Genre: What is it and how does it work?

In everyday practice people encounter and deal with genre as types, or forms, of discourse that they recognize through repeated exposure to them as appropriate for fulfilling certain purposes—for instance, reports, memos, letters, and tax forms. Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré (1999) describe this orientation:

Most readers will recall the more familiar meaning of genre, as referring to generally unchanging regularities in conventions of form and content, usually with reference to literary works, allowing readers to identify, for example classes of work such as poetry, fiction, and drama….Such classification of text has extended as well to prescriptive classification in school writing and thus the familiar categories of exposition, description, argumentation, and narration…. In the workplace we have such familiar genres as the memo, the progress report, minutes of meetings, and the annual report. The definite article that designates these genres is telling in that it seems to prescribe an unchanging, fixed, and authorized rubric, with the strong implication that adherence to form is tied in with effective writing. (19)

For professional communication teachers and students, this situation is most clearly illustrated in handbooks and textbooks that contain at least a few chapters covering various types of discourse by genres that people might anticipate using in the workplace; in other words, descriptions of and guidelines for applying what might easily be perceived by students as “the authorized rubric.” Though a number of good textbooks follow scholarship in noting that form is both functional and constraining and that genres must be adapted to communities and contexts, students often rely heavily on form as they learn to manage various types of communication.¹

For workplace participants, the legacy of genre as forms for specific purposes continues via boilerplates, templates, and stock documents. People have a general understanding of various “authorized” forms for oral and written academic, social, workplace, and project-related genres, such as meetings, meeting minutes, style sheets, and schedules, reports, proposals, and other types of texts. We learn to recognize the language and formatting conventions generally used to differentiate one genre from another; and the strategies, or “sequential moves” (Bazerman 1999), used to accomplish them—aspects of genre that are generally associated with form.

Encountering Genres as Forms

Genres certainly are, on an important level, composed of linguistic forms and strategic moves—that is, genres encompass, rather than being encompassed by—general features of language including grammar, syntax, register, and semantics and organization, the use of which are often elaborated in descriptions of particular genres (e.g. Swales 1990; Martin 1993; Anthony 1999). Bakhtin has suggested that this “encompassing” position in the hierarchy of discourse allows genre to exist in a relationship to language use that is more “changeable, flexible, and plastic”

¹ See also Bushnell (1999) for a critique of the “new prescriptive paradigm” he finds in textbooks.
than the linguistic features that are used to construct them. In other words, where structures of language limit, for instance, the ways morphemes can be combined to create words or the ways grammatical elements can be combined to create coherent sentences, genres exhibit greater variability. Bazerman (1988) has noted the difficulty in attempting to talk about genres in terms of specific textual features, since within a given genre each instantiation demonstrates considerable variation. “Genre, then, is not simply a linguistic category defined by a structured arrangement of textual features,” according to Bazerman. “Genre is a sociopsychological category which we use to recognize and construct typified actions within typified situations” (319).

Consequently, though identification and categorization of genres and their conventions contribute to peoples’ understandings of the relationship between the purposes and formal features of various types of discourse, they have sometimes led to a view of genre as decontextualized and static, and to a focus on writers’ abilities to learn and reproduce them (e.g., Conners 1982; Bushnell 1999). With regard to studies of genre, Bhatia (1993) suggests that research focused on surface level considerations of genre such as formal features “yields only limited information” and “often leads to misleading generalizations” (p. 7) about the purposes and meanings of various generic conventions and structures. The problem is not that these ideas about acceptable form exist—they are often useful and expedient—the problem is that the features of a genre are often treated as “the genre” in and of themselves leaving students and workers, especially inexperienced ones, with little understanding of the discursive significance and social power of a genre, which can only be fully articulated when a genre is situated as a part of an activity or context.

