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WORKSHOPS ON REAL WORLD WRITING GENRES: WRITING, CAREER, AND THE TROUBLE WITH CONTEMPORARY GENRE THEORY

Jerry Plotnick
University of Toronto
jerry.plotnick@utoronto.ca

Abstract

My article reports on an annual series of workshops I launched as director of my writing center. This ongoing initiative, titled Workshops on Real World Writing Genres, aims to introduce undergraduates to genres they will practice in their prospective careers. It is part of a larger effort at the University of Toronto to support students as they think ahead to life beyond their degrees. Drawing on material from workshops covering print journalism, law, public policy, medicine, and fiction, the article reflects on how well our theoretical presuppositions about genre help us prepare students to apply in their professional lives those critical thinking skills we seek to foster in our teaching. By regarding all knowledge as socially situated, contemporary genre theory has raised doubts about the capacity of our students to transfer even knowledge from one context to another. Insofar as genre theorists focus on the social creation of meaning, their account of genre, like their account of knowledge, must, I argue, remain incomplete. An exclusive focus on writing as social practice reflects a problematic division of labor in the academy between the sciences on the one hand and the social sciences and humanities on the other. The notion of writing as radically situated has always posed a problem for writing centers, since we do not typically find ourselves situated in the same communities of practice as our students. The recent interest in transfer in writing center scholarship reflects a promising shift towards a vision of the disciplines as interconnected.

In 2013-14, I introduced a series of workshops at my college writing center as part of a larger initiative that the Faculty of Arts & Science at the University of Toronto introduced that year. The title of the series is Workshops on Real World Writing Genres. In the first three years, I mounted workshops on six topics: Writing and Print Journalism, Writing and the Law, Writing in Public Policy, Writing in Medicine and Health Sciences, Writing and Publishing Fiction, and Writing for Business Professionals. This paper focuses on the first five. I invited academics and professionals from the broader writing community to lead the workshops, and I worked with them to ensure that their material was relevant to the aims of the faculty initiative: to help students think ahead to their lives outside their undergraduate degrees, and to encourage reflection. Although the series stood apart from my center's day-to-day routine of teaching individually and in groups, I saw the workshops as extending our reach and thereby expanding our pedagogical role. To teach our students to write well, we need to teach them to be supple. The ability, however, to adapt gracefully to new genres depends on exposure and practice, and students get to try out very few genres in their undergraduate degrees. So many of their assignments represent variations on a single genre—the academic essay—that they may never see again once they complete their degrees. By prompting reflection on the differences between the genres they learn in their courses and those covered in the workshops, the initiative sought to cultivate the kind of self-awareness that I see as essential not only to learning new forms but also to achieving proficiency in one's habitual form.

The workshops stimulated my own reflection on the two themes that came together in my series: genre and career. My article has two overlapping aims: one practical, the other theoretical. I report on an initiative that other writing instructors might want to introduce into their own centers, and I reflect on how writing centers have come to think, or not think, about genre. It may well be that we don't need a theory of genre to teach students how to *use* genres. No theory of genre might be better than a flawed one. Yet theory *can* shape pedagogy. We can also exert a deep influence on students merely through attitudes that may have their source in our settled acceptance of a theoretical position. My article critically examines the foundational literature in genre theory. What does contemporary genre theory try to tell us about the role of genre in the pursuit of knowledge? About the relationship of writing communities to each other and to the larger world? The workshop series offers a rich source of material for exploring such questions: it seeks to bridge the divide between academy and world, and it showcases a wider range of genres than we ourselves will likely encounter in our teaching roles. The scholarship on genre and the related question of transfer raises doubts about how well our field's conceptualization of genre prepares us to send our students out into the world, and especially about how well-equipped they will be to engage critically with that world. I argue that our theoretical presuppositions about the social nature of genre unnecessarily constrain our thinking about genre. In particular, they do not equip us to help students carry into their professional lives the critical thinking skills we seek to foster in our teaching.

My exploration of genre theory and transfer will, in the first part of my paper, draw largely on the broader field of writing studies. Despite the obvious centrality of genre to the work we perform in our centers, there is relatively little writing center scholarship that focuses directly on genre theory (Clark; Walker; Gordon). To the best of my knowledge, there is none on transfer from university to the workplace. Nevertheless, writing centers have, for better or worse, inherited an understanding of genre from the fields of writing and rhetoric as part and parcel of their participation in the epistemological turn in the humanities and social sciences that was gathering force in the mid-nineteen-eighties. In the central part of my paper, I will explore material from the workshops, both for what they may suggest about the practical benefits of introducing students to writing in their future disciplines and for what light they shed on the vexed relation of genre theory to critical thinking in the workplace. I conclude the paper with an analysis of the writing center community's distinct historical relationship to a social view of discourse and knowledge—a relationship that persists even as our commitment to evidence-based research grows. The lack of close attention to genre theory in writing center scholarship reflects a conflict we haven't adequately faced: between a commitment to a social view of discourse that sees discourse communities as deeply situated and our experience as generalists of reaching across the disciplines to help our students. I suggest that the field might benefit from a re-evaluation of basic assumptions already perceptible in its recent attention to transfer.

