PARTICIPANT MATERIAL MODULE 10: PRINCIPLES OF WORKING SCIENTIFICALLY

The principles of working scientifically

As there are no uniform standards available for the analysis and assessment of non-financial corporate reports, we offer with this brief writing an initial guidance for non-scientists, future social rapporteurs to be used in their work as point of departure The principles outlined can and should be adapted to the respective contextual conditions. We do not intend to describe scientific-analytical approaches, but present feasible principles. This is our first recommendation to future social rapporteurs, and we will specify i later, in the course of the project.

As an analyst of social reports of companies, you examine in general the reports made available to you from the perspective of what benefits they have in your work as an employee representative. You therefore need to extract knowledge from the reports and compile the results. This means, that you need to be able to read (i.e. interpret) the text and summarise the results. Therefore, the same conditions apply to your analyses as to scientific work both what concerns the formal requirements and the scientific principles. First, a text is the independent work of the author. To draw serious conclusions, the analysis of a social report should follow the scientific norms. These include specific technical, and also the following requirements:

- accuracy and correct content
- transparency/verifiability
- intellectual honesty

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to refer to the exact source and the page numbers.

How to read and write a text? A short tutorial

There are different texts and text forms and the first question should therefore be: What kind of text is this? Who wrote it and why? Who is the text written for or what does the text want to tell its readers? Does it have a message and if so, what is the it? The most usual target groups of corporate social reports are the following:

- shareholders and owners,
- employees and their representatives,
- consumers,
- media,
- politics and other interest groups and
- increasingly: future employees.

Think carefully about who the text is intended for, as the information included in the text or rather, the information not included in it, tells us a lot about the company.

The same applies to writing a text: what type of text do I want or need to write? Who is the text addressed to? What should the structure and the form of the text be like? Try to put yourself in the place of the target group of your social report analysis. This will determine how the content needs to be structured. Similar to the focus of our project, analyses serve the following target groups:

- employee representatives at the workplace level (works councils and trade unions, if necessary health and safety representatives, youth representatives, representatives of the severely disabled workers and of equal opportunities)
- employees in supervisory boards
- European Works Councils representatives,
- national and European (sectoral) unions.

1. Which text form is available?

This is the first and the most important question: Is it the social or the annual financial report of a corporation, is it a report by the government or by an organisation criticizing the government? The text will always bear a specific meaning / function which has to be determined as this will guide the reader in interpreting it. A report by the government or a corporation will always focus on the positive aspects and pass by or even ignore the negative ones. The goal of such reports is to justify, even to embellish, certain decisions

or actions. On the other hand, a report critical to the government will underline the negative aspects and tend to neglect the positive ones. Therefore, the central question we have to ask in connection with the text is: who wrote the report, what was the intention and consequently, which aspects are in focus or in the foreground (and which are not)?

2. How is the text structured?

Each text has a specific structure the author(s) define(s) before the text is written. This gives form to the writing: Which aspects shall be discussed in what length and detail and which ones should remain in the background? We always have to ask: what is the explanation and why are these (and not others) the main elements?

The table of contents of a book or the structure of a long text provides a quick overview; the same applies to a quick scan of a text or when we superficially run through it. Only a few minutes are enough to comprehend the main points, which is a substantial help for a better understanding.

3. What do I want to know about the text?

This is the central question before we deal with a text in detail. Why do I read the text? What do I want to find on reading it? What meaning do the specific aspects bear to me? Is it the past I want to learn about, is it the present (state of business) or the future activities? For example, how does the company deal with existing or potential new challenges and which are the measures it will take (and which are the ones it will not!). It is always useful to put these questions down before reading the text and to use them as orientation and focus while reading. All texts are interesting but they may drive one away from the initial questions; nevertheless, you should always be open to include aspects you have not considered significant before.

4. The so-called SQ3R method

Reading a text or a report needs to be learned. The frequently recommended and so-called 5-point method, the SQ3R method, is a useful help. The letters SQRRR stand for five important steps that structure your reading.

4.1 Gain an overview (*Survey*)

Here you try to get a first and quite high-level overview of the text. The steps mentioned under point 1. and 2. above, are very important and should be followed in any event.

4.2 Formulating questions (*Question*)

The steps indicated under point 3. above, are very important at this stage. If you had put down your questions on paper beforehand, you can write now the answers found (or not found!) in the text next to them. It may be useful to arrange your questions in line with the structure of the text so that the questions you try to find the answers for are at the end of the main sections. First, define the key questions in connection with the text as a whole and continue with questions on the sub-items in the second step only.

4.3 Doing the actual reading (*Read*)

After this, you will be able to read the text thoroughly and in detail, although selections can be made here, too. Some parts are more important than others and reading should be prioritised accordingly. The structure is very important: each section contains a main statement, a basic idea or a focal point that needs to be recorded and noted. In addition, it is important to distinguish opinions or interpretations from facts or evidence in order to be able to see, which is the opinion of the author(s) or the society and which is important (or unimportant) evidence.

4.4 Recap (*Recite*)

The aim here is to summarise what you have read and the most important pieces of information, then to clarify whether the text has sufficiently answered your questions or not. Do this possibly in your own words: in this manner, you 'translate' the text not only into your own expressions and terms, but also you will reconsider the text and set up connections to the questions you had. There is no need to spend much time and energy on making your own notes, it is enough if you note the essential elements.

Try to proceed section by section and take the orientation of the (high-level) structure of the text. After reading a section, add your notes immediately; the alteration of reading and writing helps you in keeping up your concentration and prevents you from early exhaustion. Repeat the steps 1 to 4 for each segment until you work yourself through the entire text. The last and final step should only then be taken.

4.5 Summary (*Review*)

The task here is to summarise the text and to clarify whether and how it answered the questions you had asked beforehand. Has it answered them? If so, how satisfactory and how clarifying are the answers? Which facts remained open and which were left in silence? How many facts were there in the text and how diverse were the materials used, like tables, diagrams etc.; how meaningful were these materials? Were there lot of opinions in the text and what was the aim of the opinion makers? These are the central questions we have to consider in the end.

It might be a good idea to make a written summary and above all, an evaluation to record these aspects so that you can revisit them at any time without losing any important information and assessment.

5. Writing the report

Writing has to be learned and above all, it can be learnt. Short documents, especially reports are certainly the most important readings: these are of great relevance in our everyday working life and are the most common form of writing. Unlike the accumulation of knowledge, writing is a procedural and not a cumulative competence. Acquiring writing is a different process than gaining knowledge. In order to learn to write, four important steps need to be repeated over and over again.

The first step is to read what others have already written. There are different types of texts and you should concentrate on the ones you want or need to write yourself. It is important to understand the structure of a text and to reconstruct it systematically. In this way, you deepen your understanding the way texts are constructed and apply it to your own writings. In the second step practice writing. This is perhaps the most important step, but usually also the most difficult one. It is not only the clear concentration that counts, but also the fact that you can change your writing on the computer again and again. Being assured of the possibility of reformulating your text may initially help to overcome some writing hurdles, because the written text will this way lose its permanent nature. At the same time, a written text must meet specific requirements: it must be well-structured, including a short introduction as well as summary conclusions. Finally, you should leave your written text for a while in order to return to it, read it thoroughly and, if necessary, revise it.

For reading as for writing applies the saying, no one is born a master, but extensive practice makes perfect!

Bibliography and references:

Our aim was to provide a bibliography and references possibly with translations in your respective languages. In addition to the references mentioned above, however, you will find further guidance in your national languages in science bookshops.

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