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“She is the one who gives the grade”. Students’ Orientations on Professional Writing Tasks

This study examines student teams’ working processes in a client project, in which the teams had to solve a real-life problem for a professional client and write professional texts. ‘Real-world’ client projects are often used in higher education nowadays to engage students in real-world work and communication processes (Thondhlana & Smith, 2013). These projects can be characterized as classroom-workplace collaborations that incorporate assignments to simulate workplace practice and to teach professional genres.

The key questions in this study are:

1) how did the students orient to the genre characteristics and school-based requirements of two professional genres: the project proposal and the advisory report; and

2) what were their considerations, problems, and (textual) solutions with regard to two audiences (client and instructor)?

In this third-year project, the students learned to analyze and conceptualize a complex organizational problem and to formulate advice. The results of a preliminary small scale study indicated that the students showed considerable involvement with regard to these educational goals: they were explicitly oriented to completing these assignments as real-world communication consultants. Unequivocal evidence that this involvement did not automatically result in a comparable inclination to professional writing. The students did not make well-considered and independent choices, and displayed less independence with regard to client-oriented writing. Principally, they did not seem to experience the writing tasks as fundamental components of the project.

Based on this preliminary study, a more extensive study was set up in the subsequent study year. At the Prowitec-conference, I will report on the outcomes of this more extensive study (work-in-progress) which is based on an analysis of students’ meetings, weekly journals, interviews, drafts and final versions of the students’ texts, and the instructor’s feedback. The outcomes of this study give rise for reflection on goals and the possibilities of profession-
oriented writing tasks in university study programs, on differences between educational requirements and professional necessities, and on the organization of these tasks within the curriculum. Teachers may need to take a more active role in guiding students in their orientation to professional genres in order to enhance the development of students’ genre awareness.

Literature:


