

Rhetorical genre studies: Key concepts and implications for education

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Abstract

In this paper, I provide an overview of the theoretical roots and key concepts of rhetorical genre studies (RGS), and attempt to define rhetorical genre theory. I then discuss implications of rhetorical genre theory for education, with specific focus on: the acquisition process, explicit instruction, discourse community and audience, simulation and authenticity, genre-learning strategies as empowerment, and teacher role.

Introduction

In the '80s and '90s, influenced by a range of theoretical developments related to language use, rhetoric and composition scholars in North America developed a new conceptual framework for genre that has revolutionized writing studies and education. Rhetorical genre studies (RGS), (Artemeva & Freedman, 2006), as it has come to be called, has given us a new lens, allowing us to see written (and oral) communication in a new way and leading to a deeper understanding of how the form of our communications is tied to social functions. The resulting genre theory has had major implications for education, since learning to wield genres (especially written genres) is key to academic success.

John Swales (1990) calls genre an “attractive” word, but a “fuzzy” concept (p. 33). He shows how the word has been used for different purposes in the fields of folklore

and literary studies. In folklore studies, he reports, genre is largely used to denote a classification such as myth, legend, or tale—not an “actual entity”, but an “ideal type” (p. 34). In literary studies, he continues, texts that break genre convention are celebrated. As in folklore studies, then, the emphasis in literary studies has been on the classifications (e.g. sonnet, ode) that genres constitute. RGS, however, is a discipline with little interest in literature. It has appropriated the term genre for use in its fields of interest: workplace, community and academic discourse.

To consider as potential genres such homely discourse as the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper, as well as the eulogy, the apologia, the inaugural, the public proceeding, and the sermon, is not trivialize the study of genres; it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves. (Miller, 1994, p. 27)

This paper is divided in four sections: the first is an overview of the theoretical roots of RGS; the second is list of key RGS concepts; the third is an attempt to define rhetorical genre theory; and the fourth is a discussion of key implications of rhetorical genre theory for education.

Theoretical roots of RGS

In this section, I discuss major theoretical developments which represent the roots of RGS: the New Rhetoric, speech-act theory, speech-genre theory, and social constructionism.

The new rhetoric

The New Rhetoric is the name given to a rediscovery and reapplication, in the latter half of the twentieth century, of classical rhetorical concepts—and particularly the idea that discourse is inherently persuasive (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Kenneth Burke (1950) pointed out the “necessary suasive nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclatures” (Freedman & Medway, 1994a, p. 3). As the idea of genre gained popularity in composition studies, there was an interest in the persuasive actions of genres. “If rhetoric is the study of verbal persuasion,” reasons Coe (1994), “then the rhetoric of genre is the study of how generic structures influence (i.e. ‘persuade’) both writers and readers” (p. 182).

Speech-act theory

Speech-act theory comes principally from philosopher John Austin (1962), who sees language as “a way of acting in the world” (Freedman & Medway, 1994a, p. 6). “Speech acts as envisioned by Austin and Searle are short utterances carrying out single acts. For the sake of analytic clarity Searle explicitly excludes from consideration any but the most simple utterances” (Bazerman, 1994a, p. 89).

Speech-genre theory

Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of “speech genres”, which encompass both spoken and written discourse, serves to open up the concept of genre. He distinguishes between “artistic genres” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 423) and “everyday genres” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 424): “an everyday genre is a mode of expression that involves conventions (a personal letter, table talk, a chat over the back fence, throwing rice at weddings) but is of the...ordinary everyday life and rooted in specific contexts” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 424).

Bakhtin defines genre in terms of its base form—the “utterance”. According to his theory, an utterance begins and ends with a change of speakers. Thus, a key feature of an utterance is its “addressivity”—or disposition toward an audience. The expectations of that audience, and other factors such as their “views and convictions”, “prejudices”, “sympathies and antipathies” and “specialized knowledge” (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 95-96), determine the appropriate utterance—in terms of content, style and structure. An utterance itself is not a genre, though. Similar utterances eventually develop into a “relatively stable type” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60) of utterance, which becomes a genre.

