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Meta-Genre

Janet Giltrow

University of British Columbia

Genre theorists are not the only ones who talk about genres. As readers and writers, people typify their tasks, acknowledge precedent, and offer advice. They explain good practice to newcomers; they point out ways in which others are liable to go wrong. Sometimes this talk is elicited by researchers' questions; sometimes by the traffic across community boundaries; sometimes by negotiations or struggles within those boundaries, or by disturbances at the threshold.

In this chapter, I invite my readers to listen in on talk about genres—which appears in forms as diverse as the situations it administers. I begin by reporting my own experience in coming to hear talk about genres not as incidental or amateur, or even as accurate or inaccurate, but as a complex indication of social context.

TALK ABOUT WRITING

A few years ago, when we asked teaching assistants in psychology and criminology to read aloud and comment on papers their students had written, we

heard them talking about “outsiders”: when they found faulty estimates of *insiders’* orientation towards discipline-specific terms,¹ they rationalized their dispreferences by saying that *outsiders* would not be able to understand. We reported (Giltrow & Valiquette 1994) this talk about outsiders as potentially misleading to students, and, referring to Anthony Giddens (1984), we interpreted it as evidence of the difficulty of translating tacit know-how into discursive knowledge. Since then, I have come across more readers talking about outsiders: in our research,² several readers, in different disciplines, have been prompted by features of student writing to say that students should write for general audiences, people who didn’t know anything. A teaching assistant in Canadian studies told us that a “good essay” is one you should “be able to give to someone who doesn’t know anything about the topic and they [should] be able to make some sense of it.” A sociology professor said that “essays should be written to someone else in this class or some else in some other class, your parents or your friends, not me.” Reflecting on these more recent occasions where general concepts of audience were invoked when in fact highly defined, particular audiences were at work, I made a political interpretation: referring to Kenneth Burke (1969) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), I speculated that tendencies to generalize about language and to centralize its values have the effect of denying actual division even when those divisions—or differences—are what student writers need to know about (Giltrow, 2000).

Along with other sayings about the academic genres, these ones seemed to be more mischief, impediments to learners’ progress. But I also started to see these repeated occurrences as not only nuisances, or not simply *accidental* compensations for a tacit know-how that could not be properly spoken. They also seemed organized or regular in their appearance. And the idea of the know-nothing reader turns up elsewhere, in academic contexts beyond our particular research projects. Dorothy Winsor (1994), for example, observed engineering students composing an introduction that they imagined their teacher reading but which they saw themselves addressing to someone

¹These faulty estimates involved, on the one hand, explaining too much—telling what was well understood—or, on the other hand, explaining too little—taking for granted a concept that was a site of complex intra-disciplinary reasoning.

²At the Centre for Research in Academic Writing at Simon Fraser University, I worked as a member of a research consortium, gathering data according to principles and methods we shared and regularly discussed and refined, and depositing transcripts and documents in an archive available to all researchers in the group (and to interested students). This consortium included regular and contract faculty, and graduate and undergraduate research assistants. So, some of the material I report here and later in the paper I gathered myself, but much of it was gathered by my colleagues: Elaine Dornan, Reg Johanson, Sharon Josephson, Shurli Makmillen, Tracy Punchard, Marlene Sawatsky, Wendy Strachan, Michele Valiquette, Bonnie Waterstone.

who didn’t know anything about the assignment (p. 246). In their study of writing conferences, G.G. Patthey-Chavez and Dana Ferris (1997) report this exchange between a student and her instructor—a conversation that takes the know-nothing reader to the extreme:

[instructor] do you think that they understand where you’re coming from
 [student] understand—y’mean the belief of mi- the belief of GOD, for those who know him yes, but for those who probably never heard of him, no
 [instructor] and what I’d like you to do is to assume that you’re writing to an audience that has never heard of God. (...) If you assume that they don’t [know], then you have to first explain yourself
 [student] I know . . . , you know sometime you can go into detail where it sounds like it’d be so elementary, that’s what—that’s why I’m . . . like this is an apple. (pp. 64-65)

This kind of commentary can also appear in formalized advice. A.P. Martinich, addressing students in *Philosophical Writing* (1989), says that the student “should assume (...) that the audience is (a) intelligent but (b) uninformed”: “All technical terms have to be explained as if the audience knew little or no philosophy” (p. 2).³ In scholarly settings for student writing, talk about know-nothing readers seemed to be a recurring feature, motivated by some aspect of context that participants mutually recognized, at some level.