Genre Theory and the Transfer of Critical Skills

The central, inescapable theoretical document on genre in writing studies is Carolyn Miller's 1984 article "Genre as Social Action."[1] Miller, a rhetorician, locates genre in typified actions arising in response to recurring situations. Her article had two key antecedents. From Lloyd Bitzer's seminal 1976 article, "The Rhetorical Situation," she drew on the proposition that rhetorical discourse should be studied as a response to an exigence created by a situation. This idea may, in hindsight, appear self-evident, but it signalled a deep shift of focus in rhetorical studies, from object to context and from the study of immutable principles residing in speeches and texts to the study of historical circumstances. From Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Miller drew on the premise that the study of genre is a legitimate, even central, part of rhetorical studies (13–14) and that genres cannot be reduced to their formal characteristics (18–25). Miller reshaped and synthesized these ideas in a pithy set of formulations that clearly struck a chord with the academic writing community. Her essay invariably serves as the starting point for all further discussion in our field about genre. Miller's signal contribution to genre theory, however, is her insistence that we consider not only genre but all its relevant components—the people who contribute to a genre, the motives upon which they act, the situations they respond to, indeed the world in which they move—*only* in their social aspect. Exigence is a "conventionalized social purpose" (162). It must be "located in the social world" and seen as "social motive" (158). Recurrence itself is "a social occurrence" (156). This insistence is, I believe, the chief reason for her theory's uptake in writing studies at a particular historical moment, the mid to late 1980s. Many of those who accepted Bitzer's core idea, Miller among them, criticized him for his belief that the situation had an objective existence. Unlike these earlier critics, however, Miller does not see his problem as a failure to account sufficiently either for perception (A. B. Miller; Consigny; Hunsaker and Smith) or for the creative acts of individuals (Vatz). Her definition of genre enacts the transition to the third stage of what Martin Nystrand et al. identified as the evolution of writing studies "from text to individual/cognitive to social" (271). "Situations," Miller writes, "are social constructs that are the result, not of 'perception,' but of 'definition.'"

Miller's understanding of genre as social action has supported a view of writing as not just situated but radically situated. While a reconceptualization of rhetorical studies as situational helped provide a theoretical framework for the growth of writing across the curriculum, Miller's theory of genre makes it much harder to see the disciplines as connected to each other, let alone to the world outside the university. My one reservation about launching my initiative was that the university's increasing role in preparing students for their careers may be contributing to an ongoing erosion of the idea of a liberal arts education. Much of the literature in writing studies on transfer theory, however, questions whether we can even prepare students for their future professions. In "Do As I Say: The Relationship Between Teaching and Learning New Genres," Aviva Freedman asks, "can the complex web of largely tacitly understood social, cultural and rhetorical features to which genres respond ever be explicated fully, or in such a way that can be useful to learners?" (164). The existing empirical research into transfer of professional writing skills from university to workplace (see, e.g., Anson and Forsberg; Freedman and Adam; Dias et al.; Smart and Brown; Schneider

and Andre) often follows a pattern: a review of the relevant theory; evidence of a sharp divide between the rhetorical contexts of the two domains; empirical evidence for the very real challenges that students face in adjusting to their new work environment and the new writing tasks; and an acknowledgement that, after a greater or lesser struggle, most new hires, typically interns, eventually adapt to the new circumstances. The studies, while often skeptical about the possibility of transfer, do not definitively establish whether prior learning is a hindrance or a help. Doug Brent, classifying the existing research as being either glass half empty or glass half full, sees writing studies research into transfer as reflecting a disagreement not so much about outcomes as about perception.

My primary concern in this paper, however, is not whether students are capable of transferring their writing skills to the workplace but whether they are able to transfer their critical skills—specifically, the capacity to reflect critically on workplace genres and practices using criteria from *outside* those genres and practices. This question is not often raised in the field of writing studies. But the real-world dilemmas the question might help address do arise in case studies. Jo-Anne Andre and Barbara Schneider relate the experience of three interns caught in a moral bind: a political science student who was told to look not for facts but for arguments in supporting the federal government's position in litigation; another who was expected to protect the reputation of the federal government in choosing what to release in response to freedom of information requests; and a communication studies student who was made to replace what she considered factual material in a conference report with a "certain organizational version of reality" (50). All three students felt they had no choice but to act as their superiors expected.

Certainly Patrick Dias et al. are right to point out that "most workplace authors follow a host of implicit and explicit rhetorical rules; successful compliance marks membership, failure may mean career stagnation or job loss" (109). Yet by restricting genre to the *social* world and the participants to their roles as *social* actors, contemporary genre theory cannot, for example, provide a satisfactory account of the phenomenon of the whistleblower. If the social rules of the workplace dictate that the truth is what a supervisor says it is, how can potential whistleblowers feel justified in asserting moral agency and contesting what they believe to be a falsification of reality? Only by acting on motives that cannot strictly be called social and by denying the power of social practices such as genre to define what is real. To be sure, efforts to extend and complicate Miller's theory by situating social actors at the nexus of multiple genres—be it by way of activity theory (Russell) or genre systems (Bazerman, "Systems") or genre sets (Devitt) or genre repertoires (Yates and Orlikowski)—do allow for the experience of having to negotiate conflicting loyalties. But ultimately they, too, fail to provide a fully compelling theoretical ground for the actions of whistleblowers. Truth-telling in the face of institutionally sanctioned deception loses its requisite moral and epistemological status if the act of gathering evidence and going public is reduced to just one social practice among others. There are other—less stark but no less important—occasions for the exercise of critical thinking in the workplace. Indeed, a capacity for the exercise of thoughtful contrarianism in professional life is one of the obvious justifications for continuing to stream large numbers of students through post-secondary institutions even though they could quite arguably learn the necessary career skills more efficiently by performing tasks in context.

