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WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Implications for Classroom Practice

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In our first chapter, as you may remember, we laid out what we saw as the territory: the evolution and present state of genre theory as it is applied to the teaching of writing. We located ourselves in what Aviva Freedman and others call the “North American” school of genre theorists. We wrote that first chapter as part of the book’s prospectus, well before we had read the chapters that now form the body of the book. Our basic understanding of the field, and our position in that field, have not changed since that time. But our understandings of both theory and application have deepened and shifted as we read the chapter drafts and corresponded with the authors about these drafts. In this last chapter, we describe what we have learned through the dialogues that we have had with our chapter authors. In a sense, we have experienced the processes that many of our authors chronicle in their chapters, as they and their students negotiate their understandings around a classroom genre. As editors of this volume, we began with our own understandings, which were the product of our prior experience as scholars and as teachers. Through discourse with others, our understandings have evolved, as our thinking has been influenced, inflected, by the thinking of others.

As we have read through the chapter drafts, we have been impressed by the careful and thoughtful teaching that the authors describe. The teachers we meet in this book are thoughtful and reflective about the kinds of writing they assign and about the ways in which they will approach this writing in their classrooms. We have been impressed, too, with the range of genres that have found their way into these classrooms. The academic genres assigned by the teachers have a tremendous range and resist easy categorization by discipline. Karen St. Clair, in psychology, asks for an oral presentation with an accompanying one-page handout; Mike Edwards, in writing, asks for a researched persuasive essay as a Web site; Elizabeth Petroff, in comparative literature, asks for spiritual autobiographies; Rochelle Kapp and Bongsi Bangeni, in language development, ask for

an argument tailored for readers in the social sciences; David Hibbett, a biologist, asks for a mini-review aimed at nonspecialist science readers; David Eastzer, another biologist, asks for a flyer, a science in the media journal, and a case study as his students work toward a larger project; John Williams, a historian, asks for an essay.

Through reading the book's chapters as they have evolved, we have learned how closely connected the genres chosen by the teachers are to their teaching goals, which are a function of their disciplines, certainly, but also of their institutions, the position of their course in the curriculum, and their own sense of what their students most need. So David Hibbett, working with upper-level science majors and graduate students, wants his students, as professionals in training, to be able to write a "mini-review" that explains a crux in their discipline to "a general audience who might not know the fungi he knew well." David Eastzer, working in the same discipline but with students in a general-education science course, wants his students to be informed citizens, able to read and understand reports of scientific research in the popular media. So the genres that he assigns are less connected to his discipline. The difference between these two science teachers' goals, and the genres in which they ask their students to write, can be understood in terms of the difference between a specialist course and a nonspecialist general-education course.

What we see in Eastzer's course is a balancing of specialist and nonspecialist goals, goals that that Russell and Yanez (2003) show can often be in tension in a general-education course. We see a similar balancing in the general-education courses of Petroff and St. Clair. Elizabeth Petroff, in comparative literature, wants her general-education students to come to a deeper understanding of their own lives as well as to become better readers of autobiography, and these goals have led her to focus her course on the reading and writing of spiritual autobiography. Karen St. Clair, in psychology, wants her general-education students to improve their ability to analyze and evaluate "complex contemporary issues in psychology" and to express their views in writing and speaking; this goal leads her to assign the oral presentation of an article in psychology accompanied by a handout.

First-year writing teachers, such as Kapp and Bangeni, McKee and Edwards, Kynard, and Peagler and Yancey, are teaching in courses whose institutional mission is, to some degree, to prepare students for academic writing in the rest of their curriculum. All want their first-year students to have a critical understanding of, and the ability to produce, the kinds

of writing required of them in their subsequent coursework. And, as we see, their understanding of this academic discourse varies a good deal. Because of this variation, their teaching goals for their students are different, and the difference brings about differences in genre: Kapp and Bangeni teach toward a critical approach to the argumentative essay in the social sciences; McKee and Edwards teach toward their students' ability to write on the Web; and Kynard wants her students to rethink and understand the research paper that they have previously learned to write. Peagler and Yancey include the resumé in their English 102 course as a way of fulfilling their own goals for their students' learning: to teach that all writing is situated and rhetorical, and to engage their students in reflective identity formation. Common to all of these first-year writing teachers, though, is an interest in students becoming more self-aware as writers and thinkers and more confident in their critical abilities, traits that are typically valued across many disciplines.

