

SECTION 6.

CULTURES OF WRITING IN THE WORKPLACE

Whenever writing researchers seek to define and analyze our topic, “writing,” we are confronted with an array of elements that might be included within our purview: people, technologies, media, social conventions, institutions, and so on. In the classical, rhetorical perspective, this array of elements was narrowed to foreground the people involved in a communicative act, a rhetor attempting to persuade an audience. In contrast, recent theories have broadened the approach to include a fuller array, variously referring to “system,” “context,” “situation,” or, as here, “culture.” These theories foreground the complexity and interconnectedness of the elements, and they emphasize that the elements are co-constructed. A relevant metaphor comes from chaos theory: the “butterfly effect,” where a small change in initial conditions (the flapping of a butterfly’s wings) cascades into later system-changing consequences (altering the pathway of a storm).

How, though, might writing researchers study the impact of small changes within cultures, as well as the concomitant impact that distinct elements in the cultures have on the writers who inhabit them? What frameworks might we apply? How might we manage and track the data collection and analysis? How, in short, might we best deal with the complexity of cultures?

The authors in this section have provided different responses to these questions, as they provide examples of situated studies. Focusing on the impact that automated systems for scribing information have had in the culture of search engine optimization (SEO), Spinuzzi draws upon Manuel Castells’s labor theory to provide a framework for analyzing rapidly changing genres. Nikolaidou and Karlsson examine how care providers wrestle with an institutional requirement that they keep journals about the care given to residents of retirement homes—and thus, the researchers develop a technique for analyzing how the care providers’ work identities are co-constructed with their word choices. Laquintano addresses issues of how credibility is generated within a specific community, as he examines how writers and reviewers of advice books for playing online poker interact with each other, and in the process, alter the traditional purposes for the book review genre. Finally, Perrin offers a method for capturing and tracing complex interactions within dynamic systems, and models this method by tracing the impact that small word revisions within news stories have within the context of a newsroom.

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