

The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom (1997)

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Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar.

But the symbolic landscape we have constructed for us to live in is precisely that which most fits us and the others with whom we share it. The more we inhabit these places the more we make our home in them, even as we come to explore the lives in near and increasingly distant places. Even when we find the genres we become habituated to are filled with dissension, dysfunction, or even deception, and we want to seek alternatives, they still have formed the discursive and cognitive habits we bring with us.

Other people have other places they have constructed and where they regularly go to interact. When we travel to new communicative domains, we construct our perception of them beginning with the forms we know. Even our motives and desire to participate in what the new landscape appears to offer start from motives and desires framed in earlier landscapes.

In our role as teachers we constantly welcome strangers into the discursive landscapes we value. But places that are familiar and important to us may not appear intelligible or hospitable to students we try to bring into our worlds. Moreover, students bring with them their own landscapes of familiar communicative places and desires. Students, bringing their own roadmaps from their previous experience, would also benefit from signs posted by those familiar with the new academic landscape. However, guideposts are only there when we construct them, are only useful if others know how to read them, and will only be used if they point toward destinations students see as worth going toward.

So we should not take lightly the choice of which genres we ask our students to write in. Nor should we keep those choices invisible to students, as though all writing required the same stances, commitments, and goals; as though all texts shared pretty much the same forms and features; as though all literacy were the same. Nor should we ignore students' perceptions of where they are headed and whether they are much moved to go toward the places we point them toward.

The picture I have drawn of the role of genre as it shapes educational activity is informed by developments in linguistics, rhetoric, psychology, and sociology. The ways these areas of inquiry consider genre and related concepts provide alternative ways for considering genre different from those offered by the literary tradition. These alternative traditions differ not only in the intellectual and investigative tools brought to bear on genre, but in the range of genres considered...

In literary studies the modern consideration of genre invokes an ancient tradition of evaluating works according to their species, a tradition stretching back to Aristotle, but which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had become moribund within a rule-determined version of artistic decorum. The romantic rejection of this tradition in the name of individual expression, originality, organic unity, and the chaos within added to the stigma of those works labelled as generic. Even among those literary critics who have seen past such stigmas, literary studies still have traditionally concerned themselves with a limited range of literary genres already embedded within practices and assumptions of the literary system, so that literary thinking about genre is more adapted to thinking about the lyric than the comic book, and to both of those more than to the environmental impact statement. Moreover, because literature is often written and read in contemplative circumstances, apparently (but not thoroughly) removed

from immediate exigencies of life, the social embeddedness of genre has been less visible. Moreover, insofar as literary texts advance recognizable social designs, reminding us of their social positioning, they are typically considered as propagandistic and coercive, and thus less of less literary value. Genre in literary studies has therefore come to signify more matters of textual form or of effect upon ideal readers than of social relations (see, for example, Dubrow; Fowler; Hernadi; Strelka). Curiously, because schooling also apparently has elements of removal from the immediate exigencies of life and from overt designs, other than the development of mind and reflection, the apparent contextlessness of the literary can translate readily to the apparent contextlessness of classroom language. Consequently, the literary genres can readily appear as models for the genres of classroom writing, and both can appear as the universal forms of knowledge and thought. Literary literacy can, on the face of it, appear equivalent to all literacy...

Rhetoric since its founding 2500 years ago has had an interest in genre or types of utterance, for rhetorical practice is concerned precisely with determining the effective utterance appropriate to any particular circumstance. The rhetorical concept of genre has from classic times associated the form and style of the utterance with both the occasion or situation and the social action realized in the utterance. Carolyn Miller, in reviewing the rhetorical discussion of genre and associating it with sociological concepts of typification, has defined genres "as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159). That is, rhetors become aware that a particular kind of utterance has proved effective in certain kinds of circumstances, so that when they note similar circumstances that are likely to try a similar kind of utterance. Over time and repetition, socially shared patterns and expectations emerge to guide all in the interpretation of circumstances and utterances. In her account, perception is a key to recognition of recurrent circumstances and of typified actions, so that the emergence of recognizable genres increases the recognition of situations as alike or recurrent. For example, once one is familiar with business letters of complaint as a kind of response to particular circumstances, one may begin to identify circumstance as that kind which calls for a letter of complaint. Moreover, the recognition of genre typifies possible social intentions and actions, as one realizes a letter of complaint is a possible response to some commercial injustice.