Social constructionism

The theory of social constructionism, which comes from philosopher Richard Rorty’s work in the early ‘80s, suggests that “knowledge is something that is socially constructed in response to communal needs, goals and contexts“ (Freedman & Medway, 1994a, p. 5). Kenneth Bruffee (1986), who applied Rorty’s philosophy to composition studies, explains “there is only agreement, the consensus arrived at for the time being by communities of knowledgeable peers. Concepts, ideas, theories, the world, reality, and facts are all language constructs generated by knowledge communities and used by them to maintain community coherence” (Freedman & Medway, 1994a, p. 5, quoting Bruffee). And so, instead of seeing texts in the traditional sense—as “containers of knowledge”, scholars have come to understand them “as part of the social process by which that knowledge, ‘the world, reality, and facts’ are made. :” (Freedman & Medway, 1994a, p. 5).

Rhetorical genre theory: Key concepts

This section discusses concepts that form the core of rhetorical genre theory:

genre as social action, situation and exigence, communicative purpose, discourse community, systems of genres, genre evolution, and genre fuzziness.

Genre as social action

The title of Miller's 1984 essay, "Genre as social action" has become an RGS mantra. When we use a genre, Miller suggests, we are acting—we are engaged in accomplishing something. We work "in the conventions of discourse that a society establishes as ways of 'acting together'" (Miller, 1994, p. 36). And that action, "whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only against a context of situation and through the attributing of motives" (Miller, 1994, p. 24).

RGS scholars have noted a reciprocal relationship between genre and social action; social action shapes genre but genre also shapes social action. As Miller suggested, "in...enacting the ends that one has learned one may have, one confirms and realizes the culture" (Medway, 2002, p. 145, citing Miller, 1984). Bazerman applies the concept to his investigation of patent applications: "The existence of patent applications are preconditions for the intention to obtain a patent, and therefore to apply for one" (Bazerman, 1994a).

Situation

Miller (1994) describes genres as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (Miller, 1994, p. 31). She argues that, "as action, [genre] acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose" (Miller, 1994, p. 37). What is particularly important for genre studies, says Miller, is that situations recur and that recurrent situations tend to produce recurrent actions, or "comparable responses" (Miller, 1994, p. 24, citing Bitzer 1968). Coe (1994)

elaborates: “When we see past the uniqueness of a particular situation and recognize it as familiar, we activate (at least provisionally) a structure we have previously decided is generally appropriate to that type of situation. New and radically different types of situations call for new strategies, which may be embodied in new structures.” (Coe, 1994, citing himself, 1974; 1975; 1992)

Our utterances, then, are informed by the type of situation we find ourselves in, and we draw on our experiences in similar situations, to guide us. Our communications follow common patterns because they belong to common types of situations:

The apparently infinite number of different possible situations represents in reality a very much smaller number of general types of situations, which we can describe in such terms as ‘players instructing novice in a game’, ‘mother reading bedtime story to her child’, ‘customer ordering goods over the telephone’, ‘teacher guiding pupils’, ‘discussion of a poem’, and the like. (Miller, 1994, p.30, quoting Halliday 1978)

This typification, Miller points out, is a product of the human mind: “It is through the process of typification that we create recurrence, analogies, similarities. What recurs is not a material situation (a real, objective, factual event) but our construal of a type (Miller, 1994, p. 234). The recurrence, Miller continues, only exists in our perception—no situation actually recurs. Similar situations occur, and we draw them together in our minds. Recurrence, then, is a subjective perception.

Communicative purpose

A key element of Swales' notion of genre is the idea of communicative purpose: "A genre is a class of communicative events...The principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes" (Swales, 1990, p. 53). This definition is in line with Miller (1984) in its emphasis on purpose over form as defining criteria for a genre. Swales illustrates how communicative purpose can be used as a litmus-test for genre: "Correspondence... does not constitute a genre as it does not represent a coherent set of shared purposes." (p. 53).