We might, as a thought experiment, divide genre theorists into two distinct categories. That theorists gravitating toward either of the two categories reach mostly the same conclusions helps shed light on why the social has come to occupy such a central place in writing studies. The first type of theorist sees genre as instrumental and the creation of meaning as therefore subservient to the aims of the discourse communities whose genres they study. Such theorists generally do not see it as their responsibility to question the fitness of the genres they study. The second type sees practices such as genre as constitutive of what we, as members of discourse communities, can and can't say, can and can't think, do and don't perceive, and thus of what we come to accept as true. If those who take the first approach choose not to judge, those who take the second eliminate the grounds for judging.

A constitutive view of genres—that, as social practices, they create the very world in which they act—cannot do justice to our ability to make critical judgements about the genres themselves, whether from the outside or from within. It offers no way of judging how well or poorly genres facilitate our ability to do things in the world or to better understand the world. A premise of this paper is that genres, like other social practices, are not fundamentally constitutive of our perception of the world, though of course they may shape and limit the way we view the world. But insofar as the academic culture of the humanities and social sciences remains under the shadow of postmodernism, I cannot necessarily assume that this premise is widely shared.[2] I recognize that a constitutive view of social practices can offer a trenchant form of critique, in particular a critique of power. But that critique can so easily be applied to the critic, and so on in an infinite

regression that leads ultimately to epistemological stalemate. A former professor and mentor told me back when deconstruction was in vogue that deconstruction and poststructuralism are essentially conservative movements of thought.[3] I believe he was right. By conservative, I refer here not to the ideology of the Republican Party, whatever exactly that may be at this historical moment, but simply to the preservation of the status quo. Any extreme form of epistemological skepticism leads to an acceptance of the status quo because we lose the basis for choosing one way of interpreting the world over another. As the historian Jill Lepore observed in a *New Yorker* article about evidence, "Somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century, fundamentalism and postmodernism, the religious right and the academic left, met up: either the only truth is the truth of the divine or there is no truth; for both, empiricism is an error. That epistemological havoc has never ended" (93).

I take some comfort in the fact that two of the preeminent theorists of genre in writing studies do not see genres or discourse communities more generally as constitutive. John Swales writes, "the extent to which discourse is constitutive of world view would seem to be a matter of investigation rather than assumption" (31). And Charles Bazerman observes, "Perceiving statements only within the process of social negotiation of a socially constructed reality ignores the individual's powers of observation and language's ability to adjust to observed reality" ("What Written Knowledge Does" 364). Yet even as the influence of postmodernism recedes, the line between those who see genre as constitutive and those who see it as instrumental remains blurred. Thus Bazerman the instrumentalist states early on in *Shaping Written Knowledge* that throughout the book he follows Miller (17), whom Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, unapologetic believers in the power of genre to constitute reality (13), claim as one of their own: "The notion of a socially constructed reality," they write, "is at the heart of her definition of genre" (10). In fact, Miller is somewhat cagey on the constitutive power of genre. Human nature and experience do make an appearance in her proposed hierarchy of meaning (162), albeit at several levels removed from genre. The physical world makes no appearance at all.

This blurring of epistemologies is largely a consequence, as I see it, of a disciplinary division of labor in our universities between, on the one hand, the sciences, which assume responsibility for unravelling the physical laws of the universe, and, on the other, the social sciences and humanities, which focus on society, culture, and the creation of meaning. Insofar as we in the social sciences and humanities limit our domain of inquiry to the creation of meaning within discourse communities, we risk recreating what looks like a social constructionist view of the world even when we don't accept the premises of social constructionism in its most radically skeptical form. This narrow focus on discourse and meaning in our own community helps explain why it can be so hard to distinguish between self-evident uses of the term social construction (social practices as constructions) and radical uses that challenge the very possibility of truth (the world as social construction). Consider Carolyn Miller's definition of exigence: "If rhetorical situation is not material and objective, but a social construct, or semiotic structure, how are we to understand exigence, which is at the core of situation? Exigence must be located in the social world, neither in a private perception nor in material circumstance" (157). Does Miller use "social construct" in the constitutive sense? Probably, but it's hard to be sure. The *If* of her question points to the elective disciplinary move of isolating genre within the realm of the social, in which case the statement that exigence is social becomes all but unarguable: it becomes a matter of definition.

If genres have no obligation to the world outside their discourse communities but rather create their own worlds with their own inner consistency whose logic users must accept once they enter the communities, then our students will be predisposed to mastering but not thinking critically about the genres and practices they learn in their chosen professions, and they will feel no sense of accountability to those outside their professions. In other words, we will help produce careerists.

