

## Book Review

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Tom Deans

### *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*

Patrick Dias, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré  
Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999

One of the more popular approaches to community-based writing asks students to compose workplace documents like reports, manuals or brochures for community organizations. After doing this for the first time, students and teachers alike often register their surprise about how dramatically writing in academic courses differs from writing in nonacademic organizations. They also come to recognize how significant nontextual factors like social networks, office politics and tacit knowledge prove in the success (and failure) of projects. That academic and professional contexts are in fact “worlds apart” and that we ignore their differences at our own peril constitutes the premise of an important new book, *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*, by Patrick Dias, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway and Anthony Paré. Using empirical case studies and multiple theoretical approaches (genre studies, activity theory and distributed cognition) the authors reveal both the socially situated nature of writing and the considerable gap between university and workplace contexts. While the book never explicitly considers service-learning, it delivers insights and cautions that can be readily applied to both the practical and theoretical dimensions of writing for the community.

Service-learning advocates need to face the reality that they cannot assume that even talented student writers can simply carry their academic writing skills into community organizations.

That writing in the disciplines and in the professions is shaped by social context is news to neither composition nor technical communication studies. Rather, noteworthy about *Worlds Apart* is its extensive exploration of the relationship between writing in school and writing in the workplace. That exploration is based on case studies of university courses in architecture, social work and finance as well as case studies of their professional corollaries: an architectural firm, a hospital and a bank. This

parallel structure permits both credible comparisons and humbling scrutiny of the assumptions teachers make about the transferability of learning and writing competencies from one context to the other.

As Dias et al. examine university courses in three chapters following the introduction of their theoretical orientation, they locate the two prevailing “social motives” for school writing in the need for learners to demonstrate knowledge valued by the disciplines (i.e., the epistemic motive) and the need for universities to sort and rank students (primarily through grading). The authors then devote three chapters to describing workplace writing as motivated by instrumental purposes and embedded in the larger, ongoing network of activities in organizations where knowledge and tasks are distributed among co-participants. Workplace writers generally receive little or no formal training; rather, they learn by doing and by apprenticeship. In the language of activity theory, newcomers move through stages of “attenuated authentic participation” and “legitimate peripheral participation” on the path to deeper membership in a “community of practice.” (One side benefit of this book is that it provides a grounded introduction to the principles and vocabulary of activity theory, situated learning and distributed cognition, which are likely to become increasingly important to composition and technical communication research.)

The final three chapters of *Worlds Apart* discuss the transition between school and work, and these will probably prove the most helpful to service-learning practitioners. Here the authors distill the knowledge presented in earlier chapters and reflect on the complicated and often conflicted movement from one context to the other. Upon reading this section service-learning advocates will need to face the reality that they cannot assume that even talented student writers can simply carry their academic

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writing skills into community organizations, which is a caution that Nora Bacon likewise explores in her recent article “The Trouble with Transfer: Lessons From a Study of Community Service Writing” (*Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 6 [fall 1999]: 53-62). Novice writers must be made aware that school-based habits of performing neatly defined individual assignments to demonstrate learning will fail them in workplaces where the degree to which newcomers can participate in complex, cooperative, ongoing activity systems is the measure of success. Moreover, given the embedded nature of workplace activities and the typically gradual enculturation process recounted in *Worlds Apart*, the short duration of most service-learning projects must remain a concern.

While the gap between school and work is wide, it can be bridged, and Dias et al. see promise in community-based academic experiences like internships that give students “real experience in workplace discourse” but also provide “a highly scaffolded and protected introduction” (206). Successful students, like one group of interns described, “quickly develop a picture of the entire collective endeavor and their own place in it. The picture includes the intricate and subtle geography of place and politics: the physical and organizational structure of the community” (213). Considering this finding in relation to my own service-learning courses

has prompted me to devote more attention and time to the agency profile reports (which involve on-site interviewing and research) that I typically require students to compose in anticipation of beginning their projects.

The better community-based writing initiatives inhabit a fragile but generative space where both school and workplace motives are opera-

tive, where both epistemic and instrumental purposes are evident, where both client and instructor serve as audience for documents, and where closure is signaled by both a grade and the document’s continued existence in the client’s workplace. Ultimately, *Worlds Apart* re-

minds students and instructors that “learning is profoundly situated” (220) and underscores the need to conceptualize the doing of an agency-based project as a kind of emerging membership—even if peripheral and temporary—in the community organization.

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## REFLECTIONS

ON COMMUNITY-BASED WRITING INSTRUCTION

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