FROM REFLECTIONS UPON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE TO THE DESIGN OF ONLINE WORKSHOPS ON WRITING*
De Reflexões sobre a Prática Profissional à Elaboração de Oficinas Virtuais de Redação

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Abstract

This article illustrates how reflections upon professional practice have led me to the development of a three-dimensional approach to the teaching and learning of English through online workshops on writing. It presents the findings of a previous research which support my claim that experience*,* reflection*, and* practice *may provide the bases on which the skill of composing texts in English for work-related purposes can be exercised, interpreted, and improved through a series of online reflective interactions focused on the discussion of e-mail messages conveyed at work. By explaining how online workshops on writing may be designed, this article also asserts that discussing samples of e-mail messages enables professionals to interact not only with the foreign language in a unique way, but also with their own experiential continuum, thus providing them with more opportunities to perceive job activities as potential learning situations.*

Key words: *e-mail; writing; genres; reflection upon professional practice.*

Resumo

Este artigo ilustra como reflexões sobre a prática profissional levaram-me a desenvolver uma abordagem tri-dimensional de ensino/aprendizagem de inglês através de oficinas virtuais de redação. Ele apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa que realizei anteriormente, a qual

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fundamenta minha afirmação de que experiência, reflexão, *e* prática *podem oferecer os fundamentos para que a habilidade de redação profissional em inglês possa ser exercitada, interpretada e desenvolvida através de interações virtuais reflexivas, dirigidas à discussão de mensagens eletrônicas veiculadas no ambiente de trabalho. Apresentando como oficinas virtuais de redação profissional podem ser operacionalizadas, este artigo também argumenta que a reflexão sobre textos eletrônicos produzidos em interações de trabalho permite que profissionais interajam não apenas com o idioma estrangeiro de forma inédita, mas também com o seu contínuo experiencial, tendo, portanto, mais oportunidade de perceber as atividades de trabalho como situações potenciais de aprendizagem.*

Palavras-chave: *e-mail; redação; gêneros; reflexão sobre a prática profissional.*

1.   Introduction

The purpose of this article is to describe how reflections upon professional practice have led me to conceive of a three-dimensional approach to the teaching and learning of English, which is theoretically grounded on *experience*, *reflection*, and *practice*, and potentially operationalized through online workshops on writing.

The approach I suggest was based on the findings of my doctoral research (Freire, 1998)[1] in which I aimed at studying what it was like to interact in English through computers within business settings from the Brazilian professionals' point of view. Taking the comprehensiveness of the target phenomenon into account, I attempted to focus my inquiry on the investigation of what was involved in experiencing e-mail for professional communication, in interacting in English through computers, and in reflecting upon computerized activities performed in

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the workplace. In having these goals in mind and by adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach[2] to research, I could not only identify some of the genres[3] conveyed through the electronic medium in business contexts, but also reach a better understanding of the meaning of using computers for professional purposes.

Considering its design and development, the research mentioned above regarded the description and interpretation of 152 e-mail messages, selected by five Brazilian managers from three distinct corporations in São Paulo (Brazil). These professionals were: José Luiz and Luciano, partners in an office that dealt with industrial automation systems; Paulo César and Juciane, co-workers in a Brazilian organization that traded electronic communication products and services; and Basílio, who worked in a multinational corporation that handled chemical products. The messages they presented were brought to discussion as typical samples of the electronic correspondence conveyed between their companies and their related offices abroad. By using them both as object of inquiry and as input for reflection, and by focusing our conversations on descriptions and interpretations of such texts and of the work-related activities they emerged from, the participants not only portrayed their experiences in communicating with their counterparts through computers, but also recollected features of the writing process tacitly

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2   As stated by van Manen (1990), "*herneneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a* descriptive *(phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an* interpretive *(hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) "facts" of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the "facts" of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process*" (p. 180-181).

3   Based on some theoretical sources (such as Martin,1984; Halliday & Hasan,1985/89; Bakhtin,1986; Bazerman,1988; Swales,1990; Bruner & Weisser,1991; Cope & Kalantziz,1993; Bhatia,1993; Callaghan et al,1993; Smart,1993; Schryer,1993,1994; Miller,1994; Freedman & Medway,1994; Orlikowski & Yates,1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin,1995; Lemke,1995), I conceive of *genres* as linguistically oriented social actions which emerge from the needs of situations, convey culturally recognizable communicative purposes, and tend to display regularities at the formal and structural levels. Moreover, as contextualized responses to situations, *genres* are part of a continuously evolving system whose changes are determined by the communicative and/or sociocognitive needs of the community that enacts and customarily manipulated them (Freire, 1998:50).

developed throughout their engagement in e-mail practices in the workplace. Under such research circumstances, these professionals and I got involved in a process of joint *reflection upon practice* (Schön,1983, 1987,1991,1992) which enabled us to address not only types of texts and communicative purposes usually conveyed through the electronic medium, but also the social actions that associated co-workers together in online interactions.

Apart from providing a comprehensive picture of CMC[4] practices in the workplace, the results of the investigation outlined above constituted the basis on which I conceived of an ESP program directed towards business people who have to communicate in English through the electronic medium as part of their customary job activities. The association between the theoretical/methodological orientation that guided that research and the foundation of the three-dimensional approach presented here should be, thus, clearly elucidated since the former provides the framework for the latter. Grounded on the purpose of making this relationship explicit, I will first present the research undertaken in detail by addressing the role performed by its interpretive component, as well as by discussing the essential nature of e-mail practices, the meaning of interacting through computers at work, and the significance of reflecting upon practice. To conclude this article, I will present the online workshops on writing as a possible approach teachers of English can make use of in order to develop business people's foreign language writing skills.

2.   The research interpretive component

As soon as I started investigating CMC practices in business settings, I perceived that in order to describe this phenomenon and its implications, I should transcend genre recognition and attempt to understand the way genres were enacted, manipulated, and interpreted by those who were actually involved in e-mail activities at work. At that moment, I realized that if my goal was to grasp the contextual conditions

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4   *CMC* – an expression suggested by Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire (1984) – stands for *computer-mediated communication*.

that surrounded message production and reception, as well as the meaning users made of interacting through computers for professional purposes, I should include an interpretive component in my research. This component, therefore, by accounting for the recollection of lived experiences and for professionals' reflections upon their CMC practices, would establish a stronger connection between the methodological and theoretical features of my investigation, rendering them more homogenous. Moreover, such an interpretive element would help me understand the target phenomenon the way it was, and the way it was experienced and interpreted by Brazilian professionals.

