

# How Swedish Curricula Legitimise the Engagement with Literature in English

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## *Abstract*

Literary works are read and studied in English across the different parts of the Swedish education system, primary education, secondary education, higher education and teacher education. This article considers the rationale—the purposes and benefits—for doing so that are implicitly or explicitly pointed to in curricular documents, with special focus on the kinds of engagement with literature that are authorised by the academic English subject community for the Swedish academic and school contexts. By juxtaposing and synthesising findings from three previous curricular studies, the article identifies substantive justifications and, drawing on linguistic legitimation theory, discursive forms of legitimation that interoperate in syllabi and in other steering documents to claim the validity of engaging with literature in English. It shows that the rationale that remains constant across the education system relies on the links between literature and cultural learning, or analysis, and likewise on the potential of engagement with literature in English for furthering an understanding of the world and for fostering a desired democratic citizen ethos. The cross-educational perspective of the article shows that the interdependence between the different parts of the education system has both thematic and conceptual consequences for the kinds of engagement with literature that are given the status of official legitimations.

Keywords: literature, legitimation, syllabi, education system, English

## *1. Introduction*

The overarching question addressed in the present article is what justifies the engagement with English-language literature in Swedish education. One impetus for the article comes from the observation that policy-makers, subject specialists and other stakeholders responsible for curricular construction in various ways seek to ensure that literary works are read and studied in the permutations of the English subject across the national education system. English syllabi for primary education, secondary education, higher education and teacher education all stipulate an engagement with literature. This state of affairs raises the issue of what

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makes the reading and study of literature in a non-native language valuable—valuable enough to safeguard and promote across all parts of the education system. It also raises questions about the types of engagement with literature that are legitimated in the different parts of that system. A second, and principal, impetus for the article comes from three reviews I conducted of recent syllabi for academic general English courses, secondary and upper secondary teacher education courses and primary teacher education courses in English (Dodou 2020a; Dodou 2020b; Dodou 2021). Taken together, those reviews, which also included school syllabi, seemed to me to suggest a remarkable consistency when it came to certain functions envisioned for literature in English, across the academic and school contexts. They also suggested the relevance of considering whether the expectations placed on literature in English in one part of the education system affected those in another.

The academic syllabus reviews were also a reminder of the key role academic English studies have in formulating the value of reading and studying English-language literature, not only in academic settings, but also in school settings. English studies in Sweden are normally responsible for subject education in primary teacher education and in secondary and upper secondary teacher education (henceforth referred to as English teacher education). Beyond defining the worth of pursuing academic studies in the sub-discipline, English studies legitimise, via teacher education courses, various kinds of engagement with literature in English for Swedish compulsory and upper secondary education. The task involves interpreting school curricular stipulations about literature in English and imparting to student teachers an understanding of what makes the reading and study of English-language literature worthwhile. This role of English studies raises the matter of what types of engagement with literature the academic subject community endorses.

In what follows, I explore the position granted to literature in English and the key purposes and benefits of English-language literature authorised in curricular documents. I do so with special focus on the question of legitimation and by using the above-mentioned reviews of academic and school syllabi as a starting point. The article takes the form of a meta-discussion that accounts for and juxtaposes key findings from the studies. I consider representative examples from curricular documents to illustrate the substantive justifications and the discursive legitimation strategies evident within each part of the education system. Curricular

documents here refer to school curricula, to the English syllabi included in them and to syllabus supplements. Justifications are understood in terms of educational purposes and benefits—both articulated and implied. I take it that the ones the documents point to are those granted the status as official legitimations. Discursive legitimation strategies are understood in terms of Theo van Leeuwen's (2008) linguistic theory of legitimation, which seeks to understand how language legitimates social practices—such as the engagement with literature in education.

The cross-educational perspective that the article offers provides a basis for considering dominant assumptions in the present time about what makes engagement with English-language literature worthwhile. It also sheds light on the justifications for literature in English that are deemed as effective or even as possible to articulate for each educational context. By discussing academic syllabi in relation to curricular documents for compulsory and upper secondary school, the article helps to recognise how the justifications for English-language literature in academic settings are tethered to stipulations for school teaching. Thereby, it provides an appraisal of the *raison d'être* of literature in English in Swedish academia that takes into account the interdependence of the education system.

This interdependence, it is worth noting, is established via central steering documents for Swedish education, in sections five of the Swedish Education Act (2010:800) and eight of the Swedish Higher Education Act (1992:1432), and in the Qualifications Annex of the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100). These steering documents ensure that the various parts of the national education system—primary education, secondary education, higher education, teacher education—inter-operate, even as each part can also be understood as a system in its own right, with unique circumstances, origins and goals. In practice, this interdependence means, for instance, that academic English syllabi are required to inter-operate with school curricula to ensure a relatively smooth progression along the stages of the education system. What this interdependence may mean for how literature is legitimised in Swedish education has not been documented previously.

In the next few pages, I begin by clarifying the key assumptions I make about how curricula operate across the studied educational contexts and about what makes syllabi appropriate for the question at hand, and I explain how I approach the material. I then proceed to address the curricular documents themselves, beginning with school documents, and

then turning to academic general English syllabi and teacher education syllabi. I address the syllabi in this order, in part, to trace the engagement with literature in English envisioned chronologically through the education system, in part, to highlight the potential consequences of the interdependence between the different parts of that system. Based on these accounts, finally, I make some observations about the legitimation strategies used and I comment on the kinds of engagement with literature that the academic subject community authorises.

### *2. Material*

The three curricular reviews on which the article builds attended to the knowledge mediated and to the function ascribed to the study of literature in general academic syllabi, (Dodou 2020a), in English teacher education syllabi (Dodou 2020b) and in primary teacher education syllabi (Dodou 2021). The reviews were based mainly on analyses of course objectives, as well as content and learning outcomes. The examined corpus in these studies comprised some 310 syllabi that correspond to the full portfolio of academic English courses in Sweden that included the study of literature in the years in question. Of these, some 190 were course and programme syllabi for general English courses at undergraduate and advanced level from all 21 universities and university colleges nationally that included the academic study of English in the year 2016. A further 120 were course syllabi for teacher education from all 21 institutions that offered primary and/or English teacher education in the academic year 2017–18. The corpus also included the school syllabi for English current in the period studied, the curricula for compulsory school (SNAE 2018) and for upper secondary school (SNAE 2013), as well as the English syllabus supplements, respectively *Kommentarmaterial för kursplanen i engelska* (SNAE 2017) and *Kommentarmaterial för ämnesplanen i engelska* (SNAE 2011). Together, the reviews of this material provide the starting point for observations on how the reading and study of English-language literature are justified in official curricular documents across the Swedish education system.

