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ABSTRACT

The study of discourse genres as social action has steadily displaced more traditional views of genre, proposing the organic and ecological model that any consistent pattern of response to a recurrent rhetorical situation might constitute a genre. Observation of the life cycles of genres as transient social events can occur in a classroom using improvisational, dialogic, and situationally embedded writing strategies, and it is especially powerful where writing is mediated by computer networks, such as in a network-mediated class discussion. Electronic postings differ from paper-based bulletins in that they are public documents and the only requirements are that the message be substantial and thoughtful. Observable changes in student writing from paper to electronic discussion media include: (1) less summarizing; (2) increasing awareness of audience; and (3) more creative message titles. (EF)

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On the Origin of Genres by Natural Selection: Inventing Genres Online

Draft paper for the Second International Symposium on Genre:
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In recent decades, the study of discourse genres as social action has steadily displaced more traditional views of genre as more or less arbitrarily fixed and formally defined forms, such as the formal essay, the sonnet, the sentencing or the contract. The idea that *any* consistent pattern of response to a recurrent rhetorical situation (even, as Bakhtin's essay on "Speech Genres" let us see, oral ones) might constitute a genre has turned the attention of scholars and researchers to more organic and dynamic -- perhaps even ecological -- ways of thinking about the concept of genre.

Adopting such an ecological model inevitably leads us to attend more focally to the principles underlying change and development and less to the fixed, formal defining markers of individual genres. Further, it provides more in the way of concepts we can use as tools in understanding learning and development than did the traditional formalist study of genre. Paying attention to the way in which genres arise out of social transactions leads us to think of them as Darwin invited us to think of species -- as transient events rather than permanent Platonic Forms -- and to consider attentively the processes by which they come into being, develop, and expire.

Edward O. Wilson begins his book *The Diversity of Life* with a gripping account of the return of life to Krakatau after the legendary volcanic cataclysm which not only destroyed most of the island's surface area, but covered what was left with a layer of super-heated pumice to a depth of many meters. The eruption converted the island into a kind of sterile laboratory where the mechanisms of the development of life could be observed. This was not a faithful replication of the mechanisms of evolution, to be sure, because when life originally evolved on earth there wasn't much possibility of fully-developed organisms migrating from outside the way the balloon spiders sailed on the breeze to Krakatau. But it did allow acute observers to watch how the unimaginably rich diversity of life came to re-establish itself, and, in so doing, provided materials for inferring some of the principles governing that kind of development.

In a limited sense I'm offering my students' experiences in a new territory as a similar kind of naturally occurring laboratory data. New and recurring rhetorical situations afford us a laboratory in which we can watch these processes occur. Just such a situation is afforded by the kind of writing that happens in classrooms using strategies such as improvisational, dialogic and situationally embedded writing -- for example, "inkshedding" -- where the rhetorical situation of the writing is new to students. It is especially powerful in cases where this writing is mediated by computer networks, making audience and rhetorical situation more salient for less experienced writers.

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Examining texts produced in such situations by communities of learning writers, noting the development of specific generic markers like forms of address, conventional organizational markers, ranges of diction choice, and so forth, we can begin to build models of how genres are invented, adopted and adapted by, and develop among, social groups over time.

I want here to describe such a situation (a network-mediated class discussion), introduce a wide sample of writing from students in response to it, and invite you to participate with me in observing developing patterns of discourse -- tracing, in other words, the origin of genres.

To begin, though, it's worth considering what the situation of the student writer actually is. What recurring social (and rhetorical) situation is a student writing a conventional class essay actually in, and what social act is she performing as she writes it? Disentangling the actual and the hypothetical motives of the various participants in such a complex act is an extremely ticklish business -- ticklish in the sense that any move on your part might, at any moment (and quite unpredictably) cause dramatic and distracting wiggings and twitchings in the people you're trying to study.

Let's take a stab at it, though. The student writer's motives begin with the largest relevant motive -- to attain external certification that she succeeded in the course. Within this envelope, and more immediately, there's the reality of the relation between the student writer and the teacher reader. What happens here is that in terms of motivating action, that relation masks or covers the larger situation, and becomes, for practical purposes, an envelope in which the larger one is only theoretically relevant.

