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**Author(s):** Ekström, Nora

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# From the Shadow of a Myth to an Academic Subject: Teaching Writing from a Cognitive Base

Nora Ekström  
*University of Jyväskylä*

## Introduction

As any good story of creativity teaches us, we often need to look back in order to keep moving forward.

Wegener (2016: 187)

As a novice teacher about twenty years ago, I did not enter the classroom alone; I had an invisible army of my former teachers with me. My educational history manifested itself as principles, practical exercises and stories I told. However, at the time I wasn't conscious about this. There is a certain feeling of belonging that arises when remembering one's previous teachers. Their presence protects the young teacher. Yet imitation is not always wise. This is especially true in a field such as creative writing, which has more limited research on which to base its instruction. An army can do harm, too.

In my doctoral thesis, I tried to outline the principles of teaching Writing in the University of Jyväskylä at both Basic and Advanced levels (Ekström 2011). I have experience as both a student and a teacher in these studies, and yet the task was not easy. I found educational principles I agreed with, but which had no analogy in my own classroom practice. I found methods that had proved to be effective, yet I couldn't explain why. Finally, I ended up having to study both my own history—how I became a teacher of writing—and the history of creative writing in Finland.

The main purpose of research is to acquire new knowledge. I pointedly say in my thesis that I will try to get rid of the patterns of the past and find a better

alternative wherever possible. My approach to history, however, is appreciative (Ekström 2011: 19–20). As cognitive science has shown, without memory you cannot imagine (Mullally and Maguire 2014). Furthermore, when you know the past, you can also anticipate the future.

## Manifold impact of Fennomania

Today Finland is a bilingual country.<sup>1</sup> However, as Nilsson notes, “In fact Finnish-language literature was very unusual before the Romantic nationalist revival at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the first publication of the Kalevala epics by Elias Lönnrot in 1835–1836” (2010: 135). Finland belonged to Sweden from the Middle Ages until 1809, and during those years the Swedish-speaking minority was the dominant group (Broomans 2015: 18). When the Russian Empire subdued Finland, it became an autonomous Grand Duchy. One could speak about the issues arising from Russification (Hoeven 2015: 91–2), but on the other hand during autonomy Finland was able to grant all adult citizens the right to vote as the first country in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Finland declared its independence in 1917, just after the Russian Revolution. Yet even during the years of Russian rule, Swedish remained an important language for the culture and institutions (Mäkinen 2015: 288). Finnish-language literature was only beginning to develop, and the first known attempt to educate Finnish-language writers was an interesting reflection of the national situation.

Elisabeth Järnefelt held an unofficial literary salon for writers in the later part of the nineteenth century. Järnefelt, a Russian native who married a Finnish governor, chose to support Finnish-language literature, no doubt because she and the members of her group were Fennomans. (Kopponen 1985.) They wanted Finland to be independent and thus needed the support of the majority of the Finnish-speaking population (Kirby 2006: 91–8). At the time, Finland was in fact an area inhabited by several tribes (Pulkkinen 1999: 118). To Fennomans, arts were an important vehicle for depicting the “common folk” as united. Literature was especially important, as language unified the majority of people. Writing in Järnefelt’s group was therefore clearly connected to the Fennoman movement. For example, dialects were often used in written texts in order to reflect a naturalistic style (Kopponen 1985: 85).

<sup>1</sup> Officially, the languages are Finnish and Swedish. There is also a recognized Sámi minority, who live in Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Their main language is Northern Sami.

<sup>2</sup> More can be found at <http://www.helsinki.fi/sukupoluentutkimus/aanioikeus/en/index.htm>

The writers of Järnefelt's group were successful, especially Juhani Aho. His novels are still highly valued in the canon of Finnish literature. Aho has been described as a collective author (Niemi 1985: 42). He benefited from Järnefelt's group, for instance, when developing ideas for his novels (Aho and Niemi 1881/1986: 61). In this sense, it is a shame that Järnefelt's salon is not more widely known in Finland. I still encounter many students who feel that somehow it is less worthy to write in a collective way (Ekström 2018: 148–9). This is one of the sad legacies of the Romantic myth, which I will later discuss more specifically.