Though we have been naming genres in the paragraphs above, in our work with the chapter authors we have learned that these general labels say very little about the kind of texts that students are being asked to write in specific classes. By looking at teachers' intentions and practices in specific classes, we can see how they inflect genres with particular purposes. At the more abstract levels, genre knowledge exists as social knowledge that we carry in our heads and that varies depending on our past experiences and social interactions. As teachers, we then enact this knowledge in specific ways, depending on our intentions in a particular class. Thus, to take an obvious example from this collection, to say that Carmen Kynard assigns a "research paper" does little to explain what she asks her students to do. It is only through understanding her practice in the classroom that we can see that she is asking students for something quite different from the "typical" research paper, as she scaffolds her students' practice in drawing on their own knowledge and in writing in a range of voices. Reading about her practice enables us to consider alternatives to our own conceptions of this genre and our practice of teaching it. In this instance, Kynard's goals led her to teach against the dominant conventions for a research paper. In the instance of Kapp and Bangeni, their goals for their students, while similar in some ways to Kynard's, led in a different direction. They want their students to see the validity of their own views and voices, but for them, the focus is on helping their students do so within the realm of conventions of academic discourse. Thus they teach academic argument as it manifests itself in the social sciences.

We find it interesting—and are pleased, given our own theoretical position—that none of these teachers teaches form alone. For these authors, form is almost always connected to, or grows out of, personal and social purpose. When we look at the teachers' statements about their purposes for their students' writing, we see some surprising connections. Most striking to us is a connection between Peagler and Yancey's goals for their students' resumé writing and Petroff's goals for her students as they compose their spiritual autobiographies. Both are teaching genres that function in the world, but in very different ways. The resumé feels to us like a species of Britton's "transactional" writing—writing that does the work of the world; while the spiritual autobiography feels to us like a species of "expressive" writing. Yet, both teachers of these different genres inflect their teaching of these genres with a personal purpose for the student writers related to self-understanding and self-shaping. Peagler and Yancey see composing a resumé as an activity that stimulates reflection on one's past life and projection of one's future. Petroff sees both writing and reading spiritual autobiography as contributing to deeper self-understanding and, for some, healing. Reading both Peagler/Yancey and Petroff, we hear clear echoes of Britton, from Harding, on the "spectator" function of language, where through the telling one steps aside from the world to reflect on and reshape one's experiences. Petroff defines autobiography as a "search for self-knowledge and a desire to place ourselves in the world." It is through this writing that one creates the positioning of self in relation to others, linking personal and social functions. In other courses, the personal and social are intertwined as learning the ways of a given discipline. As Beaufort and Williams write, "Genres really are the vehicles of social action for those in a discourse community." In learning to write in genres of a given discipline, students are "doing" history or "doing" biology.

We have learned as well that talking about genres at this high level of abstraction—"the analytical essay" or "argument in the social sciences" or "the academic Web essay," and in this way talking only of forms and/or the teacher's intentions—does not help us see how students "learn" genre. What is most interesting to us in these chapters, because it teaches us about how students acquire genre knowledge, are moments when we can see negotiations taking place in the interaction between teacher and student—specific interactions situated in a specific classroom. Here we draw on the vocabulary of activity theory and look at activity systems (e.g., the classroom or the institution), genre systems (the institution's, the

discipline's), and genre sets (the student's, the teacher's) (Bazerman and Prior 2004, 309–19; Bawarshi 2003, 112–44). What we almost universally see in these chapters is that a teacher brings his or her genre set into the classroom via the syllabus, the assignment, and informal interaction with students. This genre set will be a function of the teacher's past experience, individual institution, and his or her location within that institution, as well as the teacher's learning goals for students. The students bring their own genre set with them—chiefly, with the exceptions shown in Palmquist's and Edwards and McKee's chapters, a set composed of academic genres they have previously experienced in their schooling. And then the negotiation begins, or not. The fruit of negotiation is the student's finished piece of writing, which will vary substantially from student to student, the variance a function of the difference among the genre sets that students bring to their writing, the nature of the negotiations, and their intentions in the specific situation. John Williams points to the limitation of situations where there is little interaction or negotiation. In reflecting retrospectively on his experience assigning a single end-of-semester essay in a large lecture course, he concludes that his learning goals for students were not realized. He points to the fact that the large class was not conducive to discussing the assignment and that the assignment did not occasion the same opportunity for practice and interaction between student and teacher as would have some short writings early in the semester.