### *3. Theoretical assumptions*

In basing my discussion on this material, I assume, with other studies concerned with the ‘why’ of literature education, that academic and school

syllabi document various notions of literature and of its value in education (Gouvernec, Höglund, Johansson, Kabel & Sønneland 2020: 3; Persson 2007: 108–216). As I have discussed elsewhere, the national curricula for compulsory education and for upper secondary education differ from academic syllabi, in terms of their status and jurisdiction (Dodou 2020b; Dodou 2021). Where compulsory and upper secondary education have national curricula, formulated by the Swedish National Agency for Education, SNAE, academic curricula for general English courses and for teacher education specialisations are products of local decision-making within English studies and faculty boards at each institution. In both contexts, however, English curricular documents and, in particular, syllabi serve as official delimitations of the purposes, content, and practices of the English school and academic subjects, respectively, and they indicate the desired functions and effects attached to the study of literature by subject experts and other stakeholders.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I draw on curriculum theory which emphasises that syllabi, and the curricula that contain them, are products of compromise shaped within various social and institutional contexts, and that they delimit the kinds of knowledge that are considered to be valid (Lundgren 1979: 231–239; Englund 2005: 11; Barnett & Coate 2005: 27–40). I take it that the position and justification of literature in syllabi and in other curricular documents are indicative of at least two things. First, based on the status of curricula as products of compromise, I assume that the purposes and benefits envisioned for English-language literature and its study are suggestive of the kinds of justifications that were recognised as particularly effective in each setting, or even as the ones possible to make in order for the syllabi to be ratified. Second, based on the idea that curricula delimit the knowledge and practices deemed as valid, I regard the knowledge areas foregrounded as indicative of underlying assumptions about the purposes and value of engagement with literature in English. At issue here are conceptions of literature, of literary studies and of English

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<sup>1</sup> According to the SNAE webpage, school syllabi (revisions) are produced in consultation with school teachers, pupils and researchers and with input from interest groups, trade unions and other stakeholders (<https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/aktuella-forandringar-pa-grundskoleniva/andrade-laroplaner-och-kursplaner-hosten-2022> Accessed 11 August 2021).

that the academic English community and other stakeholders take for granted and that affect curricular construction.

Drawing on van Leeuwen's (2008) linguistic legitimation theory, further, I assume that the language used in syllabi to describe the position, purposes and goals attached to literature and its study is telling of how syllabi attempt to establish and to cultivate the belief in the legitimacy of reading and studying literature in English.

#### *4. Delimitations and methodological considerations*

In the meta-discussion that follows, I do not present a renewed analysis of the syllabi based on legitimation theory. Moreover, I do not seek to quantify the recurrence of various forms of legitimation or to identify a hierarchical relation between different legitimation strategies. Van Leeuwen's (2008: 105) categories of legitimation, rather, are used to bring into relief common strategies that account for the presence of literature in English. Thereby, the categories help to recognise how the purposes and benefits of engagement with literature are contextualised and formulated in each part of the education system. They also indicate ways in which justifications evident in one part of the education system interlink with justifications in another part of that system. The categories visible in the studied syllabi and to which I return below are: 1. 'authorisation' (i.e. 'legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law and/or persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested'), 2. 'instrumental rationalisation' (i.e. 'legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action and to the knowledges that society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity') and 3. 'moral evaluation' (i.e. 'legitimation by [often oblique] reference to value systems').

A comment is in order, here, on the syllabi studied. Unlike school curricular documents, which are limited to a small number, for academic English courses there is a proliferation of local syllabi. This mathematical reality notwithstanding, when it comes to the position and justifications for literature across the 190 general English syllabi studied, it is possible to talk about a higher education curriculum for English literary studies nationally. The syllabi, namely, point to a shared logic of curricular construction across the 21 higher education institutions, despite noticeable discrepancies in the financial, personnel, and other conditions for English studies, locally. The curricular logic is evident in the common progression

envisioned in academic English syllabi for undergraduate and advanced level studies, as well as in a widespread consensus about the objectives and nature of English-language literary studies (Dodou 2020a; Dodou 2020c). Similarly, the syllabi for primary teacher education and English teacher education each suggest a dominant logic of curricular construction, with respect to literature. This is evident despite the different ways in which the study of literature is organised, based on local decisions about teacher training programme structure across the 21 institutions. This national accord about the position and orientation of literary studies in English within these parts of the education system enables a discussion of dominant justification strategies across the studied higher education institutions.

It should be noted, moreover, that my discussion largely points inward to a logic of practice within English in each part of the education system and to valuations of literature and its study. This means that I do not address the curricular significance ascribed to engagement with English-language literature in relation to, say, public debates about the nature and tasks of education. However, in the contextual approach I take, I refer to stipulations in steering documents at national level, specifically the Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Higher Education Act (1992:14) and Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100). Additionally, I refer to European level policy, with special focus on the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, CEFR (2001), on which the English school syllabi build.

##### *5. School curricula*

To begin with school curricula, in the English syllabi current at the time of the studies, literature was included as part of the core content for teaching at all stages, especially in relation to goals of language 'reception', that is 'listening and reading' (SNAE 2018: 35–36; SNAE 2013: 3–12). In upper secondary education, literature could be found also as part of the 'content of communication'. Taken together, so the syllabus supplement for the compulsory school explained, the English syllabus traced a logic of progression whereby the core content of communication corresponded to 'the development of the pupils' language abilities' and the 'content' of literature was 'adapted to pupils' age' (SNAE 2017: 10, 13, my translations). This progression, in turn, corresponded to the levels of language proficiency described in CEFR (Council of Europe 2001; see

also SNAE 2013 and 2017). In secondary education, there was, with respect to literature, a gradual broadening of pupils' literary repertoires (SNAE 2017: 13), and in upper secondary education, pupils were expected to be able to discuss '[t]hemes, ideas, form and content in film and literature' and study 'cultural expressions in modern times and historically, such as literary periods', in English (SNAE 2013: 7, 11). As the syllabi and their supplements clarified, literature was one of many textual genres that pupils should encounter in the English classroom. What is more, while literature was included in the core content of English, it was not explicitly part of the aim, goals and knowledge requirements articulated for the English school subject at any level.

