

# 7

## On-Going Concerns: The Particularity of Disciplinary Discourses

### Unity vs. Particularity

One enduring theoretical issue with major implications for evaluation of students and shaping of curricula in academic writing is the degree to which academic writing is the same or different across disciplinary settings. Most people involved in teaching and research in academic writing would agree that there are some features and skills of writing that are generally held in common across all academic settings, most clearly seen in such matters of conventional correctness such as spelling or subject-verb agreement, although they might disagree on whether failure to uniformly adhere to these conventions might characterize the overall literacy of any individual. And most would also agree that writing in each field and at each level of education requires attending to particular formats and adopting particular styles, although again they might well disagree on the value of these practices and the depth of learning required to produce them. The disagreements are fundamentally over the degree and significance of similarity and difference, and therefore on what learning to write in academic settings entails, how any student's competence should be assessed, and how writing should be taught and curricula organized.

The tension between these two points of view is illustrated in a report titled "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,"

from a steering committee of the Writing Program Administrators. The purpose of the committee was to “articulate a general curricular framework for first-year composition, regardless of institutional home, student demographics, and instructor characteristics” (Steering Committee, 2001, p. 321). In short, the committee was trying to define the disciplinary “what” of first-year comp, a generalized set of fundamentals to be taught across all versions of the introductory course. Yet the document also works from the assumption that good writing is diverse, defined and evaluated variously by both different disciplines and different rhetorical contexts. In an introduction to the document, Kathleen Blake Yancey lists as a benefit that the outcome statement allows WPAs to “argue for the role of genre in first-year composition [...] and for the role that faculty outside of English must play in fostering student literacy” (Steering Committee, 2001, p. 323).

The tension between generalized writing skills and particularized instances of writing is apparent in the bifurcated statement of target outcomes. The outcomes are divided into four sections or areas of focus: Rhetorical Knowledge; Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; Process; and Knowledge of Conventions. Each section contains two lists. The first list begins with the universalizing phrase “*By the end of first-year composition, students should...*” and the second list begins with the particularizing phrase “*Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn...*” (p. 321). Thus, while the first list identifies generalized writing skills and knowledge to the composition class, the second list includes faculty from across the university in the continued development of writing ability.

The view of writing as a discipline-specific activity is reinforced in the set of objectives for students and faculty. As outlined by the document, the goals of the composition classroom include both the kinds of skills and knowledge traditionally emphasized in composition classes with a unified view of writing (i.e., students should focus on a purpose), as well as skills and knowledge associated with writing as diversified (i.e., students should use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation and meet the expectations of disciplinary readers). Other things faculty can pass on to students are how technologies are used to research and communicate in the various disciplines and the “relationships among language, knowledge, and power in their fields” (Steering Committee, 2001, p. 324).

This particular division between generality and particularity, however, would not satisfy a large number of scholars and curricular designers. On one side, pressing for more commonality in instruction, is the long tradition of instruction, textbooks and handbooks that frame writing instruction in terms of a general set of skills and concepts that will consistently direct one towards correct and effective writing. One current manifestation of this tradition of writing as singular and uniform comes from the advocates of what is now being called Academic English, defining a single set of standards for student writing. Of course this is an educationally attractive idea, for insofar as a single core set of teachable language skills can be associated with academic success, clearly those skills should have major curricular focus until such point as students can be demonstrated to have learned them or securely on a path to gain them. Further students might reasonably be held accountable for learning them as well as teachers and system curricula for teaching them, and that the demonstration of such skills would be required for entry to more advanced academic experiences (Scarcella, 2003). Such reasoning often stands behind state curriculum standards for grades K-12 in Language Arts. The identification of such a set of standards for performance, it should be noted, is distinct from the question of how these standards are best taught and learned, directly or indirectly, atomistically or integrated within complex activities.

Another more pedagogically-based version of the unity of writing comes from those who go beyond a performance based notion of unity. Rather than saying “Good writing is good writing,” they might say “Good writing is the result of numerous factors—factors which are present in some shape or form and to some degree in all instances of good writing.” Rather than claiming that all writing is essentially the same, they might say that the act of writing shares some universal or general principles across various situations. The unity of writing is what allows writers to move successfully between and among various domains and various writing situations. It isn’t that all good writing is the same, or even that a good writer can handle all kinds of writing; instead, writers use and must account for a set of essentials that are fairly stable even as they address the particulars of any writing situation.