Print Journalism

I don't want to suggest that there's anything necessarily wrong with focusing our work in writing centers on teaching our students the ropes: that is, explaining to them how the genres in their disciplines work. It's certainly not usually our role to do anything more than that. In that sense, we have to recognize that our role in writing centers is fundamentally conservative. One of the things I learned from offering these workshops is that students want above all to be told, "this is how things will work in your chosen profession." They aren't looking to hear that the way their intended profession works is going to confront them with difficult choices they will have to negotiate throughout their careers. My sense that students prefer an unambiguous road map to the future was confirmed in the student feedback for the two workshops I offered in the first year of our initiative. The most

enthusiastically received workshop that year was Writing and Print Journalism. It devoted itself to explaining to students in a clear, methodical, and unambiguous way: if you choose journalism, this is how it will be. The workshop leader, Diane,[4] was an accomplished journalist and editor. At the time of the workshop, one of her articles, on sex education for boys, was singled out as the most popular story in the history of the magazine. While she was preparing for her workshop, she lost her post as editor of a local Toronto arts and news weekly when the parent company closed it down. Yet Diane, while acknowledging the precariousness of the medium in the age of the internet, was surprisingly optimistic about the future of print journalism, and she didn't try to discourage students from pursuing a career in journalism. In her workshop, Diane assumed that students would want to know the basics, which she dutifully provided. Stories can be categorized according to whether they provide data or opinion. In between, you have the feature story, which involves research, imparts information, but also provides a take. She also provided practical information about how to break into the profession: how to conduct yourself during an interview, how to address the interviewer. Diane's workshop performed the useful function of reminding me what I sometimes forget with students: What they want may be more basic and even informational, less sophisticated, than what we are inclined to give them. At the same time, we should, I believe, be willing not always to give our students what they want and occasionally to raise rather than ease discomfort.

Law

Hermione, the presenter for the workshop on writing and the law and a professor of law at my university, did not aim to create discomfort in her audience members, but the advice she offered might inevitably put them in some conflict with their profession. In her workshop, she drew on her considerable practical work advocating for privacy. She played a key role in a decision that made it impossible for the police to request subscriber information from Canadian internet service providers without a warrant. Her account of that role makes a good case for fluency in multiple genres. She and her colleague Arthur were actively involved in the case of *R. v. Spencer*, which went before the Canadian Supreme Court in 2013. It centered on the right of the police to ask internet service providers for the identity of a person attached to an IP address when they don't have a warrant. The lower courts had ruled that the police had been within their rights to seek subscriber information from the internet provider of the appellant, Matthew David Spencer, without first seeking a warrant. The police had used that information to obtain a warrant to search his premises for child pornography, which they had suspected him of sharing on the internet. The question that Hermione and Arthur kept asking themselves was, "Why did the police not get a search warrant before going to Spencer's internet service provider?" There were no time constraints, and it was pretty clear that a judge would have provided one had the police simply asked. Hermione and Arthur concluded that the police wanted to establish a general right to demand subscriber information without a warrant. If that right were to be challenged, what better case for having public opinion on one's side than one involving child pornography? Now, Hermione and Arthur knew that the justices on the Supreme Court read the papers every morning, particularly when they happen to be covering Supreme Court cases—Hermione had clerked for a Supreme Court justice—so just prior to the hearing, they hit some of the major newspapers with opinion pieces raising the question, Why didn't the police seek a warrant? Their rhetorical strategy may have made a difference: again and again during the Supreme Court hearing, the question came up: Why didn't the police just get a warrant? The Supreme Court ruled that while Spencer would not get off—the case would have to go again to trial—the warrantless search was unreasonable.

The first half of Hermione's workshop focussed on style. For example, she said lawyers tend to use the passive voice around 75 percent of the time, with law professors often coming in at close to 90 percent. Yet she stated quite plainly: "Use active voice as much as possible." "Law is full of terrible jargon" she said. When I invite Hermione to repeat this workshop, I will ask her whether she can say more about how students can negotiate the institutional obstacles to writing against the prevailing style.

Hermione, quoting Justice John Laskin, said that good writing is good writing, but in fact the greater part of her workshop was devoted to demonstrating how one's approach to writing depends on rhetorical situation. For example, she distinguished broadly between writing as understanding and writing as doing—a distinction that genre theorists frequently make. Writing as understanding is what we do in university. Writing as doing is largely what lawyers do when they write factums or serve, as Hermione has, as advocates. Both rhetorical situations lead to different choices. I see tension, certainly, but no real contradiction between the view that good writing is good writing across disciplines and fields and that writing is inflected by genre and rhetorical situation. In

any case, Hermione's insistence that students cultivate a direct, unpretentious style is much more than a matter of clarity. Hermione clearly sees law as a part of the public realm. I would like to suggest that an insistence on clarity and transparency in our students' writing is one of the ways we can keep discourse communities from becoming walled off from the public realm and therefore immune to criticism from outside. Each gentle push in the direction of greater transparency amounts to a vote of confidence in the permeability of boundaries between disciplines and world, each acceptance of the dense jargon of a discipline a nod to the principle that genres operate according to their own socially defined rules. Contemporary genre theory offers no cogent reason for ever rejecting those rules.