In considering this interpretive component, my attention was initially directed to examining the meaning of experience and, particularly, the notion of lived experience. This questioning was actually motivated by the arguments presented by van Manen (1990:36-37), who emphasizes its relevance to studies founded on hermeneutic phenomenology. According to him, knowing what lived experience is becomes an important question since phenomenology aims at transforming lived experience into a textual expression of its essence which acquires hermeneutic significance as we, through recollection, meditation, conversations, or other kinds of interpretive acts, assign significance to the phenomena of lived life. For van Manen, lived experience constitutes the starting point and the end point of an investigation following such a methodological path. Dilthey (1994) also emphasizes that life-expression has its source in lived experience whose meaning is understood and expressed again in the form of lived experience (cf. Mueller-Vollmer,1994:25-26). These arguments, therefore, supported my search for conceptual clarification and led me to reflect upon two particular considerations:

> **(1)** Experience is a temporal flow in which every state changes before it is clearly objectified because the subsequent moment always builds on the previous one and each is past before it is grasped. It then appears as a memory which is free to expand. (Dilthey,1994:150)

> **(2)** A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflective

awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective. (Dilthey,1985:223)

The accounts above made me conceive of the flow of experience as a time-related sequence – a sort of *historical chain* (Carr,1986) – in which previous experiences provide a framework for the subsequent ones. This relationship between past and more recent experiences indicates a chain of connection and continuity which, as Dilthey suggests, is objectively captured through reflection.

Similar association between continuity and experience is addressed by Dewey (1938a). From his perspective, however, this connection is more comprehensive than just perceiving that experiences are sequenced and interrelated. He refers to continuity as also being a criterion that, articulated with the principle of interaction, serves to discriminate between educative and mis-educative experiences. For him, interaction assigns "*equal rights to both factors in experience – objective and internal conditions*" (Dewey,1938a:42) which, taken together, form what he terms *situation*. By considering that continuity, interaction and situation constitute inseparable principles for the interpretation of experiences in their "*educational function and force*," Dewey formulates the theory of *experiential continuum* (1938a:25-50).

Dewey's theory of experiential continuum is focused on the interconnected flow of various experiences, and presupposes a situated process of continuity and interaction. From his viewpoint, knowing is not simply an internal phenomenon for it displays a close relationship with a set of lived experiences while involving an active manipulation of the environment. Nevertheless, if Dewey understands that learning comes about through a continuous process of interaction between previous and subsequent experiences, he does not claim that all experiences are "*genuinely or equally educative*" (Dewey,1938a:25). As he points out, such an interpretation primarily depends on the quality that emerges from each interaction as an immediate reaction of agreement-disagreement or acceptance-rejection, as well as on the ways these reactions impact on future experiences. According to Dewey, as experiences "*neither occur nor remain in a vacuum*" (1938a:40), their

meaning and their ensuing implications should be interpreted as the result of a continuous process of communication and interaction between internal and external factors. Each experience becomes, then, a moving force whose value is understood retrospectively (since new experiences are grounded on the previous ones), as well as prospectively (since past experiences impact on the subsequent ones). From this perspective, therefore, reflecting upon lived experiences – retrospectively and prospectively – requires a process of investigation that includes reflective thought and that involves the inquirer in transaction with the situation. These are the premises suggested by Dewey (1938b) in his *theory of inquiry*, which emphasizes the "*transactional, open-ended, and inherently social*" (Schön,1992:122). These are also the assumptions on which Schön (1983,1987,1991,1992) formulates his *epistemology of practice*, which represents his interpretation of Dewey's theory of inquiry, substituting the notion of *reflective practice* for Dewey's *reflective thought* (Schön,1992:123).

The arguments presented by Schön (1983:60-63) emphasize that practice has an ambiguous connotation: it not only refers to "*performance in a range of professional situations*;" it also means "*preparation for performance*" which is characterized by repetitive or experimental activities that lead to increasing proficiency. Such an ambiguity implies that, in professional terms, the more stable the practice is, the less subject the practitioner will be to surprise. In other words, it means that the more repetitive and routinized the activities become -– and, therefore, the more spontaneously the practitioner behaves – the more s/he will miss "*important opportunities*" (Schön,1983:61) to think about or assess his/her own actions. In considering this explanation, I perceived that reflecting upon practice assumed a special significance in terms of potentially leading the professional to realize the mechanisms that tacitly guided him/her in the performance of certain tasks.

Schön's notion of reflection upon practice has evolved from the concept of *tacit knowledge* presented by Polanyi (1966/67). By sharing with him the assumption that we invariably know more than we are able to tell (Polanyi,1966/ 67:5; Schön,1983:49), Schön claims that competent practitioners tacitly master the activities they perform. However, because they are not aware of having acquired this sort of

knowledge, they can neither verbalize it promptly nor describe it in detail. For this reason, Schön (1983,1987,1991, 1992) advocates an epistemology of practice constructed upon reflection and revealed through *reflective turns* which he defines as follows:

> *When we attend to what we know already, appreciating the artistry and wisdom implicit in competent practice, believing that by reflection on that practice we can make some of our tacit knowledge explicit, we take a "reflective turn" that leads us to (...) a kind of reflective practice, a communicative and self-reflective practice of reciprocal inquiry.* (Schön,1992:123).

In considering Schön's definition above, a reflective turn, by leading practitioners to realize tacit features of their work-related routines, represents a moment of meaning through which they encounter their practice, become aware of its peculiarities and their behaviors, and perhaps become more conscious of its potential and/or limitations.

