

## 2 INVESTIGATING TEXTS IN THEIR SOCIAL CONTEXTS: THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF RHETORICAL GENRE STUDIES

Catherine F. Schryer

Innis (1946), the polymath socio-economic and communications scholar, declared that working from the margins, whether those margins be disciplinary, political or economic, produces exemplary innovative work. In this essay I suggest that Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) have been making and have the capacity to make a significant contribution to writing research precisely because RGS researchers work at the interstices of various disciplines. In fact, RGS researchers often, to quote Wenger (1998), “broker” or translate between different fields in order to accomplish their projects, projects that typically involve investigating texts in their social contexts. In order to investigate written or spoken texts in their social contexts, genre researchers have to weave together theoretical and methodological perspectives that permit them to investigate the way that texts interact with and co-construct their social networks. In the following I will outline my own journey to craft together a working model to accomplish the projects that I think are required if researchers take seriously the call to investigate texts in their social contexts. The journey begins with rhetorical genre theory, travels through applied linguistics, traverses through social theories, and winds up with some current theories on learning. At each stage, I will point to some implications for research on genre and more generally on writing research. The trip concludes with a retrospective look at some of the promises and perils of doing such research.

## RHETORICAL GENRE THEORY

Uniting much of the current research in RGS is a commitment to a central insight found in Miller's (1984) reworking of the concept of genre. Essentially, Miller established the basic framework to claim text types or genres had to be investigated in their social contexts. Building on Campbell and Jamieson's (1979) discussion of genre, Miller asserted that genres were, in fact, forms of social action – that they functioned to coordinate the work of organizations or to accomplish some kind of significant task. Miller based this argument on Campbell and Jamieson's insight that “a genre does not consist merely of a series of acts in which certain rhetorical forms recur... Instead a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms driven by an internal dynamic” (p. 21). As Miller explains, this sense of an “internal dynamic” is crucial because it conveys the sense that these language events emerge as fusions of substantive and stylistic features in response to specific situations. Using Bitzer's (1968) notion of “exigence,” Miller suggests that people in their social networks over time recognize the need to respond (exigence) to specific situations, typify those situations and develop communicative resources to respond effectively. So, for example, my own research on healthcare communication (Schryer, 1993; Schryer, Lingard, & Spafford, 2003; Schryer, Lingard, & Spafford, 2005; Schryer & Spoel, 2005; Schryer, Campbell, Spafford, & Lingard, 2006) has identified genres that have emerged to respond to healthcare professionals' needs to record their observations of patients, consult with experts, and transfer information about patients. Over time these practitioners developed ways to handle these needs, and these strategies evolved into recognizable text-types or oral speech events such as patient records, consultation letters and case presentations. These already existing structures, fusions of content, style and organization, now facilitate practice in these settings, and newcomers have to learn how to wield them in order to get their work done.

In short, Miller's reconceptualization of genre as a theoretical concept paved the way for professional communication researchers to investigate texts in their social contexts. Researchers who operationalized and refined Miller's insights include Winsor (2000) and Artemeva (1998) in engineering, Schryer (2000), Smart (1993), and Yates and Orlikowski (1992) in business communication, Spinuzzi (2003) in software development, and Bawarshi (2003) and Devitt (2004) in composition studies. In healthcare research, genre perspectives have assisted in identifying the communicative implications of specific documents such as policy documents or manuals (Berkenkotter, 2001; Spoel & James, 2003), records (Schryer, 1993), and clinical talk (Dunmire, 2000; Schryer et al., 2003; Segal, 2001). Two conferences and their related publications have

also been of particular importance for genre researchers in North America. The first conference and publication (Freedman & Medway, 1994) acknowledges the value of genre research in professional contexts; the second conference and publication (Coe, Lingard, & Teslenko, 2001) offers more critical perspectives on genre research.

Another important source for the renovation of genre theory was the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and his circle including Volosinov (1986/1929). Although Bakhtin developed his ideas during the 1920s and into the 1930s (and mostly in reaction to de Saussurean linguistics and literary formalism) his dynamic ways of thinking about language did not enter into the North American academy until the 1970s and even the 1980s. Rhetoricians (Bialostosky, 1992; Kent, 1991; Klancher, 1989; Schuster, 1985), anthropological linguists (Hanks, 1987), and professional communication researchers (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Schryer, 1993, 1994) recognized the relevance of Bakhtin's insights for investigating texts in their contexts. As Dentith (1995) notes, central to Bakhtin's thought is the basic principle "that communicative acts only have meaning, only take on their specific force and weight, in particular situations or contexts" (p. 3). Once again, the implication for RGS researchers, or any researcher interested in oral or written communication, is that texts only have significance in relation to specific social contexts.

