Writing in the Workplace: Implications for Human Resource Development

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Writing in the workplace is among the understudied business topics in the field of HRD. Yet, the impacts of writing in today's workplace are significant, and organizations making it a priority benefit from it. Furthermore, writing is related to the issue of workplace literacy which is the umbrella term for basic communication skills. This literature review provides a general view on workplace writing and discusses implications to HRD within a model research proposal.

Keywords: Workplace Literacy, Organizational Communication, Organizational Performance

Effective writing in the workplace is an essential skill (A.P. Online, 2004). While the rules are basically the same for any type of writing; there are some special issues in the business context. Knowing the elements of good business writing can make or break a career. As higher education institutions are striving to thoroughly prepare their students to the professional careers, the importance of writing skills has become more important than ever. Academe's real reasons for requiring writing from students are (a) to evaluate mastery of standard written academic language of instruction, (b) to evaluate subject matter knowledge, and (c) to evaluate critical thinking skills (Beaufort, 2000). The way a person writes, in fact, is another way of self-representation. The future career success of individuals is not only limited to their subject matter knowledge but also includes their communication skills (A.P. Online, 2004). Such skills are important to people who are involved in management. General writing behaviors in workplace settings have been a focus of research for many scholars as the workplace has become much more complicated and required higher skill levels (Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Broadhead & Freed, 1986; Brown & Herndl, 1986; Doheny-Farina, 1986; Faigley, 1985; Flower, 1989; Gunnarsson, 1997; Johns, 1989; Woolever, 1989). In a knowledge-based society, high-end and low-end workplaces alike are often rich in text, information, and technology (Tannock, 2001). Today's workplace demands workers to be innovative, flexible, and highly skilled including not only technical and interpersonal skills, but also intellectual skills that give their companies the 'critical edge' over their local and international competitors (Boyett & Conn, 1992; Hammer, 1996; Hammer & Champy, 1993; Castleton, 2002).

Literature Review

Employers today are complaining that far too many college graduates cannot write adequately; have weak thinking skills; and are unable to understand how to operate successfully within the political structure of the business environment (Thomas, 1995). One of the reasons for the writing and thinking inadequacies that employers deplore is the lack of sufficient writing requirements in the educational system—high school and college in particular (A.P. Online, 2004). Because of the large class sizes students are generally given fewer essay exams or term papers; and grading multiple-choice exams is much easier. Thus, many college students, after completing freshman English courses, do little, if any, writing until their senior year. As a result, students' thinking and writing skills remain largely underdeveloped and unrefined (p. 461).

When these graduates enter the workforce, the challenge with writing becomes more real and pressing. Although employers believe that workplace literacy training can improve various aspects of job performance, including quality of output, ability to use new technology, error rates, customer satisfaction, time savings, and safety (Sticht, 1995), they are very reluctant to invest in training in general (yet alone to provide such basic) skills that are supposedly be acquired during formal mandatory secondary schooling. The need for many workers to undertake "basic skills training" is often presented as an argument for workplace literacy programs (Castleton, 2002). Furthermore, the existing literature indicates that relatively low workplace literacy levels have the potential to severely undermine the economic well-being and adaptive capabilities of individuals, organizations (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990; Cappelli & Rogovsky, 1994; Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990; Hays, 1999) and the nation as a whole. Workplace literacy is a recent and still emerging site of educational activity (Castleton, 2002). Spilka distinguishes between public and workplace literacy by defining workplace literacy as a means that typically serves a central social purpose, to help professionals in organizations to solve problems, make

decisions, revise or create policies, perform tasks, and expand or modify their thinking (2001).

Curricula for teaching professional writing often do not reflect accurately the way writing is conducted in the workplace (Mabrito, 1999). Not surprisingly, studies and surveys of professionals in the workplace have found that many professionals feel their undergraduate training in writing left them unprepared for the writing tasks they faced every day (Aldrich, 1982; Redish, 1989; Spears, 1996). Redish further argues that readers of workplace writing frequently complain that recent college graduates not only lack strategies for writing, but they also apply inappropriate strategies to writing tasks (1989). The transition from academic writing to writing in the workplace is often a difficult one for (former) students to make (Anson & Forsberg, 1990). Similarly, bringing workplace skills into the classroom requires a paradigm shift on the part of instructors and students (Hewlette, 2004); when (as is known) professionals spend a good deal of their day writing (Anderson, 1985; Faigley, Miller, Meyer, & Witte, 1981; Kirtz & Reep, 1990; Stine & Skarzenski, 1979), this does not necessarily mean they can translate their talents into necessary practice in class settings.

