

Fall Institute 2011

IALS (INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY)  
ITS MEANING AND IMPACT FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

OCTOBER 23-25, 2011

BANFF, AB

## IALS and Writing in the Workplace

Authors:

John Vorhaus

Research Director

National Research and Development

Centre for adult literacy and numeracy

Sue Grief

Project Manager

National Research and Development

Centre for adult literacy and numeracy

Document category:

Think paper

The institute offers a forum for diverse opinions and perspectives. The views expressed in this document are the author's, not necessarily those of institute organizers and sponsors.

The authors were able to make revisions after the institute and have agreed to post this version.

## **IALS AND WRITING IN THE WORKPLACE**

**Sue Grief and John Vorhaus**

The IALS literacy levels are grounded in cognitive theories about learning and reading but do not include writing. Writing in particular is difficult to assess in the context of large-scale surveys, which therefore tend to provide limited information on this aspect of literacy. One criticism levelled at the IALS is that it did not survey writing.

This paper describes how one new study will identify the real life tasks and practices of writing as observed among small, or “micro”, businesses in England. “Micro” businesses have been defined by the Federation of Small Businesses (2010) as businesses with fewer than 10 employees. They are of particular significance to the UK economy because small and medium-sized firms employ more than 59.8 percent of the private sector workforce, and 95 percent of these firms employ fewer than 5 people (Federation of Small Businesses, 2010). In the wake of job loss in the public sector, government is looking to the private sector to create jobs. However, little research has been done on this part of the economy.

The new study on workplace writing will broaden the knowledge base about literacy in the workplace. It will seek to distinguish between the demands made on adults by the small business they work in and the skills which adults need and deploy to meet those demands.

### **Writing in the workplace**

A UK study of effective approaches to the teaching of writing (Grief, Meyer and Burgess, 2007) led to an awareness of how little is understood about the ways in which writing is used in everyday life and particularly at work. Others have explored the effects of “globalisation” and the “new work order” on the use of writing in the workplace, noting the increased demands for writing for front line workers and the ways in which this writing requires workers to take on new roles (e.g. Black, 2004).

Interest in writing at work developed in the US from a tradition of composition studies as researchers began to look at how writing was used beyond the academic setting (Odell and Goswami, 1985). Faigley (1985) highlighted the need for empirical researchers to connect theoretical approaches to the “mundane writing events of everyday life” and the value of ethnography to studies of writing was recognised (Doheney-Farina and Odell, 1985). One of the most comprehensive early empirical studies was undertaken by Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller (1985) within a Research and Development organisation. The authors drew attention to a number of aspects of writing use in the workplace which remain significant twenty-five years later and in workplaces of very different kinds:

- Different types of writing activity were found to be associated with different levels of organisational responsibility
- Writing was instrumental in the management of the work of the staff
- Differing understandings and lack of clarity regarding the roles of writing practices had the potential to lead to conflict

- Writing tasks presented both opportunities and risks for employees, providing evidence of individuals' contributions that could serve the purposes of self promotion but also serve the purposes of accountability
- The importance of writing to the company was underestimated.

### **A study of writing in small businesses**

The aim of a new study by researcher Sue Grief in England is to understand the significance of writing to “micro” businesses and the role that it plays in their day-to-day activity.

Earlier studies of writing in the workplace tended to focus on writing intensive organisations and professional occupations (Odell and Goswami, 1985; Spilka, 1993). More recently studies have involved blue collar workers but chiefly in large or medium-sized enterprises (Belfiore, Defoe and Folinsbee, 2004; Farrell, 2001; Hull, 1999; Winsor, 2000). Very few have been undertaken in England, and even fewer have looked at writing within the many “micro” businesses that constitute a significant part of the economy.

All businesses selected into this study have 10 or fewer employees, a category defined as “micro businesses” by the Federation of Small Businesses (2010), and were selected for the following reasons:

- i. Businesses of this type are very different in character to larger businesses, particularly in their structures and the relationships between those involved (Matlay, 1999)
- ii. Small and medium-sized firms employ more than 59.8 per cent of the private sector workforce, 97 percent of such firms employ fewer than 20 people and 95 percent employ fewer than 5 people (Federation of Small Businesses, 2010).
- iii. At the present time “micro” businesses have a particular significance as jobs are being lost in the public sector and the government looks to the private sector to provide employment.
- iv. Very few studies of writing have focused on businesses of this size.

The study will look at the ways in which writing is used in small enterprises in a small English market town, the significance of writing to these enterprises, the extent to which this is affected by broader social, economic and technological changes and the degree to which it is viewed as a “problem”, if at all, by those involved.

The following questions are being explored:

1. What writing practices can be identified in the day-to-day running of the business?
2. In what ways are these writing practices shaped by wider economic, technological, social and cultural influences?
3. How is writing at work perceived by employers and employees?

