

## 6 Rhetorical Genre Studies

In this chapter, we will examine how the understanding of genres as social actions (as typified ways of acting within recurrent situations, and as cultural artifacts that can tell us things about how a particular culture configures situations and ways of acting) has developed within Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) since Carolyn Miller's groundbreaking article "Genre as Social Action," discussed in Chapter 5. Along the way, we will examine how key RGS concepts such as uptake, genre systems and genre sets, genre chronotope, meta-genres, and activity systems have enriched understandings of genres as complex social actions and cultural objects. And we will consider the implications and challenges for genre research and teaching that arise from such understandings, which Parts 2 and 3 of the book will take up in more detail.

### GENRES AS FORMS OF SITUATED COGNITION

In "Rethinking Genre from a Sociocognitive Perspective," Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin examine the socio-cognitive work that genres perform within academic disciplinary contexts. Building on the idea that knowledge formation, genre formation, and socio-historical formation are interconnected (see Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge; Constructing Experience*), Berkenkotter and Huckin take as their starting point the notion that genres dynamically embody a community's ways of knowing, being, and acting. "Our thesis," they write, "is that genres are inherently dynamic rhetorical structures that can be manipulated according to the conditions of use and that genre knowledge is therefore best conceptualized as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities. For writers to make things happen, that is, to publish, to exert an influence on the field, to be cited, and so forth, they must know how to strategically use their understanding of genre" (477).

Several important genre claims emerge for RGS from this thesis. First is the notion that “genres are dynamic rhetorical forms that develop from responses to recurrent situations and serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning” (479). Within disciplinary contexts, for instance, genres normalize activities and practices, enabling community members to participate in these activities and practices in fairly predictable, familiar ways in order to get things done. At the same time, though, genres are *dynamic* because as their conditions of use change—for example because of changes in material conditions, changes in community membership, changes in technology, changes in disciplinary purposes, values, and what Charles Bazerman describes as systems of accountability (*Shaping* 61)—genres must change along with them or risk becoming obsolete. (For example, in his study of the evolution of the experimental article from 1665 to 1800, Bazerman describes how the genre changed [in terms of its structure and organization, presentation of results, stance, methods, etc.] in coordinated emergence with changes in where and how experiments were conducted, where and how they were made public, and how nature was viewed (*Shaping* 59-79). Furthermore, as Berkenkotter and Huckin note, variation is an inherent part of recurrence, and so genres must be able to accommodate that variation. Beyond being responsive to the dynamics of change and the variation within recurrence, genres also need to be responsive to their users’ individually formed inclinations and dispositions (what Pierre Bourdieu calls “habitus”)—balancing individuals’ “own uniquely formed knowledge of the world” with “socially induced perceptions of commonality” (481). For genres to function effectively over time, Berkenkotter and Huckin surmise, they “must accommodate both stability and change” (481). Catherine Schryer has captured this dynamic in her definition of genres as “stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action” (“The Lab vs. the Clinic” 108).

Another of Berkenkotter and Huckin’s contributions to the development of genre as social action is that genres are forms of situated cognition, a view that Carolyn Miller had suggested when she theorized exigence as a form of genre knowledge and that Charles Bazerman suggested when he connected genre knowledge with mutually recognized moments (see Chapter 5). For genres to perform actions, they must be connected to cognition, since how we know and how we act are related to one another. Genre knowledge (knowledge of rhetori-

cal and formal conventions) is inextricably linked to what Berkenkotter and Huckin describe as procedural knowledge (knowledge of when and how to use certain disciplinary tools, how and when to inquire, how and when to frame questions, how to recognize and negotiate problems, and where, how, and when to produce knowledge within disciplinary contexts). Genre knowledge is also linked to background knowledge—both content knowledge and knowledge of shared assumptions, including knowledge of *kairos*, having to do with rhetorical timing and opportunity (487-91). As forms of situated cognition, thus, genres enable their users not only to communicate effectively, but also to participate in (and reproduce) a community's "norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology" (501).

Berkenkotter and Huckin, continuing to draw on the sociological tradition that first informed RGS, turn to the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens and his notion of "duality of structure" to describe how genres enable their users both to enact and reproduce community.<sup>17</sup> In *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Giddens examines how structures are constantly being reproduced as they are being enacted. Giddens rejects, on the one hand, the idea that structures always already exist ontologically, and that we are passively subject to them. On the other hand, he also rejects the idea that we are originating agents of our reality. Instead, Giddens describes a recursive phenomenon in which, through our social practices, we reproduce the very social structures that subsequently make our actions necessary, possible, recognizable, and meaningful, so that our practices reproduce the very structures that consequently call for these practices. As Berkenkotter and Huckin note, genres play an important role in this process of structuration.

For example, a classroom on a university campus is a physical space made meaningful by its location in a university building on campus. But the classroom can be used for different purposes, not just to hold courses; it can be used for a department meeting, a job talk, a colloquium, and so on. We turn the physical space of a classroom into a course such as a graduate seminar on rhetorical theory, a biology course, or a first-year composition course through various genres, initially through the course timetable, which places courses within different rooms on campus, but then later through genres such as the syllabus, which begin the process of transforming the physical space of a classroom into a socially bounded, ideological space marked by

course goals, policies, assignments, and course schedule. Many other genres work together to construct the classroom as a particular course and to coordinate its work. In terms of Giddens' structuration theory, the genres provide us with the tools and resources to perform certain actions and relations in a way that not only confirms, within variation, our sense of what it means to be in a course such as this (a graduate seminar, for example), but also, through their use, help us define and reproduce this course as a certain kind of recurrent structure.

This process of social enactment and reproduction is not nearly as smooth as the above characterization suggests, however. Within any socio-historically bounded structure or system of activity there exist competing demands and goals, contradictions, tensions, and power relations that shape which ideologies and actions are reproduced. Defining genres as "stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action" (108), Catherine Schryer draws on her research into veterinary school medical genres in "The Lab vs. the Clinic: Sites of Competing Genres" to reveal how genres reflect and maintain socio-historically entrenched hierarchies between researchers and clinicians, a hierarchy reflected in other academic disciplines as well. The way that veterinary students are trained, what they come to value, how they recognize problems and go about solving them, the degree of ambiguity they are willing to tolerate along the way, the roles they perceive themselves performing, and the contributions they see themselves making—all these are "deeply embedded within the profession's basic genres" (113), particularly the "experimental article genre" (IMRDS—Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Summary) and the "recording genre" (POVMR—Problem Oriented Veterinary Medical record). Schryer's analysis of these two genres reveals differences in how each coordinates and orients the activities of its users in terms of purpose, representation of time and activity, addressivity, and epistemological assumptions (119-21). These differences, Schryer argues, are associated with status and power within the discipline, and as such they position their users at different levels of hierarchy within veterinary medicine. For example, the IMRDS genre and its users have higher status largely because the genre's typified strategies more closely resemble and "instantiate the central ideology of science—the need to order and control the natural world" (121). Because the work it enables more closely reflects dominant scientific practices, the researchers who are socialized into and use the IMRDS hold higher status than the

clinicians who are socialized into and use the POVMR. The genres thus become forms of cultural capital, valued differently within the system of values and relations that comprises the veterinary academic community.