Two key terms—utterance and speech genre—evoke Bakhtin's dynamic way of conceptualizing language and constitute his major contribution to genre theory. As he explains, the primary unit of communication is not the sentence or the word but the utterance. The utterance is "individual" and "concrete" and generated by participants in the "various areas of human activity" (1986, p. 60). The utterance inherently, he suggests, addresses and responds to another person or collective of people. This understanding of language stands in direct opposition to traditional linguists (such as de Saussure) who see language as an objective system with classifiable elements (*langue*) that the writer or speaker operationalizes. Instead, Bakhtin sees that as we speak or write we are always shaping our language for real or imagined others.

This profoundly situated understanding of language might suggest that, for Bakhtin, communication is indeterminate and chaotic. However, in "The Problem of Speech Genres" the concept of speech genre provides a balance. He suggests that, although utterances are individual, "each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances" which he calls "*speech genres*" (p. 60). He indicates that genres are heterogeneous and range from "short rejoinders of daily dialogue ... to the fairly variegated repertoire of business documents" and include the "diverse forms of scientific statements and all literary genres" (pp. 60-61). Bakhtin's theory can accommodate this diversity

because he posits that speech genres exist in both primary and secondary forms and are both centrifugal and centripetal. A primary genre is a simple, usually brief utterance such as a command (Go) or a negation (No). A secondary genre is a complex oral or written text which encompasses other primary and even other secondary genres. Thus, a complex genre can incorporate other text types. For example, a doctor's consultant report exists as a secondary genre because it encompasses other genres such as tests results. The centrifugal quality of utterances or speech genres refers to the forces of change that occur within text types; whereas the centripetal quality refers to the social forces that attempt to keep an utterance stable (Bakhtin, 1981). An important feature of Bakhtin's thought is that both actions (stabilizing and destabilizing) co-occur within utterances.

Bakhtin's insights into genre shifted the ground for communication researchers in several important ways. First, his work extends concepts of genre far beyond literary texts into examining powerful written genres such as records, reports, and letters that constitute our social worlds. Secondly, his insights, like those of Miller's, offer a way to theorize the process of classifying utterances. It really matters how social agents classify their text types or speech events. These classifications tell researchers a great deal about what a group values and recognizes as assisting in accomplishing its social purposes. At the same time, however, these same utterances are not simply instances of a category. Because each occurrence of a genre is addressed to a different context, audience, and time, it evokes a different set of strategies within an acceptable (to participants) range. In effect, genres are abstractions or ever changing sets of socially accepted strategies that participants can use to improvise their responses to a particular situation. As I (1993) suggested in a study of veterinary medical records, genres are "stabilized-for-now or stabilized enough sites of social and ideological action" (p. 200). This definition expresses the sense that genres are just stabilized enough so that agents can accomplish their social purposes but that genres are constantly evolving. Finally, Bakhtin's work suggests that utterances or genres are the socially situated ways that we learn to communicate. Rather like a singer who learns to sing by singing songs, we all learn to communicate through these constellations of resources.

## APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Applied linguists have also used the concept of genre and contributed to research into written texts, especially in areas related to second language learning, literacy, and pedagogy. One group, associated with English for Specific Purposes (ESP), has provided detailed descriptions of the moves or "schematic structures"

