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Learning to Write in the Workplace

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Editor's Foreword

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Abstract

This paper discusses the rationale for conducting research into the issue of learning to write in the workplace. The paper argues that although managers in a wide range of workplaces acknowledge the important role that writing plays in their activities, there is little evidence of systematic support in helping new workers to learn how to write in ways that are appropriate to the needs and requirements of specific organisations. It is argued that we need to learn more about the kind of higher level literacy knowledge that might enable people to transfer and adapt foundation literacy knowledge to new settings, and also about the role of formal education in initiating such higher level knowledge.

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"…writing and editing remain hidden activities in industry: as the saying goes, they just get done." Paradis, J. et al., 1985

Introduction

This paper presents the argument for conducting systematic research into the learning of workplace writing skills. Central to this argument is the fact that writing strongly represents many issues of relevance to other kinds of workplace learning, especially in terms of how the ability to meet the demands of workplace writing calls on both general cognitive skills and context-specific skills. Workplace writing is an activity which is dependent upon the accumulation of learning over a long period of time: there is no question that certain aspects of writing must first be learnt in formal education (knowledge that constitutes what Perkins and Salomon, 1989, refer to as a "tool domain"), whilst others can only be learnt during work, in relation to the specific demands of different contexts. Such a perspective inevitably raises central issues of transferability: what constitutes core knowledge (such as that contained within a tool domain like literacy); what kind of conceptual understandings about writing (such as the need to adapt structure and style according to purpose and audience) are capable of being transferred from one sphere of activity to another; the extent to which specific kinds of core or transferred knowledge might enable the learning of new knowledge; and the conditions within the working context that most effectively facilitate both effective transfer of established skills and knowledge, and the learning of new, context-specific skills.

This argument arises from the findings of our initial research into broad questions about the salience of the issue of writing in the workplace. The quotation at the start of this paper reflects the widespread tendency of the managers we spoke to, in many different kinds of workplaces, to view writing as insufficiently problematic to merit priority attention, either in terms of recruitment, training or ongoing support for new employees. So why should it merit the costly attention of research? We suggest that the answer lies not only in the claim above that the business of learning to write in the workplace can illuminate wider issues concerning the relationship between learning in formal education and work, but also in the fact that – despite the relatively low priority generally accorded to supporting the development of workplace writing skills – writing is nonetheless acknowledged as playing a critical role in achieving a wide range of workplace goals, and is often not done appropriately, even by graduate entrants. Indeed, the very fact of its low visibility constitutes, in our opinion, one of the problematic issues which merit the sustained focus of research.

The major part of this paper explores the question of whether or not writing in the workplace constitutes a sufficient problem for new entrants into work to merit systematic research attention, especially in terms of how those new entrants learn to do the writing required of them in many different kinds of job. In doing so, it will draw both on the findings of our own exploratory investigations into workplace writing, and also on the findings from previous research conducted in the United States and Great Britain**.** The final section then addresses the question of the kind of research that might be most effective in building understandings – of potential value to both educators and employers – about how the process of learning to write that was initiated in formal education provides a foundation for the localised learning about writing that is appropriate to the demands of specific working contexts.

The importance of writing in the workplace

In the United States, the importance of writing in work, and the high levels of demand and pressure often associated with that writing, has been demonstrated in a considerable number of research studies conducted during the last twenty years or so (e.g. Davis, 1977; Anderson, 1985; MacKinnon, 1993; Flower, 1994; Beaufort, 1999). This topic has received comparatively less attention in the UK, but is now beginning to be accorded increased importance, for instance in terms of recent government initiatives (i.e. National Literacy Strategy, revisions to National Curriculum, Key Skills). Given the current realities of *change* in the workplace, it can be argued that the issue of writing merits extensive attention, especially in relation to educational policy and practice. Whilst it is seemingly self-evident that some jobs, and some workplaces, demand much less writing than others, it seems likely that the rapid change in workplace practices of the last few years entails an ever-increasing emphasis on the need for many different kinds of workers to write in a variety of ways. The move to flatter management structures, the increasing emphasis on accountability and outcome-measurement, the dramatic expansion of IT resources (and the corresponding near-disappearance of the typist/secretary role) all have implications for the ways in which, and the extent to which, writing abilities are necessary that were unimagined even a few years ago ("if you look at someone like care assistants, in social services for example, I mean I don't think really literacy ever came into the job until maybe ten years ago. … now they have to contribute to quite complex care plans and assessments and so on" - local government manager, 1999).