Public Policy

The third workshop, on public policy, complicated Hermione's advice and my usual insistence as a writing instructor on the virtues of a clearer and more accessible style. It had two leaders: Rhianna and Irene. Rhianna is a consultant who has trained thousands of public service employees and has helped government to modernize communications. Irene works directly in government on communication. Both speakers have worked at the highest level of the provincial government, right up to the cabinet.

Most of the prose that I see in my one-on-one sessions does not suffer from an excess of simplicity or clarity. More often than not I find that the greatest challenge is to help students simplify their tangle of ideas and their tangled sentences into a form that their readers can understand. Can a writing practice, however, place too much emphasis on simplicity in the service of transparency? As I discovered in the workshop, there has, in the last decade or so, been a revolution in communications within government. In the mid-2000s, the Ontario government began its program to modernize communications, something that had not happened since it started issuing news releases in 1946. A government video in 2008 justified the modernization to public service employees in terms of the shorter attention span of a public subject to the onslaught of new media. Without any irony, it compared this revolution in communications to the fast food revolution that hit the restaurant industry in the 1970s and 1980s. The changes that the workshop leaders talked about applied not only to the way in which government communicates with the public but also to the way in which politicians, public servants, and consultants communicate with each other. As the examples made clear, the main casualty of this program was the very tools of the trade that students of political science, for example, will spend four years mastering: the standard paragraph, the carefully reasoned argument based on thorough analysis and context. One student said she was worried she would lose all the writing skills she learned in university.

In their often-cited study of workplace genres, *Worlds Apart*, Dias et al. argue that we frequently fail in our attempts to prepare students for the professional workplace because our simulations "cannot adequately replicate the local rhetorical complexity of workplace contexts" (175). However, in the case of the transition from writing in a political science degree program to writing in public policy, the reverse appears to be true: the workplace fails to replicate the complexity of university writing. And that is not because political science essays are impenetrably complex; on the contrary, political science is arguably the most outward looking and concrete of the social sciences. The plain writing movement is, on the whole, no doubt a force for the good, but it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Sometimes, complexity needs to be respected. The university must shoulder much of the responsibility for the growing gulf between academic and public discourse, but the workshop on Public Policy suggests that insofar as the survival of a robust public intellectual life—already seriously compromised—matters, the public and professional spheres must also share in the burden.

Medicine and Health Sciences

There is no denying that disciplinary and professional practices can limit what those practices ideally should serve: our ability to represent accurately and insightfully the world and human experience or to act in the world based on a clear-sighted understanding of it. When practices begin to take on a life of their own, they may sometimes need to be rethought, revised, even reinvented. A considerable virtue of the fourth workshop in our series, Writing in Medicine and Health Science, was the window it opened onto an attempt to reshape a genre, the controlled study, in response to a deficiency in its ability to represent the world of the sufferer. The workshop leader, Serena, is a physical therapist and social scientist who serves as a research scientist at the University of Toronto and one of its affiliated hospitals. Serena's specialty is narrative and visual methods. In her research, she attempts to incorporate the experience of patients into the study of medicine.

Since the workshop series aims to introduce students to the genres they will likely encounter in their lives beyond their undergraduate degrees, I asked

Serena to talk about her research *and* the more traditional—that is quantitative—ways of doing research. Students would already be familiar with the more traditional methods, though even her qualitative research follows closely the IMRD structure that students learn in undergraduate science courses. Indeed, a common template cuts across the social sciences and the "hard" sciences such as chemistry, physics, and biology, and in introducing qualitative methods into the health sciences, Serena does remain faithful to traditional social science methodology.

Serena's work speaks to a growing sense in the health sciences of a deficit of attention to the experience of illness. Hence the attempt to find a place for patient narrative in medical science generally and even within the culture of clinical trials. Probably the most well-known proponent of narrative medicine is Rita Charon, who has both an M.D. and a Ph.D. in English ("Narrative Medicine"). Yet this change in culture, which still remains marginal to the practice of clinical trials, is, in my view, fraught. The obvious practical difficulty is that of assessing patient experience in trials committed to providing outcomes: how does one avoid reducing that experience to ten-point scales? Despite Charon's position that the "emotional and psychological aspects of clinical cases . . . are not separable . . . from physiological or structural or historical or economic or moral ones" (Charon, "Author Replies" 7), the current medical model is driven by a belief that human experience and consciousness, along with biology, are reducible to fundamental laws of physics. Any attempt to introduce lived experience into medicine comes into conflict with that underlying belief, exemplified in our time by the larger culture's fascination with the science of the brain and the belief that it will solve the problem of consciousness (see Dehaene for an argument from neuroscience; see Dennett for the argument from natural selection; see Weinberg for a physicist's case for the reduction of all sciences to particle physics).