The implications of this socially embedded account of genre have been explored by placing it within social structural and social psychological theories, seeing the rise of genres in relation to regularized social relations and institutions of communication and in relation to socially shaped psychological practice. Genres, as perceived and used by individuals, become part of their regularized social relations and communicative landscape, which provide both means and tasks for their thought processes...

The picture of genre that emerges from these various investigations and studies is that genre is a rich multidimensional resource that helps us locate our discursive action in relation to highly structured situations. Genre is only the visible realization of a complex of social and psychological dynamics. In understanding what is afoot in the genre, we become aware of the multiple social and psychological factors our utterance needs to speak to in order to be most effective. Once we understand the dynamics and factors, we may have a range of choices available to us, including choices that are far from traditional in appearance, but which nonetheless speak to the circumstances. What we might feel as the weight of living up to the expectations of a particular genre is in fact rather the reminder of all the complexities at stake in the form. The pressure of genre is not of conformity so much as of response to complexity, and insofar as we feel drawn or seek traditional formal solutions, those standardized forms provide a means to begin to address the situation in a focused way.

When we invoke a genre such as a newspaper editorial, we are invoking not just a pattern of timely topic, evaluative and emotional words, and policy recommendations--we are invoking the role of journalism and commentary in contemporary politics, the civic and economic power of

a particular newspaper, the public reputation of its writers, and the influence of its readership. We are invoking unfolding events in which there are many players, a changing topology through time, and a deft sense of timing necessary for any editorial to be successful. We are invoking the standards of taste and criticism within a community, current attitudes toward political figures, and the emotional hot buttons of the moment. It is in this complex environment that the editorial must act.

Moreover, genre helps us understand the novelty within situations, as we see in the situation the intersection of different types of events and we work out what kind of response can speak to all the variables we see. We may see in a situation a strong expectation that we follow a well worn path, but then we may feel a discomfort with that path and an impulse to set out in a new direction. How to turn the audience in that new direction while they have their eyes firmly fixed on the expected is the art of rhetorical creativity. If that art fails, if no form and intention is recognizable to the audience, they may simply see our impulse as going nowhere and doing nothing. It is very easy for readers to dismiss what they do not recognize. Similarly, blurring, blending and mixing genres are hardly the same thing as abandoning all sense of genre; they are rather creative acts dependent on intimate knowledge of genre.

Similarly, genres enacted in the classroom are more than a ritual repetition of standardized statements. If they fail to be more than that, it is only because we so strip the meaning from the classroom activity that generic productions become only formal exercises. It is up to us as teachers to activate the dynamics of the classroom so as to make the genres we assign alive in the meaningful communications of the classroom. This may be by drawing on the students prior experience with genres in social situations that have had meaning for them or by tapping into students desires to enter particular new kinds of discursive situations or by making vital to their own concerns the new genres and discursive realms we wish to invite them into. And we must do this within the institutional definitions of our courses, so that students accept the appropriacy of what they are doing in the classroom.

As teachers, we all know in class discussion we are expected to ask certain genres of questions to open up discussion. We all know it is easy enough to make up a question on the assigned topic of the day, but we all also know how difficult it is to come up with a question that effectively engages the students and evokes reflective responses. In finding the right kind of question, we need to search for what is already alive or we can make come alive in the classroom, within all that constrains and defines that particular class setting. The study of classroom genres is not about defining the minimal requirements of any old statement, but about releasing the full power of the well chosen statement that speaks to the full psychological, social, and educational dynamics of the setting. In any classroom's discourse, how fully alive any students generic productions are depends on the life we invest in our comments and assignments that model and prompt students utterances as well as on what the students bring to the task. Our assignment questions not only identify the genre we are asking students to produce, but also provide an environment for students to speak within, a place for them to invest their energy and concern....