As a defining feature of genre, however, communicative purpose has been controversial. "Swales has been criticized for suggesting that such communicative events and purposes have an objective reality, as opposed to Miller's emphasis on the subjective perception of recurrent situations and social actions." (Smart, 2006, comment on draft of this paper).

In his 2004 monograph, *Research genres*, Swales revisits communicative purpose, concluding "it is sensible to abandon social purpose as an immediate or quick method for sorting discourses into generic categories, while retaining it as a valuable long-term outcome of analysis" (p. 72).

Discourse community

Swales' major contribution to RGS is the concept of discourse community. In *Genre Analysis* (1990), he proposes a detailed definition of the concept, which draws on Hertzberg's (1986) nice overview of the connotations of the term:

Use of the term ‘discourse community’ testifies to the increasingly common assumption that discourse operates within conventions defined by communities, be they academic disciplines or social groups. The pedagogies associated with writing across the curriculum and academic English now use the notion of ‘discourse communities’ to signify a cluster of ideas: that language use in a group is a form of social behavior, that discourse is a means of maintaining and extending the group’s knowledge and of initiating new members into the group, and that discourse is epistemic or constitutive of the group’s knowledge. (Swales, 1990, p. 21, citing Herzberg 1986)

A good example of a discourse community, Swales suggests, is the “Specific Interest Group” (Swales, 1990, p. 24).

Swales proposes six defining characteristics of discourse communities: common goals, intercommunication, information and feedback mechanisms, genres, specific texts, and expert members (Swales, 1990). A discourse community maintains its genres, he says, establishing “constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their content, positioning and form.” Swales calls this genre rationale. Genre rationale accounts for why some instances of a genre are more successful than others (e.g. student papers that get A’s)—they are more generic, or “prototypical” and thus more acceptable to the expert members of the discourse community.

Discourse community is a valuable concept to RGS because it provides a framework for understanding textual variation—explaining why a text can be appropriate for some readers, but inappropriate for others. Schryer (1993) describes textual cohesiveness as a trait specific to texts of a discourse community. Coherent

text is comprehensible to writer and reader, but not necessarily “cohesive”—or comprehensible to people outside the discourse community (Bishop, 1999, p. 224, citing Schryer (1993): “Anyone who has observed reports in various organizations knows that what “counts” as a valid report changes from organization to organization in terms not only of content but also of form and style” (Schryer, 1993, p. 208). Bazerman (1994) explains the importance of “contextual considerations” to the success of an utterance:

The contextual conditions identify such things as timing of the utterance; authority of the utterer; relationship between speaker and hearer; psychological state of the speaker and hearer towards the act, the utterance and each other; the speaker and hearer’s perception of the situation of utterance; the conventions of language through which the utterance is enacted, and the kinds of particulars (propositions and predications) included, guide the creation of a successful utterance.” (p. 85)

It is through such standards, and “restricting the communications of those who have not learned the standard forms,” that discourse communities maintain their “boundaries” and “integrity” (Coe, 1994, p. 185).

Systems of genres

Another key contribution of RGS is the notion that genres are interrelated, which Charles Bazerman lays out in an influential 1994 article called “Systems of genres and the enactment of social intentions”. Systems of genres, he explains, involve “interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings” (Bazerman, 1994a, p. 97). These interactions are conventionalized in the social setting, with

genres following each other another in a systematic way. Bazerman's example is the legal patent:

...a patent may not be issued unless there is an application. An infringement complaint cannot be filed unless there is a valid patent. An affidavit about the events in a laboratory on a certain date will not be sworn unless a challenge to the patent is filed. The intervention of each of the follow-up genres with its attendant macro-speech act, if successful, will have consequences for other genres and speech acts to follow.” (Bazerman, 1994a, p. 98)

So “to achieve our ends”, Bazerman elaborates, “we must successfully hold up our ends of the generic exchanges. That is we must successfully identify the generic utterance appropriate for our needs at each point and successfully fulfill the conditions that will constitute the perfected act” (Bazerman, 1994a, p. 98). The idea of systems of genres has allowed genre theorists to see genres in the larger social context that they respond to.