The same can be said when professionals with training and experience in one area of expertise encounter texts created by professional with training and experience in a different area of expertise. For instance, the form of some government texts that delineate rights, roles, and responsibilities with respect to building accessibility pose problems for people engaging in certain related activities. The ADAAG, which spells out the accessibility requirements for buildings, is difficult to use for planning construction projects in part because of its organization and the legalistic syntax of the wording of the requirements. Architects have noted the problematic dissimilarities from other types of standards documents that are used in construction. The form of the ADAAG (and of the ADA) is, however, consistent with other text used by the government system that created and uses the ADA and ADAAG to establish and enforce legislation.

Meeting Expectations through Form

Despite the problems resulting from form, classifying texts as members of genres serves the needs of both audiences for texts and the creators of texts. Recognizing texts as belonging to genres is one way that audiences for/users of texts determine whether and how texts meet particular needs. For writers, associating a text with a particular genre suggests a range of options for constructing texts that are recognizable to readers/users as part of a particular genre, or more important, as texts that serve particular purposes. The features that creators of texts use to associate texts with genres involve all the decisions that affect the final textual product, including aspects as broad as document design and rhetorical strategy, and aspects as specific as linguistic features (such as markers of cohesion) and choosing a title. Thus, texts and the genres
with which they are associated are the total of the accumulated decisions made by their creators and, in turn, recognized by their audiences.

Am I equating genre as form with types of schema, or set patterns, an idea that would be roundly denounced by scholars of the “paralogic” persuasion, who believe that such descriptions and uses of language are not possible? Blyler (1999) summarizes this position as the theory that people communicate by enacting a type of “hermeneutic guessing” (p.66) that can never be codified. I adopt a middle-ground position by suggesting that we do enact a guessing game but one that is guided significantly by the existing genre that are available to (or forced upon) us—maybe it’s a matching game. In a more practical sense, the fit between the creators’ and audiences’ interpretations of genre determine how well the text is perceived as matching particular needs.

In this sense, generic interpretations depend on expectations (Russell 1997) and improvisations (Schryer 2000) on the part of both writers and audiences. Simply put, writers and readers use genre as “primers” that both capitalize on and create shared expectations from which we can improvise new texts and meanings by building on existing ones. This is not to suggest that form can be understood as genre—discussion of form disconnected from the purposes it serves or out of context is useless—but rather that form is suggestive. So what we’re really talking about when we talk about form is a type of categorical, sociolinguistic knowledge that comes partly from our experiences with language, which, of course, varies tremendously from individual to individual and group to group. Literacy involves the ability to take cues about activities from generic forms (Martin 1993).

Consequently, scholars in rhetoric and professional communication have been particularly concerned with the social nature of writing and the problem of genres in various communities and contexts. In a significant re-inscribing of the concept of genre, Miller (1984) shifts the view of genre as a conjunction of form and purpose to a view of genre as a synthesis of context, social knowledge, rhetorical action, and linguistic form. Miller identifies two salient problems in attempting to define genre: “clarifying the relationship between rhetoric and its context of situation” and “understanding the way in which a genre ‘fuses’...situational with formal and substantive features” (28). Further, Miller defines rhetorical genres as “typifications” of rhetorical responses to a situational “exigence,” which “is a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need,” or more precisely, “a social motive” (30).

**Genre and Community**

A number of theorists and researchers have looked closely at genre use within disciplines, professions, and organizations—viewed loosely as discourse communities—to consider how genre are established, acquired, and changed within communities as their members determine the value of communicative events and forms in articulating their activities (e.g., Orlikowski & Yates, 1992, 1994; Schryer, 1993; Berkenkotter & Ravotas 1997; Dias, et al 1999). As Winsor (1996) puts it, “Genres develop when members of a discourse community repeatedly need to achieve some purpose. They embody the content, organization, and style that the discourse community believes will fulfill this purpose” (27). In addition, Orlikowski and Yates (1994) posit that organizations develop a “genre repertoire” of “socially recognized types of communicative actions...that are enacted by members of a community to realize particular social
purposes” (542). Genres and the conventions associated with them assist communities’ members with such activities as streamlining and aligning their discourse and ensuring accountability within communities so their members can “get on with what they are doing” (Bazerman, 1994 *Constructing*, 87).

