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Genre-based pedagogies: A social response to process

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Abstract

Process theories have been extremely influential in the evolution of L2 writing instruction. Responding to purely formal views of writing, proponents borrowed the techniques and theories of cognitive psychology and L1 composition to refine the ways we understand and teach writing. While remaining the dominant pedagogical orthodoxy for over 30 years, however, process models have for some time found themselves under siege from more socially-oriented views of writing which reject their inherent liberal individualism. Instead, genre approaches see ways of writing as purposeful, socially situated responses to particular contexts and communities. In this paper, I discuss the importance of genre approaches to teaching L2 writing and how they complement process views by emphasising the role of language in written communication.

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Introduction

Process approaches have had a major impact on the ways writing is both understood and taught, transforming narrowly-conceived product models and raising awareness of how complex writing actually is. Few teachers now see writing as an exercise in formal accuracy, and most set pre-writing activities, require multiple drafts, give extensive feedback, encourage peer review, and delay surface correction. But while process approaches have served to instil greater respect for individual writers and for the writing process itself, there is little hard

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evidence that they actually lead to significantly better writing in L2 contexts. The main reason for this is that their rich amalgam of methods collect around a discovery-oriented, ego-centred core which lacks a well-formulated theory of how language works in human interaction. Because process approaches have little to say about the ways meanings are socially constructed, they fail to consider the forces outside the individual which help guide purposes, establish relationships, and ultimately shape writing.

Genre-based pedagogies address this deficit by offering students explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts. As such they represent the most theoretically developed and fruitful response to process orthodoxies. In this brief overview I will seek to elaborate this point. I will sketch out some of the ways that genre approaches have influenced second language pedagogies by moving away from a highly restricted view of human activity over-reliant on psychological factors, to a socially informed theory of language and an authoritative pedagogy grounded in research of texts and contexts.

A social take on process

It is hazardous to speak of process as a single approach to teaching since, like genre, it is a term which embraces a range of orientations and practices. At the heart of this model, however, is the view that writing is a “non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” (Zamel, 1983, p. 165). Following Emig’s (1983) description of composing as ‘recursive’, rather than as an uninterrupted, left-to-right *Pre-writing* → *Writing* → *Post-writing* activity, this paradigm sees writing as essentially individual problem-solving. It thus seeks to construct cognitive models of what writers do when they write, emphasising the complexity of planning, the influence of task, and the value of guiding novices to greater competence by awareness of expert strategies. Writing in this view is essentially learnt, not taught, and the teacher’s role is to be non-directive and facilitating, assisting writers to express their own meanings through an encouraging and co-operative environment with minimal interference. In this section I want to consider some limitations of this model from a social perspective before offering a genre response to them.

First, process represents writing as a decontextualised skill by foregrounding the writer as an isolated individual struggling to express personal meanings. Process approaches are what Bizzell (1992) calls “inner-directed,” where language use is the outcome of individual capacities and writing processes which are “so fundamental as to be universal.” Basically, the writer needs to draw on general principles of thinking and composing to formulate and express his or her ideas. But while this view directs us to acknowledge the cognitive dimensions of writing and to see the learner as an active processor of information, it neglects the actual processes of language use. Put simply, there is little systematic understanding of the ways

language is patterned in particular domains. From a genre perspective, on the other hand, people don't just write, they write to accomplish different purposes in different contexts and this involves variation in the ways they use language, not universal rules (Halliday, 1994). So while process models can perhaps expose *how* some writers write, they do not reveal *why* they make certain linguistic and rhetorical choices. As a result, such models do not allow teachers to confidently advise students on their writing.

Second, process models disempower teachers and cast them in the role of well-meaning bystanders (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). This is a model of learning based on individual motivation, personal freedom, self-expression and learner responsibility, all of which might be stifled by too much teacher intervention. Methods require little of the teacher because they rely on an intuitive understanding of language use, so his or her involvement is reduced to developing students' metacognitive awareness of their writing processes and responding to writing. Response is potentially the most influential step because this is the point at which overt intervention and explicit language teaching are most likely to occur. Unfortunately, however, in learner-centred classrooms this is necessarily a reactive and extemporised solution to learners' writing difficulties. Because language and rhetorical organisation tend to be things tacked on to the end of the process as "editing," rather than the central resources for constructing meanings, students are offered no way of seeing how different texts are codified in distinct and recognisable ways in terms of their purpose, audience and message (Macken-Horarik, 2002).