Genre evolution

Schryer (1993) takes up Bakhtin's idea that, although genres must have certain relatively static characteristics in order for them to be considered a genre, these characteristics exhibit “transformativity” (p. 208). Schryer describes genres as “stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action.” (p. 208). She explains:

[Genres] are heavily conventionalized and yet contain inherent contradictions so that their users have internal options and thus some freedom of expression,

depending on the genre. Genres, because they exist before their users, shape their operators, yet their users and their discourse communities constantly remake and reshape them.” (pp. 208-209)

Schryer explains that “genres vary externally when social actors have a choice of genres with which to fulfill a task. They vary internally when social actors working within a genre have a choice of strategies or forms.” (p. 208, based on Witte).

Genre fuzziness

Perhaps the most useful definition of genre is the least precise. While Swales attempted to overcome some of the “fuzziness” of the concept, Medway embraces it. Reporting on his 2002 study of architecture student notebooks—Medway ruminates about the definition of genre (for genre analytic purposes). He argues that despite significant differences in approach and format, the sketchbooks still constitute a genre—albeit a “fuzzy” one. His resulting redefinition of genre reflects this fuzziness:

...perhaps the notion of genre needs to be fuzzy. Perhaps there are degrees of genreness, from tightly defined (or ossified—certainly not the case in this instance) to baggy and indeterminate. Certainly, such a view would be in the spirit of Bakhtin’s account of “speech genres,” which range from military commands to novels. Genre theory may amount to little more than this; that it’s helpful to be able to say that when people do roughly similar sorts of textual things in circumstances perceived as roughly similar, then we are in the presence of a construct that is a real social fact—and let’s call it a genre. In doing no more than this, genre theory takes us a sizable step forward from

those taxonomic grids that locate texts in terms of function, audience, level or abstraction, and the like (e.g., Kinneavy, 1983), by adding to those dimensions an acknowledgement of localized and historical situation types (Freedman & Medway, 1994b).” (Medway, 2002, p. 141)

Defining rhetorical genre theory

Before proceeding, It’s important to note one distinction: The field we’re discussing was originally named North American genre studies by Freedman and Medway (1994), since it developed primarily in North America—and could be distinguished in certain ways from a parallel movement in Australia. That movement has been called “systemic” genre studies (Paltridge, 2001, p. 2) due to the significant influence it draws from the M.A.K. Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics. In systemic genre studies, Paltridge reports, genre is more akin to text type:

The term text type describes patterns of discourse organization that occur across different genres, such as description, narrative, instruction, explanation, definition, exemplification, classification, compare-and-contrast, cause-and-effect, discussion, argument, and problem-solution texts. In some of the Australian genre literature, some of these texts types are called genres. (Paltridge, 2001)

Systemic theory does, however, emphasize the “choices a speaker or writer makes from the language system in particular contexts of use. These choices are described as functional, rather than grammatical” (Paltridge, 2001, p. 2). Both rhetorical and systemic genre theory, then, focus on the social function and the importance of context (as with many dichotomies, this one is plagued by overlap).

The RGS moniker was coined by Aviva Freedman in 2001 “to refer to that body of genre theory, research, and scholarship that has developed primarily in North America over the past twenty years” (p. 1). Freedman’s definition:

RGS considers genres as “typified symbolic actions in response to stock sets of situation types. Such a notion of genre allows for dynamism and change, given the inherent fluidity of the sociohistorical context to which genres respond. (Artemeva & Freedman, 2006, p. 12, citing Freedman 2001)

And my definition, based on the RGS literature surveyed above: a genre is a type of utterance that recurs in situations perceived as similar in response to a typical social exigence. Utterances respond to other utterances in systems maintained by discourse communities to serve their communicative purposes (and sustain their ideologies). Because genres evolve, their nature can be fuzzy at times.

