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Texts in Contexts: Theorizing Learning by Looking at Genre and Activity

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Abstract

Written texts are central to formal education. The reading (consumption) and writing (production) of texts constitutes a great deal of the activity of students and teachers, and usually forms the basis for assessment and sorting. For this reason, a whole range of fields have taken up the problem of "literacy" (or rather literacies) in formal schooling, not only applied linguistics, rhetoric, and education, but also sociology, semiotics, psychology, social psychology, socio-linguistics, linguistic anthropology, communication studies, and so on. Similarly, learning in workplace and civic contexts is also highly dependent on literacy, and the relations between formal schooling and other contexts for learning are also mediated by alphanumeric texts.

Disciplines

Cognitive Psychology | English Language and Literature | Higher Education | Modern Literature | Rhetoric and Composition | Social Psychology

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Texts in Contexts: Theorizing Learning by Looking at Genre and Activity

David R. Russell, Iowa State University

Written texts are central to formal education. The reading (consumption) and writing (production) of texts constitutes a great deal of the activity of students and teachers, and usually forms the basis for assessment and sorting. For this reason, a whole range of fields have taken up the problem of "literacy" (or rather literacies) in formal schooling, not only applied linguistics, rhetoric, and education, but also sociology, semiotics, psychology, social psychology, socio-linguistics, linguistic anthropology, communication studies, and so on. Similarly, learning in workplace and civic contexts is also highly dependent on literacy, and the relations between formal schooling and other contexts for learning are also mediated by alphanumeric texts.

And yet the relationship between texts and the contexts of education has not typically been a central concern of education, either in its practice or in educational theory, until rather recently. Reading and writing tend to be viewed, at least in modern western culture, in dualist terms, through metaphors of conduit and container. Texts are seen as mere conduits for thought or meaning or ideas or "content," and largely thought of as independent of social context. Similarly, contexts tend to be viewed as containers for communication, the bowl that holds the soup, in Jean Lave's formulation, as Anne Edwards points out in her chapter (this volume).

In viewing texts as conduits and their contexts as containers, the production, circulation, reception, and use of texts tends to disappear from conscious attention, and instead one attends to the ideas, etc. they "transmit" or "contain." Writing disappears, as Derrida (see Neel, 1988) argues. The process of education becomes a question of transmission through the transparent conduit of language, and social practices involved with reading and writing are bracketed off, in this dualistic view, as the containers of thought or "content." For most educational research, this has also been true. Lea & Street (1998) have characterized this conduit and container view as the "autonomous model" of literacy. It makes "universal claims for literacy which are related to beliefs in fundamental cognitive differences between literate and non-literate groups in society, and ... relates becoming literate to the development of logical thought and abstraction" (Lea, 1998). Learning to read and write become in this view a single, generalizable set of skills, usually learned at an early age, and the rest is remediation of a deficit. Indeed, the deficit model is nowhere more powerful than in literacy education.

From Container/Conduit to Network/Activity Approaches: New Literacy Studies and the New Rhetoric

In reaction against the dualist conduit/container approach and the autonomous model of literacy, traditions of research have grown up in the last 35 years that theorize educational contexts in relation to language. One of these, North American genre theory, begun in the 1980s (Russell, 1997b; Bazerman & Russell, 2003), grows out of U.S. traditions of rhetorical analysis applied to texts, particularly the concept of genre as social action (Miller 1984), with deep roots in Schutz's phenomenological analysis of typification (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). It is often combined with Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory, in various versions (Engestrom, 1987; Wertch, 1993). It views texts as material tools that are shared among people in dynamic social practices, tools that mediate their interactions, including reading and writing, speaking and listening, viewing and designing—literacy. This tradition systematically takes into account the contexts of communication. Indeed, it does not separate reading and writing, etc. from the contexts and practices which they mediate.

As Figure 1 suggests, transmission models of learning and communication, such as behaviorism and information-processing cognitive psychology, generally see transmission between individual minds (or brains) as the focus, and lump everything else together as context (the left side of Figure 2). Social context is what contains the interaction. And transmission models tend to view literacy as autonomous, transparent, uninteresting, because the emphasis in the analysis is on what is contained (in the container or the conduit of language).