And from workplace research sites come reports of other ways of talking about writing that are seemingly misleading but nevertheless consistent. Mary Beth Debs (1993), for instance, reports her own and others’ observation that workers resist recognizing consultative or even co-authoring practices, and resist identifying such practices as collaborative. Dorothy Winsor notes researchers’ frustrations with engineers refusing to recognize the role writing plays in their activities:

engineers talk about “writing up” technical work as though the work precedes written representation and largely determines it. . . . Writing researchers find this notion hard to accept. . . . (1994, p. 227)

Along similar lines, Rebecca Burnett (1996) examines the disappointing experience of engineering students in a co-op project whose faculty director consistently represented writing as something that came at the end.

³Martinich rationalizes this advice by saying that it is the *student’s* knowledge, not the professor’s, that is “at issue” (p. 3). Students following his advice will end up with a (constructed) reader who, on the one hand, knows nothing and who, on the other hand, (knowingly) suspects that the student knows nothing.

Studies with a footing in genre theory have been especially likely to deliver local commentary on writing—commentary on its uses, characteristics, values. Eavesdropping on this talk about writing, you hear, for example, in Graham Smart's (1993) study of a central bank, a consensus in wordings about writing. Participants repeatedly mention "written analysis"; its role in "discussion and debate"; "argument," "written argument." Accompanying these sayings about writing are document-review routines embedded in a hierarchical organizational structure—routines that, as Jamie MacKinnon's (1993) study of the bank shows, absorb newcomers into the institution. But his study also shows that the review routines can be "enormously frustrating" for newcomers until they learn the role that feedback plays in this setting where there appears to be substantial agreement but where the terms of commentary are abstract or even confounding: "Young analysts are often told that senior readers want analysis, evaluation, argument, and 'stories', but this must mystify the new employees at times" (p. 53).

These dispatches from places where writing and reading go on raise some questions: are there consistencies to language users' accounts of what they do? Is there enough consistency to these accounts to propose a category *meta-genre*—situated language about situated language? How do meta-genres inform or ratify writers? Will meta-genres have, as genres themselves have, semiotic ties to their context of use—ties that may explain the seeming occlusions of some meta-genres and the transparencies of others? More generally, could we say that genres comprise not only syntactic, substantive, and pragmatic regularities but also regularities in the way readers and writers translate their tacit know-how into discursive knowledge?

To approach these questions I offer instances of meta-genres, observing their materials and habitats. I then review some aspects of academic meta-genres, concentrating on the working language that surrounds writers at university, and overlooking for the time being the most imposing of all meta-genres, the composition handbook. I conclude by evaluating the usefulness of the concept of meta-genre to genre studies.

META-GENRES

The most conspicuous candidates for *meta-genre* are *guidelines*: a kind of pre-emptive feedback, guidelines are written regulations for the production of a genre, ruling out some kinds of expression, endorsing others. So the POVMR (the Problem Oriented Veterinary Medical Record) that Catherine Schryer (1993) studied explicitly guides the writer to compose a series of entries. The guidelines were developed to induce and/or represent the sociocognitive behaviors of experts while enlisting practitioners in the pro-

duction of useful data. The POVMR was controversial: not all members of the institution or profession saw it as serving proper or relevant interests.

Social workers observed by Anthony Paré (1993) consult four pages of guidelines (p. 115) in preparing predisposition reports. Along with regulations prohibiting certain kinds of statements as "inadmissible" (p. 118), the guidelines prompt or control social workers' interpretation and presentation of their clients to the courts—and, at the same time, seem to involve them in a kind of permanent difficulty.

Both the POVMR and PDR guidelines are constraining as well as heuristic, and both seem to implicate writers in the struggles and conflicts of institutional systems. We might reckon that guidelines are meta-genres that function as instruments to recruit writers to dominant interests, or impose discipline on diversity. But other cases suggest that this is not always entirely so.

René Galindo's (1994) study of Amish newsletters as a genre turned up a set of guidelines for community "scribes": especially, scribes are directed to avoid certain topics. They must not mention "internal" visits (this proscription is elaborated to specify mention of quilting); some wordings are prohibited—

"omit phrases such as 'flu and colds are making the rounds' when no names are mentioned"

"omit phrases like 'quite a few attended church from other districts' and 'church was well attended'"

"omit 'Lord willing' . . . etc."

—and writers, must not mention religious issues ("omit items that could be considered "preaching" or proselytizing"), although, at the same time, the genre's positive template calls for report of church events (1994, pp. 84-86). In interviews, scribes expressed no concerns about the proscription of religious issues. Despite historical and potential division in the larger Amish community, the newsletter guidelines apparently do not involve writers in the kind of difficulties the social workers experience.