In reflecting upon Dewey's experiential continuum and upon Schön's epistemology of practice, I realized that the act of recalling and interacting with the flow of experiences lived at work, and of distinguishing the tacit features involved in routinized work-related activities could lead practitioners to perceive the nature and the frames that characterized their professional practice. The resulting awareness could potentially help them to identify their most frequent actions and spontaneous responses; to analyze their individual or group performance; to assess and, if necessary, to redesign general work-related procedures; and to create and/or develop strategies to cope with either predictable or unexpected situations. In other words, by conceiving of their practice from a reflective perspective, practitioners could interact with their experiences, get involved in making new (hermeneutic) meaning, and possibly transform these experiences into educational ones (Dewey,1938a,1960; Kolb,1984). Moreover, by associating experience and understanding, they would be able to act on possibilities, *participate*[5]

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5   The meaning I attribute to participation regards the one suggested by Lave & Wenger (1991). According to them, "*participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction – indeed, are mutually constitutive*" (1991:51-52).

in their routines in an innovative way, and develop themselves in professional terms. From this perspective, therefore, a reflective attitude towards routinized practices could lead professionals to acquire and/or enhance their "*experience-knowledge*" (Greene,1991:37).

Nevertheless, I noticed that Schön's epistemology of practice emphasized the experiences lived within the boundaries of one specific work-related environment, drawing attention to the reflective behavior possibly performed by members of that particular *community of practice*[6] (Lave & Wenger,1991) at that particular point in time. It seemed to me that Schön disregarded the fact that individuals might belong to various communities (either simultaneously or over time) and, therefore, that the experiences lived inside as well as outside the workplace were equally influential in determining who those individuals were, and the way they dealt with their professional activities. Considering this constraint, I wondered whether the ideas embedded in the metaphor of the *professional knowledge landscape*, presented by Clandinin & Connelly (1995), could bridge the gap I perceived in Schön's notion of reflection upon practice, enriching its principles and enlarging its scope.

The metaphor of the professional knowledge landscape, although having arisen out of the realm of teaching, and having been originally designed for teachers as practitioners, seemed to be open to reinterpretations applied to other professional environments. As described by its authors:

> *It [the landscape metaphor] allows us to talk about space, place, and time. Furthermore, it has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships. Understanding professional knowledge*

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6   According to Lave & Wenger (1991:98), a community of practice corresponds to "*a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice*". As they remark, this concept involves a largely intuitive notion which requires a more rigorous treatment (1991: 42). Although lacking detailed explanation, I interpret their notion as referring to the community that shares common purposes and activities, and whose membership is determined by means of specific modes of participation in typical practices, as happens in business settings, for instance.

> *as comprising a landscape calls for a notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places, and things. Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it as both an intellectual and a moral landscape.* (Connelly & Clandinin,1995a:4-5)

It seemed to me that the landscape metaphor provided an excellent way of dealing with the temporal and spatial aspects of professional life. It accounted for the work-related environment where practitioners performed their professional activities, as well as for the surrounding areas in which they related to other people and took part in other events. In other words, Clandinin & Connelly's (1995) metaphor conceived of professionals in a more comprehensive way, referring to them as individuals who were exposed to various sorts of experiences inside and outside their workplaces. The metaphor transcended, therefore, the concept of practice ("*broadly conceived to include intellectual acts and self-exploration*," Connelly & Clandinin,1995a:7), and provided a way in which I could contextualize the practitioners' *personal practical knowledge*.[7]

Furthermore, the landscape metaphor seemed to be particularly relevant to the purpose of investigating the meaning professionals made of their activities undertaken through the electronic medium. It made me realize that, by motivating professionals to recollect their lived experiences and to envision them as part of their landscape, we would go beyond the generic characterization of the messages exchanged, and provide them with the means to recognize and reflect upon aspects of their tacit practice. Furthermore, by considering Connelly & Clandinin's landscape metaphor in association with Dewey's experiential continuum and Schön's epistemology of practice as the rationale for the interpretive inquiry component, my investigation would not only reveal the essence of CMC activities as a phenomenon but, particularly, the way

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7   According to Clandinin (1985:362), personal practical knowledge is "*knowledge which is imbued with all the experiences that make up a person's being. Its meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of, a person's experiential history, both professional and personal*" .

professionals lived and understood them. In this regard, using samples of e-mail messages as input for interpretive conversations would place professionals as inquirers into their own practice, and as interpreters of their own experience. As a result of recovering and reflecting upon their work-related routines and procedures, both the practitioners and I would be in touch with a network of lived experiences and able to understand the position occupied by CMC practices within the dimensions of the professional landscape.

3.   Understanding the essential nature of CMC practices

Since our first meetings, the participants in my research referred to e-mail as a *safe*, *fast*, and *efficient* communication medium. By mentioning these three qualities, they not only outlined their essential understanding of the tool, but also indicated its most remarkable features. For them, safety regarded integrity, while meant there was a guarantee that the same piece of information would reach all of its recipients exactly the way it had been generated. In this regard, by providing multiple addressability and avoiding the need to paraphrase, e-mail could ensure that the content would not be distorted and that access to information would be available on a more symmetrical basis. On the other hand, by asserting that e-mail was a fast channel of communication, the professionals emphasized its potential to connect remote sites easily, to overcome time zone differences, and to accelerate the flow of information delivery across the company. From their perspective, the agility provided by the electronic tool increased the frequency of interaction among co-workers, encouraged more integration among the hierarchical levels within the organization and, consequently, provided gains in the decision-making process and in the performance of certain job activities.

In addition to safety, agility and efficiency, the participants also referred to the impact of e-mail on *documentation*, *autonomy*, and *time control and manipulation*. From their viewpoint, documentation involved the ability to store and access every message at any time and for various purposes. By supporting the documentation of the flow of message-

exchange electronically, the e-mail system caused a significant decrease in paper manipulation and letterhead correspondence, as well as leading to a reassessment of the traditional filing procedures. Autonomy referred to the independent use of the electronic tool without restricting message reception and transmission to the schedule of the internal mail delivery and without relegating these activities to the secretarial level. In assigning to each professional the responsibility for managing his/her own electronic correspondence, e-mail indirectly changed the nature of certain occupations, particularly that of the secretaries who took on the role of administrative assistants, as clearly acknowledged in Basílio's corporation. Furthermore, autonomy in dealing with electronic correspondence also had the effect of increasing the practitioners' professional awareness and empowerment – qualities that were particularly strengthened in situations which required them to make decisions quickly and independently, without counting on their superiors' formal authorization. On the other hand, the participants associated the utilization of e-mail with the opportunities for enhanced time management. For instance, if the original messages were composed according to their degree of urgency, the replies could be also adjusted according to each professional's availability to process the information. In this regard, the electronic medium, as opposed to telephone calls, provided the receiver with enough time to evaluate the message and to prepare a response before actually replying. From the sender's perspective, e-mail allowed him/her to save time by proceeding with other work while s/he waited for a specific response or information.

