# Chapter #24

# THE 'THIRD SPACE', WHERE EVERYDAY AND FORMAL WRITING PRACTICES MEET

**Paolo Sorzio & Caterina Bembich**
*Department of Humanities, University of Trieste, Italy*

**ABSTRACT**

In this chapter, the development of literacy competence is intended as a process of progressive connection of the everyday writing repertoires with the more formal writing genre characteristic of schooling, through students' participation in innovative activities in the "third space" (Gutiérrez, 1993; 2008; Gutiérrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995). Moving from Jack Goody's conceptualization of writing as a "technology of intellect" (Goody, 1987; Olson, 1996), it is considered that young people work out highly contextualized writing repertoires in their everyday life to achieve specific goals in practice. These repertoires may differ from the literacy competencies required in school and this divergence may produce in students from non-mainstream backgrounds an experience of "cultural discontinuity" (Mehan, 1998) that, in turn, may be an element of school failure. To mediate the development of appropriate literacy repertoires in multicultural schools, it is required the construction of a "third space", in which the existing everyday writing repertoires may be transformed to achieve expressive and argumentative goals in social communication. The empirical basis for the analysis derives from a school ethnography, conducted in a secondary school serving a student population of recent immigration in Italy in a working-class town in Northern East Italy.

*Keywords:* cultural discontinuity; literacy; third space; writing practices; collaborative writing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a pivotal competence to be promoted in classrooms to contrast school failure, since educational activities are strongly based on writing and reading processes.

La scrittura è un'attività di apprendimento complessa, il cui processo è determinato da una pluralità di fattori connessi alle situazioni di apprendimento, alle vite individuali, all'intenzione e al significato veicolato dal testo

Writing is a complex learning activity, the process of which is determined by a plurality of factors connected to learning situations, individual experiences, intention and the meaning conveyed through the text (Bazerman, 2019).

Students are required to read textbooks and other sources of information; they are expected to express their reasonings in written expository texts. However, texts in schools are organized according to a specific literate genre: they are closed systems, in which all the relevant information can be inferred by reference to other explicit information; they differ from popular texts that are open artefacts, further developed and incremented by the reader's knowledge (Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Lee, 2007). According to Olson, writing systems should be conceptualized as specialized categories of thinking and communication, rather than the neutral codes to transcribe speech on paper or digital supports (Olson, 1996).

Freebody and Luke (1990) consider textual production as the integration of 4 dimensions (called "4 Resources Model"):

- Syntactic: the expressive rendition of the intended meaning of the text; it requires competence in the linguistic code, the correct use of pronouns, the selection of the information to be made explicit and the connection of different aspects of a text into a consistent whole;

- Semantic: the intended meaning, characterized by a core idea and the related information; the appropriate lexicon to highlight different aspects of the meaning;

- Pragmatic: the social objective the author intends to provoke in the community (to inform, to convince, to call for an action, to request, …);

- Affective: the strategies adopted to communicate feelings and to provoke emotions in the readers.

Traditional schooling tends to overlook the practical competencies people develop in their reading and writing activities during their everyday lives; furthermore, it tends to introduce students into literacy practices that are based on a western/schooled used of texts, at the expenses of different approaches to literacy.

The goal of a democratic approach is to offer the students more opportunities to learn (Greeno & Gresalfi, 2008), based on the recognition of their writing repertoires they have developed in their out-of-school activities, as well as valuing their collaboration with peers.

## 2. THE CULTURAL DISCONTINUITY THEORY

Social-cultural systems are characterized by a multiplicity of institutional practices (in family, in the community, at school); each practice sets up its own tasks, offering specific cultural repertoires that people acquire and use according to the expected norms of communication. As consequence, the individual will develop specific competencies in relation to the specific practices in which is engaged in (Heath, 1986).

When the requirements to pursue the goals in a new practice allow the use of previously acquired repertoires, the individual has the resources to participate effectively in the new practice and the transition between different institutional practices is straightforward. This process is well documented by Heath (1986), who analyzed the school success of pupils from family backgrounds in which the use of children's books was very similar to the requirements in primary schools.

However, there are cultural discontinuities when the requirements and repertoires in everyday practices are dissimilar from what is expected in school. In these cases, the repertoires developed in everyday practices are not recognized by the teachers as relevant resources in classroom and their use is discouraged; therefore, the individual experiences a difficult transition (Mehan, 1998). This is particularly evident in social contexts in which the specific use of writing is different and the associate literacy repertoires highly diverge from those recommended in schools (Cook-Gumperz 2006; Gee, 2004).