And Susan Kleimann's (1993) study of document cycling in two sections of the U.S. General Accounting Office suggests, rather than a positive correlation between hierarchical impositions and explicit guidelines, the reverse: the organizationally "flatter" Division 1 had more explicit practices, distributing

to all staff *written guidelines* explaining the purpose of review and the reasons for some procedures. In interviews, staff and the head of report review refer to this guidance to support, explain, and predict what they do. (p. 63, emphasis added)

Writers in Division 1 were happier than writers in Division 2, where there were “no written guidelines about functions, procedures, or rationale of review” (p. 63, emphasis added).

We may not be able to associate one kind of meta-genre—explicit guidelines—with one kind of writing context—disciplined impositions. Nor, on the other hand, can we presume that a widely shared and deeply understood set of values—such as outsiders, at least, might attribute to the Amish culture—tends to provide a likely setting for explicit guidelines. Alcoholics Anonymous initiates (Cain in Lave & Wenger, 1991) learn the testimonial genre not from “explicit teaching”—“Newcomers are not told how to tell stories, yet most people who remain in A.A. learn to do this” (p. 82)—but from models and from positive, interactive feedback:

other speakers will take the appropriate parts of the newcomer’s comments, giving parallel accounts with different interpretations . . . or expanding on parts of their own stories which are similar to parts of the newcomer’s story, while ignoring the inappropriate parts of the newcomer’s story. (p. 83).

Although, from a distance at least, the AA and Amish communities offer a relatively unified context for the genres they use, Francis Sullivan’s (1997) report from a field office of the U.S. IRS presents a divisive context, steeply hierarchical, with entry-level workers being mainly women, single parents, in their 30s and 40s, and nonuniversity educated. In that context, the meta-genre hovering near the genre of the Internal Revenue Manual (itself functioning as a meta-genre authoritatively but obscurely directing the reading, writing, and speaking of front-line tax examiners) is full of contradictions: on the one hand, managers represent the IRM as so difficult and complex that they “all” have stories of their own efforts to command it (p. 317) but *at the same time* they see front-line, entry-level workers’ difficulty with the IRM as owing to those workers’ “[functional illiteracy]” and “[inability] to comprehend simple sentences” (p. 316); on the other hand, the entry-level tax examiners both “disdain” the IRM and report feelings of “intimidation,” blaming “their own poor schooling” for their difficulties with the manual (p. 333).

The tax examiners, in the meantime, are reading and responding to returns filed by and letters composed by tax accountants: a professional community described by Amy Devitt (1991). Although these writers are involved in the same sector of their nation’s economic culture, their meta-generic expressions are qualitatively different: unified—nearly unanimous—and useful rather than divisive and contradictory. Unlike the examiners, they share a seemingly uncomplicated and efficient belief in “the authority of [the] tax publications” (p. 351)—“the IRS documents lie behind most texts in tax

accounting as the Bible lies behind most texts written by Christian ministers” (p. 344)—this belief informing their writing practices and what they say about them.

The meta-genre of tax accountants (expressing, it seems, as much consensus as Smart found among central-bank economists) also provides for representation of *clients*: informants explained certain writing practices (mainly the use of quotations) by referring to clients’ typical reasoning around tax matters (liable to “turn off” in the presence of “citations,” 1993, p. 347); liable to be “[scared] . . . away” if what they are reading has “quote marks around it” (p. 349). Similarly, the architects writing “program reports” studied by Ackerman and Oates (1996) repeatedly mention clients’ tendencies—the way clients “don’t speak our lingo” (p. 88), the way clients are unable to think visually, or in three dimensions (pp. 92, 100). One might imagine that this rhetorical threshold, which separates professional from client, is one that both beginning tax accountants and beginning architects need to locate, and the meta-genre usefully represents it, although Peter Medway’s study (1996) of an architectural office suggests that it also simplifies this threshold.⁴

ACADEMIC META-GENRES

Unlike managers at the central bank or partners in accounting firms, academic readers do not share so homogeneous an array of epistemological practices or professional interests. Despite the differences among them, however, academic readers are like accountants and central-bank economists in sharing wordings in their talk about the academic genres: the term “argument” appears everywhere, even, as Sharon Stockton (1995) found in her study of

