

The Framework for University Level Text Analysis

Maria Bäcké

Kristianstad University

Abstract: For several years there has been a huge emphasis on higher education's role in shaping future employees to fit the requirements of potential employers and adapting education to the recruitment needs of the same. This is not the only goal of higher education, however. At the very beginning, in section eight of the first chapter of the *Swedish Higher Education Act*, it is written that "[f]irst-cycle courses and study programmes shall develop the ability of students to make independent and critical assessments." In addition, "students shall develop the ability to gather and interpret information at a scholarly level." Both quotes highlight the aspect of critical analysis, which is mandatory for university studies regardless of field. To help develop critical thinking and further independent analysis among the students are thus two of the most important goals for Swedish educators in higher education.

Academic disciplines follow the *Swedish Higher Education Act* in various ways depending on the traditions and customs in their respective fields. Within the field of English literature, text analysis is at the forefront and a huge amount of research has been made delving into its method. Authors often encountered by students are Lois Tyson, M. Keith Booker, Terry Eagleton, and Jonathan Culler as they have written often used introductions to literary theory and critical perspectives. My aim in this paper is to focus on the teaching of literary text analysis as a method and a means to adhere to the *independent and critical assessment* requirement as well as to *gather and interpret* information — which I will focus on primarily — in the *Swedish Higher Education Act*. What are the strengths of text analysis as a method and to what extent does it contribute to fulfil the aims of higher education as expressed by Swedish law?

Key words: legal framework, text analysis, humanities, teaching, critical thinking

Is it enough to educate for purely utilitarian purposes, i.e. to only teach what is necessary to meet the criteria of a certain type of job or to think about education as a commodity you buy, putting the student in the position of a customer who may or may not find the "service" s/he buys to their liking? Depending on your perspective, your answer might be "yes" or "no." The above stance has indeed become more and more common in the last few decades, which has spurred a debate about what criteria higher education ought to fulfil in Sweden. A recent example is an editorial

for *Dagens Nyheter*, written by journalist Håkan Boström, who argues that the “*bildungs*” ideal ought to be brought back and knowledge ought to be valued for its own sake (Boström), and not for what it might potentially bring in terms of work or salary. On the opposite side, the organisation for entrepreneurs, Svenskt Näringsliv (Confederation of Swedish Enterprise), highlights the “crisis in the humanities” and urges the field to become more “useful” in order to make the students “easier to employ” (Axelsson). A common method of enquiry within the humanities is text analysis, which aims to discover the worldview of the author(s) of a text and facilitate independent and critical assessment. My aim in this paper is to study how the teaching of literary text analysis can be a method and a means to adhere to the *independent and critical assessment* as well as to *gather and interpret* information requirements in the *Swedish Higher Education Act*. What are the strengths of text analysis as a method and to what extent does it contribute to fulfil the aims of higher education as expressed by Swedish law?

On both sides of the debate, the humanities often become the focus and carrier of the traditional “*bildungs*” ideal and a symbol of that which is not considered “useful” or “necessary” in the current political climate, where the right-wing government has been in office for the last eight years. The following exemplifies their stance: “[i]n [the bill] the Government proposes changing the direction of the national quality assurance system for higher education institutions to meet the new demands that are based on the goals of *greater freedom, internationalisation and high quality*” (Regeringskansliet 2009/10:139). Greater freedom is mainly related to decreased governmental influence on the Swedish higher education system (Regeringskansliet 2009/10:149), internationalisation stresses the collaboration between universities and higher education systems primarily within the EU but also vis-à-vis the rest of the world (Programkontoret), and high quality, in itself a debated concept since few people agree on what high quality actually is and how it can be measured, which Universitetskanslerämbetet (the Swedish Higher Education Authority) translates into six general concepts: *knowledge* and *understanding*, *proficiency* and *ability*, and *evaluation* and *approach*. In general the Swedish government has favoured the usefulness and preparation for work life more than other aspects, and it is their wish that this aspect is stressed even further in future evaluations (Regeringskansliet, pressmeddelande).

According to Swedish law, however, neither the stance of the government nor that of Svenskt Näringsliv are adequate. On the topic of the knowledge and experience a student is supposed to gather in higher education, section eight in the *Swedish Higher Education Act* states (in full):

First-cycle courses and study programmes shall develop:

- the ability of students to make *independent and critical assessments*,
- the ability of students to *identify, formulate and solve problems autonomously*,
and
- the preparedness of students to deal with changes in working life.

In addition to knowledge and skills in their field of study, students shall develop the ability to:

- *gather and interpret information* at a scholarly level,
- stay abreast of the development of knowledge, and
- communicate their knowledge to others, including those who lack specialist knowledge in the field. (*Swedish Higher Education Act*, 2009:1037, section 8, and *Svensk Författningssamling*, my italics)

The ordinance is thus very clear about the importance of independent and critical assessment and the interpretation of various types of information, tasks often associated with the humanities.

Academic Traditions and Customs

Along with many other theoreticians, former vice chancellor at Lund University, Göran Bexell, sketches three different views and influences on academic education, and outlines the positive and negative aspects of each:

- *Academic traditionalism* — This perspective is characterised by academic freedom, collegial leadership, and academic "bildung" for life. Research and education are goals in themselves.
- *Academic instrumentalism* — The focus is on societal use and responsibility, economic growth, a utilitarian and entrepreneurial approach, and academic "training" in a specific field for a specific purpose. Research and education are means to reach a (financial) goal.
- *Academic globalism* — This category focuses on the streamlining of courses all over the world. Student ought to get the "same" education everywhere and the issue at hand regards centralised vs. locally rooted universities and educations. (Bexell 67-78)

The first two views/influences are of particular importance in the context of this paper, since, as I have indicated above, the discussion regarding the humanities often centres around "bildung" vs. direct applicability. Traditionally, the humanities have been closest to the ideas put forward by academic traditionalists with its "bildungs" ideal. The current Swedish government and organisations such as Svenskt Näringsliv favour academic instrumentalism and direct applicability, however, and they have done so to the extent that section eight in the *Swedish Higher Education Act* seems to have been forgotten or at least ignored.

The Humanities in Higher Education

The topic in focus within the humanities is, as the name indicates, *human beings, human creation* and the *individual and collective creation of meaning*. The humanities traditionally incorporate subjects such as languages, linguistics, literature, philosophy, ethics, religion and visual and performing arts. Subjects, that are sometimes classified as a part of the humanities although sometimes labelled as "social sciences," include

history, anthropology, communication studies, cultural studies and law. All these disciplines address various methodological issues in different ways and although some of them — broadly speaking — use text analysis as a method, this is not always the case. In this paper, however, I will limit myself to text analysis as it is applied within the field of English.

In a recent newspaper article Associate Professor Thomas Karlsruhn, Uppsala University, leans on Helen Small's *The Value of the Humanities* and lists what might be considered the strengths of the humanities (my translation and summary):

- The *individual and collective creation of meaning*, which the humanities explore to an extent many other disciplines do not.
- The humanities provide an *extended notion of what is useful*, pulling the idea of usefulness away from academic instrumentalism.
- "Humanistic pursuits *enhance collective and individual happiness*, provides opportunities to *live more fully and develop one's intellect*." (This argument is rarely used today.)
- "*Democracy needs us*." Shaping human perception, humanity and politics. (This is a common argument in the U.S.)
- The *inherent value of the humanities*. The humanities are important in and of themselves. (my italics)

The fact that pro-humanities articles such as these are perceived to be needed underlines the lack of appreciation for the humanities — and "bildung" — shown by the current government and entrepreneurial organisations.

Bachelor's Programme in English: Language, Literature, Society

The department of Human Sciences at Kristianstad University offers a three-year bachelor's programme "Language, Literature, and Society." The programme description provides an example which enables us to concretise how text analysis as a method is being used.

This programme gives the students increased proficiency in the English language together with theoretical knowledge about English. This comprises both oral and written proficiency, as well as a thorough introduction to English linguistics and literary theory, including *the ability to correctly apply this knowledge*. The focus throughout the programme is on communication, and the aim of the modules that do not explicitly focus on English is *to strengthen the student's communicative ability* in various ways, and to make the student aware of how the use of English is *affected by historical, cultural, and social circumstances, as well as the subject area and the medium* through which it is communicated." (hkr.se, my italics)

As the italicised parts indicate, the students on this university programme are intended to move beyond the proficiency level of language learning and be able to

correctly apply theoretical perspectives within a historical, social and cultural English-speaking context. In other words, they are supposed to independently and critically assess and interpret matters — most commonly texts — at hand, which is very much in line with the requirements of the *Swedish Higher Education Act*.

So... How Do We Do It? — A Number of Questions

In further detail, how would a simple text analysis be performed? This is a basic model of questions I follow when teaching text analysis.

1. What is being said?

- Basic communication theory (Shannon & Weaver) and rhetorics: Who is the sender, who is the *intended* recipient, who is the *actual* recipient, what is the message and how is it framed?
- What are the underlying motives for the sender communicating this? How does the recipient interpret this message and why?

2. How is it being said?

- How is the message framed? This deals with the aesthetics of the text, the style, the genre, the language et cetera.