In everyday life activities, writing is used to achieve social goals, such as communicating pieces of information, memorizing procedures (i.e., cooking recipes), taking notes, expressing feelings, creating lists. Being a highly contextualized process, writing in everyday life does not require many explicit information, since its meaning is easily reconstructed from the situation in which it occurs.

School writing is a specialized discursive genre; written texts are closed systems, and their meaning should be derived from the internal logic of the text, rather than on reference to the contextual information directly accessible to perception (Olson, 1996). Through the systematic use of literacy, paradigmatic knowledge has developed and meaning depends on the structural relations between informational elements.

Whereas the use of writing in everyday life is largely distant from the conventions of the specialized writing genre of school literacy, the learner experiences a large discontinuity between the repertoires has acquired and the school educational demands; as consequence, the learner's participation in the writing practices remains peripheral and at risk of failure.

Democratic education should consider urgent the creation of innovative opportunities to bridge the distance between the everyday uses of writing and the requirements of formal education, especially for students from non-mainstream backgrounds. The reason is two-fold:

1. the unevenly distribution of literacy among social groups reproduces unequal access to power; emancipatory movements have always posed the right to access the writing practices in formal education for women, working class people and other traditionally excluded groups as a political aim (Cook-Gumperz 2006);

2. many jobs in the future require literacy competencies in terms of the use and interpretation of big data sets, as well as the capacity to understand highly specialized argumentations in written texts (OECD, 2017).

Schools should promote the acquisition of differentiated literacy competencies to enable the students to access literacy as a complex and sophisticated technology of the intellect.

## 3. BREAKING DOWN THE INSULATION OF SCHOOL FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

A more encompassing vision of the cultural nature of writing as well as of its different uses may be encouraged in schools, by creating some transitional zones in which the experiential use of everyday writing intertwines with the more formal aspects of the specialized genre of school literacy. Kris Gutiérrez (1993, 2008) (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995) defines the transitional zone as a "third space", in which different writing repertoires coexist and it is possible to explore innovative students' participation that allow them a sustained process of sharing ideas, in order to produce original cooperative texts on relevant social themes (Thompson, 2014); the "third space" becomes the educational zone of opportunity to connect different writing repertoires:

> "Where teacher and student scripts - the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment- intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge" (Gutiérrez 2008, p. 152).

The activities in the "third space" consist in writing collaborative text on topics that are relevant for the students, that are not in the service of the teacher's assessment of the levels of individual competencies. The teachers listen carefully to the students' contributions as moves towards the transformation of their everyday repertoires through new educational demands, according to democratic norms of collaboration, collective revision and public discussion.

In the "third space" some shortcomings of everyday repertoires emerge but they can be recontextualized in more advanced genres, by incorporating the existing writing functions into more formal conventions: increased cohesion among different parts of the written text, explicitness of information, extension of the lexicon that becomes more articulated and precise.

Many studies highlight how collaborative writing can help students to produce texts that are more articulated and more complex than those produced individually (Pham, 2021; Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2019). Collaborative writing learning activities are more motivating for students and increase their engagement (Dobao, 2012). Through collaborative writing, students can improve their skills, enhance precision in the use of grammar and expand their vocabulary. Furthermore, students have more opportunities to interact and debate, exchange their views, and develop critical thinking skills (Talib & Cheung, 2017; Dobao, 2014). Studies highlight that writings produced through collaborative activities are more fluid, better organized and more complex and articulated in terms of content (Pham, 2021).

## 4. METHODOLOGY

21 students attending the second year of a professional school in North-Eastern Italy participated in the project (21 females; age M=16,5; SD= 0.28). The composition of the class was complex: 6 foreign students with low knowledge of Italian language, 9 students were repeating the year, 6 present special educational needs.

The context in which the professional institute is located present a high rate of immigration, especially from Bangladesh; it is a phenomenon linked to the development of the shipbuilding industry that characterizes the economy of the town.

The school has a high percentage of non-Italian-speaking students, most of them coming from culturally and economically disadvantaged situations. The school organization provides for an Intercultural Commission "with specific tasks for welcoming and for planning personalized interventions" and for a Working Group for Inclusion. Every school year Italian L2 courses are activated both as initial literacy and as a language suitable for study.

