The author explores new conceptions of genre and genre learning: learning genres, learning through genres, and learning about genres. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, she argues that reconceptualizing genres as situated, social, and active, rather than focusing on formal features, can extend and enrich process approaches to writing and enhance learning in the elementary classroom.

Situated, Social, Active

Rewriting Genre in the Elementary Classroom

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Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (Bazerman, 1997, p. 19)

New insights into genre promise to revitalize its role in the learning and teaching of writing. Rather than rules to be followed (for example, using story grammar elements to create a story) or models to be imitated (for example, the thank you letter as a Thanksgiving writing activity), genres are now being thought of as cultural resources on which writers draw in the process of writing for particular purposes and in specific situations. Incorporating new notions of genre into our writing programs implies a major shift in the way we think about writing tasks, texts, and contexts.

In this article, I explore new conceptions of genre and how genres are learned and then discuss the ways that these ideas can inform our practices as writing teachers. Although genres may be linguistic (oral or written), artistic (visual or performative), and so forth, in the...
context of this article, I use *genre* to refer to any ways with words that incorporate writing (including combinations of written and visual representation).

**NEW CONCEPTIONS OF GENRE**

Traditionally, emphasis on genre has meant stressing structure rather than purpose. For the most part, genres have been viewed as “(a) primarily literary, (b) entirely defined by textual regularities in form and content, (c) fixed and immutable, and (d) classifiable into neat and mutually exclusive categories and subcategories” (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 1). More recently, genre has been reconceived, particularly from the influence of sociolinguistics. Miller (1984), for example, has suggested we think of genres as ways of participating in the actions of a community, and Swales (1990) has proposed we consider genres in terms of communicative purposes that give rise to particular features, rather than in terms of the features themselves. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1979/1986), however, has been the most influential.

Bakhtin (1979/1986) focused on how language functions in particular contexts and how we use language to achieve particular purposes. He suggested that all language is dialogue because our understandings of words and how to use them are shaped by and developed through interactions with others. Even when we write to and for ourselves, we use words in ways that we have learned from our communities and cultures. An important part of Bakhtin’s work is his discussion of genres that, he explains, are structures that are embedded in and develop out of the various spheres of human activity. Genres are flexible models, not merely generic forms into which writers slot ideas—they reflect an integration of

- content (what we want to express),
- form (ways of organizing our words and ideas),
- function (purposes for writing), and
- context of situation (the setting, which is multidimensional and includes a range of factors from global to specific).

As Bakhtin (1979/1986) put it: “Each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of . . . genres [oral and written] that differentiate and
grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex” (p. 60). These socially constructed genres provide a set of signals that enable a speaker/writer and listener/reader to interpret the particulars of a specific communicative interaction. Yet genres are sufficiently open-ended to allow for individual choice, creativity, and voice—writers make choices about what they write and how they write it, and they express the uniqueness of their own personalities in their writing—so writing is very much an individual creative process as well as a social one. Bakhtin’s perspective helps us see genres as situated, social actions:

- situated in that they arise out of and are embedded in particular contexts and spheres of activity,
- social in that they are learned through and used in interactions with others,
- active in that they are dynamic, flexible, purposeful, and useful and are learned through engagement—by doing.

Thus, genres are viewed as social actions situated in particular types of contexts within a discourse community. Formal features are seen not as ends in themselves but as derived from and related “to the writer’s social motive in responding to a recurrent social situation of a certain type” (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 3).

Bakhtin (1979/1986) expanded the concept of genre to include a wide array of forms, such as those used in everyday settings and in academic and professional disciplines, in addition to literary genres. He considered the genres used in daily communicative activities as primary genres. Primary genres are context-embedded, localized, and intrinsically tied to time and place. Secondary genres, on the other hand, are removed from the contexts of activities in which primary genres are embedded. This makes them more complex, not because of their structural characteristics, but because they “rise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, socio-political, and so on. . . . They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others” (p. 62).

Building on the work of Bakhtin (1979/1986) and others, researchers have begun to explore written genres from a wider perspective. These include explorations of writing in spheres of activity other than generic writing, such as expository writing at the postsecondary level, workplace writing, emerging technologies, and cross-cultural
studies. With the exception of the Australian genrists, such as Martin (1993) and Christie (1993), most of this work is descriptive rather than prescriptive.