Still, the stubborn irreducibility of our experience of illness, which is never purely mental or physical, remains the often unacknowledged bedrock of medicine. Witness the fact that attempts to replace that experience by objective biological markers measurable only by instruments so often fail to produce the expected results. Symptoms that correlate well with these markers in an untreated population often move in the opposite direction under treatment (see Gøtzsche 123–26). For example, low bone density is a good predictor of bone fractures. In a four-year trial of fluoride treatment in post-menopausal women, bone density increased significantly overall in the treatment versus the control group, but the number of vertebral fractures was 20% higher among those who received fluoride, and the number of non-vertebral fractures 200% higher (Riggs et al. 806–07).

It is not likely that these deeply rooted philosophical and methodological problems will be sorted out any time soon. Insofar as they are addressed, the locus of change will be ideas, not genre. Changes to genre do not generally drive changes to models of the world. But the pressure to modify or reinvent a genre can itself be symptomatic of a felt need to rethink such a model. A paradox of the form of genre theory that Carolyn Miller helped bring into being is its inadequacy as a source of insight into why genres change. It rightly posits change as an essential feature of genres—in contrast to the post-Aristotelian view of genres as *a priori* and unchanging. Yet by circumscribing genre within the social realm and shifting "emphasis away from discourse as representation" (Artemeva 7), genre theory inevitably loses sight of one of the primary motives for change: the friction that is generated when social conventions and practices come into conflict with actuality. This is not to say that genres typically serve a directly representational need; most do not. But the activities of practitioners of all genres are underwritten by their participation in a world that, at some basic level, cannot properly be called social except in the obvious sense that we communicate about it in symbolic forms such as language. In what way can the comparatively large number of bone fractures experienced by those who received treatment in the fluoride study be usefully understood as a product of social activity when it so stubbornly defied the expectations of its discourse community? Our understanding of the genre of the controlled trial will be incomplete unless we acknowledge that, much as it may try to channel experience in ways that fit a preconceived view of the world, this genre, like others, is in dialogue with nature, external reality, the actual—call it what you like.

The biologist, physician, and early sociologist of science Ludwick Fleck referred to the inevitable incursions of the unexpected into the collective activity of science as the "passive elements" of knowledge. The historically contingent "thought styles" that scientists use to organize their investigations of nature he referred to as the "active elements" of knowledge. That biological markers, despite their manifest unreliability, continue to find their way into controlled studies as substitutes for direct clinical data offers but one small example of the stubbornness of Fleck's thought styles in the face of countervailing evidence. However, the fact that biological markers so often do not behave as expected attests to the inability of those thought styles to bend their objects of study to their will. We ignore

both Fleck's active and passive elements of knowledge at our own peril.

Fiction

The fiction event took a different form than the other five workshops. It was publicized and staged as a "conversation" between three Toronto writers—André Alexis, Miriam Toews, and Anne Michaels—who have, over the last three years, taught one-on-one at my writing center in their role as the Barker Fairley Distinguished Visitor (UC Alumni). Undergraduates, alumni, graduate students and faculty in the university's English department, and students in my campus's two creative writing programs were all invited. The event, in my college's 150-seat auditorium, was waiting list only just a few days after it was announced. That three writers talking about the craft of fiction would be such a draw needs little explanation. Nevertheless, the reverence still accorded to novelists serves as a reminder that, for many, art, in particular the art of fiction, is one of the few vocations that offers the prospect of an uncompromised engagement of self with self and with world. How many forms of writing, let alone of earning a living, meet Toews's impromptu definition: "If living is a problem, and if writing is working out problems, and if from writing we want to know how to live, then writing is trying to figure out the problem of life and how to live it" (UC Alumni)? Genres, ideally, should be enabling—they should act in the service of argument or expression rather than impede it. In the words of the literary critic Alastair Fowler, they "offer room" to "move in" (31).

The more specialized our work, however, the less of our being we bring into play, and the more we may feel constrained by the genre. Many of our students will cease to write essays when they complete their degrees. My encounters with real-world genres reminded me just how much freedom and scope for expression the essay form offers, even if I sometimes wish the academic argumentative essay could be less rigid than it often is and rediscover its roots in the open-ended explorations of Montaigne. But as the fiction event also made clear, the relative freedom to explore offered by both the novel and essay forms can place demands on the self that many will not mind relinquishing at the end of their degrees. After all, one of the functions of genres is to limit possibility and the need for invention and thus to make the task of writing more tractable, even bearable. The more open-ended the task, the higher the demands placed on the writer. Asked by the moderator what compels her to start writing, Toews answered, "Oh, everything. Did you say start? I thought you said stop" (UC Alumni).