These competing genres and the ideologies they embody reflect ongoing, socio-historically saturated tensions and power relations within veterinary medicine. Even if there was a concerted interest among members of the community to alleviate these tensions, Schryer speculates, doing so will take a long time, not only because the genres “deeply enact their ideology” (122), but also because the genres do not function in isolation; they relate to other more and less powerful genres. At the same time, the genres are part of a complex socialization process that includes methods of training and labeling students, in ways that are connected to but also exceed the genres.

Such a multi-dimensional and complex understanding of genre—as a dynamic concept marked by stability and change; functioning as a form of situated cognition; tied to ideology, power, and social actions and relations; and recursively helping to enact and reproduce community—challenges RGS to consider how genre knowledge is acquired, and raises questions as to whether genre knowledge can be taught explicitly, in ways advocated within ESP and SFL genre approaches. Since their research led them to conclude that “genre knowledge is a form of situated cognition, inextricable from . . . procedural and social knowledge,” Berkenkotter and Huckin offer that these levels of knowledge can only be acquired over time, “requiring immersion into the culture, and a lengthy period of apprenticeship and enculturation” (487). Situating and then explicating textual features gets us closer to but not close enough to understanding genres as social actions, in ways valued in RGS.<sup>18</sup> Further complicating matters is the recognition, articulated by Freedman (“Anyone”), Devitt (“Intertextuality”), Bazerman (*Constructing*; “Systems”), and Orlikowski and Yates, that genres do not exist in isolation but rather in dynamic interaction with other genres. In order to understand genre as social action, thus, we need to look at the constellations of genres that coordinate complex social actions within and between systems of activity.

#### UPTAKE AND RELATIONS BETWEEN GENRES

In Chapter 2, we described Mikhail Bakhtin’s contributions to literary genre study, especially his understanding of the complex rela-

tions within and between genres. In one set of relationships, Bakhtin describes how complex “secondary” genres such as the novel absorb and transform more simple “primary genres” (genres that Bakhtin describes as being linked immediately to their contexts). A secondary genre re-contextualizes primary genres by placing them in relationship to other primary genres within its symbolic world (see Bazerman’s “The Writing of Social Organization” and *Shaping Written Knowledge* for how scientific articles re-contextualize situated interactions within their genred symbolic worlds). As such, “the primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones” (Bakhtin, “Problem” 62). At the same time, Bakhtin also describes a more horizontal set of relationships between genres, in which genres engage in dialogic interaction with one another as one genre becomes a response to another within a sphere of communication. For example, a call for papers leads to proposals, which lead to letters of acceptance or rejection, and so on. Such an intertextual view of genres has been central to RGS’s understanding of genres as complex social actions.

Bakhtin defines genres as “relatively stable types of . . . utterances” (60) within which words and sentences attain typical expressions, relations, meanings, and boundaries (87), and within which exist “typical conception[s] of the addressee” (95) and typical forms of addressivity (99). Genres help frame the boundaries and meanings of utterances, providing us with conceptual frames through which we encounter utterances, predict their length and structure, anticipate their end, and prepare responsive utterances (79). In short, genres enable us to create typified relationships between utterances as we organize and enact complex forms of social interaction. As typified utterances, genres are dialogically related to and acquire meaning in interaction with other genres.<sup>19</sup>

Anne Freedman, in two important essays, “Anyone for Tennis?” and “Uptake,” turns to the notion of “uptake” to describe the complex ways genres relate to and take up one another within systems of activity. Using a game of tennis as an analogy, Freedman describes how utterances play off of (or take up) each other in a way similar to how shots in a tennis match play off of each other. Freedman begins by distinguishing between a ball and a shot. A ball is a physical object that becomes meaningful when it is played—that is, when it becomes a shot. A shot, therefore, is a played ball, in much the same way that an utterance is a played sentence in Bakhtin’s formulation. Tennis players

do not exchange balls, Freadman explains; they exchange shots (“Anyone” 43). But for shots to be meaningful exchanges, they need to take place within a particular game. “Each shot is formally determined by the rules of the game, and materially determined by the skill of the players, and each return shot is determined by the shot to which it is a response” (44). Within the context of a game of tennis, shots become meaningful because they are played within certain rules and boundaries (if the shot lands inside the line it means something, whereas if it falls outside, it means something else) by players capable of exchanging them.

So shots become meaningful because they take place within a certain game. The game itself, according to Freadman, becomes meaningful because it takes place within a certain “ceremonial.” If the same exchange of shots happens on a tennis court at a neighborhood park or on a court in Wimbledon, England, the rules of the game remain the same, but because of the different ceremonials, the games themselves have different meanings and values. As Freadman puts it, ceremonials provide “the rules for playing” of games: “Ceremonies are games that situate other games: they are the rules for the setting of a game, for constituting participants as players in that game, for placing and timing it in relation with other places and times. They are the rules for playing of a game, but they are not the rules of the game” (“Anyone” 46-47). In the case of Wimbledon, for instance, it is the ritual and the system of signs that define it as a ceremonial: It is the strawberries and cream, the tea and scones, the royal family box, the tradition of center court, the player rankings, the dress code, the prize money, etc. It is the entire system of signs that goes into making the ceremonial what it is and that gives meaning and value to the games and shots that take place there.

Freadman uses this tennis analogy to describe how genres are both meaningful in and relate to one another within ceremonials. Genres are “games” that take place within “ceremonials.” And within ceremonials, genres constitute the rules for play for the exchange of texts, or “shots.” In short, ceremonials are the rules for playing, genres are the rules for play (for the exchange of texts), and texts are the actual exchanges—the playing of the game. We cannot really understand a particular exchange of texts without understanding the genres, and we cannot understand particular genres without understanding how they are related to one another within a ceremonial.

