

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary
Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power**

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Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1995, 190 pages.

In an ambitious synthesis of current writing theory, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin provide an account of their accumulated research and attempt a theoretical recasting in the updated context of recent rhetoric and genre studies. This is a strong presentation with both meticulous accounts of research on academic and scholarly writing, and succinct summaries of relevant theories of discourse. The result is an impressive effort to integrate the heft of their empirical studies into a theoretical framework friendly to both the pedagogical and research interests of writing disciplines. There is a double purpose to this rather short but important book: first, to articulate a rhetorically based theory of genre that also accounts for the sociocognitive dimension of reception, and, second, to thereby raise the value of this approach to discourse studies.

Berkenkotter and Huckin outline their theoretical antecedents in the Preface and first chapter, citing the work of Campbell and Jamieson (1978) and Miller (1984) on genre and rhetoric, and devote the rest of the book to reports of studies of academic and scholarly writing that apply or advance genre theory. These studies are updated versions of case study research they worked on over a period of eight years. They describe their research activities as a two-pronged investigation of text-based disciplinary communication: a study of the situated actions of writers and the respective contexts of their communicative systems. In short, their goal is to "interpret individual processes . . . as communicative acts within a discursive network or system" (p.ix), and to focus on how "genre is embedded in the communicative

activities of the members of an academic discipline” (p.2). The framework they develop for this investigation is outlined as a reconfigured integration of five important principles that have current salience in a number of discipline areas: dynamism, situatedness, the complementarity of form and content, the duality of structure and community ownership.

The first principle, dynamism, is based on the premise that any discourse is an instantiation of a socially or intersubjectively constructed response to a socially construed or recognizable exigence; and the situation to which the response is directed has an internal dynamism of its own that allows for and contributes to changes or evolutions in genres. This principle is illustrated, explicitly and implicitly, in at least three of the reported studies in this book. For example, in their study of the “news value” of scientific journal articles, Berkenkotter and Huckin track the evolution of the genre from full-blown traditional articles to shorter pieces more like the Quick Report or Letter. They similarly describe the development of the scholarly publication, *Reader*, from its beginnings as a newsletter for reader-response critics and practitioners to its formal status as a refereed scholarly journal. In a third example, at the more local level of writer-editor correspondence, they illustrate the agonistic nature of peer review correspondence in scientific article writing, showing how the product is shaped by both genre expectations (on the part of peers and the editor) and by individual preferences (on the part of the writer).

The second principle of their theory, “situatedness”, is based primarily on the concepts and studies of cognitive apprenticeship (Brown, Collins and Duguid) and “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger). Berkenkotter and Huckin define situatedness as a tacit dimension of genre knowledge that is gained only through the enculturation process of apprentices: it is “inextricably a product of the activity and situations in which it is produced” (citing Brown et al.). They compare this secondary genre knowledge to the secondary, contextual knowledge that language learners must acquire to be fluent in a second language. The operation of this principle is clearly illustrated as part of the genre knowledge that researchers and scholars activate in the attenuated negotiation of scientific knowledge throughout the peer review process. Berkenkotter and Huckin show how, as writer and editor agree and contest, their tactics of deference and assertion are rooted in the situated strategy and knowledge of a biology specialty’s discursive practices and values. In another case, a study of an apprentice scholar of rhetoric, they present a more explicit comment on the role of situated knowledge. As the apprentice learns the specialized practices of advanced literacy in this discourse community, he depends very much on the expert knowledge of his mentors who help him

through the apprenticeship stage of legitimate peripheral participation, a stage that allows him to practice his developing genre knowledge for the community he is entering.

They acknowledge, however, that in the classroom the concept of “situatedness” is a tricky one, and in their concluding chapter, they provide a critique which reflects the current debate around explicit versus implicit instruction in genre knowledge. Such instruction can double-bind both instructor and student: if this dimension of genre knowledge can be acquired only in situ, then how far can classroom instruction in genre knowledge go to help student-writers gain appropriate communicative competence? At what point does genre instruction hamper and interfere with the intuitive, authentic acquisition that will take place for motivated professionals once they are in a culturally meaningful milieu? Berkenkotter and Huckin seem to imply that explicit genre instruction is a desired commodity in education, yet they also document and verify the unintended products of such instruction: “childish innovations” of real-world genres that fail. The acquisition of a template, which for many students is perceived as a reliable structure or “form” for all occasions, can lead to problematic discursive faux pas — responses to idealized rhetorical situations that are “odd” matches for the situated expectations of a particular audience in a particular discourse community.