The description provided by the participants suggested that, as a form of "*textualization of work-related procedures*" (Zuboff,1988:180), and as the leading channel of internal communication, e-mail provided an innovative way of performing certain job activities and of dealing with and distributing information across the company. It was also implicit in the practitioners' remarks that, as claimed by Zuboff (1988: 180), an e-mail text was the result of a "*radical centralization*" of information in a single computer system which, at the same time, involved an equally "*radical decentralization*" through which texts could be "*constituted at any time from any place*". In reflecting upon this formulation in the light of the participants' views, I realized that electronic texts could be

retrieved at any time, from practically any place, and undoubtedly for various purposes – including the one of partially reproducing previous messages, as Basílio mentioned. His description made it clear that e-mail texts were not regulated by conventional principles of authorship and that the information conveyed within the corporation tended to be seen as belonging in common to its community members who could use it for professional purposes in many ways.

On the other hand, I realized that the notion of decentralization could be also understood as a means of guaranteeing equal access to information which, through the electronic medium, could be delivered simultaneously to a literally unlimited number of receivers. In addition, I realized that decentralization also impacted on the process of communication between distinct hierarchical levels within the organization, reducing the distance between them and bringing them somehow closer to one another. In my view, the proximity provided by e-mail engendered a more informal pattern of interaction which affected not only upward and downward channels of communication, but also the flow of interpersonal communication enacted across the company hierarchy. Except for Basílio, the participants agreed with this interpretation and supported my view that, to some extent, e-mail has flattened the corporation hierarchy. Basílio, however, maintained a partly divergent point of view, emphasizing that e-mail, although a significant influence, was not the cause of the structural transformations perceived within his corporation. For him, these transformations resulted from a more inclusive process of change that included the introduction of e-mail and found in it an ideal way to speed up work-related activities – a need which had already been perceived.

As a fast form of communication based on written texts and primarily focused on the information to be conveyed, e-mail seemed to impact on the various participants differently and, consequently, to lead them to distinct perceptions and reactions. Luciano, for instance, pointed out that the increasing use of the electronic tool reduced opportunities for more concrete personal contacts. On the other hand, Basílio displayed a particular empathy with CMC systems whose inherent agility was compatible with his own working style. However, he stressed that e-mail somehow allowed its users to hide and dissimulate their real

thoughts. In this regard, Juciane developed a particular feeling against the possibility of using the e-mail text to cover or disguise genuine reactions. She had actually developed an individual set of strategies – which might include the intentional use of upper-case letters and/or the deliberate repetition of exclamation or question marks – to counteract this feeling and to give expression to her own personality in the messages she composed. José Luiz and Paulo César seemed to be less sensitive to this theme: although they emphasized the relevance of e-mail to the performance of their professional activities, they made no particular comment on the facilitation or otherwise of personal relationships.

My analysis of the participants' reflections and interpretations provided me with a variety of views of the electronic tool and CMC systems, revealing the different ways they tended to be perceived by salespeople, entrepreneurs and simple users. Due to the nature of their professional occupations, Paulo César and Juciane's approach to e-mail intuitively displayed the viewpoint of the sales representative who was convinced of the advantages of the system and accustomed to pointing out its benefits to potential customers. From a mainly commercial perspective, they stated that e-mail represented the ideal way to shorten distances and to accelerate the flow of information at a relatively low cost. Furthermore, they seemed to be proud of the fact that their corporation could ensure excellent connection facilities, continuous assistance and maintenance, and, by using a private server, offer an alternative to those companies interested in adopting or expanding their electronic network.

On the other hand, José Luiz and Luciano represented the point of view of the entrepreneur who was not only aware of the advantages of e-mail, but also attentive to the cost factor and to the concrete possibilities of using the system in practical terms. Although they knew that e-mail, by improving their communication with other offices abroad, suited their communicative needs, they regretted the lack of available telephone lines, the difficulties in accessing the system during working hours, and the restrictive policies adopted by Embratel – the Brazilian telecommunication agency. For them, the attitude adopted by this governmental agency obstructed the utilization of the network at any time or from any place and hindered the inclusion of clients on a large

scale. The peculiarities of the Brazilian context, however, affected the two entrepreneurs differently: Luciano adopted a tolerant attitude and pointed to "*time*" as a natural solution. While he waited for the situation to improve, he took advantage of other communication tools as a way of overcoming the existing difficulties. José Luiz, by contrast, adopted a more combative attitude, claiming that he could not accept that Embratel's "*great technical team*" and "*excellent resources*" had to stand idle because of political reasons.

As a simple user who was involved neither in selling nor in buying e-mail systems, Basílio looked at the tool and its utilization from an operational and communicative point of view, drawing attention to the aspects that directly affected the performance of his work-related activities. In this regard, the agility with which the electronic medium responded to his professional needs and to his personal working style, as well as its potential to connect worldwide co-workers and to receive their replies promptly constituted the most attractive features of this form of communication. From his perspective as a user, Basílio was not particularly attentive to the commercial or political factors that affected the installation or expansion of e-mail networks; his only concern was to have the tool available and to be able to use it to fulfill his communicative needs. For this reason, I believe, he was more sensitive to individual reluctance or resistance to accessing the system against which he reacted by displaying his absolute disagreement.

