WORLDS APART

Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts is an impressive multisite comparative study of writing in different university courses and matched workplaces: law and public administration courses and government institutions; management courses and financial institutions; social work courses and social work agencies; and architecture courses and architecture practice. The study, carried out across 7 years by a dozen people, looked intently into how writing functions within the activities of each of these various settings. The study, despite its size and multi-authorship, avoids the simplifications that typically are needed to generate consistency and comparability across extensive data. Rather than looking for easy points of comparison, the authors sought to understand each setting through detailed ethnography and found comparisons only by understanding how writing is operative within the particularities of settings.

This revealing theoretical understanding was developed in a conversation among the four lead investigators over the years of the project, a conversation that I saw as a distant onlooker and then as an editor. Although there are numerous other products of this research project, this book is a culmination of that theoretical discussion about the overall meanings of all of the findings. What they found at each of the sites was that learning to write in the locally relevant genres was a means by which individuals were socialized into the particular activities, ideologies, identities, meaning systems, power structures, institutional goals, and cooperative endeavors enacted in each place. Furthermore, those genres became the site of tension among the various motives, perceptions, and goals of different individuals as those in institutional power tried to regulate others into particular ways of life,

and others insisted that important motives were being lost if they wrote as they were directed, as in the case of the social work agency. Yet, in many of the sites the generic shaping of the communal activity and way of life went uncontested as individuals wanted to become creative architects, competent lawyers, recipients of contracts, contributors to a well-analyzed monetary policy, or just students with good grades.

Each of these settings offered different pathways of explicit and implicit instruction, mentoring, disciplining, accountability, and evaluation. In schools, no matter what the subject area, the socialization into practice predictably appeared as pedagogy directed toward student performance of known practice, for which students were held accountable—what the authors here have called *facilitated performance*. Although workplace internship experiences carried important elements of learning, these still became framed as facilitated performance when returned to the classroom. In the workplace, the focus was on the work task at hand, rather than the overt instruction and evaluation of the learner; the learning was in the doing and the accountability was in the accomplishment of the work; insofar as there was overt training, it was built around the learner's actual participation in the work, either through what the authors call *attenuated authentic performance* (where mentors limit, focus, advise, and themselves remain responsible for the tasks of the novices) or through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wegner's term here used to indicate the novice's actual responsibility and accountability for limited tasks performed).

In each of the classroom and workplace sites, the writing was integrated with relevant practices, modes of expression, and material realities, but most of the classrooms were so fully devoted to textual practices that the world of student production was tightly framed by the written and spoken texts that made up the course. The most notable exception was in architecture, where the writing was integrated with, and subordinated to, visual and material design; internship courses also provided some contact with the social, material, and representational complexity of the workplace, although students' papers remained the central form of evaluation and responsibility. In the workplace, however, the writing was integrated with many forms of experience and representation in the course of the work—relationship with and responsibility toward clients and the dramatic realities of courtroom proceedings; economic data and the actual economic well-being of a nation; and, again most strikingly, in architecture, the visual design and material construction. These issues are made most explicit in the chapters on architectural education and practice, but they are an undercurrent throughout the book.

In coming to understand the writing process and writing learning in these various sites, the authors have developed and refined activity theory as a tool of analyses. The theoretical discussions in this book are clear and illuminating, and lead to a widely applicable and easily intelligible way of approaching writing in any school or workplace setting.

The ultimate effect of the theoretical clarity evolved through the long conversation of the authors, however, is the surprising illumination of the details of how writing works in each of these settings and the kinds of demands and opportunities each presents for the developing writer. The 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.