In the school practice, the classroom communication is based on students sitting individually in front of the teacher, who frames the topic and the pace of the lessons, although they are encouraged to put questions, to ask for clarifications, and to express their views; students have little opportunities to work together in working out complex ideas, recognizing the main ideas of a topic, relating it to the contextual information, designing and producing the text, respecting the formal rules of production.

Together with the teachers of the Intercultural Commission and the Working Group for Inclusion, we designed a project that departed from that established classroom organization and we proposed small group activities in which the students are invited to jointly reflect and write a text as a commentary on a meaningful and authentic theme for them. To construct a positive students' attitude towards school literacy, a perspective based on their existing repertoires of writing is proposed[1].

### 4.1. The Framework of the Classroom Activities

The students responded to a small questionnaire about their literary practices in their everyday lives and were invited to collaboratively write a text as a commentary to the "Manifesto of non-hostile communication", published by the 'Parole O_stili' Association (2016)[2]. The Manifesto can be considered an appropriate choice, since it refers to meaningful experiences in the lives of the adolescents (i.e. hostility; microaggressions, misunderstandings, deception); these topics involve an affective tone that should be communicated through a written text that integrates the students' reflections both at the semantic and at the syntactic planes. The tool has stimulated students to reflect together on the communication styles adopted by young people, the possible consequences of the use of

non-empathic language, and on the importance of considering the point of view of the other. In this "third space", the students were free to choose the genre (expository or narrative), modality (written or graphic text), and then to integrate the texts in an artefact that could circulate, be discussed, and further integrated. The proposed perspective is consistent with the 4 resources model by Freebody and Luke (1990).

The activity was organized in 6 lessons oriented to changing the practice of writing through the mediation of collaborative processes. Students work together in the production of a text: collaboration allows students both to connect personal ideas and to work out a text, to make explicit different writing functions (planning, execution, revision), assessing relevance (what to make explicit on the background of presuppositions); by sharing ideas on an interpersonal plane, students may develop metalinguistic awareness.

We adopted the ethnographic observations on the writing situations, to highlight the opportunities to learn emerging during collaborative writing. Ethnographic approaches require the researchers' engagement in the contexts of daily practice of the subjects and the documentation of the activities through fieldnotes and open interviews. In the fieldnotes, narrative reports of the students' interactions are gathered, to analytically reconstruct the structure of participation of each student in the collaborative writing processes (Erickson, 2004; 2017). In this perspective, the opportunities and constraints of the collaborative activity in promoting students' participation and learning can be highlighted, shared and discussed between the research team, the teachers and the students, to develop more engaging writing practices in the classroom.

## 4.2. Results

*Questionnaire: Writing as a practice*

The students' answers to a short questionnaire highlight that they use writing in their daily lives for pragmatic reasons: some use writing as a support for homework, some express pleasure in writing (" it is a way to blow off tensions" (answer 16); "I like to write at home, where I am quite and more inspired" (answer 21); "It is an opportunity to escape reality" (answer 19); "Writing makes me understand better what happens to me" (answer 15); "I write my daydreams" "In writing I throw out my bad feelings"; "Writing helps me to understand homework" to a dislike "Because it is like at school" (answer 4); (Table 1).

*Table 1.*
*Questionnaire: Writing as a practice.*

| Question 2: why do you write? | | Question 3: Whom do you write to? | | Question 4: Which are your preferred topics? | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| To overcome my difficulties to express orally my thoughts | 01 | Just write down | 04 | No | 09 |
| In conducting some activities | 05 | To myself | 02 | Everyday facts | 03 |
| To Imagine, to think | 06 | Messages | 01 | Schooling | 01 |
| Dialogue | 04 | Friends and relatives | 08 | My dreams | 01 |
| No answers | 05 | No answers | 06 | What it emerges | 02 |

*Ethnographic observations: the process of writing*

The collaborative writing activity is an opportunity to develop a relevant unit of analysis of the process of learning literacy. In our ethnographic observations, we gathered data on:

- the organization of the setting,

- the interactions among students, each with her/his personal writing experiences and repertoires,

- the material and informational resources they use,

- the rules of the activity and the evolving talk in interaction. Talk is not only a means to express ideas, but more crucially is a means to construct ideas together (Mercer, 2000).

The products of two groups are selected to highlight both the students' expressive potentialities and their difficulties in managing the four dimensions of formal writing, as defined by Freebody and Luke (1990).

