

CHAPTER 17

GENRE AS A PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCE AT UNIVERSITY

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In this chapter I want to consider genre as a dynamic and transformative resource in the learning and teaching portfolio. I argue that conventional approaches to genre tend to be both limited and limiting with their emphasis on what genres look like and what they are for and argue instead that it is more helpful to explore what genres actually do, how they shape our thinking and the knowledge we produce. Using examples taken from a larger study (Fiona English, 2011), the discussion shows how such an approach can enable students to develop not only a meaningful genre awareness but also a deeper understanding of their disciplinary knowledge.

GENRE AND ACADEMIC LITERACIES

Genre has been an important category in writing pedagogy for many years but has taken different forms depending on different theoretical frames of reference. In the United States it has been firmly based within the long standing rhetoric and composition tradition whereas in the United Kingdom, for example, it has been more linguistically oriented following Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (e.g., 1989) whereby genres are seen as social processes that enable us to shape texts in particular ways to achieve particular goals (e.g., Jim Martin, 1993). This approach with its strong focus on the features, or elements, (grammatical structures, lexical configurations and organizational strategies) that typify a given genre has been very influential in the teaching of writing at school (e.g., Tom Gorman et al., 1990) and at university (e.g., Ken Hyland, 2007).

However, with the increasing drive for quick “solutions” to the “problem” of student writing in the climate of a “skills” over knowledge (Ron Barnett, 2009), emphasis has been placed on a “how to” approach and much genre-based writing pedagogy has come to concentrate on producing *genres* rather than on producing *knowledge*. A genre becomes simplified into little more than a template (a report, an essay etc.) and so long as the “elements” are in place, an appropriate a successful text, it is supposed, will emerge. As Gunther Kress (1994) warns, “Effective teaching of genres can make the individual into an efficiently intuitive, and unreflecting,

user of the genre The genre will construct the world for its proficient user. Is that what we want?" (p. 126).

This divorce between content and form ignores the reality of the writing experience and the many different kinds of *work* involved and writing comes to be viewed as technique, a means of displaying knowledge. It is here that an academic literacies perspective can intervene by offering a critique to such thinking, foregrounding writing as knowledge *making* instead of transmission (e.g., Theresa Lillis, 2003) and in so doing, offer a thicker description of what it means to write at university or school both in the context of research and pedagogy (e.g. Mary Lea, 2004).

DOING ACADEMIC LITERACIES

The work I discuss here presents an example of how academic literacies can work in both pedagogy, in underpinning classroom activity, and theory, in encouraging new thinking about taken-for-granted literacy practices such as genre. It also confirms that academic literacies, far from being a methodology, as it is sometimes taken to be, is more an epistemology, a way of thinking about literacy as negotiated and contested practices (Lea & Brian Street, 1998) within the specific and complex communicative landscape (English, 2011) of the educational institution.

The example I use emerged from a credit-bearing first year module option that I developed whilst working as an academic literacies practitioner at a specialist university in London. The module was institutionally understood as "study skills" but as I had been given free rein over the content, I was able to develop a programme around practices rather than skills, oriented towards learning at the level of analysis and critique so as to encourage students to reflect their own textual interactions. Genre was obviously a key topic, but rather than adopting the kind of modelling approach that typifies study skills courses, we problematized such fixed-form concepts and explored instead how genres developed out of specific practices and why. Following on from this, the final assignment involved students reworking an essay that they had already submitted for their major studies (e.g., politics, social anthropology, linguistics, economics) using any genre they liked, a process I now call "regenring." I asked them to also submit the original essay alongside the new version as a point of reference for me.

The students chose to rework their essays using a range of different genres including journalistic (a tabloidesque report on a time travellers conference on political systems), pedagogic (an "information" booklet for 11 year-olds on the use of loan words), and, most popularly, dramatic (e.g., a simulated radio debate and phone-in with Friedman and Keynes; a play in eight scenes enacting an ethnographic study of the "built environment"). What the students produced far

exceeded any expectations I had, not just in terms of the quality of the writing and the evidence of their genre awareness, but, more importantly, on the impact that this work had had on their disciplinary understanding and engagement. They were more “alive” than the essays and the students seemed to have enjoyed writing them, something that was commented on in interview:

It wasn't so much having to reproduce facts and saying the right thing to get the marks, it was more of an exercise in doing it the way you wanted to. (Peter)

Whatever the genre used, it quickly became clear that there had been a profound shift, not only in terms of what I might once have thought of as generic “shape” but in the materiality of the work itself. Regenring involved far more than simply relocating material from one “frame” into another. It had had a profound impact on the students’ knowledge and understanding as well as on their own sense of involvement. As Dan, one of the group pointed out, commenting on his play:

And I felt that by using the characters ... I found myself free or freer to express my opinions or my ideas of my feelings toward the subject in a way that the purely conventional way of writing didn't or wouldn't allow me. (Dan)

CASE STUDY

For the purposes of showing the effects of regenring, I have chosen to discuss “Sonia’s” work. She was taking a degree in African Studies and had completed the first term of the course but was already disaffected with her studies. She commented on this when talking about her reasons for choosing the regenring assignment.