Nowadays I often mention Aho in my teaching: with his versatile texts he is a good example of a modern writer. An important theme to him was the relationship between nature and culture (Niemi 1985: 24–5, 33, 46). This theme is most timely and a good example of a motive for writing that does not require personal tragedy, as some theories of creativity have claimed.

Romanticist Fennomans believed that only vernacular language could express the soul of the people (Hoeven 2015: 85). At one point, Fennomans considered language as having the same status as a person's homeland (Virtanen 2002: 265). Eventually, Finnish and Swedish cultures began to diverge (Nilsson 2010: 135–8) and today only about 5 percent of the population speaks Swedish as their first language. There are no academic writing programs in Finland that operate in Swedish. All the information I managed to gather about teaching writing in Swedish was about short courses in community colleges. In fact, it is quite revealing that it was only writing this article which made me think about this issue for the first time.

Some of the Finnish Swedes speak Finnish so well that they can study writing in Finnish. Meanwhile, Swedish language writers can also travel to Sweden for education. There appear to be a number of similarities between the curricula of the Swedish University of Lund (2019) and University of Jyväskylä (2019a). Both focus upon the same theme; namely, the ability to give and receive feedback as a knowledge-based target for learning. This is an important difference with, for instance, the University of Iowa (2019a), whose online general catalog only says that the courses will involve “critique of class members' work.” In some course descriptions there is a little more detail, such as that “students will be expected to read the submitted story beforehand and respond with a letter as well as respectful and constructive in-class critique” (University of Iowa 2019b). However, there is no information detailing when and where the skill of giving feedback will be learned—and there is no mention at all about learning to receive feedback. So, it seems that at least in these two Scandinavian examples kindred culture leads to similarities in educational principles: learning to learn is emphasized.

## Finnish guidebooks for creative writers

It took a long time after Järnefelt's group before organized writing programs were established in Finland. Fennomans put literature on such a pedestal that it seemed almost impossible to teach fiction writing. The ideas of the Romantic era suited the Fennomans well: art, especially literature, was seen as representative of nature, and thus stood in opposition to the industrialized and organized society. During the Romantic era writing gained political dimensions (Eagleton 2008: 17). In Finland, even as late as the 1960s, only published authors were able to really deal with sensitive national topics (Jokinen 1997: 8–9). The Romantic concept concentrated one-sidedly on the unconscious part of creative process. Writing was primarily seen as a spontaneous activity: inspiration and ideas were considered more important than implementation. (Bennett 2005: 60–6; Weiner 2000: 76; Bolter 1991: 21; Ekström 2011: 37.) Authors remained outside of the society—or at least outside of the education provided by the society. As a result, organized teaching of writers started late compared to, say, that of the visual arts.

In the twentieth century writing guides were important ways of advising creative writers.<sup>3</sup> Studying the development of these guides reveals how the teaching of writing in Finland was slowly becoming possible at various level. In my thesis I peruse more than fifty Finnish writing guides for writers. In this article, it is possible to only mention a few. I therefore concentrate on those published before creative writing programs started up at universities in Finland.

Best-selling authors Vihtori Peltonen and Mika Waltari wrote the first two writing guides. Although these books have much in common, they reflect different aspects of Fennomania. In his foreword Peltonen (1900) regrets that he did not manage to write a better guide. Meanwhile, Waltari (1935/2005: 5–7) reports feeling a certain amount of hilarity when he wrote his text, which is an objectively less important book.

Peltonen published *Kynäilijä* (Scribbler/Penman) in 1900. He compares writing to building houses while also making his connection to academic studies clear. For example, he refers to Socrates when describing how true beauty depends on expediency. He describes how the demands of beauty and harmony guide approaches to narrative, letters, and scientific research. In this way, Peltonen portrays all humans as born with a natural sense for beauty—though

<sup>3</sup> Some writing guides are connected to foundations, which aim to educate both through short courses and by giving feedback through the mail. Read more at <https://kansanvalistusseura.fi/briefly-in-english/> and <https://nuorenoimoanliitto.fi/in-english>

he notes that aesthetic preferences are cultural and vary across different continents (Peltonen 1900: 5–9).

