

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Worlds Apart: Acting & Writing in Academic & Workplace Contexts

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Patrick Dias, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, Anthony Paré, Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts. ISBN: 0805821481 - Paperback - List Price: \$29.95 Publisher: Erlbaum, Lawrence Associates, Incorporated - Published Date: 03/01/1999

It's not all that often that folks in literary fields get a chance to live through a classical paradigm shift. I would argue that one such chance occurred in the early eighties when it suddenly became possible to attend to writing which was neither produced nor studied in school — that is, writing which could not broadly be termed either school writing or “belles lettres.”

Before that, most people involved in studying the development of what we might call the later, or higher, stages of literacy, especially writing (and, less explicitly, reading), at the postsecondary levels, generally assumed that such writing was hardly worth study. Not only was it smeared with toil and bleared with trade, it was so obviously simple as to be unworthy of serious attention. Compared with what one might find to say about a sonnet or an essay, it seemed clear there was almost nothing of interest to be said about an insurance case report, a memorandum of agreement, a call for proposals or a letter of intent. Once you'd pointed out how clichéd and uncreative the language was, and how conventional and formulaic the organization of the text, the work of analysis and understanding seemed to be over.

Suddenly, however — primarily with the work of Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami — the comfortable wall between the writing we could take seriously and the writing we could ignore broke down. Acknowledging the central importance of the intimate connections between texts and the social situations in which they are inextricably embedded, their “Writing in Nonacademic Settings” (1981) demonstrated the sophisticated level of intentional rhetorical choices at work in the most mundane business communications. In doing so, it raised the possibility of comparison with the kinds

of writing being produced in the academy — especially the kind being produced by students. It also opened up new methods for attending to the circumstances under which texts are produced, how their authors act and think in immediate circumstances, and how the texts influence those circumstances.

Worlds Apart is a powerful and thought-provoking report of an ambitious and meticulous seven-year study of writing in workplaces and in academic contexts, conducted by a team of researchers based at Carleton and McGill universities. In many ways it represents the culmination of the ensuing two decades' worth of attention to kinds of writing activity that once passed utterly undetected under the academic radar screen.

The Carleton-McGill project's most important contribution to our understanding of writing and literacy generally may be the way it allows us to see how Russian-based "activity theory" and North American "genre theory" afford us a new, binocular understanding of the nature of writing and the contexts in which it's learned. I won't attempt to offer here an account of either of these rich and complex theoretical perspectives. The book itself does this brilliantly, which is one reason it is absolutely indispensable for anyone who wishes to understand the functions, development and learning of literacy now. It represents a thorough and useful handbook to what's known now, how we've come to know it, and what the current disputes about it are.

To summarize very briefly, the book shows us how considering writing as a contextualized "activity" rather than a linguistic object allows us to see that, in the almost complete absence of direct, explicit instruction, social workers (for example) learn, on the job, how to write the kinds of reports that actually benefit their clients by persuading someone to take appropriate action, and to suggest some of the reasons that learning is so effective. The authors show us how this process is rooted in the relations among the people and texts engaged in a human activity, and how that understanding of patterns of activity allows us in turn to understand in a richer way the patterned linguistic actions that evolve typically out of repeated rhetorical exigencies and produce the forms of discourse we have (following, among others, Carolyn Miller) come to call genres.

The book is organized into four sections: an extremely important introductory one on method, one reporting investigations of "university writing" (by which is meant writing done in connection with formal classes and explicit learning situations), one reporting on investigations of workplace writing (in contexts such as a children's hospital social services department, the Bank of Canada, or an architectural firm), and a final section titled "Transitions," which addresses the question "How can students move successfully from the academic writing described in Part II ... to the complex rhetorical environments of the workplace?" The central insight of the

book is embodied in its title: the world of school writing is utterly different and apart from the world of workplace writing, where texts have functions and serve purposes beyond the “epistemic” ones of learning, evaluation and grading.

In one sense, of course, this seems obvious (this is “just school”; that’s “the real world”) but the implications of this sort of exploration of these differences at this level are crucial for our understanding of the nature of texts, text production, and learning about texts. And though it may seem obvious, it hardly goes without saying. Among English departments, for example, models of text are, in general, profoundly and radically unhooked from action. Not only all student essays, but most professional texts, have as their central function not participating in a task by means of what they say, but rather demonstrating the author’s expertise or skill so that others will judge the work and its author positively. It is, in fact, often very difficult to make clear the distinction between writing which has, and writing which does not have, what the authors of *Worlds Apart* call “authenticity” or “rhetorical reality” to people who have spent their careers working almost exclusively with either aesthetic texts or texts that exist primarily to exhibit their authors’ skill (or betray their lack of it).

