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The Dilemma of Genre in Teaching Writing
Paul Black
Waseda University and Northern Territory University

In Australia, and perhaps other countries, there has been increased emphasis on the importance of genre in teaching writing to both first-language speakers and learners of English. What has not been well noted, however, is that a fundamental conflict between what is desirable and what tends to be pedagogically most practical actually follows from the definition of genre used by such proponents of genre-based teaching as Martin (1984). After showing why this is so in theory I will discuss what this means in terms of classroom practice.

Some Historical Background

About ten years ago process approaches to writing seemed to be at the height of their influence in Australia and New Zealand, to judge from the popularity of such books as those by Walshe (1982) and Graves (1983). Such approaches tended to emphasize not only treating writing as a process, but also the importance of learning to write by doing it rather than by talking about it. In connection with L1 elementary school education, for example, Walshe (1982: 11) spoke of ‘building a “writing community” in which children write willingly and thoughtfully and so chiefly learn to write by writing itself... In short, LET THEM WRITE, and only then teach at the point of revealed need.’
At this time it was felt to be important to motivate students by giving them a great deal of choice in what to write. Because of this, more attention was paid to helping students find motivating topics than to getting them to produce particular types of writing, at least in the early grades. By the mid-1980’s, however, there was a reaction against this position by writing specialists with backgrounds in systemic (or systemic functional) linguistics. It was found, for example, that children given complete freedom of topic choice in a selection of largely English L1 classrooms generally ended up writing recounts on only four themes (Martin, Christie, and Rothery 1987: 77; see also Walton, 1990a: 225). These specialists felt that such children should and could have much richer writing experiences at an early age, including work in such academically more important genres as reports and exposition. This was felt to be true not only for English L1 students but also for ESL learners in Australia, especially because it would support the academic and hence social advancement of the Australian Aboriginal and immigrant minorities.

Martin’s (1985) book on *Factual Writing* was an especially strong argument for change at this time, maintaining as it did that ‘People who have not mastered expository writing cannot really hope to change the world; nor can they work effectively to keep it from changing in ways they don’t like’ (Martin 1985: 50). Martin’s claim may seem somewhat exaggerated: are the people who change the world more likely to be those with a mastery of expository writing or those rich enough to hire the best advertising agencies? Martin’s book
was itself a masterful example of expository writing, however, and as Martin (1985: 50) himself went on to point out, ‘Exposition counts, even if it has nothing to do with the truth.’

Through their writing, and no doubt teaching as well, Martin and other systemicists have indeed succeeded in changing the world a bit to make themselves very influential in Australian education. Unfortunately they tended to accomplish this by stereotyping process writing in terms of its worst extremes (e.g. in Painter 1986: 88) and attacking it before they had much to offer as an alternative. This led to a somewhat misleading and occasionally acrimonious debate between so-called ‘genre’ and ‘process’ positions; see Walton (1990b) for a recent review. As I have shown elsewhere (Black 1991), however, even such established process writing approaches as that of Walshe (1982) can accommodate a proper concern for genre; see also Collerson (1988) for another approach.

**The Nature of Genre**

The term *genre* has long been used to refer to the classification of writing into such types as narration and exposition. In recent years, however, some systemic linguists have essentially followed Bakhtin (e.g. 1986) to extend the meaning of *genre* to cover not only writing, but also the classification of any social process or social interaction into types (Ventola 1989: 129). Martin (1984: 25) more specifically defined *genre* to refer to any activity that proceeds in stages designed to accomplish a particular purpose in a culturally appropriate way. Systemicists go further than this, with techniques for analyzing and
distinguishing particular genres (see e.g. Hasan’s section of Halliday and Hasan 1985), but here I’m concerned only with their functional definition of genre.

Although I am not a systemicist, I also believe that the form of a piece of writing, including it’s generic form, tends to be dictated by its function in a culturally determined way. To put it another way, the test of a piece of writing is how well it accomplishes its purpose, which depends in part on the cultural background of the readers.

Consider American business letters as an example. Normally they give the writer’s return address prominently on the first page, whether or not in a letterhead: the function of this is to make the identity of the sender obvious at a glance. Usually the intent of the letter is made clear in the first paragraph, so that it can be seen quickly, with little searching. The function of this is to save the reader’s time, and for the same reason the letter as a whole also tends to be as short as possible. Typically the first paragraph also mentions any past correspondence (e.g. ‘Thank you for your letter of the 19th...’) so that the receiver knows immediately whether to check the files for further background.