Peltonen published his novels under the pen-name Johannes Linnankoski. He was a journalist and the founder of a newspaper, as well as being an eager spokesperson for universal education (Laitinen 1998: 130). For a short while Peltonen studied teacher training, and both his book and career in general are examples of rapid national development. According to Söderhjelm neither of his parents could even write their own name. Yet they both were able, and eager, to read and willing to educate their children (Söderhjelm 1919: 18–21). This was probably due to the historical situation. As Mäkinen notes:

Still, as a legacy from Snellman and the *fennomania*, Finns see themselves even now as a nation of readers, where the circulation statistics of public libraries and the annual sales figures of book market are important pieces of news. This does not mean that everybody reads regularly. It is more a question of ideology and a feature of the national identity.

(2015: 297)

Peltonen did not romanticize writing, even though he mentions that genius is innate. Yet even a genius needs a lot of practice. He makes it clear that the skill of writing, then often considered a gift from birth, can be developed through practice and exercise (Peltonen 1900: 10–11). On the whole, Peltonen believes in the power of education, and he applies this directly to creative writing.

## What qualifications are required from an author?

Mika Waltari (1935/2005), author of the next writing guide started a tradition of focusing on the importance of the personality of the author. Indeed, I borrowed the title of this chapter after his guide's first heading. The title of his book is *Aiotko Kirjailijaksi?* (*Are You Going to be an Author?*).

The Romantic myth<sup>4</sup> about the innate genius of the writer makes it difficult to believe that writing can be taught, and Waltari's book is a good example of this. On one hand, he gives a lot of information and advice on how to become a writer, while on the other he belittles his own advice and therefore provides contradictory content. In fact, Waltari actually explicitly states that it is a good result if someone gives up writing after reading his guide and understands

<sup>4</sup> As Andrew Bennett (2005, 53–71) has pointed out, the concept of the literary genius was not as one-dimensional as some literature about the period has suggested.

how demanding writing really is (1935/2005: 10). The distrust of education is explicit.

According to Waltari, an author needs to be cultured, but there is no necessity to study in an organized way. Emphasizing the importance of personality, he claims to only give advice based on his experience as a writer, and for instance as an inspector of manuscripts offered to publishers. He even mentions avoiding taking example from guides published in other countries (Waltari 1935/2005: 6–7, 18, 59). He also makes no reference to Peltonen, which seems peculiar.

In addition to the Romantic myth, Waltari was also likely affected by contemporary biographic trends in literary study and research. In Finland, the focus of this research tended to emphasize the author's psychology (Koskela and Rojola 2000: 16–19). Correspondingly, there is a special emphasis on the author's personality and its importance when writing guides discuss fiction in the 1950s and 1960s (Ekström 2011: 47).

Waltari's description of a writer is somewhat contradictory. According to him the true author will experience a passionate youth and a restless adulthood. Furthermore, the new generations will push old authors aside. On the other hand, Waltari frequently uses terms such as "great" and "destiny" in an admiring way (Waltari 1935/2005: 12–15, 82, 147–9, 177). On the whole, Waltari makes many distinctions between different genres and kinds of authors: in particular, between the great ones and the ones who have to *settle*. These generalizations further emphasize the cult of the author's personality.

There is a principle in Waltari's guide that has strongly influenced my experiences both as a student of writing and my early years as an instructor. Waltari argues that authors should never explain their works or publicly oppose their critics (1935/2005: 211). This principle applied to classrooms in Finland even through to the beginning of the 2000s. In a typical feedback situation, the teacher and other students in the class discussed the work-in-progress almost as if the writer was not present at all. At least the writer was quiet—sometimes the rule was to talk only after everyone else had been given the opportunity to speak.

In 2006, I made a small-scale study about feedback with students at the very beginning of their creative writing studies. It was clear that these respondents also assumed the writer's role to be passive in feedback situations. I realized that I had also been instructing to take notes while receiving feedback, rather than to answer queries or discuss their own work. (Ekström 2008). In a humorous way, one could say that a student focusing on his notes was like a passenger in an airplane preparing for an emergency landing, head between the knees. I therefore

noticed a big difference between my concept of learning as an active constructivist process and my teaching practice.

Though I did not abandon guides for writers—and their advice—after this, I started to read them in another way: I paid more attention to whether the author leaned more on their pedagogical knowledge or their own experiences.

