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Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Student Writing

Abstract
Writing, often in conjunction with other media, is profoundly important to higher education, as it is to other modern institutions students will enter. Student writing mediates much of the activity of learning, and the most crucial parts, typically, such as assessment. Yet in higher education, writing often is devalued or even dismissed as a set of easily generalizable, elementary skills of transcribing speech or thought that students should have learned earlier in secondary or elementary school. This remedial model, and the tradition of complaint and cascading blame that goes with it, results not only in remedial courses but also, often, in the exclusion of student writing from the realm of serious inquiry and discussion in higher education.

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Comments
CHAT and Student Writing

David R. Russell

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Yet in many countries, higher education teachers, administrators, and policy makers have come to see writing as an important tool of learning and teaching. CHAT has provided concepts and research for using student writing as a means of meeting the pedagogic challenges this volume addresses (see Introduction). This chapter describes how CHAT-based research and interventions in several countries address specific issues of current higher education, and provides new answers, however partial. But first I briefly explain how writing, in CHAT terms, is more than a means for assessing students; it is a tool of university-level teaching, learning, and sociocognitive development.

For transmission models of communication, teaching/learning, and behavior, CHAT substitutes models of tool-mediated activity (see Figure 5.1). Writing (broadly seen as inscriptions on surfaces) is an extremely powerful and plastic cultural tool, as it is relatively permanent, often portable, and usually inexpensive to produce. It is therefore an efficient tool for (re)organizing and regulating thought and behavior. As such, it mediates not only thought, but also the social organization of literate cultures – think of laws, religious texts, maps (Bazerman, 2006; Goody, 1986).
For pedagogy, writing has broad potential as a tool of both learning and development, understood through the Vygotskian concepts of internalization and externalization. As the editors put it, "learning as not simply a matter of internalising what one is taught; rather, internalisation is complemented by a process of externalisation where learners take these ideas and work with them to shape what Vygotsky termed the social situations of their development." These concepts suggest writing is potentially much more than an autonomous transcription of speech or thought, a mere conduit of transmission. It is a tool for reorganizing and deepening thought. As E. M. Forster put it, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (1971, p. 99). Or as another novelist, C. Day-Lewis, put it, we not only "write in order to be understood, we write in order to understand."

The central theoretical concept – from its Vygotskian origins in the work of James Britton and his colleagues (1975) – is that students not only learn to write but also write to learn. This concept provides a deeper understanding of writing than the sender-receiver model. Writing is a tool for learning instead of merely a tool for assessing learning. Writing is conceived as a means of engaging students with the problems and methods of a discipline as well as a means of sorting students.

James Britton’s work (1975) inspired the language-across-the-curriculum (LAC) movement at the secondary level in the United Kingdom, which in turn inspired the writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) or writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) movement in U.S. higher education, beginning in the 1970s (Russell, 2002). According to the most recent survey (Thaiss & Porter, 2010), more than half of the institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada who responded have some kind of program to improve student writing in the disciplines – and student learning through writing. Some 65 percent of PhD-granting universities reported such a program. WAC programs consist
of such efforts as workshops for professors to learn techniques for improving students' learning through their writing, and often writing centers for students (Bazerman et al., 2005). And there are research and intervention efforts, though with different histories, in many countries, such as Australia, France, Colombia, Germany, New Zealand, Switzerland, and many others.

Recent large-scale survey research of more than twenty-three thousand students in eighty-two U.S. universities found that writing with certain qualities contributes significantly to student engagement and learning. The report concluded:

When institutions provided students with extensive, intellectually challenging writing activities, the students engaged in more deep learning activities such as analysis, synthesis, integration of ideas from various sources, and grappled more with course ideas both in and out of the classroom. In turn, students whose faculty assigned projects with these same characteristics reported greater personal, social, practical, and academic learning and development. (NSSE, 2008, pp. 20–21)

In a CHAT view, writing is important to student learning, but also to the intellectual activity of the disciplines. Researchers use writing to learn as well as to communicate. And they use highly differentiated forms (genres) of writing to do their work and "discuss" it in scholarly publications. Simply put, writing is specialized as well as transversal. Many aspects of writing are similar in all fields. All use the same basic grammar and spelling, and all pose problems, cite previous literature, give their methods and results, but they do so in very different ways, such that the writing in one field is often unintelligible to researchers in another. Writing is in fundamental ways different in each discipline, as it mediates the different activity of each.