The third principle of their theoretical framework is a commonplace in genre theory: form and content are not dichotomous but are necessary complements in a definition of genre. Although they could have addressed “situation” here as the third component of genre, thereby making such bipolarities irrelevant, Berkenkotter and Huckin do elucidate the falseness of this dichotomy through the evidence of their studies. For example, they find that typical readers of scientific journal articles expect “news value” or “novelty” as the central contribution of a researcher/writer, and that these readers expect to find the elements of “news value” in conventionally located places in the genre. Content and form are thus overlapping features of coherence and readability. In another study, the authors document readers’ expectations of such conventional form/content patterns, even among “penumbral” readers of scholarly journal articles: in their study of the biology experimental article, they find that the genre expectations — both content and arrangement related — of such readers are a useful prediction of the expectations that experts share with apprentices.

Perhaps the lynch-pin in Berkenkotter and Huckin’s theorizing is the incorporation of structuration theory. They make this their fourth principle: the duality of structure. Yoking genre theory with Giddens’ theory of structure, they describe the relationship between situation and agent as dynamic and reciprocal:

“it is the social actors in roles construing typified situations that are the agents of change” (p.21). Where there is an equalizing effect in speaker-addressee relationships, they make this precept ring true, as in their study of peer review correspondence, which amply demonstrates how individual researchers can make the genre bend to their imperatives. Part of the suasive power of these negotiations comes, however, from the mutuality of need and status: the editor needs a good article and the writer-researcher has some power in these negotiations because she has a good article to offer — and, as a member of the same discipline she is also a peer. So, while “illocutionary acts do get things done in the world” (p.76), as Berkenkotter and Huckin claim, their accomplishment is a greater likelihood in such equalizing situations. Similarly, the authors demonstrate how the emergent discourse community of reader-response critics and practitioners can use “situated artful actions” (p.79) to make their texts “causal entities in the social environment” (citing Bazerman and Paradis); that is, they can change a genre and in so doing change the relative configuration of other genres like literary criticism. On the other hand, this same study describes the gradual transformation of a newsletter into a scholarly journal and seems to suggest by this example that the conventional features of the scholarly genre per se seem to override even the strongest initiatives at odds with institutionalized genre conventions.

This apparent dominance of structure over innovation and agency also seems to characterize the authors’ description of how the Conference of College Composition and Communications (CCC) tended to adjudicate proposals for their 1988 conference. The list of features of successful proposals suggests a fairly rigid and constraining generic power. This vulnerability of the “duality of structure” principle becomes apparent again in the last two chapters of the book. While Berkenkotter and Huckin acknowledge that their apprentice-scholar in the discipline of rhetoric certainly was engaged in an asymmetrical power relation with his mentors and the disciplinary community they represented, they argue nevertheless that, as a less powerful, marginal member of this community he was still able to use tactics of resistance in the face of the coercive power of his superiors. In fact, they claim that there is no evidence of hegemonic, oppressive assimilation into this community, and instead assert his active pursuance of certain choices and possibilities. This stance is extended in the last chapter into the assertion that exposing students to a wide range of genres gives them a communicative repertoire that is institutionally freeing instead of restricting. Ideally, this could certainly be so, but realistically the political situatedness of apprentices entails and activates a very different context and a very different set of constraints and opportunities — resources that more likely resemble those of the apprentice than the scholar. The authors seem to be

caught in a contradiction: while they disclaim the expressivist school of genre acquisition (in which students experiment with and choose their own expressions of possible genres), and support instead the school of explicit instruction, apparently opting for structure over individual agency, they also suggest that explicit instruction can be emancipatory and predicated on "choice". Yet evidence of effective choices is rather thin.