It is, of course, reasonable to assume that many manual or service workers, especially at the lower levels, write no more than has ever been the case. A recent study, though, conducted by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority suggests that this represents a decreasing proportion of the workforce: "Less than 5% of jobs in the survey made only a very low level of demand on any literacy and communication skills" (QCA, 1999, p. 7). According to the same study, there was a general opinion among the directors and managers interviewed that "sound literacy and communication skills were desirable for employees in the modern workplace and essential for those aspiring to team leadership, supervision or management" (QCA, 1999, p. 5). Few organizations exist which possess neither customers, nor superiors, nor boards of directors, who will not require written records, reports or customer/client-oriented material, such as letters, pamphlets or promotional literature. On the other hand, there is no doubt that many jobs do exist in

which writing is only a minor activity for many workers, and our own initial investigations suggest to us that the QCA figure gives an exaggerated impression of the experiences of many workers employed in non-graduate jobs, for whom writing will only be a very marginal activity.

Whilst it is well recognised that writing is a highly contextualized activity, and it is certainly the case that every context imposes very specific and localised writing demands upon workers, our own data has indicated the possibility of identifying certain types of demand which arise in a very wide range of settings. Whether in a small-medium size enterprise or a large national company, those many workers who do have to write significant texts on a regular basis find themselves being increasingly responsible for the production of writing for a range of purposes, using a range of styles, encompassing: highly objective, opinion-free, specialist communications for in-house purposes; non-specialist, reader-friendly texts for outside audiences; taking into account the expectations and demands of a range of audiences within a single text (e.g. managers, customers, board members). In terms of both pursuing the day-to-day aims of work in efficient and effective ways, and avoiding the undesirable consequences of inappropriate written communications, we are firmly convinced that few workplaces can afford to leave the production of high quality writing to chance, and that few future workers, especially those whose education has progressed to graduate study or its equivalent, will not need to carry out a range of writing tasks to a high level of demand.

Low Profile/priority of Writing in the Workplace

Whilst all the managers we spoke to, without exception, could cite specific and regular problems with the writing produced in their organizations, we were struck by the fact that little priority was given to establishing systematic means of solving or preventing such problems. Seen as a means to an end, rather than the central concern, writing seems to be generally dealt with – in terms of both quality assurance and quality control – on an *ad hoc* basis. A very typical response from managers to the question of how quality of writing was ensured was, as one manager put it, that "there are structures to enable that to happen". In many instances, such structures simply entail the fact that more than one person will normally see any document that is sent out. Nonetheless, such *ad hoc* arrangements did not always appear to be highly efficient. In one case, the managing director of a medium-sized manufacturing company with whom we spoke – having told us that we would be "terrified if we looked at the level of unsophistication" of some of the writing sent out by his company to customers – explained that he tends to check or actually write most material to customers himself, because of his lack of confidence in the writing capacities of some of his subordinates. In opting for such a problem-repairing (rather than solving) approach, he was effectively accepting that writing was too peripheral an activity to merit a planned - and perhaps more economically efficient - position in the hierarchy of his business's activities.

The low profile/priority of writing in the workplace is also reflected in the highly variable extent to which consideration of writing skills are reported to play in recruitment. Whilst some companies do, notably, actually specify in graduate recruitment literature (GET, 1998) the needs for "excellent writing ability and understanding of English language"

(engineering) and the "ability to write clearly and without ambiguity" (finance), our own investigations indicated that far higher priority was given to broad communication and presentation skills (an emphasis vividly illustrated in Deborah Cameron's recent *Good to Talk?)*. We did encounter - for instance in local government, and also in a major engineering company - some degree of explicit concern for, and testing of, writing abilities at the recruitment stage, but other managers made it clear that issues such as the ability to "man-manage" or "grasp the technology" constituted far more essential recruitment criteria than the ability to write - in such cases, the assumption appeared to be that solutions of some kind would be found to deal with any weaknesses in writing at a later stage, once the new recruit was established in a job.