Question one focuses on recurrent patterns in the ways in which writing is used and how these can be described. These may be relatively formal, as in the production of reports or invoices for customers on specially printed standardized forms, or informal, as in the use of written messages for colleagues.

Question two addresses the impact of changes in the wider world on the writing done in small businesses. Against the impacts of globalisation, the knowledge economy and technological change on writing at work, are small local businesses encountering more or different requirements for writing? How, for example, does a greater reliance on technology influence what is written, how it is written and by whom? Do national regulations impose new requirements to write and, if so, what does this mean for employers and employees?

Question three focuses on the subjective views of employers and employees. It requires exploring the degree to which employers and employees are aware of the role of writing in their work, and the values and meanings they attach to it. Also, to what extent, if at all, is writing viewed as a problem, either in the sense that some employees find writing difficult or that they face too many writing tasks. Employers' views may differ from those of their employees; for some, employer or employee, writing could represent a personal problem.

### **Design and data collection**

The project will include in-depth, qualitative studies of "micro" businesses in Bungay, a small market town in North Suffolk.

All businesses in the study will employ workers with qualifications no higher than level 3 of the UK National Qualifications Framework (= IALS Level 2). This will ensure a broad similarity between the sites, placing the focus on businesses in which writing supports the main activity, for example styling hair or servicing vehicles, rather than on businesses that are writing intensive and where written texts may constitute the main product, for example, consultancy and legal firms.

While at one level the unit of analysis is the workplace, within each workplace the focus will be on "literacy events", that is, activities in which literacy, and particularly writing, has a role. Data on such events will come, where possible, from direct observation, accounts from interviews and analysis of documents. Analysis of this data will aim to identify patterns of behaviour that represent "literacy practices".

The documents collected will be discussed with the participants who created and used them, in order to understand the roles these play within the organisation and the ways they are perceived. Each document will be analysed in relation to its purpose and intended audience, its function within the organisational structure and any links it has beyond the workplace.

### **A focus on what people actually do with writing**

Writing has been studied as text to be analysed, as a skill to be taught and learned, as a cognitive process, as an anthropological artefact and as a social practice. In seeking to understand the ways in which writing is used in local workplaces, including the relationship between employer demands and employees' skills, this study will seek to describe in detail what people actually do with writing in specific contexts, what meanings it conveys, the social and institutional relationships it implies and the values, attitudes and feelings of those involved.

The study, therefore, will gather data on an area of literacy that PIACC does not as yet include, and will provide valuable evidence both on workplace writing practices and for any future attempts to include these practices in a survey of adult literacy.

## References

- Belfiore, M., Defoe, T. and Folinsbee, F. (2004). *Reading Work: Literacies in the new workplace*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Black, S. (2004). 'Whose Economic Wellbeing? A challenge to dominant discourses on the relationship between literacy/numeracy skills and (un)employment'. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 13 (1), 10.
- Doheney-Farina, S. and Odell, L. (1985). 'Ethnographic Research on Writing: Assumptions and Methodology'. In L. Odell and D. Goswami (Eds), *Writing in Non-academic settings*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Faigley, L. (1985). 'Non-academic Writing: The Social Perspective'. In L. Odell and D. Goswami (Eds), *Writing in Non-academic Settings* (pp. 231-248). New York: Guilford Press.
- Farrell, L. (2001). 'The 'New Word Order': workplace education and the textual practice of economic globalisation'. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 9 (1).
- Federation of Small Businesses. (2010). *Small Business Statistics*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.fsb.org.uk/stats>. [Last accessed 29 June 2011].
- Grief, S., Meyer, B. and Burgess, A. (2007). *Effective Teaching and Learning; Writing*. London: National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy.
- Hull, G. A. (1999). 'What's in a Label? Complicating Notions of the Skills-Poor Worker'. *Written Communication*, 16 (4), 379 - 411.
- Matlay, H. (1999). 'Employee relations in small firms: A micro business perspective'. *Employee Relations*, 21 (3), 285-295.
- Odell, L. and Goswami, D. (Eds) (1985), *Writing in Non-academic Settings*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Olson, D. R. and Torrance, N. (Eds) (1991), *Literacy and Orality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy*. London: Methuen.
- Papen, U. (2005). *Adult Literacy as Social Practice: More than skills*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Paradis, J., Dobrin, D. and Miller, R. (1985). 'Writing at Exxon ITD: Notes on the writing environment of an R and D organisation'. In L. Odell and D. Goswami (Eds), *Writing in Non-academic settings*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Spilka, R. (1993). *Writing in the Workplace: New Research Perspectives*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Winsor, D. A. (2000). 'Ordering Work: Blue collar literacy and the political nature of genre'. *Written Communication*, 17 (2), 29.