The considerations presented so far summarize the essential nature of CMC in the Brazilian context, showing how practitioners conceptualized e-mail and how it impacted on their workplaces. A reflection upon the portrait sketched by these professionals leads me to conclude that e-mail communication has undoubtedly become a significant working tool whose manipulation has been requiring professionals to deal – promptly and efficiently – with information in Portuguese and particularly in English. The characterization provided in this section indicates, therefore, that the integration of CMC practices at work has demanded practitioners not only to develop their professional knowledge in order to accomplish job routines successfully, but also to acquire technological knowledge in order to manipulate computers for communicative purposes in an effective way, as well as reaching higher

levels of foreign language proficiency in order to understand and convey work-related contents accurately. As a teacher of English and a researcher, this perception induces me to associate *tool* and *language* and, by exploiting the communicative features of CMC practices, attempt to establish a meaningful partnership that may impact positively on the design of ESP courses for business people.

4.   Making meaning of interacting through computers

According to the five professionals who participated in the research I have been referring to, the communication enacted through e-mail included the exchange of messages among co-workers within the same company and among professionals in related offices in various countries. It constituted, therefore, a form of internal correspondence focusing on the content to be delivered either to the whole community or to specific recipients. This being the case, e-mail messages could describe various communicative movements within the company. Firstly, they could be directed downward. In this case, they constituted a channel for updating procedures, for bringing about personnel changes, for conveying general instructions and information, for reinforcing internal rules and policies, and (on a more restricted scale) for distributing departmental announcements. In describing a downward movement of communication, e-mail messages could be identified as *corporate circulars* and *bulletins*. Secondly, e-mail messages could be directed upward and become an instrument for the regular reporting of individual or departmental activities and/or descriptions of sporadic events or unexpected situations. Messages like those could be identified as *periodic* and *occasional reports*. Finally, electronic correspondence could circulate across the company hierarchy, conveying all sorts of information, requests and/or advice. In this case, the e-mail text constituted a tool through which professional meaning was negotiated and specialized knowledge was shared or developed. Correspondence directed upward included various sorts of documents that could be identified as *requests*, *responses*, *for-your-information reports*, *cover messages*, *acknowledgments, memos*, *discussions*, and a special type of message which was characterized by the overlap of various communicative purposes.

The communicative movements presented above illustrated, therefore, the various kinds of social actions (Miller,1994) and communicative purposes (Swales,1990) that associated co-workers together through the electronic medium and that gave rise to the *genres* enacted and tacitly manipulated by their corporate communities. In drawing special attention to them, I realized that these genres not only performed single roles, but they also interact with one another in two specific ways. Firstly, some genres (corporate circular, bulletin, periodic report, occasional report, cover message, acknowledgment, discussion, and memo) displayed independent features that, by conveying only one side of a multiple person interaction, characterized them as part of a *set* (Devitt,1991:340) or *repertoire* (Orlikowski & Yates,1994:544) established by a community. Secondly, other genres (request, for-your-information report, and response) established an interdependent relationship among themselves that associated them together in a *system* (Bazerman,1994: 97-99). I perceived that such a system included the participation of both sides of the interactive chain, in such a way that the pattern of initiation and response could be regarded as an *electronic adjacency pair* (Freire,1998 based on Schegloff & Sacks,1973). However, I also found some messages which performed overlapping functions (blurred or mixed genres) and that, by combining different genres in a single e-mail message, served various purposes. These roles performed by genres indicated, therefore, what they could show about themselves and about their relationships.

On the other hand, I also perceived that genres could reveal aspects of the community that manipulated them. In this regard, the predominance of discussions and requests in José Luiz and Luciano's company indicated its focus on an intensive interactive process that characterized its teamwork style. By contrast, the organization in which Paulo César and Juciane worked based its CMC practices on a system of initiation-response adjacency pairs (*requests and responses*, and *requests and for-your-information reports*) which characterized the mutual consultation network from which professionals could get technical support and/or information to assist their customers. The corporation in which Basílio worked displayed a variety of genres which did not indicate a strong emphasis on any particular organizational

pattern. However, the relative importance given to bulletins and corporate circulars could indicate a preoccupation with the dissemination of instructions, procedures and policy statements, which regarded its intention to reinforce aspects of the company internal culture. In spite of dealing with a restricted corpus of 152 messages which included quite a reduced number of examples of certain genres, I realized that the electronic correspondence focused on in this study tended to be predominantly based on the manipulation of requests, responses, for-your-information reports, and discussions. The emphasis given to these specific genres led me to conclude that CMC practices were characterized by the exchange of specialized information and by the co-construction of knowledge which supported the performance of routine job activities.

The participants showed no hesitation in identifying electronic correspondence as an informal process of communication which was constrained neither by institutional regulations nor by the patterns traditionally associated with business letters. For them, since their fundamental concern was with the subjects to be conveyed and with the urgency of requesting or sending specific information, their preoccupation with the formal features of writing was certainly reduced. For this reason, they perceived electronic messages as compatible with the utilization of customized formats, with the expression of individual writing styles, and with a tolerant approach to issues involving grammatical form and accuracy.

Interestingly enough, the professionals were aware that the messages exchanged through the computerized medium entailed a number of grammatical mistakes and typographical errors about which they were not very concerned since their priority was the accurate transmission of content. Throughout our conversations, however, it became evident that this assumption was to some extent misleading for, as they pointed out, the distinction between content and form, as well as their relaxed approach to writing, should be limited to certain contexts. As they explained, the nature of the target situation and of the document to be delivered, as well as the nature of the target audience, were factors that determined whether or not they should pay special attention to language accuracy and matters of text organization. Periodic reports,

for instance, required a higher level of textual elaboration than that which was applied in routine correspondence, as mentioned by Paulo César, Juciane and Basílio. By the same token, an e-mail message addressed to the president of the company and copied to other recipients also required special attention in terms of formality, as Basílio commented. By perceiving this interrelationship between context, recipients and language use, and by tacitly dealing with the interdependency among the semiotic components of the situation (field, tenor, and mode)[8] , the participants revealed, therefore, an intuitive manipulation of the notion of *register*[9].

