Genre Theory

Teaching, Writing, and Being

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1 Why Study Genre Theory?

A friend asked me, "Why is genre theory worth exploring?" Good question. I think it's because genre theory can address many of the problems and challenges we encounter when we teach writing to secondary students. Genre theory is based on the idea that writing is social and that it responds to situations; consequently, writing isn't the same for every person or every situation. Genre theory is "messy" and "complex," to use Amy Devitt's words, and that makes it hard to define—but, for me, it provides answers that help me improve my instruction and student writing (Writing 219). Those answers make it worth the mess and complexity.

So what are the benefits of using genre theory in the classroom? To begin with, genre theory addresses some aspects of the writing process that get left out of many classrooms. The writing process approach is intended to help students imitate the procedures of more experienced writers and, thus, improve their writing products. Unfortunately, it doesn't always do that. Over twenty years ago, Arthur N. Applebee anticipated a potential problem when he observed that "in many excellent classrooms the various process activities have been divorced from the purposes they were meant to serve. In the original studies of individual writers, the multitude of specific techniques that writers used to aid their planning, revising, or editing were strategies or routines that they orchestrated to solve particular problems. The choice of appropriate strategies was driven by the task at hand—not by a generalized concept of the 'writing process' that the writers used in all contexts" (102). Sometimes those parts of the process originally attached to specific situations and purposes are taught or perceived as routine steps performed for all writing situations.

In contrast to this "generalized" process we sometimes see implemented in classrooms, Mary Jo Reiff describes her process as she wrote her pedagogical response to the preceding theory chapters of the edited collection Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers. Among other things, she compared the genre she was asked to write to ones she knew and then found similarities; she asked questions about her role and the actions her chapter was intended to perform; she "looked for clues about how the assignment located [her] within a situa-
tion and provided [her] with the rhetorical means for acting within that situation,” and she located herself in the larger context of the culture (“Moving” 157). In essence, she modeled procedures successful writers follow whenever they are asked or need to act through writing: they adapt the writing process for the specific purposes at hand—and these include consideration of the social aspects of writing. Genre theory fattens the idea of the writing process, fills it out from its sometimes lean appearance in secondary classes. A more complete idea of process—including the introduction of social considerations—can lead to student success with writing.

An understanding of genre theory is particularly helpful to writers during invention and revision because knowing about genres helps us position ourselves and consider readers’ expectations. When I want to write a letter to my friend, I know immediately that I won’t have to explain everything I say or even use complete sentences. I won’t worry about revision—I probably won’t even reread what I write. In contrast, when I wrote a letter of complaint to a large company, I thought for a long time about my position as a customer and the number of people who might read my letter before it got into the hands of someone who could provide the satisfaction I wanted. I selected appropriate details from my experience, and I was conscious of the tone I was using since I wanted to be taken seriously. I had several people read drafts of the letter and give me suggestions for revision before I finally mailed it. Knowing the genre of complaint letters helped me know where to start my writing and which considerations to think about when I revised. Knowing genres gives all writers a “metarhetorical awareness” (Horning 261) that allows them to make effective choices all through the writing process.

The fuller understanding of writing processes that comes from genre theory also leads to a better solution for the product/process dichotomy evident in some classrooms. When it is clearly connected to the situation, students don’t see process as a series of products teachers ask them to complete in addition to the paper they were originally assigned. They don’t see the freewrite or revision as an extra—and they shouldn’t be inclined to scribble on a copy of the final draft just to make it look as though it had been revised. When each product is obviously a part of the process, the challenges of getting students to work through that process diminish. The connections between what writers do to create texts and the success of those texts in accomplishing their purposes in specific situations show the value of the choices made during the writing process. Genre theory links process and product in key ways.
Genre theory also challenges students' assumptions that good writing is always the same, that situation, purpose, audience, and relationships don't have an impact on successful writing. Sometimes students think that teachers are keeping the secret of good writing to themselves or that some teachers (the ones that give them high grades for writing) are the only ones who recognize good writing. Genre theory encourages "the idea that good writers adapt well from one genred site of action to the next" (Bawarshi, *Genre* 156; emphasis added). Good writing depends on context—and good writers are ones who know that.

Charles Bazerman points out that thinking about genres—of the situations associated with them and the actions carried out by them—can help students "understand when seemingly well-written texts go wrong, when those texts don't do what they need to do" ("Speech Acts" 311). When students think there is only one "right" way to write, genre theory can help them understand the need to adapt writing to situations and the problems that might result if they choose not to adapt.