The fifth and last principle, community ownership, is perhaps the concept that first invited the current position that genre is situationally based. Berkenkotter and Huckin cite this connection in their assertion that genres function "in terms of the discourse communities that 'own' them" (p.21). They illustrate the principle of community ownership in four different studies: a biologist's revision strategies of an experimental article to meet the expectations of typical readers of the genre, the professionalization of the reader-response school of literary studies, the community expectations of a conference executive as to what constitutes an acceptable proposal and the socialization of a graduate student into the field of rhetoric. The influence of discourse community expectations can, in part, explain features of genres that seem to be in contradiction, yet are expected in a genre. In the case of the experimental article, writers feel some pressure to demonstrate both how they are constrained by earlier research and also how their discovery is purely inductive. Apparently contradictory features such as these nevertheless typify the expectations of readers in this discourse community. Similarly, members of the reader-response community gradually came to endorse genre changes that spanned subverting the genre (a newsletter for insiders, without citations, in resistance to mainstream critical theory) to emulating the conventional features of scholarly publications. As the community changed (as its members became professionalized, applied for tenure, added prestigious publications to their resumes), so did the genre.

The effects of ownership are perhaps best illustrated in Berkenkotter and Huckin's study of how conference institutions (CCC) gatekeep the making of disciplinary knowledge. The prestigious members of this community exercised power to define what could constitute its discursive products. Successful conference proposals offered a constellation of preferred features: a clearly defined problem (or gap in knowledge), the description of this problem as "novel" to insiders, citations to preferred scholarly influences, a topic close to that of the conference's theme and a linear arrangement of dominant problem, method and findings/conclusions. All of these features served the quality of "interestingness" (p.111), which the conference committee had endorsed as a key requirement.

The fourth example comes from their study of the apprentice writer in rhetoric. As noted earlier, “ownership” here seems to eclipse the agency and choice postulated by structuration theory: the apprentice seems to take on the mantle of his discipline without protest. His prose moves from a personal to a professional register, from expressive to academic conventions, from the after-thoughts of “companion documents” to his professor, to the “risky” action of submitting a “final product” without such addenda and from supplying too much given information to supplying too much new information. Berkenkotter and Huckin protest that the apprentice has not been coerced by these structures, and seem to suggest he has been voluntarily seduced instead. As seems to be the case in so many assertions of agency in the face of institutional power, structuration theory keeps its secret. While we might speculate that both forces are at work, research methodologies don’t yet permit an insightful glimpse into the balances and imbalances of constraint and opportunity.

In this effort to map out recent genre theory as it has been rhetorically conceived, Berkenkotter and Huckin perhaps, at times, present overly synoptic and synthetic versions of supporting theories (such as Austin’s taxonomy of speech acts, or Bakhtin’s division of genres into primary and secondary). Other readers might wish that they would take some of their speculations further. In the authors’ view, an important element of the value of their work is its focus on nonliterary texts, which they perceive as part of the productive step taken by others, like Bazerman, to expand genre studies beyond literary texts and claim its relevance for other types of texts. Yet, while they do help move genre studies out of literary studies and into other academic disciplines, some writing professionals might argue that they do not move it far enough — in fact, some very interesting work is being pioneered outside of academia, in nonacademic genres and discourse communities where “situatedness” and the “duality of structure” are particularly consequential and concrete (Pare, Smart, Freedman, Schryer and Miller). One might also wish for more speculation on and validation of noncategorical features of discourse, for example, those unintended artefacts of learning like the apprentice’s “companion documents,” or those conference proposals that exhibited dispreferred features yet were successful. What rhetorical choices and imperatives do these documents reveal? And what to they contribute to our understanding of genre as changing and evolving?

These caveats do not, however, constitute serious impediments to the direction that Berkenkotter and Huckin are striking for the development of genre theory. Genre theorists and rhetoricians should welcome the authors’ moves into new theoretical territory, and the sensibility and rigour they bring to this enterprise as careful ground-breakers. Indeed, this book will no doubt contribute to the growing cache of rhetoric and genre studies within the language research community.