Focusing particularly on disciplinary genre use, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) suggest that “genres are intimately linked to a discipline’s methodology, and they package information in ways that conform to a discipline’s norms, values, and ideology. Understanding the genres of written communication in one’s field is, therefore, essential to professional success” (1). Using genre effectively is a demonstration of the ability to participate in critical activities associated knowledge building in a field—it is one litmus test of recognizable achievement necessary for participation.

For example, Bazerman (1988, 1994) and Myers (1990) have demonstrated that genre serves both knowledge-making and gate-keeping functions in disciplines of science. Myers (1990) follows several biologists through the process of writing in different authorized genres of their discipline, including proposals and scientific articles. Difficulties in expressing disciplinary knowledge, Myers finds, include not only constructing genre effectively, but also integrating genre and the appropriate rhetorical stance. Significantly, the knowledge claims the biologists make are perceived and understood partly on the basis of genre. If a writer’s use of genre is not sufficient for expressing that knowledge, the content of communication—in these cases scientific findings—is not enough to guarantee that others within a community will accept a contributor’s work as knowledge.

Myers’s study of the biologists’ writing is one example of how people’s participation in their communities is bound up in their ability to learn and translate into practice “the rules of the game,” including the conventions of discourse instantiated in the communities’ genre—genre in which communities’ knowledge is embodied. Of course, for people to adopt the genre knowledge of a community, they must first gain membership and learn the intricacies of the genres required for participation. The question of how it is that people develop the ability to use genre has provided additional insights into the ways genre functions because learning genres involves more than acquiring a set of guidelines. It involves people’s enculturation into communities’ social perspectives and patterns of making and interpreting knowledge.

This contention is supported by studies of the learning of experienced and inexperienced people in the workplace, including their abilities to learn, adopt, and use specific genre (e.g. Smart 1993; Katz, 1998; Dias et. al. 1999). These studies illustrate the complexity of workplace discourse and the tension between communities’ authorized strategies and individuals’ improvisations. Experienced people understand, tacitly and explicitly, the circumstances in which they are involved—the material aspects of the work, the community’s perspectives and culture, the accepted practices, the needs of audiences both up and down the proverbial food chain, the reasons for implementing particular genre in particular instances, and the conventions associated with genres that address the rhetorical aspects of those instances (Dias, et al 1999). Because experienced people have an intimate knowledge of the communities in which they are immersed, they also know when the rules can be bent or broken, which conventions adjusted and changed. Peoples’ professional expertise is tied to certain bodies of knowledge and the genres used to enact that knowledge. Such diversity is helpful in pooling knowledge and expertise, but it can
also be a challenge in situations where different perspectives conflict because of deeply ingrained professional and disciplinary perspectives and habits.

**Reproducing Culture through Genre**

The functions of genre that assist communities to facilitate their activities and share knowledge also raise questions about the role that generic regulation plays in privileging particular knowledge, promoting ideologies, and determining inclusion and exclusion from discourse and, in turn, communities. Clearly participants in communities use genre to “not only signal and reaffirm their status as community members, but they also reproduce important aspects of that community’s identity and its organizing process” (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). In these respects, though genres help communities maintain the cohesion necessary to function, they are not neutral discursive forms for taking care of business; they are ideologically loaded and motive-laden (Dias et al. 1999) tools for reproducing the beliefs and achieving the objectives of particular communities and cultures. While people learn and use the genre of the communities in which they participate, the broad implications of genre are not always apparent even to community insiders and researchers.