The earliest rhetoricians, even those who deeply recognized the particularity of writing situations, sought general approaches to fram-

ing language. The anonymous sophist who composed the *Dissoi Logoi*, offers a simple general formula: “Everything done at the right time is seemly and everything done at the wrong time is disgraceful” (Sprague, 1972). One must merely decide what is the right time to do something or not do something to achieve seemliness and avoid disgrace. This opens up the issue of differences of situations and styles and forms of presentation, but subsumes them under a general skill that is in the hands of the rhetor.

Recent theorists and teachers of writing have found unifying principles of writing in the author’s relationship to the emerging text. The writer must find his or her personal voice and must claim ownership of the text, for successful writing to result.

The concept of voice is wide-spread in composition pedagogy and is discussed in most writing textbooks. A passage from Donald Murray’s (1991) *The Craft of Revision*, in a chapter titled “Re-Write with Voice,” will serve to illustrate what is generally meant by voice:

Now I can play the music of language that will wrap around the words and give them that extra aura of meaning that is the mark of effective writing. It is the music of language that draws the writer to the writing desk and informs the writer of the meanings and feelings that lie within the subject; it is the music of language that attracts and holds the reader and causes the reader to trust and believe the writer; it is the music of language that provides emphasis and clarity.” (Murray, 1991, p. 168)

Murray also includes a list of problems that develop when a text has no voice, including lack of emotional engagement and a sense of anonymity in a text.

Ownership is also a common term in contemporary composition pedagogy. Much of the interest in the issue of ownership is associated with Paolo Friere and his American interpreters, such as Ira Shor, Cy Knoblauch, and Lil Brannon. Linda Adler-Kassner (1998) also argues that progressives like Fred Newton Scott and John Dewey saw ownership as an important ingredient in a student’s impulse to write. Further, she argues they preferred the essay form, in that it provided a place for students to articulate themselves in the language that is closest to them and their social and cultural setting.

On the other side are those who find great differences in the characteristics and considerations at play in writing in different situations. Their concerns go beyond the response of any piece of writing to some local particulars of the situation and the necessity to meet the formal conventions expected as appropriate to the situation. They argue that the very tasks that writing accomplishes, the means by which it accomplishes it, the considerations that one must address, and the process by which one brings a piece of writing are deeply embedded within differing social arrangements and uses of languages to accomplish manifestly different activities. Thus students are aided most by learning how to understand and participate in specific writing situations, including learning and responding to the local criteria and expectations, as well as strategically deploying task-relevant techniques. In this view the application of general criteria of writing quality and the instruction in general principles and procedures may even be counter-productive because it turns the writer's attention and energy away from noting and responding to the particularity of the situation, task, and means.

Because *Writing Across the Curriculum* and writing in the disciplines potentially highlights the differences in writing within different academic situations, Bazerman and Russell (1994) consider it challenging the traditional general teachings of rhetoric, that homogenize all rhetorical situations into the oral legal and political institutions that gave rise to classical rhetoric. They note that the medieval art of letter writing began to address the particular rhetorical characteristics of bureaucratic and economic relations enacted through writing, but that these *Ars Dictaminis* remained only a minor by-way on the rhetorical tradition, with little influence on the continuing classical tradition. Similarly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries several rhetoricians, including Bacon, Priestley, and Smith, started to develop print-based rhetorics that addressed new social systems of influence, including journalism, literary culture, and the sciences. By 1800, these alternative rhetorics were homogenized into Bellettrism, which formed the ground for literary studies, leaving the rhetorical tradition to remain focused on its traditional concerns of political and legal argumentation. They see the engagements writing across the curriculum makes with the practices of different disciplines as once again opening up inquiry into the specialized tasks of writing. This inquiry into particularities of writing tasks has led them and other scholars to turn towards genre and activity theory as ways of articulating these differences, as we will examine in a following section.

