GENRE STUDIES AROUND THE GLOBE

BEYOND THE THREE TRADITIONS

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Chapter 4

A Genre Based Theory of Literate Action

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Genre, like amazing grace, came on me when I was lost—lost as I tried to find conceptual clarity in the details and variety of scientific writing. I entered into an empirical study of scientific writing because in the 1960s and 1970s those in writing and rhetoric, as well as most academics and educators, were treating all non-fiction, certainly all academic writing, as a single type—an undifferentiated category, just better or worse, and written according to standards of grammatical correctness or literary elegance. The more I looked at scientific writing, and more broadly academic writing, the more variety I found, the more dimensions of variation, the more invention, the more situations and meanings, the more historical change. All my stereotypes of scientific writing had gotten disrupted in the complexity of social studies of science (under the kind guidance of Robert Merton, the founder of the field, see Merton, 1938 & 1973) as I began to see writing as social communication, within academic groupings with varying epistemic projects. My first published study, "What Written Knowledge Does," was highly hedged to indicate that I was not claiming typicality or generality for the three examples I analyzed in depth—but presented them only as spots on a geography yet to be defined (first presented in 1979 and published as Bazerman, 1981). When I met Miller at the 1979 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Minneapolis and heard the ideas about genre she was developing for the theory section of her dissertation (later to

become Miller, 1984), I found a way to bring order to the social and textual complexity I was finding. In particular, with her connecting the rhetorical tradition of genre studies with the phenomenological concept of typified action, as understood by participants, I saw a way to see how social processes could produce patterned textual practices through communicative processes of co-alignment of individual perspectives.

Of course, in a way genre was already there in the inquiry, for rhetoricians talking about scientific writing as a single thing were using a type which they then tried to subsume into the forensic, deliberative, and epideictic types of classical rhetoric, seeing little difference between Greek oral deliberation in the agora and published science. Teachers of technical writing also had their generalized types, largely based on textual characteristics. These broad types missed the specifics that most practitioners of academic genres knew when they wrote and could report, if you could talk to them in a way that evoked practice talk, rather than evaluative talk which relied on the familiar analytical terms of their education concerning grammar, standardized form, and the like.

That disjunction between evaluative and practice types suggests several of the things we have since learned about genre. Genre can exist at different levels of specificity and on different principles, depending on the sophistication of the user, but also the situations and purposes for which types are invoked. Genre identification results from a process of recognition and use, rather than an inherent feature of language or texts—a process in languaging and reflection on language, not purely in the language object itself. Genre is a matter of perception. Practitioners make distinctions that are not always organized in theory. People can over time, with greater experience, make different and more refined distinctions among texts, as well as see different patterns of similarity.

In my literary days (my 1971 doctoral dissertation was on poetry occasioned by the death of Queen Elizabeth I and the accession of King James I) I had gotten some sense of the variation and differentiation of genre, following patterns of social organization and social events. The Latin schoolmasters wrote in certain styles and genres and the London guildsman in others; those mourning the loss of a queen in genres different than those seeking a position from the new king. Though I had a sense of social and activity distribution of

genres, I could not link literary and social theory, nor could I apply my insights to scientific writing. But then Miller indicated how phenomenology and typification could bridge rhetorical theory and social theory. I began to see genre and typification everywhere. This mind altering condition was indeed hallucinogenic for me (and I have seen it in others) in tempting the belief that one could create a stable taxonomy of genre types. Yet the more I looked at the historical and social transformations of genre, the more it became evident that only ethno-taxonomies (that is, the types invoked by practitioners in practice) are theoretically sustainable, and these ethno-taxonomies are only quasi-stable, held together only as long as dynamics, regulations, social forces, and rhetorical situations supported shared social understandings.

The world became even more hallucinogenic as I saw the communicative world as one of processes, with forms coming in and out of the mist. This means that it is hard to know how writers were able to frame comments and elaborate thoughts to be intelligible and effective—unless they make assumptions and followed patterns. Similarly readers need to be able to make assumptions about the writers' intentions embodied in texts. To make their way in this world and assert their presence, needs, and interests, people have to rely on models, precedents, and simplified rules. In this way we create cloud clusters of ideas, knowledge, and activity that are as transient as our thoughts, but held together contingently by co-orientation to signs evoking enough common understanding for immediate practical purposes. Inscribed signs endure and travel more than spoken, but also present more difficulties in creating co-alignment and reasonably shared mutual understanding. People contingently structure these cloud clusters through networks and regulations of texts—forming the basis of modern institutions within information and knowledge societies. But these networks and regulations are more fragile than we imagine, as they are only maintained insofar as people keep them alive through repeated use and alignment to them. Indeed in this moment of digital transformation our networks, regulations, and orientations are now up for readjustment as our technologies of information are changing although the underlying social and cognitive processes are the same. It is just the transient configurations are coming together and crystallizing under different conditions with different temporary

and mutable stabilizing forces. Any long-lasting configuration needs lots of social and psychological energy to keep it in the air and keep it quasi-stable, although that constant infusion of energy can bring with it new interests and vectors, moving the genres in new directions.