Third, this inductive, discovery-based approach to instruction fails to make plain what is to be learnt (e.g., Feez, 2002; Hasan, 1996). In process classrooms students are not typically given explicit teaching in the structure of target text types. Instead they are expected to discover appropriate forms in the process of writing itself, gleaning this knowledge from unanalysed samples of expert writing, from the growing experience of repetition, and from suggestions in the margins of their drafts. This deflects attention from language and presupposes a knowledge of genre outcomes. While well-intentioned, this is a procedure which principally advantages middle class L1 students who, immersed in the values of the cultural mainstream, share the teacher's familiarity with key genres (Christie, 1996; Martin, 1993). L2 learners commonly do not have access to this cultural resource and so lack knowledge of the typical patterns and possibilities of variation within the texts that possess cultural capital (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Hasan, 1996).

Delpit (1988, p. 287), writing from the context of an African American teacher's experience, makes a similar argument:

[A]dherents to process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them. Teachers do students no service to suggest, even implicitly, that 'product' is not important. In this country students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture,

is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit.

Students outside the mainstream, therefore, find themselves in an invisible curriculum, denied access to the sources of understanding they need to succeed. Thrown back on their own resources, they are forced to draw on the discourse conventions of their own cultures and may fail to produce texts that are either contextually adequate or educationally valued.

A related difficulty is that process pedagogies also draw heavily on inaccessible cultural knowledge in their instructional practices and in the concepts which inform judgements of good writing. [Ramanathan and Atkinson \(1999\)](#), for instance, point to the role that hidden mainstream US values play in process methods. Key principles which originated in L1 classrooms such as personal voice, peer review, critical thinking, and textual ownership tacitly incorporate an ideology of individualism which L2 learners may have serious trouble accessing. So, once again, while such crucial culturally specific norms of thought and expression in process classrooms may be unreflectively transparent for mainstream American undergraduates, they may not always be recognised or accepted by students from cultures less entrenched in the ideology of individualism.

A final point I want to make about process models of learning concerns their lack of engagement with the socio-political realities of students' everyday lives and target situations. In process methodologies personal growth and self-actualisation are core learning principles, as writers develop confidence and self-awareness in the process of reflecting on their ideas and their writing. But while this approach responds to the individual needs and personalities of learners, it offers them little by way of the resources to participate in, understand, or challenge valued discourses (e.g., [Hasan, 1996](#); [Martin, 1993](#)). It leaves students innocent of the valued ways of acting and being in society, despite the fact that they need ways to manage the appropriate linguistic and rhetorical tools to both gain access to the powerful genres of mainstream culture and the means to conduct a critical appraisal of them. [Hammond and Macken-Horarik \(1999\)](#) argue that an effective critical literacy in English must presuppose control of mainstream literacy practices. Importantly, however, process models fail to introduce students to the cultural and linguistic resources necessary for them to engage critically with texts.

I should hasten to point out here that I raise these issues not to condemn process approaches or to criticise the many teachers who implement learner-centeredness in their classrooms. Progressive pedagogies have done much to inform the teaching of writing by moving us away from grammar practice and authoritarian teaching roles to facilitate more equal, respectful and interactive relationships in settings that value reflection and negotiation. I have simply tried to highlight the problems posed by an approach uninformed by an explicit theory of how language works or the ways that social context affects linguistic outcomes. These are areas where genre-based models have made their strongest impact. Put simply, social

theorists argue that because process approaches emphasise individual cognition at the expense of language use, they fail to offer any clear standpoint on the social nature of writing (Martin, Christie & Rothery, 1987).

From a social perspective, a writer's choices are always context-dependent, motivated by variations in social activity, in writer–reader relations, and by constraints on the progress of the interaction. As a result, teachers cannot expect weak writers to improve simply by equipping them with the strategies of good writers. Not only are such strategies only part of the process, but they too are likely to vary with context. Instead, we need to explore ways of scaffolding students' learning and using knowledge of language to guide them towards a conscious understanding of target genres and the ways language creates meanings in context. This is the goal of genre pedagogies.

A brief overview of genre

Genre refers to abstract, socially recognised ways of using language. It is based on the assumptions that the features of a similar group of texts depend on the social context of their creation and use, and that those features can be described in a way that relates a text to others like it and to the choices and constraints acting on text producers. Language is seen as embedded in (and constitutive of) social realities, since it is through recurrent use of conventionalised forms that individuals develop relationships, establish communities, and get things done. Genre theorists, therefore, locate participant relationships at the heart of language use and assume that every successful text will display the writer's awareness of its context and the readers who form part of that context. Genres, then, are “the effects of the action of individual social agents acting *both* within the bounds of their history and the constraints of particular contexts, *and* with a knowledge of existing generic types” (Kress, 1989, p. 10, Kress's emphasis).