At first sight, in these documents, the inclusion of literature in English was legitimised via 'authorisation' (van Leeuwen 2008: 106–109). Because the syllabus and its supplement offered no explicit rationale for engaging with literature in English, the answer to the question why literature should be taught in this subject seems to be that the policy documents said so. In other words, the authority of the national syllabi legitimised the inclusion of literature. However, if the implicit purposes and benefits of literature in relation to the goals of the English subject are factored in, the curricular formulations divulge that another form of legitimisation was at play, namely 'instrumental rationalisation' (van Leeuwen 2008: 113–117). Here, justification is based on the utility of the content and practices to reach the goals of the English school subject.

The overarching objectives of the subject for years 1–9 were to help pupils

to develop knowledge of the English language and of the areas and contexts where English is used, and also pupils' confidence in their ability to use the language in different situations and for different purposes. Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop all-round communicative skills. (SNAE 2018: 34)

An additional aim was that pupils develop 'knowledge about and an understanding of different living conditions, as well as social and cultural phenomena in the areas and contexts where English is used' (SNAE 2018: 34). The aims were reiterated in the English syllabus for upper secondary education, albeit with some broadening of scope.<sup>2</sup> These objectives, in

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, for upper secondary education, emphasis was placed on pupils' 'knowledge of language and the surrounding world' (SNAE 2011: 1).

turn, were subsumed under the overall intentions expressed in section four of the Swedish Education Act (2010:800) that compulsory and upper secondary education should help pupils acquire and develop ‘knowledge and values’ as well as ‘impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based’.<sup>3</sup> These intentions were defined as overarching tasks for compulsory and upper secondary education in each curriculum (SNAE 2013: 4; SNAE 2018: 5).

The formulations in these steering documents indicate that the benefits of engaging with literature in English were to be understood primarily in relation to subject aims of developed communicative abilities and (inter)cultural learning, and in relation to overall curricular goals of democratic citizenship formation. Literary works, the syllabi and supplements imply, were ‘keys to understanding the language’ (SNAE 2017: 8, my translation); they were examples of ‘cultural phenomena’ and vehicles of ideas, attitudes and values (SNAE 2011: 5; SNAE 2017: 12). Both syllabus supplements, it may be noted, explicitly defined ‘cultural phenomena’ as not merely literature, art or theatre, but mainly as knowledge about living conditions, forms of social interaction, norms of behaviour and social matters (SNAE 2011: 5; SNAE 2017: 12). Benefits of engaging with literature that may be surmised include developed skills of English language reception and production, not least the ability to ‘interpret what is read or listened to’ (SNAE 2017: 12). Likewise, they include increased general knowledge, especially as regards aspects of English-speaking cultures and societies. These benefits, in turn, recall values expressed in CEFR (2001: 1–8), where intercultural and communicative competence were defined as key to European mobility and prosperity, alongside the preservation of a healthy democracy, and where the political ambition to foster ‘respect for identity and cultural diversity’ was explicitly linked to language learning (2001: 5).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The translation of the legal text is taken from the English version of the *Curriculum for compulsory school* (SNAE 2018: 5).

<sup>4</sup> In a comparative study of L1 curricula for lower secondary school in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, Gouvernec et al. (2020: 28) show that literature education in the mother tongue serves ‘as a means to maintain and improve democratic society and through the moulding and development of good citizens’. In relation to curricular formulations for the Swedish school subject, no fewer than eleven justifications for literature have been identified (Persson 2007: 123–

As a form of legitimation, ‘instrumental rationalisation’ involves the justification of practices via allusions to unspoken value systems and to a moral logic regarding the desired goals and effects (Wodak & van Leeuwen 1999: 105). With respect to engagement with literature, in English its inclusion was implicitly legitimised in the curricular documents via oblique references, for instance, to the intercultural understanding that foreign language learning was recognised as particularly apt to develop, in European and Swedish educational policy. In this regard, the engagement with literature was defined as a ‘moralised activity’ (Wodak & van Leeuwen 1999:105), which was coded as positive.

The implicit justifications in the school steering documents, then, were suggestive of a logic of foreign language teaching in Sweden where literature in a non-native language serves to develop target language skills and what today is often called cultural learning and intercultural communication. By extension, the curricular documents implicitly authorised language approaches (primarily) and cultural approaches to literature in the English school classroom.

#### *6. General academic English syllabi*

Unlike school syllabi, in the academic English syllabi studied, literary studies comprised a substantial part of the undergraduate curriculum and, at advanced level, they sometimes involved the sole focus of one- or two-year MA programmes in English. The comparative analysis of learning outcomes and content formulations pointed to the following four main, interwoven aims for literary studies:

The first concerns knowledge about literature—its genres, themes, and development—and its relation to circumstances of its production. The second main aim concerns disciplinary knowledge, especially ways of engaging with literary texts and related cultural expressions that are typical for literary studies. The third cluster

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137). These include that the teaching of literature provides experiences, offers knowledge, develops language, develops and strengthens personal identity, promotes good reading habits, counteracts undemocratic values, and provides knowledge about literature, literary history and literary terminology, thus making pupils better readers. While these legitimations for literature were not articulated for the English subject, they were apparently part of a logic of curricular construction that characterised the work of the Swedish National Agency for Education.

regards contextual knowledge about culture, broadly defined as socio-historical events, phenomena and attitudes, and its significance for the study of literature. The fourth involves knowledge about modes of thinking typical of scholarly communities. (Dodou 2020a: 267)

A further, different order, aim concerned students' abilities to formulate their analyses in correct and appropriate English. In what follows, I take these aims as a starting point to identify substantive justifications for the engagement with literature, and by way of examples discursive legitimisation strategies for the same. The list is not exhaustive, but it is representative of dominant justifications offered. I should add that I rarely make distinctions between justifications in undergraduate and advanced level studies, as the justifications were not necessarily based on different purposes or benefits. Instead, the discursive strategies changed, so that, for example, theoretical assumptions were more often made explicit in advanced level syllabi. Justifications, it should be observed, were normally implicit and so subject to interpretation.