Thus many aspects of the letter are clearly dictated by function. At the same time, the functions themselves, as well as the way in which the letter accomplishes them, can be culturally dependent. In comparing English, French, and Japanese business letters, for example, Jenkins and Hinds (1987) pointed out how the letters function differently in each society. In France, for example, a
business letter has the force of a legal document, which makes the writers cautious about making promises or suggestive comments that might be more common in American business letters. Perhaps not all aspects of form are clearly functional in such a way: it’s less obvious why a Japanese business letter should begin with a seasonal greeting, for example. However, writing a document in a way that does not meet cultural expectations—e.g. by omitting the seasonal greeting or the phrase "preliminaries omitted" from a Japanese business letter—may make it a bit jarring and thus that much harder to read.

That the form of a piece of writing should depend crucially on function may seem basic and obvious, but this principle often seems to be ignored in the classroom. Consider what this would imply when a teacher has the students write only for practice, rather than for some real communicative purpose: if the real purpose is only practice, in what ways might this affect generic form? Teachers may attempt to constrain the genre artificially by providing either a pretend purpose—e.g. to argue for a particular position—or explicit information about the required form, but then it would seem that the students’ abilities to produce examples of the appropriate genre would depend as much on their acting ability as on their ability to communicate in writing.

As Raimes (1984) noted, even when students are asked to pretend they are writing for real purposes, deep down in their hearts they know that they are really just writing for the teacher. Interestingly, it turns out that even when they are actually trying to communicate with
the teacher, this may not constrain genre in the way the teacher might desire. For example, I recently asked a class of students to write a paper describing their writing habits, and I saw this as a real communicative task because, as I explained to the students, I really wanted to know about their approaches to writing. When the students submitted their papers, however, I was somewhat disappointed to find that few began with more than a rudimentary introduction. What I had failed to realize was that writing about something that was under class discussion, and hence in the context of shared background between student and teacher, did not functionally require much introduction.

How student writing depends on the classroom context has often been pointed out by systemicists. As Hammond (1987: 172) notes, the work of such systemicists as Christie (e.g. 1986) has made the link between language and the context in which it occurs one of the most important principles of the “genre-based” approach to teaching writing. As Samraj (1989: 198) recently put it, teachers ‘must realise that as speakers of a language we do not speak or write sentences in a vacuum but produce texts appropriate to the context of situation we are interacting in.’

Accordingly one might expect that a basic tenet of genre-based approaches would be to pursue writing for real purposes, so that genre would tend to be constrained by these purposes rather than in some artificial way. This is indeed an element of some genre-based approaches, but as Elliott and McGregor (1989: 7-8) note, the principle is not always applied. For example, one can find those
concerned with genre praising the form of a definition produced by a school child without considering the fact that the definition did not seem to have been written to serve any real communicative function, and thus that there is no way to judge how successful the definition might be in terms of such a function. Some other systemicists seem to avoid the question of what students should write by stressing text analysis as a teaching technique, e.g. that students be directed in the analysis of texts that were ‘the product of contextualized language-related activities which have clear communicative goals’ (Ragan 1989: 126).

It’s not really surprising that even systemicists do not always insist on finding real purposes for student writing: they are not always easy to find. This is what makes genre a dilemma: to the extent that purpose dictates genre, we can only make a pretence of writing particular genres until we actually have the purposes that require these genres, and such purposes are not always readily at hand. To learn to write the kind of writing that will help them change the world, perhaps students had best set out to change the world. Not all teachers may be prepared to promote social change just in order to teach expository writing, however.
Prospects for the Classroom

Even in connection with process writing Walshe (1982, e.g. p. 47-49) had stressed the importance of having real purposes, and hence real readers, so that the writing becomes a genuine medium of communication. Indeed, this is just one aspect of a general principle of language teaching in a ‘creative-constructionist perspective’ that Nonaka (1992) sums up as follows: ‘the best way to learn a language is by doing something else in a language that attracts students’ attention or interest and therefore motivates them to learn it.’ This principle should apply as well to learning to write in specific genres as to learning other language skills, and it should also apply equally well to either L1 or L2 speakers of the language. Even if some L1 speakers are from backgrounds that have already familiarized them with a range of genres, others, such as the non-mainstream groups described by Heath (1983), may well have no advantage over L2 speakers in this regard.

If matters of genre are ignored, it is not hard to find writing tasks which serve real communicative functions, at least between student and teacher: e.g. journal writing, autobiographical writing, and other projects in which there is a joint interest (e.g. how one goes about writing). Attention to the writing required for other work in school is also valuable. This can be as sweeping as attention to ‘writing across the curriculum’ (WATC) or it can be based on a single subject; for an especially clever example see Heath’s (1983: 315-342) description of a science program that had students doing ethnographic research. The theme-based ‘concentrated language encounters’ approach developed
for Australian primary schools (see e.g. Northern Territory Department of Education 1985) is also particularly valuable because it involves the creation of context that entails the use of reading, writing, speaking, and often other skills and knowledge as well.