Implications for education

In this section, I discuss the implications of rhetorical genre theory for education, within the following categories: the acquisition process, explicit instruction, discourse community and audience, simulation and authenticity, genre-learning strategies as empowerment, and teacher role.

The acquisition process

Freedman (1987) reports on a study of first-year law students learning how to write “a discipline-specific genre” (Freedman, 1987, p. 96). Inspired by Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) *Ways with Words*, Freedman’s ethnographic study follows six students’ progress over an academic year, delving deeply into the process students

go through in learning to write in the law genre—in being “socialized into the discipline” (Freedman, 1987, p.). The process, she reports, is largely subconscious. Freedman found that her participants learned to write in the genre without explicit instruction on, or conscious awareness of its textual features. Furthermore, they did this without looking at models of the genre—apparently, students read only from a textbook which represented a different genre. Freedman suggests that her participants learned to adhere to the rhetorical conventions of their discipline by cultivating a “dimly felt sense” (Freedman, 1987, p. 102) of the genre. One participant said she did poorly on her second paper because she “didn’t have a sense of what they wanted” (Freedman, 1987, p. 103).

This “dimly-felt sense”, Freedman finds, develops from: reading and writing they’ve done in the past (particularly academic reading and writing); what the professor says in class about the assignment—and the assignment instructions themselves; the lexicon and “lines of reasoning” (p. 105) used by professor, TA and textbook authors to present the subject matter; and conversations among students in discussion groups. Freedman notes students’ ability to self-correct. In attempting to satisfy the requirements delineated by the professor, her participants did not look for specific feedback on their writing. Instead, she reports, they gauged their success largely by the grade received, and (if necessary), modified their “dimly-felt sense” of the genre and adjusted their approach to achieving the end result. And Freedman notes that these modifications and adjustments weren’t based on prof. or TA commentary—students paid more attention to the mark as an evaluation of their success and less to the sometimes extensive comments given.

This makes sense if we consider students’ dimly-felt sense of the genre as their

own—part of a complex web of "beliefs, assumptions and knowledge (BAK)" (Woods, 1996) that cannot be wiped clean every time they take a new class. Perhaps it can only be adapted: "Accompanying [students'] broad schema" Freedman explains, "was a recognition that this schema had to be modified further for particular disciplines and/or assignments" (Freedman, 1987, p. 104). It should be noted that Freedman's students were native English speakers; accordingly, they had a good amount of relevant content and form schemata. Non-native English speakers, since their English-medium schemata is considerably smaller, may not have the same ability to work from a dimly-felt sense, or to self-correct.

Swales (1990) emphasizes the role of schemata (prior knowledge) in our acquisition of genre: "[we] consistently overlay schemata on events to align those events with previously established patterns of experience, knowledge and belief" (p. 83). Central to his theory is that "content schemata" is just as important as "formal schemata" (p. 84) for guiding us into genres. Success in a genre, for example, requires knowing what content is appropriate (Paltridge 2001). Swales suggests that teachers cannot expect students to perform in genres without cultivating schemata.

As for how schemata develops, Swales invokes Becker's (1983) "particularist position", which holds that we store particular information about each instance of a genre, as opposed to general information about the genre itself. Says Swales:

[Becker] usefully emphasizes the well-attested phenomenon that each experience we have of a class of events changes our perceptions of that class. Equally usefully, it points to the strength of textual memory. There are quotations that we use and respond to, just as there are 'catch phrases' that we

consider indexical of people well known to us. So it is that memory of *a text* (as opposed to memory of *text*) allows us to make comments like ‘The imagery here seems reminiscent of *The Waste Land*’... (Swales, 1990, p. 86)

The particularist position would seem to hold that model texts are important to genre acquisition. In fact, though Freedman (1987) reports that models weren’t necessary to her participants, she doesn’t rule out their value. In a 1994 paper, she suggests that “good student papers” (p. 205) may serve as models of school genres—but she wouldn’t advise teaching the models explicitly.