#### *6.1 Disciplinarity and the fostering of critical readers*

One key way in which general academic syllabi justified literary studies was via disciplinarity. Syllabi highlighted the generic and discipline-specific scholarly competences literary studies involve and, on occasion, they included statements that literary studies are one of the “two main branches of English as an academic subject” (Kristianstad 2016: ENK102). When it comes to justifying the study of literature, the syllabi normally announced that literary studies were part of the curriculum, and so legitimised them by way of ‘authorisation’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 106–109). The legitimacy of literary studies rested on the expertise—and authority—that the educational institution harboured and this helped to distinguish an educational project that emanates from the academic discipline from the aims and content of the school subject.

This demarcation implied both a continuation of and a break from the school curricula. On the one hand, because literary studies at both undergraduate and advanced level revolved around reading (as the disciplinary question and method legitimised in the syllabi), the study of English-language literature was a continuation of the activities in schools: students read English-language literature and they wrote and talked about it. On the other hand, academic English studies involved a shift of focus

as well as of practice. Literature was visibly a privileged object of study in academic curricula, which focused foremost on discipline-specific knowledge and practices—be those expressed in terms of a developed ability to ‘read literary texts closely and sensitively’ (Malmö 2015: EN102B) or to use ‘theories and concepts in ... independent analyses and interpretations’ of literary works (Dalarna 2014: EN3067). The emphasis in almost all syllabi on literary concepts, on ‘close reading’, and on ‘critical analysis’ points to the ambition to ‘discipline’ students’ engagement with literature.

The benefits of thus engaging with literature in English were not articulated in the studied syllabi. Content descriptions and learning outcomes on interpretative and analytical abilities, however, suggested that disciplinary modes of reading were meant to foster better readers. The latter can be understood as readers who possess ‘literary competence’ (Culler 1997), who understand the particularities of representational forms of language and who are, as it were, sophisticated and critical. Learning outcomes for literary studies regularly foregrounded critical abilities, both the ability to ‘critically assess information and sources’ with ‘scholarly awareness’ (Lund 2014: ENGX54, my translation), and the ability to ‘critically consider language representations as constructing gender, ethnicity and class’ (Gothenburg 2015: EN2214, my translation). Moreover, some syllabi suggested that literary reading skills were transferable when making sense of other ‘cultural phenomena’ (Linköping 2013: 711G25, my translation) or ‘forms of narrative’ (Stockholm 2011: ENPS27, my translation). In this respect, discipline-specific practices of reading were valuable for developing students’ generic abilities of critical reasoning and evaluation of ideas. Thereby, literary reading practices were also implicitly legitimised in terms of ‘instrumental rationalisation’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 113–117), that is, the purposefulness of the practices, for helping to achieve desired educational effects.

The discursive legitimations, it is worth noting, for instance when it comes to critical thinking, also involved ‘moral evaluation’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 109–110)—literary studies, that is, were legitimated by (oblique) reference to value systems. In both policy and literary theory, sharpened critical abilities have been valorised for better equipping students for participatory citizenship as well as for helping to maintain a healthy democracy. The Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), for one, has highlighted students’ abilities to ‘critically interpret’ relevant

information and to ‘discuss phenomena, issues and situations critically’. The discipline, further, has regarded the promotion of critical thinking both as a corollary of literary studies, particularly in arguments that emphasise their vigilant and detached reading practices (Miller 1989), and as a property of literature itself, especially when literature is understood as enacting social or political critique (Felski 2015: 16). By hinting at these values and the potential of literary studies to promote them, the syllabi justified the presence of literature as well as the recurring focus in literary studies on reading practices informed by critical and cultural theories.

### *6.2 Subject matter, intellectual horizons and ethos building*

Besides these justifications, which concern developed disciplinary and cognitive skills transferable beyond the academic area of study, key justifications were based on textual selections and the topics and theoretical perspectives thematised. To begin with textual selections, a justification tied to aims concerning knowledge about literature relied on what could be called the canonicity of the studied material. A recurring goal, especially in survey and thematic courses irrespective of level, was to familiarise students with a canon of literary works and writers, and with ‘representative’ or ‘key’ literary movements, periods and genres, topics and theories. Repeatedly, syllabi announced that courses aimed to introduce the ‘most significant authors and works’ (Lund 2014: ENGA21), ‘the most important literary theories’ (Umeå 2016: 1EN061, my translation), and ‘central interests ... representative subjects, questions and aesthetic strategies’ for particular periods or bodies of work (Uppsala 2014: 5EN423). Similarly, a handful of syllabi indicated an ambition to help students situate (critical and cultural) ‘theories in a larger cultural, social, and ideological context’ (Dalarna 2015: EN3056). In van Leeuwen’s (2008: 113–117) terms, the examples display a form of legitimation based on ‘instrumental rationalisation’, that is, based on the utility of a particular content.

The benefits of studying literature in English, so these syllabi suggest, entail the acquisition of general knowledge with respect to canons of thought and writing. The benefits foremost seemed to concern the development of students’ horizons of intelligibility. These included initiating students into literary and intellectual traditions that inform the academic study of literature—and so expanding students’ understanding of such matters as literary conventions and innovations, and, on occasion,

literary historiography, processes of canonisation and the problem of representing reality. At the same time, the artistic and intellectual inheritance to which students were introduced, not least via theory, would help them to understand a range of social, political, ethical and representational matters that transcend both the discipline of literary studies and the context of the English-speaking world. In other words, the content of literary studies meant that the projected benefits of studying literature surpassed the specifically literary and disciplinary.