(Hyland, 2002, p. 116) within genres as diverse as the research article (Swales, 1990), grant proposals (Connor, 2000; Connor & Mauranen, 1999), and business letters (Bhatia, 1993; Upton & Connor, 2001). Many of the analytic tools used by these researchers derive from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994). To focus carefully on texts, a communication specialist needs specific definitions and tools in order to do a fine grained analysis. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) provides particularly useful tools as it centers on function or how language both affects and is constrained by specific social contexts. In a study, for instance, of consultant letters and reports that travel between optometrists and ophthalmologists, my own research group (Schryer, Gladcova, Spafford, & Lingard, forthcoming) focused on the ways these communicators used modality to negotiate issues of competency and responsibility. Fortunately software such as WordSmith (2005) exists that can facilitate textual analysis across the large data sets that genre researchers often want to investigate in order to identify a range of strategies evoked by a particular genre. Another group of linguists (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Martin 1992, 2001) who have contributed to genre research has focused on the pedagogical implications of genre research. Often called the Sydney School, this group asserts that the often tacit rhetorical and linguistic choices within powerful genres need demystification for those with less access to privileged forms of education. Like many sociocultural theorists (Bourdieu, 1991; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), members of the Sydney School accept that the discourse practices of traditional schooling reflect upper or middle class Western-style discourse practices. Children born into families that use these discourse practices have a distinct advantage. Consequently, these scholars call for more overt teaching of genres in order to resolve this inequity.

The Sydney School critiques RGS research on two counts. They note that North American genre researchers, through their dependence on qualitative studies, have focused on exploring social context rather than texts and that RGS has failed to link genre research to pedagogical issues. RGS advocates, on the other hand, have critiqued the Sydney School, for abstracting genres from their social contexts and attempting to codify them (Freedman & Medway, 1994). The pedagogy associated with this type of research, they suggest, fails to address issues related to situated learning.

Gee and colleagues (1996) effectively dramatize the debate by pointing to the discourses associated with law school. They point out that law students are not directly taught the strategies associated with legal discourse. Rather they are subjected to an immersion program wherein they learn “inside the procedures, rather than overtly about them” (p. 13). This immersion program works for two reasons. First, as Gee and colleagues point out, trying to spell out the rules of the game involved in doing law would only offer a “panacea” (p. 12). They assert

that, “All that goes into thinking, acting, believing, valuing, dressing, interacting, reading, and writing like a lawyer cannot be put overtly into words” (p. 12) and the attempt to codify all these strategies produces stilted, unconvincing performances. Secondly, learning inside procedures ensures that a learner “takes on perspectives, adopts a worldview, accepts a set of core values and masters an identity without a great deal of critical and reflective awareness” (p. 13). Such an immersion is necessary for apprentices. No field or organization wants its newcomers to question its basic values as such questioning would undermine the kinds of “fluent and fluid performances” (p. 13) that mark a speaker as a member of a field. However, Gee and others (Casanave, 2002) also note that these kinds of immersion experiences work to exclude those not prepared to deal with these discourse expectations or their attendant ideological commitments. Of course, Gee and colleagues suggest that field-specific discourses should be critiqued but not during the process of acquiring them.

The implications of this debate for researchers committed to investigating texts in their social contexts are two-fold. To focus on texts, we need to profit from linguistic concepts that take into account social contexts (see Giltrow, 2002; Hodge & Kress, 1993; Hyland, 2000; Stillar, 1998; and Swales, 1990). At the same time the pedagogical implications of RGS research or any project that focuses on communication must be acknowledged for two reasons. First, results from such research can move into classroom practice in sometimes de-contextualized ways. Secondly and more importantly, as theories of situated learning assert (Wenger, 1998), social contexts are, by their very nature, learning spaces, and text-types or genres often exist at the heart of these spaces. As we will see, communication researchers who investigate texts in their social contexts need a theorized account of learning in order to understand these social spaces.

## SOCIAL CONTEXT THEORIES

Because RGS researchers explore texts in their contexts, they need ways to conceptualize social contexts (theories) and ways to navigate that context (methods). RGS researchers (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Schryer, 2000; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992) have profited from the theoretical and methodological insights developed by theorists such as Giddens and Bourdieu. Central to Giddens’ (1993) work is his insistence on the “mutual dependence of structure and agency” (p. 122). Giddens rejects structuralist and functionalist notions that conceptualize social structures as abstract systems outside of time. Such accounts describe agents as either fully in control of their own operations or as

fully subject to their social contexts. For example, in de Saussurean linguistics, language users are conceptualized as fully in control of their language systems; whereas in Levi-Straussian structuralism, agents are at the mercy of systems (such as systems of myths) which compel them to articulate essentially the same structure (despite discrepant details). Neither account explains, in Giddens' view, the complex and nuanced way that human agents are affected by and reproduce their social environments. Rather, Giddens suggests that temporality is always present in social contexts. Agents bring with them their memories of past experiences and/or they use already existing structures—genres such as reports, meetings, memos, patient records et cetera—to guide them in their interactions with other social agents. These already constructed social structures are filled with “rules” or the resources and constraints that enable and constrain the constant reproduction of social life. However, as Giddens explains, these “rules” are not like the rigid rules present in a game of chess. Rather they are more fluid, emergent and dependent on the collective agreement of those involved in the interaction (pp. 118-120).