The student writer / teacher reader relationship is seen, or felt, by most students to be one in which the writer's job isn't a rhetorical one such as to communicate, persuade, amuse, or inform, but rather to impress an adjudicator (James Britton's "teacher as examiner") with her ability to communicate, persuade, amuse, inform, etc. It is to display ability rather than to use the text to accomplish something intrinsic to it. Anne Freadman has pointed out the extent to which, in French class, any instance of language isn't a socially communicative event, but is rather "an example of French"; Anthony Paré has shown how this situation turns "audience" into a distant, approving or disapproving, group of "people out there in chairs."

It is often argued -- rightly -- that this situation is one in which almost all educational texts are produced, and that the difference between impressing an adjudicator and persuading an interlocutor is a pretty subtle one. It is indeed, but it is nonetheless powerful. It is particularly powerful for a student writer who has never had experience of writing for other purposes than demonstrating the ability to write, or the knowledge of facts the reader already knows, or of reading text to be amused, persuaded, informed or engaged (who has not, in the terms set out by Douglas Vipond and myself, habitually been a point-driven or dialogic reader, or writer).

What happens, for language users who are habitually dialogic, is that within the envelope of the student writer / teacher reader relationship another envelope is constructed, an imaginary one, in which a writer has a shot at persuading, amusing, informing, surprising an imaginable reader. Good teacher readers collaborate in the imagining of this situation, by commenting dialogically on student papers, allowing the student writer to believe that someone actually is being affected in other than a judgmental way by the writing. And indeed, of course, sometimes this actually does happen -- though it's rare for students to believe that it's happened even when it has.

The question of how the parties perceive the situation -- and, even more, of how deeply those perceptions go, how they affect their actions -- is an important complication. To understand how situations condition action, we need not so much to know how the situation looks to *us*, but how it looks to the *actors*. It's worth remembering Carolyn Miller's (1984, 1994: 28) invocation of the distinction between Bitzer's "exigency" and Burke's "motive" as a background for understanding this. She makes the point that the exigency (what observers would agree constituted the real requirements of the situation) has to be recognized by the actor to become a motive.

Thus, as I describe the particular situation I am using as an observational space, the way Wilson's biologists used Krakatau, there's a complication those biologists didn't encounter: for the purposes of biology, the existence and nature of the volcano-devastated atoll could be taken as given. No one cared to speculate about how the balloon spiders perceived it; their behavior was their perception. Not so with human actors and human situations. We need to be very careful, not only with how we describe situations, but with whether we think the people in them saw them the same way.

The situation I'm concerned with here looks (at least to outsiders) like this. Students are enrolled in an 18-credit first year experience, The Aquinas Program, which involves three of their five first-year courses taught as one interdisciplinary module. Their particular section is called Truth in Society, and involves a collaborative, writing-based investigation of the problem of how people come to believe the things they do. In this program they spend all of every Tuesday and Thursday, and eight or ten hours beyond that, working on various aspects of this course. For a good portion of the time they'll be involved in a collaborative investigation of some specific historical instance, chosen by the class, when people's beliefs were challenged or changed -- recent foci have been the Salem witch trials, the media coverage of the Gulf War, the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. But there are other tasks, all intended to help the students become members of the academic or intellectual community, and most writing-based.

One of the things they are required to do is to write about local public "Occasions" -- mostly these are on-campus lectures, performances (readings and plays), gallery openings, etc. In order for the Occasion to "count" toward the course requirements a student needs to persuade at least eight other people to attend and to write a public reflection about the occasions; she then also needs to read the other people's reflections and write a response to at least one of them. All of this, clearly, is designed to afford opportunities for the students to participate in active and engaged ways in the intellectual life of the campus community.

These written reflections on occasions, like much of the other writing the students do in the course, are intended to be, and are, at least in theory, public documents in a way not much student writing is. At the beginning of the course they are written on sheets of paper and posted on the bulletin board in the classroom (because the section comprises three-flexibly scheduled courses and the room is reserved for this course all day Tuesday and Thursday, students have time to browse through the documents and post their responses). By the beginning of October, however, the venue for the reflections and responses was moved to a World Wide Web based discussion program, and the process of composing reflections and reading and responding to those of others moved to the computer lab or to students' home computers. The program we currently use is called HyperNews; it displays the postings in an outline format so that students can see at a glance what topics have been begun and who has responded to which, and can read postings simply by clicking on them. In this it is somewhat like the actual cork bulletin board in the classroom, though less tedious to maintain and much easier to read.