In the first group three students (Alessia, Giada and Veronica) worked out collaboratively on the Manifesto and co-constructed the final text:

[5] Giada: what can be done?

[6] Alessia: if I talk to someone about a concern of mine, but she doesn't listen to me

[7] Alessia (dictates to Veronica): if I have a concern, the other has to listen to me =

[8] Giada: =anyway, not that she has to=

[9] Alessia: =then (0.4)

[10] Giada: I expect her to give me an advice, not making comments (0.3) uhm (0.3) talking about her concerns:

[11] Alessia: comparing her problems to mine

[12] Giada (looks at Veronica who is writing what the peers are saying and proposes): without the comma (after 'comments') I mean=

In this extract, Alessia introduces one rule of kindness and friendship [6], on which Giada further elaborates [10]; meanwhile, she supports Veronica in her writing effort [7]; also, Giada helps Veronica in correcting her syntax [12].

Veronica writes down the text of the discussion; she is joined by Alessia who takes the role of the revisor: "If I have a concern, the other person should listen to me and give me advice, without interrupting me or comparing her concerns to mine. Do not give a comment on something you don't know. Before attacking someone, reflect and understand her". The girls worked out collaboratively the ideas by interpreting rude and hostile social acts in terms of consequences in the states of mind of the others (humiliation, vulnerability, confusion, …); the group decides to give itself the name of "Listening is above anything else".

Finally, the definitive text is the following:

A says (angrily): you tripped me!
B: No, you are wrong
C: you are quarrelsome
B: No, you are unfair, you lie
C: if you give a gift, you cannot ask it back
B: she had pushed me
the moral of the story is "Don't take part in a quarrel, without even knowing why"

In the text, the students introduce three fictional characters (A, B, C), and refer to different layers of meaning: The girl C takes part in favor of A, based on what A said her about B in a previous situation in which C didn't take part. However, A was unfair in her report to C, and therefore C does not know some relevant information of the situation that made B angry (A was rude to B).

The students used all the dimensions of writing as they are proposed by Freebody and Luke (1990):

- Syntactical: the girls were able to support each other. Other girls in the group took the role of attentive listeners (looking at the talking peer, smiling at jokes, offering postural hints of agreement about the unfolding of the activity). They silently participated and their peers never perceived their presence as an obstacle, an opposition or as a condition needing an explanation.

- Semantic: they try to introduce different levels of complexity, that is the different frames of understanding each character is following (A: knowing the situation but having said only a partial truth to B; B knowing only a part of the situation; C knowing the situation but not knowing what B knows). However, the group was not able to manage all that complexity and did not make the relevant information explicit in the text, and therefore a reader loses its complexity.

- Pragmatic: they rely on a very rhythmic dramatic genre to show the consequences of deception on others.

- Affective: they are interested in deception, lie, misunderstanding.

Students' collaboration creates opportunities to learn elements of writing (working out the semantic aspects of the situation: Alessia and Giada jointly elaborate the consequences of lack of close listening [utterances 7, 10, 11]; furthermore, Veronica receives help in her syntactic competence. However, they are not yet able to compose an effective text. Many elements of the intended situation are left implicit, and a reader faces many difficulties to understand which is the correct frame of reference and therefore to attribute the correct meaning to the characters' utterances.

The second group, called "Kaliumbapé", works out a text based on the joint analysis of the concept of "embarrassment":

*"We have learned that in given situations, embarrassment is normal; in other ones, it produces uneasiness (in other people). There are different types of embarrassment: when two or more people quarrel, embarrassment arises because one person would like to say something, which in turn produces offence in the other; when two people who are not enough close, stay together for a period.*

*It could be embarrassing also the situation in which a group is formed by people who do not know each other".*

The students create a list of different types of "embarrassment". In their text, they use mental verbs which refer to individual mental states as consequences of social situations. Their definitions open either to the possibility of the reciprocal understanding of people, or to misunderstanding and conflict, if the interpretation of others' embarrassment is failing.

The students can write down sophisticated strategies of understanding of the psychological consequences of specific social situations. Dealing directly with their experiences and personal reflections, they were able to elaborate on the 4 dimensions of writing:

- Syntactical: the dimension is developed in terms of a series of definitions of a psychological concept ("embarrassment").
- Semantic: they work out the conceptualization of the different conditions that compose the meaning of "embarrassment".
- Pragmatic: they present a text that can help other to reflect on embarrassment and uneasiness.
- Affective: they make systematic connections between social situations and psychological states.

