



L2 student–U.S. professor interactions through disciplinary writing assignments: An activity theory perspective

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Abstract

This study aimed to explain the complexity involved in multiple agents' learning in interaction in graduate disciplinary writing contexts. Adopting activity theory (Engeström, 1999) as a guiding framework, I analyzed interactive experiences between an L2 English student writer and his professor regarding different writing assignments in a U.S. graduate course. Sources of qualitative data through one semester included interviews, a class observation, and written documents. The semilongitudinal nature of the study illuminated both participants' changes in their writing and teaching practices over time.

Activity theory enabled the visualization of the participants' experiences with each assignment as an activity system. Moreover, the concept of interacting activity systems or activity system network offered a useful perspective to understand concurrent and multi-directional learning between the student and the professor, who mutually shaped and influenced each other's writing and teaching practices. The study's findings provide encouragement for L2 English students in terms of their potential power to bring change to their professors' teaching practices and their L2 disciplinary communities. Furthermore, through the lens of activity theory, the study offers future possibilities of exploring L2 graduate disciplinary socialization by investigating different genres as activity systems and learning in multiple directions among students.

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Keywords: L2 graduate writing; Disciplinary socialization; Activity theory; Activity system network; Change and transformation; Multi-directionality of learning

Introduction

In graduate level second language (L2) writing studies, our notion of writing has been expanded beyond consideration of texts to that of writing as practice. The line of studies with this notion have focused on what students do, including interacting with disciplinary reading and producing texts, developing strategies to cope with the assignments, dialoguing with professors on their written texts, and responding to their comments in specific literacy contexts (e.g., courses, seminars, doctoral dissertation writing) (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Belcher, 1994; Casanave, 1995, 2002, Chap. 3, 4; Dong, 1996; Prior, 1998; Riazi, 1997). These studies, mostly employing a naturalistic qualitative case study approach, helped enhance our understanding of graduate students' disciplinary socialization in their everyday literacy activity. Among those, Casanave's and Prior's rigorous documentations of both first language (L1) and L2 graduate students' literacy activities in U.S. disciplinary courses illustrated the individual,

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dynamic, and highly complex nature of disciplinary socialization to the extent that socialization encompassed students' resistance to various academic expectations of literacy activities in which they engaged. L2 graduate disciplinary socialization has been more recently explored in scholarly publication writing (e.g., Cho, 2004; Li, 2005, 2006, 2007) and genre knowledge development in different kinds of advanced academic writing (e.g., lab reports, Master's thesis, and conference papers; Tardy, 2005, 2009).

The view of graduate level disciplinary socialization through writing as concrete interactional activities in a local context is understood by the notions of "writing as situated social practice" (Casanave, 2002, p. 19) and writing as "participatory practice" (Casanave, 2008, p. 16), both of which were developed largely based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) notions of "communities of practice" and "legitimate peripheral participation" (LPP) (both on p. 30), in which novice members develop their expertise and professional identity with increasing participation in the social practices in the community comprising people with differing levels of expertise. In fact, many of the previous studies mentioned above adopted Lave and Wenger's view of learning as a guiding framework (e.g., Belcher, 1994; Casanave, 2002; Cho, 2004; Li, 2005, 2006, 2007; Prior, 1998, Chap. 4; Tardy, 2005), applying it to graduate students as novices in their disciplinary communities learning from more expert members (e.g., professors, dissertation advisors) through participation in everyday discursive practices.

However, the original conceptualization of learning by Lave and Wenger (1991) and the subsequent adaptations of their analytical viewpoint to L2 graduate literacy development pose a problem in that they lack a concurrent and multi-directional perspective of learning among different people. Lave and Wenger noted that LPP does not refer to learning on the part of the novice only but the interaction between people and practice (p. 116), but their focus was still a unidirectional trajectory in which novices become experts. Their conceptualization of learning did not address multi-directionality in which more expert members in a particular community may experience change and transformation as a result of interactional experiences with less expert members. The change and transformation can also occur concurrently between and among the participating members in a community. Moreover, the community and the social practice may undergo change and transformation as a result of individual and collective changes brought by the participating members. However, this concurrent and multi-directional view of learning was not fully addressed in Lave and Wenger's framework.

Accordingly, the studies on L2 disciplinary socialization mentioned above appear to lack a perspective of learning taking place in multiple directions among different people. Those studies demystified the intricacies of graduate academic literacy practices between students and more experienced members in disciplinary communities (course professors, dissertation advisors, journal reviewers), including conflicts and negotiations over the executions and evaluations of particular writing assignments (Casanave, 1995, 2002, Chap. 3, 4; Prior, 1998), successful and less successful thesis/dissertation advising relationships (Belcher, 1994; Tardy, 2005), and accommodating to or rejecting journal reviewers' responses to manuscript submissions (Cho, 2004; Li, 2005, 2006, 2007). However, as a whole they did not document whether and how students' professors, advisors, or journal reviewers changed or transformed as a result of their interactional academic relationships with students, nor did they illustrate whether and to what extent students brought changes to the social practices in their disciplinary communities.

In the present study, I aim to offer an additional perspective to L2 graduate disciplinary socialization that includes a collective and multi-directional view of learning by focusing on disciplinary discursive practices of an L2 English graduate student and one of his professors in a specific graduate course. Through the narration of interactional experiences between the student and his professor, I illustrate how their interactions affected and contributed to individual and mutual changes in their writing and teaching practices within the course. As a theoretical framework of the study, I adopt activity theory (Engeström, 1999, 2001) because it depicts learning and development in multiple directions (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999) and it views learning as "both collective and individual" and "innovative and transforming" (Martin, 2005, pp. 143–144).

Activity theory: a complex and dynamic view of learning

Activity theory is categorized as a branch of Sociocultural theory (SCT), traditionally defined in association with the work of Vygotsky¹ (e.g., 1978), central to which is the view of the human mind as mediated by both physical and

¹ Prior (2008) provides a broader definition of SCT based on multiple interdisciplinary traditions, including Vygotsky's theories, anthropology, philosophy, and sociology in relation to writing research.

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