To analyze such writing, researchers have taken a variety of approaches. Some, for example, survey recent graduates in the workforce (Bednar & Olney, 1987; Wiggs, 1993), occasionally with special emphasis on the transition from academic to workplace writing (Anson and Forsberg, 1990). Others have focused on particular groups of professionals; e.g., business executives (Gallion & Kavan, 1994), nurse managers (Spears, 1996), or other professional discourse communities (Odell, 1985; Spilka, 1993). Another approach is to look at the effect of context on writing processes (Driskill, 1989) and the social aspects of writing (Faigley, 1985). Vygotsky contends that "teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary . . . [and that] writing should be incorporated into a task . . . necessary and relevant for life" (1978, p. 118). Put differently, the above shows that when writing is taught in a career context, students come to value writing and tend to do better meeting course requirements in terms of performance and commitment.

Interdisciplinary research into the writing conventions and processes of various professional discourse communities, defining 'good' writing in each, learning how students can produce effective writing in their majors and workplaces, and understanding how teachers can help students in this process (Robert & Comprone, 1993, p. 61). Walvrood and McCarthy (1990) reported a productive writing role experienced by some college students; the role required integrating subject matter, using knowledge from outside the class, adopting the discourse forms and methods of reasoning of that professional group, and analysis of the data of concern for the group.

The theory of situated cognition suggests that the real world is the most effective environment for learning (Lave, 1998, p. 1). People employed by organizations of all descriptions, while contending with ethical dilemmas, problem solving, and meeting organizational objectives, are faced with ethical dilemmas and contend with problems in need of solutions, whether professional or personal. Many of them inherently follow specific writing conventions, file standard reports, as well as carry on interoffice and external correspondence yet may do so poorly. Abstract notions about awareness of audience, purpose, and the self-image a writer wishes to convey may take on meaning when placed in a real-life context such as the workplace if consistent and appropriate training are offered. Problem-solving heuristics and research strategies have the potential for transfer into numerous situations and offer solutions for such challenges.

Since excellent writing skills are among the must-haves in a college graduates in today's world of business, the amount of writing during schooling can have a profound effect on whether students develop these skills satisfactorily to meet the writing skills requirements of the business (A.P. Online, 2004). A straightforward representation of workers as possessing inadequate literacy skills for current and future jobs, however, remains most pervasive among the commonly held beliefs on literacy and work (Freebody & Welch, 1993; Gowen, 1994; Green, Hodgens, & Luke, 1997; Hull, 1993, 1997; Hull & Grubb, 1999; Castleton, 2002). Bazerman and Paradis report that, in the workplace, textual dynamics are a central agency in the social construction of objects, concepts, and instruction (1991). Students need specific and rigorous preparation for the world of work. With the necessary curriculum changes to prepare students for what they really need to know and be able to do on the job, it is possible to better prepare students for their future careers.

Within a model that casts workers' skills as inherently individualistic, little attention is given to the reality of workplaces as communities of workers who possess a diverse range of skills that they use in complementary ways (Castleton, 2002). From a business management and organizational communication perspective, Forrester describes the problem as:

> In the increased competitive pressure on management to improve the quality and quantity of the labour input, the notion of employee subjectivity (affective elements such as initiative, "emotional labour" [customer care], values and attitudes, intra-individual management, self actualisation and adaptability) has emerged as a key area of new management and thinking and that workplace or work-related learning is often seen as an essential part of "capturing" employee subjectivity in achieving corporate objectives. The

> wider socio-economic changes of recent decades has resulted in many workplaces questioning aspects of the traditionalist "Taylorist" division between thinking and doing along with the rigidities characteristic of a Fordist workplace regime. *However, instead of the brave new world of employee "empowerment", 'autonomy", satisfaction and fulfillment within those "new workplaces" or "workplaces of the future" there is just as likely, we suggest, to emerge new mechanisms of oppression and managerial control (*1999, p. 188).