Pressures and problems experienced by junior employees

Both the findings from our own preliminary study, and published research, indicate that recent recruits and junior employees generally tend to view writing as a greater source of problems, in terms of time and stress, than do their managers. One American study describes graduate entrants to a bank as taking at least a year to understand the extent to which the writing they had to do posed new problems for which they had not initially been prepared : "I see there is a lot of learning to be done and a lot of improvement to be made" (MacKinnon, 1993, p. 49). The more recent QCA study, whilst recognizing that many young employees wrote little at first, found that "Some young employees at all job levels struggled to acquire the necessary skills to write difficult letters whilst those in higher level jobs often found reports and minutes hard to structure" (QCA, 1999, p. 7). In our own study, one respondent – an engineer in local government – spoke of "sweating blood" over the letters he had to write in the course of his work, whilst another – a technical expert in the RAF – spoke of the frustrations involved in producing writing that would satisfy the very rigid requirements of superior officers. Two junior managers in the manufacturing company we visited spoke of the frustrations of spending a lot of time writing letters to customers - "it's very labour-intensive and resource-intensive in that instance when I know all the other things I have to do". Barton & Hamilton, in their recent study of everyday literacy, report a member of the fire brigade who suffered similar frustration in learning to write safety reports, given that they had joined the fire service joined "to fight fires not to do office work" (1998, p. 89).

None of the junior employees with whom we spoke reported receiving systematic training on entry to their jobs, although some did talk (appreciatively) of one-off training courses at later stages. On the whole, the mode of learning was consistent with the claim from a young graduate entrant to a large engineering company that, when it came to learning how to write reports, "a lot of it is down to trial and error". The same young graduate made it clear that previous learning had been of little value in this respect, and that most of his learning was the result of informal processes of on-the-job socialization, and that the requirements thus learnt bore little relation to what he had learnt about report writing in the course of his degree. This was echoed vividly by one young manufacturing manager, who said that "you just pick things up. But from school I don't think I really learnt very much at all." As well as raising very important wider questions of how formal education does, or ought, to prepare people for the future demands of work, these comments reflect a general impression that learning to establish yourself – at least, in

terms of the writing you do - in a working environment is a constant process of figuring out requirements for oneself, entailing a considerable degree of hidden effort.

Increase in writing demand during employment

Regardless of the type of work, there appears to be a widespread tendency in very many workplaces to place limited demand upon new recruits in terms of writing during the first year or two of employment. To quote one exceptionally structured instance, in the RAF - where the need to write a wide range of highly codified documents is both ubiquitous and problematic according to our respondent - nobody writes anything at all below the level of corporal (at which time, "service writing" becomes a specific focus of training). This picture varies, of course, in relation to the type of appointment: graduate recruits are likely to encounter heavier writing demands from the start of their employment than non-graduate employees. This general view, though, is confirmed in the findings of the recent large scale survey into Paid Work in Britain (Ashton et al., 1999), which provides strong statistical evidence that writing is experienced as a sharply increasing demand as a worker ascends the managerial ladder (although at the very highest levels it appears from our own evidence to be often the case that managers progress into a mode of generating and overseeing the production of key texts, consequently writing less than previously).

It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the ability to meet writing demands potentially constitutes a relevant criterion in judgements related to the continued advancement of junior workers. QCA's study states that "sound literacy and communication skills appeared to be a factor which contributed to young employees being chosen for promotion though their role in review and appraisal systems was often unclear" (QCA, 1999, p. *7).* Opinions of the managers we have spoken to were varied in this respect. A senior manager in a large UK bank stated that, when it came to promotion "writing is not really an issue … It may be one of a range of issues, but it's not going to be the one." On the other hand, the managing director of a small manufacturing company acknowledged that "it depends on the level, on the scale of the problem. Clearly [name] would reach a stage where he just couldn't go any further".

On present evidence, it does appear that, whilst on occasions reference to written evidence might be explicitly included in the process of forming judgements about workers (either during regular processes of review, or specifically at times when promotion or continuation of employment is decided upon), writing does not tend to be systematically taken into account in the majority of workplaces. But there is, nonetheless, a strong possibility that knowledge about a worker's writing influences decisions about the kinds of tasks that person is allocated – often based on judgements such as "good writer" or "bad writer" (Brady, 1993) – which in turn are likely to have an impact on that person's future career. Written documents are easy to refer to, and writing of all kinds constitutes an opportunity to display a wide range of abilities, such as understanding of organisational values and priorities, the ability to synthesise information and viewpoints and draw conclusions, as well as general qualities of accuracy, attention to detail and task completion. Because of the relatively low profile accorded to writing in the workplace, we believe that the answer to the question of whether or not this is the case is far from self-evident; because there is considerable evidence to suggest both that writing does,

nonetheless, play an important role in many kinds of work, and that learning to enact that role satisfactorily presents evident problems to junior workers, we believe that a strong case exists for finding out considerably more than is currently known about what happens in this respect.