Ceremonials contain multiple genres. For example, Freedman describes the ceremonial of a trial, which consists of several related genres: the swearing in of the jury, the judge's instructions, the opening statement, calling of witnesses, cross-examination, jury deliberations, the reading of the verdict, etc. (59). "Each of these moments is a genre, though it may be occupied by several texts, and each of the texts will deploy a range of tactics. . . . To understand the rules of the genre is to know when and where it is appropriate to do and say certain things, and to know that to say and do them at inappropriate places and times is to run the risk of having them ruled out. To use these rules with skill is to apply questions of strategy to decisions of timing and the tactical plan of the rhetoric" (59). Within the rules of the ceremonial, the various genres play off of each other in coordinated, consequential ways. And within the rules of the genre game, every text is a situated performance in which its speaker or writer plays off of the typified strategies embodied in the genre, including the sense of timing and opportunity.<sup>20</sup>

The ability to know how to negotiate genres and how to apply and turn genre strategies (rules for play) into textual practices (actual performances) involves knowledge of what Freedman refers to as *uptake*. Within speech act theory, uptake traditionally refers to how an illocutionary act (saying, for example, "it is hot in here" with the intention of getting someone to cool the room) gets taken up as a perlocutionary effect (someone subsequently opening a window) under certain conditions. In her work, Freedman applies uptake to genre theory, arguing that genres are defined in part by the uptakes they condition and secure within ceremonials: for example, how a call for papers gets taken up as proposals, or, as in Freedman's more consequential example, how a court sentence during a trial gets taken up as an execution. For example, in a classroom setting, some genres function mainly within intra-classroom relations, such as when the assignment prompt creates the conditions for the student essay, while other genres function directly and indirectly in relation to genres outside of the classroom, such as the way that class rosters and grade sheets connect students in the classroom to a system of genres, including transcripts, at the registrar's office and, beyond that, to genres such as resumes and letters of recommendation that draw students into larger economic relations. Together, these inter- and intra-generic relations maintain the conditions within which individuals identify, situate, and interact with one



another in relations of power, and perform meaningful, consequential social actions—or, conversely, are excluded from them. Uptake helps us understand how systematic, normalized relations between genres coordinate complex forms of social action—how and why genres get taken up in certain ways and not others, and what gets done and not done as a result.

As Freadman is careful to note, uptake does not depend on causation but on *selection*. Uptake, she explains, “selects, defines, or represents its object. . . . This is the hidden dimension of the long, ramified, intertextual memory of uptake: the object is taken from a set of possibilities” (“Uptake” 48). Uptakes, Freadman tells us, have memories (40). What we choose to take up and how we do so is the result of *learned recognitions of significance* that over time and in particular contexts become habitual. Knowledge of uptake is knowledge of what to take up, how, and when, including how to execute uptakes strategically and when to resist expected uptakes. Knowledge of uptake, as Freadman puts it, is knowledge of “generic boundary” (43) or what Bawarshi has described as a genre’s “uptake profile” (“Genres as Forms of In[ter]vention” 81), which delimits the range of ways, from more to less prototypical, that a genre can be taken up within a particular context. As such, knowledge of uptake is knowledge of when and why to use a genre; how to select an appropriate genre in relation to another or others; where along the range of its uptake profile to take up a genre, and at what cost; how some genres explicitly cite other genres in their uptake while some do so only implicitly, and so on. Such genre uptake knowledge is often tacitly acquired, ideologically consequential, deeply remembered and affective, and quite durable, connected not only to memories of prior, habitual responses to a genre, but also memories of prior engagements with other, related genres. Genre uptake knowledge is also bound up in memories of prior experiences, relations with other users of the genre, and a sense of one’s authority within a ceremonial.

Since, according to Freadman, ceremonials, genres, and uptakes are connected, and since “knowing a genre is . . . knowing how to take it up” (“Anyone” 63) within a system of relations, we cannot fully understand genres as social actions without accounting for uptake. And this creates another challenge for RGS researchers to consider when thinking about the pedagogical implications of genre teaching: How does one teach a largely habitual, meta-cognitive process mostly acquired through socialization? Freadman explains, for example, that

when a genre is abstracted from its context of use and taught explicitly in the context of a classroom, or when a genre from one disciplinary or public context is simulated in another context, say, a classroom, the genre has been severed from its semiotic environment, and the pairing of the explicated or simulated genre “with its appropriate uptake has been broken” (“Anyone” 48). Like Berkenkotter and Huckin, Freedman recommends an apprenticeship-based genre approach along with teaching students how to recognize a genre’s context and its relationship to other genres within and between systems of activity.

### GENRE SETS AND GENRE SYSTEMS

Over the past fifteen years, RGS scholars have developed several useful concepts to describe the complex ways in which related genres enable their users to perform consequential social actions. In *Writing Genres*, Amy Devitt distinguishes between “context of genres” (“the set of all existing genres in a society or culture”) (54), “genre repertoires” (“the set of genres that a group owns, acting through which a group achieves all of its purposes, not just those connected to a particular activity”) (57; for an additional discussion of genre repertoires, see also Orlikowski and Yates), “genre systems” (the “set of genres interacting to achieve an overarching function within an activity system”) (56), and “genre sets” (the “more loosely defined sets of genres, associated through the activities and functions of a collective but defining only a limited range of actions”) (57). While the four categories describe different levels of genre relationships (Clay Spinuzzi has defined another category he calls “genre ecology” to describe the contingent, mediated, interconnected, and less sequenced relationships among genres within and between activity systems—see *Tracing Genres*), we will focus on genre systems and genre sets, since these are most associated with specific, bounded social actions. In fact, part of what defines a genre system or genre set as such are the actions that these genres, working in dynamic interaction with each other, enable individuals to perform over time, within different contexts of activity. By studying genre systems and genre sets, researchers can gain insight into social roles and relationships, power dynamics, the distribution of cognition and activities, and the social construction of space-time (what Bakhtin calls “chronotope”) within different contexts.

The notion of genre set was first introduced by Amy Devitt to describe the set of genres used by tax accountants to perform their work (“Intertextuality”). Expanding the notion of genre sets, Charles Bazerman introduced the idea of genre systems to describe the constellation of genre sets that coordinate and enact the work of multiple groups within larger systems of activity (“Systems”; see also Bazerman’s earlier discussion of genre systems in *Constructing Experience*, 31-38).<sup>21</sup> Using U.S. patent applications as his case study, Bazerman traces the system of interrelated genres that connect patent applications to patent grants, including the application, letters of correspondence, various forms, appeals, and potential court rulings, as well as the patent grant. The patent grant subsequently connects to other genre systems, such as funding corporations, and so on. “What we have, in essence,” Bazerman explains, “is a complex web of interrelated genres where each participant makes a recognizable act or move in some recognizable genre, which then may be followed by a certain range of appropriate generic responses by others” (“Systems” 96-97). As Bazerman’s study suggests, a genre system includes genres from multiple genre sets, over time, and can involve the interaction of users with different levels of expertise and authority, who may not all have equal knowledge of or access to all the genres within the system. Yet the relationship of the genres to one another, coordinated through a series of appropriately timed and expected uptakes, enables their users to enact complex social actions over time—in this case, enabling the approval or denial of a patent grant.