⁴Peter Medway’s study (1996) of the work of an architectural design team shows just how complex this threshold can be. One team member reported that, even among the designers themselves, there can be different interpretations of the same representation: “instances of confusion arise from the fact that there are many people working on some things and sometimes we all happen to be working on one actual element of building fabric, so something somebody designed and put down on paper is not completely understood by somebody else who is working on the plan. . . . What’s on paper can be interpreted differently, and still be . . . and still be correct” (p. 487). And the aesthetic/functional opposition that the architects in Ackerman and Oates’ study talk about as a stage in the career of the “program report” genre, in Medway’s study becomes more complicated, as the architects read their own construct (the “virtual” building they have come to know as an object of “shared cognition,” p. 487), in a second level of semiotic activity, “for the way it generates interpretation and for the significance that is likely to be found in it” (p. 495).

history professors, when people mean something else (narrative rather than argumentative structure). In our studies of academic meta-genres, we have found that, in guidelines, in elicited commentary and in marking, the terms “logic” and “evidence” are almost as common as “argument.” And, like the supervisor of a student who reported his co-op experience to Dorothy Winsor (1996), academic readers also ask for “specifics” and “detail,” without offering specifics themselves—and sometimes in the *presence of* specifics, as when a student writes in a paper for a course in the sociology of the environment, “our water comes from a metal tap and flows down a metal drain . . . we drive over concrete roads and highways,” and the professor responds, “This is the point at which I wonder when it’s going to get more specific” (elicited commentary). As I have mentioned, the idea of “outsiders” appears too, but in less practical form than the accountants’ and architects’ ideas of “clients.” These collocates—“argument,” “logic,” “evidence,” “specifics”—and the satellite “outsiders” transcend disciplinary difference, generalize discursive values, and appear at moments where deviance is encountered, or the ideal imagined.

Whereas generalities urge students to an ideal, proscriptions can be more particular, and discipline-specific. In elicited commentary, a sociology professor disapproves of statements that derive from ideas of society as an aggregation of individuals. In a handout to students in a children’s literature course, a professor disallows claims that a narrative would “appeal” to “the child’s imagination.”⁵ Other guidelines caution philosophy students to avoid certain types of beginnings and endings:

don’t point out that your topic is an important one, and one that has interested philosophers for hundreds of years . . . do not close by saying that philosophers have been divided over the issue for as long as humans have been keeping records and you cannot be expected to resolve the dispute in a few short pages.

A set of guidelines for history students warns against statements about human nature, and claims that anything was inevitable. This document also advises against too much “direct quotation of secondary sources”—useful advice, for knowledge-making in history reserves direct speech for archival sources, and this discursive practice embodies and enables the kind of work that counts particularly as scholarly history. But the rationalization that follows then misleadingly generalizes this advice: “your paper will flow better if you paraphrase the statement.” The accountants studied by Devitt have a more realistic rationale for their quotation practices.

⁵I am this professor.

Warnings that suppress what writers would say if not disciplined are complicated by calls for “voice”—the student’s “own.” A teaching assistant in Canadian Studies reports receiving a four-page paper with “64 citations”: “I wrote in the comments ‘Where is your voice in all this?’” (elicited commentary). Guidelines for students in a political science course explain that “A” papers are distinguished by an “individualized writing style” (but the “A” paper “uses many sources”). Even when dictates are as firm as they are in A. R. Martinich’s *Philosophical Writing*, they can be represented as preliminary to the individual voice: explaining that he will offer one main “structure” for the philosophical essay, Martinich says that his “purpose is to help students write *something* valuable so that they can begin to develop their own styles” (1989, p. xi, emphasis in original).

Praise for the private voice is accompanied by another prominent set of proscriptions: those against “academic dishonesty.” These are coded in the high-level guidelines of university policy statements: “Academic honesty is a condition of continued membership in the university community.” I have also found this edict quoted, with and without acknowledgement, in essay-writing guidelines published by individual departments

Ron Scollon (1995) describes ideas about plagiarism as associated with the “own voice” notion—something a person can find, or lose, or develop.⁶ Scollon goes on to analyze the concept of plagiarism as implicated in culture-specific notions of the self. He finds shortfalls between the assumptions of Western-styled university classrooms and those which non-native speakers of English bring to such classrooms. But native speakers may also experience discrepancy in the meta-genres that direct their academic writing. On the one hand, they are warned against certain things they would tend to say, or they are found to be wanting in, for example, “logic” or “specifics” if they write down ideas they have brought with them, yet, on the other hand, they are enjoined to speak on their “own,” this encouragement coming hand-in-hand with codes of censure and penalty for copying.