Since I've started university I've felt myself struggling with the academic work and yearning to do something creative. This assignment seemed like a good opportunity. (Sonia)

The following extracts come from different parts of an essay written in response to the following instruction, *Give an account of the origin and present day function of one African lingua franca*, and reflect the tone of the whole essay.

Extract One

[-1-] The word “Swahili” is Arabic in origin and means coast. Swahili is spoken on the East coast of Africa by many as a first language and has spread into the interior as far as the Congo as a lingua franca. Though Swahili uses words adopted from Arabic, English and Portuguese, it has the definite structure of a Bantu language and is written in the Latin script.

- [-2-] Swahili is presumed to have started its life in the region of the Tana River estuary and to have spread further when Arabs and Persians settled in the area due to trading, thus spreading the language along their trading roots. In 975 Ali Ben Sultan al Hassan Ben Ali bought the island of Kilwa in exchange for a few bales of textiles and it became an important trading centre encouraging the use of Swahili along the coast south of the Zambezi River.
- [-3-] There are a very large number of Swahili dialects that have derived from specific social situations, some of which are dying out because of a change in social circumstances. Due to the function of some of these dialects, such as the mode of common communication in the army and work force the dialect has undergone considerable simplification and lost much of its structure until it can only be called a pidgin.

The first thing that strikes us about these extracts is that Sonia has adopted a literal approach to the task. The extracts typify the whole essay in their encyclopaedic exposition of the topic and the assertiveness with which the information is presented seems at odds with the “struggle” that Sonia refers to above. There is a textbook type quality about the discourse which, as Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar (1986) point out in their discussion of “statement” types (pp. 75-88), tends to present information as uncontroversial fact, using unhedged assertions in contrast to “authentic” professional disciplinary debates and arguments. In Sonia’s essay there is no commentary on the information presented, nor is any indication given of its sources apart from the list of four references at the end. In fact, although it is obvious that Sonia has been able to identify relevant information and use certain linguistic terms of reference it is not clear whether she has understood the relevant body of knowledge or whether she has simply located it.

In contrast to the essay, the regenred work offers a very different take on the topic. Her alternative title, *Culturally Confused*, indicates a different kind of understanding of the topic compared to the original essay. It problematizes the idea of a “lingua franca” by locating it in the context of culture and identity. The new version is produced as a dramatised scenario of a father telling a bedtime “story” to his two children aged eight or nine and in the process becomes grounded in a “real world” context. Extract Two is a good illustration of this.

The demands of the genre, characterisation and setting and the to-ing and fro-ing of dialogue between the children and the parent, force Sonia to shape the information differently. The “facts” of the essay are now represented as dialogue which means they are discussed rather than presented, argued over rather than accepted. Despite the factual exaggeration regarding the number of languages spoken in Africa, this version introduces new dimensions to the work, not least of which is a “critical perspective,” that most elusive, but desired, aspect of student academic performance. Ultimately, in the new version, Sonia has laid claim to the disciplinary material and instead of merely displaying a series of “facts,” as in her essay, she provides a *view* on the topic.

A further aspect of Sonia’s regenred work is the provision of detailed supplemen-

tary notes. These include contextual notes, which explain why she designed the new version as she did, and stage management notes, which explain the physical and interpersonal contexts of the play. In this way Sonia uses both the physical environment, as discussed in Carey Jewitt (2005), and the interpersonal histories of the participants as semiotic resources. The contextual notes demonstrate the strength of agency that Sonia has in relation to the new work and the confidence with which she can creatively combine “*imagination as well as the intellect*,” something she feels unable to do in conventional academic work. Extract Three is an example of this.

Extract Two

Parent:

At this point seated in the armchair addressing the children.

“Can you remember what our bedtime story was about yesterday?”

Child 1:

“Yessssssssss! It was about ...

[six more exchanges]

Parent:

“OK, anyway, today I thought I could tell you the story about how Swahili came to be such an important language in East Africa. People always talk about the importance of English as a world language but they rarely consider that there exist many other important non-European languages all over the world. People need to learn one of these important languages so they can talk to people who have different first languages to themselves.”

Child 1:

“Umm ... Why would they be speaking to people with a different language?”

Parent:

“That’s a good question you bright little spark! Now in the situation of Africa there are two hundred thousand different languages spoken. It’s not like in England. In Africa if you go from one village to the next you are likely to find a different language ...”