Another characteristic of the situation is that the writing produced is not assessed in any way other than a stated requirement that the postings be "substantial and thoughtful." Students write in a situation where the only response to their text will be instrumental -- that is, it will not be a comment on the merits of their writing or their ideas, and normally it will not be a response from the teacher.

The rhetorical situation, then, at least from the point of view of an outside observer, is one in which the student's writing should have, as the obvious and salient motive, centrally the urge to say something of interest to, and likely to get a response from, the rest of an increasingly known community, about a shared experience of some complexity and richness.

It is important to remember, however, that - like all such social laboratories - this context is so rich that it's difficult or impossible to factor out important matters and disentangle causes from accidents. Not all students come into such a situation without experience of writing in anticipation of such pragmatically authentic consequences. Some have learned to learn how to write in new situations, and adjust very quickly; others never catch on at all, and continue doggedly to write summaries designed to demonstrate to an authority that they'd actually attended. Alterations in patterns of discourse are as likely to be triggered by the particulars of the immediate circumstances as by the general rhetorical situation; thus only the most general of trends can be observed across the corpus of roughly 560 texts produced between September 17 and the Christmas holiday. All of these texts produced after about the first of October are available on the course's "[Occasions Archive](#)."

When they exist, patterns are, of course, best seen in the writing of individuals over the course of the term. One thing that we might expect to see is changes from the conventions of school essay writing to more dialogic models: rather than summarizing what is already known, for instance, one might find writers taking more cognizance of the fact that the readers all, by definition, share experience of the Occasion being discussed. In other words, what we might see is the emergence of a genre.

Using John Swales' terms, we can say that a genre "comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (58). I can assume -- or at the very least hope -- that these conditions are met in the situation I am describing. There are, however, none of the "expert members of the parent discourse community" Swales says are necessary to recognize the purpose and constitute the rationale for the genre. We are thrown back on the necessity to look for what Swales describes as "various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content, and intended audience." And we need to be looking for them in a state of flux, where -- as on Krakatau -- some species are proving to be unsuited to the environment, and where others are crowding them out and then failing themselves.

So what developing patterns *can* be seen? When they exist, patterns of change are, of course, most clearly seen by tracing the writing of individuals over the course of the term. One thing that we might expect to see is changes from the conventions of school essay writing to more dialogic models: rather than summarizing, for instance, what is already known, writers might take more cognizance of the fact that their readers all, by definition, share experience of the Occasion being discussed.

Grace's writing, for instance, seems to become more intertextual and multivocal. Early in October, she reflected on a lecture on the Holocaust by offering essentially a summary of the speaker's remarks. By the end of the month, reflecting on a lecture by a maker of masks, summary takes a back seat to reflection on how she felt during the experience. In her responses to the reflections I think there's a similar pattern. In the

early October response to Erica's reflection on the Holocaust lecture, for instance, she focuses again almost entirely on what was said, though it's hooked to Erica's reflection. A month and a dozen postings later, however, in responding to Becky's reflection on a poetry reading by a MicMac woman, at the end of November, she weaves Becky's text deftly into her own, and focuses not so much on what happened and was said but on the relationship between Becky's ideas about it and her own. Still, even here, there is little obvious sense of anticipation that someone else is likely to read and respond to these thoughts.

It is impossible, of course, to know whether that anticipation of dialogue is actually there in the writer if there are no textual markers of it, such as direct terms of address. It may be, for example, that the sequence of reflections written by Rebecca between her first one, posted on the wall in the class, and the subsequent postings on the Holocaust on October 9, the lecture on masks on the 29th, on the Michael Collins film on November 9, a talk on Aboriginal and Indonesian Music on the 14th, to the Micmac Poetry Reading on the 21st, embody a growing awareness of the dialogic nature of the situation, but I don't see much clear evidence. There is the fact that the title of the last one ("MicMac Poetry Reading - An inspiration") advertises what her take on the occasion was; there is also, perhaps, a decreasing amount of purely descriptive information about the event and a shift toward information which carries a value expected to be understood by a reader who had shared in the occasion. For example, her reflection on Rita Jo's reading includes this remark: "They begun the reading by burning sweet grass which I thought was kind of different but also neat because it was a part of their culture." Does this indicate that what is important here is the discussion, clear elsewhere in the forum (for instance, in Becky's discussion), of the nature and effect of the sweetgrass ritual? It is plausible, but it is not clear to me how to establish that it is part of the evolution of Rebecca's repertoire of genres.