LEARNING GENRES

What does it mean to “learn genres?” It means, in essence, learning how to participate in the actions of a community (Himley, 1986). Yet, although we all speak and write in genres, most of our knowledge is tacit (Coe, 1994; Freedman, 1993a). Previously, it was thought genres were learned “by encountering a number of instances of the form, discovering (or being told) what its ‘rules’ are, internalizing that abstract definition, and using it as an algorithm to generate new examples” (Hunt, 1994, p. 246). However, rather than simply being handed over (Dias, 1994), current thinking suggests that we learn new genres by forming analogies and making connections with the ones we already know (Bazerman, 1997). Hunt (1994) suggests we think of learning genres in the following way:

A genre is invoked or invented (reinvented) as a response to a social situation, a response made by someone who wants to create an utterance that will make what Bakhtin (1979/1986) calls her “speech will” a part of the social situation and thus participate in a dialogue; they are invented by people participating in more or less stable social situations and so the forms they continually invent exhibit stable characteristics. (p. 247)

Although “research evidence concerning genre acquisition is limited” (Freedman, 1993a, p. 226), research studies of young children’s writing have shown that learning genre is part of children’s literacy development. For example, Donovan (1997) found that kindergarten children can write—and distinguish between—information texts and stories even before they can write with conventional spellings. My own research inquiries have demonstrated that learning genres is an emergent process, as are other aspects of writing (Chapman, 1994), and that this process involves both social and cognitive construction (Chapman, 1995). Learning genres is cognitive in that children invent genres for particular communicative purposes, much as they invent spelling and punctuation. It is social in that children learn through interaction with others and in that characteristics of the writing
situation itself (as well as events that precede and follow it) determine the genres children use (Chapman, 1995).

Most significant, learning genres can be thought of as learning to use genres as cultural resources or cognitive tools (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993). Learning genres, like learning other aspects of writing, is most effective in contexts that support engagement with writing, not simply following rules or applying formulas (Freedman, 1993a)—contexts in which genre is more than “a ritual repetition of standardized statements” (Bazerman, 1997, p. 24). Like other aspects of writing, genre is cultivated through

• engagement,
• exploration and inquiry,
• personal connections and meaning making,
• participation in a discourse community,
• apprenticeship and mentoring,
• collaboration, and
• talk about text.

A classroom is a community of learners; when it comes to genre, it has three interrelated purposes (to adapt Halliday, 1982): learning genres, or widening students’ genre repertoires; learning about genres, or fostering genre awareness (what Coe, 1994, refers to as “metagenre awareness”); and learning through genres, or using genres as tools for thinking and learning in particular situations. Teachers breathe life into learning genres, learning about genres, and learning through genres when they “activate the dynamics of the classroom” (Bazerman, 1997), making writing situated, social, and active.

**SITUATED GENRES/SITUATING GENRES IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM**

“Genre knowledge is a form of situated cognition” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, p. 485). As teachers of writing, Freedman and Medway (1994) suggest, we need to attend more to the features of a writing situation than to the features of a text. Writing is situated when it is an integral and purposeful part of the various spheres of activity in the classroom. As teachers of writing, we explore and create situations in which writing is useful and meaningful. *Learning community* implies a
coming together to learn. These two aspects—coming together and learning—provide two major kinds of situations: those that involve communal tasks of living and working together and those that focus on learning (although from a genre perspective, both are situations for learning/writing). Although curricular activities provide obvious opportunities for situating writing, an often ignored aspect of the classroom is its daily routines. In a sense, the classroom is a child’s workplace, and these activities can be thought of as situations for classroom workplace literacy (Chapman, 1997).

Genres in the Classroom Workplace

Workplace writing arises out of situations in which it is necessary, it is relevant, it gets things done, and it is part of general and genuine communication (Bearne et al., 1990, cited in Greenwood, 1994, p. 239). Classroom workplace writing encompasses many primary genres, in the Bakhtinian sense, and is therefore a logical starting place for very young children. Because these genres usually are tied to specific routines, they are immediate and their purposes are real to the children.