A Research Proposal

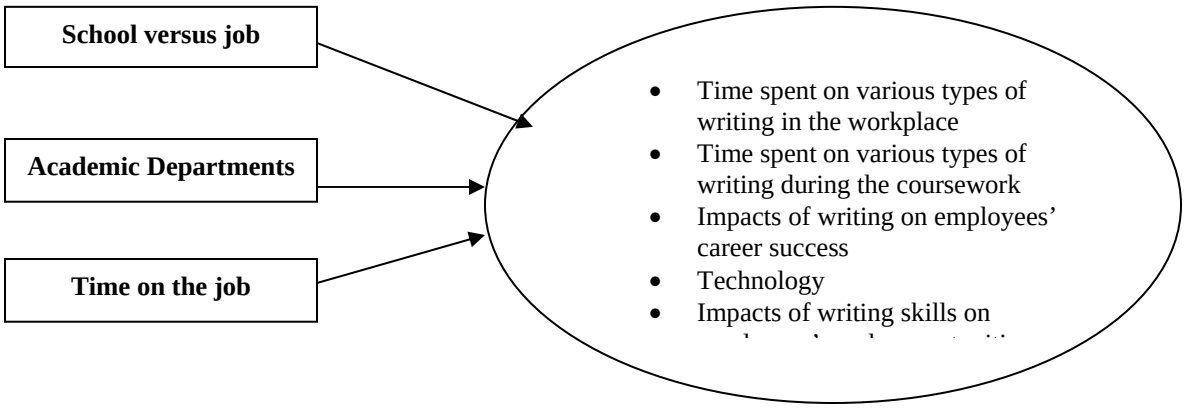
This section of the paper will present a model of a research study proposing a quantitative methodology to identify whether there is a correlation between the writing required in academic curricula and use of writing in the workplace. As it is clearly stated in the literature review, writing is very important in day-to-day business activities and communications. Accurate and powerful writing, however, requires significant amount of maturation through practice. Students develop and attain a fundamental level of writing skills during school, starting from first grade continuing through to higher education. But, it is in the undergraduate years that they receive their field-specific writing experience, which is the area of interest to workplace literacy. For the purposes of this proposed study, graduates of the business school are proposed as the target population to sample and study as this would be of relevance to workplace writing. The amount of writing in the required academic curricula of undergraduate business programs is hypothesized to indicate the level of experience of writing students may receive during their higher education experience.

Exploring such a correlation would further enable college administrators and faculty to take appropriate actions to ensure the adequacy and quality of writing in academia to sufficiently equip the students with skills and abilities of writing applicable in the workplace. Therefore, the paper attempts to achieve the following objectives:

a) To identify the correlation between writing required in functional area courses and that required in functional area careers;
b) To understand the usage of writing in the workplace;
c) To examine the impacts of writing on individuals' career success;
d) To identify the impacts of technology on writing in the workplace; and
e) To study the impacts of writing skills on individuals' work opportunities.

This proposed study to better understand the impact of writing in the workplace from the employee, team, and organizational view point includes the following variables as illustrated in Figure I:

Table I. Variables



Independent Variables **Dependent Variables**

Dependent Variables: the outcome or criterion variable as they represent the change or difference in the variables being investigated.

1) The time spent on various types of writing in the workplace is measured with a multiple-choice questionnaire item such as memos, emails, business reports, and letters.
2) Time spent on various types of writing during the coursework is measured with a multiple-choice questionnaire item such as essay writing, dairies, term papers, and research papers.

3) Impacts of writing on individuals' career success are measured with a Likert scale asking participants about their beliefs of the impacts of writing on their career success on a scale from 1 to 5.
4) Technology is measured with a multiple-choice questionnaire item asking the study participants the technology used for writing such as word processing, email, spread sheet, Power Point presentations, and Access data base.
5) Impacts of writing skills on individuals' work opportunities are measured with a Likert scale asking participants about their beliefs of the impacts of writing on work opportunities on a scale from 1 to 5.

The independent variables are the cause or experimental variables.

1. School versus job is measured by the practices within the curricula and the workplace. The dependent variables are, thus, correlated in terms of school and job.
2. Academic departments are measured by each identifier (e.g., accounting, human resources …). Furthermore, these departments are individually correlated with the dependent variables.
3. The third independent variable of this proposed study is time on the job, which refers to the length of employment, is measured with a Likert scale grouping number of years. This variable is then correlated with the dependent variables.

Proposed Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the overarching hypothesis is that there is a positive relationship between writing required in the students' major courses in their undergraduate education and success in their chosen area of work. The proposed study also includes the following sub-hypotheses:

A. The demand/need for writing skills will have increased over the duration of the respondents' careers.
B. The higher the level of writing required in functional area careers, the more writing that will be required in functional area coursework.
C. Regardless of the area, the amount of writing required in functional area courses will be described as insufficient by respondents in the field.
D. Individuals who have experienced more writing exposure in their coursework will advance more rapidly in their chosen careers.
E. Changes in technology will have differential effects on individual fields of concentration, producing varied needs for writing capabilities in different functional fields/careers.
F. Those with higher levels of writing skills/experience will be perceived more positively by their organizational and will advance faster in their chosen careers.

Methodology

This is a correlational research proposal in which the study attempts to determine the variables' the level of relatedness. This degree of relation may be expressed as a correlation coefficient. Because of the large number of variables in the study correlational method is also allows the opportunity to analyze how the variables, either singly or in combination, affect the pattern of behavior. This method further provides information concerning the degree of relationship between the variables being studied.

Population and Sample

To ensure population validity, the following demographic variables between the accessible population and the target population is compared. Additional analyses of such variables should also show no significant demographic differences between the samples and the accessible population.

a) Gender composition;
b) Mean salary;
c) Mean age;
d) Mean years of work experience.