Genre sets are more bounded constellations of genres that enable particular groups of individuals to accomplish particular actions within a genre system. Anthony Paré, for example, has described the genre set used by hospital social workers, which includes referral forms, initial assessments, ongoing assessments (progress reports), and closing/transfer reports (“Writing as a Way into Social Work” 156). Likewise, Bazerman describes the various genre sets available within a classroom. A teacher’s genre set can include writing the syllabus, developing assignments, preparing lesson plans, sending announcements to the class, replying to student questions, providing feedback on student papers, and submitting grade sheets. Students’ genre set can include class notes, reading notes, e-mail queries to the instructor, essays, answering exam questions, and so on (“Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems” 318). Within a classroom, genre sets can also include groupings of genres that enable specific actions, such as the genre set

of peer review or teacher feedback in response to student writing. Together, these genre sets form an interactive genre system, which helps teacher and students organize and carry out the work of the course in a coordinated, sequenced way.

The teacher and students do not have equal access to all these genres, and they do not have equal authority to determine when these genres can be used, which is what helps establish power relationships. For example, the teacher may have access to grading rubrics that are invisible to students, yet these rubrics work behind the scenes (as what Janet Giltrow has described as meta-genres, which we will discuss shortly) to mediate between the genre of a student's paper and its uptake in the genre of the instructor's feedback on the student's paper. But because the work of the course is organized and carried out through its genre system, its genre sets are interdependent and must interact within appropriately timed uptakes in order to produce recognizable, consequential social activities within the classroom. As Paré explains in regard to hospital social workers, "the social work newcomer must learn how to participate in the social work community's genre set and learn how that set is influenced by and fits into the larger institution's genre system" ("Writing" 159).

The classroom genre system functions in relation to other genre systems. The system of genres that enables a student to register for a class (on-line registration, course descriptions, time schedule, forms for paying tuition, financial aid applications, etc.) is related to the classroom genre system that eventually enables a teacher to provide feedback on a student paper. Likewise, if the student lodges a complaint about his or her grade, then the student must participate in another related system of genres, that might include writing a grade complaint e-mail first to the teacher and eventually to the writing program director, submitting a formal letter of grade appeal that makes a case for a higher grade, meeting with the director, having the director potentially submit a change of grade form, etc. Genres do not exist in isolation, and neither do genre systems and genre sets.

As Bazerman's research on patents reveals, genre systems help maintain and enact social intentions:

[T]he genres, in-so-far as they identify a repertoire of actions that may be taken in a set of circumstances, identify the possible intentions one may have. Thus they embody the range of social intentions toward

which one may orient one's energies. . . . That is: the intention, the recognition of the intention, the achievement of that intention with the coparticipation of others, and the further actions of others respecting that achievement . . . all exist in the realm of social fact constructed by the maintenance of the patent system and the communicative forms (genres) by which it is enacted. ("Systems" 82)

Our experience with a genre system and its genre sets habituates what Freedman describes as our uptake memory, informing our expectations and intentions as we encounter, experience, and negotiate the seams between genres.

### GENRE AND DISTRIBUTED COGNITION

Part of how genre systems and their genre sets coordinate complex social actions within systems of activity is by supplying intentions, distributing cognition, and shaping our notions of timing and opportunity (what Greek rhetoricians called *kairos*). Genre systems do not just sequence activities; they also sequence how we relate to and assign roles to one another, how we define the limits of our agency, how we come to know and learn, and how we construct, value, and experience ourselves in social time and space—what Bakhtin refers to as “chronotope” (see *Dialogic Imagination* 84-258). Aviva Freedman and Graham Smart have applied theories of “distributed cognition” (Salomon; Cole and Engeström) to genre systems in order to describe how “within specific activities, thinking, knowing, and learning are distributed among co-participants, as well as mediated through the cultural artifacts in place” (“Navigating” 240). Genre systems and sets help to mediate and distribute cognition within systems of activity by allowing us to think “in conjunction or partnership with others” (Salomon xiii). In terms of hospital social workers, Paré explains: “By learning to use [their genre set]—that is, by learning the questions to ask during interviews, by learning the appropriate stance to take toward information and readers, by learning how to organize their observations of the world under the categories offered by the texts—[social work] students are joining in socially shared cognition” (“Writing” 154). If, as Berkenkotter and Huckin describe, genres are forms of situated cognition, then genre

systems and genre sets are the means by which cognition is distributed among participants across time and space.

Genre systems and genre sets organize and distribute cognition, in part, by shaping our sense of timing and opportunity—when, where, why, how, and by whom we expect actions to take place (Yates and Orlikowski, “Genre Systems” 106). Yates and Orlikowski, in their research on the function of *chronos* and *kairos* in communicative interaction, describe how genre systems choreograph a time and place for coordinated social interaction among participants and activities chronologically (by way of measurable, quantifiable, “objective” time) and kairotically (by way of constructing a sense of timeliness and opportunity in specific situations) (104, 108). Part of participating in a genre system is knowing strategically when, how, and where to use certain genres in relation to other genres. As Yates and Orlikowski conclude, “Understanding the role of *chronos* and *kairos* in the unfolding enactment of a genre system can help us understand conditions under which actors exercise discretion about whether and when to take certain communicative actions” (118-19). As such, knowledge of a genre’s rhetorical conventions must be accompanied by knowledge of its placement and timing within a system and set of genres.

Bawarshi, for example, has described how assignment prompts in a writing classroom choreograph both chronological and kairotic time for the production of student writing. Chronologically, the writing prompt assigns a specific time sequence for the production of the student essay, often delimiting what is due at what time and when. At the same time, the writing prompt also establishes a kairotic relationship by providing the student essay with a timeliness and an opportunity that authorizes it. Participating within this kairotic interplay between two genres, students must discern the opportunity granted by the prompt and then write an essay that defines its own opportunity in relation to the prompt. In so doing, students negotiate a complex kairotic relationship in which they are expected to take up the opportunity discerned in the writing prompt without acknowledging its presence explicitly in their essay (*Genre and the Invention of the Writer* 133-41). This uptake between the opportunity discerned in one genre and the opportunity defined or appropriated by students in another genre reveals how genre systems shape what Bazerman has called “*kairotic* coordination,” which leads to “the kinds of shared orientations to and shared participations within mutually recognized moments”

(*Constructing Experience* 110). By choreographing mutually recognizable moments for acting and interacting, genres systems enable the distribution of cognition across time and space.