Yet even as I became aware of the fragility and transience of generic appearances, I began to see the tremendous power of the typification processes and the specific role of written genres in forming our modern way of life and our modern systems of knowledge. I saw this within the historical and social research I was doing on the experimental article, and other scientific genres; in Edison's insertion of electric technology within our economic, social, cultural and material lives; in numerous cases in the history of environmental science and environmentalism; and in other sites of empirical work I have engaged and continue to engage in. I also saw this in the practical work of orienting writing students to the worlds they were writing for. On the theoretical plane I saw this as I attempted to make sense of the particulars I found. I had been sketching out this theoretical picture at the edges of the empirical work: in passages in articles, in latter chapters of historical books (Bazerman, 1988, 1999), in introductions to collections (Bazerman & Paradis, 1991), and in articles that promised fuller exposition (Bazerman, 2000). Now I have finally published a two volume theoretical work (Bazerman, 2013a, 2013b). One volume presents a practical theory of rhetoric—that is a picture of writing that helps us engage in writing and make strategic choices. The other volume presents an account of humans as writing creatures, the challenges they must confront, the resources they harness, and the consequences for engaging in these odd practices of leaving little bits of ink or electrons on various media for others to find and make sense of. The remainder of this chapter summarizes those volumes in two ways. First I will give a narrative account of how the theory grows out of genre, and then I will give a more structured introduction based on the tables of contents of the two volumes.

The theory realized in both volumes is multidisciplinary, grounded in intersecting theoretical lines of several traditions in contemporary social science. The theory, nonetheless, has genre and typification near its center, for genre and typification create a conjunction where numerous theories operating in different spheres

can meet. The connection between rhetorical force and social typification opened up ways to think systematically about social action, and how participants perceive action—as indicated in the Miller 1984's title of "Genre as Social Action." Actually I had written an earlier chapter "Scientific Writing as a Social Act" for a collection edited by Miller and others (Bazerman, 1983). In that chapter, I summarized various social theories of science and considered what their consequences for writing would be, but that article came to no solid conclusion. After seeing an early version of Miller's paper, and with typification in hand, I could see how those theories (many of them having a base in phenomenology) aligned with scientific texts and text production. Further Mertonian functional structural sociology places at the heart of social structure the perception of social actors about structured choices within their perceived fields of social action (Stinchcombe, 1975). Putting perceived structured choices together with genre and typification, I could see how social structures arose and ramified through perceptual processes. The mechanisms of social reproduction through local action have been more recently elaborated by the structurationism of Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu's theories of practice, habitus, and social field (1977, 1990). Merton, however, got to these ideas more through pragmatism than phenomenology. Merton's sources connected with much of contemporary American social science which had its roots in pragmatism, mediated by such early figures as George Herbert Mead with his ideas of the social formation of the self arising out of the need to communicate and perceptions of how others saw us and understood us (Mead, 1934). Methodologically these dual sources of phenomenology and pragmatist sociology place genre research well within the tradition of sociological ethnography. Sociological ethnography in turn lies behind much of organizational theory that attends to perspectives of participants. Research in technical and business communication had already been going in that direction, but genre then provided an important link in how texts and textual practices become organized in social settings to carry out actions. The researchers who then brought genre and typification into understanding technical and organizational writing (such as Van Nostrand, 1997; Dias et al 1999; Winsor, 2003; and Smart, 2006) were building on already prepared ground.

These researchers implicitly drew on organizational ethnography and technical writing research (going back at least to Odell and Goswami, 1985), but were more explicitly drawing on another resource which genre theory opened up—Vygotskian activity theory. This is a resource of interest to all in language studies because, like Mead's theories, it links the learning of language to cognitive development and development of personality—but provides more specific and detailed mechanisms and evidence than provided by Mead. I had encountered Vygotsky earlier in thinking about the effects of writing education, but when I saw the social typifications of genre in terms of Vygotskian cultural tools, the implications became apparent. Learning to use a genre would direct cognitive activity and development. This early insight drove my development of genre theory, seeing the linkage between learning academic genres and developing disciplinary ways of thought. More recently, I have started an empirical program to demonstrate the cognitive developmental effects of learning specialized genres (Bazerman 2009; Bazerman, Simon, & Pieng, 2014; Bazerman, Simon, Ewing, & Pieng, 2013).