Paré (1993), Berkenkotter (2001), and Winsor (2000), for instance, demonstrate that the regularizing nature of genre can obscure practices and relationships that are part of the fabric of communities. In his study of social workers’ case reports in the Canadian juvenile justice system, Paré looks at the regulatory aspects of community discourse that are imposed partly through the use of the case report genre. He observes that though “many conventional or generic features of texts and contexts are designed to produce a fair and effective exchange of ideas or opinions” and “almost always make writing and reading easier,” the case report genre is also used to control discourse and knowledge among participants “by replicating, as closely as possible, the processes of composition and interpretation” (112-113). While Paré’s study deals with the regulation of professional discourse that is effected through particular genres, which he acknowledges “are not inherently harmful” (122), he also shows that regulations on discourse imposed through genres can shape versions of reality and regulate the thinking of community members in ways that are not apparent in the official, completed reports. What is black-boxed here is how the conventions of the report genre the social workers use construct and enforce official versions of social workers interpretations.

The subject of Berkenkotter’s study of genre use, a mental health professional, is similarly situated within a complex network of genre, disciplines, professions and organizations. Using samples of notes taken by a therapist during the initial interview of a patient, Berkenkotter demonstrates that the therapist’s clinical notes “recontextualize” patients’ experiences as they move from the patient’s genre of narrative to the medical practitioner’s genre of diagnosis. The diagnosis is transformed via the application of a third text in yet another genre, the *DSM-IV*. Further, the diagnosis becomes part of “the systems of reimbursement, health care, research, and medical reasoning” (341). In the process, the patient’s own “text,” as well as the text of the patient-therapist relationship, is black-boxed in other genres such as insurance forms, spreadsheets, and various reports.

Winsor’s (2000) study focuses more on the ways genres organize relationships among participants in community activity. Investigating the politics of genre use in one manufacturing company, Agricorp, Winsor found that the genre of “work order” served to structure work...
processes and also to maintain the statuses of professionals (engineers) and blue-collar workers (technicians) by reinforcing organizational agendas and power structures. In demonstrating that genres can be used to enforce divisions among different classes of workers within the same organization, Winsor notes that “the uneven distribution of power is not due to heroic accomplishments that result in merited differences. Rather it is accomplished in the systemic use of sociotechnical means, including generic texts such as work orders that ordinarily slip unnoticed beneath the surface of everyday life” (180). In this sense, the routine nature of the work order black-boxes the role of the genre in establishing and maintaining relationships that reproduce the organization’s hierarchical structure.

In the three examples provided by Paré, Berkenkotter, and Winsor, people using genre to participate in discourse are involved in highly complex discursive exchanges that include multiple communities and/or genres. In each case, genres function to regulate, regularize, and even recontextualize participants’ activities, and to control the management of information as well as the knowledge created from that information.

This is not to suggest that people have no ability to change genre use or that genres themselves never change. Schryer (1993), Winsor (1999), and Munger (1999) each discuss situations in which participants in communities attempted to change genres or improvise the use of genre. In Schryer’s (1993) study of “competing” genre needs for clinical and research record keeping at a veterinary school, when a new genre for taking histories was introduced at the school clinic some people adopted it while others did not. Winsor (1999) describes how the engineers she studied used the genre of “documentation” (in the sense of documenting events and actions in genre such as meeting minutes and memos) in both anticipated and unanticipated ways, including in situations that involved different groups “where participants’ goals overlap…but do not completely coincide” (p. 217). Winsor suggests that the documentation was used not only to record events but also to subtly guarantee that people were held accountable for future actions. In his study of the run reports of emergency medical technicians (EMTs), Munger discusses the ways the genre changed over time in response to the needs of multiple communities with responsibilities for patient care and data gathering. When the technicians who used the run reports criticized a substantive change in the form, the change was reversed.

**Genre and Context**

The various configurations of communities and situations in which genre are used suggest that we need to look beyond communities to adequately explain the various ways people understand and use genre. The notion of *context* more adequately accounts for genre when multiple communities, activities, interests, and genre converge to form complex systems.