Cultural-historical activity theory approaches to literacy often take the "network" as their metaphor for context. People and their tools (including especially those tools called symbols) form complex networks of interactions, stabilized-for-now in literacy practices. These models, which I have called "shared tool models" (the right side of Figure 2) see context as a weaving together of people and their tools in culture. The network *is* the context. Etymologically, context (con-text) is from the Greek term for weaving, as in textile, or texture. In this sense, context is what is "woven together with" (Cole, 1996). These linguistic approaches view the diagram on the right of Figure 2—the messy one—as a much more accurate picture of what instructors and researchers face when they try to understand what is happening with a student or a classroom. Students' interactions, past, present, and (hoped for) future, all play a part in their (and the instructor's) learning. The problem is that it is hard to know what to focus on in our analysis. How can we do justice to the complexity while still coming up with a useful analysis?

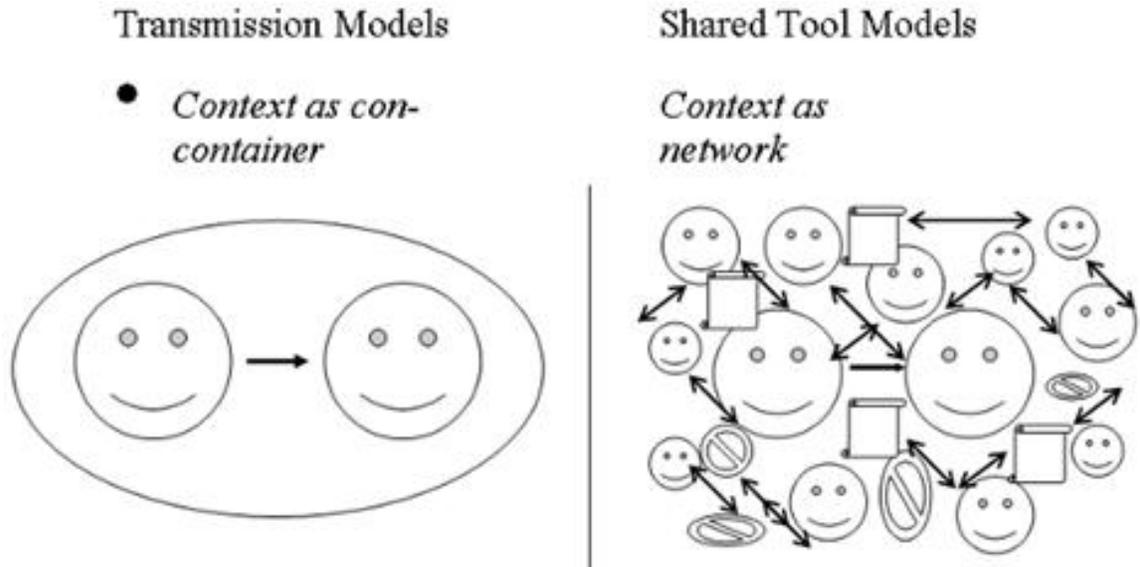


Figure 1: 'Context' as Container or Network

Activity Theory and the New Rhetoric: Learning by expanding

Activity theory is a development of Vygotsky's (1978) theories of tool mediation and zone of proximal development, Activity theory tries to make sense of the messy networks of human interactions by looking at people and their tools as they engage in particular activities. Activity theory calls these networks—and theorizes context—in terms of activity systems (Leont'ev, 1981; Cole & Engestrom, 1993).

This broad (some would say squishy) unit of analysis is necessary when we go beyond transmission models of individual cognition (traditional transfer of skills or cognitive apprenticeship) or a specific task (cognitive psychology) to take a shared tool approach that incorporates a range of features (see Figure 2).

