

Genre Pedagogies for the Library Classroom: Teaching Sources Rhetorically

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The research process is often complex and unintuitive. Although library databases, discovery systems, and commercial search engines provide students with more information choice than ever before, this glut of information often exists outside of any context, resulting in a bewildering research process. It comes as no surprise that in a study from Leeder (2016), the genres of materials housed within these platforms were misidentified 60% of the time by first-year students. As library instructors, we have the opportunity to assist students in navigating these systems and the materials contained within by helping them gain an awareness of the social and cultural contexts surrounding the genres of the library. In this paper, a rhetoric-based approach recently explored by Burkholder (2019) will be investigated to help students “learn to identify and respond to the ideological demands of social context” (p. 306) during the research process. To do so, we will investigate genre pedagogies—first created by composition instructors to grow students’ awareness of the context surrounding the information they use—and demonstrate how they can be applied at the library.

The Background of Rhetorical Genre Theory

The rhetorical analysis of genre began in the late 20th century, with communication scholars exploring genre use during the communication process. Miller (1984) was one of the first to synthesize and name this approach in her article “Genre as Social Action” where she described the importance of genre use in achieving successful discourse. The rhetorical approach to genre differs from how genre is often perceived in library work. In the library, genre signifies the subject or literary classification assigned to a variety of material types as a means of organization. By this definition, genres have significance due to their precise categorization; an assigned genre is an indication of the underlying substance and form of a material.

Rhetorical genre theory explores genre beyond substance or form. Taking into account social context, this investigation asks when, where, and why people use genres to communicate, along with questioning the implications of their use in various contexts. A recent definition of the theory offered by Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) described it as, “the study of genres as forms of situated cognition, social action, and social reproduction” (p. 60). Exploring these factors clarifies how communication inhibits or encourages action in particular communities. Devitt (2004) explained, “part of what all readers and writers recognize when they recognize genres are the roles they are to play, the roles being played by other people, what they can gain from the discourse, and what the discourses are about” (p. 12). When an audience recognizes a genre, the content becomes quickly categorized and responses come easily. Different genres incite different action based on the expectations they impart. For instance, a political campaign speech or a to-do list provoke distinct actions and responses from their audience.

An essential part of understanding genre rhetorically is knowing genre does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it inhabits the contexts of culture and community. One’s culture “defines what situations and genres are possible or likely” (Devitt, 2004,

p. 25), by constructing the context and informing the expectations necessary for clear communication. The U.S. political campaign speech, for example, is recognizable and replicable because of the contemporary representative political culture in which it resides.

Communities are small cultures, establishing which genres are acceptable for their members to use. It was Swales (1990) who examined the use of genre in “discourse communities,” defining them as active groups with clear memberships and common goals, often communicating using community-exclusive language. Examples of discourse communities include fandoms and academic disciplines. Devitt (2004) explained that in order to gain entrance to or examine a discourse community, one must acquire the community’s genre knowledge first. Simply put, genre knowledge can either help or hinder access to, communication with, and participation within different communities. This gated access is the concern for those who view communication through the lens of rhetorical genre. This concern is applied in the classroom by introducing students to the language of their newly chosen discourse communities.

Rhetorical Genre Theory in the Classroom

[F]or the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community. (Miller, 1984, p. 165)

Genre pedagogies have become a common mode of inquiry within composition studies, offering an application of theory in the classroom. Composition instructors are tasked with teaching students how to negotiate the properties of academic writing to become better writers and thinkers. Genre pedagogies are deployed by composition instructors to teach students how to write the forms of formal genre and to “help students perceive, understand, and even change situations” (Devitt, 2014, p. 146) by examining the context surrounding genre as it is used. By gaining this genre knowledge, composition instructors believe students become more entrenched in the discourse communities (or academic disciplines) needed to succeed in academia.