Giddens' insights help explain how relationships exist between texts and their social contexts. Giddens, like genre researchers, is particularly interested in recurring structures, and text types fall into this category. In fact, genres function as structured structures that structure (Schryer et al., 2003, p. 66). In other words, genres pre-exist their users. They are filled with rules and resources that both constrain and enable the performance of their cases. For example, in our research on case presentations, my research group (Schryer et al., 2003) never observed case presentations that used exactly the same resources even though all participants labeled these events as case presentations.

Giddens also offers a methodological stance of importance to genre researchers. He parallels his focus on agency with an insistence that agents “are able to explain most of what they do, if asked” (p. 93). Researchers need to include participant information in their data collection because social agents have access to both discursive and practical knowledge about their routine activities. Social agents, according to Giddens, are reflexively monitoring their own activities and have valuable explanations (discursive knowledge) of their practices. At the same time agents have “practical knowledge” or “knowledge embodied in what actors ‘know how to do’” (p. 126) in their daily activities. This practical knowledge, however, is often tacit and, consequently, researchers need to develop methodologies that capture this knowledge.

Another social theorist, Bourdieu (1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), has contributed significantly to the theoretical and methodological development of much genre research. Like Giddens, Bourdieu acknowledges temporality in both social agents and their chosen professions or fields. Unlike



Giddens, however, Bourdieu emphasizes the role of power in social life. In fact, for Bourdieu, the most important aspect of social agents is that they are social or inhabited by “habitus.” Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) defines habitus as “socialized subjectivity” (p. 126). As Wacquant, one of Bourdieu’s main collaborators, explains, the habitus “consists of a set of historical relations ‘deposited’ within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). Habitus, thus, is not a passive kind of socialization; it produces an active engagement wherein social agents, because of their prior experiences, recognize how to respond appropriately and even strategically to “fields” (p. 14) or specific social contexts. To respond, agents must have a range of resources that predispose them to react appropriately, and, in fact, these predispositions emerge within social contexts or fields. Thus, for example, healthcare fields accept students from academic programs that predispose them to work within healthcare paradigms. These professions or fields then further shape students to perceive, communicate and behave in professional or acceptable ways.

The concept of ‘field,’ or ‘market,’ or ‘game’ is central to Bourdieu’s way of conceptualizing disciplines, organizations, or social systems and their relationship to power. For Bourdieu, society is not a seamless totality, but, rather an “ensemble of relatively autonomous spheres of play” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17). A game, market, or field is a “structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distributions of different kinds of resources or capital” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 14). The position of agents within a field is determined by their access to three different forms of power or capital: economic (material wealth), cultural (knowledge, skills) and social (accumulated prestige or honor) (Thompson, 1991, p. 14). Bourdieu’s model highlights the workings of power between and within different social spaces or fields.

In other words, agents are structured by their experiences within a field. At the same time, they also structure or reproduce those fields but not in purely reductive ways. Rather, because agents occupy different positions within their fields (and thus have different access to power) and because fields themselves occupy different positions in relation to each other, agents enact different strategies (although only within a specific range). Bourdieu calls these regulated, improvisational strategies, triggered by the interaction between habitus and field, “the logic of practice” (as cited in Robbins, 1991, p. 112). Much of my own research has been dedicated to exploring the logics of practice articulated within genres such as insurance writing (Schryer, 2000) and healthcare communication (Schryer et al., 2003; 2005).