In North American research on writing in higher education, the concept of genre-as-social-action, linked often to CHAT, has become important (Miller, 1984, 1994). A genre is not seen as a set of formal features, but as a typified response to a recurring need. Researchers write in certain ways because they think and communicate and manipulate certain objects in certain typical ways. Thus, students often find it difficult to move from the writing of one discipline to that of another, like "a stranger in strange lands," as the title of a seminal article on this put it (McCarthy, 1987).

Moreover, genres form systems or ecologies, which mediate systems or ecologies of activity (Bazerman, 1994; Spinuzzi, 2003). Those systems of activity and the genres that mediate them extend from researchers to professionals and publics beyond higher education. And they extend from researchers to students (Russell, 1997). The humble lab report in chemistry 101 is a reflection of – and potentially a step on a high scaffold toward – the work of scientists
in professional laboratories. Thus writing is essential whether it is students creating new knowledge for themselves – what we call learning – or academics creating new knowledge for their fields – what we call research. Writing indexes the methods and epistemology of each discipline, the practices of each profession. But students are often not taught – but only expected to know or divine – the ways with words, that is to say, the genres of a discipline.

Research on writing in higher education often exposes and analyzes deep contradictions among the conflicting societal demands and interests in higher education, such as the rifts between “pure” and “applied” research (research for internal higher education interests and interests external to higher education). In relation to education, writing exposes the contradictions between the formation of students specifically (professionally) versus generally (for citizenship); for research (and reproduction) versus for professional practice (service); between the interests of teaching versus research. All are embodied in the tensions students and teachers experience in choosing and learning and writing the genres of higher education. And all reflect the great sea changes outlined in the introduction to this volume. I begin with the institutions that have the oldest and most numerous students – and those with the least status.

Community Colleges and Adult/Further Education: Motivational Pathways of Texts

The first two of the three sea changes in higher education Wells and Edwards point to in their introduction – the broadening of higher education curricula to practical arts and sciences, and the expansions of higher education in both the number and types of students and the number and types of institutions – makes the cultural-historical contradictions of writing most dramatically evident. CHAT research has shown how the genres, audiences, and purposes for writing have also dramatically expanded, though often with little or no provision for, or even awareness of, the change on the part of teachers and administrators (Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010). In a three-year longitudinal study in two UK further education colleges (similar to U.S. community colleges), Ivanić, Edwards, and Barton (2009) used activity theory, in combination with semiotic and discourse analysis, to describe the multiple and multimodal literacies (deliberately plural) of students and teachers in curriculums such as child care, catering, travel, and tourism.

Many of the students had worked or were currently working in the sector they were studying (common in these types of institutions), and all the students got extensive practical experiences as part of their curriculum (test kitchens, laboratory crèches, etc.). The researchers found that students had
extensive and often very demanding literacy tasks in their everyday or work lives outside higher education. “Students engaged not only in vernacular literacy practices – that is, those which arise from their own interests and concerns – but also in a wide range of bureaucratic, more formal literacy practices which are demanded by the practicalities of their lives” (Ivanic, Edwards, & Barton, 2009, p. 180). Yet teachers and students rarely perceived these “outside” literacy practices as valuable.

What has become clear in our projects is that communication, which encompasses literacy practices, is an important part of the hidden curriculum in colleges. Yet all too often the communicative aspects of learning remain unacknowledged, literacies are treated as “belonging” in college or out of college, and students’ everyday literacy practices remain untapped as resources for learning. As long as these tendencies continue, literacy in colleges and in other educational institutions will remain a constant “problem.” (Ivanic, Edwards, & Barton, 2009, p. 190)

Ironically, students in vocational curricula were expected to produce a greater diversity of – and often linguistically more demanding – genres than students in academic courses, where they wrote only one (the academic essay). For example, students in child care wrote pamphlets for parents and students in catering developed menu prose and business plans, as well as academic essays. And vocational students experienced a contradiction in purposes and often great difficulty in writing, arising from this ambiguity in the curriculum.