Genre pedagogies were created for composition classrooms, but there are many similarities between teaching composition and information literacy, inviting transfer from one to the other. Nearly 30 years ago, Fister (1992) introduced her fellow instruction librarians to composition practices, highlighting the foundational characteristics they share with library instruction. She explained,

Both fields deal with the teaching of skills rather than content, which makes us stepchildren in the academy while making us innovators in pedagogy. We, more than other fields, attempt to view the academic world from the student’s vantage point and try to interpret its peculiar culture in ways that make sense to newcomers. Because of our interdisciplinary nature we teach holistically, attempting to give students a lingua franca to gain entry into the bewil-

dering variety of academic discourse communities. (Fister, 1992, p. 154)

Fister recognized that library and composition instructors teach different steps to the same goal: to assist students' negotiation of the unfamiliar rhetorical situations within their chosen academic discipline. Supporting Fister's recognition, it is not only possible but also useful to explore how genre pedagogies can teach students to navigate the information landscape.

In composition studies, genre pedagogies are separated into three pedagogical tactics. Devitt (2014) provided a framework for these tactics and named them as: a) teaching particular genres, b) teaching genre awareness, and c) teaching genre critique. Sound pedagogical practice, according to Devitt, involves a scaffolded mixture of all three approaches. The following sections will explore each of these techniques from their original framework and suggest methods of using these tactics to teach library instruction.

Teaching Particular Genres

Teaching particular genres is done by explicitly presenting the conventions of a small number of contextually appropriate genres. The rationale behind this method of teaching is to "let everyone play the game, to give everyone access to the rules and tricks" (Devitt, 2014, p. 147) of the language of the academy. The pedagogical process of teaching particular genres is what Devitt called a "teaching-learning cycle" (p. 148) starting when students review a model example of a particular genre and consider its social function, organizational structure, and linguistic features. Then, along with their instructor and peers, students collaboratively negotiate the creation of a new text using its features. Finally, students write an example of the genre on their own.

Many genre pedagogists (e.g., Devitt, 2014; Freedman, 1993; Wardle, 2009) do not recommend using this method exclusively, describing it as problematic for transfer because of its inauthenticity. Freedman, for instance, questioned this method's assumptions, asking how possible it is for students to successfully apply genre knowledge learned in the classroom to real life situations. Referring to Miller's (1984) assertion that genre is rhetorically and contextually motivated, Freedman asked, "if genres are a response to context, can they be learned out of context?" (p. 194). The tactics of teaching genre awareness and genre critique are responses to the drawbacks of teaching particular genres.

To teach particular genres of the library, it is first necessary to know what they are. Andersen (2009), who wrote on the benefits of using genre theory in the library, identified "information genres" (p. 344) on two levels: the materials housed within information systems (e.g., eBooks, journal articles, newspaper articles, etc.) and the information systems themselves (e.g., library databases, digital archives, etc.). Librarians should be cognizant of both of these levels while teaching.

Teaching particular genres is already common practice in the library classroom—for example, presenting an introduction to the parts of a scholarly journal article or a database primer. To truly use this pedagogical method, the genre must be taught explicitly, introducing students to the classification and form along with a chance to investigate the genre in context. There may be substantial value in teaching the library database as an

explicit genre using Devitt's (2014) teaching-learning cycle. An example lesson plan could start by introducing students to a variety of library databases and asking for their features to be investigated. Then, students could reflect upon and discuss a database's audience, how the fields in a record correspond to the advanced search options, and perhaps Boolean operators, if the situation warrants. Finally, students can use this knowledge to perform their own database searches for a class assignment.

Introducing students to a genre in this way is often feasible within the timeframe of a typical one-shot library session, but it is important not to be formulaic despite the time limit. Devitt (2014) specified five elements to keep in mind when teaching particular genres: a) remind students that when using the genre outside of the classroom example, the situation will likely be more complex, b) give a wide variety of examples, c) encourage use of the genre only when it makes sense, d) leave time for reflection, and e) name the genre's limitations allowing for critique. Abiding by these principles can improve the learning experience for students, particularly in a one-shot situation.