Perhaps an even more challenging example can be found in Neil's postings. They may allow us to infer an awareness of situation, but there aren't clear markings of that awareness or of its development. The earliest, on the AIDS video, tries to confront his own interior conflict about homosexuality, but cannot be argued, I think, to show a clear sense that he is thinking about what he is saying being read by the rest of the class. And although it can be seen by his other postings that he is aware of that rhetorical situation, his last posting of the term, on Rita Jo's reading, even though I found it one of the most powerful pieces of reflection of the year, shows little evidence that I can see of generic change: the audience and purpose are still consistent with the register of the personal essay, to be read by the instructor only.

It's true as well that occasionally you can see dialogic awareness of audience and rhetorical situation develop even in writers who exhibit considerable fluency and competence from the beginning. Ken, for instance, very early in the term, before we had started posting reflection on the Web site, posted on the classroom wall a reflection on a film, *Longtime Companion*, about the devastation caused by AIDS in the gay community. In it, although there is a clear focus and a real power, there's little sense that it would have been written differently if it had anticipated other readers. By the end of the term, however, Ken responds to a production of David Mamet's *Oleanna* with an almost painful awareness of who's going to read and respond, and a sense of the consequences for his future conversations, both online and in the classroom, of his politically incorrect siding with the teacher against the student. He begins by acknowledging, "Alright, I'm going to be called some horrible names for this," concedes that "I know for a fact that there are those who disagree with me," and concludes with "That's my two cents. So, who's up first to tell me to take my evil currency elsewhere?"

Ken's sidelong (and, at the end, direct) acknowledgements of an ongoing relationship between reader and

writer are, it seems to me, direct markers of an awareness of a rhetorical situation which is different from any that most students have had experience with. The extent to which these markers (and others) are evidence of a developing set of generic conventions is not easy to establish.

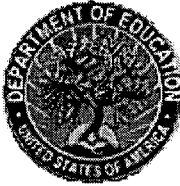
More obviously, one might expect to see changes in the use of the titles for individual postings, as people realize that the title is the first thing potential readers see -- indeed, unless the title attracts their attention, it's all they'll see.

Looking at the whole outline of the term's postings, it's not immediately obvious that there are changes in the pattern of titling. There are, all term, consistently infrequent instances of writers simply not bothering with titles -- or at least until mid-November. Instances of titles which merely identify the topic (and which are strictly unnecessary, since the structure of the page make it clear what the topic must be) seem to become fewer over the course of the term, but it is clear that in the *Oleanna* discussion, for instance, which is very late in the term, a substantial number of postings are simply titled "Oleanna." On the other hand, in the discussion of the reading of poetry by *Rita Joe*, even later in the term, there is a high proportion of titles which advertise the point of the posting (for example, Becky's reflection, and all but one of the responses to it, are titled in such ways).

There are more markers (direct address, allusion to the existence of audience, etc.) visible in the postings which are more explicitly dialogic -- the responses to the reflections of others. It is, however, in the original reflections that I think the impact of the rhetorical situation is most reasonably tested, since response isn't insisted on there, but the writers' awareness of the addressed nature of the text (as shown particularly dramatically in Ken's last posting) might be displayed.

It is apparent that one important source of information about whether or not the formal markers I'm attending to here represent actual allowance for addressivity, or anticipation of audience response, would be to ask the writers themselves. I have refrained from doing so, however, on the ground that it would be a little like taking a truckload of fertilizer to Krakatau: if you want to observe what's happening in a given situation, you don't want to change the situation. Were I to begin asking students about their motivations in placing titles on their postings, it is clear to me that one consequence would be to direct their attention to the nature of the titles, and thus to their effects on their audience. I expect that strategies such as the discourse-based interview (as used by Odell and Goswami, and in the research Doug Vipond and I have conducted on literary reading) will illuminate many of these questions, but until that becomes possible, the most immediate question is whether there are textual markers which signal the kinds of evolutionary process I'm hypothesizing, and what they are.

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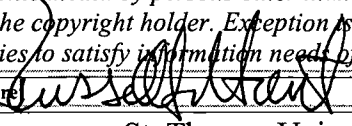
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