The researchers concluded college staff needed to become aware of the literacies that mediate learning (Ivanic, Edwards, & Barton, 2009, p. 183). Based on the descriptive research, the teachers made changes in their practice to develop hybrid academic/workplace genres that engaged with students’ everyday literacy practices. These “tended to increase their capacity for engagement and recall, and their confidence” (Ivanic, Edwards, & Barton, 2009, p. 186). For the researchers, “It is diversification and multiplication of literacy practices which is the issue and not the lack of them. If one seeks to impose a standardised view of literacy, then diversity and multiplicity will inevitably be problematic, but they could be a source of strength” (Ivanic, Edwards, & Barton, 2009, p. 181).

**Writing across the Curriculums: Contradictions in “General”/“Liberal” Education**

CHAT has also been used to understand the differences among the discourses – and activities – of different disciplines, and therefore what is general or transversal about writing and what is not. As I mentioned earlier, writing indexes
the epistemology and practices of each discipline, and it also maps in its genres the motivational and developmental trajectories expected of students. Russell and Yañez (2003; Yañez & Russell, 2009) studied a third-year Irish education history course in a large Midwestern public university (MWU), which students in fields other than history took to satisfy a university general education requirement (common in U.S. universities to broaden students’ education). They wanted to understand obstacles to WAC (and the deeper attitudes, practices, and structures involved) in multiple contexts: the classroom, the broader university, and professional and civic contexts beyond it.

They found the assigned genres (book report, research paper) were defined very differently by the teacher and the students, which produced frustration in the students and tensions and disturbances in the classroom. By broadening the analysis to other activity systems (professional academic history, secondary school history teaching, and journalism), the researchers found the tensions were symptoms of deeper contradictions between the students and teachers’ constructions of the object and motive of the course. The teacher perceived the assignments as genres of professional academic history useful for deepening students’ critical thinking and making them more critically aware citizens, though the genres he assigned were those of professional academic historians rather than of civic discourse. The students perceived the genres as linked to the activity system of secondary school history or popular history for leisure reading, and even where the teacher’s genres were understood, students did not perceive those genres of academic historians as relevant to their diverse professional pathways or future citizenship. Students expressed their sense of just doing it for a grade rather than for their future involvements, and they expressed alienation in their approach to the writing tasks.

From interviews with history faculty members and curricular/policy documents from the department and the university written over the last fifty years, the researchers traced the intertextual and intersubjective links between the classroom and the institution to identify deeper contradictions and a strategic ambiguity. When convenient, writing was conceived in terms of unproblematic transmission: a container or conduit for thought. “Content” is placed into written “form” and sent. Writing is a generalizable set of discrete skills necessary for critical thinking and democratic life. Students do not have to understand the relationship between the practices of academic history and their own pursuits. Citizenship is not a social practice into which one is enculturated but an accumulation of knowledge and skills taught to the masses – an ideology of mass education.

But when convenient, writing is alternatively conceived as a tool of enculturation in some specific social practice, such as the activity of doing
professional academic history – an ideology of elite, meritocratic education. This strategic ambiguity allowed MWU to pursue contradictory motives in general education without confronting their consequences at the human level of teaching and learning. The strategic ambiguity made it possible for faculty members and administrators to alternatively invoke one and ignore the other of these two official motives when necessary or convenient in working out the division of labor. Graduate students, for example, taught the general education courses, freeing tenure-line faculty members for teaching majors and doing research. However, this strategic ambiguity over conceptions of general education and writing left the instructor, and his students from many disciplines, to wrestle with the consequences.

STEM Education

Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education (STEM) has been an important site of research on writing in higher education because of its prestige in the academic world and its links to powerful professional worlds. Moreover, STEM fields use not only alphabetic but also alphanumeric and graphical inscriptions.