A related justification for literary studies was by way of the cultural-contextualising orientation of the subject matters and theories addressed. This justification relied on the prevailing curricular valorisation of literature for the ways in which it relates, and responds, to the circumstances out of which it arises, and its valuation as a source of knowledge and as a means of understanding the world. Syllabi at both undergraduate and advanced level repeatedly highlighted students' dual abilities to understand aspects of English-speaking cultures through literary representations and to understand literary works in light of their historical, social and cultural contexts. Even if not all syllabi offered definitions of literature, some described literary works as 'reflections of the writers' and their readers' values' (Skövde 2014: EN127G, my translation), as a 'record ... [of] cultural assumptions' (Dalarna 2014: EN1120), and as a 'political instrument for social critique' (Gothenburg 2015: EN2214, my translation). Thereby, they indicated that literature serves both to illustrate various social phenomena, practices and values and to probe matters of public concern, such as social justice. The subject matters most frequently foregrounded in the studied syllabi in relation to literary studies, it should be noted, included representations of gender, colonialism and postcolonialism, ethnicity, nationality and power. These topics were in keeping with the theories most frequently stated in syllabi at both the undergraduate and advanced levels, which normally centred on modern critical and cultural schools of thought.

The benefits of literary studies implied here include the following. Academic literary studies familiarised students with social conditions, political ideologies and cultural mentalities from different English-speaking societies and at different points in time. Thereby literary studies imparted an understanding of various facets of English-speaking 'culture'—broadly understood—to language students unfamiliar with the histories and societies of the English-speaking world, and thus contributed

to students' general knowledge. This aim and the envisioned benefits, it can be noted, were consonant with the ambitions for literature in English in the school curricula. In some cases, the language of academic syllabi even recalls school curricular documents. One example is the English I syllabus that declared the aim to impart knowledge about 'social structures and everyday life in the USA and Great Britain' (Linköping 2012: 711G26, my translation). An additional benefit alluded to in the syllabi was the fostering of students' contextual reading skills, that is, their ability to regard literary works in relation to other texts, and to specific ideas, incidents or events. At the same time, the governing theoretical-critical investment in matters of social justice suggests that in the academic context English literary studies were, at least partly, an ethos-building project. The benefits here included the shaping of citizens, to use Nussbaum's terms (2002: 289), who can imagine 'what it would be like to be in the position of someone very different from oneself', who are able to function in a complex interlocking world and who can question taken-for-granted ideas and traditions.

'Instrumental rationalisation' (van Leeuwen 2008: 113–117), then, was a key means of legitimating literary studies when reference was made to the thematic or theoretical orientation of literary studies, and to conceptions of literature. Characteristically for this form of legitimation, the functions foregrounded were attached to a moral logic. In the studied syllabi, this logic largely concerned citizenship formation. The system of values obliquely alluded to can be traced to discipline-specific discourses about the potential of literary studies to equip students for participatory citizenship mentioned above. It can also be understood in terms of allusions to the underlying values of the Swedish higher education system, both democratic values that emphasise equality, sustainability and justice and the goal to 'promote understanding of other countries and of international circumstances' (Higher Education Act 1992:1434, Section 5).

### *6.3 Literary studies in general academic syllabi*

As the account suggests, the substantive justification for literary studies found in the academic syllabi included the reasoning abilities that literary studies can help to develop, the horizons of intelligibility that they can offer and the ethos-building work that they can facilitate. Their potential to develop students' language abilities, on the other hand—unlike school

curricula—was not a primary vindication of literary studies in academic general English curricula.

## *7. Teacher education syllabi*

### *7.1 English teacher education*

In secondary and upper secondary teacher education, English syllabi were often so designed as to harmonise with syllabi for the academic discipline, with regard to the curricular position, aims and substance of literary studies, and progression normally followed the logic of general syllabi for English I-III, 1-90 credits (Dodou 2020b). Literary studies enjoyed a similarly prominent position, although the requirements of teacher education policy meant that the number of credits dedicated to literature courses, and to English more generally, were somewhat more limited.<sup>5</sup> Like general English syllabi, syllabi for English teacher education pointed to a relative consensus about the orientation of literary studies, with regard to the focus on the disciplinary questions of reading and sense-making, the emphasis on literature's ability to offer insights about the world, as well as the areas of thematic interest and the theoretical tools for literary analysis prioritised. Major subject matters addressed included gender and ethnicity and the theoretical-critical investments that dominated coalesced around modern critical and cultural theories, especially those formulated since the 1960s (Dodou 2020b: 134–140).

A principal goal with literary studies in the 87 syllabi in question concerned student teachers' ability to 'read, analyse and interpret literary texts' (Mälardalen 2013: ENA207, my translation) using 'adequate terminology' (West 2017: ELI201, my translation) and 'theoretical concepts and perspectives' (Karlstad 2017: ENGL13, my translation). Another was that students familiarise themselves with cultural conditions in English-speaking countries. To this end, literature regularly served to 'shed light on social, cultural and historical phenomena in English-speaking countries' (Borås 2017: 11EN50, my translation). A third goal, regarding the spectrum and development of English-language literature and present particularly in programme specialisations for upper secondary

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<sup>5</sup> English curricula comprised 45-90 credits for secondary teacher education and 90–120 credits for upper secondary teacher education, and they normally devoted 7.5–15 literature-oriented credits in the former and 20–25 in the latter programme (Dodou 2020b).

education, included ‘familiarity with literary epochs, genres and narrative elements’ (Linneaus 2017: 1ENÄ04, my translation). As with general English syllabi, English teacher education syllabi emphasised students’ abilities to apply scholarly principles to problems. An added goal concerned the uses of literature in language education. Compared with general English syllabi, in teacher education syllabi aims regarding students’ language proficiency were more prominent.

Unsurprisingly, given the correspondence between general and English teacher education syllabi, some of the outlined benefits for literary studies also overlapped. Literary studies, so the documents implied, foster nuanced and contextualised reading practices, alongside literary competence, and so make better readers. They develop student teachers’ analytical and reasoning abilities, thus equipping them as critical thinkers. Moreover, literary studies contribute to student teachers’ acquisition of general knowledge about social conditions, historical events, and cultural phenomena in English-speaking countries. They develop student teachers’ horizons of intelligibility and so help them to better make sense of ‘socio-cultural questions’ and ‘socio-historical conditions’. In so doing, literary studies further student teachers’ understanding of themselves and the world and they sharpen students’ cognitive capacities—for instance, to evaluate aspects of reality.