USING META-GENRE AS A TERM OF ANALYSIS

Provisionally, we could say that meta-genres are atmospheres of wordings and activities, demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations—atmospheres surrounding genres. Like genres themselves, meta-genres are indexed to their context of use: every activity—or discipline—having its own relation to and life in language, and meta-genres representing or advancing these rela-

⁶As an arbiter of transfer credit, I read many course descriptions, especially from U.S. colleges, where promises to help students find their own voices co-occur with outlines of penalties for copying, lateness, absence, and indifference.

tions, positioning genres in relation to other activities. Yet, as a concept, meta-genre may be a profitless complication of the study of writing; as an occurrence, it may be only epiphenomenal. Is there anything to be gained from recognizing meta-genre?

Meta-genre in Teaching and Learning

By focusing our attention on meta-generic atmospheres, we could make more deliberate and sensitive estimates of situations in which writers learn to compose in a particular genre. We could look for degrees of explicitness (ranging from, for example, the general advisories on "honesty" in academic writing to the specific ones on direct-speech quotation in history); for the presence of modeled interactions (as in newcomers' initiation in AA genres) or their absence (as in rubrics that explain criteria for "A," "B," and "C" papers in political science); or for the proximity of precedents in the writers' lived experience (nearby in the case of Amish scribes, who begin their newsletter careers having known of the genre since childhood, remote in the case of cop students undertaking a project [Burnett, 1996]); for the depth of abstractions accumulating around the genre (shallow accumulations around the Amish newsletter, none around the AA story, deep drifts of abstraction around the academic and central-bank genres). From instances I have cited we might learn that generalizing, centralizing abstractions can be effective in one situation but less so in another. Among bank economists, such terms can be temporarily mystifying to newcomers, yet finally iconic of unanimities and sovereign agreements.⁷ But when such terms are habitually and repeatedly used in the absence of instantiations—as they are in academic contexts—they may only reinforce insiders' mutual understandings while estranging newcomers from this consensus. And this may be especially so when students hear the same wordings in different disciplinary contexts.

At the same time as the concept of meta-genre can help us attend to the kind and quantity of information a context transmits to writers and readers, we could also come to recognize that meta-genres—like genres themselves—are situated expressions, motivated by their contexts of use. So, although compositionists may be frustrated by, for example, engineers consis-

tently representing writing as something that comes at the end, the problem may not be in the meta-genre itself—which, as Dorothy Winsor (1996) says, tells a "story" (here about the relation of design to language)—but with the settings in which the meta-genre is used: functional in a professional scene saturated with instances of the genre and the design practices it supports and represents, the "write-it-up" meta-genre can be dysfunctional in the kind of context Rebecca Burnett describes, where student writers were isolated from the professional context and had only the project director's words to go on.

The concept of meta-genre could contribute to a more systematic means of understanding situations where teachers try something new. So, when Russell Hunt (1998) examines the "origins of genres" in the "laboratory" of an innovative course that asked first-year students to participate in Web-based discussion groups, and finds students moving only very gradually (if at all) away from the summary style of the "school essay" towards a more "dialogic" form (p. 4), we might ask about the meta-generic atmosphere in this innovative situation. Estimating that atmosphere, we find few explicit signals beyond the configuration of the technology itself: neither precedents nor "expert" feedback guided students to the new forms of expression called for—"public [reflections]" about "local public 'Occasions'" and "[responses]" to others' reflections (p. 3).⁸ In a new, meta-generically scant setting, writers (not surprisingly) consulted established, neighboring forms: does an innovative situation with only a thin meta-generic atmosphere send participants to existing genres? Would new genres have originated more readily in a more meta-generically rich atmosphere? Like students in the course Hunt describes, those in an innovative first-year course I have been studying were also asked to participate in on-line discussion groups: students engage in "reflection exercises" in which they "explore and discuss [assigned topics] with each other," and "generate ideas" (handout). Like writers in the course Hunt describes, these ones wrote in a context without precedents, and, similarly, the context urged them towards general rather than specific goals: the instructors "asked students to write engaging discussions on-line. We didn't really have any strict rules on how they should speak or write to each other" (elicited commentary). Like the instructors in the course Hunt describes, these ones also seemed to be looking for a "dialogic" form and noticed the interference or influence of other forms: whereas Hunt sees the "school essay" showing up, the instructor I interviewed detected the form of the "email message." These students did however seem to move slightly more quickly towards the kinds of discussion the instructors hoped for. This development might be attributable to one circumstance these two courses did not share: in the course I have been studying, instructors provided "feedback on a

⁷A similar consensus—at once mystifying and unifying—shows up in medical education. Analyzing the meta-genres surrounding medical students' learning of the *patient case presentation* genre, Lorelei Lingard finds that "relevance" and its collocates (e.g., "important," "pertinent") abound in curricular documents: "these terms appear in such abundance that students are not likely to miss the presence of an important diagnostic notion at work . . . , but the indistinct meanings of these concepts and their fluctuating relations to one another create a sense of a central but ill-defined premise underlying these instructions" (1998, p. 141).