Interventions using CHAT and genre as social action critically analyze some genre systems of formal schooling in light of research on literacy practices among professionals and students. Then the learning environment is re-mediated based on that research, often using Internet technology. The most demonstrably effective example is Labwrite, an online program used to teach students the processes of laboratory practice and lab report writing, common in natural sciences and engineering education (Carter, Ferzli, & Wiebe, 2004, 2007). The lab report is also common in workplaces for scientists, engineers, and technicians, but a genre whose classroom version often degenerates into a cookbook or worksheet formulaic genre. The researchers first did an analysis of university chemistry teaching and learning in laboratory contexts and the professional practices of scientists and engineers. Researchers drew on workplace studies of professionals researching and writing lab reports, classroom case studies of laboratory practices, and research on students’ literacy practices in writing reports outside of the classroom/laboratory. The researchers then developed a web-based tool for leading students through the process of producing a lab report. In quasi-experimental, quantitatively analyzed studies, LabWrite was found to be significantly better than traditional instruction in improving students’ 1) understanding of specific scientific concepts, 2) understanding of the scientific method, and 3) attitudes toward lab work (Carter, Ferzli, & Wiebe, 2004).
Rather than explicitly teaching the specific linguistic resources, LabWrite explicitly teaches the genre in the process of performing a rhetorical action in its target context of use, the activity of chemistry education in higher education. LabWrite leads students through the process of doing and representing (textually, mathematically, and graphically) a laboratory experiment. The instruction in “writing” a lab report begins before the students enter the laboratory, continues in the laboratory, and concludes after the students have left the laboratory. The goal of instruction is not to improve the students’ writing per se, but to improve their learning: to teach scientific concepts and the scientific method using writing as a means. Because the students are writing to learn, they are assessed on their learning, not their writing. The genre is a tool for doing and learning science in the context of the course-specific laboratory, and the students learn the genre as a matter of course in doing the activity.

This approach shows particular promise. It is the only one that has proven effective (measured by quasi-experimental comparison methods) in teaching a genre to L1 adults. However, because the LabWrite study was confined to a very specific and regularized genre and activity system (the laboratory report in laboratory science instruction), the potential for transfer from formal schooling to professional spheres of activity beyond is not addressed, as Carter, Ferzli, and Wiebe point out (2004). Yet transfer is very often the goal of teaching genre, particularly in professional education. To address the problem of transfer, we must move beyond writing to learn toward writing to professionalize.

**Professional Education and Technologies of the Word**

CHAT concepts of development and genre as social action have also informed research on the transition from writing in higher education to writing in professional work, fundamentally different activity systems nevertheless linked through systems of genres. This transition is crucial to understanding the contradictions of higher education, between traditional values of liberal education and new demands on higher education from employers, government employability agendas, and so on.

The most extensive study of the transition was conducted by a group of Canadian researchers (Dias et al., 1999; Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994). A central but uncomfortable finding is that there is little transfer between communication in the genres of professional education in higher education and communication in the genres of professional work. These researchers found that students attributed their learning to schooling (writing for the teacher, for a mark), even when teachers attempt to simulate the workplace by
assigning workplace genres, having professionals in the field attend student presentations, and so forth. That is, students recognize and create texts as belonging to the activity (and genre) system of schooling, though the texts teachers assign for reading or writing may have been drawn from or intended for workplace systems of genres. The social motive of schooling (epistemic) is fundamentally different than that of work (pragmatic).

This fundamental contradiction in social motives generates other contradictions. Writing in schooling is primarily individual, is typically done for assessment, and leads to a mark. Incorporating other students’ work is often considered cheating. Writing in professional environments is primarily collective, collaborative, and leads to a product or service. In schooling, then, there is little “document cycling” – feedback and revision loops common in professional workplaces (Paradis, Dobrin, & Miller, 1985).

An obvious intervention, then, is to immerse students in a target genre system beyond the classroom, in a workplace, as with internships or service learning, but this is expensive and difficult to control. Based on CHAT research on communication in professional organizations, researchers construct multimedia simulations of fictional organizations, represented by fictional Internet and intranet sites, to create an activity system that mediates between schooling and work (Fisher, 2006, 2007; Russell & Fisher, 2009) (see Figure 5.2). Students role play as they collaboratively engage in workplace-like activities in the fictional online learning environment, using the tools and genres typical in workplaces in a particular sector (databases, files of documents, meeting minutes, videotaped meetings, synchronous and asynchronous communication, etc.).