The beginning of the school day, in particular, provides opportunities for writing: Students can sign in when they come to school (and sign out when they leave the room for various reasons) and they can help take attendance. Traditionally, much of the writing involved in the organizational and administrative tasks of the classroom is done by the teacher, but children can learn a range of instrumental genres by participating in and eventually assuming responsibility for many routines. For example, they can record book exchanges, keep track of project work, write reminders to the class, and record important events in the classroom such as decisions made in class meetings. Teachers can write collaboratively with children in planning the daily agenda or special events, inviting visitors, and writing thank you letters.

Elementary students can learn how to use writing to help them manage collaborative and cooperative group work (making plans, keeping track, negotiating who will do various tasks and how they will be done, giving directions, and so forth). We also should encourage them to use writing instrumentally for their own purposes, such as letting us know when there is a problem or when they need something. They can write reminder notes to us. (I still have one that says, “Ples Mrs. C cut sum mor book cuvrs.”) [Please Mrs. C., cut some more...
book covers.) And they also should be encouraged to write reminders to themselves (for example, in their daily planners or homework books.)

In classroom workplace situations, the emphasis should be on learning genres and learning through genres, particularly how to manage and organize activities, how to get along with others, and so forth. Learning about genres is not the major purpose of such activities, although even here we can foster children’s genre awareness when appropriate. For example, when a situation provides an authentic opportunity for writing letters, we can help students understand that as well as containing a message, a letter must supply a reader with information about who it is addressed to, who it was written by and when, and where to send a reply. In this instance, we might teach students the textual features of letters inductively, encouraging them to reinvent the genre.

Genres Across the Curriculum

Curriculum subjects, as vehicles for teaching content knowledge and ways of thinking and communicating, are derived from and related to specific disciplines, such as science. Disciplines are communities of practice that construct knowledge and representations of reality in particular ways (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Russell (1997) describes disciplines as activity systems and “the process of learning (to write) new genres is a part of a process of expanding one’s involvement with activity systems,” (Russell, 1997, p. 516). He argues that learning to use genres as cognitive tools is more important than adopting textual features. Likewise, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) see genres as “the intellectual scaffolds on which community-based knowledge is constructed” (p. 501) and genre knowledge as “transmitted through enculturation, as apprentices become socialized to the ways of speaking [and writing] in particular disciplinary communities” (p. 482). Although the curriculum areas provide useful contexts for situating writing genres, it is important to realize that there are significant differences between school subjects and the disciplinary communities they represent (Green & Lee, 1994); this is reflected in differences between curriculum genres and those genres in the related discipline.

Each curriculum area encompasses discipline-related content knowledge and skills as well as language, including genres. The
notion of having students write in particular genres in specific subject areas is not new. Report writing is often integrated with science and social studies, for example. Yet whereas expository writing is commonly associated with science and social studies and narration and description with the language arts, this is an oversimplification. Description, for instance, is an important aspect of writing in science (e.g., recording observations); narrative can be a powerful tool in social studies (e.g., biographical and autobiographical accounts). Moreover, genres are not discrete categories; for example, description may be embedded in exposition and in narrative. Description can increase the effectiveness of expository writing by providing examples and illustrations to make a particular point. Likewise, it is often descriptions within a narrative that make a story come to life. It is becoming increasingly common to find narrative accounts within exposition in information texts. This weaving together of genres within genres by accomplished writers is done deliberately to achieve particular purposes. My research in genre development (Chapman, 1994, 1995) demonstrates that the integration of exposition, description, and narrative also occurs even in very young children’s writing, although not with the conscious awareness that adults writers bring to writing tasks.

In comparison to genres in their related disciplines, school genres “are characterized by quite different textual features and conventions, given their classroom-based contexts and rhetorical functions” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, p. 488). From an emergent literacy perspective, school genres could be considered as developmental approximations like invented spellings (Chapman, 1994) because children in school are far removed from professional disciplinary communities. As students progress through secondary, postsecondary, and graduate levels, they become increasingly closer to actual disciplinary practices; this is reflected in their genres. As Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) suggest, becoming a member of a disciplinary community is “similar to second language acquisition, requiring immersion into the culture, and a lengthy period of apprenticeship and enculturation. In contrast . . . [school and undergraduate] students learn many institutional or curriculum genres” (p. 487). Rather than expecting students to write the way professionals do from the beginning, we need a gradual transition or progression from provisional varieties that are more comfortable for younger and less experienced students (Freedman & Medway, 1994).
The most important aspect of curriculum genres is their epistemic (knowledge-constructing) potential: learning through genres. Curriculum genres can create situations that enable students to experience ways of discipline-based thinking and communicating. In school, we cannot replicate exactly what goes on in the wider world. For instance, we cannot all be scientists, and our students will not all become scientists by profession; but we can engage them in hands on science and cultivate scientific ways of thinking and using language. To continue the previous example, we can use scientific language to talk about scientific concepts and help children learn to use genres to communicate scientific ideas, including visual genres such as charts, maps, graphs, and diagrams.