⁸Hunt also reports "a stated requirement that the posting be 'substantial and thoughtful'" (1998, p. 4).

weekly basis" (handout). Does this suggest that innovation calls for more explicit meta-generic activity? Possibly, but another case suggests that even a meticulously tended meta-generic atmosphere does not always result in an entirely satisfactory outcome when writers and readers are involved in novel situations. In an innovative instructional situation described by Wendy Strachan (1998), the instructor in a first-year literature course asked students to write, instead of a traditional essay, an introduction to an anthology of poems. Despite careful directions, and samples, and despite students' careful attention to these materials, the meta-genre did not do the job. Although students produced writing that more or less resembled the target genre, *markers* still responded to the students' writing with the traditional genre in their heads, and evaluated accordingly. Seemingly, even these exhaustive meta-generic activities could not by themselves transform the motivations of all participants in the situation.⁹ Although these analyses offer few firm directives as to the design of meta-genres for innovative settings, they do suggest that, at the same time as we observe how people behave when they want to induce a new form of writing, we should attend to the timing, quality, and sufficiency of meta-generic signals in novel or nonce situations. We can ask of the meta-genre, is it realistic? Is it compatible with the actual motivations of people in the situation? And we can recognize that, when the explicit meta-genre is scant, participants will read the situation for familiar signs (finding inducement to compose a "school essay" or an "email message"), and even when the meta-genre is exhaustive participants may still do so (markers in the literature course looking for features of traditional essays). Further study may show us that meta-genres cannot construct a rhetorical situation all by themselves, or entirely reform an existing one, the limits of meta-genre revealing homeostasis in genres themselves.

When innovation is attempted on a more incremental scale, as an adjustment to a learning situation, the concept of meta-genre can provide perspective on such efforts. In our work at the SFU Writing Centre we investigated the ambient meta-genres of the academic community and, recognizing dysfunctions, tried to devise new ways of talking about writing.¹⁰ Meta-genre helps us to understand talk about writing as part of the context of writing, helps us to revise this talk—and also helps us to understand resistance to our

⁹In another novel situation reported to me, students in an innovative first-year psychology course received an eight-page handout directing their preparation of a writing assignment—a handout longer, as my informant pointed out, than the assignment itself. And still, I was told, some students complained that they had not been given enough direction.

¹⁰We worked on a form of commentary derived from think-aloud protocol and focused on reception: readers in the Writing Centre offered a kind of play-by-play report of their experience, avoiding names for structural features and concentrating instead on representing to the writer their efforts at interpretation.

efforts. Existing meta-genres—in handouts, handbooks, marking commentary, and repeated advice—whatever their inefficiencies, are widely recognized frames for the writing they direct, shared by readers and writers, collating their perceptions, and promising, perhaps misleadingly but nevertheless assuringly, an eventual ratification of writers' efforts. Semiotically tied to their contexts of use, accumulating through generations of institutional life, these meta-genres are not lightly surrendered.

Meta-genre in Analyses of the Sociopolitics of Literacy

Although meta-genre can support our analyses of learning situations, it could have an equally valuable use as a critical instrument for investigating the sociopolitics of sites of writing and reading. Sharp disparities in the meta-generic expressions of users of the same genre, for example, could be signs of contest and domination where language is a site for interested interpretations, as it is in the tax field office, as managers and workers struggle over definitions of workplace literacy. On the other hand, the consensual solidarities of some meta-genres may signify a functional collusion of understandings, a deep socialization and isomorphism of practice and identity, as they do among tax accountants and central-bank economists. Alert to disparities or collusions, we could read meta-genres for evidence of dissent or acclamation in social locales.