Writing Centers and Theory

There are some encouraging signs in the writing center community of a readiness to let go of some of the theoretical constraints imposed by a purely social view of discourse. In our practical work, we have never adhered to a very strict reading of genre as social action. That is true of necessity, because a social theory of discourse does not in fact provide a very hospitable framework for the work we do. To the extent that writing is socially situated, writing center instructors are not well positioned to provide the kind of teaching that students need, for we do not typically find ourselves firmly situated in the same communities of practice—that is, disciplines—as our students. In the generalist/specialist debate, there should be little question of where contemporary genre theory stands: on the side of the specialists. Kristen Walker might argue, as she did in her 1998 article "The Debate over Generalist and Specialist Tutors: Genre Theory's Contribution," that "genre theory, as it has evolved from social constructionism, provides 'generalists' and 'specialists' with a tool to analyze discipline-specific discourse" (28), but she can do so only by stripping genre theory in its still social constructionist phase of most of its intended force. Similarly, Layne Gordon's recent "Addressing Genre in the Writing Center" states that "Miller's theory illustrates the potential that genre theory holds for increasing students' sense of ownership over their writing" (1). If anything, Miller's social theory of genre does the opposite. As Eric Hobson—with Christine Murphy, one of the few outspoken critics over the last few decades of the epistemological turn in writing center scholarship—notes, although we in the writing center community debate "questions of epistemology without making a production of it," often "we do so without being too aware of the nature or implications of our theoretical stance" (65).

The relative paucity of writing center scholarship devoted specifically to genre theory speaks to the poor fit between writing centers and contemporary genre theory. The notion of writing as a social activity played out differently in the writing center community than it did in writing studies *per se*. Partaking in the growing interest in poststructuralist thought in the humanities and social sciences of the 1980s, writing center administrators such as Kenneth Bruffee and Lisa Ede focussed primarily on the idea of writing as a collaborative activity, not on the situated nature of writing. Their work from that period has a heady quality that derives from their sense of placing writing and discourse at the very center of a significant new movement of thought. Both were eager to explore

ideas they recognized as "subversive" of common sense (Ede 9), "exotic and perhaps downright nonsensical and dangerous" to many (Bruffee 775). Ede's 1989 paper "Writing As a Social Process" insists not so much that we make writing more collaborative in our teaching practices as that we see it as collaborative even when it appears to be solitary. Bruffee made the case for the social constructionist position that "the matrix of thought is not the individual self but some community of knowledgeable peers" and that knowledge "is by its nature inaccessible" (775). The virtue of these polemical articles is that they do not shy away from the implications of a social constructionist view of reality. One of their problems, however, is a reliance on either/or thinking. Either writing is collaborative or solitary. Either knowledge is social or it accumulates as inventory in a storehouse. As always, such thinking relies on mischaracterization of the wrong side of the either/or. For example, resistance to the idea of collaborative learning, according to Ede, came from English departments immersed in the romantic and post-romantic literary traditions (9). Yet literature departments became immersed in poststructuralist theory and postmodernism before writing centers did, and the isolation of the writer, for many, remains an unromantic but inescapable fact in spite of whatever conscious or unconscious dialogue may be going on in our heads when we compose.

Inasmuch as we are willing to acknowledge that postmodernism may be playing itself out (has even, in its subordination of truth to discourse, become singularly irrelevant as a form of critique in the age of Trump if not intellectually complicit in the public devaluation of factual truth)[5] then the way to extricate ourselves from a theory of the social nature of discourse and knowledge turned problematic is not to reject all of its claims out of hand. Rather, it is to recognize that the theory's inadequacies stem from the attempt to turn what should have been a valuable corrective into a theory of everything. Doing so would mean ceding the pride of place that some in the profession believe a social theory of discourse holds in the academy. Rather than continuing to insist, as Anthony Paré says we must in "The Once and Future Writing Centre," "on the foundational role of discourse in any reasonable theory of learning and knowing" (6), we need to acknowledge that discourse is just one player in the pursuit of knowledge. The way to resolve the quandaries posed by a social theory of genre is assuredly not to return to a neo-Aristotelian theory of genres as formal in nature and fixed. Rather, it is to recognize that genres are indeed mediated socially but only in part. They are shaped by other forces as well, and the actors who work within and occasionally help change genres act on motives and a perception of the world that often transcend the merely social.

I believe a recognition of this kind lies behind the recent flurry of interest in transfer within the writing center community (Hagemann; Hughes et al.; Driscoll and Harcourt; Devet, "Using Metagenre"; Zimmerelli; Devet, "Writing Center and Transfer"; Driscoll; Hill). An ability to move—sometimes with ease, sometimes with effort—between discourse communities forms the basis of our ability to uncover relationships between disparate fields and to learn from the connections we make. As Bonnie Devet has so eloquently put it, "Transfer can, in fact, be considered the heart of a college education because students' ability to connect and link ideas is central to what a higher degree should teach" ("Writing Center and Transfer" 121). Much of this recent writing center scholarship is premised on a growing consensus within the fields of cognitive education and psychology that transfer of knowledge from one domain to the other does indeed occur under the proper conditions. Teaching for transfer is most likely to occur, according to a 2007 review article in *Higher Education*, when it emphasizes "deep understanding of principles and meta-cognitive strategies" (Billing 512). In a recent study of the effects of teaching tutors about transfer, Heather Hill draws on the notion of metacognition, which she describes as "an awareness and understanding of one's own learning and thought processes" (82). Michael Carter's metagenre offers a counterpart within writing studies. Though Carter's metagenre—which he describes as a "genre of genres" (393)—tries to remain true to Miller's social understanding of genre, it does propose a shift within writing studies away from the view that learning is radically situated and towards a vision of the disciplines as interconnected.