Situating them within the school subjects enables students to use genres as cultural tools, as resources for supporting and extending thinking (Hanks, 1991, cited in Freedman, 1997). Our concern should not be about how similar a particular genre is to those in related disciplines but about the epistemic possibilities of the genre. Indeed, non-traditional forms as mediums of learning may be more powerful than traditional ones (Dias, 1994; Freedman & Medway, 1994). Nor should we see widening students repertoires as the ultimate goal, for as Anderson (1994) cautions, a wider repertoire in and of itself will not necessarily guarantee that deep learning takes place.

Traditional genres serve not only to enable knowledge construction and communication in the disciplines but also to perpetuate power relations. In today’s society, science is held in high regard and scientific literacy is seen as a key to power. But simply adopting genres of power will not empower students; instead, students need opportunities for personal meaning making (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Moreover, rather than emphasizing some disciplines or curriculum areas over others, students need opportunities to see connections among them. Shanahan (1997) has argued that curriculum integration has the potential to do this, but only if it is approached thoughtfully using genre as a cultural resource and cognitive tool:

Integrated instruction will serve literacy learning best if it focuses on genres as cultural ways of communicating, and on being able to translate information from one form to another. These connections should be made explicitly, and process talks in which disciplinary similarities and differences are explored should be a regular part of integrated instruction. (p. 17)
Thus, replacing traditional views of genre with newer conceptions discussed here has the potential to deepen and enrich integrated approaches to curriculum.

**Genres in the Language Arts**

It is beyond the scope of this article to do an in-depth examination of the implications of new conceptions of genre as they relate to the language arts curriculum. Instead, I will discuss the notion of situation as it relates to literary genres, focusing on narrative as a key element for revitalizing genre study in the language arts (keeping in mind, of course, that narrative is not restricted to the language arts and that narrative is not the only literary genre worthy of study).

Ironically, although traditional conceptions of genre focused almost exclusively on literary genres, these forms are, from a Bakhtinian perspective, highly remote from the immediate kinds of contexts in which other genres are embedded. As noted earlier, Bakhtin (1979/1986) considered genres that are used in highly developed and organized cultural communication (artistic, scientific, and so forth) to be complex, secondary genres. Because we can create scientific contexts in the classroom with hands on science activities, we can make scientific situations and the genres embedded in them socially situated, immediate, and real for students. The challenge is: How do we foster this kind of connection with literary genres?

Although it “has always been tacitly assumed that narrative skill comes ‘naturally’ . . . a closer look shows that not to be true at all” (Bruner, 1996, p. 40). There are cultural variations in the learning of narrative: Children in different communities learn to use narratives in differing ways (Heath, 1983). There are also individual differences among children within a given community. From the various studies I have conducted, I have concluded that the ability to hook an audience’s attention in the telling of stories varies even in the first grade. Graves (1994) and Calkins (1994), among others, have provided evidence that children can learn to write more effective narratives through a writers’ workshop approach. Yet Russell (1997) found that students in composition classes “have particular difficulty seeing the connection between their writing and other social practices” (p. 541) and that for students, literary genres appear to be decontextualized rather than socially situated. Perhaps the traditional approach to teaching literary genres, with its focus on textual features rather than
features of situations, has created this sense of disconnection and contributed to the idea that narrative is more decorative than useful.

Bruner’s (1986, 1996) reflections on the role of narrative as a way of thinking, rather than as a text type, are consistent with newer conceptions of genre. In The Culture of Education (1996), he proposes that people structure experience through

- logical scientific thinking “for treating of physical things” and
- narrative thinking “for treating people and their plights” (and also, I might add, their passions) (p. 39).