Schryer has likewise described how genres are strategies “that we use to mutually negotiate or improvise our way through time and space” (“Genre and Power” 74). Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope, Schryer explains that “genres express space/time relations that reflect current social beliefs regarding the placement and actions of human individuals in space and time” (75). Specifically, she focuses on the power dynamics that emerge from the way genres position their users within space/time relations (76). Schryer’s research on veterinary school genres, described earlier, reveals how the genre sets used by clinicians and researchers function in hierarchical relationship to one another within the larger genre system, and position their users in relations of power within that system. Devitt’s research on tax accountants likewise illustrates the conflicts and differences in ideology embodied within and across different tax accounting genres (“Intertextuality” 84-85), while Paré’s research on hospital social workers demonstrates the competing values and uneven status of genres and their users within a hospital’s genre system. Working in a context in which medicine predominates, hospital social workers have a lower disciplinary status than doctors and psychiatrists, and their genres reflect that status. Not only do social work genres exist to serve the needs of the more prestigious members of the hospital, but they also must accommodate those needs in terms of adopting cognitive strategies that are more prized in medicine, such as objectivity and factuality (Paré, “Writing” 160). As Paré describes it, “Social work newcomers learn to collaborate in community knowledge-making activities, or genre sets, that are shaped by levels of power and status within the larger genre system” (160).

All of which is to say that cognition is not distributed evenly within genre systems, nor is it distributed arbitrarily. Instead, how we negotiate the various genres within a system of genres depends on what we described earlier as our uptake knowledge—our ideologically-informed, learned, and remembered knowledge of when, why, where, and how to take up a genre in relation to other genres within a system of activity. Carol Berkenkotter, for example, has demonstrated how psychotherapists and their clients engage in a series of uptakes that synchronizes their activities and interactions (“Genre Systems”). During the course of a psychotherapy session, therapists and clients par-

ticipate in a number of genres, including the “client’s narrative during the therapy session,” the “therapists’ notes” (which are taken during the session), and the “psychosocial assessment” (which the therapist writes after the session). The movement between these genres is guided by what Berkenkotter calls a process of “recontextualization,” in which the therapist re-contextualizes the patient’s narrative from one genre to the next.

Recontextualization—the taking up of information from one genre to another—is akin to translation, as “the therapist must translate into psychiatric nomenclature the information the client provided during the initial interview” (“Genre Systems” 335). But as Berkenkotter’s analysis makes clear, the therapist is not simply putting into a different language and genre (for example, in his or her therapist’s notes and then later in his or her psychosocial assessment report) what the client has reported in an earlier genre (what the client reports in his or her narrative during the therapy session). During the process of genre recontextualization, the client’s narrative is transformed and resituated into what Bazerman has called different “social facts” (“Speech Acts” 311), in each case becoming imbued with a different ideological use and exchange value, setting up different social relations, and performing different social actions within the genre system that leads eventually to a diagnosis. The process of moving from client narrative to therapist diagnosis, Berkenkotter explains, is guided by the psychotherapy genre system, which is connected to other genres systems, such as when insurance companies use the psychosocial assessment report to determine coverage and reimbursement.

Most striking from Berkenkotter’s analysis is the role played by the *DSM IV* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) during the process of recontextualization. Therapists rely on the *DSM IV* to help them define, categorize, and diagnose mental disorders; as such, it informs the therapist’s uptake knowledge by shaping how the therapist encounters and recognizes moments of significance in the client’s narrative and then how the therapist begins to recontextualize those moments into a diagnosis first within the genre of therapist notes and then within the “psychosocial assessment.”

#### META-GENRES

In mediating between the client’s narrative and the therapist’s notes, the *DSM IV* (Berkenkotter, “Genre Systems” 339) functions as what



Janet Giltrow has called a “meta-genre” that teaches and stabilizes uptakes. Giltrow defines meta-genres as “atmospheres surrounding genres” (“Meta-genre” 195). Like genres, meta-genres have “semiotic ties to their contexts of use” (190), but their function is to provide shared background knowledge and guidance in how to produce and negotiate genres within systems and sets of genres. Meta-genres can take the form of guidelines or manuals for how to produce and use genres—genres about genres (190)—but they can also take the form of shared discourse about genres. For example, Giltrow points to how academics have shared language to talk about academic writing, words such as “argument” (and its collocations, “logic” and “evidence”), “specifics,” and “detail” (193-94). A syllabus, thus, can perhaps be defined as a meta-genre, as can a writing program’s learning outcomes, which supply the shared vocabulary for assigning, producing, reflecting on, and assessing student writing. Some communities will have more defined, explicit meta-genres that guide their genre systems while other communities will have tacitly agreed upon meta-genres. In either case, meta-genres help teach and stabilize uptakes, and knowledge of meta-genres can signal insider and outsider status. As Giltrow observes,

meta-genres flourish at those boundaries, at the thresholds of communities of discourse, patrolling or controlling individuals’ participation in the collective, foreseeing or suspecting their involvements elsewhere, differentiating, initiating, restricting, inducing forms of activity, rationalizing and representing the relations of the genre to the community that uses it. This representation is not always direct; often it is oblique, a mediated symbolics of practice. (203)

As Giltrow also notes, meta-genres can be quite durable (199), sometimes working against attempts to change genres within a genre system, sometimes carried consciously or unconsciously by individuals beyond the contexts of their use and affecting how individuals engage with genres in different systems of activity. In any case, meta-genres form part of our genre and uptake knowledge, and hence play a role in distributing cognition and shaping how we navigate genre systems and their genre sets in order to enact meaningful, consequential actions.

In the next section, we will illustrate how the key concepts we have discussed in this chapter—genres as situated and distributed cogni-

tion, genre systems and sets, uptake, genre chronotope, and meta-genre—interact within Activity Systems.

### GENRE AND ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

As we have been suggesting so far, genre systems, genre sets, meta-genres, and the habitual uptakes that mediate interactions within and between them all take place and become meaningful within contexts. Scholars have described these contexts as ceremonials (Freadman), discourse communities (Swales), spheres of communication (Bakhtin), and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger), all of which reiterate the idea that genres situate and distribute cognition, frame social identities, organize spatial and temporal relations, and coordinate meaningful, consequential actions within contexts. As we saw in Giddens' theory of structuration, however, these contexts are not merely backdrops or frames within which genres and actions take place. Instead, contexts exist in a dynamic, inter-dependent, mutually-constructing relationship with the genre systems they situate so that through the use of genres and other mediational means, we enact context as we function within it. Synthesizing Yrjo Engeström's concept of activity system with Bazerman's concept of genre systems, David Russell turns to activity systems as a way to account for these dynamic, ecological interactions between genres and their contexts of use.

In their systems version of Vygotskian activity theory, Engeström, and Engeström and Cole propose a view of context defined by and emerging from mediated, interactive, multiply shared, often competing, and motivated activities. As Engeström explains, within an activity system, the subjects or agents, the objectives, and the mediational means function inseparably from one another ("Developmental Studies" 67). As such, context becomes "an ongoing, dynamic accomplishment of people acting together with shared tools, including—most powerfully—writing" (Russell, "Rethinking Genre" 508-09). At the same time, Engeström notes, an "activity system is not a homogeneous entity. To the contrary it is composed of a multitude of often disparate elements, voices and viewpoints" (68).

