

Introduction

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Writing is alive when it is being written, read, remembered, contemplated, followed--when it is part of human activity. Otherwise it is dead on the page, devoid of meaning, devoid of influence, worthless. The signs on the page serve to mediate between people, activate their thoughts, direct their attention, coordinate their actions, provide the means of relationship. It is in the context of their activities that people consider texts and give meaning to texts. And it is in the organization of activities that people find the needs, stances, interactions, tasks that orient their attention toward texts they write and read. So to study text production, text reception, text meaning, text value apart from their animating activities is to miss the core of text's being. This collection presents a group of essays that attempts to understand texts and what people do with them as part of the activities realized through textual action.

Activity Theory is a set of related approaches that view human phenomena as dynamic, in action. Human-produced artifacts, such as utterances or texts, or shovels or symphonies, are not to be understood as objects in themselves, but within the activities that give rise and use to them. Their meanings are found in these dynamics of human interaction. Things human exist in an evanescent world held up by focused consciousness and attention and activity. The objects created and used in action then are studied as mediating artifacts rather than things in themselves, having rules of objects. The principles by which they are formed and maintained and changed are those of activity. Texts—alphanumeric marks on surfaces—are one material tool or technology among many. But texts powerfully and pervasively mediate and re-mediate human activities.

The main line of activity approaches grows out of a tradition in Soviet psychology founded on the work of L. S. Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) dynamic view of psychology, particularly developed by A. N. Leontiev (1978; 1981). Various specifics of this tradition are reviewed in essays in this collection. But also other traditions, especially postmodern views of language and social processes, such as Latour's Actor/Network theory (1987; 1994), have entered into contemporary activity theory and are reflected in the chapters here.

Although Activity Theory relies on an interdisciplinary perspective that understands psychological states and performance as shaped by and responsive to social, historical, cultural, and linguistic resources, conditions and processes, it has until been recently elaborated in largely psychological terms. The sociological, anthropological, historical and linguistic dimensions of activity need to be elaborated to fill out the perspective promised by activity theory. The study of writing—its production, its textual manifestations, and its use within organized social settings--provides one means of elaborating these dimensions. This is particularly so since writing activities and artifacts have become pervasive structuring elements within large systems of modern life, systems which have emerged historically in coordination with the development of their textual practices (such as law, science, government, bureaucracy, and financial institutions).

The work of this collection grows out of a long historical intersection between studies of writing and studies of activity. Activity theory pioneers Vygotsky and Luria (1981) were interested in writing, and writing pioneers James Moffet (1968), Janet Emig, (1971) and James Britton (1971) drew on the work of Vygotsky. One specific line of work bringing writing together with activity has been through the study of genre as mediating socially organized activities. This line of work has been expressed and developed in Bazerman (1988), Bazerman and Paradis (1991), Freedman & Medway (1994); Berkenkotter & Huckin (1994); Geisler, (1994); Russell, (1997), Russell and Bazerman, (1997), Dias et al, (1999); Van Nostrand (1997); Winsor (1996), Prior (1998), Swales, (1998), Smart (1993, 2000); Haas (1996), Coe et al (2002). These studies have been elucidating how writing as situated at the crucial junctures of the organized activities of modernity, have been spelling out how writing does socially organized work, and how writers so situated do the work of creating and interpreting text within their daily activities. The current collection grows out of this tradition, which will be elaborated and advanced in each of the chapters. (For useful introductions to the theory, see especially Russell & Bazerman, 1997).

Research on writing in human activity has a range of applications. More and more human activities are mediated through writing, particularly as technology uses writing more and more to link us together. Modern business, government, education, and science run on writing, in myriad, constantly-changing genres and media. "Knowledge work," as the current buzzword has it, is almost always "paper work." And most dramatically, the World Wide Web runs on writing, often writing linked to visual images and databases, with cascading consequences felt worldwide. Yet the ways people use writing to get things done, to structure our interactions, or even to organize the time and tempo of our very lives have not been much studied.

The lines of research represented here have far-reaching potential applications. The design of electronic tools, whether hardware software, interfaces or documentation, has benefited from activity research on writing (Spinuzzi, 2000; Spinuzzi & Zachry, 2000). Similarly, the design (re-mediation) of organizational structures and procedures mediated by writing have benefited from research focusing on the written tools in use, such as "communication audits" of organizations. Education has also felt its effects, in helping students to learn through writing, as well as learn to write the specialized genres that mediate teaching, learning, research, and outreach (most notably the international Writing across the Curriculum movement). And in a wider sense, this research has informed critical analysis of political and social structures of disciplines and professions, and public policy debates, such as in environmental and risk-management controversies (Herndl, 1996; Sauer, 2002), medical research and practice (Berkenkotter & Ravotas, 1997, 1998; McCarthy & Geiryn, 1991, 1994), social work (Paré, 1993, 2000), and many others. The study of writing in activity shows great promise for making important contributions in the huge range of human activities that are mediated by writing.