Their use of the writing process enables the systematicity and organization of their reflections, leading to a structured text. Through their collaborative activity, the students in this group have developed a strategy of joint design of the text. Each student proposed an aspect of "embarrassment" (related to her experience) and together they searched a hypothetical social situation in which embarrassment was a consequence. During the dialogue, also other stereotypical situations were considered such as the adults asking adolescents about friendship, or parents urging their children to make visit to grandparents. However, those situations were considered too obvious and discarded.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The results emerged in this study, highlight how collaborative writing is a participatory process, in which the meanings expressed by students in their texts, derived from a process of exchange of shared knowledge and experiences lived in the social world (Bazerman, 2017). Collaborative writing stimulates student participation and motivation and allows the sharing of ideas, thoughts and experiences which can make textual production more complex and meaningful (Pham, 2021; Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2019).

The study highlights that co-designing a collaborative writing activity in a vulnerable school context can be effective if teachers and researchers recognize and value the non-formal writing repertoires that students develop in their everyday lives and connect them to the academic writing on relevant topics in students' experiences (Elola, 2010; Thompson, 2012). Improving the understanding of learning processes that are based on informal practices and incorporating them into formal practices, could therefore help students who find in a condition of disadvantage, to feel more valued in their skills and recognize in their potential (Bourke, O'Neill, & Loveridge, 2018; Spencer, 2021).

For the students, writing is more an informal practice (directed to oneself, to relatives and friends): they use some writing repertoires to achieve practical goals in their everyday lives; it supports interiority, or deeper understanding of daily experiences.

During the collaborative activity in the classroom, the writing process appeared more difficult; the students reasoned by prototypical scenarios and some relevant elements in the writing were not sufficiently developed. However, they showed a sophisticated analysis of the consequences of hostile communication on others' feelings, self-confidence, and interpersonal relationships: students were able to identify different layers of meaning and introduce different levels of complexity.

The process of learning to write should be consider in the complexity of the elements that are involved: not only linguistic and cognitive skills, but also social, relational ones, communication methods and personal experiences that can contribute to the creation of meaning (Bazerman et al, 2017). The results highlighted through this study, can offer useful suggestions for teachers regarding collaborative writing processes and the potential that this form of learning can offer to students. The practice promotes the development of expressive repertoires, which may be recognized and encouraged also in school. More educational practice is needed, to promote their competence in designing a complex text.

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## AUTHORS' INFORMATION

**Full name:** Paolo Sorzio
**Institutional affiliation:** Dept. of Humanities, University of Trieste
**Institutional address:** 8, via Lazzaretto Vecchio, 34123 Trieste, Italy
**Short biographical sketch:** Paolo Sorzio is Associate Professor of "Qualitative Research Methodologies" and of "Educational Design" at the School of Education, University of Trieste. His interests are related to the analysis of structure of participation in school context and on professionals' in-service training programs. He is co-author with Caterina Bembich of *La ricerca empirica in educazione* [Research Styles in Education], Rome: Carocci, an introductory text about different reasoning styles in educational research.

**Full name:** Caterina Bembich
**Institutional affiliation:** Dept. of Humanities, University of Trieste
**Institutional address:** 8, via Lazzaretto Vecchio, 34123 Trieste, Italy
**Short biographical sketch:** Caterina Bembich is Researcher at the University of Trieste, where she teaches "Experimental Pedagogy" and "Tools and techniques for educational research". Her research focuses on risk and protective factors in vulnerable educational contexts; on inclusive processes addressed through innovative methodologies. Among her publications with P. Sorzio (2021). *Misurare e Interpretare i processi di contrasto al rischio educativo* [Measuring and Interpreting the Educational Interventions to Contrast Risks in Education], Lecce, Pensa MultiMedia Publisher.

## ENDNOTES

1. The study was developed within the FAMI-IMPACT FVG 2018-2020 project, funded by the 2014-2020 - OS2 Migration and Integration Asylum Fund. The project is carried out in collaboration with the University of XXX and the University of XXX with the proponent XXX region, to promote research and teacher training to contrast early school leaving, for foreign students in Italy.

2. The Manifesto is available on the site of the Parole O_stili Association: https://paroleostili.it/manifesto/; it is made up of a 10-sentence handbook, which identifies the fundamental principles of a positive, respectful, empathetic and responsible speech.