This view of writing as a particular located activity has even led some scholars to argue for the abolition of the general first year college writing course, and make all writing instruction embedded in disciplinary coursework or apprenticeship situations. A number of essays taking this perspective, reviewing the history of the debate, and providing alternatives to generalized composition instruction are collected in Joseph Petraglia's (1995) *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*. Authors in that volume draw on studies in situated cognition and cognitive psychology, pragmatic phenomenology, functional linguistics, as well as activity theory to argue that writing development occurs only within committed engagement to focused organized task environments. They do not believe general instruction in general writing skills to meet general criteria of good writing can elicit the situated engagement and situated decision making that leads to improvement in writing. Bazerman, in a final essay, however, suggests that the first-year writing course can develop as a meaningful site for student writing, addressing the intellectual and personal issues of students entering a particular institution of higher education within a small group of similarly situated people, who can get to know each other and who can respond to each other's writing and concerns. The committed and responsive discussion of matters of personal importance, drawing on the intellectual resources of the university, provides a basis for students to enter into the various other literate interactions they will encounter in the university and beyond.

### Genre and Activity Theories

A favored conceptual approach to understanding and researching the diversity of writing has been to consider how genre comes to organize writing and writing processes within differing settings. Writing in different areas is visibly different. A lab report in physics is organized in different ways, reports on different kinds of events, uses different kinds of evidence, and argues for different kinds of points than an analysis of a poem or a paper in history. We recognize these different kinds of writing by calling the different kinds of writing different genres—the lab report, the poetry analysis, the history essay. These highly visible differences marked by well-known genre names both indicate to us the diversity of writing and give us a framework for examining the ranges and distinctions of diversity in writing.

One way to look at genre is to attempt to identify the specific genres people write in and identify the distinctive characteristics of each. Within a fixed domain at one particular historical moment, among users who share a similar orientation towards texts, this can be quite a useful approach. For example, Amy Devitt (1991) found that among tax accountants in the late 1980s there were thirteen well-recognized kinds of letters, memos, and other documents written by professionals that described the full range of texts and work of the profession, which she called the genre set of that profession. Moreover, each of those text-types had specific motives, forms, audiences, styles, and ways of relating to the tax code.

As useful as genre is as a concept and a practical, every-day means of distinguishing kinds of writing, researchers have found that genre is a more slippery category than it first appears. Take the case of the experimental report in science. An article reporting an experiment in a physics journal is noticeably different than one in a chemistry journal, as would be recognized by any practitioner—and particularly anyone attempting to present results to both of the journals. Experimental reports in psychology education might vary even further. Scientists will also recognize and categorize differences between reports from different specialties. Further the characteristics and kinds of articles change historically—the experimental article of the seventeenth century is very far from the one today, having few characteristics of any contemporary journal article. Finally, the characteristics, motives, and goals of a genre change in different educational and professional settings. A high school physics lab report is a far cry from one appearing in a research journal—for many reasons including that a high school student is not expected to be arguing for novel contributions to knowledge, but rather is only demonstrating specific basic kinds of competence in laboratory practice and scientific thinking. Yet, there are some similarities among all these variants and subtypes of experimental article (such as presenting methods and results or observations), even as they might be recognized as very different sorts of communication.

These considerations suggest that the number and kinds of genres proliferate and constantly change, making it hard to establish any fixed and simple taxonomy of text types, or even at what level of generality to identify genres—at the general level of scientific paper or somewhat more specific experimental report or at the much more precise level of introductory college biology lab report incorporating forms

from a pre-printed lab manual. Even more troubling for the notion of fixed genre taxonomies, the level at which you might recognize and use genre, or even the categories you might depend on, depend on your level of knowledge and engagement with the area, your socialization into the text-using group, and your particular tasks at the moment. A college educated person in the humanities who knows little science may see all scientific papers or at least all experimental reports as a single kind, while experts in a scientific specialty may have a much more finely graded set of categories that help them decide what kind of paper they are reading. And even those experts may invoke different categories based on whether they are searching comparable results to support their research or they are looking to determine the current state of thinking about a particular concept or theory. Because of the complex and changing landscape of possible text distinctions and the different genre attributions people may make concerning any text, Bazerman (1988) suggests that we consider genres not as fixed characteristics attaching to particular texts, but as psycho-social recognition categories. That is, genres are what people, as groups and as individuals, recognize them to be. The names people attribute to genres helps strengthen socially shared perception of categories, but there is even some range of meanings and examples people would attribute to a single fixed name. They are social in that the categories become shared through exemplar, instruction, naming, meta-talk and other modes of typification. But they are also individual in that each person's attribution of category affects their orientation towards a text and thus their reading and writing behavior and thought.

