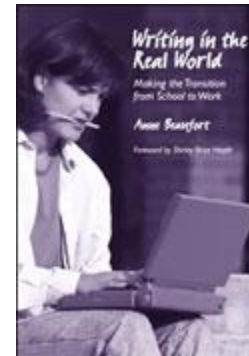

Review

A different slant on workplace literacy: Writing in a non-profit agency

A review of *Writing in the Real World, Making the Transition from School to Work*, by Anne Beaufort, foreword by Shirley Brice Heath. New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1999.

by Linda Shohet

This book explores a different aspect of workplace literacy than we usually associate with the term. For her doctoral thesis, Anne Beaufort conducted an ethnographic study of the conditions and processes that influence the way people write in a non-profit organization. Most studies of workplace writing have focused on professions such as engineering or medicine. Beaufort spent time observing and recording the routine of an under-funded Job Resource Center. Beside providing insight into the way that writing (often collaboratively) is done, she offers a close-to-the-bone portrait of the daily strains and stresses in a typical non-profit milieu. She documents the ways that employees learn on the job to write in unfamiliar genres (grant applications, project reports, press releases, fund-raising appeals) and includes some templates that have been developed at the organization to help employees get it right. From the perspective of a literacy organization administrator, you will recognize the scenes.



Excerpts from *Writing in the Real World*:

- It's frustrating, I work, I write under conditions that I'm not used to which is that I have tons of interruptions and I have a million things on my mind. When I was in school I had a habit of just sitting in a café in the corner for hours to do my writing.... In this room, there's always people coming and going, the phone rings all the time. (Ursula, 7/14/92, p.1, emphasis added) (21)
- It's one of these atmospheres where things come up and everyone wants to deal with it and talk about it or whatever, then people just can interrupt you in the middle of anything and say, "Oh, can I interrupt? I have to...." You know.... they want to talk about it right here, right then.... It's just constant interruptions around here. (Pam, 3/16/92, pp.2-3, emphasis added) (22)
- I was just trying to write a simple letter ...and I could not think of how to say, write that letter, shoot ...and I had like this major block then just when I think of something the phone would ring or somebody would ask me a question,

somebody comes to the Macintosh and they don't know how to use the Macintosh and its just, my blood pressure was coming out of my head, 'cause I can't, I can't concentrate. (Ursula, 1/12/93, p.8, emphasis added) (22)

- For me it takes a great deal of discipline to sit down and write and tune everything out and ... try to concentrate on only what I'm doing when there's a lot of other things going on that I know need to be taken care of. We have some program problems.... It's hard to block those things out and just think about what you're writing. I mean it happens when you're in school too. It definitely happened to me in school too, but when it's work and there's money tied up to it and a deadline and all that stuff, somehow to me there's more pressure. (Selma, 11/24/92, pp.11-12, emphasis added) (23)

Each of the writers developed her own way of handling this obstacle to writing. Pam went to a nearby restaurant to get her thoughts organized. Selma stayed home some days to write. Ursula stayed after hours to work when the phones had quit ringing or came in on a Saturday morning. But writing had to be accomplished at the office during business hours too, so they all needed to learn the mental discipline of keeping their train of thought in the midst of interruptions. Pam noticed this skill in her boss and other project directors: "When stuff like that comes up, they just stop whatever they're doing, deal with the issue, and then try to go back and focus" (3/16/93, p3) (23) (Author)

Another aspect of the physical environment supported writing, though. The same people who interrupted and caused one to lose a sentence forming in the mind could serve as sounding boards to bounce ideas off in the brainstorming stages of a writing project, or would read a piece of writing in draft stage and offer editing suggestions. Someone was always around to read a piece, and all four writers relied on other to catch typographical errors, awkward phrasing, or grammatical errors....(23) (Author)