and it becomes blank in the head."

One student expressed her stress facing an examination in the form of an essay. Her reflections concerning freedom as a threat:

"My first spontaneous thought was that after almost 3,5 years of study, we may write a text where we can express what we both feel and think. Our own thoughts can appear and it will be a more free text. That was a very stressful thought"

To summarize, all the students expressed that they have been drilled in writing scientific thesis and "correct" reports. They think that the structure they have been

taught which they mentioned as IMRAD (which means: introduction, method, results, analysis and discussion) provides some protection. There is no room for personal opinions and thoughts when students' writes in the way they are taught to.

Personal academic essays and the tutorial process

The students got an introduction to personal essay writing at the course start, and then they got an in-depth theory and methodology review. The students had clear motives why the academic personal essay form was selected as their choice. In the teaching of academic personal essay writing, we emphasized that it is important to consider a different and joyful style. The student group gave feedback on the introduction that "they still liked the idea" and they thought, "it was good to try another form of academic writing".

No academic personal essays were therefore offered as a model. The students were just offered to read an essay of free choice. It was a chosen methodical approach. A personal essay as a model might perhaps prevent their creativity in the writing process.

Methodological instructions were few, but made as clear as possible, like specific examples of certain operations in order to facilitate the writing process. Various approaches to view the concept in different ways and to find possible other alternative, which are central parts of personal essay writing, were also introduced. An example is:

“The supervisory processes were presented so that everyone got a picture of what support they were offered. The tutorial was offered, both in individual supervision and as group supervision. One student summed up their experience of the need to get instructions on essay writing, but also the fear and concerns that do not cope with this, also the fear and worry about not being able to cope with the expectations that: when I realized that we were going to write an essay I thought, what is this, how do I write, and what am I going to write?”

The students expressed their experience of the introduction as positive, but a certain amount of frustration appeared in their reflections. They were given a theme for the essay writing, i.e. Leadership. "I've always liked the topic of leadership," said one student to quote, "but the academic personal essay form, in early education had been the very best. I have learnt a lot".

There were students, who thought that the introduction was problematic, because they did not understand what the text would end up like: "I felt it was scary because it was a new way of working and it felt completely alien". Another student says, "It's good to get the opportunity? to write more freely and in a more personal, yet formal, style. I see it as an advantage since it is this way that I should follow when I write an informational letter to parents. "

The students were positive, curious but also a little concerned about the freedom they had got in the writing process. Students compared previous texts and pointed out "the texts they wrote during the earlier part of the training lacked emotion and was relatively difficult and laborious to get through". One student said that the briefing before the essay was too thin. The student claimed that the examples given on how to work with the concept were difficult to absorb:

The confusion and the feeling of making error persisted after the briefing with Lars and all the dedication he talked about confused me. Especially the parallel he drew up with obstacles and Gessle's song, in a Cole Porter song, on to Cole Porter, to a different text on a fence. Then I felt it here, I will never manage.

In conclusion, they were all positive to the tutorial that we presented. We pointed out that it would not be possible to provide supervision in the course within the budgetary framework, which the students understood. We stressed the fact that the tutorials along the way were of crucial importance for the students to be able to develop their essay writing abilities.

To be led by the hand and to let the students go

The students were positive about both the joint guidance and to the individual tutorial. The individual tutorial was given personally and in writing through the Blackboard. The individual and personal guidance to students were used only by a few. The personal guidance was close to the submission of the final version. Group tutorials were given whenever we could. Regarding the written comments the students were very happy and grateful for this guidance in the process. The comments given were mainly supporting the student's creativity, but the comments also supported the writing ability especially the critical discussions. One student pointed out the quality of the comments:

My comments on the essay were very good. It felt a bit contradictory that we would write a little more freely, but when it came down to it, as you said that we should "tighten up the text" and put in some "thesis" in it.

The same student showed a great gratitude for everything and that she had learned something new and interesting. The student also hoped that she would be able to write an essay. One student also says that she was grateful that she had the opportunity to test this method with writing an essay:

I have never before written an essay, and I have had a hard time harnessing the essay possibilities. A completely different way of writing has influenced my education at the University of Gavle, which has changed my way to thinking about writing that constituted obstacles to myself while writing this essay. I've found it had hard to soar off into my writing. My essay is very narrative. I have really tried to enlist the help of the comments I received to my first version of the essay, but I know that my mind set always stops me. I wish that we had this opportunity to write an essay earlier in the education because I think it would have helped my writing during the degree project. To train writing more freely and more personal, but still formal, I see as an advantage since it is this style I should apply when, for example, I'll write the information letter to parents.

It has been an evolving process for students who eventually perceived this as something positive for their development. Another student points out the tutorial in this:

Tutorial by Lasse was both rewarding and very useful. I got many insights, thoughts and ideas. Writing an essay is somehow more freely, you can float away, to associate further, and draw parallels.

However, typing cramps sometimes appeared and panic once again and I was unsure if I followed the red thread because I did not managed to convey what I wanted, and had in my head. After many tears and much deleting I have finally got together three pages to submit.

The same student ends with: "Thanks to both of you for having opened up my enjoyment in writing again".

In conclusion, the students were satisfied with the guidance they received, and they were positive to the model in used. Looking at the quality of the essays it might have been useful with a couple of additional guidance opportunities. But there were no resources or time for more tutoring. The students rewrote the academic personal essay three times.

The frames were clear and distinct and the tutorial was planned in three steps. That contributed to give an acceptable quality of the academic personal essays. All the students who submitted an academic personal essay were approved. The products have been discussed with the students. They also submitted their own reflections and conclusions, which we summarized with from two vantage points: experiences of writing the essay and how essay writing can develop the students' academic writing skills.

