Written Discourse in the Workplace

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Introduction
To date, an examination of writing practices has not been part of the Victoria University Language in the Workplace project (LWP), which has confined itself to oral interactions amongst workers *within* a specific organisation. The purpose of this brief report is to:

(i) consider what an analysis of workplace writing might involve; and
(ii) describe a possible analytical framework.

The Scope of Inquiry
Studies of workplace writing generally involve communications to people outside the immediate workplace as a specific site: i.e. to other organisations, or to wider 'publics'; these are largely communications produced for informational or public relations purposes. Studies of texts produced by organisations for internal consumption have generally been genre or rhetorical analyses: their focus has not been on written *interactions*, i.e. textual exchanges within the organisation. Both these kinds of studies tend to concentrate either in European frameworks of critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis, or in the American tradition of rhetorical analysis. One exemplary study within the latter that does focus on intra-firm written interactions is Herndl, Fennell, and Miller's (1991) analysis of an exchange of memos preceding the Three Mile Island nuclear power accident that resulted from communicational failure.

My own research has, however, been built around a strong focus on textual exchanges, those taking place during the process of public policy formation. These include, for example, exchanges between government and public in the form of discussion papers and submissions; exchanges between government agencies and particular interest groups; and exchanges between one government agency and another on a particular policy question (Wallace 1998).

In terms of scope of inquiry into workplace writing, the last type of exchange – between one government agency and another – is a particularly fruitful area for further work. This is especially so because the writers of such texts typically engage in oral exchanges as well on the same issues. This brings us very close to what the LWP has identified as a possible focus of future investigation: comparison between written and oral texts produced during the course of a specific project or problem-solving situation. It would be particularly interesting, moreover, to focus on written exchanges which have oral counterparts *within the same geographical workplace site* where the LWP has been examining oral exchanges. It could be very instructive to

expose to analysis a comparison between written and oral communications in a situation where agents are also in regular interpersonal contact that is not wholly task-specific.

Analysis could focus on the following questions:

1. Is there any pattern by which writing and speech divide up between them particular aspects of the project or problem requiring resolution?

2. Are there differences in the visibility of power relations as expressed in written and oral communications on the same issue?

3. Do writing and speech employ different argumentational styles?

4. Do argumentational styles or discourses differ between particular sets of interacting groupings?

5. What differences in practices and relationships appear to be emerging with the introduction of new communications technologies such as e-mail and collaborative writing software?

A Framework for Analysis

My research to date has been based on a model of textual production which I developed by drawing on the sociological methodology of Pierre Bourdieu, together with some of the linguistic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. The main feature of this model *as a mode of analysis* (which is applicable to both speech and writing) is the need for an extensive reconstruction of the occasion and context for any text. An appreciation of the importance of the role of context is by now well established amongst discourse analysts of all kinds, but Bourdieu is notable for the scrupulousness with which he attends to this requirement. It means formulating the particular domain of social activity the text is a manifestation of as a *field* in which each participant's influence is defined by the amount of relevant *capital* (social, financial, cultural resources) they hold as well as by the positions they are encouraged (by their *habitus* or socially-embodied dispositions) to take up. These elements need to be reconstructed for each text.

This power to influence the field is the power to determine what counts as authoritative knowledge and effective communication in that field and to dictate the system of terms and classifications (the dominant discourses) applying in that field – what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence.

I would add that the contextual conditions that require uncovering are subject to constant transformation. My experience is that only a continuous and exhaustive undertaking of and exposure to emerging cross-disciplinary theoretical and empirical research can equip one with anything approaching full awareness of these contemporary conditions. In addition, the 'textual reality construction' model developed by Bryan Green (1983) would make for very interesting application in the situation I referred to earlier where

written and oral texts are being produced by agents in more or less constant interpersonal contact. Textual reality construction refers to the devices (of selection, ordering, etc.) typically employed in written texts which constitute a domain of activity in ways quite removed from that produced by everyday face-to-face interaction (what Green calls 'situated reality'). Written texts are therefore a very powerful medium for those in a position to write them. The greater interpenetration of textual and situated reality in the workplace context might mean that it would be more difficult for an independent textual realm to obtain firm purchase, but that would be something to be tested in the course of research.

References

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