
REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives

Lilita Rodman

University of British Columbia

Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives, ed. by Rachel Spilka, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993.

WRITING IN THE WORKPLACE: New Research Perspectives provides a benchmark of research on workplace writing in the 1990s that complements Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami's earlier, ground-breaking collection, *Writing in Nonacademic Settings* (1985). Of the 19 solicited articles in this award-winning anthology,¹ several are by Canadians (Smart, Segal, Paré, Reither, MacKinnon). Every teacher of technical writing, and most serious students of technical writing, should become familiar with this book, though few will want to read every article. Part One has more direct applications to the classroom than does Part Two, which is of greater interest to those who want to do research in technical writing.

Part One: Research Studies of Writing in the Workplace

The ten studies in Part One examine in detail the writing practices in Canadian as well as American public and private organizations. Not surprisingly, they emphasize how important the social context of the organization is in determining the details of the writing process and in determining genre features. They enrich our understanding of the complexity of producing the corporate document and extend our understanding of the review process, the collaborative process, the role of oral communication in the writing process, and audience analysis.

1. Co-winner of the 1993 NCTE Award in Technical and Scientific Writing for the best collection of essays.

In "Situational Exigence: Composing Processes on the Job by Writer's Role and Task Value," Barbara Couture and Jone Rymer report on a survey of the writing processes of 431 professionals holding 33 different jobs and having an average of seven years' experience with their current employer. This large survey shows that the most important variables in composition behavior are not the discipline or occupation of the writer, or the genre of the writing task, but rather whether the writing task is routine or special, and whether the writer is a career writer or a professional who writes. Another important study of the writing process in organizations is Rachel Spilka's "Moving Between Oral and Written Discourse to Fulfill Rhetorical and Social Goals," which examines the back-and-forth movement between oral and written modes of expression throughout the composing process in six case studies in a state Department of Environment Protection.

Three articles focus specifically on collaboration in corporate settings. Susan Kleimann's "The Reciprocal Relationship of Workplace Culture and Review," is a very important study of the review process, the process whose goal is to produce a document that speaks with the voice of the organization. It shows how the cultures of two divisions (one hierarchical and one collaborative) affect the review process in the United States General Accounting Office. In "Negotiating Meaning in a Hospital Discourse Community," Jennie Dautermann reports how 14 nurses revising a hospital's regulation system over two years negotiated to create consensus within the writing group, to accommodate external demands on the project, and to translate group decisions into community action. And "The Interrelation of Genre, Context, and Process in the Collaborative Writing of Two Corporate Documents," by Geoffrey A. Cross, reports on a study of collaboration in a large private organization. This case study of the group writing of an executive letter of an annual report (with 27 different audiences) and the corporate annual plan (with 7 different audiences) emphasizes that generic constraints should not be considered apart from social forces in the document-writing context. The article includes a discussion of which modes of collaboration are most effective.

Another three articles examine writing in Canadian organizations. In "Genre as Community Invention: A Central Bank's Response to Its Executives' Expectations as Readers," Graham Smart shows how the Bank of Canada invents the particular genres its executives need for decision-making. He discusses how the interplay of contextual influences determines similarities and differences in text features, and illustrates this interplay with

a detailed examination of the automation proposal and the note to management. This article is complemented by Jamie MacKinnon's "Becoming a Rhetor: Developing Writing Ability in a Mature, Writing-Intensive Organization," which describes how the writing processes and products of ten new writers at the Bank of Canada developed over a year and a half. Stressing the rhetorical demands of writing, this article focusses on the importance of gaining knowledge of the social and organizational context and on the use of document cycling and complex feedback. In "Discourse Regulations and the Production of Knowledge," Anthony Paré demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between discourse and knowledge in writing by social workers in the juvenile court system in Quebec. He shows how guidelines for writing predisposition reports control the knowledge created about a juvenile by social workers.

The two remaining articles are rather more isolated in their application. Barbara Mirel's "Beyond the Monkey House: Audience Analyses in Computerized Workplaces," based on 25 interviews of users of database programs, is an in-depth analysis of audience and manual writing which demonstrates that users adapt programs to perform their real-world tasks. It concludes that contextual analyses of reading are a necessary corollary to contextual analyses of writing. Judy Z. Segal, in "Writing and Medicine: Text and Context," argues that such textual features as the passive, nominalizations, and "qualifying language" are correlates of the paternalism of Western medicine. She analyzes one review article to show how review articles function as epideictic rhetoric.