A clear instance of this negotiation is visible in the accounts of David Eastzer's general-education Science in Society class, where Jonathan and Carson bring their very different genre sets with them into the classroom and, as Mary Soliday writes in chapter 4, these writers "used this knowledge to conform to, yet also depart from, David's instructions when they organized their work." And in Carmen Kynard's classroom we see a conflict between her students' genre sets, and in particular their understanding of the almost, for them, automated "research paper," and the kinds of writing that she wants her students to do. In a subsequent semester, to bring this conflict in understandings out for negotiation, she began by asking students to reflect on their prior research experiences in order to learn their internalized conception of this genre, "research paper."

Another instance of this negotiation occurs in a first-year writing course taught in computer-equipped classrooms, where Mike Edwards and Heidi McKee ask their students, in different ways, to write "papers" on the Web. Edwards wants academic essays that have been "migrated"

to the Web; McKee will accept “native” Web sites. Both teachers’ expectations are more visibly unclear than other teachers in our chapters, more visibly unclear because they are working in a new medium with academic genres that are, for the moment, not clearly defined. The students in this course bring to their academic Web composing their own experience of the Web, which is chiefly of nonacademic Web sites and is therefore to some degree unfamiliar to their teachers. The result, at least in Edwards’s class, is, as he writes, clearly visible “disjunctions created by our differing expectations about the conventions of essays and the World Wide Web.” McKee’s student Jennifer draws on her experience of the “bio profile” Web site; after the fact, McKee reflects that she finds herself missing the “little essay.” The Web sites produced by the students in Mike Palmquist’s study show the influence on these sites of print genres, such as the anthology. The one student, Kathy, whose site was not visibly influenced by print genres was influenced by her research into what she deemed “business Web sites”—a case of a student looking for models while she composes.

As we look at the chapters from this perspective, focusing on the negotiations that take place around genre, it begins to become clear that these negotiations are facilitated by informal interactions between teacher and student. The teacher presents his or her sense of the appropriate genre to students in a syllabus and in an assignment, but these documents are not adequate for the student to discover and understand precisely “what the teacher wants.” In the informal interaction that is part of class discussion or teacher responses to questions in lecture, the teacher can make expectations more explicit. Further, in discussion and other exchanges, both students and teachers can learn and change their understandings of a given genre. As Edwards and McKee demonstrate, the interaction can be two-way and can include what we learn from reading our students’ work. And, behind the careful work of a teacher like Elizabeth Petroff lie decades of this interaction, as her past students have helped shape her present sense of what spiritual autobiography can be.

In Mary Soliday’s chapter, one of her focus students, Dawn, describes how she came to understand David Eastzer’s expectations—not through the syllabus alone, or through David’s careful scaffolding through reading and writing, but through informal classroom interaction. “Well, we did a few examples—like in class...we would come to class [and] he’d give us an article [to] read and put up some sample questions on the board and then we would take like fifteen minutes to write out what we thought and then we would go over it. And he would say, ‘You know, this is the

kind of writing you need to do for the question.” Soliday distinguishes between the substantial “explicit maps for genres” that David supplied to his students and the implicit teaching he did “through the repeated social situations he created in his classroom—for example, through class discussions, lectures, and impromptu writing.” And Rachel remembers a moment during a class interaction with David when she and, she believes, her classmates as well, came to understand what was an essential point for David: that questions in science might not have clear answers. This understanding would have a formative effect on the academic writing that Rachel and her classmates would do in this class—visible in intellectual stance, voice, and perhaps structure.

In David Hibbett’s upper-level science course, although in his assignment he seemed to Anne Geller to have “suggested a fairly rigid textual structure,” what he wanted wasn’t “clear” to his students, who drew on their own genre sets as they tried to understand it. Was it “creative writing”? Was it like the research paper? Geller writes that, “it wasn’t until the writing workshops that David could articulate the central motive for writing a mini-review.” Geller continues, “It was the collaborative environment of David’s classroom that made negotiation of genre a possibility.” In this course, students gave presentations and planned classes. In Geller’s view, this sharing of authority helped them “practice the expert stance they would need to have in their mini-reviews.” These writing workshops reminded David of “‘lab meetings,’ times when all who work in a lab get together with the PI (principal investigator) to talk about and negotiate projects, experiments, successes, challenges, and pending publications.” In this interactive context, David’s students Caitlin and Ewa are able to draw on their very different academic genre sets as they move toward what David understands as the mini-review in science. As Geller notes, “We often forget the power of this type of conversation, perhaps because it is so difficult to fit into a semester’s discipline-specific teaching.”