Extract Three

The set ... must be minimal and modern with two single beds and an armchair to the left. Perhaps the beds could have patchwork quilts on them and the wooden floor a Moroccan rug. A giant world map can be stuck to the walls behind the beds, with pins, scribbles and highlighter indicating places they have been, want to go, or various important and trivial facts the children have learnt. Some of the visible toys should serve an education function and not be associated with popular culture. It is clearly a conscientious household striving to create a corner of individuality and safety in a contrary, consumer world. ... Through the window should be a view of an intimidating grey city, harsh and cold against the bedroom warmth. The city serves as a contrast to the African world the parent talks about

Such information has no place in an essay because essays orient away from “everyday” experienced knowledge towards academic “articulated knowledge” (Diana

Laurillard, 1993) problematized in Lea (1998). However, these stage management notes do something that essays also do; that is they provide authorial guidance. Successful essays do this by choosing specific textual materials such as discourse links or expressions of modality that indicate how the reader is supposed to understand the writer's intentions, as has been widely discussed (Maggi Charles, 2006, English, 1999, Susan Hunston & Geoff Thompson, 2000). Writers of plays use stage management instead and Sonia has made good use of this resource in asserting this authorial control.

There is a further dimension to Sonia's new version, that of reflection on being a student, something that is almost always invisible in conventional essays but which other students using dramatic genres also found themselves doing. In the present case, it is represented by the children themselves who both guide, through questioning, and subvert, through challenge and distraction, the father's "story." Their interventions are intended to shift the discussion away from what *he* wants to talk about to what *they* want to talk about. As his contributions become longer and longer there is a gradual shift from initial enthusiasm on the part of the children towards a growing boredom which echoes, it is tempting to say, Sonia's own experiences at the time.

Extract Four

Parent:

[after a lengthy phase of expounding on the topic of Swahili] "Sorry, I can see you're getting bored now—but I just want to tell you one more thing!"

[he proceeds to tell it ...]

Child 2:

"If you lived in Africa people would put sellotape over your mouth or everyone would always be asleep!"

The opportunity to give voice to such feelings would be considered out of place in a student essay, but here it is made possible by the construction of the plot and the characters who "perform" it. In fact, the humour of the child's remark in Extract Four reflects an attitude, not of despair but rather of exasperation, an attitude confirmed by Sonia's eventual re-engagement with academia.

THE ORIENTATION OF GENRES— A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

To understand what was going on with this work, I developed an analytic framework (see Figure 17.1) that could be sufficiently flexible yet theoretically robust enough to explain how genre choice affected both disciplinary content and student experience which were the two key aspects that the students reported

during interview. The concept of “orientation” allows for a focus on these elements by separating them out into two main categories (the social and the material) and then subdividing them into the more specific analytical categories: *contextual orientation*, associated with the circumstances and purposes surrounding the production, *discursive orientation*, associated with authorial identity and agency, *thematic orientation*, concerning choice of topics and organization and *semiotic orientation*, associated with choice of mode (e.g., writing, speaking, performance) and what I call textual resources (e.g., grammatical structures, vocabulary, gestures).

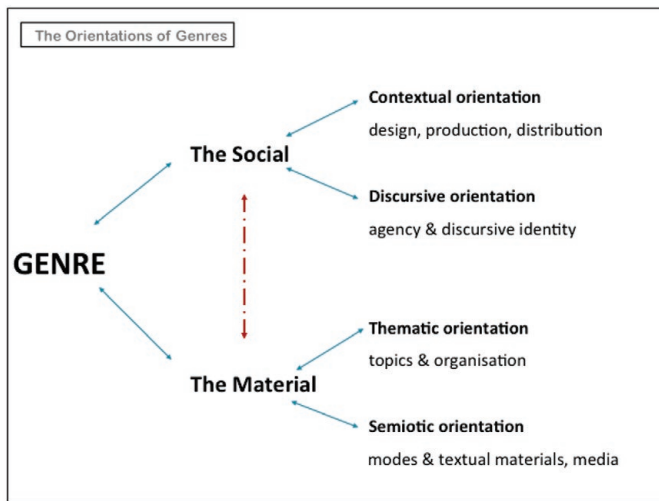


Figure 17.1: *The social orientations of genres.*

Working with Sonia’s two versions, Tables 17.1 and 17.2 demonstrate how the framework can be used to reveal the effects of the different genres. It is possible to consider each category separately by reading across and down each table but it is also possible to see how the two tables interact by considering how the material resources that are used (thematic and semiotic) reflect and promote particular social effects (contextual and discursive). Because of the constraints of space, I can only offer the tables as exemplification. A full explanation can be found in English (2011).

Table 17.1 focuses on the context in which Sonia produced her work and how that context positioned her. Setting out the differences using the categories in this way demonstrates more clearly the affordances of the different genres in relation to the orientations established above.