The students had numerous comments on the academic personal essay writing education part, above all, on the thesis work, but also about writing assignments in other courses. These assignments virtually took all the enjoyment out of writing essays. Some students said that it was the most enjoyable task ~~fun~~ they had worked on ~~done~~ throughout their education.

They also believed that teacher education should provide all students an opportunity to test this form of academic personal essay writing, already in the beginning, so as not to damage the creativity or ~~to~~ make them afraid of going outside the template.

One student writes in his reflections:

I think I can see and understand the potential of writing in essay form even though it was a completely new form to meet and right ~~just~~ at the end of the education. It was strange but nice to try to be widening in my mind and in my writing. Just essay form might have been a good way for me to work with during the whole training period since I always had to struggle with my writing.

The same student also points to the importance of a combination of the writing forms to appeal, develop and challenge the students. One student expresses gratitude for having been given the opportunity to test the academic personal essay method and had earlier taught himself some of this method. They eventually got individual reviews of the final essay and an assessment of the results of the examination task. It was therefore a very positive atmosphere for the final summary accounting.

Conclusions and implications for teacher education

The result of the personal essay writing research and developmental project was much better than expected. The students tried the academic personal essay methodology. They felt that it was difficult to decide what to write about and also how they should pursue. They all tried their very best, according to the reflection protocol. The approach was different from what they were used to.

It would have been better if a few more tutoring occasions had been possible. We would have liked five versions of the academic essays, but we were only able to have three versions. The quality was largely spread, but most of the academic personal essays were quite good. Each essay was discussed both as a product and process. The students also came with their own reflections and we summarized the reflections from two vantage points: experiences of writing the personal essay and how essay writing can be developed for students in higher education. They said that they have learnt a lot but it had been difficult to take responsibility on your own for the essay.

They got the tutorial for the final essay and an assessment of the results of the examination task. There was a positive atmosphere for their final accounting. One of the students said that the papers were so good that you'd think they were written by

established authors. There were a couple of personal essays that were sent to be published in a magazine, not a scientific magazine. These students had to work more with their academic personal essays before they were published. All students could pass the educational part: Leadership.

The academic personal essays were all printed in one report and distributed to students in advance before the final seminar. We did not print their individual reflection protocols, but the students had to give a short summary orally. They got the task to read selected parts to the entire student group. There were students who had tested the academic personal essay form in the past and this had facilitated the completion of the academic personal essay task. They thought, however, that it was more difficult to write about leadership than about something that had a creative and exploratory theme.

Some found it difficult to comment on their own process because it was the first time they had written an academic personal essay. The education part Leadership in the course was highlighted as being very fruitful. The students saw a potential in the essay as a form, how it gives freedom in writing, despite the difficulties the freedom made it interesting. They expressed the experience of essay form as more demanding in comparison to traditional academic thesis writing. With its emphasis upon 'right or wrong' thinking it complicated their writing process.

The most striking result is the increasing enjoyment in writing and the newfound inspiration to write that was expressed by the students. One student who has reading and writing difficulties could not hold back his/her tears at the introduction of the essay assignment. The same student said after the course was completed that she had written a letter to the editor of a newspaper in her hometown, and the article was already published on the Web in the local newspaper. She was very happy about this. She stated that the investigation of her own practice was fruitful to her writing process.

The tutorials for the academic personal essays seemed heavy, because there were three versions of the essay forms. It would have been desirable for us to work with five versions, in order to reach really top quality. All students received a personal letter outlining steps to reach better quality. Our tutoring was limited in scope. Group tutoring was also taking place in parallel with the individual tutorial. In addition to the individual text was a summary text compiled for the entire group's academic personal essay writing. The tutorial took longer time because all the essays were different, but this can certainly be improved.

The result of the academic personal essay writing is good when it comes to both form and content. Students demonstrated a sound knowledge of leadership and showed that they had read both course books and their reference literature. They were noticeably proud of their accomplishments.

There was no traditional seminar with an opponent and a respondent. Everyone had to read all the other students' essays. They had to tell us about the process of essay writing and they had to read one part of the essay loud. They also described their writing process. The discussion was about the content of the essay as well as the form of the essay. The contribution of knowledge was highlighted. The students were very surprised by the results, which they thought was very interesting and inspiring.

The interest for personal academic essays at the university had been very low. According to the research and education strategy all lecturers must combine research with their own teaching, however, the heads of the university did not mentioned the research and development project. They denied that there was an essay project at the University.

The research and developmental project has been reported to the Ministry of Education in Sweden and also to the Chancellor of the Agency of the Universities. This type of academic personal essay is considered to be a positive alternative to scientific papers in teacher education, but also in other courses (SOU 1999:63). It is also a possibility to look at academic personal essays as an alternative to traditional scientific thesis. Since the project has been presented to the Ministry of education and science and at the national boards of Universities both Secretary of State Peter Honeth and the University Chancellor Lars Haikkola were in favor of the academic essay. On the basis of the national evaluations of teacher education program the work has stalled, which is unfortunate. The national boards of universities determine the goals, while universities will determine the method. The supervisory authority for universities supports the academic personal essay as a form.

The universities are free to interpret the curriculum and they can choose to use academic personal essays today instead of traditional academic thesis. The tradition seems to strong and it seems difficult to change. Further research and developmental work is needed to support students' academic writing. Further research is also needed to offer final and conclusive solutions to the existing problems, which has been discussed in the article.

Endnotes

¹Academic personal essay is used in the article. The researchers constructed the concept. It is a generic concept, not a subject oriented concept.

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