The psychosocial processes of categorization or typification, while they may make difficulty for any fixed categories of genres, nonetheless suggest the great power and importance of genre categorization as a process. Genre categorization helps orient and organize individual and group perceptions, thought, and behavior and triggers deeper commonalities than would be suggested by just some text conventions. Devitt's study of tax accountancy letters cited above indicates that genre identified far deeper commonalities of texts than just surface level conventional appearances. Genres gave shape to the interactions, situations, relationships and roles, motives, and even conceptual worlds brought together by the genre. Carolyn Miller's (1984) article "Genre as a Social Act" by defining genres as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" brings together the rhetorical tradition of as-

sociating genre with particular forms of presentation associated with political and judiciary forums with Schutz's theory of social typification (Schutz, 1967; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Schutz argued that we make sense and give order to the potentially infinitely variable everyday world of interactions by the attribution of types to situations and people's behaviors. Through these typifications we make meaning of the every-day life world. These typifications are a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, for once we interpret our interactional situations and the behavior of others in terms of these types, we behave in ways consistent with these types. These types become shared among people both by how they describe situations and the way that they act that reinforces certain interpretations of meaning. Thus people identifying a certain grouping of people as a class with certain people designated students and others teachers invokes common understandings of what they are doing and how they should behave with each other and draw meaning from each other's behavior. Although participants may bring somewhat different experiences and understandings of what happens and how people behave in a classroom, over time the behaviors and meanings in this classroom become increasingly well-defined and shared, that is typified. Many recent theorists have also found Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) discussion of genre helpful in elaborating the concept, though Bakhtin's essay on the problem of genre was not available in English until after the framework of this theory of genre was already well developed in ways that extended beyond Bakhtin's interests (Bazerman, in press).

When genre is understood as a kind of typification, we can see how people come to share expectations and assumptions about pieces of writing. Even more we can see how the genres themselves come to shape the entire social interaction, even identifying motives and ways to act (Miller, 1984). The recognition that the sheet of paper handed out by the teacher is an assignment puts an obligation on the students to write in the assigned genre. The range of appropriate (and even resistant) responses is limited as are the motives the students can pursue and enact within the assignment.

By the teacher assigning the paper and by students responding, they are enacting and constituting their roles as teacher and student, reaffirming the typifications that hold the classroom together. We can even say that the entire recognition of a situation requiring action (the rhetorical situation, see Bitzer, 1968) and the defined moment

of action is communally shaped and recognized by genre (Bazerman, 1994). Thus in the previous example the rhetorical situation of the student writing is first defined by the assignment genre, with the student have some limited range to reframe the situation to allow novel responses only insofar as the teacher accepts those reframings. Further the situation is temporally initiated by the assignment, and the duration and culmination is set by the assignment deadlines (again depending on the teacher's acceptance of student attempts to redefine the due date). Further the tempo and changing temporal character of the period in between is shaped by the due date. Even more we can see the activity of student and teacher within this period are structured by the assignment situation and the students work to fulfill the obligations of the genre (Bazerman, 1997). Students will inquire about the detailed expectations. Class discussions may prepare students and help raise preliminary ideas. Some class time may be spent on preliminary writing or providing support for the writing. Students may need to go to the library or look back in textbooks to gather materials. Peer groups may be formed to discuss ideas or review manuscript. Again, depending on the genres assigned the entire structure of activities will be changed.

The ways the various texts come together to define situations, provide resources, and serve as interactional contexts for each new piece of writing suggests that genres do not stand alone, but rather exist in systematic relation to one another. Some genres only are timely and meaningful when preceded by another, as a letter to the editor in most cases follows on something previously appearing in the publication, but not too many issues ago. Some genres require responses in other genres, as a blank tax form requires a return of a completed form and a letter of correction in return from the tax agency requires either an acceptance and a check or a further contestation. Some genres rely on the existence of other genres for their composition, as school exams and student answers usually depend on textbooks, other assigned readings, teacher-distributed material, and lesson plans. To focus our attention on these relationships and linkages of genres, Bazerman (1994) suggested we consider genre systems and the way such a system frames each single use of a genre to carry out a set of intentions within systematic relations.