In the syllabi, the legitimacy of literary studies largely rested on ‘instrumental rationalisation’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 113–117), or the purposefulness of the content, in relation both to the ideals of disciplinary and citizenship formation outlined in the general English syllabi section above and to the professional requirements of teacher qualification programmes. Likewise, it relied on ‘authorisation’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 106–109), in particular the authority of official regulations for teacher education and for school teaching. Indeed, the syllabi recurrently legitimated literary studies by way of amalgamating disciplinary goals with national regulations for compulsory, upper secondary and higher education. For instance, the presence of literary history survey courses was implicitly justified, not only in relation to the authority of specialists in the sub-discipline and of the academic subject tradition to teach literary history. It was also justified in relation to school curricular stipulations that upper secondary school teaching should address ‘literary periods’ (SNAE 2013: 7). Similarly, broad textual definitions, which mean that films and television series occasionally featured in literature courses, indirectly

served to justify literary studies as much based on disciplinary developments (such as the cultural turn in literary studies) as on school curricular stipulations concerning the teaching of ‘fiction in spoken, dramatised and filmed forms’ in English (SNAE 2018: 37).

Besides unequivocal allusions to the core content of the English school subject, by virtue of their thematic and theoretical orientation, the teacher education syllabi alluded to values underpinning the national education system. For instance, the syllabi repeatedly emphasised ‘cultural questions such as ethnicity, identity, ethics and multicultural society’ (Dalarna 2013: EN1103, my translation) and ‘perspectives on equality and diversity’ (Jönköping 2017: LE2N16, my translation). This thematic and theoretical focus was in keeping with the predominant orientation of general English syllabi toward various areas of political and ethical interest. The focus was consistent with school curriculum stipulations that education ‘should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based’ (2018: 5; 2017: 7). It was also consistent with the ethos underpinning the Swedish Education Act (2010:800, Section 4) and Higher Education Act (1992:1434, Section 5) regarding social sustainability and international awareness. In other words, the syllabi legitimised the engagement with literature as a ‘moralised activity’ (Wodak & van Leeuwen 1999: 105), which can shape the cognitive abilities and democratic ethos of student teachers—and, by extension, of their pupils.

### *7.2 Primary teacher education*

In primary teacher education, which is generalist by nature rather than based on disciplinary specialisation, English studies devoted no more than five weeks to the study of literature—though often its study was much briefer. In several cases, especially in the syllabi for years 4–6 of the compulsory school, special courses were dedicated to literature, though literature also regularly featured in courses on English language teaching and learning, especially for years 1–3.

The most frequently recurring aim formulated for the study of literature in the 33 studied syllabi concerned the uses of literature in English language teaching—with special focus on its potential for furthering pupils’ language development. This aim characterised the position and orientation of engagement with literature especially in years 1–3 syllabi. In syllabi for years 4–6, the aims also included developed

‘strategies of interpretation’ (Karlstad 2015: LPGG15, my translation) and abilities to ‘analyse literary and cultural narratives’ (West 2016: EFG401, my translation). Likewise, years 4–6 courses aimed to develop student teachers’ knowledge about English-language literature as well as to give them ‘insights into parts of English-speaking culture’ (Gävle 2017: ENG509, my translation). Their purposes included developing student teachers’ skills of reading, ‘critical ability’ (Luleå 2016: E0003P, my translation) and the ability to ‘reflect on social and cultural expressions in the English-speaking world’ (Dalarna 2014: EN1116). An aim evident in both programme specialisations, but typical primarily for syllabi that included distinct literature courses, was to ‘improve [teacher] students’ writing’ (Södertörn 2017: 1089EN) and language proficiency, more generally, by way of literature.

A distinctive feature for primary teacher education syllabi, worth noting, is that they habitually equated the needs of pupils, as described in the school curriculum, with the needs of student teachers for professional preparation. For instance, syllabi regularly established an overlap between the needs for language development of primary student teachers and of primary school pupils. Similarly, engagement with literature was repeatedly presented as beneficial in comparable ways for student teachers and their prospective pupils as regards furthering their ‘creativity and intercultural ability’ (Mälardalen 2015: ENA602, my translation) and their ‘understanding of language, literature and culture’ (Borås 2018: C46E60, my translation). This tendency suggests that the study of English-language literature in primary teacher education was not self-evident, but largely depended on school curricular stipulations regarding the core content and aims of English. A key means to justify it was to refer to the language learning logic of the school subject, with respect to both language development and intercultural awareness.

If the presence of literature was implicitly justified by way of ‘authorisation’ and allusions to the school curriculum requirements about the inclusion of ‘[s]ongs, rhymes, poems and tales’ as well as ‘narratives for children’ as part of the content of their teaching (SNAE 2018: 35–36), its study was legitimised via ‘instrumental rationalisation’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 113–117). Principal emphasis was placed on the utility of the chosen content for professional preparation. What mainly justified the study of literature in syllabi for years 1–3, for instance, was its contribution to student teachers’ developing repertoire of appropriate teaching materials

and instructional methods. Whether they emphasised student teachers' awareness of how to use literature in light of 'theories on vocabulary and phrase acquisition' (Halmstad 2017: EN2045, my translation) or their training in 'reading aloud and in free narration' (Linneaus 2016: 1GN036, my translation), the syllabi implied that, in years 1–3 courses, literature served to expand student teachers' methodological toolkits for language teaching. By contrast, in most syllabi for years 4–6, the study of literature was also justified in terms that recall English teacher education and general academic syllabi. The aims of literary studies, namely, suggested that the benefits of studying literature involve sharpened cognitive abilities of reasoning and analysis and an informed understanding of aspects of English-speaking societies. In this respect, the study of literature was linked not only to teachers' professional skills, but also to their personal growth and citizenship formation.

### *7.3 The study of literature in teacher education*

The justifications for the study of literature in teacher education programmes were closely tied to school curricular stipulations and to professional training. In primary teacher education, and for years 1–3 especially, the logic of the language subject of English was predominant. Important justifications for English teacher education and for the years 4–6 programme specialisation were the development of literary reading skills and of reasoning abilities, as well as the development of student teachers' language competences and of their general knowledge. The approaches to literature authorised in English teacher education were mainly critical and contextualising, whereas in primary teacher education they mainly prioritised cultural learning and language development.