Students play the role of consultants (or interns) in a fictional organization. The “consultants” produce texts in a range of genres (written, oral, visual, and electronic) that arise in the fictional activity (and genre) system of the company. The texts are submitted to characters in the simulation, such as the CEO pictured here in a video (see Figure 5.2). And the characters reply to the students-as-consultants through a closed e-mail system (though it is actually – as the students are told – the teacher replying in character, using a special role-sensitive e-mail system). There is also a document server with a universe of documents from various departments of the organization. And in the interactions of fictional characters and students-as-consultants, that document universe is brought into circulation through the genre system, where students must act on deadlines, face ethical dilemmas seeded into the simulation, and deal with “emergencies,” such as an anti-GMO demonstration outside the company headquarters. In other words, the elements of time and space, although fictional, are added to the fictional case to create
a learning environment where students experience genre as social action in workplaces.

Research into students' learning in these environments suggests students are much more likely to attribute their learning in the online simulation environment to contexts of professional work than to contexts of schooling, as compared to their attributions of other parts of their courses that use more traditional learning environments (e.g., Blackboard™ and face-to-face instruction) (Fisher, 2006). These attributions seem to be shaped by the changes in classroom rules, division of labor, and community the simulation affords, and by the contradictions between the genre systems of schooling and workplace (mediated by the simulation as a teaching tool). For example, in engineering and business simulations, students draw freely from each other's work as it is posted to a shared file space and from the student work published in the simulation (students add to the simulation over time). This literacy practice is extremely atypical in classroom settings, where writing is primarily individual and done for assessment, and where incorporating other students' work is often considered cheating. But it is extremely typical in the workplace, where people often draw from a common pool of documents and where documents cycle through multiple readers in the division of labor. The goal of the online multimedia simulations is to exploit the contradictions between the two activity systems to produce reflective practice and reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983, 1987).
Graduate Education and the Thesis/Dissertation: Lamination of Activity and Multi-Genre

The Master and PhD thesis (dissertation) has become a major issue with the exponential growth of this sector of higher education – and a major object of CHAT research for twenty-five years. From the first ethnographic studies of PhD students (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988), research has found that students finally come to write the genre, but often at the price of profound conflicts of identity, long periods of inactivity, and other human and financial costs. Caught between the activity systems of the institution and its requirements, on one hand, and the discipline and its practices on the other, newcomers to the genre and activity of the thesis/dissertation bring their own sociocultural history and take an active role in learning to write it. Disciplinary enculturation is less a slow absorption or unconscious, passive assimilation and more a conscious, often chaotic battle, though often hidden from view.

Paul Prior’s longitudinal studies (1998) have found that students at this level engage in a process of “gentrification,” reclassifying texts, attributing similarities, as they learn – and sometimes reject – powerful disciplinary and institutional practices. Each student participates in multiple networks of activity simultaneously – university, department, discipline, committees, job market, family. And each must negotiate this “laminated” activity in writing this most important document of their career (See also Blakeslee, 1997; Casanave, 2002).

An ethnographic study of eleven students using activity theory (Lundell & Beach, 2003) isolated two central contradictions of graduate education revealed in their processes of thesis writing:

- Students must write in the format and style required by the rules of the department and university, but the formats and styles do not easily translate into presentation or publications for the job market.
- They must conform to the practices of the thesis director, who is often uninformed about the department/university rules, and who does not give them the rules.

Paré and Starke Meyerling’s 2009 study of sixty PhD students and their thesis directors found that the thesis is not only a double genre – a last exercise at the university, a final test, but also, entirely or partially, the first significant contribution to the disciplinary conversations. The thesis is also a multi-genre, which responds to multiple exigencies, functions in multiple systems of activity, and is addressed to multiple readers. Not only does the
thesis contain a number of distinct embedded genres, each difficult to master (literature review, essay, experimental report), but it also responds to different social actions in many contexts, including the dyad of the director and student, the thesis committee, the department, the university, the disciplinary community, hiring committees, and the broader social structures of research in the field. Thus, the thesis is perhaps the most complex genre written in the university (whether by students, teachers, or researchers) in its multiplicity of intellectual, rhetorical, and social demands.