In interpreting interactions undertaken through the foreign language, all of the participants emphasized the role performed by computers in intensifying their exposure to English and in providing them with significant opportunities to enlarge their lexical repertoire. Unquestionably, for them, vocabulary constituted the most troublesome area and the one that might sometimes interfere with their reading and writing activities, as particularly mentioned by Paulo César. They recognized that interacting with native speakers and being required to comprehend and compose messages in English on a daily basis led them to acquire new expressions and patterns of language use and, consequently, to develop their foreign language proficiency considerably. From their perspective, therefore, e-mail not only constituted a valuable communication tool; it was also perceived as an important mediator of learning.

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8   As summarized by Eggins (1994:52), the three semiotic components of the situation account for "*what the language is being used to talk about*" (field), "*the role relationship between interactants*" (tenor), and "*the role language is playing in the interaction*" (mode).

9   As presented by Halliday (1978/92:111), "*a register can be defined as the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. It is the meaning potential that is accessible in a given social context. Both the situation and the register associated with it can be described to varying degrees of specificity; but the existence of registers is a fact of everyday experience – speakers have no difficulty in recognizing the semantic options and combinations of options that are 'at risk' under particular environmental conditions. Since these options are realized in the form of grammar and vocabulary, the register is recognizable as a particular selection of words and structures. But it is defined in terms of meanings; it is not an aggregate of conventional forms of expression superposed on some underlying content by 'social factors' of one kind or another. It is the selection of meanings that constitutes the variety to which a text belongs.*

It was clear to me that the participants' engagement in practical activities led them to live enriching foreign language experiences and to intuitively recognize that learning was a *situated process* (Brown, Collins & Duguid,1989), developed through participation, i.e., through the significant interaction between experience and understanding (Lave & Wenger, 1991:51-52). Although all of them had been submitted to formal instruction in English, they were unanimous in asserting that their involvement in genuine situations that required them to communicate in the foreign language represented their most effective and continuous source of language development. E-mail, therefore, provided them with the ideal context for establishing contact with the target language and its (native or non-native) speakers and, through the exchange of professional knowledge, to develop their general linguistic competence and technical language skills. This unique understanding of electronic interactions as learning opportunities made me realize that work-related environments constitute practical educational sites in which knowledge and meaning are exchanged, negotiated, created and recreated.

This point of view was reinforced by Basílio's comments on a procedure developed in his corporation according to which the contents of certain episodes were electronically shared with the whole community and some concepts were highlighted by the heading "*key learning.*" This practice indicated a specific didactic orientation that, by encouraging the exchange of experiences and reflection upon their meaning, promoted a vicarious form of learning which ultimately impacted on decision-making processes and on professional awareness. In comparing the two learning situations mentioned – the one in which professionals transformed electronic interactions into foreign language learning opportunities and the one in which the company provided its employees with an opportunity to learn from their co-workers' experiences – I concluded that conceiving of workplaces as educational sites involves reflecting on each professional's learning agenda and on his/her willingness to interact with each potential learning situation and to transform this experience into an educational one (Dewey,1938a). On the other hand, understanding work-related environments as educational settings also involves the recognition of the educational

policy that guides each company and that is made explicit through their regular routines.

It will be clear from the comments presented so far that interacting through the electronic medium in the foreign language is a highly complex matter that requires the intuitive mastery of the genres of internal written communication enacted by each corporate community. Furthermore, dealing with e-mail messages and making them potential learning tools involves interaction with and understanding of the experiences lived through the medium and through the foreign language in order to establish significant interconnections among them in such a way that they can be transformed into educational experiences (Dewey,1938a,1960; Kolb,1984). In my opinion, this situated movement of interaction, understanding, and transformation of experiences constitutes the bridge between practice and learning which was intuitively built by the practitioners focused on in the study I have been describing.

A reflection upon the considerations presented so far leads me to figure out that the relationship between *learning* and *practice* plays a distinctive role in the understanding of CMC activities in work-related environments taken as educational sites. Furthermore, I deduct that an association between *learning* and *practice* together with an association between *tool* and *language,* which can be achieved by *reflections upon lived experiences* may provide a steadier structure on which an approach to ESP for business people could be grounded.

5.   Conceiving of reflections upon practice

In rethinking my conversations with the participants in the light of the reflective turns they took while interpreting some of the experiences they had lived, I perceived that the act of recalling the experiences lived inside and outside their workplaces led them to search for meaning that involved *telling lived stories*, *establishing relationships*, and *thinking again* about them (Clandinin & Connelly,1995b:153-157). Their engagement in sharing facts and interpretations made them partners in my investigation (Schön,1983:323) and – at least during the

period of my research – inquirers into their own practices and professional landscapes. However, I noticed that, although they all engaged in a similar process of examining their electronic correspondence and of looking backwards and forwards across their own experiences, each professional developed a preference for certain themes, subtly indicating the interpretive directions in which s/he was willing to go. Although these directions were tacitly understood throughout our meetings, they became evident when José Luiz defined his comments as a "*report*", when Luciano identified his reflections as "*self-criticism*", when Juciane perceived herself "*leaving her own world*", when Basílio caught himself contemplating "*a ten-year-old picture*", and even when Paulo César found that he could not summarize his perceptions by using a single word or expression. It seemed to me that these individual reactions revealed the inner interpretations the participants made of the hermeneutic conversations we shared together.

In characterizing his reflective process as a report, José Luiz emphasized the descriptive viewpoint from which he approached his personal and professional experiences. This aspect of his comments seemed particularly important because through descriptions he could more easily realize the restricted use he had been making of the electronic medium and feel motivated to explore a wider range of strategies. In this regard, his descriptions were decisive in making him take a reflective turn that led him from perception to concrete action. At the same time, his report had a contemplative aspect, shown by his reflections upon his professional development, by the linguistic differences he perceived in messages produced by native and non-native speakers of English, by his interest in promoting his employees' growth, and, particularly, by his criticism of the constraints he felt in the Brazilian CMC context. In addressing these topics, his descriptive approach took on more critical overtones that revealed features of his professional and foreign language awareness. For me, therefore, contemplating his accounts involved going beyond his descriptions and attempting to understand the more funda-mental critical point of view from which he regarded certain aspects of his professional landscape.