### *8. How the engagement with literature in English is legitimised*

Over the last several pages, I have traced major purposes and benefits, to which curricular documents point, for including literature in English across the various parts of the Swedish education system. I have shown that these documents reveal both continuations and discontinuations in the justifications for engaging with literature in English. By way of concluding, I comment on those justifications and on how various forms of legitimation interoperate. I also address the kinds of engagement with

literature across the different parts of the education system that the academic subject community endorses, more or less openly.

First, however, I want to return to the idea that syllabi are telling of the kinds of justifications that are possible to articulate in the contexts examined. One aspect of this, mentioned earlier and emphasised in curriculum theory for both academic and school contexts, concerns the nature of syllabi and other curricular documents as products of compromise (Barnett & Coate 2005: 39–40; Englund 2005: 11). A corollary of this is that the documents were so written as to be open for interpretation, for instance, about the purposes of school curricular content. Another is that the documents were subject to formal processes of curricular approval. This means that the legitimisation strategies that are evident—for instance, in teacher education syllabi in relation to the authority of (higher education) law and (teacher education and school) regulations—were likely the result of negotiations within faculty bodies at each university about what knowledge is valid for teacher qualification.

It is safe to assume, further, that the justifications for literature were shaped by the nature of the English subject in each setting. As educational research that focuses on curriculum study and the relation between school subjects and academic disciplines makes clear, it is essential to bear in mind the premises for English in the respective school and academic contexts addressed.<sup>6</sup> What makes English distinct in each context is not merely its institutional setting, but also its curricular purpose, substance and practice. For example, as Thomas Popkewitz (2002: 262–263) points out with regard to practice, primary and secondary education subjects are laden with psychological considerations for age-related learning. Academic disciplines, by contrast, take for granted ‘many aspects of social, emotional, and cognitive development ... along with the prior knowledge and experiences that enable abstract and higher order thinking’ (Detmers 2019: 90). Moreover, in relation to subject content and its justifications, a crucial reminder, provided in educational research, and elsewhere, is that neither school subjects nor academic disciplines are given. Disciplinary and subject definitions shift over time (Goodson & McClaren 1993) and these shifts affect curricular substance as well as its justifications.

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<sup>6</sup> For an explication of different ways of understanding the relation between a school subject and its related academic discipline, see Stengel (1997).

I mention these conditions for curricular construction as a way of highlighting factors that affect how the engagement with literature was legitimised across the permutations of the English subject. To these factors, the account above suggests, can be added the interdependence between the different parts of the education system.

### *8.1 Discursive legitimations for the engagement with literature*

When it comes to the discursive legitimations for the engagement with literature, principal forms were ‘authorisation’ and ‘instrumental rationalisation’, although ‘moral evaluation’ featured in syllabi. While these forms of legitimation recurred in syllabi across the education system, the authority that they relied upon and the specific goals and effects that they alluded to varied. In the following, I unpack key ways in which different legitimation strategies operated to illustrate how they coexisted and intertwined in the studied documents.

To begin with ‘authorisation’, in one respect all syllabi had an iterative authorising function: they legitimated the engagement with literature by virtue of including it as part of the curricular substance for English. The very nature of the syllabus genre involves the ‘authorisation’ of what van Leeuwen (2008) calls social practices, in this case the engagement of literature in educational settings. Implicit in this form of legitimation was the authority of expertise, of academic English staff and of other experts and stakeholders involved in curricular construction. Due to the contractual nature of the documents, this form of legitimation is strong, in the sense that it is binding. At the same time, it does not provide an answer to the question *why* pupils and students of English should read literature as part of their education. From a justificatory perspective, iterative forms of ‘authorisation’ are weak.

Yet, as the account above shows, ‘authorisation’ was not simply iterative. For one thing, all studied syllabi legitimated the engagement with literature, more or less implicitly, via the authority of regulation. Academic syllabi, for instance, did so consistently by way of requirements in national steering documents for higher education. I refer here not only to ubiquitous echoes to the qualifications requirements set out in the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) regarding ‘knowledge and understanding’, ‘competence and skills’ and ‘judgement and approach’. I also refer to the oblique, though unequivocal, references to the ethos desired for higher education institutions and stipulated in section five of

the Higher Education Act (1992:1434). This regards the promotion of ‘sustainable development to assure for present and future generations a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice’, ‘[e]quality between women and men’ and ‘understanding of other countries and of international circumstances’. As noted above, social justice was a thematic preoccupation regularly foregrounded in literature courses nationally in both general and English teacher education syllabi, and syllabi recurrently linked the study of literature both to knowledge about socio-historical conditions and to cultural analysis. Indeed, in those cases where the thematic-theoretical orientation of literary studies in English was made known in the syllabi, it largely harmonised with the values articulated in the Higher Education Act. This suggests that the legitimacy of literary studies in English also rested on references to the value systems expressed in the national steering documents.

In addition, the account above indicates that, when it came to legitimising the presence of literature, the syllabi for one part of the education system referred to the authority of curricular regulations from other parts of the education system. Its presence in primary teacher education, for instance, relied as much on the authority of school curricular regulations as on the authority of the academic discipline. The upshot resembles an authorising echo chamber, which highlights the interdependence between (regulations for) the different parts of the education system.

As indicated earlier, various forms of legitimation intertwined, as the syllabi authorised not just the presence of literature, but also its presence in relation to specific educational goals and learning outcomes. The focus on reading as the principal form of engagement with literature, for example, was legitimised via ‘instrumental rationalisation’. In the school curricula, the reading of literature in English was linked primarily to goals of functional language development, (inter)cultural competence, and democratic citizenship formation. In academic general syllabi, by contrast, the reading of literature was attached not so much to language development, as it was to cognitive abilities—especially sharpened skills of interpretation, reasoning, and argumentation as well as developed contextual thinking abilities. The development of these abilities, so syllabi suggested, were a result of the disciplinary modes of reading taught. In this educational setting, moreover, (inter)cultural competence seemed less important than were abilities of cultural analysis in relation to literature

and the development of students' horizons of intelligibility in terms of specific historical events, cultural ideals, social phenomena, and theoretical standpoints. Ethos building, however, was an implicit goal of studying literature also in this context. Even when the substantive justifications did not always overlap, in curricular documents for both school and academic courses the reading of English-language literature was given the status of 'moralised activity', in van Leeuwen's sense.