Russell (1997a, 1997b) further suggested that the genre systems be considered within larger activity systems. Activity systems consist of

regularized organized arrangements that facilitate communal pursuit of objects (Leontiev, 1978). Following on Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) interest in tools and signs in mediating human activity, activity theory sees the ongoing culture of a group embodied in the artefacts that mediate the work of the group (Cole, 1996). Texts may be seen as such mediating artifacts (tools and signs that enable the coordinated work), and genres may be seen as means of providing regularity and orderliness to the ongoing communal processes of activity. Engestrom (1996) has also pointed to the importance of rules and the division of labor that mediate the individual's relationship with the community and with the communal object. Genres may also be understood as vehicles of regulation through their formation of expectations and of division of labor through the rights and responsibilities people in different social roles have to read and write in various genres.

Russell (1997a) points out that not only can one map out the work of text-mediated activity systems through the distribution and timing of genres within the activity group, one may also understand how work and meaning flows from one activity group to another through the flow of documents and the relations between genres in one activity system and another. Thus claims from articles that originally appeared within the activity system of biological research eventually find their way into the activity systems of classrooms either in the form of textbook knowledge or in the form of reprints of classic articles. Many of the studies on writing in the disciplines, professions, and across the curriculum have used genre and activity theory including Bawarshi (2000, 2001, 2003); Bazerman (1988, 1999); Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995); Blakeslee (2001); Casanave (1995, 2002); Dias, et al. (1999); Geisler (1994); Gunnarson (1997); Haas (1993, 1996); Macdonald (1994); McCarthy (1991); McCarthy and Gerring (1994); Myers (1990a); Prior (1998); Smart (1993, 1999, 2000, 2002); Van Nostrand (1997); and Winsor (1996, 2003). Collections of research essays using genre and activity theories include Bazerman and Paradis (1991); Freedman and Medway (1994 a, 1994b); Dias, et al. (1999); Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko (2002); Russell and Bazerman (1997); Bazerman and Russell (2003).

Two other related views of genre come out of the functional linguistic world. Within Structural functional Linguistics (see M. A. K. Halliday, 1985) genre is viewed as a "staged, goal-oriented social process" (Martin, Christie, & Rothery, 1987, p. 58). This view is elabo-

rated in Hasan and Martin (1989) and Martin (1992); related views are elaborated in Cope and Kalantzis (1993) and Kress (1987). Within the applied linguistic field of English for specific purposes, attention has been given to the various rhetorical moves enacted within the sections of specific genres. The most well-known example of this analysis is Swales' "create a research space" model of the introductory section of a scientific research paper. According to this model an introduction establishes a research territory by showing the importance of the area and reviewing the literature; defines a niche for the current work by indicating a gap, question, or limitation of previous work; and occupies that niche by stating the goal of the current study (Swales, 1990; see also Bhatia, 1993).

### Intertextuality

A genre system and activity theory system approach to texts also directs one towards a theory of intertextuality. For texts within systems rely on, refer to, incorporate, supersede, or otherwise relate to one another. The term intertextuality was first coined by Julia Kristeva (1980) in a work of literary theory *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, where she suggests that any text is a mosaic of quotations. She finds the origin of her thinking in Volosinov's (1986) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (originally published in 1929 and sometimes attributed to Mikhail Bakhtin). Volosinov argues that language exists only in individual utterances located in particular moments, histories, and relations; one cannot properly understand language apart from its instances of use, embedded within many surrounding utterances. Volosinov, furthermore, begins a technical analysis of how texts position themselves to each other through linguistic systems of direct and indirect quotations. That relation among texts is in large part organized by genre within activity systems. Fundamentally all the other genres and texts that previously occurred within the activity system are part of the intertextual context of any new text. The new text may explicitly or implicitly refer to those prior texts and their consequences. A proposal is constrained by the request it is responding to, plus it picks up topics, project specifics, and criteria to address from the request for proposals. The agreement to accept the proposal echoes materials from both previous documents, and so on until the work

and project are completed. Moreover, within a genre one is expected or allowed to draw on or refer to texts of specific other genres from either the same activity system or other particular systems. Thus science textbooks rely on the research and handbook literature of the field, but cite them in different ways than other research articles. The textbooks codify, select, sequence on pedagogic principles, and explain in a unified way the aggregate of knowledge gained from the literature, whereas research articles use the literature as resources to make the case for their new claims or competitors to be removed. For a fuller consideration of intertextuality in writing (see Porter, 1986; Selzer, 1993b; Bazerman, in press).