Explicit instruction

In 1994, citing her 1987 study, Freedman asserts that “Clearly, explicit teaching is not necessary for the acquisition of even very sophisticated school genres” (Freedman, 1994, p. 196). Freedman’s argument hinges on parallels she draws between child and adult learners—the implication that since children don’t learn explicitly, adults may not either—and Stephen Krashen’s (1991) theory that conscious learning leads to conscious knowledge and only unconscious acquisition leads to proficiency in performance.

Woods (2006, classroom discussion) puts Freedman’s argument in perspective—her 1987 and 1994 papers were intended as an alternative to Sydney School genre education which at the time was highly explicit. And, to be fair, Freedman doesn’t discount the potential benefit of some explicit instruction—she simply reasons that it may not be necessary, and given the potential of misleading students, as in Giltrow’s (2002) “Meta-Genre” (see below), perhaps should be avoided.

Discourse community and audience

The explicit teaching debate aside, Freedman's (1987) study is interesting as it investigates the socialization process that students go through in learning a new genre. Freedman's participants didn't need to consider the textual form—they were initiated into the discourse community socially. Their cultivation of a “dimly-felt sense” of the genre was a social process—based on grades received on their writing, etc. Swales (1990) suggests that academic classes can (and perhaps should) become a distinct discourse community in their own right:

Except in exceptional cases of well-knit groups of advanced students already familiar with much of the material, an academic class is unlikely to be a discourse community at the outset. However, the hoped-for outcome is that it will form a discourse community (McKenna, 1987). Somewhere down the line, broad agreement on goals will be established, a full range of participatory mechanisms will be created, information exchange and feedback will flourish by peer-review and instructor commentary, understanding the rationale of and facility with appropriate genres will develop, control of the technical vocabulary in both oral and written contexts will emerge, and a level of expertise that permits critical thinking be made manifest. (Swales, 1990, p. 32)

In many courses, however, students are instructed to address their writing to an imagined audience outside the classroom. Giltrow (2002) gives examples: one TA says that a “good essay” is one you should “be able to give to someone who doesn't know anything about the topic and the [should] be able to make some sense of it;” a sociology professor says that “essays should be written to someone else in this class or someone else in some other class, your parents or your friends, not me”—one

instructor (presumably discussing a religion paper) even advises a student to “assume that [they were] writing to an audience that has never heard of God” (p. 189).

Despite such advice, students have to keep in mind their real audience, which is always the TA or professor. “Dorothy Winsor (1994),” reports Giltrow, “observed engineering students composing an introduction that they imagined their teacher reading but which they saw themselves addressing to someone who didn’t know anything about the assignment” (Giltrow, 2002). Which brings us to another academic genre issue: simulation and authenticity.

Simulation and authenticity

In “Wearing suits to class: Simulating genres and simulations as genre”, Freedman, Adam & Smart (1994) compare discourse in a university financial analysis class with a workplace that those students might expect to find themselves in upon graduation. They found clear indications that, despite the professor’s intention to simulate the workplace context, students were working in school genres, not workplace genres. They also note that the professor’s approach to student texts was not that of a workplace supervisor—he read as a grader, separating texts into piles according to potential grades, and overlooking textual inconsistencies or shortcomings when he saw evidence of student learning. The authors suggest that because the students’ real motivation is demonstrating knowledge to their professor in order to get grades, their purpose and audience remain in the academy. Such simulations, in a sense, actually constitutes genres in themselves.

It is the idea of preparation for a future context, a future audience, a future discourse community that complicates education. If we stay in the present context,

the issue dissolves. In this sense, any situation may be considered an authentic context. Freedman explains: “School writing has a real context—not the imaginary situation specified in some assignments (from ‘you are an irate customer writing to the President of Air Canada’ to elaborated ‘cases’), but the classroom itself and all that it entails” (Freedman, 1994, p. ?). And following Swales’ depiction of the classroom as discourse community, the teacher is a real audience, and the classroom produces real exigencies. In a sense, using the classroom as a site of simulation devalues the real academic context that it represents.