Integral to habitus is linguistic habitus, or agents' improvisational and communicative "feel for the game" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 129), or the communication strategies that agents can access in order to enhance and distinguish their own position and thus play the game successfully. Language, particularly that aspect of language called style, is deeply implicated in this struggle to succeed. Bourdieu observes that "style exists only in relation to agents endowed with schemes of perception and appreciation that enable them to constitute it as a set of systematic differences" (p. 39). Furthermore, this process of differentiation, or style production is deeply implicated in the reproduction of symbolic power. Bourdieu notes that

This production of instruments of production, such as rhetorical devices, genres, legitimate styles, and manners and, more generally, all the formulations destined to be "authoritative" and to be cited as examples of "good usage", confers on those who engage in it a power over language. (p. 58)

As instruments of production, some genres, especially those enacted by well-positioned agents in well-positioned fields such as medicine or law, can reproduce forms of symbolic power that can literally shape their receivers' views of the world. These genres are, in Bourdieu's terms, "symbolic structures" (p. 166).

Bourdieu, like Giddens, provides a useful methodological stance for genre researchers who wish to examine texts in their social contexts. He recognizes the "logic of practice" possessed by all participants within their fields. But researchers themselves also have their own logic of practice—one that is distinct from the groups that they study. In fact, Bourdieu suggests a methodology that combines two types of analyses in order to uncover the structures that maintain and reproduce power. His methodology, called "social praxeology" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 11), consists of two crucial steps: "First, we push aside mundane representations to construct the objective structures ... that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations. Second, we reintroduce the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation" (p. 11).

Several of my projects, but also those of other researchers (Hyland 1999, 2000), have included first, a close reading (objective) of specific texts to describe and critique the strategies evoked within these discursive events, and second, interviewing participants and asking them for explanations for their strategies and problem-solving techniques. This interview data can provide richer views of the social context that surround texts. As Bourdieu makes clear, although both steps are necessary, the first step takes priority. In other words, disciplinary forms

of analysis are crucial and lead to what he calls “objectivist” (p. 11) analysis. However, Bourdieu is not invoking the objective paradigm of truth and validity to which feminist researchers and postmodernists have so rightly objected. Bourdieu sees disciplinary forms of analysis as situated language practices that themselves require reflection to see what values and ideologies they espouse.

Bourdieu also insists researchers must analyze agents’ practical knowledge, or “*phronesis*” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 128) for two reasons. First, in order for researchers to understand what passes for common sense, or decorum, or “the way we do things around here,” this intuitive “feel for the game” set of improvisational strategies must be articulated (p. 128). And, second, when the operations of the logic of practice are articulated, agents can sometimes acquire “tools for distinguishing zones of necessity and of freedom, and thereby for identifying spaces open to moral action” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, p. 49). This moment of reflexivity occurs when social agents themselves can become more aware of the social within them and more capable of controlling their own categories of thought and action. Needless to say this commitment to investigating participants’ “practical knowledge” also involves a commitment to qualitative data analysis techniques (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998) greatly facilitated by data analysis software programs such as NVIVO.

Several implications of importance to communication research emerge from these structuration theorists. Both Giddens and Bourdieu provide a theorized way to conceptualize the dynamic, dialogical ways that texts and their social contexts interact. Their understanding of the rich nature of social improvisation provides a way to explain the ways that structure and agency are not dialectically opposed poles of opposition but rather in a state of constant co-construction. Bourdieu also provides not only a critical perspective on power within social groups but also a balanced methodology – a way to justify doing textual analysis using linguistic disciplinary resources together with qualitative studies that explore with research participants the reasons for their language choices. Finally, Bourdieu’s insights offer a rationale for interdisciplinary projects. After all, how can researchers gain insights into the tacit realm of the “logic of practice,” unless they bring members of the group they are studying into the research team? In fact, practices associated with qualitative data analysis—locating, defining and refining themes—in my experience, can lead to the moments of reflexivity to which Bourdieu alludes.

Although, in my view, Giddens and Bourdieu provide the basis for conceptualizing social context, Activity Theory (AT) adds additional insights to explain the complex agents and their social structures, especially with respect to the role of learning and the role of technologies. Vygotsky (1978) and Leont’ev (1981) opposed simplistic notions of socialisation which either envisioned indi-

vidual agents as self-contained pre-formed entities (psychological model) or as entities totally at the mercy of their environments (behaviorist model). Instead, as noted elsewhere (Schryer et al., 2003), they envisioned agents as learning through using tools in purposeful, goal directed activities. They saw that these tools, both physical (hammers, pencils) and cultural (language), pre-exist their users and mediate the interaction between agents and their social environments. By using tools, human agents internalized the values, practices and beliefs associated with their social worlds. At the same time as they become experienced users, agents can, in the midst of purposeful activity, affect their social contexts or even modify their tools. Certainly in our research, we saw that, by using the mediating tool of case presentations, healthcare students were internalizing the values and practices while involved in purposeful activities that would lead to their own ability to affect future social contexts (i.e., their ability to deal with their own future patients or clients).