Although the above involve real communication, their tendency to take place within the context of a single classroom makes them a less than perfect basis for learning a more “public” writing that depends less on a shared context. Audience is a large part of purpose: we write things to achieve a purpose with respect to a particular audience. For learning to write for a wider audience, it is better to find tasks that lead students to communicate with the world outside of their school.

In this regard I was especially fortunate in a somewhat unusual program I taught in during the 1980’s. This was at the School of Australian Linguistics (in Batchelor, NT), where I was helping Aboriginal teachers and literacy workers improve their vernacular language and literacy skills for use in bilingual and other programs. Since the students were learning to write for vocational purposes, it was usually easy to find things for them to write that could actually be used in their communities. For example, some groups who came to the School began their studies by writing letters about their trip and their studies and sending them back home for publication in their local newsletters. In addition, books prepared by the students were often sent to their communities for use in local language programs, including some developed and run by the students themselves.
More conventional programs can also provide real opportunities for communication with the world outside the classroom. For example, business letter writing can be practiced by writing letters in order to accomplish particular projects, e.g. to obtain information from organizations in connection with a social studies project. Writing personal letters to students elsewhere or exchanging messages over a computer network may also be useful communicative experiences, although they do not support the learning of genres more valuable in academic or daily life. Producing some sort of local publication provides a chance for writing in such other genres as narrative, report, and exposition to reach some sort of real outside audience. Even if the publication does not actually become widely read, the potential alone can certainly affect student performance: my own experience is that some students become far more critical of spelling and wording, at least, when they are given one last chance before publication. Sometimes a class can also find good reason for such other writing tasks as preparing a petition or some other submission to government.

Unfortunately some of these approaches tend to become less feasible at higher levels of education. At the university level the fragmentation of studies, with each subject an island to itself, can make it difficult to apply a ‘writing across the curriculum’ approach. Furthermore, even in this age of desk top publishing, preparing a school publication can require considerable effort and some expense. It can be managed more easily by primary school teachers than by teachers of university level writing classes, since the latter usually
have much less time to deal with much longer writings—and in Japan, at least, few of my university level students are prepared to submit their papers on computer diskettes. Institutionally supported publications, such as college newsletters and literary journals, generally provide an outlet for only an insignificant proportion of all student writing.

It can thus be difficult to develop real purposes for such more highly valued genres as reports and exposition in some classroom situations, especially for a foreign language at the university level. I myself have all but given up doing this for a writing class I currently teach in Japan. One assignment I gave was to state a problem in Japanese education and argue for a solution. This seemed a motivating task—the students eagerly debated it orally—but its real communicative function will be limited unless I can find the time and energy needed for preparing a publication. For a larger project the students will be researching and reporting on a topic of their own choice. This involves some purposeful writing: as a first step the students will have to defend their choice in writing to gain my approval. However, the extent to which their final reports will have a real communicative function will probably depend on whether they can use them in their other studies. Preparing such reports should be valuable even if it only helps them develop their own thoughts on their topics, but even so, such a purpose can not be expected to constrain generic form in the way that writing for a real outside audience should.
This is what makes genre a dilemma: by definition it arises from purposes that may not be easy to accommodate within a classroom. This is actually just part of the more general dilemma of how to use the artificially confined world of the classroom to prepare students for real world language use. When Wilkins (1991) recently pointed out this problem recently in connection with oral language use, he suggested that a solution would depend on finding alternatives to traditional classroom practices. Along similar lines one might wonder if writing skills might not better be taught entirely outside the classroom. For example, one could imagine teaching writing only by having “writing counsellors” to counsel students on the writing they are doing to accomplish real purposes, whether within and outside of formal studies. This is essentially how some of us already learn to write: the greatest improvements in my own writing skills (however they are now) came about when I began writing grant applications and papers for publication under the guidance of patient and experienced mentors.

**Conclusion**

Teaching students to write the genres they need for real purposes in life is undoubtedly important, but there is a fundamental conflict between what is desirable and what is pedagogically most convenient. To the extent that genre depends on purpose, and we learn better by doing than by pretending to do, it is important to find real purposes for writing. It is not always easy to do this in the classroom, however, and especially difficult for such highly valued genres as exposition. It is thus not surprising for teachers to fall back on assigning writing
that does not really have much communicative function, and presumably such practice writing is of some value even if it is not ideal. If teachers can appraise writing in terms of its real communicative functions, however, they will be better prepared to seize the opportunities for purposeful writing that occasionally present themselves.
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