In "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis," and following Engeström and Cole and Engeström, David Russell defines an activity system as "any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated

human interaction” (510). As figure 6.1 illustrates, an activity system is comprised of “subjects,” “mediational means,” and “objects/motives,” which interact to produce certain outcomes. This interaction is supported by “rules/norms,” “community,” and “division of labor.” Subjects are the individuals, working individually or in groups, who carry out an activity; mediational means are the material and semiotic “tools in use” that enable subjects to carry out their work; and the object/motive is the focus of the action—that to which the subjects apply their mediational means in order to accomplish an outcome. As Russell explains, object/motives constitute both “the *object of study* of some disciplines (e.g., cells in cytology, literary works in literary criticism)” as well as “an overall direction of that activity, a (provisionally) shared purpose or motive (e.g. analyzing cells, analyzing literary works)” (511). Supporting and informing the interaction between subjects, motives, and objects/motives are rules/norms, community, and division of labor. As Engeström describes them, rules/norms “refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system”; community “comprises multiple individuals and/or sub-groups who share the same general object and who construct themselves as distinct from other communities”; and “division of labor refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status” (*Learning by Expanding* 78).

For example, within the activity system of a first-year writing classroom, the subjects would include teacher and students; the object/motive would be the production and improvement of student writing in relation to defined course outcomes, which students are required to meet in order to complete the course; and the mediational means include the physical space of the classroom (desks and chairs, dry-erase boards, technological equipment, etc.) as well as, importantly, the various genre sets described earlier that define the genre system of the classroom—from meta-genres such as the writing program’s outcomes statement and the course syllabus, to the related genres that distribute cognition and coordinate the work of teacher and students, such as assignment prompts, the various genres of student writing, peer review sheets, teacher end comments, student-teacher conferences, class discussions, student course evaluations, grade sheets, and so on. Genre systems mediate the work of activity systems by maintaining stabilized for now, normalized ways of acting and interacting that subjects use

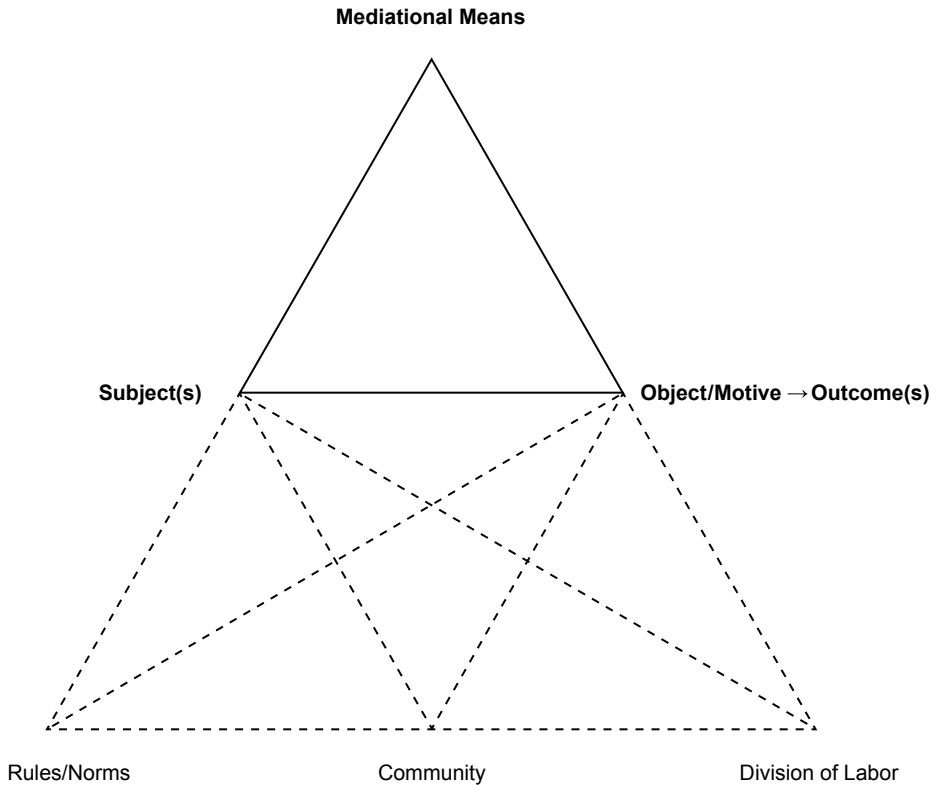


Figure 6.1: An activity system (adapted from Engeström, “Activity Theory” 31).

in order to produce consequential, recognizable outcomes. Underscoring the interaction between students/teacher, genre system, and object/motive are the rules and norms of school culture, the sense of academic community, and the division of labor that create hierarchies between teacher and students.

As Russell notes, “[d]issensus, resistance, conflicts, and deep contradictions are constantly produced in activity systems” as subjects may have different understandings of the motives, and as the division of labor will create hierarchical differences and power relations (511). As we discussed earlier in terms of the classroom genre system, students and teacher do not have equal access to all the genres, and the different genre sets within which they participate position them in various relations of power. At the same time, while the overarch-

ing outcome of the activity system may be students' ability to demonstrate the course outcomes, some of the genres within the classroom genre system might create conflict for the teacher, as she or he uses some genres to assume the role of coach to student writing while other genres require the teacher to assume the role of evaluator of student writing. Nonetheless, in the coordinated, complex activities and relations they help their users enact, genre systems not only "operationalize" (Russell 513) activity systems, but also maintain and dynamically re-create them (Russell 512).

Figure 6.2 illustrates the multiple genre sets and their genre system that interact to enable subjects within an activity system to accomplish their objective(s). In the case of the classroom activity system, these genre sets operationalize the micro-level activities that together operationalize the macro-level activities of the classroom. As such, there are both intra- and inter-genre set uptakes. The arrows in Figure 6.2 describe the uptake relations between genres within a genre set *and* between genre sets within a genre system. Within the genre set of the peer review, for instance, the assignment prompt, student texts, and peer review worksheet will mediate how students take up each other's work. At the same time, the genre set of peer review is also connected to the genre set of teacher feedback. And as we discussed earlier, within the activity system of the classroom, meta-genre(s) inform genre knowledge and guide uptakes.