It is customary to identify three broad, overlapping schools of genre theory (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2002). *The New Rhetoric approach*, influenced by post-structuralism, rhetoric and first language composition, studies genre “as the motivated, functional relationship between text type and rhetorical situation” (Coe, 2002, p. 195). The focus here is mainly on the rhetorical contexts in which genres are employed rather than detailed analyses of text elements (e.g., Freedman & Medway, 1994). *The ESP approach* is more linguistic in orientation and sees genre as a class of structured communicative events employed by specific discourse communities whose members share broad social purposes (Swales, 1990, pp. 45–47). These purposes are the rationale of a genre and help to shape the ways it is structured and the choices of content and style it makes available (Johns, 1997). A third orientation is based on Halliday's (1994) *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL). Known in the US as the “Sydney School” (e.g., Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2002), this model of genre stresses the purposeful, interactive, and sequential character of different genres and the ways language is systematically

linked to context through patterns of lexico-grammatical and rhetorical features (Christie & Martin, 1997).

While these approaches are united by a common attempt to describe and explain regularities of purpose, form, and situated social action, they clearly differ in the emphasis they give to text or context, the research methods they employ, and the types of pedagogies they encourage (Hyland, 2002a). New Rhetoric, with its emphasis on the socially constructed nature of genre, has helped unpack some of the complex relations between text and context and the ways that one reshapes the other. But while New Rhetoric underlines that literacy is not the monolithic competence it is often perceived to be, its contribution to L2 writing instruction has been minimal. Australian and ESP genre theorists, however, have been closely engaged with issues of L2 teaching, and unswerving in their efforts to provide students with a knowledge of relevant genres so they can act effectively in their target contexts.

ESP genre approaches have perhaps had the most influence on L2 writing instruction worldwide, grounding teaching in a solid research base and drawing strength from an eclectic set of pedagogies and linguistic theories. SFL, however, perhaps offers the most theoretically sophisticated and pedagogically developed approach of the three, underpinned by a highly evolved and insightful theory of language and motivated by a commitment to language and literacy education. Basically, Halliday's theory systematically links language to its contexts of use, studying how language varies from one context to another and, within that variation, the underlying patterns which organise texts so they are culturally and socially recognised as performing particular functions. The exploration and description of these patterns and their variations has been the focus of genre theory and the resources it exploits to provide disadvantaged learners with access to the cultural capital of socially valued genres.

A genre view of language and writing

Genre theory seeks to (i) understand the ways individuals use language to orient to and interpret particular communicative situations, and (ii) employ this knowledge for literacy education. This second purpose complements research in the cross-disciplinary movement known as the New Literacy Studies, which stresses that all writing is situated and indicative of broader social practices (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Basically, genres are rhetorical actions that writers draw on to respond to perceived repeated situations; they are choices which represent effective ways of getting things done in familiar contexts. Some genre theorists have, therefore, sought to identify the recognisable structural identity, or "generic integrity," of particular academic and workplace genres in terms of their *stages* (or rhetorical structures) and the constraints on typical move sequences (Bhatia, 1999; Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yalop et al., 2000). Another research direction has looked

at language variation *across* genres and the resources available for creating meanings in a culture (Hunston & Thompson, 2001). This research attempts to show how clusters of register, style, lexis, and other features reflect the different personal and institutional purposes of writers, the different assumptions they make about their audiences, and the different kinds of interactions they create with their readers. As a result, a lot more is known about the ways writers frame their ideas for particular readers, construct an appropriate authorial self, and negotiate participant relationships in writing (e.g., Bondi, 1999; Hyland, 2000, 2002b, 2002c; Thompson, 2001).

One important assumption made by genre adherents is that writing is *dialogic* (Bakhtin, 1986), both because it presupposes and responds to an active audience, and because it involves a plurality of voices through links to other texts. Writing involves drawing on the texts we typically encounter and are familiar with. Consequently, the concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Bakhtin, 1986) have been extremely influential in genre theory. One influence has been that analysts are not simply concerned with describing text similarities, but with exploring the contextual constraints on allowable configurations. Variation is just as important as similarity because texts spread along a continuum of approximation to core genre examples, with varying options and restrictions operating in particular cases (Swales, 1990). Genre research, thus, extends beyond texts to the sites where relationships can facilitate and constrain composing and to the discourse communities in which texts will be used and judged (Hyland, 2000).