Engeström (1987, 1999) and other researchers (Cole, 1999; Scribner, 1985; Wertsch, 1981) have extended Vygotsky and Leont'ev's work into a model for the analysis of complex interactions between agents and social structures in professional and workplaces settings. While retaining the concepts of tools mediating the socialization of agents, they have expanded the analytical concepts within the notion of system to account for more of the dialectical, or rather dialogical, interactions that occur between social agents and between social agents and their settings. Engeström (1993) defines an activity system as a system "that incorporates both the object-oriented productive aspect and the person-oriented communicative aspect of human conduct," and he suggests that a human activity system "always contains the subsystems of production, distribution, exchange and consumption" (p. 67).

Furthermore, activity system theorists have developed interesting approaches to help account for change and the ways that agents themselves, while internalizing their social tools affect their social settings. Most workplace settings are characterized by multiple and even overlapping activity settings. As participants in those systems, agents can and often do bring rules and resources from one system into another and in this way can introduce change or innovation into a system. Furthermore, according to Engeström (1987; 1999), activity systems are characterized by contradictions, and change sometimes enters systems because of those contradictions. In his work on a health clinic, Engeström (1993) noted the internal contradiction that physicians experience as "gatekeepers and cost-efficient producers ... and as healers or consultants" (p. 72).

In more recent research, Engeström, Engeström, and Vähäaho (1999) introduced the concept of Knotworking to describe work situations that require the "active construction of constantly changing combinations of people and ar-

refacts over lengthy trajectories of time and widely distributed space” (p. 345). The metaphor of the knot describes the unstable, distributed and collaborative nature of many workplace settings. Communication, technologies and especially communication technologies are essential to mediate this unstable collective activity system. Part of this collectivity, as Engeström and colleagues make clear in their illustrative example of a mental patient being forced into care, are “mediational means” (p. 355). Mediation means include genres such as healthcare records and technologies such as handcuffs, each of which represents an activity system. In a knotworking situation, in fact, representatives from activity systems (in their illustrative case—healthcare providers, social workers and the police) have to improvise ways to co-operate with each other in order to accomplish their task (dissolve the knot).

Several important implications, especially for future work in genre and communication studies, emerge from AT. As researchers we need to attend to the role that technologies play with respect to communication. As tools, technologies change the nature of the genres that we use daily. Electronic reports are not the same as paper reports. Online healthcare records differ substantially from paper-based records. Most importantly, genres and technologies exist in complex human communication networks. As Bazerman (1994) and others (Spinuzzi, 2003) have noted, genres are not solitary entities and neither are technologies. We need research prepared to investigate the complex interactions of texts and their social, technological contexts. Finally, AT is a theory about learning. As social agents learn to use tools, whether symbolic such as genres or technological such as software programs, they are learning the practices and values of their social settings.

## LEARNING THEORIES

From the perspective of AT, the problematic of simply importing lessons learned about specific workplace genres into class room settings is clear. For instance, Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré (1999) in their thought provoking comparison of writing practices in the workplace and the academy, claim that the school genres of the academy are “worlds apart” (p. 3) from workplace genres. Reflecting the purposes of schooling, educational genres typically create the circumstances wherein “epistemic” or knowledge-making tasks are evaluated on an individual basis (p. 44). As Dias and colleagues explain, “Within the classroom context each paper is graded in comparison to all others, and the institution has a vested interest in a quality spread” (p. 62). Workplace genres, on the other hand, mediate the interactions of agents in different ways. In work-

place settings managers will intervene in writing processes as “the institutional goal is to elicit the best possible product from each employee each time writing is undertaken” (p. 62). In fact, Dias and colleagues conclude that the activity systems of education and workplaces differ so radically, that educational institutions cannot claim to be teaching workplace communication. This perspective, of course, is deeply troubling to educators in professional communication who claim that the strategies that students learn in professional communication classrooms translate into useful practices in workplace settings. (See Fahnestock, 1993 and Freedman, 1993a, 1993b for a succinct debate on this issue.)