Instrumentation: Survey

For the purposes of data gathering, a questionnaire is designed to be used in this survey methodology. Survey design calls for administering the instrument to collect data from participants in the sample concerning their characteristics, experiences, and opinions in order to generalize and associate the findings with the population that the sample is intended to represent. The questionnaire is in closed form, multiple-item scale, and Likert scale is used to rank the items in the questions. Questions regarding demographic variables are also included at the end of the questionnaire.

Before conducting the survey, a pilot testing is to be done among a sample of individuals from the population from which the study intends to draw the survey participants. Using a sample of graduates located within close proximity of the studied institution, who could be surveyed and interviewed, this pilot testing would allow the determination and validity measures for the instrument.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics of demographic variables of the samples are presented in order to analyze the independent variables. Statistical analyses are conducted to explore the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variables. Multiple regression analysis is also conducted in order to identify how much variance of the dependent variables will be accounted for by the combination of the independent variables. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (R) is also utilized to measure the degree of relationships among the variables.

Implications for HRD

The issue of workplace writing and workplace literacy are closely related to HRD activities in the organizations. First, increasing workplace literacy requires learning. Trainers, particularly adult educators, have embraced the notion of the workplace as a site for learning (Spencer, 2001). Furthermore, in order to achieve the goals of any training program the employees with low levels of basic skills are problematic as workplace literacy skill levels may influence an individual's ability to participate and learn in training, his or her perceptions of various aspects of work-related training, and ultimately the ability to apply new learning on the job (Bates & Holton, 2004). Achieving learning both at the individual and organizational level is one of the goals of HRD as it is related to employee satisfaction, workforce development, and increasing expertise. Put differently, the greater the gap between a worker's skills and those necessary in the workplace, the greater the burden on HRD activities in the organization.

Second, increasing workplace literacy would lead to better organizational performance, organizational communication, and productivity as outcome measures. Spencer in his recent study reports that in those few cases where genuine moves toward a learning organization that include some benefits for workers have taken place, workers are reported as being better off, enjoying greater job satisfaction, experiencing more flexible work patterns, and having more control over how work is conducted (2001). Hence, HRD's effort to achieve learning organizations has been substantiated as has been the case with other empirical studies (Vince, 2002; Poell & der Krogt, 2003; Hodgkinson, 2000; Gardiner, Leat, & Sadler-Smith, 2001; Naquin, & Holton, 2003; Ortenblad, 2004; Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004; Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004; Rowden, 2002; Torraco, 2002; Yang, 2003; Russ-Eft, 2002). Third, HRD scholars and professionals should undoubtedly attach a greater level of emphasis to these issues as advocates of quality of work (Lowe, 2000) and learning to benefit the workers' work group and labor union (Spencer, 2001). A recent study by Bates and Holton (2004) suggests that the linkage between learning transfer system perceptions and workplace literacy skills has important implications for training and learning transfer practitioners and researchers operating in organizational environments with significant numbers of low-skill employees.

And last, but not least, there is an existing reality and challenge; whether HRD professionals or scholars choose to acknowledge or emphasize them, issues on workplace writing and literacy have already been documented and led to calls for remedies in various governmental reports in different countries across the globe including, *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want* (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990) in the United States, *Implementation of 'Education and Training 2010' Work Programme* (Cheallaigh, 2003) in the European Union; *Workforce Literacy: An Economic Challenge for Canada* (Drouin, 1990) in Canada; and *Literacy at Work* (National Board of Employment and Training, 1996) in Australia.

Conclusion

Success in today's workplace requires that individuals have a broad set of foundation skills among which context workplace literacy skills are critical (Bates & Holton, 2004). Hull and Grubb (1999) noted that the "growing concern is that many workers and prospective workers are not up to the task, having been poorly or insufficiently educated and having grown accustomed to jobs that do not expect much" (p. 311). Organizations which believe in the importance of investing in human capital need to be presented the fact that they also have a stake in the problem. To improve this situation, organizations must be convinced (a) that written communications affect the bottom line; (b) that writing is not a general, portable skill that all managers should have; and (c) that writing-skill development requires more than a quick, 1-day seminar (Beaufort, 2000). Successful workplace communication can be critical to an organization's ability to fulfill its goals, overcome its constraints, and in general, function smoothly and make progress toward its mission (Spilka, 2001). From an HRD perspective, what should be concerning to us is how the issue of workplace literacy impact our business practices and interventions. Therefore, what is needed is research aimed at examining how workplace literacy influences training participation, learning, and the application of new learning to job performance (that is, learning transfer) (Bates & Holton, 2004). New empirical research needs to be conducted to examine this relationship and explore ways to improve the present situation.

The outcome of this study should allow the forging of a stronger relationship and linkage between the provision of writing education in academia and the use of writing skills to promote the development of the workforce within organizations. Evidence suggests the linkage here is weak, largely because of the divergence in focus of the two "institutions," education and work (A P Online, 2004).

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