3. What is not being said?

- What is omitted and (potentially) why? What could be added to the picture the sender paints?

4. How does it fit together?

- How can the message be interpreted and why?
- What structures or patterns can be discerned?
- What parallels can be drawn and what similarities or differences can be seen in or between texts?
- What underlying worldview can be discerned?

Literary Theory

Literary theories have sometimes been described as lenses through which we interpret the world, or in this case works of literature, fictional or otherwise. Jonathan Culler, Professor of English at Cornell University describes theory in the following manner:

- Theory is interdisciplinary
- Theory is analytical and speculative
- Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural
- Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things (Culler 14-15)

Although we are primarily discussing literary theory here, Culler nevertheless emphasises the interdisciplinary character of theoretical approaches. In addition, he stresses the analytical, speculative, reflexive and enquiring aspects of theory, which, again, is closely linked to the independent and critical assessment requirement of the *Swedish Higher Education Act*.

Theories are valuable tools when attempting to see matters from differing viewpoints when analysing text. Lois Tyson, Professor of English at Grand Valley State University, gives the following perspective on the boundaries of each literary theory as she also brings the "one-eyedness" of theory into focus:

Think of each theory as a new pair of eye-glasses through which certain elements of our world are brought into focus while others, of course fade into the background ... Why should some ideas have to fade into the background in order to focus on others? Doesn't it suggest that each theory can offer only an incomplete picture of the world? (Tyson 3)

It is important to remember that the theories themselves usually reveal only one piece of the puzzle, and, as Lois Tyson suggests, the preference of one theory over another can also be political:

Indeed, because they are ways of seeing the world, critical theories compete with one another for dominance in educational and cultural communities. Each theory offers itself as the most (or the only) accurate means of understanding human experience. Thus, competition among theories has always had a strong political dimension. (Tyson 3)

In the field of English literature, critical theory/discussion/analysis — especially if more than one viewpoint is applied — provides the opportunity for students to analyse various texts and learn how to make *independent and critical assessments*, to *gather and interpret information* on human conditions and creations as well as the individual and collective creation of meaning — which is what the *Swedish Higher Education Act* requires from higher education within the humanities — or any other field — in Sweden.

So... Why Is Text Analysis Relevant?

On a general level, text analysis as a method inspires and requires students to think and assess independently and critically and to gather and interpret information from various points of view. This is at the very core of what we do as scholars and students of the humanities.

Depending on the current political tendencies, various aspects of the neutral criteria of the *Swedish Higher Education Act* can be highlighted more than others. The current Swedish government has empowered instrumental — entrepreneurial and utilitarian — aspects throughout the entire Swedish educational system, whereas the interpretational, critical and independent thinking/analysis/assessment have not

received as much attention. It does indeed permeate the current ideological framework so completely that it almost eclipses the value of the humanities and the intentions of the authors of section eight in the *Swedish Higher Education Act*.

The humanities “*bildungs*” ideal, focused on by Karlsruhn as well as Small, points to the exploration of individual and collective creation of meaning, an extended notion of what is useful, the idea that democracy needs varying views on humanity and politics and that the humanities thereby is important in and of itself. This idea seems to be well supported by the *Swedish Higher Education Act*.

Apart from foregrounding the aspect of proficiency and communicative ability in language learning, the programme description for the bachelor’s programme *Language, Literature, Society* indicates, on the local level, that students are also to learn how to correctly apply linguistic and literary theories in a manner outlined previously, understand that the use of English is affected by historical, cultural, and social circumstances, as well as the subject area and the medium through which it is communicated. Analytical and critical approaches are thus found at the core of the programme description.

Concluding words

There is a clear difference between the criteria in the *Swedish Higher Education Act* and contemporary political attitudes and foci. Although the subject of English might be considered useful from an instrumental point of view also in the current political climate because of its proficiency and internationalisation components, the analytical and interpretative aspects have not been valued as highly.

In this paper, I have mainly discussed how the discrepancies between the legal framework, the political intentions and initiatives, and the local framework of our programmes and courses within the humanities influence our teaching as well as the situation of the students, but I would like to point to how these discrepancies also tend to influence funding and research focus.

I hope to have shown that the core ideas of the *Swedish Higher Education Act*, regardless of political agendas, are thus put into the concrete context of the humanities in general and the subject of English, and text analysis, in particular.

With its focus on analysis and critical thinking, the humanities have the potential to provide important knowledge about human beings, human creation and the individual and collective creation of meaning. No other academic field focuses on this, and the viewpoint(s) of the humanities with its pluralistic and multifaceted approach is therefore crucial.

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