

Review

Alamargot, D., Terrier, P., & Cellier, J.M. (eds.) & G. Rijlaarsdam (Series Ed.) (2007). *Written documents in the workplace*. Studies in Writing. Amsterdam/ London: Elsevier | ISBN-13: 978-0-08-047487-8

This most recent volume in the series *Studies in Writing* is entitled '*Written documents in the workplace*'. The main goal of this book is 'to bridge the gap between fundamental research into writing and reading and the issue of efficiency of written communication in the workplace'. Writing in organizational settings differs from writing in educational and academic settings. Most importantly, reading and writing in the workplace is heavily influenced by the social and communicative contexts that define the (formal) characteristics of workplace documents, and shapes the cognition needed for their production and comprehension. In order to improve professional texts and help writers to improve on their professional writing skills (one of the aims of professional writing research), it becomes necessary to investigate writing and reading processes in situ (e.g., the workplace). Professional documents differ from academic texts in numerous ways: writers have different characteristics as being 'functional' writers rather than 'professional' and professional readers seldom read 'to learn' (like 'normal' readers) but read 'to do' their job. All in all enough reasons to validate the study of 'workplace writing' as an important terrain for writing research.

Written documents in workplace contains 17 contributions written by internationally acclaimed researchers, mainly from France, Spain and Canada. The book is divided in three sections: (1) Defining Professional Documents, (2) Composing Documents and (3) Understanding Documents, preceded by an introduction in which the editors explain the rationale for the volume.



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The first section contains three contributions that define professional documents in terms of their linguistic and pragmatic characteristics, focusing on one particular genre: procedural texts. Together they cover issues like linguistic markers of lexical and coherence relations, as well as the function of pictograms and linguistic aspects of enumerations.

The second section consists of 7 articles and focuses on professional writing processes, instead of products. Here, we see a great variety of themes, ranging from the use of procedural texts and procedural writing by children to online writing tools and media-related issues like blogging. Most contributions share an interest in procedural documents, which they approach from a cognitive perspective. They explore what people (should) think when composing procedural documents and how that thinking can be constrained by organizational context. Two of the more inspiring contributions to this section are chapters 4 and 5 (by Ganier & Barcenilla and Quinlan & Alamargot, respectively).

In '*Considering users and the way they use procedural texts*' Ganier & Barcenilla present an interesting model for the interaction between user characteristics, equipment variables and quality of manuals. The authors aim to explore the value of these factors in explaining (and thus predicting) the various problems that manuals may cause. Ganier & Barcenilla explore research into factors related to the user (e.g., age and prior knowledge) and the document (e.g., attractiveness and usability), combining the research findings into their model. Anyone familiar with modeling in general and cognition modeling in particular knows that combining so many factors in one single model is a '*tour de force*', and it is clear that we will need some form of reductionism in order to form testable hypotheses. But Ganier & Barcenilla show what the relevant factors are and other researchers can take it up from there. I personally found the addition of the equipment variables to existing models enlightening.

In '*Highly effective writers and the role of reading*' Quinlan & Alamargot demonstrate how reading and writing are closely related in professional settings. Workers in professional settings seldom rely solely on their memory and imagination when they compose documents. (In contrast to, for instance, the writers in the early Flower & Hayes' studies.) They read in order to write and recycle a lot of their reading in new texts. This phenomenon challenges traditional models of writing and traditional models of reading at the same time. Quinlan and Alamargot clearly demonstrate that studying contextual writing may provide more fundamental insight as well. Studies like this really bridge the gap between fundamental (i.e. non-contextual) and more functional research. The one cannot go without the other in my opinion.

In this second section, a third contribution also aroused my interest: *Procedural texts written by children*. Although children's writing is fascinating, and I agree with the authors' claim that 'difficulties about children's productions can become important guidelines in the professional training of novice writers of technical documents, I fail

to see the relevance of this topic to the present volume. And more importantly, Marti and Garcia-Mila, hardly provide a rationale for its inclusion.

The final section of the book addresses issues of reading and understanding professional documents. In seven chapters, researchers theorize how text comprehension can be influenced by task orientation and reading strategies. The first three articles examine skilled reading by focusing on the interactions between the formation of text base and the situation models. These chapters shed light on the ways document characteristics influence memory and task performance. The remainder of the section addresses issues like the influence of hypertext and modern media on comprehensibility and translating professional documents. With a large variety of interesting and relevant themes, most of the chapters in this final section focus on 'procedural texts.'

For a reviewer, the most prominent question after reading a book is: Did the authors achieve their aim? That is, did they bridge that gap between fundamental and more functional research? The answer is – of course - yes and no. Let me start with the 'yeses'. Many of the contributions show that studying workplace documents, workplace writing and workplace reading can provide insights into more fundamental aspects of texts and cognitive processing that may challenge existing models. Furthermore, the book demonstrates that reflecting on a particular genre (in this case, procedural documents or simply 'manuals') from different perspectives can make a cumulative contribution; a whole that is more than the sum of parts. Although a lot of challenges remain, Written documents in the workplace may certainly contribute to a revival of 'context' in reading and writing research, not unlike that of the mid 1980's.

However, I also have some reservations. Firstly, only a few chapters in this book study the influence of 'context' empirically. Most chapters are of a theoretical, philosophical nature and – in my view – do not yet provide the empirical evidence necessary to support the claims. Moreover, only a few articles factually present original data. While I realize that there can be different ways of pursuing knowledge, I myself am a strong believer in empirical data. The models presented in this book really deserve to be tested in experiments, multiple case studies, corpus studies, etc. In addition to thinking and theorizing about writing and reading in organizations, it can be challenging to actually study readers and writers in context. The contributions in Written documents in the workplace present many interesting hypotheses that may very well be tested in organizational or more controlled situations.

Secondly, it is a pity that researchers in this domain (even on the same continent) appear to work in isolation. I have learned from reading this book that I have overlooked much of the interesting research in France and Spain. Similarly, it is apparent that most of the authors have overlooked American, Dutch and Belgian work, even though a lot of it has been published in international journals. Manuals for instance have been a subject of research for more than 20 years now, and the

outcomes fill in a number of blanks in Written documents in the workplace. Moreover, the Lowlands-US connection adds a more empirical approach, which aptly complements Alamargot's et al. philosophical/theoretical perspective. This combination of empirical and theoretical work is in my view necessary for continued progress in this domain. After all, we are all trying to bridge that same gap.

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