

Abstract

Textbooks for firefighters must bridge the gap between practitioners and theorists

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The paper presents the results of my doctoral thesis (Göransson 2004) which describes how a group of firefighters, who consistently maintain that they are “practitioners and not theorists” relate to various forms of language based knowledge and language based “knowledging” in their vocational training which is based on problem based learning. Data was gathered during 10 weeks on scene and consists of classroom- and training field observations, 14 qualitative interviews with six students and several informal discussions with learning firefighters.

From a sociocultural perspective to learning (Säljö 2000, Vygotskij 2001), and within the parameters of a didactic perspective (Uljens 1997) with the focus on the students as learning language users (Hymes 1986), understanding is searched for as regards what happens in the educational setting. Inspired by McCormick (1994) I consider the learning process as a meeting between the educational text and the student. The actions of the students and teachers are discussed in relation to external contexts, such as the students’ vocational background as firefighters and national curricular directives.

Also in vocational training students and teachers are faced with written-text based, often abstract, information which they are expected to read, critically study, question and reconstruct into new knowledge of their own. Our social contexts are of crucial significance to what and how we read, write and learn. Language use and learning are closely connected, but when the everyday language of the students encounters a logical-scientific paradigm at school language can create problems (Bruner 1986, Heath 1983). Here the learning method, in spite of its intentions, did not stimulate reading or writing, formal classroom interaction, abstract thinking or generalization. The firefighters saw much of the library work as a waste of time. They want to find their own working life reality in their text books. The theories they meet must be applicable directly to their working situation. It is a great challenge for text book authors to bridge the linguistic gap between practitioners and theorists and stimulate the dialogue between these different voices. My paper shows some possible ways of doing this.

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