Moreover, genre is a tool to getting at the resources the students bring with them, the genres they carry from their educations and their experiences in society and it is a tool for framing challenges that reach beyond what they know into new domains that are as yet for them unexplored, but not so different from what they know as to be unintelligible. As creative teachers, desiring to increase our students' rhetorical skill, flexibility and creativity, we can try to locate those kinds of utterances our students are ready to make if they are given the challenge and some guidance in what such statements do and how they do it. That is, our strategic choice of genres to bring into the classroom can help introduce students into new realms of discourse just beyond the edge of their current linguistic habitat.

What genres we choose to bring into the class through our comments and assigned readings, and which genres we ask students to communicate in as we signal by our questions,

assignments, models, and instructions are matters that need to be worked out in each individual circumstance. But if we find the right generic locations within which to place the communicative activity of each class, students may become capable of remarkable performances as they speak to environments they grasp and they want to speak to. Many years ago, teaching third grade in an inner city school, I found that children whom the system had given up on were able to create complex play scripts based on television cartoons popular at that time--they knew the genre of Crusader Rabbit and they very much liked playing in that generic space. More recently I found urban college students in a business program, who were not much motivated toward autobiographical revelation nor towards social science analysis, come alive with wonderful discussion and papers when we put together social structural analysis of social and economic mobility with their individual and family sagas. Immigrants of Asian peasant families or fallen Iranian aristocracy had remarkable things to say about how political and economic structure affected their life chances as well as the surrounding social stability and political harmony. African-American students had precise understanding of the barriers placed to social mobility in both rural and urban settings, in North and South.

But among a group of equally ambitious and academically more advanced group of engineering students the social mobility assignment fell flat, because their privileged cultural homogeneity had given them few opportunities to think about how they and their families' fates were dependent on social factors. Rather their individual and family sagas were built around tales of individual initiative and character. In this class the genres of social analysis and personal narrative intersected in a different and less intellectually exciting place. However, the right generic mix for this class was found in an assignment that coupled the ambitious stories of their own lives with descriptions of technological progress. Their research papers, describing leading-edge developments and ten-year projections for fields they hoped to contribute to, led to remarkably sophisticated and interesting papers, which, for example, argued for the increasing role of architects in space station design or set out new directions for micro-chips.

So which kinds of readings and lectures and assignments work in any classroom circumstance depends on a negotiation among institutions, teacher, and students. That negotiation determines where the journey of the class can most successfully go while meeting the goals and needs of each. Sometimes institutions have clear imperatives, as defined through professional accreditation requirements or faculty senate mandates. Although we at times may see these demands as rather blunt if not stupefying instruments, they do assert the stakes the several professions and disciplines have in the specialized literacy of students entering their domains. We as teachers often have strong opinions about the kinds of writing we feel will lead to most growth. And students may have strong attractions and aversions to the various kinds of discursive domains offered in the university and the professional worlds beyond.

Since without student motivation little happens in a writing class, the last must always be attended to. Learning to write is hard work, requiring addressing ever more difficult writing problems, so that if we want students to learn to write we must locate the kinds of writing they will want to work hard at, the kinds of writing problems they will want to solve. Once students learn what it is to engage deeply and write well in any particular circumstance, they have a sense of the possibilities of literate participation in any discursive arena... It is only those who have never participated more than marginally who do not notice where they are, because they do not perceive why all that detailed attention is worth their effort. Once students feel part of the life in a genre, any genre that grabs their attention, the detailed and hard work of writing becomes compellingly real, for the work has a real payoff in engagement within activities the students find important.