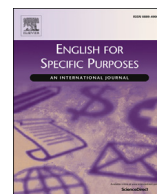


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From the Editors

Bringing reality to the classroom: Exercises in intertextuality

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ABSTRACT

The ability to handle intertextual relations in email is an important component of workplace writing competence that is, for the most part, overlooked in classroom contexts because of a tendency to treat emails as independent texts. This study reports on a series of email assignments that required students to read and process a collection of texts before composing emails themselves, with the aim of examining how students dealt with the demands made by the intertextual nature of workplace writing. The findings suggest that the management of multiple texts and their intertextual relations poses considerable challenges for student writers, specifically relating to the amount of information to include, the degree of explicitness needed in referring to other texts, and the management of the dialogue and writer-reader relationship. The study concludes that there is a need to demonstrate to students the centrality of intertextuality and the ways in which it contributes to the coherence of workplace communication. Students need to understand, too, that managing intertextuality is not simply a question of textual manipulation, but of understanding the communicative context and of considering how they want their relationship with the reader to develop.

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1. Introduction

Intertextuality, the notion that texts are linked to other texts, is a pervasive element of workplace writing, and its traces can be seen to a greater or lesser extent in many of the texts produced in workplace settings: the references made to specific documents, such as catalogues and regulations, the email chains that evolve from enquiries and negotiations, and the templates produced in organisations that writers use to carry out routine tasks, to name but a few instances. The notion of intertextuality has been variously explained and defined. Bazerman (2004), for example, captures the idea that the construction of texts is both backward and forward looking in its influences and references, while Fairclough (1992) considers the tactical aspects of this phenomenon, and the ways in which text producers might call upon other texts for their own particular ends. The importance of intertextuality as a feature of workplace writing is largely accepted, and a wealth of research has demonstrated the ways in which texts written in professional settings draw upon other texts, both written and spoken, as writers collaborate, directly or indirectly, to produce workplace genres (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Gimenez, 2006; Kankaanranta, 2006; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). Further recognition of the importance of this feature of workplace writing is evidenced in research that has looked more specifically at intertextuality as a significant factor in the way that writers deal with text construction (Cheng & Mok, 2008; Evans, 2012; Ho, 2011; Warren, 2013, 2016). However, there is little evidence that activities and practices informed by the intertextual nature of workplace writing have found their way into the classroom.

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Business communication textbooks, for example, take little notice of this phenomenon, and tend to treat texts as standalone, decontextualised entities (Bremner, 2008). Similarly, while the importance of acquainting students with intertextuality as an influence on workplace writing has been acknowledged (e.g. Evans, 2012; Hyland, 2004) there are, to our knowledge, no reports of instructors attempting to take account of intertextuality in their teaching. This study represents an attempt at redressing that situation. Conducted in Hong Kong, it reports on the use of an innovative series of student email assignments designed to address the intertextual nature of workplace writing.

2. Literature review

Research into the role and influence of intertextuality in workplace contexts is predicated on the understanding that texts should not be viewed in isolation; thus, researchers interested in this area see workplace genres as components of larger networks of interrelated activity, describing these variously as “genre sets” (Devitt, 1991, 2004), “systems of genres” (Bazerman, 1994), or “genre repertoires” (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). Berkenkotter highlights the importance of recognising the interconnected nature of writing in workplace settings, as she explains that “*the professions are organized by genre systems [emphasis in original]*” (2001, p. 327).

One of the earliest attempts at categorising intertextuality comes in the work of Devitt (1991), who identifies three types: referential, functional and generic. Referential intertextuality describes instances when one text refers directly to another; functional intertextuality can be seen when a text in a larger set or system is shaped in some way by the texts surrounding it; generic intertextuality is the outcome in textual form of writers drawing on previous texts that have been deployed in response to similar recurring situations (cf. Miller, 1984). A useful extension of Devitt’s (1991) work can be seen in Bhatia (2004), who builds on her notions of referential and functional intertextuality, providing more detailed categories of these phenomena, namely “texts providing a context” (p. 126), “texts within and around the text”, “[t]exts explicitly referred to in the text”, “texts implicitly referred to in the text”, “texts embedded within the text” and “texts mixed with the text” (p. 127). These categories serve as a helpful lens through which intertextual activity can be viewed, and are revisited in Section 5.

Intertextual contributions to the construction of texts can come from a variety of sources. At a referential level these can include other texts in a chain of correspondence, as might be seen in a negotiated exchange between a buyer and supplier, or documents that are referred to in order to provide more detailed information, such as price lists, import procedures, regulations and so on. Much of the intertextual influence on a text will come from within the organisation. This is because writing processes take place in organisational settings, and as such are socially constructed (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). Writing is thus context-bound, and texts will be produced with reference to previous documents, the expectations of the professional community, house styles and other factors that are part of a particular workplace setting. The outcome of this is that writers in these settings are often required to write texts in particular ways, either explicitly prescribed in the form of templates or similar, or the result of there being tacitly recognised ways of doing things within an organisation, part of what Berkenkotter describes as the “historically sedimented practices” (2001, p. 338) that might be found there. Moreover, as has been observed by Burnett (2001), as much as 75%–85% of workplace writing is collaborative in nature; thus, any document will very likely be the outcome of multiple inputs from other contributors. Freedman, Adam, and Smart (1994) capture these organisational and collegial influences with their point that “workplace writing is resonant with the discourse of colleagues and the ongoing conversation of the institution” (p. 210).

It is important to remember that intertextuality is not restricted to the relationships among written texts, but that spoken discourse also helps shape the texts produced in professional settings. Gunnarsson (1997), for example, notes the “continuous interplay” between spoken and written discourse in the workplace. Nickerson’s (2000) study of intraorganisational communication finds that writers employed intertextuality in their emails as they included texts taken both from previous emails and meetings; similarly, Evans observes that emails are “tightly interwoven with other texts... as well as spoken discourses” (2012, p. 210).

A further key element of writing in professional contexts is that the relationship among texts in systems of genres is dynamic. Workplace writing is an “ongoing, dialogic process” (Bremner, 2008) and this dialogue will have an impact on the ways in which texts are constructed. This dialogic relationship among texts is perhaps most vividly represented in the ways that emails function in workplace contexts. A number of studies have looked at the role of intertextuality in the production of email (Cheng & Mok, 2008; Evans, 2012; Gimenez, 2006; Ho, 2011; Warren, 2013, 2016). These studies demonstrate not only the centrality of intertextual relations in email discourse flows, but also the fact that a “writer or speaker needs to be able to handle intertextuality appropriately” (Warren, 2016, p. 27) to achieve coherent professional discourse. Ho (2011), looking at request emails between academics, provides a specific instance of how the ability to handle intertextuality could be advantageous, saying that “the strategic incorporation of intertextual and interdiscursive elements could effect a higher chance of request compliance” (p. 2545).

It seems clear, then, that not only is intertextuality a pervasive feature of workplace writing, but it also plays a valuable role in creating effective professional discourse, as explained above, suggesting that the ability to manage this aspect of the writing process is a necessary component of a writer’s competence. The pedagogical implication of this is the need to help students understand the ways in which intertextual links affect the writing process and the shape of the texts that emerge, and to help them develop the skills required to manage texts accordingly. However, as noted, while there is some acknowledgement of the value of acquainting students with intertextuality (Devitt, 2004; Holmes, 2004; Hyland, 2004), there have been no reported attempts to design workplace-oriented tasks and activities in classroom settings that might expose students to the

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