Much of Dias and colleagues’ arguments stem from their realization that the activity systems of the workplace and education have inherently different purposes. However, their insights were also shaped by current research into learning theory, particularly the concept of “communities of practice” (COP) as developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), and later refined by Wenger (1998). Lave and Wenger describe a COP as “a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Wenger later expands this definition to suggest that a COP consists of three elements. First, a COP consists of people involved in “mutual engagement” (p. 73). They have formed a complex network of relations to accomplish their work. Second, the group is involved in a “joint enterprise” that requires negotiated expertise and involves accountability and local interpretations. Finally, the group has a “shared repertoire,” or resources such as discourses, tools, style, concepts and genres. A COP could consist of insurance assessors (Wenger, 1998), workplace teams (Gee et al., 1996), or any group such as agency-based social workers or healthcare providers involved over time in a set of practices to accomplish a specific kind of work. Lave and Wenger and their many supporters insist that learning is a natural and ubiquitous phenomenon and that it occurs most naturally and effectively within COPs through the process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 34). As Lave and Wenger explain, “learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (p. 35) and occurs naturally and constantly in groups consisting of expert and inexperienced members. Less expert members learn through their involvement in legitimate (recognized by the group) practices. At first this involvement is peripheral (by observing, by being assigned part of the task, by being supervised) but eventually less expert members assume full participation in the group’s activities.

For educators, this position on learning has several implications. Dias and colleagues’ recognition of the value placed on “situated learning” within COPs puts educational programs into question. How can such programs, separated as they often are from practitioners, create COPs wherein their students can acquire

“legitimate” practices? As Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) point out, students need to be in “cognitive apprenticeships” (p. 38) where they can legitimately steal knowledge. This last observation also echoes a value placed on tacit knowledge. Brown and Duguid (1996) state that “In being explicated, the implicit loses its value as implicit knowledge ... and that, in fact, “implicit aspects of practice have a dynamism by virtue of their implicitness” (p. 50). Less expert members learn through involvement in discourses and practices not necessarily by analysing and abstracting those same practices. This value placed on tacit knowledge offers challenges to educators. What should experts’ role be in a COP or in apprenticeship situations? One traditional role has always been to develop concepts, procedures or rules that attempt to codify practice. But Brown and colleagues (1989), as well as Lave and Wenger, insist that evolving practices and knowledge always exceed codification and that implicit knowledge is more valued anyway. Another response has merged from Vygotsky’s notion of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) and the notion of “scaffolding” that emerged in response to Vygotsky’s work. In fact, Bruner and Sherwood (1976) saw the implications of ZPD and the role of the mentor/expert in Vygotsky’s work and developed the notion of “scaffolding” “to describe the ways that effective mentors interacted with learners. For this group of researchers, the ZPD refers to the distance between what learners can do on their own and what they can do with assistance. An expert who intervenes in a legitimate task and provides scaffolding by reframing or reinterpreting the novices’ words or deeds into the terms and processes of the activity system can assist in the internalizing of the system’s practices.

Lave and Wenger also insist that COPs exist in overlapping networks of other COPs, some of which have more power than others. They also suggest that we all belong to many COPs (work groups, church affiliations, volunteer programs, etc.). Wenger (1998) notes as well that some individuals find themselves “brokering” between COPs, that is, working at the margins of different communities bringing resources (or problems) from one group to another (pp. 108-110). Quoting the work of Bowker and Star (1999), he also suggests that some documents or tools can function as “boundary objects” or reifications that can move between COPs and coordinate their work (pp. 105-108).

The research on situated learning has several implications for genre researchers. The notion that workplaces are inherently learning spaces puts recurrent text types or genres at the heart of many workplace practices. As symbolic structures or sets of improvisational resources that users invoke in order to address recognizable (to them) issues or problems, genres should be at the centre of written or oral communication research. In fact, the point at which they should be studied is at the point when they are being learned. During the learning or training process is one of the few times that tacit strategies become more overt

and when the nature of situated expertise also becomes more transparent. Much of the critical work of genre researchers should consist of studies that uncover these tacit sets of resources, not just to make them more visible, but also to open them up for critique. As Gee and colleagues (1996) note in their study of the discursive practices associated with law, these practices need critique. These practices seem like “common sense” to their users, but once they are opened up for critical reflection, then even their users might want to challenge some of their practices and attendant ideological values. Genre researchers working in interdisciplinary teams using a text-in-social context approach are well positioned to offer such a balanced critique—one that combines discourse analysis with social agents’ explanations of their language choices.

