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Echoes of a Reading: Genre as Social Action as Formative Influence on Genres and Ideology

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Carolyn Miller's article on Genre as Social Action had a formative influence on my own article Records as Genre, and the story of that influence might give heart to new scholars. So here's what happened.

My dissertation was an ethnographic study of literacy at a veterinary college. As a result of my data gathering techniques—60 to 70 interviews, hours of classroom, clinic and lab observations, and an extensive document collection of exams, syllabi, and student work—I had scads of data. During my data analysis I became aware of the fascinating role that record keeping played in the labs, clinics, and classrooms. As I was coding, I found many references to and instances of the Problem Oriented Veterinary Medical Record (POVMR) system, a variant of the Problem Oriented Medical Record (POMR) system. I found the POVMR, not only being used for records, but also enacted in student case presentations and formal case presentation in Rounds. I saw it being used to structure lectures and even used in exams. At the same time I became aware that adopting the POVMR was highly political. The College was moving towards a more medicalized approach to providing veterinary care, and the POVMR was the engine of that change. I kept on seeing versions of the POVMR working within the College, and indeed changing the College. So I became aware that this one kind of text was having an extraordinary influence. And yet nothing in the literature that I was reading (literature on advanced literacies in the professions) touched on how a text type could have this kind of influence. I had no conceptual language to describe what I was seeing.

So like any good researcher I tried to write up my observations for publication. But perhaps, like many new scholars, I had great data but no salient way to explain what I had observed. I sent my first version to a top rated journal in the field. They rejected it as lacking a theoretical frame to explain my data (and they were right). But the reviewers told me that I should read Carolyn Miller's article Genre as Social Action. And I did.

Reading Carolyn's work truly was a eureka moment for me because I was also reading Mikhail Bakhtin's insights into speech genres (1986) and Dorothy Smith's observation that texts such as records create "documentary reality" (1974, p. 257). Carolyn helped me see that genres such as the POVMR acted within organizations; Bakhtin showed me that such genres had to be fluid as variants adjusted to different contexts; and Smith's argument that record keeping profoundly affects our personal and social lives explained why a text type like this could have such power.

Thinking through these perspectives helped me to understand what I was seeing at the College and shaped the resulting definition of genre as stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action. The echoes of my reading are clearly present in this definition. Carolyn's notion that texts can share similarities and those similarities (like familiar paths) can be operationalized to respond to familiar situations to get work done made complete sense to me. I could see the POVMR doing the work of this profession. At the same time each instance of the POVMR was different—and this is where Bakhtin's notion of the centripedal and centrifugal came into play. Some features of a genre have to be familiar enough to use (centripedal) while other features have to adjust to a specific context (centrifugal). And both Bakhtin and Smith agree that all texts and thus all genres are inherently ideological. They enact value systems.

So I revised my article with the help of Carolyn, Mikhail and Dorothy, and submitted it to *Written Communication*. It was accepted. So many thanks to Carolyn, who provided me with a great concept to think with.

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