

Abstracts

Producing Work and the Economy

- *A Central Bank's "Communications Strategy": The Interplay of Activity, Discourse Genres, and Technology in a Time of Organizational Change*

Graham Smart, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

This chapter reports on an ethnographic study of the technology-mediated discourse practices of a professional organization in a period of major transition. Employing theories of genre and activity along with other theoretical constructs, the study examined how the Bank of Canada, the country's central bank, employs a "Communications Strategy" to orchestrate the organization's communicative interactions with other social groups in the Canadian public-policy sphere. After identifying a set of written and spoken genres associated with the Communications Strategy, the chapter suggests that the genre set and various mediating technologies can be usefully viewed as parts of a local sphere of organizational activity. The chapter then describes two features of the genre set: the genre knowledge within the community-of-practice associated with it and the relationship of the genre set to processes of organizational change. Next, the chapter discusses the role that the genre set plays in the activity of the Communications Strategy, focusing on three primary functions: co-coordinating the intellectual and discursive work of a large number of individuals performing a variety of professional roles; generating, shaping, and communicating the "public information" that constitutes the Bank's official public position on its monetary policy; and acting as a site for organizational learning. The chapter concludes with five theoretical claims regarding the way in which the genre set, mediated by technology, operates within the Bank, suggesting that these theoretical claims might serve as a heuristic for other researchers.

2 *Structure and Agency in Medical Case Presentations*

Catherine F. Schryer, University of Waterloo, Canada; Catherine F. Schryer, Lorelei Lingard, University of Toronto, Canada; Marlee Spafford, University of Waterloo, Canada; Kim Garwood, Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Canada.

This study investigated the role that medical case presentations play in the renegotiation or reconstruction of agency that occurs between medical students and physicians. Medical case presentations perform a dual function in teaching hospitals. They constitute formalized ways that physicians convey complex information about patients, and they are educational vehicles which medical students use to demonstrate their medical problem-solving abilities. This study observed and transcribed 16 oral case presentations performed by third-year medical students in a children's hospital. As part of an interview protocol, two transcripts, one from a less and one from a more expert student, were turned into scripts, dramatized and videotaped. Ten faculty and 11 students were interviewed and asked to identify the differences between a more or less expert student performance. Data were analyzed using modified grounded theory and statistical strategies. Using a combination of dialectical social theories—specifically structuration theories (Giddens and Bourdieu) and activity theory (Vygotsky and Engestrom)-- as well as rhetorical theories of genre (Bazerman, Russell and Schryer), this study concludes that genres such as case presentations function as mediating tools that allow participants to negotiate agency across generations and across levels of

expertise as sets of strategic choices. This renegotiation or reconstruction of agency, however, is not unproblematic. Genres have ideological consequences, and, through medical case presentations, medical students are learning to classify in quite specific ways, behaviors that could negatively affect communication with their patients.

- *Palm™ Technologies: An Activity-Theoretic Analysis of the Rapid Emergence of a New Writing Tool*

Cheryl Geisler, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Palm Technologies, a group of personal digital assistants or PDAs developed in the early 90s, have rapidly embedded themselves into the daily lives of users. The aim of this chapter is to provide an activity theoretic account of PDAs as technologies of text. Three questions are pursued: Out of what cultural history did Palm Technologies emerge? What motivated users to adopt Palm Technologies? How did Palm Technologies become incorporated into the activity patterns of everyday life? The evidence presented suggests that Palm Technologies work by moving systematic management techniques originally developed for organizations into the personal sphere. When systematic management becomes personal, task management separates from the task itself, leading to a fragmentation of motive that may challenge some of the basic assumptions of activity theory. This fragmentation is mediated through the space-time affordances of textualization and concurrent linearization of time. Like the systematic management of organizations before it, such textual affordances may become subject to surveillance and manipulation--by ourselves if not by others. All of this suggests that some interesting issues will arise as PDA technologies attempt to move outside of their managerial base and into the domestic sphere, in effect *databasing* our lives.

- *Compound Mediation in Software Development: Using Genre Ecologies to Study Textual Artifacts*

Clay Spinuzzi, University of Texas, Austin

Traditionally, technical communicators have seen the texts that they produce--manuals, references, and instructions--as "bridging" or mediating between a worker and her tool. But field studies of workers indicate that the mediational relationship is much more complicated: Workers often draw simultaneously upon many different textual artifacts to mediate their work, including not only the official genres produced by technical communicators manuals but also ad hoc notes, comments, and improvisational drawings produced by the workers themselves. In this chapter, I theorize these instances of *compound mediation* by drawing on activity theory and genre theory. I describe an analytical framework, that of *genre ecologies*, that can be used to systematically investigate compound mediation within and across groups of workers. Unlike other analytical frameworks that have been used in studies of technology (such as distributed cognition's functional systems and contextual design's work models), the genre ecology framework highlights the interpretive and cultural-historical aspects of compound mediation that are so important in understanding the use of textual artifacts. The analytical framework is illustrated by an observational study of how 22 software developers in a global corporation used various textual artifacts to mediate their software development work.

