

# Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work

Suzanne E. Guess

Reprinted from *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*  
Volume 16 No. 3, July 2002, pp. 345-348  
© 2002 by Sage Publications  
Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc

*Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*. Anne Beaufort. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999

Reviewed by Suzanne E. Guess

*American Republic Insurance Company*

"You won't use half of what you learn in your education classes once you get a teaching job." My supervising teacher communicated this bit of wisdom to me during the practicum segment of my teacher education program as an undergraduate student. Although I thought what she said seemed peculiar, I didn't think much of it at the time. When I landed my first teaching job, however, I discovered she was right. I didn't use half of what I learned, some of what I learned didn't work, and what wasn't part of my education curriculum (managing the paper load, choosing course materials, handling sensitive situations such as threats and bluffs from students, etc.), I learned by the seat of my pants. After 12 years, due to economic factors and ideological differences, I left full-time teaching to work in business. Because, as a technical writer, I've discovered that what I practice is not always what I taught students, the subtitle of Anne Beaufort's book *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work* caught my attention. Would her conclusions reflect my experiences of education versus work experience?

Beaufort's book is a study of the learning processes of four writers as they learn to write new genres and contexts and, specifically, of how they negotiate "that difficult boundary crossing from writing in school to writing in business situations" (11). She focuses on three overlapping issues: learning the norms of several discourse communities, understanding what "expert knowledge" consists of, and recognizing the processes required to master knowledge in these areas (137). Her argument is that learning and being competent in workplace writing require knowledge in two areas: the discourse communities required for doing business and the knowledge domains inherent in each discourse community. While reading this book, I found myself relating to many of the struggles the study participants experienced in the workplace. I also came away with some new ideas I can use in the business writing courses I teach on a part-time basis.

Beaufort maintains that learning the nuances of the overlapping discourse communities necessary for doing business is critical to a writer's success in the workplace. As support for her argument, she devotes chapter 3 to identifying the discourse communities of the institutional site the four writers must learn to negotiate as they seek to secure grant funding and support for the Job Resource Center's (JRC) agency mission. The discussion about this site centers on Beaufort's definition of the discourse community, which is much more than a set of writing practices; it is a "social entity" (59) that includes goals, values, physical working conditions, and the writer's influence in that community. Knowledge of the various discourse communities is only part of the

equation; knowing how they function, overlap, and influence each other is another. Beaufort notes that the amount of time dedicated to certain writing projects at the site and the degree of precision expected "were in direct proportion to how crucial the text was to the organization's survival" (61). Discourse communities, then, can have enormous power and influence over the work that is completed and the degree to which it is completed. From a pedagogical point of view, I wonder how these ideas of power and influence over work flow could be worked into the course curriculum. Although simulating such an environment would be impossible, we could make students aware of these constructs within the workplace.

The second issue Beaufort focuses on is the writer's need to determine what qualifies as "expert knowledge" in each of the discourse communities in which the writer participates. Beaufort breaks down this expert knowledge into five types of context-specific knowledge domains "critical to full participation in the [discourse] community": discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and process knowledge (63). In chapter 4, Beaufort discusses how the study participants mastered the context-specific knowledge domains and what helped or constrained their efforts in this socialization process. Beaufort observes that the writers were assigned project writing roles consistent with their individual knowledge-domain expertise. The roles Beaufort identifies—observer, reader/researcher, document designer, ghostwriter, coauthor/low-status text, author/low-status text, coauthor/high-status text, author/high-status text, negotiator, and inventor—reflected increasing mastery of each of the five types of knowledge domains. Describing how the four writers socialized themselves to their professional surroundings, Beaufort observes that the women gained and relied on "concrete and situation-specific" knowledge rather than on abstract knowledge and that what they learned was necessary to further the goals of the organization—not just "knowledge for knowledge's sake" (81). With that, Beaufort makes a keen observation about "the importance not just of acquiring new knowledge and skills [in the workplace], but also of knowing *how* to learn in informal settings" (100).

This insight is critical. While reflecting on my teaching experiences, I realized that although I encouraged my students to read about and discuss corporate culture and the communities within, we didn't talk much about how to learn and gain expertise in the workplace. While reflecting on my work as a technical writer, I realized that my experience (as well as that of those with whom I work, to some extent) in learning the context-specific knowledge domains closely mirrored Beaufort's observations. I had to learn different ways of writing that often were at odds with what I learned in college and what I taught my students. Within any business, many discourse communities exist (e.g., departments, project teams, etc.), each with its own set of knowledge domains that employees need to learn to do the work of business successfully. Giving students a concrete framework for different genres of

business communication while making a disclaimer, of sorts, that the framework is general and should be filled in once they learn the requirements of their workplace could help ease the disconnect many experience upon entering the workplace.