As Figure 6.2 also suggests, genres not only coordinate the work within an activity system, but also between activity systems. Within the genre set of teacher feedback, for example, the teacher end comment is connected to the genre of the grade sheet, which then connects the classroom activity system to another activity system within the university, the registrar's office, where student grades enter into a different genre system that leads to transcripts, affects financial aid, determines entry into different majors and disciplines, and so on. As Russell elaborates, "classroom genres are linked intertextually to written genres of the university activity system: Student papers are commodified into grades placed on student papers, which then are further commodified in grade reports, which are collated into transcripts, and so on. . . . Thus, the system of written genres extends beyond the classroom, spatially and temporally, as transcripts, diplomas, and other documents become tools for helping students select—and to select students for—further, deeper, and more powerful involvements" in other

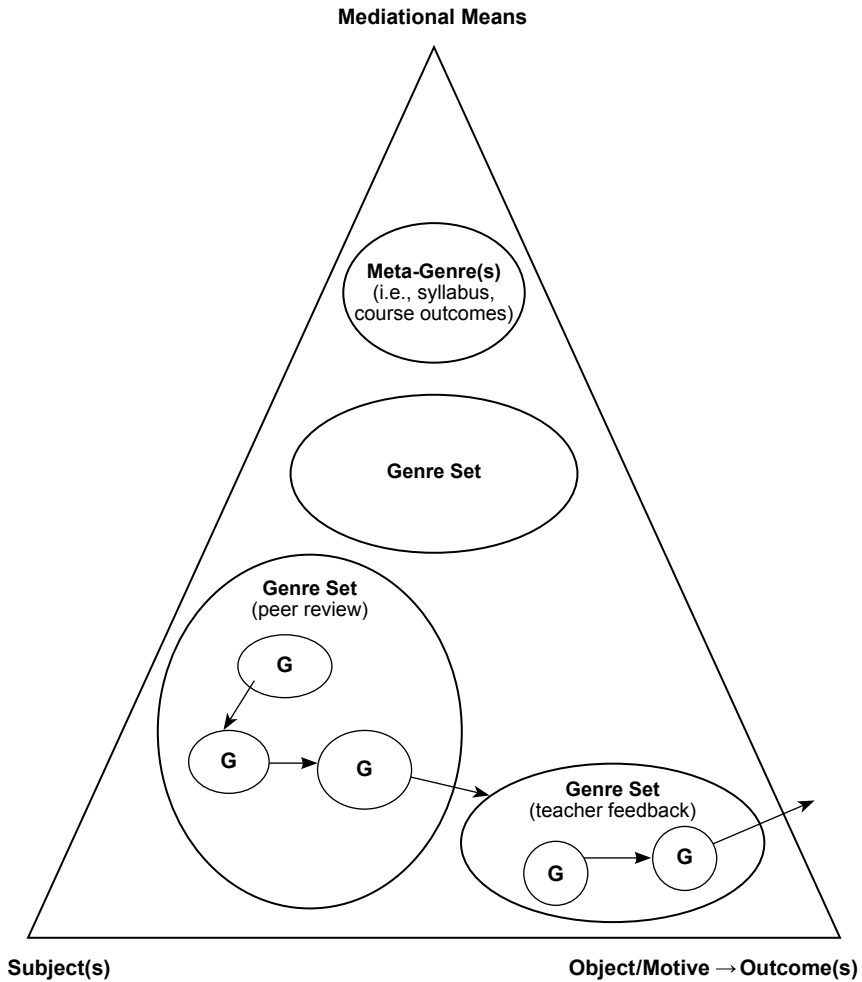


Figure 6.2. Genre Sets within a Genre System within an Activity System.

activity systems (530-31). In this way, activity systems and the genres that operationalize them are always connected to other activity systems and genre systems.

As illustrated in Figure 6.3 (adapted from Russell, “Rethinking Genre”), the multiple activity systems branch out and connect to one another in a rhizome-like way. In a large activity system like the university, some activity systems (departments, classrooms, research labs,

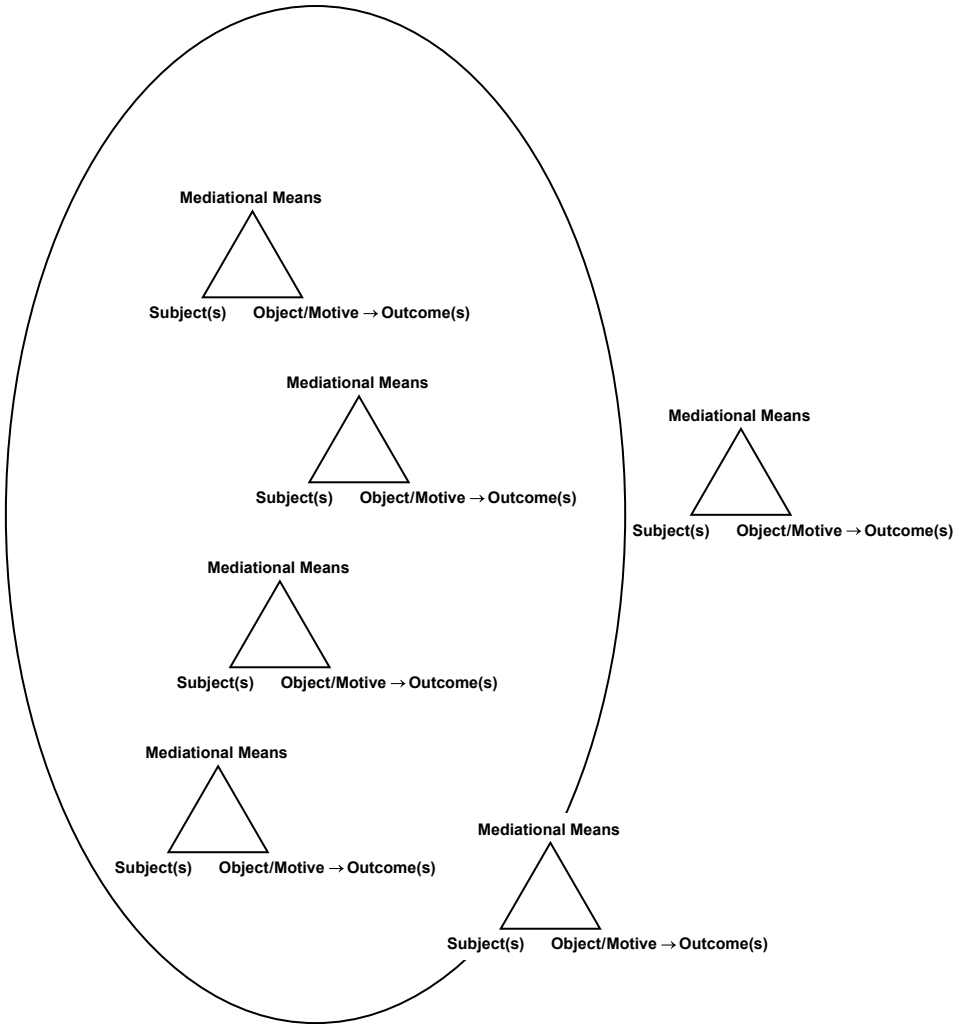


Figure 6.3: An overarching activity system made up of multiple activity systems, some of which connect the overarching activity system to external activity systems (adapted from Russell, “Rethinking Genre” 526).

etc.) are more centrally related to the overall outcomes and motives; others such as financial aid offices, the registrar’s office, athletic departments, and the office of development exist on the peripheries and boundaries connecting the overarching activity system to other ac-

tivity systems. While the inter-relations between activity systems enable individuals to perform and navigate complex social activities and relations over time and space, they also, as Russell describes, create conflicts and contradictions as individuals “are pulled between the object/motives of the multiple activity systems with which they interact” (519). This is often the case with the tension between athletics and academics on university campuses, and also the case as private industry increasingly funds academic research. As Russell has more recently explained, “to theorize the ways texts mediate activity across different contexts, one must theorize the relations of all these elements in multiple activity systems, what Engeström et al. call polycontextuality” (“Writing in Multiple Contexts” 358-59).