The authors make this distinction very clear in Chapter 11, “Contexts for Writing: University and Work Compared.” There they say, among other things:

Because most of the purposes and necessities of work are absent from the classroom, there are numerous functions that academic writing is never called on to serve. First, students have no need to produce legally valid records, nor occasion to perform acts for which they will be held to account.... Nor do their texts have performativity, in the sense of realizing speech acts such as orders or requests. (226)

They are aware that many readers, especially in English departments, will say that students *are*, in fact, “held to account” for their writing, or argue that comments on student papers are not, as the authors say they are, merely rationalizations for grades, but are — or can be — Dialogic responses to what students are saying. Thus they are at pains to make the radical differences in the two situations apparent, and to make the implications of these differences for learning as explicit as possible. Students who have been taught to write in traditional ways, they demonstrate through case study after case study, are not only not helped to learn how to write in authentic professional contexts, they are often seriously handicapped by their expectation that there is only one way to learn, and that it is by being told explicitly. In fact, one of the salient characteristics of the workplace learning situation as described in this book is that learning is *not* an explicit goal; they report that both novices and experienced

mentors regularly deny that it is a goal at all. Consequently, many novices do not recognize the opportunities for learning implicit, for example, in having a text rejected or edited. The authors point out, for example, the common occurrence of

the inference from their previous learning patterns that suggests that anything written in response to a draft by a grader is evaluative and final. For these novices entering the workplace, then, the comments written on their drafts often meant negative evaluation and evoked resistance, rather than being recognized as opportunities for learning (and further collaborative performance). (196)

One of many reasons to welcome the publication of *Worlds Apart* is that we no longer have to mount the argument that there are profound differences between writing in these two situations: we can simply refer people to the book, as we can refer people who really want to know what we mean when we say marks and evaluation are poisonous to learning to Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards*.

There are also, though, some ways in which the book is a disappointment. There's a kind of narrowness involved in seeing the central issue as "the performance of universities in preparing their graduates for the changed writing demands of professional workplaces." For those of us primarily concerned with postsecondary education, this focus on what can seem to be job training, while understandable, renders it both conceptually narrow and less likely to influence postsecondary education in general, and writing instruction specifically, than by rights it should. Many of the members of English departments and composition faculties who'll deny that there's any significant or radical difference between classroom writing and workplace writing will also argue that they not only aren't, but shouldn't be, judged by whether their students are "prepared for the realities of the workplace situation." And here I might well agree with them.

I might, for instance, say that I believe that it's crucially important for students to become "better" (in the broadest conceivable sense of that word) writers — but not because they'll have to write in their workplace, but rather because writing is our most powerful tool for thinking and learning anything, and because it is through writing (and reading — and they are no more separable than speaking and listening) that we can participate effectively in almost any sophisticated intellectual activity or society. I do not mean to suggest that the authors are unaware of this — but I would say that focusing the book so thoroughly on the transition between university writing and workplace writing has two damaging consequences, one methodological and one rhetorical.

The methodological consequence is that there are kinds of writing which simply do not occur here. Lots of writing that isn't academic in their sense isn't a function of the workplace, either: not only "aesthetic" writing, but writing of the kind you are reading right now: writing which, from my point of view as writer, is "workplace" writing, but exhibits very few of the earmarks of the workplace writing described in this book. What is the workplace task it is intended to accomplish? Who are the colleagues who are participating in its creation? This review, I would argue, hasn't a lot in common with either the classroom writing or the workplace writing described in *Worlds Apart*. Much other writing exists, it would seem, out there between those planets. The authors, of course, don't pretend to account to for all possible forms of writing, but there seems to be a consistent, and usually tacit, assumption that a given text pretty much has to fall into one category or the other, and this means that discourse models that might have implications for the way they think of learning get lost.

The rhetorical consequence I'm concerned about is that the audience whom I think most directly needs to hear what this book has to say will find themselves alienated from reading it — not only because of its professional context (how many English professors regularly read Erlbaum books?), but because its focus on the consequences of education for futures in the workplace, for careers, is not of much interest to them. A specialist in eighteenth century literature (of which I am one) will find it difficult to see how her interest in deepening students' literary understanding should be judged by its relevance to their possible futures in investment analysis or social work.

I would have been happier to see more attention paid to the ways in which the modes of learning exhibited in the two worlds might be brought together. Indeed, *When Worlds Collide* might be a good title for the next book — and a way of characterizing what seems to me mostly missing here. These worlds are certainly apart — no question about that — but it strikes me it might make more sense to connect them then to talk about better ways of jumping from one to the other.