The history of a meta-genre itself—its timing in the schedule of the genre's career, its changes over time—could be read to discriminate among rhetorical situations. For example, at one extreme, the composing of Web pages, at first only technically prescribed, has already generated directive and evaluative commentary (e.g., Duin & Archee, 1997), whereas, at the other extreme, authors of a guide to writing ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) claim that this genre has long awaited written guidelines and formal attention (p. viii). One of these activities—technological, incorporating—may be more exposed, open, or reflexive; the other—traditional, isolate—more cloistered, or tacitly construed. Deborah Cameron's (1995) historical study of the *London Times* in-house style guide from 1913 to its market debut as *The Times English Style and Usage Guide* in 1992 shows something between the instant directions for Web pages and the long delayed instructions for fieldnotes. Throughout this period, the guide's peremptory tone persists, despite changes in its dictates, but by 1992 *style* itself has gone from being a "hallowed mystery" to being both a mystery and also a "marketable commodity" (p. 63). In its current form, the celebrated "clarity," "judiciousness," and "good sense" that the *Times*' meta-genre attributes to the paper's own style are differential values that locate the *Times* (and its readers' imagined selves) among other producers and consumers of the

journalistic genres. By 1992 this meta-genre had become a means of both rationalizing and marketing privilege, positioning producers and users of the *Times* in an oscillating social order.

Whereas comings and goings of prescriptions can leave a political record of ideas about writing, so can proscriptions leave a lively record of the not-said—or the said but censured or disallowed but immanent. Examining Margery Kempe's transgression of the "genre taboos" of the fifteenth-century sermon, Nadeane Trowse (1998) shows that, when the "how to" manual is not sufficient to regulate conditions of production, when tumultuous sociohistorical circumstances cannot be moderated in a positive template, or even in cautions and warnings, legislation can silence uses and users of the genre, this enforcement leaving its own record.¹¹ Proscriptions associated with the fifteenth-century sermon leave a startling imprint of the sociohistorical, political context of this genre, just as the proscriptions in Amish newsletter guidelines register immanent speech—whether proselytism or small-talk—in the context of that genre.

Proscriptions invoke the pragmatics of the negative: we deny or negate only when the positive is entertained in the context of utterance (Jordan, 1998). (So the philosophy handout would not rule out certain kinds of beginnings and endings, nor would the Amish newsletter guidelines rule out mention of quilting if students and scribes were not already disposed to write those ways.) When the proscription is rationalized, the rationale can itself indicate ideologies as it does in the *Times* style guide, and in edicts in which Martinich (1989) outlaws the passive in philosophical writing, briskly confusing syntactic and nonsyntactic categories—"A person who writes 'It will be argued' is passive" (p. 4)—and associating active voice with "courage."

When proscriptions are not rationalized, they may be left unexplained for the reasons we proposed when we first speculated on the appearance of the "outsider" in academic meta-genres: much of genre know-how is tacit, and its discursive representation can be difficult and even distorting. But there may be additional reasons for stand-alone proscriptions. Examining my own unrationalized proscription against saying, in essays for a children's literature course, that a narrative would "appeal to the child's imagination," I find that I dictated this condition because, in my experience, many students were likely to say this, and it was a claim that generated sentimental versions of childhood, uncongenial or even repugnant to the problematizing routines of late twentieth-century literary-critical reasoning, and to the political values of that reasoning and its class identifications. But I did not say this to the

¹¹Among the proscriptions accompanying the sermon genre are rules against expressing ideas from books written in Latin, discussion of clerical vices, and explanations of biblical texts.

writers in my course at the time, sensing, probably, that disclosure of political and social factors was more than I could handle.¹²

A meta-genre that occludes or tactfully or timidly evades, or naturalizes highly contingent practices, may not be bad in itself, but, rather, a sign of unspoken negotiations among conflicting interests, a way of everybody getting on and going on despite hunches and suspicions. But a meta-genre that is contradictory may be a sign of troubles. (And unanimity in one group may mean trouble for some other group.) So the tax-examiners and their managers wrestle with class and gender divisions that are represented in contradictory conceptualizations of literacy, schooling, and difficulty, and the same genre looks very different from different positions in the same work unit—and unlike the conflicts in interpretation in the architects' office that Peter Medway studied, these are never reconciled. Similarly, in academic settings, conflicts between students' schoolroom interpretations of, for example, "argument" and professors' discipline-specific interpretations of the term wait for reconciliation—often throughout the undergraduate years and sometimes beyond. In the meantime, the academic meta-genres involve themselves in other troublesome contradictions: whereas the actual practice of the scholarly genres is both highly regular and very respectful of writers' appropriation of others' words, and sensitive to incursions from folk genres whose styles students may reproduce, the meta-genre promotes the individual "voice," "honesty," and outspokenness, as if shy to concede the normalizing forces of scholarly discourse, or shy to confront the folk genres, resorting instead to moralizing alibis. Whereas, in actual practice, the scholarly genres address narrow, specialized audiences, academic meta-genres invoke know-nothing "outsiders," general readers in broader domains, as if shy to recognize or acknowledge the limited contexts and local features of scholarly expression, at once using and disavowing the kinds of expression actual outsiders could see as "jargon," as if preferring or profiting from a representation of the scholarly genres as broadly communicative, their forms serviceable to the communities that surround and subsidize scholarly institutions. By deliberating on these meta-generic materials—including reiteration of consensual abstractions, rarity of modeling in interaction, and seldom or misleadingly rationalized proscriptions—we could come to better understanding of the political configurations of the academic genres and student populations in research institutions. At least, we might be able to analyze students' persistent questions about the hospitality of academic readers to students' "own opinions."¹³ Or we might come to understand why meta-genres of some academic disciplines demur,