Part Two: Implications of Recent Research for Theory, Pedagogy and Practice, and Future Research

The nine articles in Part Two examine how the results of research relate to theory, to classroom practice, and to future research. They provide new perspectives on the discipline of technical/business writing by reassessing how we do research, by suggesting what kinds of research we should undertake, and by reassessing how research should relate to classroom practice.

Four articles that should be of particular interest to researchers focus on various aspects of research methodology. In "On Theory, Practice, and Method: Toward a Heuristic Research Methodology for Professional Writing," a very theoretical article, Patricia Sullivan and James E. Porter analyze various approaches to the relationship in research among theory,

practice, and method. They conclude that to improve research we have to keep the perspectives of theory, practice, and method in dialectic tension. This very interesting article won the 1993 NCTE Award in Technical and Scientific Writing for the best article on philosophy or theory of technical or scientific communication. Unfortunately, I have to criticize the graphics. The problem is that although they illustrate extremely simple relationships (either one-way or two-way influence between variables), they fail to use graphic elements in conventional ways, and sometimes they then compromise clarity. This article is complemented by Leslie A. Olsen's "Research on Discourse Communities: An Overview," an authoritative "state of the art" assessment of the study of discourse communities. It first reviews studies of discourse communities by social constructionists and disciplinary definers, and by discourse and genre analysts, and then outlines areas that research still needs to address. With a considerably narrower scope, Mary Beth Debs' "Reflexive and Reflective Tensions: Considering Research Methods from Writing-Related Fields," is a review of six social science methods that could be used in studying writing in the workplace. Finally, in "Surveying the Field and Looking Ahead: A Systems Theory Perspective on Research on Writing in the Workplace," Tyler Bouldin and Lee Odell construct a reference frame from General Systems Theory — a set of assumptions in Biology — and Sutherland's hierarchy of inquiries: speculative inquiry, deductive inquiry, inductive inquiry, and experimental inquiry. They then review research on invention in writing in the workplace as evidencing these various types of inquiry and go on to suggest various kinds of research that need to be conducted. They argue against Sutherland's privileging of experimental inquiry as the most precise and reliable, and claim that experimental inquiry is inappropriate for the study of workplace writing because writing is so open a system that replication of experiments is neither possible nor desirable. While their position is certainly the one supported by researchers in workplace writing and in composition research in general, I do not think it is one that would survive careful scrutiny. Is writing more open than language or than the many human behaviours that have been studied very convincingly using experimental inquiry? I would agree that it would be very difficult to study writing experimentally, but I think it is dishonest to give the wrong reasons for avoiding doing so. I think we should admit that the problem is not that the subject of our study is inappropriate for experimental study, but rather that we are disinclined to engage in experimental inquiry because of personal preferences, lack of

appropriate training, or lack of the huge resources that most experimental research requires.

Three articles focus on more specific aspects of research. In “Corporate Authority: Sponsoring Rhetorical Practice,” Mary Beth Debs suggests that when we discuss writing in corporations, we need to add the sponsoring organization to the triad of writer, audience, and text. Jack Selzer, in “Intertextuality and the Writing Process: An Overview,” examines authorship within corporations from the perspective of intertextuality, “the sum total of all the voices drawn by a writer into his or her developing text and as all the voices heard by readers in the experience of that writing” (176). In “Research as Rhetoric: Confronting the Methodological and Ethical Problems of Research on Writing in Nonacademic Settings,” Stephen Doheny-Farina discusses the forces that affect how research questions, methods, and results are formed and argues that it is our attempt to do ethical research that is our strongest authority.

Rachel Spilka’s “Influencing Workplace Practice: A Challenge for Professional Writing Specialists in Academia,” is the pivotal article in the collection, for it examines both elements in the relationship between what we teach and what workplace practice is. Spilka argues that educators must maintain tension in their pedagogy between social accommodation and social innovation. She discusses how academics might improve workplace practice, how studies of workplace practice might be used — with caution — in academic courses, and how future studies of workplace writing might be designed. James A. Reither also discusses pedagogical implications of research in “Bridging the Gap: Scenic Motives for Collaborative Writing in Workplace and School,” where he suggests that courses should be redesigned to make them more like collaborative workplaces by engaging students in creating written knowledge, by redefining the teacher’s role as that of a research project manager, and by encouraging students to come to class as “experts” prepared to share what they have discovered.

Clearly, this is an excellent collection of essays that will have a very important impact both on what we know about workplace writing and on how the scholarly investigation of workplace writing will proceed. It is very significant that Canadian scholars are so well represented in this important book, though it is perhaps telling that there is only one article by a Canadian (Reither) in the more theoretical Part Two.