**Accounting for Difference: Context and Control**

The workplace studies that I mention in the previous sections demonstrate that genres serve to regulate both discursive practices and social relationships within communities in ways that are relatively transparent to participants in communities’ activities and virtually invisible to people outside them. But these studies also complicate our notions of genre by demonstrating that professions and organizations are not homogenous groups but complex systems that can be
composed of different groups of participants with different tasks in relationship to larger objectives. In terms of professions, Berkenkotter (2001) sums up, suggesting that

*the professions are organized by genre systems and their work is carried out through genre systems.* The notion of genre system enables us to characterize actors’ specific discursive practices in the context of chains of interrelated genres (what Fairclough, 1992, and Linell, 1998, p. 149, called “intertextual chains”) that both constitute and are constituted by institutional practices. (p. 327 italics hers)

Discursive practices can involve people in the same organization using genres differently, or the same genre can be used to meet a variety of needs of different groups both inside and outside communities in “multiple institutional genre systems” (Berkenkotter 2001 p. 338). In practice, communities and their participants also routinely interact with and are influenced by other communities, adapting genres and creating new ones over time. Forces both internal and external to communities, other communities’ activities and expectations for instance, shape genre use, particularly when communities overlap.

Two points are important here. First, community and context are not synonymous. Rather communities contribute to and sometimes create contexts, which precede and follow from the activities of communities and may include multiple communities. For example, a business, as a community engaged in a particular kind of work, is part of the context created by the need that the business fills, the business’s activities and interests, as well as those of its suppliers, customers, shareholders, and other entities that impact the conditions of the company’s work. On the other hand, as Winsor’s (2000) discussion of the engineers and technicians at Agricorp suggests, various communities may form within a business or organization when different groups have responsibilities for different aspects of the organization’s activity. The workers Winsor discusses might also be said to belong to different communities by virtue of their professional affiliations.

Second, individuals and communities participate in multiple contexts and are therefore shaped by various and multiple interactions from which genre knowledge must be appropriated, used, and even transferred among contexts and communities. Genre enters the equation when communities create and use genres in response to contexts—to manage the activities and relationships that constitute contexts.

Schryer (2000), following Bourdieu, adopts the terms *field*, as “‘a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or capital,’” in which “agents…are in the constant process of attempting to distinguish their field from other markets and thus acquire more recognition, or symbolic power, and a better position vis-à-vis other fields” (p. 457). Abbott (1988) refers to this positioning in the professions as jurisdiction, or making jurisdictional claims on knowledge, activity, and capital. The more value a field (or profession, discipline, organization) can acquire and return, the more power it marshals. Accordingly, Schryer contends, “as instruments of production, some genres, especially those enacted by well-positioned fields such as education and medicine, can

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2 See also Wenger’s (1999) discussion of insurance claims processors as a “community of practice.”
reproduce forms of symbolic power that can literally shape their receivers’ views of the world” (458).

**Conceptualizing Context: Genre in Systems**

In complex interconnected networks or systems of communities and contexts, genres operate as significant mediums of exchange between participants—including individuals and entire communities—that co-construct both genre and activity. Bazerman (1994 *Systems*), for instance, uses the example of the patent system and the various genres of documents involved in creating and defending patents to make the case for “systems of genre,” which, within transactions involving genres that respond to other genres, “instantiate the participation of all the parties” (p. 99).

Russell (1997) explores the relationship of school and professional genres by illustrating how complex systems of activity and genre are related to one specialization, cell biology. The genres used and created by students—textbooks, lab reports, exams—exist in relationship to other genres within the broader educational system—such as syllabi, grade reports, and transcripts—that are used for various purposes beyond student learning including evaluation and selection of students (by institutional means or by student self-selection) into disciplines. Russell shows that these school genres have relationships to genres in the professional realm of cell biology; for instance, research genres create knowledge, which in turn becomes part of the students’ system via textbooks. The professional and school genres are also shaped in part by the genres of other groups in different contexts, including the government, advocacy groups, and pharmaceutical companies to name a few.

Understanding the influences of various communities and genres in complex contexts allows us to trace the influences created by the give-and-take among communities in their individual and collective attempts to articulate knowledge and negotiate interests. In explicating connections and links, we account for the social motives and purposes and the power relationships that shape texts and genres.