Genre knowledge also makes important connections for students between reading and writing. Sunny Hyon says that genre "is the first element shaping readers' interpretations of a text, guiding their expectations about the text's topics and the author's comment on that topic" (123). Thus, when young students see the cover of the book *Diary of a Worm* (Cronin), with its picture of a worm in a red ball cap and wielding a pencil as he sits on a bottle cap (if they know picture books at all), they position themselves accordingly: they suspend disbelief, expecting a worm to be personified, to tell of his days, and to show personality. They don't expect a scientific book dense with facts about worms. In a reverse example, when my university students were assigned an article about genre theory, they had a lot of difficulty with it initially. They didn't know how to position themselves as readers since they didn't know the conversation the article was a part of. It was my job to orient them to the academic situation that the article responded to. Because genre connects reading and writing, J. L. Lemke claims that "genre is potentially the great unifying theme of the language arts curriculum... It enables us to teach students about the expectations of readers, and the strategies of writers" (4). In fact, Richard M. Coe asserts that genre "epitomizes" the important ways teachers can connect reading and writing in the classroom because both are social processes and participate in social actions ("Teaching" 159). Genre theory, then, can help students succeed as both readers and writers.

Testing is another classroom concern that genre theory can address. When teachers feel that pressure to succeed on high-stakes standardized
tests is encouraging a limited view of writing among their students, genre theory can bring back an appropriate perspective. If, as Carolyn R. Miller claims, “genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (“Genre” 165), then they are also keys to understanding testing situations and how they differ from other writing actions. Coe claims that “understanding genre will help students become versatile writers, able to adapt to the wide variety of types of writing tasks they are likely to encounter in their lives” (“New Rhetoric” 200). That adaptability means that they will be better able to separate the writing expectations of a standardized test from those of, for example, a college entrance essay. Since students sometimes get the impression that “passing the test” must mean that they are “good” writers, a genre approach is invaluable. It can help teachers clarify for students that the kind of writing valued on tests represents a limited perspective of what counts as effective writing.

The pressure of testing can also limit teachers’ view of writing instruction. Teachers can’t ignore students’ need to write for such situations, but David Russell provides an effective analogy to remind teachers that genre theory also addresses this test-preparation situation. He explains that some people may be skilled at ball handling in one game (table tennis, for instance) but awkward with the same-sized ball in another game (jacks, for instance). Russell concludes that “there is no autonomous, generalizable skill called ball using or ball handling that can be learned and then applied to all ball games” (57). When he asks, “How can one teach ball-using skills unless one also teaches students the games, because the skills have their motive and meaning only in terms of a particular game or games that use them?” (58), teachers should hear: How can we teach writing as a discrete skill without connecting it to the situation in which it resides? With a genre approach, we can teach students that the values of writing in one situation (testing) are unique to that situation and not necessarily valued in the same way in other writing situations or for other purposes: “One always evaluates the effectiveness of ball using within a particular game, not in general” (59). With that perspective from genre theory, teachers can prepare students to succeed on tests without abandoning good practice. Testing is just one “game” of writing.

Knowing about genres also contributes to critical literacy because it helps students say what they want to say within a situation and understand the implications of doing so. In her book Writing Genres, Devitt proposes that the consequences of resisting generic expectations might depend on “the status in the society of the individual who is breaking the convention...” Having established membership in a group, a writer then can violate expectations with less severe consequences, though even
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then the consequences are unpredictable" (86). Once students understand
the social aspects of genres, understand that genres carry expectations
for acting in certain ways, they can begin to consider the implications of
choosing to follow or to resist the expectations associated with those situa­
tions. When students resist generic expectations—when their use of
informal language in a letter of apology to the principal suggests that they
are peers instead of working within a relationship that has an unequal
level of authority—there will be consequences. Genre theory helps ex­
plain that situation. However, Devitt also notes that “to conform to those
expectations also entails consequences, good and bad” (“Genre” 46). Stu­
dents who know that genres are more than forms, that they
represent ways of being and acting in the world, are more capable of choosing re­
sistance or compliance—and the resulting consequences—more effect­
ively.

Currently, teachers are looking for more effective ways to address
multimedia writing in their classes. Genre theory provides a sound foun­
dation for such instruction, especially at a time when many teachers are
treating different media simply as forms or technological gimmicks with
no regard to situation, context, rhetorical strategies, or social action. Kevin
Brooks makes a strong case for how genre-based pedagogy can be an
important way to approach teaching multimedia projects, Web writing,
and hypertexts. Because, he says, students know online genres, their fa­
miliarity should serve as “guideposts,” “should be at the heart of a genre­
based hypertext pedagogy” (342). He suggests “having students under­
stand that all texts, including hypertexts, are rooted in one or more
genres” (343). Students who understand genres and their connection to
text and situation will be better able to adjust to the challenges of
writing in multiple mediums. Also, since “a strong trend in hypertext
production seems to be the blurring of genres or the creation of hybrid
genres” (343–44), genre theory makes a good foundation for instruction
in hypertexts.

These are just some of the reasons genre theory is worth explor­
ing: the ways it enhances the writing process, especially in invention and
revision; the ways it connects reading and writing, aiding both readers
and writers; the ways it develops writers as critical thinkers and users of
language; and the ways it presents fuller approaches to testing and
multimodal writing. Nancy Myers states boldly that “without an under­
standing of genre, students do not succeed” (165). I agree wholeheart­
edly. So, even though genre theory is somewhat complicated, its benefits
to writing and writing instruction—its ability to address many of the
concerns and issues of secondary classrooms—make it a valuable addi­
tion to pedagogy.