These two kinds of thinking “have varied modes of expression in different cultures, which also cultivate them differently. No culture is without both of them, though different cultures privilege them differently” (Bruner, 1996, pp. 39-40). Although not downplaying or devaluing logical scientific thinking, Bruner highlights narrative as “the mode of thinking and feeling that helps children (indeed, people generally) create a version of the world in which, psychologically, they can envisage a place for themselves—a personal world” (p. 39). This echoes an idea he introduced in Actual Minds, Possible Worlds:

Insofar as we account for our own actions and for the human events that occur around us principally in terms of narrative, story, drama, it is conceivable that our sensitivity to narrative provides the major link between our own sense of self and our sense of others in the social world around us. (Bruner, 1986, p. 69)

On an immediate level, narratives—personal stories—are an integral part of thinking and communicating in our daily lives; in the broadest sense, narrative is a cultural thread that unites people.

When it comes to narrative, perhaps rather than thinking of time/place situations (noun), we should be thinking of situating (verb): Situating oneself in the world, in relation to others and to one’s culture. In reflecting on how to create narrative sensibility, Bruner (1996) suggests that:

Two commonplaces seem to have stood the test of time. The first is that a child should “know,” have a “feel” for, the myths, histories, folktales, conventional stories of his or her culture (or cultures). They frame and nourish an identity. The second commonplace urges imagination through fiction . . . that takes him or her into a world of possibilities . . .
Obviously, if narrative is to be made an instrument of the mind on behalf of meaning-making, it requires work on our part—reading it, making it, analyzing it, understanding its craft, seeing its uses, discussing it. (p. 41)

Drama and writing in role (the “as if” mode) have tremendous possibilities for both tapping students’ imaginations and helping them resituate themselves. By writing in role, we can put ourselves into different situations, see things from different perspectives, and situate ourselves differently in relation to other times, places, and people. Imaginative narratives need not be limited to fiction and fantasy. They can also relate to real life: history (other times), geography (other places), and important social issues. Students’ understandings of social issues can be deepened when they take on multiple roles. For example, they can explore the varying perspectives of people who use the forest in different ways: loggers and others who work in the forest industry, people who use wood and paper products in their work, people who like to hike in the forest, and so forth. The potential of narrative genres is realized more fully by shifting from learning about narrative (e.g., story elements) to learning through narrative—narrative as a tool for creating personal identity and for connecting with others, one’s culture, and one’s world.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development provides a framework for understanding the social construction of genre knowledge. Vygotsky viewed learning as a process of internalizing ways of thinking, acting, and communicating from one’s culture. Individual literacy would not be possible without a literate culture. Our culture provides literacy resources: tools (such as an alphabetic writing system and genres) and people (more advanced literacy users). An important part of teaching writing is to socialize children into the culture’s ways of using writing or, to paraphrase Vygotsky, to cultivate genres rather than impose them.

Younger members of a literate society can be thought of as apprentices who appropriate their community’s writing genres. Apprentices
do not sit on the sidelines and watch “experts” or sit and listen to lectures from “the masters.” Rather, they are immersed in the community’s work (learning and writing) and its accompanying ways with words (oral and written genres). Apprentices work collaboratively but are individually responsible; they are expected to participate in the work of the community in developmentally appropriate ways and take responsibility for things within their capabilities. Literacy apprentices learn to write by writing: In the process, they learn genres, learn through genres, and learn about genres.

In the classroom, teachers (and more able peers) act as mentors who provide models and demonstrations of genres in use. They also serve an important role as mediators who scaffold or guide children’s learning and participation by providing assistance and support. Much of this is accomplished through talk or the “dialogic co-construction of meaning, which is the essence of education” (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992, p. 33).