Freedman, Adam & Smart do, however, note some benefits of classroom simulation. There were similarities between the academic and workplace genres, especially in the type of argumentation used: “the kinds of claims made, and the ways of justifying such claims...specifically, the economic paradigm and its model of human behavior based on rational expectation and utility maximization” (p. 216). “When students leave the university to enter the workplace”, they allow, “they may have acquired, in part as a result of their writing in disciplinary courses, the intellectual stance, the ideology, and the values necessary for their professional lives.” (p. 216)

The experience of entering a classroom (discourse community) and figuring out professor (audience) expectations may prepare us for entering any other discourse community and writing appropriately. In fact, EAP programs justify themselves on this point. The experience of learning to write appropriately for one instructor in one classroom context is, presumably, valuable preparation for the next class. Especially for students who plan to go on in the academy, classroom writing is authentic practice. Of course new contextual factors will need to be considered in subsequent

classes.

In the end, Freedman, Adam & Smart assert that the benefits of simulation are limited—that students will have to learn new genres when they enter the workforce: “It is only through immersion in workplace contexts that writers can develop the practical knowledge (Giddens, 1984) or local knowledge (Geertz, 1983) and the situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991) necessary to genre knowledge.” (p. 222). Presumably, the benefit of such simulation is that it mitigates the learning curve that student will face when they’re on the job somewhere.

Paré (1994) illustrates how external audiences can actually enter the classroom. He describes a project he designed for engineering students in which they worked together to assemble a textbook that was actually used to teach physics to high school students. Paltridge (2001) suggests “letters of invitation and thanks to guest speakers, letters to the editor, and information leaflets for newcomers to the language center in which the students are studying.” (p. 56) Students are more motivated, he argues, “if the pieces of writing they do in class can become genuine pieces of communication with real audiences, such as other students, visitors, the local newspaper, or organization.” (Paltridge, 2001, p. 56, drawing on Hedge 1988). So external audiences can be invoked in authentic ways.

Genre-learning strategies as empowerment

If classrooms are unique discourse communities that cannot completely simulate target discourse communities, and if students are going to need to learn new genres each time they enter new communities, it makes sense for teachers to focus on genre-learning strategies that can be reapplied. It also makes sense to share genre theory

with students, so they better understand the connection between text form and social action.

One empowering approach is teaching students to become genre analysts. Swales suggests that discourse communities can be studied using ethnographic approaches in order to get at the contextual factors at play. Paltridge (2001) reports that Johns (1997), and Prior (1995) also herald the benefits of students doing ethnographic analysis on the communities that produce their target genres. This approach fits with learner autonomy theory as it allows students to choose the genres they investigate—after all, teachers can never be sure what genres students will want to learn down the road.

Teacher role

Teachers who take Freedman's (1987; 1994) advice and avoid explicit genre instruction may struggle for alternate ways to provide genre focus that will support students' acquisition processes. Freedman (1994) illustrates:

Whatever their curricular goal, teachers may draw on a range of strategies to ensure that students have sufficient exposure to relevant or related discourse, that they experience the rhetorical exigences as insiders within the relevant contexts, and that they are both 'pushed', and 'guided' in their attempts to respond appropriately to these exigences. (p. 200)

Paltridge (2001) puts it nicely: a teacher has a role to play in "setting up facilitative environments" (p. 50).

Summary/Conclusion

In this paper I've attempted the following: an overview of the theoretical roots of RGS, a list of key RGS concepts; a definition of rhetorical genre theory, and a discussion of its key implications for education.

I think RGS has a lot to offer learners with an interest in seeing beyond the forms of discourse. I think it can prepare us to negotiate new situations, and be successful in any social spheres. Teachers interested in genre-based instruction, I think, can strengthen their practice by considering the intricacies of the genre acquisition process, cultivating academic discourse communities, and striking a balance between simulation and authenticity.

As we go forward, I think we will need more published examples of pedagogical units like Swales' one on academic communications. We will also need research studies that investigate these pedagogical units. For genre-based instruction to be successful, we need to refine our practice collectively.

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