Luciano's perception of his reflective process as self-criticism did not extend throughout our conversations. In fact, he had initially

attributed to me an evaluative role, expecting me to provide him with new insights and assuring me in advance that he would agree with my conclusions. It was only in our last meeting that he reframed this view and asserted his own accountability for the interpretation of his professional practices. In fact, some of my comments caved into question certain routines of his company such as the one regarding filing procedures. However, the criticism – or self-criticism – emerged from his own reflections upon these routines and from the conclusions he came to about their relevance and efficiency. In reviewing his practice from a critical perspective, he also confronted his notion of time and concluded that he had not been managing it effectively. This realization constituted a reflective turn which, taken as a result of his self-criticism, led to new insights about the way he was performing his job activities. Luciano's reflections, however, also involved some linguistic issues, particularly, the theme of pronominal variation. In this regard, the recurrent use of *we* (when the first-person singular pronoun would be acceptable and sometimes more appropriate), in spite of representing a feature of his company's electronic correspondence, conformed to a characteristic that he found evident in his own speech. His marked personal and professional curiosity about the use of this pronoun, which caused him to start monitoring his e-mail messages more carefully, led me to believe that this linguistic reflective turn had impacted on him more strikingly than the issue of time control and manipulation.

Juciane's image of stepping outside her own world and contemplating her routines and e-mail messages as if from a distance drew attention to the strategy through which she was able to envision the features of her practice and the specifics of her professional landscape. I noted that the reflective process she undertook, rather than being confined to the confrontation of a professional with the tacit routines performed at work, included a passionate self-encounter through which she perceived the extent to which her personal voice was in her electronic texts. By outlining her role as a message generator, Juciane realized her identity as a writer (Ivanïc,1994) and made it explicit that the reflective turn she took, in addition to its linguistic and professional aspects, also involved a deeper understanding of her own subjectivity.

Basílio symbolized the detailed analysis in which he got involved by envisioning his reflective process as an old photograph that he could examine carefully and in so doing distinguish the aspects that had changed over time. This metaphor led me to recall his comments and the nature of the themes addressed to conclude that the location where our conversations took place constituted an important research variable. The fact of being at home, free from the typical constraints and interruptions of an office environment certainly encouraged Basílio to dig deeper into his memories and to provide me with several fascinating vignettes of his experiences. Perhaps location has also influenced the image conveyed by his metaphor since recalling memories through pictures seems to be an activity that we usually undertake at home. Sitting comfortably in his living room and observing an old photograph of his corporation led Basílio to reflect on its policies, routines, and computerized processes. He also went back to the origins of his company, reviewing the development of his own professional practices and the policy changes in which he played a role. Perceiving himself within a wider process of transformation which included the introduction of e-mail and the ensuing changes in the nature and performance of his activities, undoubtedly represented Basílio's reflective turn.

In contrast to the other participants, Paulo César's perception of his reflective process was not expressed by a convenient metaphor or keyword. It seemed that, for him, getting in touch with his tacit routines and thinking of e-mail messages from an unfamiliar point of view resulted in outcomes that could not be condensed in a few words. I too found it difficult to coin an expression that could adequately convey the movement of surprise-reflection-realization that he displayed many ti-mes throughout our meetings. This reaction was particularly evident when, for instance, he contrasted the e-mail messages composed by professionals of various nationalities and outlined an interesting cross-cultural analogy based on the peculiarities of their writing styles. He displayed a similar reaction when, in discussing issues of pronominal variation, he realized the various connotations associated with the use of the first-person plural pronoun. His reflections upon cross-cultural communication and upon pronominal variation resulted in a much clearer perception of writers and writing styles and, consequently, he developed

an increased awareness of how he composed messages in English and of what his troublesome areas in the realm of foreign language proficiency were (i.e., sentence length and punctuation). This discovery resulted from the reflective turns he took by thinking of his correspondence and his work in general from a more contemplative viewpoint. Nevertheless, Paulo César's genuine surprise when confronted with certain themes and his search for meaning made me feel like an eye-opener who challenged his understanding of e-mail messages from a linguistic perspective, mediated his reflection upon them, and led him to conceive of them differently. On the other hand, if I opened his eyes in the first place, he kept them open in a process of continuing self-realization and improvement. Perhaps this image of *keeping eyes open* could express Paulo César's reflective process for, in my view, it captures not only his reaction to what went beyond his normal understanding, but also his determination to deal with his discoveries and to be more attentive to their impact on his performance in English.

The accounts presented so far represent the most significant reflective turns taken by the participants through the reflective process we shared together. They show that using e-mail messages written in English as input for reflection did not lead participants to linguistic insights exclusively. As perceived by the outcomes outlined here, they motivated professionals to recall past events and experiences, to rethink the frames of their practice, to establish novel associations with various aspects of their routines, to visualize alternative possibilities, and to interact with their professional landscapes in an innovative way. Hence, the perceptions achieved through reflection enabled the participants to understand their existing practice or to make new meanings and to reformulate their instrumental, linguistic and professional procedures.

6.   Online workshops on writing: a three-dimensional approach to the development of writing skills

My conversations with the five participants in the research focused on in this article was an enriching experience for me not only because it allowed me to envision the peculiarities of e-mail messages

conveyed in English, to be in touch with the perceptions and interpretations professionals made of their tacit work-related routines, and to recognize some features of their professional landscapes. As illustrated by the exhaustive presentation intentionally undertaken in the previous sections, talking with those professionals was also significant because our dialogues opened up new research horizons and led me to foresee some possible routes to be explored in further investigations. The experiences I lived within the business territory, in addition to promoting a deeper understanding of CMC practices at work, made me reflect upon certain features of the Brazilian ESP context and wonder about the possibility of applying the discoveries I had made to courses aiming at developing business people's writing skills.

