

CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

**The construction of workplace writing: Texts,
contexts and interaction in an academic
administration**

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF WORKPLACE WRITING: TEXTS, CONTEXTS AND INTERACTION IN AN ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

This research is an in-depth investigation of how texts are constructed in an institutional context, looking specifically at how a university administration went about introducing and implementing a new educational philosophy and program. Based on a twelve-month study of the creation of texts and the surrounding activity, the investigation is centred on the belief that writing performance in the workplace involves a range of skills and levels of awareness beyond language. The research thus seeks to provide a detailed account of the complexities of the writing process in a professional context, and thereby to identify the features of specialist competence that may contribute to successful workplace performance.

Adopting a framework informed by activity systems theory (Russell 1997), the study looks at a substantial collection of written data, including e-mails, multiple drafts of policy documents and course proposals, minutes of meetings, and other documentation that surrounded the process. These are presented and analysed in a narrative format, and supported by interview data taken from various participants in the process.

A number of significant issues emerge from this analysis, relating both to the nature of workplace writing and to the likely impact on the learner. The first relates to the importance of the institutional context – the degree to which the texts are a reflection of the organisation, and how they help to shape organisational policy in a dynamic, intertwined fashion. Closely linked to this is the way in which power is distributed and how decisions are taken, communicated and implemented i.e. who has the authority to contribute what and when. It can be seen that there is often conflict

between institutional demands and individual interests, and that writers need to negotiate a line between these.

The second issue is the way in which texts combine to achieve different goals, that they are not stand-alone entities, but components in dynamic genre systems; different texts take shape, develop and contribute to the development of new texts in the system as they are recontextualised. Such texts can have multiple functions for different people within organisations: they can be both instrumental and interpersonal, and these goals can interpenetrate in one text. Participants in these systems thus have to understand how language and texts are manipulated to achieve different ends in organisational contexts: as writers 'getting things done' they need to be able to accommodate the different interests and motives of other participants, both institutional and individual; this may involve addressing multiple audiences as well as employing appropriate politeness strategies.

The third issue is the way in which collaboration operates in a workplace context. The notion of single-authored documents is implicitly questioned by the high levels of intertextuality seen in creating texts in an institution where so much pre-existing documentation has to be referred to, where templates play a major role in accounting for work done and to be done, and where ideas and text are regularly appropriated by others. In addition to this, it is observed that more explicit collaboration is not necessarily co-operative in the way that is anticipated in the classroom; often it involves contestation and the negotiation of diversity.

The final issue is that much writing-related activity is far removed from the physical act of writing itself and that there is considerable interdependence to be found in spoken and written discourse. Connected to this is the importance of choosing a suitable medium to communicate varying aims to different audiences. The modern workplace offers a range of tools for communicating, and making an appropriate choice will be influenced by an understanding of one's audience and of the power (or limitations) of the tool; the ability to visualize the end-product and its reception is essential.

It is suggested that if these are the kinds of demands that are made on writers in workplace contexts, then the activities and contexts that we create in the classroom need to go well beyond the teaching of templates for particular text types. Rather we should be creating situations in which genres function as components in broader cycles of activity, where collaborative processes are enacted around asymmetry in terms of power and knowledge, where the motives of participants are varied, where the context provided is a dynamic and influential factor in shaping what goes on, and where writers have to make strategic choices on the basis of all these factors.