Writing Centers and the Turn to Evidence-Based Research

The principal pedagogical aim of my initiative—to increase awareness of the genres in which the students now write—dovetails with the recent writing center scholarship on transfer. My assumption is that exposure to multiple genres will help produce more proficient writers. I doubt, however, whether the assumption could ever be validated empirically in a suitably rigorous long-term trial. Such a trial would no doubt be impracticable. But all studies, even the most expensive, carefully planned ones, necessarily reduce messy real-world conditions to the clean lines of a

protocol that will produce results amenable to analysis. All make assumptions; all inescapably simplify.

Hill's study on preparing tutors for transfer offers a case in point. It tested whether teaching transfer to tutors enhances their "ability to facilitate the transfer of writing-related knowledge" by conducting a one-hour session aiming to educate three tutors on the theory of transfer (77). This was a modest study that aimed to confirm something fairly simple: that training tutors about transfer concepts would cause those topics to emerge in the tutors' subsequent teaching. Though the study cannot say much about the longer-term effects of the training session, that is a drawback of any study, albeit one that is often ignored: the longstanding practices of drug-regulating agencies in effect assume that short-term trials predict long-term outcomes. Hill's study also says nothing about actual learning outcomes. I am more concerned, however, with the ways in which Hill's application of a still somewhat controversial finding from other studies—that abstract understanding facilitates successful transfer—may compromise her analysis. Tutors, she points out, never mentioned abstract concepts such as "discourse community" or "rhetorical community," and they "missed opportunities to engage students in more complex discussions of the genre-specific nature of writing conventions" (94). Unless, however, it leads to a deeper understanding of genre, exposure to the jargon of our field may not actually serve students. And is it even clear all would benefit from help at so abstract a level of thought? One of the problems with evidence-based research is that it generally aggregates its data in order to form conclusions. An outcomes-based study that concluded slightly in favour of metacognition as a precondition for transfer may have had 53 student participants who benefited greatly from higher-level reasoning and 47 who did substantially worse. It would be a mistake to conclude that *all* students need to be taught to engage in higher-level reasoning based on the mean of an outcome. The more focussed on outcomes our writing center research becomes, the more likely we are to do a disservice to perhaps the greatest strength of the work we perform: its attention to the individual.

I raise these issues because as our profession continues to move towards evidence-based research as a way to define and assess what we do, no doubt in part a response to larger institutional pressures and expectations, we should be cautious of the false promise sometimes offered by such research and conscious of what we may stand to lose when we reduce the day-to-day craft of teaching writing to data. To be sure, the data we collect, particularly when the voices of instructor and student are preserved, can open a valuable window onto the teaching practices of our profession. (For a survey of qualitative writing center research, see Babcock et al.; for a discussion of the dangers of reductionism in our adoption of evidence-based research, see Littlejohn.) Though the move toward empiricism is welcome, we risk, in our simultaneous commitment to theories that insulate us from the empirical world and research protocols that claim to capture it, straddling two incompatible epistemologies that reproduce the mind-body dualism both aim to rise above. That is, we can still be Foucauldians in the way we theorize and positivists in the way we justify our work to ourselves and others. Between social constructionism on the one side and scientism on the other lies the cumulative and shared experience of helping students weigh evidence in a variety of shapes; reflect on the role of culture and society in shaping our understanding of the world; achieve insight; and form compelling arguments that aspire to an approximation of truth. Continuing to do that work means learning to live with a modest amount of uncertainty.

Notes

1. Hyon identifies the school of genre analysis that has dominated writing and rhetorical studies as the New Rhetoric, in contradistinction to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the Australian school of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). There has been cross-fertilization between the New Rhetoric and ESP. Since the three schools share the premise that participation in a genre is a fundamentally social act, my critique of Miller should apply broadly to all three.
2. By postmodernism, I refer broadly to the turn to skepticism about the foundations of knowledge and truth embodied in movements of thought as various as deconstruction, semiotics, social constructionism, anti-foundationalism, the strong program in sociology, and the sociology of scientific knowledge.
3. The term poststructuralism has been applied both narrowly to practices and ideas inspired by the French thinkers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and—like "postmodernism"—more widely to the general turn to skepticism in the academy beginning in the late-1960s. Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, was a philosophy professor whose greatest impact was on literature departments, no doubt because of the honorific role that literature and the free play of language assumed in his subversions of the hierarchies of the Western tradition. Foucault, whose work was centered not on language but on culture and society, has had an arguably much greater impact on writing

studies, if only indirectly through social constructionism.

4. I use pseudonyms for the leaders of the first four workshops.

5. While the profession has shifted considerably in the last decade or so, the extent to which the writing studies community remains committed to social constructionism is, as I suggest in the concluding pages of this article, less clear. Philosophical skepticism in one shape or another will likely remain with us forever. There is no grand consensus among philosophers on the nature of reality. The position that the world is real and that we have access to it may ultimately depend on an act of faith, though I believe there are empirical grounds for accepting such a position over skepticism or social constructionism in their more unalloyed forms. But my brief against social constructionism here is primarily pragmatic. For a pragmatic critique of the social construction of knowledge, see Patricia Roberts-Miller's "Post-Contemporary Composition: Social Constructivism and Its Alternatives" (100–04).

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