Discourse community is a concept central to genre views of writing as it is a powerful metaphor joining writers, texts and readers in a particular discursive space (Porter, 1992; Swales, 1990, 1998). While often criticised as altogether too structuralist, static, and deterministic, the notion of discourse community foregrounds the socially situated nature of genre and helps illuminate something of what writers and readers bring to a text, implying a certain degree of inter-community diversity and intra-community homogeneity in generic forms. Genre theory has, therefore, often relied on some sense of “discourse community” to account for this kind of variation, seeking to draw on its explanatory and predictive authority without framing communities as utopias of shared and agreed-upon values and conventions. While reservations about the concept persist, it is currently the most useful tool available to explain the situated cognition required for interpretation and engagement. Communities are where genres make sense; they are the systems where the multiple beliefs and practices of text users overlap and intersect (Swales, 1998).

It is also worth mentioning here that while process and genre are often contrasted in terms of their views of writer creativity, genres are not overbearing structures which impose uniformity on users. There is huge potential for internal heterogeneity of genres, and issues of unity and identity are frequently raised in the literature. The fact that language users routinely and unreflectively recognise similarities and differences between texts with sufficient agreement to successfully negotiate and interpret meanings is itself highly significant. Our abstract,

more-or-less shared knowledge of texts, intertextuality, audience, and standard purposes makes writing and reading efficient and contributes to mutual understanding. Genres help unite the social and the cognitive because they are central to how writers understand, construct, and reproduce their social realities. But while a shared sense of genre is needed to accomplish understanding, it is not necessary to assume that these are fixed, monolithic, discrete and unchanging.

Genre and second language literacy

Genre-based pedagogies rest on the idea that literacies are community resources which are realised in social relationships, rather than the property of individual writers struggling with personal expression. This view offers writing teachers a radical new perspective on what they do, for the naïve assumptions that writing, and teaching writing, are somehow neutral, value-free activities are no longer defensible. It encourages us to acknowledge that literacies are situated and multiple — positioned in relation to the social institutions and power relations that sustain them. Expressed most simply, writing is used in many ways across many social contexts, but only some of these have institutional and cultural stature. It is not the case that all genres are created equal, because they are associated with, and are used to regulate entry into, social communities possessing more or less prestige and influence. The question of access to, and production of, valued texts is central to the notions of power and control in modern society, and underlines the genre theorist's emphasis on which genres should be taught.

What this means is that writing cannot be distilled down to a set of cognitive processes. Genre knowledge is important to students' understanding of their L2 environments, and crucial to their life chances in those environments. The teaching of key genres is, therefore, a means of helping learners gain access to ways of communicating that have accrued cultural capital in particular professional, academic, and occupational communities. By making the genres of power visible and attainable through explicit instruction, genre pedagogies seek to demystify the kinds of writing that will enhance learners' career opportunities and provide access to a greater range of life choices. Without the resources to understand these genres, students in university and WAC contexts will continue to find their own writing practices regarded merely as failed attempts to approximate prestigious forms (Johns, 1997).

For some critics, however, providing L2 students with more effective access to the dominant genres of our culture does nothing to change the power structures that support them, or to challenge the social inequalities which are maintained through exclusion from them (e.g., Benesch, 2001). Luke (1996, p. 314), for example, writes:

A salient criticism of the 'genre model' is that its emphasis on the direct transmission of text types does not necessarily lead on to a critical reappraisal

of that disciplinary corpus, its field or its related institutions, but rather may lend itself to an uncritical reproduction of discipline.

Thus, teaching genres may only reproduce the dominant discourses of the powerful and the social relations which they construct and maintain.

A similar charge could, of course, be levelled at process and other pedagogies which simply perpetuate inequalities by failing to provide students with better access to powerful genres (e.g., [Hasan, 1996](#)). In fact, learning about genres does not preclude critical analysis but provides a necessary basis for critical engagement with cultural and textual practices. As [Bakhtin \(1986, p. 80\)](#) has suggested, writers must be able to control the genres they use before they can exploit them. [Hammond and Macken-Horarik \(1999, p. 529\)](#) make this point forcefully:

Systematic discussion of language choices in text construction and the development of metalanguage — that is, of functional ways of talking and thinking about language — facilitates critical analysis. It helps students see written texts as constructs that can be discussed in quite precise and explicit ways and that can therefore be analysed, compared, criticised, deconstructed, and reconstructed.

In other words, to fail to provide learners with what we know about how language works as communication denies them both the means of communicating effectively in writing and of analysing texts critically.

Genre approaches seem to offer the most effective means for learners to both access and critique cultural and linguistic resources ([Hasan, 1996](#)). By providing learners with an explicit rhetorical understanding of texts and a metalanguage by which to analyse them, genre teachers can assist students to see texts as artifacts that can be explicitly questioned, compared, and deconstructed, thereby revealing their underlying assumptions and ideologies.