In our introduction, we indicated our own discomfort with what has been identified as the Sydney School genre approach, primarily because of what seems to us its prescriptiveness. Not surprisingly, none of the contributors to our collection identify directly with this approach either. What we do see, though, is a variant genre approach, particularly in the courses taught by Kapp and Bangeni, Peagler and Yancey, and Petroff. From these, we learn how a genre approach can be enacted in ways that are flexible and that invite students to take on more authority as users of that genre. In all three of these courses, a primary goal is teaching and

learning a specific genre, but that is not the sole purpose: the genre is taught as having both personal and social purposes—to advance one’s understanding of a given issue, to present oneself to others for a job, to shape an understanding of one’s own life in a way that might serve a similar purpose for readers. In these courses, models are used not as exemplars to be slavishly imitated but as illustrations to evaluate and use as guides for one’s own writing. Further, in all three courses there is a good deal of interaction and negotiation wherein students’ views are respected: interactions between teacher and students, between student and students, and between reading and writing.

In characterizing their “genre approach,” both Kapp and Bangeni and Peagler and Yancey differentiate their approach from ones they see as solely instrumental. In doing so, they identify key aspects of the pedagogy of many of the teachers in this collection. As Kapp and Bangeni write, “If students are to become critical members of, and contributors to, the discourse, rather than instrumental producers, they have to be allowed the time and space to engage with the messy process of exploring (through talking, reading, and writing) who they are (and who they are becoming) in relation to the authoritative voices in the field.” Peagler and Yancey link their approach to what Russel Durst identifies as “reflective instrumentalism.” Peagler and Yancey write that they “resist an instrumental approach that, we believe, is at odds with student growth and development as well as with what we know about writing. The addition of ‘reflective’ to such instrumentalism, in our case, means that writing is useful, that it is conceptual and theoretical, that it allows both faculty and students to learn through reflection and in the exercise of writing.” Time and space, exploratory talk, reading and writing, critical reflection on a genre and one’s own position in using that genre, students as learners with some authority, an openness to learning and change on the part of both the student and teacher, and something key to an understanding of genre as social—writing as useful: we see aspects of many of these traits in the practice of the teachers in this collection. Further, regardless of whether learning a specific genre is a primary or subordinate goal of a course, we see affirmed in all of these chapters the importance of some scaffolding of learning. This scaffolding might take the form of sequencing writing activities, of integrating reading and writing activities, of workshops, or of drafting and revising.

Finally, we have learned, though we knew it before, how important talk among teachers is to the quality of teaching and learning. This

teacher-talk makes us more conscious of the pedagogical choices we make, and therefore more able to set goals, develop strategies, and assess the results. The talk we've seen in these chapters happens in a number of locations. It takes place between teachers in the context of a writing or WAC program, linking a specialist in writing with a specialist in another discipline. We can imagine, and often hear directly in these chapters, the talk between Anne Beaufort and John Williams; Mary Soliday and her graduate students and David Eastzer; Anne Geller and David Hibbett; Heidi McKee and Mike Edwards; and Chris Anson, Deanna Dannels, and Karen St. Clair. Each of these chapters is the result of a structured project of reflective teaching. Together these chapters constitute a powerful argument for the inclusion into the teacher's workday of structured occasions for teacher-talk.

We have experienced this talk among teachers directly as we have read and responded to the chapter authors. As the drafts of the chapters progressed to their final form, we believe that we have seen reflection on, and revision of, teaching practice on the part of the chapter authors. Many of the teachers in our chapters say that "next time" they will do things a little differently, which strongly suggests to us that they have learned as they have reflected on their practice. Karen St. Clair, the teacher in chapter 9, vows that next time she will "provide a lot more guidance to students," and, reading between her lines, this guidance will come in group and one-to-one discussion. In reflecting on his experience, John Williams resolves that he will include shorter and more frequent writing throughout the semester.

This talk about teaching has affected us, as it has our chapter authors. Through the conversations we have had with the chapter authors, both of us have been moved to reflect on and talk with each other about our own teaching practice in ways that have been useful, even formative. The book stands, then, as an argument for genre theory as an important locus for talk, reading, and writing about pedagogical theory as it is individually applied in particular classrooms, with particular students. The book stands as well, by implication, as an argument for practices both in our teaching and in our professional lives that create spaces for this talk, this conversation, this social action.