The third issue Beaufort focuses on is the writer's need to recognize the processes required to master knowledge of the discourse communities and their accompanying knowledge domains. In chapter 5, Beaufort argues that mastering workplace writing genres requires more than just mastering the formal rhetorical, content, structural, and linguistic features of a particular genre. She maintains that writers need to acquire "an understanding of the *genre's function* within the discourse community" (105 emphasis added). In other words, writers need to know what kind of work a particular genre does for overlapping discourse communities. For example, a press release can simultaneously present news and create news simply by manipulating the content and structure of the press-release genre (111). How the writers in Beaufort's study acquired the knowledge of working genres within overlapping discourse communities is the focus for the remainder of the chapter. One of the final conclusions has implications for corporate training but is difficult, if not impossible, to duplicate in a classroom setting. Beaufort argues that "immersion in the discourse community in which a genre was used did not immediately or automatically give a writer an understanding of or control over its production." The key for learning genre and discourse community knowledge, then, is "a combination of coaching and immersion in the social context" (136).

In the classroom, teachers can only make students aware of the different discourse communities they will encounter and coach them on the formal features of different genres they may be required to produce. In this context, their education is not complete when students receive their diplomas; their education continues when they enter the workplace. This observation is particularly insightful in light of many corporate executives' complaints that today's college graduates do not communicate effectively. Perhaps the problem isn't so much that students do not know how to communicate but that they have not acquired the discourse community knowledge of their employers, a process that can easily take years to accomplish. Corporate trainers should consider that training does not end after the three-to-five-day orientation sessions.

Beaufort supports that argument in chapter 6 by tracing the writing development of three of the study participants from elementary through graduate school. Although this discussion is intriguing, the conclusion is stinging. Participants' writing experiences run the gamut from the "empty vessel" or "exploding head" theories of writing instruction to what they experienced as undergraduates: "discourse community norms [that] were not made clear, [and] professors [who did not] attempt . . . to treat students as 'legitimate' participants in the discourse community of scholars, instead assigning

[them] limited and often marginalized writing roles" (161). Therefore, the fact that students may have difficulty adjusting to workplace writing is not surprising. Beaufort's work waivers, however, at the point where she cites Cheryl Geisler's work. Geisler maintains that education contradicts itself: While it seeks to teach expertise, it also acts as gatekeeper to prevent some students from obtaining advanced schooling and entering the academic professions. Beaufort refutes Geisler's findings "on the basis of the data here that the issues in achieving expert writing performance are both developmental and curricular" (170). True, but the data from her participants indicate that they received more helpful writing instruction from professors in graduate school after they were allowed some insider status into the academic community. The data actually support Geisler's findings because the four study participants did not receive the expertise training until after they were admitted to graduate school.

What, then, are the implications of Beaufort's work for teaching writing? One conclusion is to continue to develop the small-group work model prevalent in current writing pedagogy, where the teacher is more of a writing coach than a sole repository of knowledge. Beaufort refers to the small-group model as an "apprenticeship-like model" (194). Although that model is not new to most teachers, Beaufort takes two steps forward to help students make that bridge between writing in school and writing for work. First, she states that teachers must work to "make curriculum/writing assignment[s] rich in social meaning . . . or . . . to make the communicative work of the writing project of greater importance to students than grades" (194 emphasis added). Most teachers strive for this but find that the task is not easy, with the current trend in higher education edging toward the student as customer rather than the student as engaged learner. The second step Beaufort urges teachers to take is to "make learning for transfer an educational goal of all writing classes" (195), which should integrate all five knowledge domains as frames of reference not as a selective mix and match of rhetorical analysis here, genre features there. Doing so would ask students to analyze how "abstract concepts . . . can be applied across a variety of writing situations . . . inside and outside of academic settings" and to "cultivate metacognitive thinking" (195).

Beaufort recognizes that learning is a lifelong process and that students' education is not complete when they receive the diploma. She directly addresses business trainers and managers and urges them to adopt or continue the apprenticeship model by mentoring employees in writing skills through the processes she describes. Consequently, *Writing in the Real World* is an accessible, practical text for academics and business managers alike and makes a valuable contribution to writing pedagogy and business communication.