According to Coe (1994):

The most important lesson for student writers to learn is that genres are socially real and that to participate effectively in a discourse community one usually must adapt (or ground) readers’ generic expectations. They should learn to notice genres, to make sense of genres, even to renovate genres. (p. 165)

Writing is more socially real not only when it is embedded in social situations but also when writers and readers engage in conversations around texts. The dialogic nature of writing can be realized through what Hunt (1994) refers to as inkshedding or “informal or impromptu writing, writing which is immediately read and used and responded to by others, and then discarded” (p. 248). Rather than finished products or products to be finished, such writing can be seen as part of an ongoing conversation, in Bakhtin’s (1979/1986) sense. Through classroom conversations about their own and others’ writing, students can become more aware of a reader’s or audience’s expectations, coming to understand that textual features, rather than arbitrary rules to be followed, are conventions that enable writers and readers to communicate: They help frame a text so that readers can make sense of it (Bakhtin, 1979/1986). Thus, genre awareness becomes useful rather than inert knowledge.
ACTIVATING GENRE/LEARNING
GENRE ACTIVELY

Like other aspects of writing, genre learning results from engagement in purposeful activities in which genres are integral to the activity or task, as tools in use rather than as ends unto themselves.

People who use tools actively rather than just acquire them... build an increasingly rich, implicit understanding of the world in which they use the tools and of the tools themselves. The understanding, both of the world and of the tool, continually changes as a result of their interaction. (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 33)

Genre as Strategy

Rather than teaching new genres directly, teachers may create situations for learning and using genres as strategies, introducing new genres in the context of shared experiences, providing scaffolding and metacognitive talk, engaging students in conversations about their learning/writing, and encouraging them to talk and collaborate with each other. The emphasis in learning new genres is on strategic, situated use rather than “memorization of isolated bits of information or the application of a simple algorithm” (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992, p. 41). When students have had many supported experiences with different genres, these become parts of their repertoire of ways of constructing and representing meaning, resources upon which they can draw in other activities.

Expanding students’ genre repertoires can make an important contribution to what Langer (1997) refers to as mindful learning. “A mindful approach to any activity has three characteristics: the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective” (p. 4). Mindfulness is strategic rather than rule bound; it is fostered through diversity and flexibility: “The larger our repertoire and the less we are attached to any specific procedure or strategy, the more flexible our thinking is likely to be” (Langer, 1997, p. 113, italics added).

As well as finding and creating shared experiences for introducing and using particular genres, teachers also need to engage students in explorations and form finding (Mirtz, 1997) through open-ended activities. As Turner (1993) discovered, open-endedness increases students’ engagement, motivation, persistence, and strategic
thinking. Open-ended activities provide students with opportunities to choose, invent, or reinvent genres that are personally meaningful and relevant to the challenges provoked by open-endedness.

Genre as Process

Many advocates of process writing have considered genre incompatible with process, especially a traditional method of genre instruction that takes a structural approach and emphasizes literary genres. New views portray genre as situated, social, active, dynamic, and flexible, and “considerations of audience and situation are fundamental” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, p. 492). These notions of genre not only are consistent with the tenets of process writing but also have the potential to enhance and extend it.

Genre-based approaches have been developed as an alternative to process writing. Martin (1993) and Christie (1993), among others who advocate a structuralist approach, argue that process writing does not take into account the cultural and political dimensions of literacy and the disadvantages of nonmainstream students. They believe that such students need explicit instruction to empower them for success in school and society. Anderson (1994) contends these approaches take an impoverished view and oversimplify the notion of scaffolding. I also would argue that such approaches ignore much of the research on writing instruction, such as the ineffectiveness of imitating models and the effectiveness of environmental or process approaches (Hillocks, 1986). However, when we emphasize genre as a tool for thinking and communicating rather than its textual features, when we focus more on learning than producing genres, when we place more emphasis on contingent responsiveness to students’ writing than on formal instruction (Freedman, 1993b; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992), genre and process can become seamless.

Approaching genre from a process perspective and the degree to which we emphasize learning genres, learning through genres, and/or learning about genres depends on our situations and contexts of situation, and most especially on our students, on what they already know, on how they are experienced. Students need to learn discourse in genres, but that does not necessarily mean teachers must teach genre knowledge explicitly, nor that students’ knowledge cannot be tacit. (Coe, 1994)
Like Coe, I believe that sometimes it is best to teach a new genre directly and, at other times, it is more appropriate to use an inductive or discovery approach “to create situations in which students can reinvent the wheel of a genre” (Coe, 1994, p. 163). Because formal features are now understood to derive from and relate to a writer’s purpose and the social context of writing, I would agree with Freedman and Medway (1994) that any consideration of form should be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Here are some ways in which process and genre may be integrated in the elementary classroom:

- Emphasize ideas rather than form in the early stages;
- when introducing a new genre, begin by immersing children in the genre (e.g., reading to them, providing them with materials for independent reading);
- through discussion, focus students’ attention first on the genre as a way of thinking and communicating ideas within a particular context; for example, teach legends as ways of representing and communicating history by people within a particular culture;
- help students notice a genre’s text features and how they function and develop an awareness of readers’ and/or audiences’ needs as they relate to this genre; consider creating a web or list of criteria or attributes collaboratively with students;
- encourage students to explore a genre through writing of their own (possibly using the attributes or criteria generated by the class) as part of prewriting and/or revision
- use a process approach to writing—prewriting, drafting, editing—but incorporate genre-specific techniques and strategies where they are meaningful and appropriate;
- keep in mind that, “genres predict—they do not determine—structure. There is always more than one way to skin a rhetorical cat” (Russell, 1997, p. 522).

**A CLASSROOM STORY**

To illustrate some of the key ideas I have discussed, I provide an example of how, a number of years ago, I integrated genre and process in an exploration of fables with a Grades 2 to 3 class. The fable study was part of a larger unit on animals. I chose to study the fable because I wanted the children to develop an understanding of how animals
are represented in literature and to compare and contrast these representations with factual information about animals. I also wanted the children to develop an awareness of stereotypes and how literary representations can bias people’s attitudes toward animals such as the wolf. In other words, although the children would learn the fable genre and its features, my primary purpose was to foster a critical stance toward reading and an understanding of stereotypes through the fable genre.

I began the fable study several weeks into the animal unit by stocking the classroom library with fables as well as other animal books. Then, during the course of a week, I read a different fable (all written by Aesop) to the children each day during story time (immersion). Near the end of the week, I asked the children if they noticed any similar features about the stories (exploration and inquiry). I explained that the stories were of a type we call fables and we generated a list of attributes, which we recorded on a chart, including: the stories are short, they are make believe, they have animal characters, the characters talk and act like humans, there is a problem in the story, there is a lesson or moral at the end of the story (talk about text). Together, the children were able to come up with this list quite easily.

With additional scaffolding (apprenticeship and mentoring), I helped the children notice that the animals were depicted in particular ways, such as the fox as sly and greedy, the tortoise as slow and steady, and so forth. With further discussion, for example, comparing facts about the animals with their representations in the fable, the children came to understand the nature of stereotypes and how they are constructed through literature (participation in a discourse community). We began a second chart titled “Fables We Have Read,” on which I listed the stories I had read to them. The children suggested additional titles of stories they had read that they felt met the criteria for fables (personal connections and meaning making). The list grew over time as children discovered more fables during their independent reading.

During the next week, the children wrote their own fables using a process approach (engagement and exploration). The children were familiar with storyboards, so we used them as a prewriting activity to help them plan their stories. Once the children had finished their drafts, they shared them in small groups (collaboration), responding first to the ideas and then using the attribute charts in the editing phase to check whether their stories met the criteria for fables. After
revising and proofreading, we published the children’s stories in a
class book that was placed in the classroom library.

I knew that the children learned the formal features of the fable
when they wrote their stories. It was not until several months later,
however, that I realized how well they had constructed their under-
standing of the genre. I had just finished reading aloud *George and
Martha*, a collection of stories by James Marshall (1972), when one stu-
dent, Michelle, informed me: “Mrs. C., *George and Martha* are modern
fables.” When I asked her to tell me about her thinking, she rattled off
the criteria for fables and added, “but they’re modern because they
were written nowadays.”

At the time I planned and taught the fable within the animal unit, I
was familiar with Vygotsky’s (1978) theories and process writing. I
have always used a variety of techniques in flexible ways in my teach-
ing, and it seemed appropriate to integrate process and genre
approaches. Now, as I reflect on the fable study, I ponder how my
evolving understanding of genre might influence the way in which I
would teach the unit today. In some ways, my approach would likely
be similar: The fable study was situated (within the context of the ani-
mal unit), social (we worked as a community and the children col-
laborated in various ways), and active (the children engaged in listen-
ing, speaking, reading and writing; with assistance, they constructed
understanding). The children learned the fable, learned about the
fable (its features), and learned through the fable (stereotypes).

