Introduction: Changing Regularities of Genre

Commentary

—Charles Bazerman

As documented in these several essays, the ancient concept of genre or kind has gained new vigor and applicability in contemporary studies of writing. The concept of genre helps us locate what is particular to each kind of writing and what skills and knowledge students need in order to be able to communicate effectively within each kind. Two approaches toward genre have proven particularly useful, and both are employed by the articles collected in this special issue of the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*. The Australian-based Systemic Functional Linguistic approach to genre directs attention to particular linguistic features, lexical choices, and the organization of texts through sequential moves. In contrast, what has been called the North American approach to genre directs our attention to the typification of rhetorical action—that is, the repeated communicative actions people do with each other, the repeated forms by which they do it, and the interpretive practices by which they recognize what they are doing. This approach directs our attention to the historical emergence of current practice, the current social organization of communication, and people's strategic use of forms to participate in socially organized activities. The articles here provide good introductions to the concepts and literatures of both approaches, which themselves have grown out of practical language education. The articles each also develop useful applications for technical writing education and practice.

Both approaches attune us to the particularity of processes and skills of technical writing, one by orienting us toward the linguistic repertoire of engineering and the other by showing us how specific texts functionally mediate the socially organized practices of engineering. Both suggest that while technical writing relies upon more general writing skills, by the time students reach disciplinary specialization at the university, they are well into specialized writing practices and need specialized writing instruction. The specialization of writing instruction is in part a matter of motivation—the students at this point are far more interested in becoming engineers (including talking and writing like engineers) than in taking another general English class. But specialized writing instruction is even more a substantive matter because, as genre analysis has been showing us, each field has special uses of language which are aided by focused assignments, explicit instruction, and supervised practice as part of the overall professional training.

For such reasons, some universities and engineering schools are transforming freshman writing to speak directly to the linguistic needs, interests, and practices of engineering students, as LeeAnne Kryder describes happening at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The program there has students learn to write in the genres of professional engineering practice and engineering education. The relationship between classroom writing and industry practice is further supported by outreach to the engineering community.

Similarly, Kristin Walker reports on discipline-specific instruction at the University of South Carolina

in writing the engineering lab report. This instruction is based on linguistic analysis of the genres electrical and computer engineering students will write as part of their professional education.

As both these programs recognize, the closer the writing is to professional practice, the more motivated, challenging, and useful the experience of writing classes is likely to be. Richard Sheehan Johnson and Andrew Flood take that idea further to embed the classroom writing within real activities through what they call the open case. Students are asked to prepare reports and other documents about actual engineering problems and issues on campus. In addressing the real problems on campus, students come to appreciate the complexity of actual workplace tasks and the ways in which their own writing attempts to impose order and to bring about action. The authors provide a six-step classroom plan that provides students opportunities and support to engage in the real work of planning and managing the complex workplace of the campus through case reports. Often enough, these student case reports have entered into actual campus planning and maintenance.

While genre research and theory emphasize that the repertoire of available genres is ever evolving to meet changing local needs and strategic opportunities, they also recognize the value of getting momentary snapshots of this changing landscape. It helps to know what the range of genres widely used in any field are at any point and what specific features

regularly allow those genres to carry out their typical work. One way to obtain a census of currently used genres is to see what names of document types are currently recognized and used by members of a professional field. Document types that become so familiar as to develop a widely recognized name clearly have a robustness within that field.

Following this strategy, Thomas Orr, in surveying 200 computer scientists, found the names of 90 genres widely used and recognized. Such surveys of genre names are an excellent first step in getting the lay of the land as constructed by practitioners; however, because of the fluid and evolving nature of genres, documents called by the same name may vary in form and function. The processes by which genre name-terms emerge, attract professional recognition, foster certain practices and understandings, hide differences, and perhaps crystallize into highly regulated forms are worth investigating so that students and practitioners can use genre knowledge strategically and creatively rather than as limiting (and perhaps inappropriate) algorithms.

Lawrence Anthony looks into the kind of complexity and change that occurs within genres, as he notes that article introductions in software engineering do not follow the standard model of research article introductions proposed by John Swales. Swales' model, indicating how writers define and create a research space for their current work by setting it against a prior literature, has previously been shown to vary considerably

as writers address the particularity of their work and fields. Anthony points out how software engineering, in order to meet the needs of this particular field, has created a new variation on the standard pattern.

Looking at specialized writing practices through the lens of genre has been remarkably productive for research, theory, and classroom practice. But the more we learn about genre, the more careful we are not to treat the obvious and revealing differences of text types as indicators of a fixed taxonomy. Rather genre differences give us a way of recognizing and orienting to evolving communicative landscapes. By seeing how professionals currently use genres to carry out their work and by entering themselves into those generic practices, students can start to learn new ways of communicating that will bring them into the professional world of work. But as they move into the world of work, they will also start to become aware of how they have to orient to new sets of practices through time, in different companies and agencies, within different situations and projects, and at different levels of organizational responsibility. A genre-based writing education, beyond helping students develop a first set of communicative practices to begin professional work, should provide students with analytic tools to recognize and adapt to the changing genre landscapes their professional lives will travel across.

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