

The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom  
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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.

For almost two centuries genre has been an important term in the arts and art criticism, first brought to the English language in relation to a kind of painting of rustic scenes favored by the French Academy, but the term spread to the literary and other arts. Although the term genre is now used widely to identify the distinctiveness of various

kinds of creations in all creative realms, it still bears the stigma of a shallow formulaicness and a limited vocabulary of stylistic and organizational gestures associated with French rustic genre painting. Artistic productions considered as being primarily within a genre are frequently set in contrast to richer, more creative works of art that are only incidentally of a genre and are thought to transcend the limitations of genre.

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 thoroughgoingly) 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 (but again far from thoroughgoingly) has elements of removal from 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.

Recent literary theory, noting the indeterminacy of literary forms, the novelty of individual texts, and the idiosyncrasy of reader response, calls formal or textual definitions of genre (Derrida; Foucault, 22; Hernadi) into question and sees the identification of any text as being essentially of one or another genre as chimerical. Both Bakhtin and Cohen's rehabilitations of genre are dependent on placing symbolic types into psycho-social history. Bakhtin, viewing utterances as communicative, sees in speech genres a situational stabilization influencing referentiality, expressiveness and addressivity; generic shaping of communicative action thereby regularizes our subjects of discourse, our emotional stance towards those subjects, and our relations to those we communicate with. Cohen argues that genres are historically constructed and evolving, as parts of changing social expectations as perceived by each individual. Thus not only do genres change, what counts as an example of a genre is historically determined, how readers apply generic expectations change, and each text helps transform the landscape of generic expectations.

These most recent turns in literary understanding of genre match well with work already preceding in linguistics and rhetoric. Moreover, since much of the work in



Huckin; Yates and Orlikowski.) Structurationist accounts of genre thus provide a means



life and meaning that will evoke the students' desires to speak in kind. Genre is our tool for getting at, defining, and intervening in those dynamics.

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 sophist(ti)-3(r)20( so7p( own live)-7(s w

meeting the goals and needs of each. Sometimes institutions have clear imperatives, as

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