- *Writing and the Management of Power: Producing Public Policy in New Zealand*

Derek Wallace, Victoria University, Wellington

In contrast to the traditional view of policymaking, which assumes a rational process of problem identification and solution evaluation, much actual policy turns out to be solution-led. In other words, predetermined policy measures are imposed as “solutions” to retrospectively presented “problems”. This has been particularly true, ironically, of the supposedly rational neo-liberal or “New Right” resurgence of the last quarter-century, whose influence is perhaps diminishing in some quarters but continues to be felt.

In these conditions, the processes and mechanisms of policy development, particularly the various genres of the formal written stages, can be viewed as a *system of production*, where the favored policy is “managed” through the traditional democratic framework of agenda setting, consultation, and enactment. This chapter charts the passage of a particular instance of policy development in New Zealand – the privatization of electricity supply – through this textual regime. The chapter shows both how traditional textual genres can survive unchanged into new circumstances, thereby misleading their readers, and how genres can change or rupture under pressure of new conditions and expectations. It will be demonstrated that the staged production of policy creates a differentiation of audiences that limits participation; and that viewing the texts in interaction allows analysts to refine their perceptions of the rhetorical purposes of each.

Producing Selves in Community

- *Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity*

Paul Prior and Jody Shipka, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This chapter explores the chronotopic lamination (Bakhtin, 1981; Prior, 1998) of writers’ literate activity—the dispersed, fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action along with the ways multiple activity footings are held and managed. Twenty-one academic writers (undergraduates, graduates, and professors) participated in interviews where they were asked to draw and then discuss two representations of their processes in writing a particular piece. To further explore writers’ multiple streams of activity and the ways texts mediate that activity, we also asked participants to share drafts, final texts, notes, annotated readings or other material they used in their writing. We focus here on four case studies that illustrate our findings. The interviews showed that the writers’ work crossed institutional settings, especially mixing home, community, and discipline, and thus was deeply laminated (multimotivational and multi-mediated). In particular, we found that writers actively engage in what we call ESSP’s (environment selecting and structuring practices), which not only lead to their texts but also contribute to the distributed, delicate, and partly intentional management of affect, sense, identity, and consciousness.

- *Intercultural Knowledge Building: The Literate Action of a Community Think Tank*

Linda Flower, Carnegie Mellon University

Intercultural rhetoric is the study of literate practices that use cultural difference to build knowledge and support wise action. This paper documents the practice of a community think tank on urban workforce issues and examines the strategies used in this dialogue to

1) design an intercultural forum, 2) structure inquiry within diversity, and 3) build intercultural knowledge. It asks, can such literate action produce significant, *transformative* knowledge?

The study draws on conceptual tools of activity theory and social cognitive rhetoric to explore the conflicts built into this process and the mediating role of documentation. It argues that two important outcomes of intercultural inquiry are its ability 1) to construct a richly situated representation of workforce issues--as a social and cognitive activity, and 2) to build a guide for action that emerges not solely from the arguments of causal logic, but from culturally negotiated "working theories," attuned to multiple realities and possible outcomes.

- *Participant and Institutional Identity: Self-representation across Multiple Genres at a Catholic College*

Katrina M. Powell, Louisiana State University

This qualitative research project, informed by ethnographic and feminist research methodologies, focuses on how students negotiate various genres with which they come in contact. Through the close analysis of a small, religious-affiliated, liberal arts college, this study examines how students' constructs of "self" are reflected in school genres and how their backgrounds, specific academic disciplines, and institutional goals affect those constructs. In order to conduct this analysis, activity theory is used to examine possible competing goals within the activity system (the college itself) and, in turn, how those goals can affect student writing. Since participant identity is an issue of activity systems, I examine identity through self-representation, as it has been theorized in autobiography studies. Combining activity theory and theories of self-representation and performance, I create a framework to explore how genres can simultaneously liberate and constrain and how students negotiate the various tensions they may encounter within an activity system.

- *Creating a Writer's Identity on the Boundaries of Two Communities of Practice*

Jean Ketter and Judith W. Hunter, Grinnell College

In this case study, we explore the way one student, who aspired to become a professional writer, learned through her writing activity in two communities: academia and public relations. We use activity theory to conceptualize the student's learning as an activity that balances between individual agency in meaning making and the social, historical and cultural forces that shape how individuals make meaning. Perceiving the two settings as communities of practice that provided opportunities for pursuing shared enterprises and engaging in collective learning, we show how the student's simultaneous participation in these contrasting communities challenged and refined her understanding of what it means to be an effective writer. We discuss how the work she engaged in on the boundaries of two writing communities enhanced her developing identity as a professional writer as she became aware of and tested the limitations of writing in these two communities. Our study shows the benefit of providing opportunities for teachers and students to explore how contrasting communities of practice define successful writing activity and how writing activity operates in the cultural and political sphere of each community.