Compared with discursive forms of legitimation that relied on iterative 'authorisation', 'instrumental rationalisation' is strong, in one sense, because it helps answer the question why literature in English was worthwhile reading in each educational setting. That the answers were so often implicit and open to interpretation, however, makes the form of legitimation relatively weak, especially if one is looking for arguments that state unequivocally the relevance of studying literature. Indeed, van Leeuwen's categories help to highlight that, in terms of substantive justifications, the engagement with literature was foremost legitimised via allusions to underlying value systems for (literature) education.

### *8.2 Substantive justifications across the education system*

To turn to the substantive justifications for literature in English, I comment on the function for literature that the academic community endorsed for Swedish academic and school contexts by way of teacher education. By virtue of bridging the discipline and the school subject, the latter serves to illustrate continuations and discontinuities across the education system.

As the cross-educational account has indicated, English syllabi across the Swedish education system consistently legitimised the reading of English-language literary works as an occasion for cultural-contextual learning. Reading was authorised as the principal form of engagement with literature in teacher education syllabi, and similarly, in general academic and in school syllabi for English. Teacher education syllabi, further, regularly endorsed the conception of literature as a means of cultural illustration and analysis. English teacher education syllabi did so, for instance, by favouring critical and cultural theories and topics to do with social justice in literature courses. Primary teacher education syllabi did it by emphasising the potential of literature to grant 'insights into parts of English-speaking cultures' (Gävle 2017: ENG508, my translation) and to develop students' 'understanding of English-language children's and youth culture' (Södertörn 2017: 1063EN, my translation). As this

suggests, the syllabi authorised that engagement which regards literature in English as inseparable from practices of reading and from goals of cultural learning and ethos-building. This conception was visible also in general academic syllabi and in school syllabi for English.

The reciprocal influence between the different parts of the education system ensured this conceptual continuity about the uses of English-language literature. It seems safe to surmise that stipulations in the school syllabi affected subject content in teacher education syllabi, given the responsibilities of teacher education to prepare future teachers for school teaching that complies with the national curriculum. That it was possible to interpret school curricular documents as sanctioning approaches to literature that centre on reading and cultural learning surely helped legitimise such a focus in teacher education. At the same time, the reading practices foregrounded for teacher education literature courses largely coincided with the cultural-contextualising modes of reading dominant in general academic syllabi. This overlap points to the close relation between teacher education and the English discipline. It also suggests that the approaches to literature legitimised for disciplinary studies and for teacher education in English harmonised with intentions implied for the school subject. This harmonisation meant an opportunity for academic staff responsible for curricular construction to introduce student teachers to cultural and contextualising modes of reading typical for the discipline (and so to reach the academic objectives of teacher education), whilst also fulfilling the duty of professional preparation for school teaching. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to consider whether the thematic and theoretical orientation of general academic syllabi was influenced by teacher education practices, and, by extension, by school curricular stipulations. It is enough, here, to recognise that rationales from the school and disciplinary contexts influenced teacher education syllabi. At the same time, teacher education courses effectively endorsed reading and cultural learning approaches to literature for the school context, by virtue of fostering those very same approaches in professional training.

By endorsing a form of cultural-contextual engagement with literature, it is worth pointing out, the teacher education syllabi effectively de-legitimised other approaches to literature. For instance, with few exceptions, the syllabi did not seem to activate the potential found in the school curriculum for orienting the academic study of literature toward the study of language. This was in keeping with general academic English

syllabi, as noted above.<sup>7</sup> I hasten to add that links between literature and language recurred in teacher education courses on English language teaching and learning. That is to say, the subject community endorsed language approaches to literature for the school context. For the academic context of teacher education, however, such approaches were scarcely visible in the syllabi and they did not serve to legitimise literary studies. When language was highlighted in relation to literary studies, this was normally to suggest that student teachers' developed language abilities were a corollary of engaging with literature.

The de-legitimation in most general academic and teacher education syllabi of approaches to literature that emphasise the study of language constitutes the clearest form of discontinuity between the engagement with literature sanctioned in curricular documents for the school and academic settings. This discontinuity is in keeping with the shift, internationally, in the rationale for academic literary studies in English away from the study of language itself in the latter part of the twentieth century (Kramsch & Kramsch 1999). Yet, it raises questions about the justifications that seem possible—and relevant—to make for the study of English-language literature in Sweden today, compared to past justifications.

#### *8.4 Concluding remarks*

To conclude, by virtue of its cross-educational approach, the present article has achieved two things. First, it has offered an account of the position and substantive justifications of literature in English across the different parts of the education system, and it has provided an occasion to juxtapose the envisioned benefits of engaging with literature in English across that system. Second, it has identified linguistic strategies for legitimising English-language literature in Swedish education. In doing so, the article has indicated that the interdependence between the different parts of the education system has both thematic and conceptual consequences for the kinds of engagement with literature in English that are given the status of official legitimations. Indeed, it has suggested that, in some respects, the English syllabi for teacher education, for general

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<sup>7</sup> In a handful of general syllabi, literary studies were coupled with the study of language, for instance via linguistic approaches to representational forms of language. Those syllabi, however, which almost exclusively occurred at advanced level, were exceptions to an apparent norm.

academic courses and for school teaching interoperate to foster and endorse a justificatory continuity for the engagement with English-language literature. By bringing into relief the significance of this interdependence, the article does not merely record forms of rationalising English-language literature that are currently dominant. It also helps to further the understanding of the forces that shape the development of the literature curriculum.

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- University of Skövde. 2014. EN127G: *English/British and American crime fiction*, 7.5 credits. Skövde: Högskolan i Skövde, Utbildningskommittén för Lärande.
- University West. 2017. ELI201: *Engelska för ämneslärare: Litteratur och intertextualitet*, 15 credits. Trollhättan: Institutionen för Individ och Samhälle.
- University West. 2016. EFG401: *Engelska för grundlärare 4–6: Del II*, 15 credits. Trollhättan: Institutionen för Individ och Samhälle.
- Uppsala University. 2014. 5EN423: *Postmodernism and beyond: Narrative turns since 1960*, 15 credits. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, Institutionsstyrelsen för Engelska institutionen.
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