### Different generations meet in the classroom

An author and a scholar have in common the need to research. Peltonen (1900: 15) describes how writers both interview experts and engage in personal research through observation. Waltari (1935/2005: 20, 176) also mentions that authors often experience and explore the world, but he warns not to explore too much. Like a scholar, an author too is in danger of getting carried away in the exciting process of gathering information.

These suggestions by Peltonen and Waltari are central to recent studies of writing. Nevertheless, Erno Paasilinna emphasized the “explorer” metaphor in another way: “one should live a life that makes a writer” (1979a: 8). This quote became famous in Finland.<sup>5</sup> Paasilinna (1979b: 18) argues that education will unify writers and their way of observing. In fact, he claims (albeit vaguely) that there are examples of this from other countries. I believe these ideas reflect his experiences during his school years—he was educated during a time when behavioristic principles held sway, and when experts therefore concentrated on the tangible and observable, and were not as interested in the inner life of people (Bower and Hilgard 1981: 74).

Behaviorism focused on evaluation, and so did writing guides affected by this conception of learning. It was common for them to speak about evaluation instead of feedback. It therefore seems funny that some examples of rude evaluations were not only written but also reprinted. As a famous author, Hannu Salama describes the way he responds to a writer is to give a “rough response” which often includes swear words (Kylätasku and Linnilä 1970: 34). It appears to me that this phenomenon was due to the Romantic myth of the difficult genius, whereby authors did not care about appearing polite or civilized.

<sup>5</sup> Yet the author is questioned even in the editor’s preface (Korolainen 1979).



Paasilinna's ideas reveal an important lesson: the learning concepts of students might differ. This is why it is important to start education by discussing how one learns writing: what does feedback really mean? Why are the intentions of the writer important? Who is responsible for learning?

### Literature research in guides

Paasilinna (1979a: 9) says that language is the author's only tool and it therefore has to be personal. Although Paasilinna opposed writing programs, it is probable that this statement and overall formalistic literary research supported the creation of creative writing studies in Finland. Formalists spoke in the 1960s about literary language that deformed ordinary language (Eagleton 2008: 3). However, where should one learn this kind of language?

The most important literary theory in writing guides seems to be New Criticism, which put aside the personality of the author. It first appeared in Finland in the 1950s, but continued to appear in the guides twenty years later. At the same time, proper writing exercises begin to appear in these books. It seems that both in the United States and Finland, there was a clear connection between New Criticism and educating writers. Both educators and New Criticism emphasize a pragmatic approach to literature and the making of new texts (Myers 2006, 130–1; Ekström 2011, 48–9).

One of my former teachers, Liisa Enwald (1980) wrote a guide which also described New Criticism. As a young teacher I often taught close reading to my students as well. But since then I have grown more skeptical about applying the concepts of literary theory to teaching writing. Analysing the text simply shouldn't take more time—or pages—than writing it. Sometimes the concepts and methods of literary studies are too exact.

Waltari (1935/2005, 24–6) had already noticed the difference between literary theory and writing: he urges writers to respect literary studies, but emphasizes that a writer reads differently to a scholar. I believe that close reading frequently leads to feedback that is too specific, thus overwhelming the writer with information. Väinö Kirstinä (1976, 16) criticizes New Criticism for ignoring the text's relationship with reality. Maybe it should also be criticized for forgetting the writer, their capacity to receive feedback, their intentions, and their emotional connection with the text.

Enwald's (1980) guide is noteworthy because she gives advice on how to teach writers. This is a whole new level of thinking: how to improve the education of

writers instead of asking whether they should or should not be taught (Ekström 2011: 53–4).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, cognitive science was providing increased vocabulary and metaphors for the human mind (Anderson 1995, 11), and thus the practice of imagining and the process of creating was not seen as such a mystery anymore.