Table 17.2 summarizes key differences in the material orientation of the genres. It considers how each version is organized, the themes they include and the modes and textual materials they use in their production.

Taking both tables together it is possible to see how the social is reflected in and promoted by the material (thematic and semiotic), and the material in turn, reflects and promotes the social (contextual and discursive). Using the analytical tool of orientation highlights, the ways in which genre choice affords different ways of knowing, different ways representing and different ways of experiencing.

CONCLUSION

In this discussion I have argued for a new direction in genre pedagogy using the

Table 17.1—Social orientations of genres

THE SOCIAL		
	Essay	Interactive Bedtime “Story”
Contextual Orientation		
Design	Responding to client’s design	Designing for client
Production	Essayist (student essay)	Dramatic, didactic “conversation”
Distribution	For institutional assessment Normative practice, reproduction of ... Evaluation against normative implicit disciplinary (and institutionalised) criteria and/ or values	For institutional assessment Alternative practice, experiment, reconfiguration of ... Interpretive effect—for assessment/ evaluation against non-normative disciplinary criteria and/or values
Discursive Orientation		
Purpose	Display knowledge of client’s design Display learning	Experiment with learning/ writing Tell (teach) about Inform Entertain
Process	Acquire Reflect Reproduce Replicate	Reflect (on disciplinary materials) Reflect (on experience) Synthesize Recontextualize Create Inform Contend/Evaluate
Identity	Novice as though expert	Expert as if parent (Unwilling) pupils (as if) young children
Role	Performer	Informer (parent) Dissenter (children)
Agency	Mediated Disguised/ unidentifiable Intertextual	Unmediated Visible Interpersonal

insights provided by academic literacies. Rather than seeing genre as a pedagogical goal, I have shown how it can be used as a pedagogical resource. Of particular relevance to the present book is the clear evidence from the example used here

Table 17.2—Material orientations of genres

THE MATERIAL		
	Essay	Interactive Bedtime “Story”
Thematic Orientation		
Organization	Essay management (introduction, “body,” conclusion i.e., sequence of information/ideas) Descriptions, examples	Narrative & stage management (sequence of events) Story telling Interactions between characters, dialogues
Topics & specific characteristics	Disciplinary topics Linguistic terms of reference Swahili as a lingua franca Examples of history and uses presented as list	Disciplinary topics “Everyday” terms of reference Swahili as a lingua franca presented as political act, linked to discussion on linguistic terminology Didactic parent and argumentative, assertive children.
Semiotic Orientation		
Modes	Writing (writtenness)	Written speech/scripted speech (spokenness) Characters, props, stage management
Textual Materials	Impersonal forms (e.g., “it” fronted, nominalizations, passive constructions) Clause complexity/ density of expression Disciplinary terminology—unexplained Formal (writing-like) expression (e.g., full forms, subordination) Topically organized with no explicit threading Absence of interpersonal resources (i.e., no cohesive directives, lack of attitudinal markers, no links between topics) Explicitness as asserted fact—encyclopaedic information (e.g., no hedges)	Personal forms—subject fronted, personal pronouns + impersonal forms where “father” is “recounting” the essayist information Clause intricacy + clause complexity during “recount” sections Disciplinary terminology explained + colloquial terms Colloquial (speech) expression Topically organized but strongly mediated by dialogic interactions (e.g., responses to questions, challenges, recapitulations) Frequent use of interpersonal resources, interruptions, agreements/disagreements Explicitness—pedagogized information—didactic, directives (e.g., People need to learn ...), approbation (e.g., That’s a good question) hedges (e.g., Perhaps it’s to do with ...)

of how this approach to genre enables students to engage at the epistemological level that academic literacies argues for, as has been well documented in Lea and Street (1998), Carys Jones et al. (1999) and more recently in Lillis and Mary Scott (2007). The analytical framework, which draws on social semiotics (e.g., Kress, 2010), serves to reveal the transformative nature of the regenring activity offering insights not only into the nature of academic knowledge and the close association between the genres used and the knowledge produced, akin to Basil Bernstein's (2000) vertical and horizontal discourses, but also into the experiences of students in their attempts to interact with the disciplines they have chosen. Working with students in this way also encourages the critique that academic literacies thinking promotes and provides the opportunity for students to position themselves as producers of knowledge rather than as merely receivers.

The discussion also raises questions about the genres that typify university education and the ways that they constrain how disciplines can be understood. I am not arguing for the abandonment of essays, nor am I suggesting that they are a poor way of helping students reflect on their disciplinary material. What I am suggesting is that we incorporate a wider range of genres into the learning and teaching repertoire, even including tasks such as the regenring activity described here. In this way it may be possible to encourage "*new ways of looking at old questions*," as one of my lecturer informants put it when asked what they hoped to see in their students' assignments. However, this will only be achieved if we develop new ways of asking those questions and offering students new ways to explore them.

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