The complex relationships between genre and form, community, and context are particularly relevant when groups that interact use different strategies and conventions for constructing genres, when different communities have unequal power in discourse, and when contexts or the rhetorical stances that people bring to them are not shared. In these types of situations, the structure afforded by the genres people routinely use within their “home” communities—disciplines, professions, organizations—and in contexts with which they are familiar, only partially assist them in making sense of discourse. To more fully understand the ways genre use facilitates participation in discursive activities, as well as the ways genre use often inhibits participation, we need to continue to study how genres function in contexts that involve discursive activity among people from different communities with different interests, including the effects on audiences toward whom discourse is directed, and on people who are affected by—but have little influence over—discourse.

**Genre and Function**

To say that we use genre to read and write—to interpret, manage, construct, and negotiate various types of text—and that our use of genre is mediated by our understanding of form, our
affiliations with communities, and our involvement in contexts doesn’t explain the specific ways that genres “operationalize” typified activities, to use Russell’s (1997) term, particularly when the activities under consideration are reading and writing. Therefore, in this section, I outline three functions of genre that derive from the research and theory discussed above—practical, metacommunicative, and social/political—that help focus attention on the relationship between local-level literate activity as acts of genre use that respond to the broader social context.

**Practical Functions**

Practical functions concern providing knowledge and information that people need to participate in activities—information about what people need to do and how they need to do it. Practical functions include the ways that genres assist the activities of others and the ways that genres assist in the realization of objectives. For example, families make grocery lists to guide their shopping decisions (Russell 1997). Computer companies create user manuals that many of us struggle with at home to get our computers to do our bidding. Technicians and engineers use work orders that to negotiate tasks to be performed at a manufacturing company (Winsor 2000). Psychiatrists write diagnoses in clinics, which insurance claims processors recontextualize into statements that are then routed through complex systems involving medicine, business, and individual patients (Berkenkotter 2001). Indeed, much of the research pertaining to genre and community described in this chapter centers on the idea that communities develop genres primarily to get their work done.

However, for a genre to function practically, knowledge and information must be exchanged in a usable form, which involves an additional function—metacommunication.

**Metacommunicative Functions**

Metacommunicative functions include the ways that genres assist in the exchange of information and the ways that genres scaffold practical and social messages. Metacommunication involves the ways that writers structure information so that audiences can read and interpret texts effectively. Brandt (1990), though not specifically discussing genre, suggests that “to use and understand language requires knowing how to accomplish language and its setting simultaneously, knowing how to use language not merely to share meaning with others but also to constitute the conditions necessary for meaning to be shared” (30, italics hers). To exchange knowledge in a meaningful way, writers and readers rely on properties of texts, such as “cohesion, labeling and lexical variety” to “sustain much of the metacommunicative undertalk by which writing and reading are managed” (9). Brandt uses the term “undertalk” to signify that metacommunicative exchanges between writers and readers “function as part of the involvement-focus of written discourse” (9) that exists not only within the text but outside the text in the context that includes both the writer and the reader.

I interpret metacommunication as the scaffolding that gives meaning to information and that connects writers, readers, and the contexts in which the text is created and used.

**Social/Political Functions**

Social/political functions include the ways that genres mediate relationships and represent social contexts. Writers make social/political choices in deciding which perspectives to incorporate, which information to stress, which words to use, and even how to organization information. Consequently, genres involve power dynamics in that participants who control genres also
control representations and interpretations of participants and relationships in contexts, and thus the ways in which relationships are constructed and managed.

**Relationship of Functions**

The three functions of genre I focus on here, practical, metacommunicative, and contextual, are interrelated and writers and readers manage these functions through the content, form, and design of texts.

Separating these interrelated functions of genre for discussion presents some problems. I don’t suggest that we can easily compartmentalize aspects of texts or genres because all aspects function together in determining the full sense of what writers represent and what readers interpret. However, recognizing the functions of genre as typified actions that operationalize text-making activities may provide one tool for investigating genre use in contexts that include members of different communities and multiple audiences.