Producing Education

- *'Big Picture People Rarely Become Historians': Genre Systems and the Contradictions of General Education*

David R. Russell and Arturo Yañez

This study synthesizes Y. Engeström's version of cultural historical activity theory and North American genre systems theory to explore the problem of specialized discourses in activities that involve non-specialists, in this case students in a university 'general education' course in Irish history struggling to write the genres of professional academic history. We trace the textual pathways (genre systems) that mediate between the activity systems (and motives) of specialist teachers and the activity systems (and motives) of non-specialist students. Specifically, we argue that the specialist/lay contradiction in U.S. general education is embedded in historical practices in the modern university, and manifested in alienation that students often experience through the writing requirements in general education courses. This historical contradiction also makes it difficult for instructors to make writing meaningful for non-specialists and go beyond fact-based, rote instruction to mediate higher-order learning through writing. However, our analysis of the Irish History course suggests this alienation may be overcome when students, with the help of their instructors, see the textual pathways (genre systems) of specialist discourse leading to useful knowledge/skill in their activity systems beyond the course as specialists in other fields or as citizens.

- *Legends of the Centre: System, Self, and Linguistic Consciousness*

Janet Giltrow, University of British Columbia

Commentators on language standardization, including Bourdieu and Bakhtin, provide various perspectives on what this chapter calls *modern linguistic consciousness*: speakers' awareness of their own speech in relation to others' and in relation to the operation of centralizing *system*. In this chapter, these formulations are used to analyze interview data collected from readers and writers at a South Asian university—and, in turn, these data elaborate the picture of modern linguistic consciousness. Readers and writers can pick out *self* amidst the words of others, and in the presence of centralizing mandates; they can position themselves in working spaces adjacent to *system*, and, while recognizing speech norms, imagine themselves as not occupying those norms. Linguistic consciousness can be detected in the expression of *rules*—but rules themselves turn out to be complex spaces hosting diverse possibilities. Moreover, modern systems, in managing the speech of populations, may not always operate exclusively in the service of the centre.

- *Accounting for Conflicting Mental Models of Communication in Student-Teacher Interaction: An Activity Theory Analysis*

Kathryn Evans, University of San Francisco

Using activity theory as a framework, this article discusses a naturalistic study of two college classrooms in which the instructors often relied on transmission models of communication—models assuming that stable, fixed meanings can be neatly transmitted from person to person. Particularly noteworthy was that these instructors seemed to rely on transmission models despite training in recent theories of communication and that, contrary to previous assumptions that people's communicative models are stable, both teachers

shifted in and out of these models. Based on an analysis of the contexts surrounding shifts into transmission models, the article argues that these shifts happened in patterned ways. It then accounts for the resilience of transmission models within a broader sociocultural framework.

- *What is Not Institutionally Visible Does Not Count: The Problem of Making Activity Assessable, Accountable, and Plannable*

Charles Bazerman, University of California at Santa Barbara

This hypertext examines from an activity theory perspective the vexed problem of assessment and its relation to planning, accountability, curriculum, and learning. Assessment although only part of the educational process has implications for almost all of education. Local, state, and federal policies that have put great weight and high stakes on a battery of assessment tools that stand outside the daily life of the classroom but are intended to hold classrooms, teachers, and schools accountable for results.

While situated evaluation is an aspect of most human practices, institution-wide testing creates substantial difficulties for the local practices of each class, and particularly creates tensions between student-centered classroom practice and subject-centered expectations. Such tensions have been a continuing puzzle for progressive education. Dewey and his followers regularly preferred to keep evaluation and decision-making local, but for various institutional reasons had to seek larger ways of assessing student achievement without ever being able to develop fully appropriate assessment tools. The teaching of writing has faced a similar dilemma, with standardized forms of writing assessment setting reductionist definitions and expectations of writing, and not directing students towards the highest levels of accomplishment. This study seeks considers genre and activity analysis as the basis for defining and assessing writing tasks through analysis of materials collected from a complex sequence of social studies writing assignments on the Maya from a sixth grade class.

- *Dissertation Writers' Negotiations with Competing Activity Systems*

Dana Lundell & Richard Beach, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Previous research on dissertation writing fails to embed it within the context of different, and often competing institutional forces constituting the genre expectations associated with producing the dissertation. The purpose of this study was to examine the negotiations of dissertation writers in a large Midwestern research university across a range of different activity systems: the Graduate School, department, advisor, committee, employment, and potential job market as different "layered" (Prior, 1998) systems. Analysis of interview data of 11 writers indicated that writers perceived marked differences in the objects/outcomes, roles, norms, and genre tools to vary across these different systems. While the Graduate School and departments formulated one set of expectations, the advisor or committee articulated different expectations for completing the dissertation. Writers also experienced time conflicts between the demands of teaching and writing. And, they experienced conflicting outcomes for the dissertation related to writing for an advisor or committee as opposed to positioning themselves for the job market, creating ambiguity related to their dissertation audience. They also noted that the research university positions the dissertation genre as preparing students for positions in other research universities as opposed work in universities in which teaching is a priority.