Writers were also gradually released from the expectation—as previously articulated by Fennomans—that they had a political duty. Waltari (2005/1935: 74–7) makes an important distinction between describing a social phenomenon and agitating for change. Väinö Kirstinä (1968) argues in his preface that the 1960s demand too much politics from writers. At the same time, the Arts Council’s contemporary report stated that it is the government’s responsibility to promote and develop the arts (Rautiainen 2008: 25). Instead of focusing on the author’s responsibility to support national pursuits, the coin was flipped; an artist scholarship scheme was planned in the 1960s and put into action in the 1970s and 1980s (Rautiainen 2007: 50). On the other hand, portraying Finnish common folk seems to be a consistent part of the Finnish literary canon. As Lyytikäinen points out, even parodies tend to replicate this theme and extend this emphasis on regular people. She also notices that even as late as 1999, “The popular media, however, seems to favor national subjects, and traditional literature is a constant source in this regard. Indeed, cinema appears to have become a central vehicle of ‘national’ art.” (Lyytikäinen 1999: 139 and 164).

One of the more recent guides refers back to Waltari in its title: Taija Tuominen wrote *Minusta Tulee Kirjailija (I am Going to be an Author)* in 2013. In a way, it closes the circle. At the end of the book there are references to both domestic and international writing guides, as well as novels and even creative research. Alongside writing guides, research is becoming increasingly important for writers. In the curriculum of Basic Studies, for example, students are asked to read an article about how to evoke vivid imagery in a reader’s mind (Suvanto 2016). Meanwhile, theses are often helpful, as they offer practical advice—or catalog a range of advice from a collection of writing guides.

## University of Jyväskylä: Studies in Writing

A comprehensive set of basic studies in writing courses were developed at Jyväskylä in 1992. A few years later specific subject studies were launched. Advanced studies begun in 2002. Behind the development of academic studies

<sup>6</sup> Short courses in Creative Writing had also been growing more common in community colleges since the middle of the 1960s.

in writing were the wishes of amateur writers and authors in Central Finland. Officially, the initiative came from the Regional Artist for literature, Markku Laitinen. Meanwhile, the advisory board consisted of members from several departments of the University of Jyväskylä: Communication, Literature, Art Education and Teacher Education. The board also had members from the Writers' Association of Central Finland (Vuori 1998: 10–11).

At least one member of the board, Pirkko Heikkinen (1999: 2) from the Youth Institute of Mikkeli, was familiar with the models of UCLA and Iowa. On the other hand, the first coordinator and teacher of the studies, Miisa Jääskeläinen (2002: 6–9), does not mention foreign writing programs at all when she summarizes her influences as a teacher. This corresponds with my experience as her student from the autumn of 1994 onwards.

Instead of seeking direct models, studies in writing in the University of Jyväskylä were developed by conducting a survey and asking about the wishes of the students (Vuori 1998). In 1997, teachers Miisa Jääskeläinen and Petri Pietiläinen mention that creative writing is taught in the United States and United Kingdom. Instead of describing these models in detail, however, they emphasize the value of research—in a book dedicated to introducing proseminar works written by the students. Furthermore, they criticize Anglo-Saxon education for concentrating on texts and genres, and claim that this focus should change. As a highly revealing example of successful change, they refer to the process writing method, which was created in an international research project which was itself joined by some educationalists from the University of Jyväskylä. They were thus seeking something similar for the development of teaching creative writing: an interdisciplinary component which involved active new research. (Jääskeläinen and Pietiläinen 1997: 1–3.)

Over the course of time, the title of the writing program at Jyväskylä University has been influenced by administrative policies as well as the natural development of the academic subject. The Writing Program changed first into Studies in Creative Writing, and finally into Studies in Writing. The omission of the word creative is meant to reflect the idea that all writing is creative in nature. This view of literature is related to pre-Romantic beliefs (Eagleton 2008: 15). It also reflects a key tenet of creativity research in recent decades: that creativity is natural to all humans, and it should therefore be encouraged in all teaching. Like Peltonen (1900), the curriculum in the writing program at Jyväskylä seeks to highlight the similarities between different genres and styles of writing.

At the moment, both basic studies and subject studies are organized by the Open University of Jyväskylä, and “creative writing is a line of specialization in

the advanced level of studies in Literature” (University of Jyväskylä 2019b). In advanced studies, students are able to write both scientific and creative texts as a part of their coursework and master’s thesis. Some doctoral theses have also been reviewed.

I choose to present here the curriculum overview of Basic Studies in Writing, since quantitatively such courses reach more students. Basic studies also plants a seed for all that comes later. Each course is worth five ECTS credits.