In fact, such teams can function as “brokers” and possibly create “boundary objects” that traverse different communities of practice. For instance, the interdisciplinary team in which I am involved has published its findings in fields as diverse as optometry (Spafford, Lingard, Schryer, & Hrynchak, 2004, 2005), medical education (Lingard, Garwood, Schryer, & Spafford, 2003; Lingard, Schryer, Spafford, & Garwood, 2003), social work (Spafford et al., 2007) and professional communication (Schryer et al., 2003, 2005; Varpio, Spafford, Schryer, & Lingard, 2007). These publications, in my view, constitute “boundary objects,” because in each instance the findings which they articulate have been negotiated across these fields of practice. Furthermore, the writers themselves have functioned as “brokers” articulating their own field concerns but also forming a community of practice in which expertise can be explored, challenged and negotiated.

This “brokering” role is also one that communication instructors can adopt in their classrooms. Dias and colleagues are correct in asserting that classroom activity systems cannot replicate the activity systems present in workplace settings and they should not claim to do so. Rather, classroom instructors can create communities of practice within their courses that focus on some of the resources present in workplace writing. After all, genres consist of sets of resources and some of those resources (such as the judicious use of the passive voice) can be taught. As instructors we can also teach our students to be savvy genre readers. After all, even the academic essay has a history and consists of a plentitude of resources (see Giltrow, 2002; Hyland, 2000). Teaching students to negotiate and then challenge this genre can help them to understand other texts that they will encounter and that also envelop themselves in the mantle of common sense. We can and should contribute to our students’ developing linguistic habitus—but in ways that make them critically aware of their genre choices.

So the working model that I have been journeying towards begins with genre as an overarching concept. This concept allows me to analyze instances of



texts as fleeting performances that pull together strategies from a repertoire of available but also evolving strategies. Many of these strategies can be tacit and all reflect deeply shared social values. My job as a researcher is to map, as best as I can, these shifting resources by examining them through two lenses: discourse analysis and qualitative data gathered through interviews and observations. These maps, these boundary objects, then can become accounts that instructors or practitioners can use to query discursive practices in the classroom or in their own fields. However, like all texts, my accounts are participating in generic resources and as such also have their blind spots or areas of common sense.

## PROMISE

In an admonition to communication researchers, Sarangi and Roberts (1999) observed that we need “thick description” that “reaches down to the level of fine-grained linguistic analysis and up and out to broader ethnographic description and wider political and ideological accounts” (p. 1). RGS researchers are particularly well placed to heed this admonition. We take the injunction to investigate texts in their social contexts seriously and thus, in our different ways, continue to identify the theoretical resources and methodological skills needed to conduct the kinds of studies that Sarangi and Roberts require. I think, too, that as an enterprise we have a useful, considered approach to pedagogy. We study sites of situated learning in workplace settings and therefore know that our findings cannot be codified into strict rules. They can only be used as accounts or maps to make traversing workplace terrains a little less mysterious.

## PERILS

However, some perils do exist. Investigating texts in their social contexts often means creating two large data sets: one dedicated to analyzing a set of texts, and the other focused on analyzing interview data. These two different kinds of demands mean that such projects can be lengthy and expensive and can require combinations of expertise that exceed the typical humanity’s style research project. Furthermore, careful planning and design are needed to get the results from the two data sets to talk to each other. Again, researchers need to think about the time and money needed for such planning. As noted earlier, such projects also often require an interdisciplinary team in order to provide the insider knowledge needed to understand the “logic of practice.” Brokering between fields can be challenging, especially if that brokering concludes with

published research studies. In what fields should these studies be published? Is it possible that such a diversity of fields and audiences means that a community of practice around genre studies might not stabilize?

Needless to say, despite these perils I believe that RGS and other communication researchers who seriously investigate texts in their social contexts are on the right track. These studies are producing the innovative, exemplary work that Innis (1946) suggests can only come from the margins, the interstices between disciplines.

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