To sum up, from a genre perspective writing is not an abstract activity, but a social practice. What is considered good writing, appropriate engagement, convincing argument, effective persuasion, and creative expression does not depend on mastery of universal processes, but varies from one community context to the next. By focusing on the literacy practices writers encounter at school, at work, and at university, genre pedagogies help them to distinguish differences and provide them with a means of conceptualising their varied experiential frameworks. Highlighting variability thus helps undermine a deficit view which sees writing difficulties as learner weaknesses and which misrepresents writing as a universal, naturalised and non-contestable way of participating in communities.

Genre-based pedagogies

Genre not only presents teachers and students with a different view of writing, but also with a distinct set of teaching practices. In contrast to process models, genre-based pedagogies support learners within a contextual framework for writing which

foregrounds the meanings and text-types at stake in a situation. At their core, these methods offer writers an explicit understanding of how texts in target genres are structured and why they are written in the ways they are. To create a well-formed and effective text, students need to know the lexico-grammatical patterns which typically occur in its different stages, and the teacher's task is to assist students towards a command of this through an awareness of target genres and an explicit grammar of linguistic choices. Providing writers with a knowledge of grammar shifts writing instruction from the implicit and exploratory to a conscious manipulation of language and choice.

Inside genre classrooms a range of methods are employed. These include investigating the texts and contexts of students' target situations, encouraging reflection on writing practices, exploiting genre sets, and creating mixed-genre portfolios (Johns, 1997; Paltridge, 2001). In SFL approaches the teaching–learning process is typically seen as a *cycle* which takes writers through modelling, joint negotiation, and independent construction, allowing students different points of entry and enabling teachers to systematically expand the meanings students can create (e.g., Feez, 2002). This model represents a “visible pedagogy” in which what is to be learned and assessed is made clear to students, as opposed to the invisible pedagogy of process approaches (e.g., Delpit, 1988).

The theoretical underpinning of this pedagogical approach is provided by Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the interactive collaboration between teacher and student, with the teacher taking an authoritative role to “scaffold” or support learners as they move towards their potential level of performance. This scaffolding is most evident at the early stages of learning a genre where the teacher contributes what learners cannot do alone. The teacher intervenes at this stage to model and discuss texts, deconstructing and analysing their language and structure. This support is strategically diminished as students progress, with teachers and learners sharing responsibility in the joint negotiation and construction of texts, often through several drafts and with peer assistance, until the learner has the knowledge and skills to perform independently. Here is an approach to writing instruction with a central role for both language and teachers. It is teaching which supports L2 students with an explicit pedagogy and which presupposes little prior understanding of cultural practices.

Genre pedagogies assume that writing instruction will be more successful if students are aware of what target discourses look like, but it is this reproductive element which process adherents have been most critical. The argument is that the explicit teaching of genres imposes restrictive formulae which can straightjacket creativity through conformity and prescriptivism; that genres might be taught as moulds into which content is poured, rather than as ways of making meanings (e.g., Dixon, 1987; Raimes, 1991). There is always some danger of reifying genres with a text-intensive focus, as inexperienced or unimaginative teachers may fail to acknowledge variation and choice, applying what Freedman and Medway (1994, p. 46) calls “a recipe theory of genre” so that students see genres as ‘how-to-do’ lists. Obviously the dangers of a static, decontextualised pedagogy

exist and must be guarded against, but there is nothing *inherently* prescriptive in a genre approach. I can see no reason why providing students with an understanding of discourse should be any more prescriptive than, say, providing them with a description of a clause, or even of stages in a writing process.

In sum, genre is a socially informed theory of language offering an authoritative pedagogy grounded in research on texts and contexts, strongly committed to empowering students to participate effectively in target situations. Genre pedagogy is buttressed by the belief that learning is best accomplished through explicit awareness of language, rather than through experiment and exploration, but this does not mean replacing communicative practices with teacher-centred ones. There is nothing here that excludes the familiar tools of the process teacher's trade. Genre simply requires that they be used in the transparent, language-rich, and supportive contexts which will most effectively help students to mean.

Conclusion

Genre is, in part, a social response to process. It suggests that because writing is a means of connecting people with each other in ways that carry particular social meanings, it cannot be only a set of cognitive abilities. The process of writing is a rich collection of elements of which cognition is only one, and to understand it fully and to teach it effectively we need to include in this mix the writer's experiences together with a sense of self, of others, of situation, of purpose and — above all — of the linguistic resources to address these effectively in social action. Writing is a basic resource for constructing our relationships with others and for understanding our experience of the world, and as such genre is centrally involved in the ways we negotiate, construct, and change our understanding of our societies and ourselves. As Christie (1987, p. 30) has observed, “Learning the genres of one's culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it.”

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