Teaching Genre Awareness

Devitt (2014) described teaching genre awareness as the process of clarifying how to contextually understand *any* genre, rather than explicitly knowing a few instructor-chosen genres. This method encompasses genre's rhetorical nature and "treats genres as meaningful social actions, with formal features as the visible traces of shared perceptions" (Devitt, 2014, p. 152). Students gain the tools and the language to analyze, recognize, and name what encompasses the genres of any situation or community.

Devitt's (2014) pedagogical approach to teaching genre awareness uses similar steps described in the previous section, but with the goal of teaching strategies for rhetorical and contextual analysis and to identify patterns of genre rather than model the genres reviewed. An example assignment cited by Devitt asks students to create a genre manual in which they reflect on why, how, and for whom a genre exists. This process of teaching genre awareness elevates students to active participants in the genres they use and helps them to enter into and understand the academic communities they wish to join.

Bringing genre awareness into the library requires instructors to change their approach to how genres are often discussed in the library. In his argument for teaching library sources as social acts, Burkholder (2010) problematized the word *source* itself when it is used by librarians referring to library materials. He explored the expansive meaning of a source and explained, "the term describes an idealized version of reality and cannot account for the overwhelming complexity of the information environment; nor can it possibly illuminate the rhetorical nature of sources" (p. 2). Too frequently, the library session is taught towards finding the ideal source, objectifying and dehumanizing scholarship. By ignoring the social context surrounding the materials students are asked to discover, the research process remains decontextualized, difficult to navigate, and devoid of meaning. Furthermore, contemporary library discovery systems obfuscate genre to the point that it becomes easy for students, and even librarians, to forget or miss it. An indexed material's format often exists as a single field in a long list of equally weighted options from which to choose when conducting a search. Sub-genre (e.g., a book review from a journal) is often even more difficult to locate and contextualize in a list of results.

Focusing on genre awareness in library instruction provides space to ask students to analyze and reflect on an information genre using the elements of the rhetorical situation, namely its purpose, subject, audience, author, and context. If students consider these elements of the library database, for instance, they become more rhetorically aware of the genres housed within the database as well.

Teaching Genre Critique

Teaching genre critique welcomes students to examine and question the genres within their social and cultural spheres. A critical genre awareness pedagogy “opens students to see genres as created by people to achieve aims” (Devitt, 2010, p. 348) rather than natural objects that are neutral or fixed. By learning to be critical of genre, students question the roles any particular genre asks them to play. Devitt described the process of teaching this method as an instructional cycle in which students analyze, write, critique, and change a genre to fit their needs. Changing and critiquing genre are the additions to instruction, arriving only after students gain the ability to analyze and use genre. This cycle emphasizes the importance of scaffolding all three pedagogies.

Transferring this pedagogy to the library, additional research should be done to explore the myriad ways genre critique intersects with critical library instruction, but many composition assignment examples described by Devitt (2014) are easily transferred to the library classroom. For example, Devitt suggested an assignment in which students rhetorically review and critique a course syllabus. This approach can also work with any information genre. Additionally, Devitt advocated for “calling students’ attention to hybrid, blurred, or emerging genres [which] can help students gain a critical stance toward genres more fully normalized” (p. 155). Realistically, this may present itself in an exploration of the rhetorical differences between a dissertation, conference proceeding, and book by the same author on the same subject, or a discussion on Sci-Hub, a shadow platform for information discovery. Andersen (2009) recognized information genres as meaningful on their own as well as notable in the way they interact with one another. Asking students to explore similar content housed within different information genres welcomes a critical lens.

Conclusion

Transferring the tenets of rhetorical genre theory to the library classroom can transform students’ understandings of information genres and empower them to become comfortable in their academic discourse community. Practically, Burkholder (2010) has also established that using rhetorical and genre-centric pedagogies better equips students to locate and choose the most persuasive evidence for the situation, therefore becoming better researchers. Helping students achieve this critical eye may be challenging for librarians relying on one-shot library instruction models, yet this reality does not negate the value of the approach. Framing library instruction through rhetorical genre theory constitutes a structural change. Adoption of these genre pedagogies offers a tangible, proven process to integrate genre awareness into existing methods of instruction.

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