

Writing Is Definitely Situated: Worlds of Writing Through a Vygotskian Lens

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Dias, Patrick, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Pare. *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999. 264 pages. \$32.50 (paper); \$59.95 (cloth).

Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts is a richly detailed description of classroom and workplace writing based on extensive empirical research interpreted through and contributing to lucid theoretical discussions. A grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada enabled the authors of this book—Patrick Dias, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway and Anthony Pare, and other researchers, Christine Adam, Dawn Allen, Natasha Artemeva, Jane Ledwell-Brown, Stephen Fai, Jennifer Fraser, Danica Robertson, Tariq Sami, Graham Smart, and Scott Weir—to conduct this multisite, multidisciplinary investigation of academic and workplace writing over a six-year period in Montreal and Ottawa. Empirical data about “rich and multiple contours of writing” (ix) has been gathered in studies of writing across disciplinary communities and related workplace settings, including banking, social work, and architecture.

The book is divided into four sections. The first introduces the theoretical lenses—encapsulated in genre, activity, and semiotic theories—through which the authors analyze the wealth of data collected in these studies. The authors believe that “writing is not a module that we bring along and plug into any situation we find ourselves in” (17). Writing, they believe, is “profoundly situated” (220) and it is this theme that is explored in the remaining chapters of the book.

In the three chapters in Part II, the authors examine student writing produced for classes in three distinct disciplines—an undergraduate introductory course in the law, a year-long business course, and a design studio class for students of architecture—each of which in turn con-

tributes to an understanding of theory. The authors offer a fascinating study of undergraduate students joining the legal discourse community by learning to use specific language and thought patterns in their essays without explicit instruction. The work produced in this classroom illustrates the epistemic function of writing in school as well as the social and cultural nature of writing and learning. That is, not only did the students learn to write according to disciplinary expectations, they also acquired “the values, stance, and ideology of the course” (60).

Following the study of legal discourse, the authors complicate the discussion of the situatedness of academic writing when they examine student writing in a business course. The teacher, who “would rather have students spend time thinking rather than writing” (77), seems to have lacked a clear understanding of the epistemic function of writing. Yet, the study reveals sources of tension created less through personal failure than by the need to function within a larger system, which demands that certain concepts be taught and that large numbers of students be assessed efficiently. Because of such institutional constraints, the teacher of this course limited the amount of writing required of students because she did not have the time to read and evaluate large samples of student writing. Another tension became apparent when the teacher attempted to provide students with authentic business experiences, but the students understood that the assignments were still part of the activity system of the school. That is, even during the second semester of the business course, when students were working with a business organization, the students understood that the teacher remained the primary reader of their projects (although ostensibly they were solving an authentic business problem) and that all assignments (even simulations) were a school performance.

The writing of young architects complicates the issue of writing in the disciplines, because in this community of practice, language is not the central means of displaying knowledge. Much of the students’ writing in the studio design class, although epistemic, was not evaluated by the professor. Instead, students used writing as a tool to aid in their thinking and to help them manage long-term projects. The researchers noted that students expressed ideas in writing that could not be expressed in drawing, such as intentions and experiential impressions. In addition, students used writing as a form of display not for their professor but as if they wanted to be perceived as fascinating characters at some future time.

Just as writing in university-level classes is one component of a larger activity system, writing in the workplace is also “part of a complex network of activities of which composition is only one strand” (223).

While writing in school is epistemic and part of the work of schooling (including grading), which provides opportunities for speculation, questioning and hypothesizing, writing in the workplace serves different functions. There, it is instrumental and part of the work of the larger whole. There, newcomers must master a new “complex multisymbolic communicative web” (226) in order to become successful members of the community. What is required is not a simple transference of skills learned in school, but the ability to solve new rhetorical problems.

The three chapters in Part III of *Worlds Apart* illustrate how workplace writing can be distinguished from school writing in terms of its “complexity, multifunctionality, and implicatedness in power relations” (151). Each contribution to this section further problematizes our understanding of writing by revealing the complex purposes, authorship, audiences, and ideologies that characterize writing in the workplace. For example, the study of writing by social workers in a hospital illustrates how writing is socially motivated and reproduces certain ideologies through repeated sociorhetorical activity. The reports of the social workers recorded on medical charts are socially motivated to provide accountability to the larger community and to the social work community, but they also serve as a heuristic and thereby replicate the ideology of the hospital.

Sociorhetorical activity in chains of interconnected genres in the Bank of Canada illustrates the complexity of workplace writing. There, a discursively-created reality, the economy, is monitored and analyzed through interconnections of people, texts, and technologies or *distributed cognition*, for the purpose of providing knowledge about the Canadian economy that senior decision makers need for directing Canadian monetary policy. That is, thinking at the Bank of Canada occurs across the borders of individual minds through sets of generic texts, which become “repositories of communal knowledge, devices for generating new knowledge, [and] sites for enculturation” (142).

Writing in architectural practice provides another opportunity for the authors to continue to explore professional writing and to elucidate how this differs from school writing. Architects generate a quantity of rhetorically complex written documents using a number of modes of communication, usually without debating about the generic form or the mode to be used. More commonly, “an utterly familiar exigence is registered and an utterly specific medium-and-genre response automatically activated” (160). The written documents are rhetorically complex, partly because of the layers of interpersonal relationships in which the

architects work and partly because of the need to be persuasive. None of the expertise required for the constant and complex writing activity produced in the architectural firm studied here was learned in school.

The final section of *Worlds Apart* draws together the “unsettling implications for writing theory and the teaching of writing” (xi) suggested throughout the book, particularly the complexities of learning to write in the workplace. Still firmly anchored in theory, the discussion moves to how new employees must acquire new rhetorical moves and writing practices at work and how they must learn *how* to learn in situations where the focus is not on teaching and learning. Then the authors explore a model of school-to-work transition in which students learn by scaffolded participation in authentic workplace tasks monitored by experienced employees.

The authors could have included more discussion about those “unsettling implications” for writing theory. Although I have some ideas about what those implications might be, I wanted to know more specifically how the authors tied various challenges to writing theory to their on-site investigations. It is possible that this discussion should be explored in another document. Although the book may seem repetitious at first glance, the chapters of this book are carefully crafted, interrelated building blocks of a complex rhetorical structure, which has a spiral shape. Because the information in the book comes from a variety of studies and scholars, only skillful writing and editing could have produced a text that integrates these studies so that they build upon each other, build upon theory, and build new theoretical constructs. As Bazerman suggests in the introduction, “[t]he theoretically illuminated case studies reveal the rich and multiple contours of writing within each situation and thereby help us to see similar dynamics in other situations. The authors have used theory to help them figure out what they have seen and thereby have given us sharper theoretical lenses to see what is occurring in other places. That is among the best uses of theory” (ix). This alone makes *Worlds Apart* worth reading. One would hope for similar multisite investigations to be conducted and reported in the future. The book offers insights useful for a wide audience, including teachers and administrators in colleges and universities and in business and the professions. Such audiences will discover in this volume a readable and rewarding text.