The chapters in this volume look at human activity and writing from three different perspectives: The role of writing in producing work and the economy; the role of writing in creating, maintaining, and transforming socially located selves and communities; and the role of writing formal education.

Producing Work and the Economy. Graham Smart traces the complex set of genres a central bank evolved to communicate with various publics, and in doing so he examines the ways genre sets are linked to intersubjectivities and organizational learning, both for internally formulating policy (through debate) and for regularly communicating a unified rhetorical position for the organization to outsiders. Catherine Schryer and her colleagues describe how medical students come to assert their agency in the genre of the case presentation, as they learn to diagnose patients by consuming and producing texts. Cheryl Geisler chronicles the ways Palm Technologies' personal digital assistants have rapidly become embedded in the lives of users, mediating and organizing everyday activity through written genres. Clay Spinuzzi shows how 22 software developers use *compound mediation*—drawing simultaneously upon textual artifacts in many genres, official, unofficial, or ad hoc—to create different *genre ecologies* to carry out their work. Derek Wallace charts the processes and mechanisms of policy development (here, the privatization of electricity supply in New Zealand) as a textually-managed *system of production* rather than a rational decision-making process, through which the government in power uses the traditional system of written genres of policy deliberation to circumvent democratic agenda setting, consultation, and enactment of policy.

Producing Selves in Community. Paul Prior and Jody Shipka analyze in detail the ways three people writing in different settings select and structure elements of their environment to manage time and space. Radically expanding notions of writing process, the chapter argues that that literate activity is not simply specialized cultural forms of cognition—however distributed—or the use of ready cultural tools, but rather *laminated* ways of making and transforming the material and social worlds we inhabit. Linda Flower's chapter describes the mediating role of documentation in a community think tank on inner city workforce issues. She explores how literate practices use cultural difference to build collaborative knowledge and support wise action. Katrina M. Powell examines the wide range of genre systems at a small, private, Catholic-affiliated college, and asks how genres can constitute identities within activity systems, as students negotiate competing motives in their textual self-representations. Similarly, Jean Ketter and Judith W. Hunter's case study of one student in a small, elite private college doing an internship in public relations explores how she negotiated her identity and aspirations through writing simultaneously the genres of competing activity systems: academia and public relations.

Producing Education. Janet Giltrow analyzes the ways teachers and students mutually construct and reconstruct a "legend" of the examination system within a university in India. Drawing on Bourdieu and Bakhtin, she reflects on the ways linguistic consciousness and the self are formed and reformed through genres of written discourse in the institutional systems of modernity. Kathryn Evans uses activity theory to understand why two instructors shifted in and out of transmission models of communication in their classrooms. She identifies patterns in these shifts in mental models of communication, arguing that the resilience of transmission models is buttressed by their usefulness in a range of recurrent sociocultural situations, often involving teacher power. Charles Bazerman reflects on the history of Deweyan progressives' struggles to assess student work (particularly writing) beyond the local level, then considers ways activity and genre theory might enable such mass assessment, drawing on an analysis of

materials collected from a complex sequence of social studies writing assignments on the Maya from a sixth grade class. Building on Prior's concept of layered or laminated systems and Engeström's concept of contradictions between activity systems, Dana Lundell & Richard Beach analyze problems graduate students in a large Midwestern research university have in finishing their dissertations, as they encounter constraints in writing the genre in relation to a range of different activity systems: the Graduate School, department, advisor, committee, current employment, and potential job market.

To advance in productive ways, practical or theoretical, writing research needs to move beyond texts as ends in themselves. The study of writing benefits from being embedded in people's uses and interpretation of texts and the creation of meaning and consequence in carrying out the work of the world. This rhetorical view of language in purposive use deepens the social and historical analyses of traditional rhetorical approaches, locates rhetorical action within the complex and differentiated organized activity systems of the contemporary world, and opens up for analysis the many influences written language may have beyond persuasion.

The activity approaches to understanding writing presented in this volume give us ways to examine more closely how people do the work of the world and form the relations that give rise to the sense of selves and societies through writing, reading, and circulating texts. These essays provide major contributions to both writing research and activity theory as well as to the recently emerged but now robust research tradition that brings the two together.

-- *the Editors*

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