Rather than taking me off on a different direction, new insights
about genre have expanded my vision of learning and writing and
have opened up new avenues for exploration. Bakhtin’s (1979/1986)
work has broadened my understanding of the social construction of
knowledge to include the broader cultural sphere as well as the inter-
personal. Building on this understanding, I would consider a possible
extension—exploring the fable from the perspective of Aesop’s time
and culture to help children understand the roles of stories in different
times and cultures and the various purposes of storytelling. I also
would want to nudge children’s thinking further by pursuing a dis-
cussion of how our society achieves the fable’s purpose—teaching a
lesson—through stories in books as well as in movies and television.
In this way, I would hope to raise the children’s awareness not only of
the fable as a genre but also of the ways that people shape language
for particular purposes in different contexts.
CONCLUSIONS (TO BE CONTINUED)

As in other aspects of language learning and teaching, conceptions of genre have changed dramatically in recent times, particularly as a result of insights from sociolinguistics. Bakhtin (1979/1986) has been highly influential, especially in his characterizations of genre as situated, social, and active. I have used these three key ideas—situated, social, and active—as an organizing framework for this discussion of genre. I have treated them separately for this purpose but in reality, they are intricately related. In the process, I have tried to show how newer views of genre not only are consistent with current understandings of language and literacy, emergent literacy, the sociocognitive construction of knowledge, and process approaches to writing instruction but also promise to enrich and enlarge our understandings of literacy and/or learning and teaching.

Bakhtin (1979/1986) has shown us that genres are much more plastic and free than we had previously thought. They evolve over time, dialogically, within the context of communities of practice as people interact and communicate with each other; so too do our notions of best practice in writing instruction. Yet, Bakhtin’s work has created tensions as well as insights in our understandings of genre. For instance:

- To what degree are genres flexible? If there is too little familiarity in structure, listeners/readers cannot fully grasp a speaker/writer’s intent. Yet, one has to keep in mind features of context and purpose rather than the text alone. Perhaps there is a continuum, with formal situations being less tolerant of flexibility in a genre’s form. Part of learning genres then is developing an awareness of when flexibility is more acceptable or desirable.

- To what degree do students benefit from explicit instruction in genre? As teachers of writing, we need to take into account the students we teach in context of their communities and cultures, appreciating the diversity in students’ learning needs. Rather than one-size-fits-all teaching, we need to adapt the ways we scaffold students’ genre learning. We also need to keep in mind that explicit instruction need not imply a rigid, structuralist approach. Rather, it can entail a conscious attempt to focus students’ attention on particular aspects of writing rather than expecting students to discover them on their own. The degree of explicit instruction we provide then is something with which
each of us must struggle on an ongoing basis, with every new group of students—indeed, with each writing situation.

- To what degree are models helpful? Although the use of models has been shown to have limited value when teachers provide the models and students copy them, they have been shown to be beneficial when students generate criteria and apply them to their own work (Hillocks, 1986). Rather than imitating models, teachers might help students deconstruct and reconstruct them to understand and to own them. In this way, the use of models may be process oriented (to foster genre awareness) rather than product oriented (to produce a piece of writing that adheres to a particular set of conventions).

Bakhtin (1979/1986) also has helped us see that writing—in any genre—is incomplete and unfinished; it is but part of a conversation. The writing of this piece has been part of a conversation that began when I submitted a manuscript to the editors of Written Communication in 1994. At that point, I had heard of Bakhtin’s work and had thought that I should “get around to reading it some time soon.” A reviewer (still unknown to me) suggested I read Bakhtin’s Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, not to revise that particular piece (Chapman, 1994) but to consider some new ways of thinking about genre. Reading Bakhtin transformed my thinking about genres and how they are learned. It also prompted me to reanalyze my data, which in turn led me to reformulate my hypotheses about children’s emergent genres (e.g., Chapman, 1995) and to reframe my continuing research.

Similarly, in submitting the manuscript for this article, the reviewers challenged me to illustrate the integration of genre and process (to show rather than tell) and to wrestle with some of the tensions that a more flexible notion of genre creates. For me, this writing has been a conversation—in my own mind as my ideas of genre continue to evolve and with those who share my interest in genre. In the spirit of Bakhtin, I hope that this discussion of genre can contribute to continued conversations about learning and writing.

REFERENCES


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