Taking the Brazilian context into account, the learning and teaching of English for business purposes is characterized, on the one hand, by professionals who wish to achieve higher levels of foreign language specialization and, on the other hand, by teachers of English who have been "*unexpectedly*" (Strevens,1988:8) required to teach business students whose needs and expectations they are not familiar with and, consequently, they do not know in depth. Under such circumstances, language teachers have not only to cope with their lack of background knowledge about professional environments in general, but also to deal with students who have specific needs of their own. As indicated by the five participants in the research I have undertaken, their engagement in practical activities that required them to interact in English on a daily basis represented for them the most effective source of foreign language learning, particularly with regard to the acquisition of new expressions and patterns of language use. In addition, all of them were quite emphatic in claiming that, in spite of any linguistic difficulty they might have, they were able to establish and maintain an efficient communication process with international co-workers, as shown by the positive results of the negotiations they jointly developed. The implications of these two factors – the impact of practice on learning, and the consideration of the outcomes received as a way of assessing foreign language performance – led me to conceive of the teaching of English for business purposes from a different perspective and to explore an idea that took these important insights into account.

In rethinking ESP programs for business people in the light of my investigation, I realized that an association between *lived experience* (the background knowledge acquired by negotiating meaning in various situations), *reflection* (the recollection of past events and the continual search for meaning), and *practice* (tacit performance) might result in an innovative, three-dimensional approach to the teaching and learning of writing skills. This new approach, by leading practitioners to review examples of their own correspondence and to think about them from a fresh point of view, might provide them with opportunities to reflect on and to re-interpret the tacit frames of the written tasks they routinely perform in English at work. By focusing lesson content on the search for the communicative objectives that characterize recurrent situations, professionals might come up with alternative ways of overcoming their difficulties and expressing themselves in English more effectively. In addition, by recalling the circumstances that surrounded the production and reception of particular texts, these professionals might be brought to relive and establish connections between their past and more recent experiences involving the use of the target language. In other words, discussing samples of the texts produced in their own work-related activities might enable these practitioners to interact not only with English in a different way, but also with their own experiential continuum.

The approach I present could be realized through *workshops on writing* in which professionals and teachers of English would research on the features that characterize the correspondence typically conveyed through the electronic medium and on the aspects that portray each professional's profile as a writer and as a foreign language user. By attempting at reproducing the contemplative atmosphere created in the research I have meticulously described previously, and by using e-mail messages both as object of inquiry and as input for reflection, business people would get involved in an inquisitive, interpretive process that would place them in touch with the boundaries of their professional landscapes and with alternative ways of dealing with electronic texts in English.

Rather than following a pre-established syllabus and making use of a series of prescriptive exercises directed towards specific issues

regarding content and/or form, the workshops on writing I conceive of would be focused on shared exploratory activities as a result of which each professional and his/her teacher would become partners in the investigation of how rhetorical goals might be better reached through written texts in English. The teacher-student interaction and their joint reflections upon the messages selected by each professional and brought to discussion as typical samples of the electronic correspondence conveyed within his/her company would, therefore, guide the evolvement of these workshops which would be based neither on a textbook nor on any ready-made pedagogical material. According to my proposal, professionals and teachers would become the designers of the course they would be developing together and whose sequence would be decided in partnership. In this regard, there are neither lists of contents nor recipes to be shared; the structure and development of these workshops on writing would be tailor-made and thoroughly based on each professional's needs and expectations.

The workshops I suggest would be based on the professionals' tacit knowledge about their work-related practices, on their language awareness, on reflections upon experiences lived through the foreign language, and on their own interpretation of this whole set of influences. Considering the nature of the target language skill (writing), and the professionals' customary difficulty in having time available to constantly attend language classes, the workshops might be developed through the electronic medium. This channel of communication would enable practitioners to participate in discussions at a time convenient to them, and would also provide them with the text of the whole reflective process which could be accessed at any time and for various purposes. On the other hand, I believe that taking advantage of the medium regularly employed to perform work-related tasks and making use of it for teaching-learning purposes would also lead professionals to establish a significant association between *tool* and *language* and, consequently, make it much easier for them to perceive job activities as learning situations.

As stated above, this approach would involve professionals in discussing samples of their own routine correspondence and constitute an indirect way of addressing written genres in a teaching-learning

situation. I do not suggest any explicit definition of genres, but the manipulation of the intuitive knowledge professionals already have about them, i.e., about the social actions they represent and about the communicative purposes they convey, as well as about the patterns of language use required in each type of work-related interaction. Therefore, the three-dimensional approach I suggest takes the students' "*matrix of practical experience*" (Phelps, 1988:213) as its starting point; conceives of genres within their genuine context (cf. Freedman,1994:194), and entails "*familiarity with the context rather than with the text-type*" (Greenwood,1994:238).

In a broader curricular perspective (van Lier,1996), the approach I present here evokes *awareness* (in the sense that new learning would be related to existing knowledge), focuses on *authenticity* (since learning would be based on the interpretation of the written texts generated in work-related situations), and aims at *autonomy* and *achievement* by attempting to provide the learners with the opportunity to reflect upon the frames of their own practice and upon possible ways of assessing and improving their own performance. My three-dimensional approach arises, therefore, from the consideration that professionals not only have a *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi,1966/67) about the routines they are involved in at work, but they also have a tacit conception of genres and genre manipulation which is built up through their involvement in everyday communication. My aim as a teacher would be to help business people engage in online workshops on writing to make this knowledge come to the surface and to turn it into a conscious perception that could enable them to see how they might develop appropriate rhetorical and linguistic responses to their customary work-related situations performed in English.

The possibility of articulating *lived experience*, *reflection* and *practice*, and of envisioning a unique ESP three-dimensional approach directed towards the development of writing skills through online interactions constitutes one of the most relevant outcomes of the research described in this article for it engenders some significant implications for the teaching and learning of English for business purposes. On the one hand, knowing what is tacit for business professionals may enable teachers of English to better fulfill their needs, as well as potentially

leading them to reach a higher level of foreign language performance. On the other hand, by guiding those professionals to reflect upon their routines at work and, particularly, upon the way they tacitly deal with the reception and production of texts in English, teachers of English can mediate the metaphorical encounter of business people with the dimensions of their professional knowledge landscapes and provide them with an opportunity to interpret – and perhaps reframe – aspects of their practice, thus allowing them to go far beyond possible linguistic boundaries. From this perspective, by sharing recollections and interpretations, and then bridging the tacit to the unknown, both teachers of English and business professionals may find out a singular way of understanding workplaces as potential instructional sites, and of facing work-related activities as learning opportunities which may be transformed into educational experiences.

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