Summary

Available research evidence, from previous studies and our own preliminary work, suggests that the demands of writing in work absorb and possibly waste more time and human resource than is generally recognized because of the generally low visibility of writing as an issue in most organizations and businesses. Indeed, we would argue that it is writing's very lack of visibility which potentially obscures the seriousness of the problems associated with its production.

The importance of such an issue touches upon employers, managers, workers and educators. For employers and managers, the importance primarily concerns - as we have suggested above - questions of investment and wastage: of time, human resource, money. Even where the *ad hoc* arrangements that several organizations report adopting in order to deal with writing-associated problems in the workplace are viewed as adequate, it is important to recognize that the accelerating realities of change in the workplace are bound sooner or later to threaten the stability of old practices, and pose unfamiliar challenges to workers at all levels of responsibility. It was apparent to us, also, that most of the organizations with whom we have spoken felt somewhat in the dark about whether or not their orientation towards issues of writing reflected wider practice. They lacked, as one manager explained to us, any means by which to benchmark their own performance in respect of writing.

For workers at very many different levels of employment, but most specifically junior workers, the issue is one of opportunity. We are not currently able to say with any precision how and to what extent prospects of employment and advancement are dependent on the capacity to produce, or learn how to produce, the writing needed in work. Whilst managers generally express some degree of confidence about finding workers who will learn to produce the required writing, it is less likely that those entering employment can afford to underestimate the extent to which weaknesses in writing will limit their prospects.

As far as educators are concerned, the issue is not likely to be so much one of introducing a significant element of work-oriented literacy preparation, as developing literacy-related elements which already exist to a limited extent both in secondary and higher education. At the secondary level, the increasing drive towards addressing issues of literacy across the curriculum (strongly emphasised now by the moves to introduce the National Literacy Strategy into the secondary school) aims above all to help pupils develop strategies and conceptual awareness in relation to the highly varied literacy demands of different disciplines. As Lea & Street demonstrate (1998), an increasing awareness of the difficulties experienced by undergraduates in coping with academic writing in different disciplines provides an equivalent area for development in higher education. Although at both levels, there is quite legitimately a dominant concern for the immediate demands of

academic writing, we believe that educators would wish to benefit from a greater awareness of the kinds of writing demand, and learning needs, that their students will eventually face, and would appreciate greater guidance on how their current practice could be developed to help prepare them for such demands and needs.

We believe that the question of learning is central to these concerns. Specifically, we need to explore in more systematic ways the question of whether the dominant modes of learning to write in the workplace allow for the most effective and efficient use of human resources. We need to develop our conception of the broad literacy capacities, and perhaps conceptual understandings about literacy, that formal education should emphasise in order to provide a firm and dynamic basis for the context-specific learning that must take place in the workplace, and the ways in which organisations might most effectively build on those. In order to do this, we need to advance our understandings of the (largely informal and improvised) processes and strategies that junior workers deploy in order to cope with that context-specific learning once in work, and the ways in which these relate to the wide-ranging literacy capacities and orientations which they bring with them from their education. This involves the difficult task of developing a methodology which will allow us to track the writing processes of junior workers, as a means of identifying their growing understandings of what is required of them, and the ways in which they draw on existing literacy skills, build on existing concepts about literacy, or attempt to construct new understandings, in order to do so.

Developing a Focus for Research

The proposed research aims to investigate the hypothesis that two kinds of prior learning potentially play a significant role in the successful achievement of localised learning about writing which new workers must undertake in the specific context of their jobs: *foundation knowledge* (literacy skills), and *conceptual knowledge* (general understandings and principles about the application of literacy skills in specific contexts):

1. *foundation knowledge*: this can be seen as a subset of the generic literacy skills learnt mainly in formal education, and specified in the National Curriculum, Key Skills and elsewhere in terms of skills of accuracy in spelling, punctuation and grammar; knowledge of language structures at the levels of words, phrases, sentences and whole texts; composition strategies such as planning, drafting, redrafting and proof-reading. This knowledge is broadly applicable to all acts of writing and, whilst it is capable of diminishing or increasing throughout life, constitutes a life-long, non-context-specific set of skills and understandings. It concerns what Broadhead & Freed (1986) refer to as "cultural norms" of writing (which stands as one of five key norms they identify, the others being "institutional", "generic", "personal" and "situational", all of which are referred to further below).

2.*conceptual knowledge:* this is distinct from the localised knowledge about writing which can only be gained within a specific context, and provides – according to our hypothesis – a crucial foundation for learning that localised knowledge. It is, in effect, initiated knowledge for development in context. What constitutes such knowledge remains to be determined with greater precision through further research, but broadly

concerns conceptual understandings about the nature and importance of localised exigencies of writing such as:

- contextualised imperatives about uses of language within specific contexts or discourse communities – "institutional norms"
- linguistic and structural characteristics of different types of document – "generic norms" (*genre* would probably be a more appropriate term)
- the purposes and audience for specific documents – "situational norms"
- an individual writer's own linguistic or rhetorical preferences, and composition process behaviour – "personal norms" (Broadhead & Freed, 1986, pp. 11-14)

Such conceptual knowledge about literacy is distinct from foundation literacy knowledge in one key respect: until it is developed in context, through actual writing tasks for real purposes, it tends to remain somewhat abstract and insubstantial. Actual knowledge of, and the need to act in the light of, contextual exigencies of this kind provides the means for modifying both foundation and initiated conceptual knowledge in order to meet the localised demands of writing in work. But the evidence of our own research indicates that those workers who had experienced such conceptual learning about literacy prior to entering work tended to approach the learning of new writing skills in a metacognitive manner: they tended to see the composition of any written document from a problem-solving perspective which enabled to build principles and routines for coping with future demands. The absence of such metacognitive behaviour, on the other hand, appeared to signal considerably greater difficulties in this respect.

Such a perspective on learning potentially takes us beyond the more familiar bi-polar view of what is involved in learning to write in the workplace. Beaufort, in reviewing the field, points out that "Several theorists in composition … have applied the framework of general versus local knowledge to an understanding of what expert writers know and do (1998, p. 182). The notion of general knowledge presented here is equivalent to our own description of foundation knowledge presented above, whilst the local knowledge refers to the specific exigencies of individual contexts. The problem, as we have already observed, lies in managing to connect the foundation or general knowledge with the local. Beaufort goes on to refer to Smargorinsky and Smith (1992), who suggest that "the best strategy for developing writing skills useful in more than one context would be to teach the basics of good writing ('general knowledge') and a meta-level awareness of problem-solving strategies for dealing with particular rhetorical contexts ('task-specific knowledge')" (*ibid*.). This is very much in line with what we are proposing here, although similarly lacking in the precision about the kinds of conceptual learning about writing that might best provide the means of linking foundation knowledge to what must be learnt in context.

Conclusion

It is that lack of precision which, in our opinion, would provide the most fruitful direction for research into the issue of learning to write in the workplace. We need to learn, first of all from a period of detailed qualitative enquiry, and subsequently from a wider survey approach that grows out of those qualitative findings, about the different kinds of

knowledge that new entrants into work bring to bear on the task of learning to write the documents required of them in their jobs. We need to extend and deepen our understandings about the ways in which the varying degrees of foundation and conceptual knowledge about literacy which these people bring with them into work interact with the different kinds of provision for learning they encounter once in work. Our preliminary investigations of this topic have enabled us to develop strategies for enabling workers to articulate the different kinds of knowledge they are drawing on during the actual process of writing a document (especially by making use of word processing facilities which make it relatively easy to track and record their ongoing thinking during the composition process, for subsequent discussion in post-writing interview). The development of this process has already demonstrated to us that it is possible to gain access to the ways in which prior knowledge about writing interact with growing knowledge about localised exigencies of writing.

The outcomes of this research will potentially, as we indicated at the start of this paper, offer valuable understandings for educators about the kinds of conceptual knowledge about writing that appear most effect in initiating the learning of localised knowledge about writing, and for employers about the kinds of conditions in work which most effectively support that process. As we also indicated at the start, we also believe that such findings would also illuminate wider processes relating to the relationship between prior learning and the learning that must take place once in work.

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