### **Basic Studies in Writing**

Compulsory courses:

- Artistic and Scientific Approaches to Writing
- The Writer as a Reader

Optional: choose one

- Fact and Fiction in Writing
- Creative Autobiographical Writing

Optional: choose two

- Prose
- Drama
- Poetry
- Non-fiction

Optional: choose one

- Text Collection
- Writing as a Creative Process

From the very beginning, the aim has been to form an investigative relationship with writing. In Basic Studies in Writing, students rehearse this, for example, by searching for new perspectives on family members during the course “Creative Autobiographical Writing.” Students interview relatives and gather information from sources such as diaries, old letters, or archives.

Permanent employees tend to be professional educators and researchers. Although one’s own writing experience is valuable, teaching expertise is also needed in the design of the study structure. This permanent staff ensures that the pedagogical ideas remain consistent through the study modules and that the teaching is based on research. During the introductory course, they will ensure that all students have certain basic skills both as students and writers. Creativity is viewed holistically, influenced by motivation, discipline, and the surrounding

community. It is as important to be aware of the cognitive processes behind creativity, as it is to be conscious of its communal nature (Sawyer 2012).

One of the next big questions at Jyväskylä—and other writing programs in Finland—is again a question of the language. We already have some (Finnish) students who would prefer to write in English, especially science fiction. Immigration is also expanding. Sweden is ahead of us with an international program in creative writing and thus a possible model for our future (University of Stockholm 2019). Since the University of Jyväskylä is also an active member of the European Association of Creative Writing Programs (EACWP), the basis for international co-operation is solid.

### In education, diversity is a benefit

There is a difference in educating authors and writers. In a language area of about five million people, it makes sense to educate writers who are able to make their living by producing many kinds of texts. Yet, the evaluative distinction that Waltari earlier made between different kinds of writers is unnecessary.

In Finish Open University students come from different backgrounds. Some have a doctoral degree and some haven't studied at all since primary school. Students have different professions and usually they are of various ages. Studies in writing often plays a role in the examinations of teachers and journalists. Some of the students are already published authors. Even though they share an interest in writing in common, as readers they differ. It is possible to lean on the knowledge of the participants. The classroom is filled with students who have an expertise in their mother tongue, and knowledge of various fields of literature as well as a wide range of genres.

My taste in literature is narrow; I have my likes and dislikes. But together with the group of students, we can overcome personal taste. Another way to overcome this is through research. This is why all education should be based on it. This principle does not exclude the writing guides. However, guides should be tested to prove their usefulness and validity.

Researching writing guides shows how attitudes towards writing and creativity have changed over time. It helps to understand and question the methods of one's teachers—and hopefully to question one's own methods too. For me, personally, it was extremely important to identify the relationship between my concept of learning and my teaching practice. Teaching creative writing should not start with the text but instead with the ability to learn. How

one learns writing? Who is responsible for learning? When we give up talking about natural-born gifts or “living a life that makes a writer,” the teacher’s responsibility grows a little bigger. At the very least, each instructor is responsible for thinking about teaching instead of repeating old models or sharing personal experience as generic. The academic tradition of systematic questioning is actually very beneficial in this sense. A writer, a teacher, and a scholar have lot in common, indeed.

Learning diaries are also a good example of the power of research. It seems to me that I knew their creative potential for a long time, but it was only after my colleague, Anne Mari Rautiainen started to research them for her doctoral dissertation that the opportunity of writing a learning diary in a creative way found its way into the actual written instructions of the courses. Naturally, more and more students have become interested in this new kind of learning diary since then.

In education, it is not the success of the teacher that counts, but the success and satisfaction of the students. I believe learning to write is a craft, but it cannot be learned only from the master or by reading a writing guide. Connecting with other apprentices is even more important. Rather than lecturing, it is the master’s task to create a framework for peer learning. With peer support it is also easier to question the instructor’s advice.

Maintaining a critical attitude towards writing studies means questioning whether the information gained is personally applicable. An important way to do this is through writing learning diaries. Writing these diaries is an opportunity to study different genres too; students are encouraged to write them in a creative way, for instance, in the form of a dialog in a drama course. I believe this also provides an important way to rehearse a new kind of writing, through playing with genre expectations while remaining objective. This form of expression can therefore also help bridge the gap between writing and the research of writing.

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