¹²As I recall, in extemporaneous rationalizations for this proscription, I resorted to research pieties: how do you *know* about "the child's imagination?" What *evidence* do you have about this?

¹³Dismantling notions of "resistance" as they are presented in particular in two issues of *College English* devoted to "psychoanalysis and pedagogy" and in general in both

defer rather than announce dispreferences for student voices informed by television sensibilities and consumer values (and possibly Christian values, and neoconservative ones, in some disciplines), and preferences for reasoning derived from Western "middle-class urban political conscience" (Giltrow, 2000). Examining these meta-genres, we will find that they beat around the bush, and it will be interesting to know about this routine and the role it plays in positioning academic and research institutions in the larger social order.

* * *

The instances of *meta-genre* I have offered may be too diverse—rules, silences, gestures, collocations, complaints, habituated up-takes, warnings, homilies—for the phenomenon to count as a category. Moreover, some of the examples I cite may be artifacts of research procedures, just as the concept itself may be an artifact of my own review of others' research.

But if the concept survives the diversity of its own manifestations, and if other investigators detect its operations, then it may have some usefulness in organizing recent complications of genre theory—complications arising mainly from the burden that concepts of *situation* and *context* have had to carry. Genre theory insists that we understand regularities of form as motivated by regularities of situation—and this has resulted in many advances we now take for granted. But at the same time inadequacies in our sense of situation or context have inspired, if not a full crisis of confidence in genre theory, at least the observation that, despite its insistence on situation, genre theory tends to focus on text and neglect surroundings, or underestimate their extent. David Russell (1997) points out that, even in social-constructionist views of language, "context" is prone to the "container" metaphor (p. 506), and is liable to go underanalyzed. Russell does not impugn genre theory itself on these grounds, but he does suggest that genre theory could be sustained or supported by "Y. Engeström's (1987, 1993) systems version of Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory" (p. 505), on the grounds that activity theory can explain writers' participation in multiple systems of collective motives

traditional and politically renewed literature classrooms, Heather Murray (1996) observes the professoriate's "reading" of students—especially young women students—and its mission to help students find themselves despite themselves. Whereas the professors congratulate themselves on seeing through students' questions about the relevance and practice of literary study, Murray restores to these questions their original value: "These students, or any students, are of course asking real questions and making real statements. [In the case of the question 'Why is English so important?'], the query being posed is: what is the status in academic discourse of 'opinion' and one's own thoughts, which probably have been developed in a different context?" (Reading Readers, p. 151) The academic meta-genres typically shrug off this question, or evade or transform it.

extending far beyond the immediate context and that these participations can be the sites of "dialectical contradictions," with intersecting activity systems "[pulling] participants in different directions" (p. 512). He notes that work at the boundaries of systems can be especially vulnerable to these pulls and contradictions. Although the concept of meta-genre does not by itself correct deficiencies in our reading of context, it can contribute to the larger picture that Russell urges on us, for meta-genres flourish at those boundaries, at the thresholds of communities of discourse, patrolling or controlling individuals' participation in the collective, foreseeing or suspecting their involvements elsewhere, differentiating, initiating, restricting, inducing forms of activity, rationalizing and representing the relations of the genre to the community that uses it. This representation is not always direct; often it is oblique, a mediated symbolics of practice.

Finally, the concept of meta-genre can help to organize research practice itself, checking for naivetés. I recognize my own naiveté in estimating readers' mention of "outsiders" as simply and randomly mistaken, and I have seen others' naiveté in accepting certain kinds of report as an unmediated representation of practice. Meta-genre respects commentary on writing as functionally motivated rather than simply mistaken or immediately illuminating, as itself an object of interpretation, a site where language users give accounts of themselves, and try to come to a situated understanding of their activities, their positions vis-à-vis one another, the risks incurred and indemnities afforded as they compose.

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