**Conclusion**

CHAT calls attention to the fundamental cultural tools of teaching and learning – and to their relation to the cognitive and social organization that extends beyond the teacher, the learner, and the classroom. Writing, like many cultural tools, tends to be invisible when people use it habitually, smoothly – or in A. N. Leont'ev's (1978) terms, when it is fully operationalized in some activity. Yet it disappears from conscious attention as one focuses on what one is writing, not on one's writing itself. In routine genres there seems to be no "writing," only "writing it up," the last and least interesting step. This invisibility is fine – useful – until it breaks down under the pressure of new challenges, and thus writing is bumped up into conscious attention with the attendant emotions. This is a normal part of learning to write a new genre in a new activity system (a scientist having to write a press release, for example (Smart, 2000)).

Yet for students, the genres of higher education – like the kinds of critical thinking those genres externalize and mediate – are for the most part new challenges for students, though the genres often go by the same names as those the students wrote in secondary school (essay, report), with the attendant confusion and unlearning necessary to sort out the differences in the kinds and disciplines of thinking/writing (Donahue, 2008; Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010). So students must consciously wrestle with writing. They must struggle to acquire on their own the genre know-how that is for their professors so routinized, so operationalized in the activity and "content" of the field as to be invisible to them. Yet this is the very know-how on which not only students' grades but also their success beyond the university depends, in large part (as employer surveys so often point out (e.g., Bowers & Metcalf, 2008). This is the fundamental and unchanging challenge of teaching and learning with writing.

Yet in recent years, with the new challenges of higher education, what is true for individuals has become true for the higher education sector writ
large. The old ways of teaching and learning (with) writing no longer work smoothly. Student writing development has thus become an object of conscious attention, a "problem" in higher education all around the world, because it reveals fundamental contradictions in contemporary higher education. Higher education sits between two contradictory pressures, what Burton Clark (1989) has called disciplinary excellence versus social equity. On one end, the intake end of social equity, far more students (and far more diverse students) come streaming into higher education – bringing in a far greater diversity of linguistic resources, not only international students but also students from different cultural and class backgrounds. Many of these new students do not know the ways of reading and writing that seem second nature to traditional students. Moreover, the patterns of participation have changed, with many students in higher education part time, balancing schedules and, more important, spending a large part of their time away from the academic environment and its traditional discourses.

On the other end, disciplinary excellence, higher education is also changing. Excellence used to mean reproducing an intellectual (and in many ways a social) elite, to carry on what was then the relatively stable work of the disciplines and professions. But changes in both knowledge and work mean postindustrial societies and economies need more "knowledge workers," and this knowledge work depends on written communication in and between specialisms. Higher education is essential to the employability agendas of modern societies, and this means higher education must use and teach more sophisticated and diverse genres of written communication. Students are leaving higher education to enter far more specialized and yet far more interdisciplinary workplaces. As the pace and complexity of global communication increases, the division of intellectual labor increases, and with it the importance of writing. Students will need greater linguistic and rhetorical flexibility to effectively enter and eventually transform professions and institutions.

Between these two contradictory pressures, a changing notion of social equity on one hand and a changing notion of disciplinary excellence on the other, sits student writing in higher education. Because it is no longer possible for higher education to simply skim the cream and pour the rest out, it is no longer possible to ignore issues of teaching and learning, and no longer possible to leave the problem of writing development solely in the hands of individual students, unaided by academic staff.

Attention to writing, given the CHAT take on pedagogy, is not a distraction from teaching content, but a means of teaching it more effectively, because content is seen not as a thing to be put into students' minds but as a resource for engaging with, communicating with, others and the world – most powerfully,
usually, through writing. In this sense, writing is no longer a remedial subject, another course or courses to be taken outside a curriculum (the knee-jerk reaction of modern higher education to problems is to create another course). Writing is rather a shared responsibility, a means of teaching and learning and critical thinking for students and researchers. And as the tradition of CHAT research I have touched on here suggests, writing is also an interesting object of research and a tool of pedagogical experiment and reform in its own right.

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Retrieved from http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bazerman_wac/.