During the mid-1980s, Vygotskian developmental theory allowed me to find an alternative answer to the epistemological problem that was behind the conflicts that became known as the science wars—how mere words and symbols passed among chatting humans could capture anything about the ambient world outside the minds of individuals and societies. Vygotsky demonstrated in a number of studies working with young children how language was learned dynamically in the course of material activity and was thus deeply saturated with our experience of the world (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Scientific language and genres, further, were learned within rigorous material practices of experimentation and evidence gathering. In *Shaping Written Knowledge* (Bazerman, 1988), I elaborated this position in the theoretical chapter "How language does the work of science."

The Vygotskian path leads as well to activity theory resting on the fundamental notion of both the individual and society engaged in complex activities, which required the assembly of functional systems (either internally for the individual or externally for the society). The external aspect of functional activity systems was elaborated by Leont'ev (1978) and then Engestrom (1987), who addressed organizational issues, with a particular focus on how

tools, rules, resources, and division of labor were organized among participants for the production of the object—as embodied in Engestrom's now famous heuristic triangles. Russell (1997) and Spinuzzi (2003) have begun to elaborate the potential of activity systems for writing, and have been followed up by many others.

The internal aspect of functional activity systems looking into the neuropsychological organization of individuals was pursued by Vygotsky's other major protégé and collaborator, Luria. Luria (1961, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1976, 1979) investigated the internal cognitive formation of functional systems and their disruption, including brain function and disruption—providing some of the important insights now driving cognitive neuroscience). Issues of internal cognitive functional systems are of immense importance to understanding writing, and tread some of the same ground as Flower and Hayes (1981), but with a more variable, situational, sociocultural, and personal developmental approach. The potential of this line of activity theory for understanding cognition in writing has been little explored.

Together both lines of the Vygostkian model of internal and external activity provide means for considering the interaction of individual and group activity systems, and provide potential for understanding the social formation of cognition. Vygotsky himself focused most directly on how interpersonally experienced signs and symbols became internalized to form tools for thinking, perception, and self-regulation. This process gives us a way to understand specialized modes of thought developed through participation in socially organized activities. That is, thinking like a lawyer or a chemist comes from participating in the activities of a lawyer or a chemist and communicating with legal and chemistry peers in professional activity settings. As one of the key devices for organizing concepts and activities in distinctive social systems, genre itself becomes one of the ways that organizes language experience and becomes part of cognitive resources of the individual. These cognitive resources then are also at hand as one externalizes internal thoughts in new circumstances to form new statements—and these formulations emerge as genre-formed utterances, though each new instantiation potentially changes the genre. Thus we come to speak our thoughts in genres, and learn from each other in genres, even as we change genres in each new use.

The social landscape of genres and the range of thoughts expressed and expressible are constantly transformed through new utterances, but with continuity of typifications of evolving domains. In the genres and their circulation we find the mechanisms of socially distributed thoughts, which each individual makes sense of and incorporates in the self, and each self contributes to the public resources and vitality. This vision incorporates Volosinov's (1973) and Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) views about social speech and ideology (along with Volosinov's comments about internal cognition formed by language that are slightly earlier than Vygotsky's, but not nearly as developed).

The intersection of Vygotsky, Volosinov, and Bakhtin over genre also brings with it intertextuality and the chronotope, where intertextuality represents our reliance on each other's words as structured through the repertoire and stance of the genres of each activity system or social domain (Devitt, 1991 and Berkenkotter et al., 1991 were among the earlier explorers of this dimension within contemporary genre theory). The explicit social marking of intertextuality makes evident why citation studies have been as powerful as they have been in mapping scientific work and why the number crunching, network mapping of scientometrics holds such fascination, even though the tools it has developed do not yet capture the full richness of the ways in which texts represent each other and form and re-form social stories and relationships of communal action (Koschnick, 2013).

The chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981) provides us a way of analyzing the world and actions represented in each of the genres and thus expressible within each domain (Schryer, 2002 was a pioneer in exploring the potential of chronotope for genre theory). Together chronotope and intertextuality provide tools for understanding the social and material worlds indexed and activated within genres and their associated activity systems. The conjunction of intertextuality and chronotope within activity-directed genred utterances helps us confront the issue of what knowledge is, of what use it is, how it is formed, and how it is maintained within the social groupings that attend to and align with various genres. The indexicality of intertextuality and chronotope also provides ways of understanding how texts become meaningful to groups and create degrees of alignment among participants—without relying on

unsustainable assumptions on one side about meaning being solidly fixed and immanent in the text or on the other side about inherent understanding of abstract meanings. While study of the symbol system can tell us many things about the symbol system and how we have come to order it in conformity with our needs and capacities, study of the symbol system alone does not get us to meaning, unless we assume that meaning is immanent in the words. Further, meaning as a construct of minds in isolation makes communication of meaning equally problematic, at least since the time of Locke, unless one assumes great similarity of minds and experiences. Rather the approach that comes from genre as typification finds meaning only in attributions people make, and the puzzle is to understand how people come to make close-enough attributions to signs to make the symbol system function for coordinating social life and work. The mechanisms of participating in typified, genred worlds provides ways for people to develop sufficient coalignment and common resources for organizing their minds in ways that make them better able to understand each other.

Co-orientation towards genred written texts can bootstrap larger, increasingly organized groupings of people across time and space, sharing common knowledge, activity orientations, and regulations, forming institutions of modernity. Goody (1986) in his book *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, began to articulate how writing transformed society, but if we add genre theory in all the complexity and dimensionality I have been sketching out, we can see more concretely how the circulation of texts creates common commitments, cognitive horizons, material relations, and ongoing activity—such that people live their lives with reference to and engaged within social entities that stretch across space and time, and are not just caught up in the people and objects in their immediate sight and hearing (Bazerman, 2006). Writing provides mid-level mechanisms to link micro and macro-sociology. Writing's extension of social action from the local to the distant makes clear why learning to write is so important for participation in the major institutions of modernity, and why increases of domain specific writing skills bring empowerment in those domains. Conversely, lack of skill means disempowerment and marginality.

I have gestured at a lot of ground in this essay, tying together over forty years of loose strings with the strings increasingly tangled

and intertwined. I have told the story as a synthetic narrative of making connections. The two volume work ties together these strings more tightly with more theoretical coherence. The second volume, in particular, presents the various sources and connective reasoning of the theory. The first part of this volume presents a view of what it means to be human and the role of symbolic communication in the formation of socially active selves. I look at three major lines of social scientific thinking of the last century (with earlier roots) as I mentioned above—Vygotsky (with Leont'ev and Luria extensions), Schutz (1967) and the sociological phenomenologists, and the pragmatists with a special focus on Dewey (1910, 1947), Mead (1934), and Sullivan (1953). Given the social communicative formation of active social selves, the second part of the volume examines the orders we have made through our symbolic interaction: social, interactional, linguistic, utterance, meaning, and the world indexed through meanings. I end with a consideration of the spot these orders put us on as writers.

The first volume, based on the view of our place in the communicative world set out in the second volume, then provides a practical view of what it means to be a writer and how we might think of our writing tasks. It is meant to inform practice, to provide us a way of perceiving the structure of choices in front of us. That is, it provides a way of strategically reflecting on our situation to help us in our choice making. Rather than taking the fundamental problem of rhetoric to be persuasion in high stakes oral platform oratory within a set of taken for granted social institutions, this rhetorical theory takes as its fundamental problem literate action—making ourselves understood and interactionally effective at a distance. The problem of communicating at a distance presents us with the puzzle of locating our communication in a recognizable site of social interaction, despite our text traveling through time and space. Genre and all the typifications that go with it provide the solution to this puzzle—by creating a shared space of mutual alignment for interaction, and invoking the larger activity systems the genre is recognizably part of. The consequent problems are how one acts within that space to bring about change, and how one's text emerges to take its place within the social world of intertexts, thereby changing the communicative landscape by performing social speech acts and creating social facts. Thus the rhetoric includes

an account of individual and social processes of text production as well as processes of social uptake and transformation. Meaning only emerges within those social and individual processes by which we make, understand, and act on meaning. This rhetoric has implications for how we teach writing so students can better understand what they can accomplish through writing and how.

The two volumes attempt to understand why and how we carry off the bizarre magic of communication at a distance, mediated by marks on a page or screen. They do so on the basis of contemporary social and psychological theory, grounded in empirical investigations of writing. In so doing, they aim to help us understand the consequences of our choices, and thus should help us choose with an expanded sense of our options. Only time and social processes will tell whether I have hit a useful mark.

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