Part of the work meta-genres perform, existing as Giltrow explains on the boundaries between activity systems, is to smooth over some of the tensions individuals experience within and between activity systems by rationalizing the contradictions and conflicts. At the same time, however, these tensions can also lead to resistance and change, as individuals bring knowledge from one activity system to another (Russell, “Rethinking Genre” 522), which affects how they use and take up genres (uptake memory can traverse activity systems). Likewise, as individuals encounter greater tensions within and between activity systems (because of changes in technology, access to genres, the presence of newcomers, cultural differences, etc.) the genres begin to reflect those tensions as they take hybrid forms (Russell 523).<sup>22</sup>

Charles Bazerman’s *The Languages of Edison’s Light* provides one of the fullest accounts of the way multiple activity systems evolve, are mobilized, and interact in complex projects—in this case, in the invention of the incandescent light bulb. Bazerman’s research reveals how Thomas Edison and his colleagues actively mobilized various activity systems in order to create the conditions as well as the social need that eventually made incandescent light and central power a reality. That is, before Edison and his colleagues made incandescent light and central power a technological reality, they had to make them a social and discursive reality. They did so, in part, by relying on networks of information, particularly newspapers. As Bazerman details, changes in journalism and the wider circulation of newspapers not only helped establish Edison as a celebrity, which in turn gave him the credibility to win financial backers to support his research, but also helped capture the public imagination: “Edison’s use of the public stage to gain public



attention for his inventions culminated when he announced the perfection of the incandescent light in such a way that it seemed the fulfillment of many social needs and dreams” (38). Bazerman’s research reveals the interdependencies among systems of activity as financial markets and capital investment, patent systems, newspapers, fairs and exhibitions, and urban politics came to bear on the invention and domestication of incandescent light. But equally significant, Bazerman’s research also reveals the agency involved in mobilizing these multiple realms. For example, the Menlo Park Notebooks, which helped to coordinate Edison’s and his colleagues’ laboratory research, were also frequently annotated after the fact to index the formal legal record and granted patents. In this way, “these raw working documents were transformed into legal records for circulation in other communicative and documentary systems beyond the laboratory” (Bazerman 66). At the same time, drawings that first appeared in the notebooks would later be “re-presented in advertisements, publicity, and newspaper articles” (76). Here, we see how mediational means such as the notebooks served different objects/motives as they were recontextualized in different activity systems.

As a conceptual and an analytical tool, the notion of activity systems has contributed much to RGS. It has allowed genre scholars to illustrate the dialectical relationship between genres, individuals, activities, and contexts. It has also helped genre scholars map the complex relations (what Spinuzzi and Spinuzzi and Zachry call “genre ecologies”) within and between genre systems, as these operationalize constellations of activity systems. It has allowed genre scholars to bring together several key concepts and to show how they co-operate: genre systems, genre sets, meta-genre, and uptake. It has enabled genre scholars to more fully describe tensions within genres as individuals negotiate multiple, competing goals. It has helped genre scholars trace individual and group cognitive development as these are mediated by activity system-specific genres (Bazerman, “Genre and Cognitive Development” 295). It has helped to articulate further some of the challenges of teaching genres. And it has provided genre scholars with a flexible analytical tool for studying varying dimensions of activity. Since larger activity systems will often contain multiple activity systems and be connected to multiple other activity systems, a genre researcher can adjust her or his analytical frame in order to study varying levels of activity. However, no matter the size of the activity system

framework under study, the concept of activity system will compel the researcher at least to recognize and acknowledge the interdependencies between what is happening in one activity system and its genres with what is happening in related ones.

## CONCLUSION

Since part of what defines a genre is its placement within a system of genre relations within and between activity systems, genres cannot be defined or taught only through their formal features. This brings us back to the pedagogical quandary RGS has faced. For example, if students perceive a task as serving a certain function within an activity system, they will likely select a mediational means (a genre or set of genres) that is appropriate to their understanding of the objective. They will also assume a subjectivity compatible with that understanding. Some students may recognize the object/motives but may not have access to the appropriate mediational means, or they may not feel they have the requisite authority (subjectivity) to accomplish the task even though they understand the object/motives and have access to the mediational means. How we understand the object and outcomes determines what mediational means we use and how we use them. Likewise, how we recognize the object and motives to act depends on our subject position.

In *Building Genre Knowledge*, Christine Tardy follows the development of four international graduate students (two MA and two PhD) as over time they learn the genres of their disciplines. The four students took a graduate level writing course, which was explicitly about teaching disciplinary genres (the mediational means), but outside of the object/motive context of their particular activity systems. What Tardy found was that genre knowledge is not fully activated or learned until the object/motives are acquired and become real for their users. Students can be taught to write a conference proposal or abstract, but until the stakes or outcomes are real, formal knowledge of the mediational means is not enough. What Tardy also found is that the task might be real and the formal genre knowledge mastered, but if the student does not feel authorized—does not feel that she or he has the authority to contribute to the objectives of the discipline—then the other knowledges are incomplete. Meta-knowledge of mediational means without access to task and authorizing subjectivity is incom-

plete. One's subjectivity is defined in part by one's relationship to and understanding of the object/motive, and how to manipulate the mediational means in terms of the object/motive. As such, subjectivity and identity are bound up in genre knowledge and performance, as we are constantly accomplishing ourselves and our objectives/motives as we enact them through our mediational means.

A rhetorical and sociological understanding of genre has revealed genre as a rich analytical tool for studying academic, workplace, and public systems of activity, but it has also left RGS researchers with questions about the pedagogical implications of teaching genres. Clearly, genres are part of how individuals participate in complex relations with one another in order to get things done, and how newcomers learn to construct themselves and participate effectively within activity systems. But how we can teach genres in ways that honor their complexity and their status as more than just typified rhetorical features is the question RGS continues to face. In Part 2 of the book, we will next explore the range of ways genre researchers have studied how genres are acquired and used in academic, workplace, public, and new media environments. And then in Part 3, we will examine genre's pedagogical possibilities for the teaching of writing.