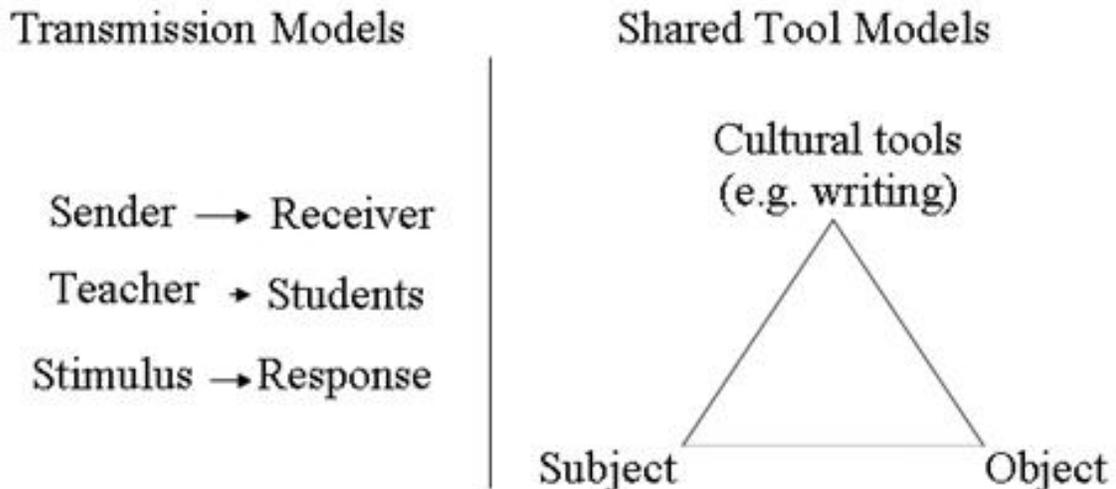


Figure 2: Transmission v. shared tool models of communication

Vygotsky's theory of mediated activity primarily addressed individuals or dyads. It was broadened by Leont'ev in the 1940s to an activity system, and elaborated by Cole & Engestrom (1993) to theorize the elements necessary for understanding social activity. Vygotsky's basic mediational model is expanded, in the triangles below (Figure 3).

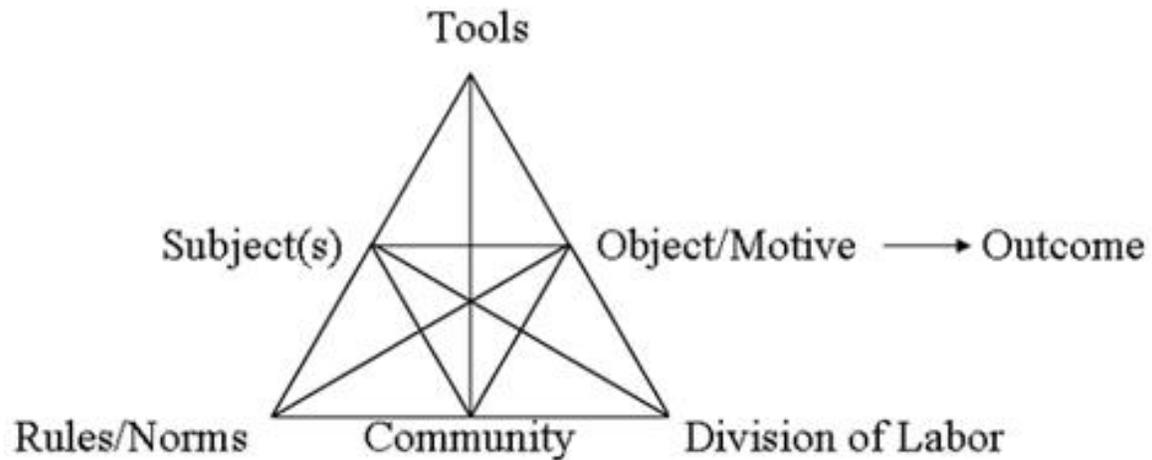


Figure 3: Model of an activity system (expansion of Vygotsky's mediational triangle)

In a course in higher education, for example, there are the people involved, the students and teacher. These are the subjects, with their identities, their subjectivities. And one can use this flexible triangular lens to zoom in and out: to one student, to several or all the participants, or to the whole institution or discipline, depending on the research questions one is asking.

In a course in formal schooling there are a range of tools. There are desks, chalkboard, and so on, but also other material tools: spoken, written, and visual symbols (sounds in the air and marks on surfaces) which can be analyzed as belonging to various genres: syllabus, lectures, discussions, readings, writing assignments, grade books, grade report forms, diplomas. These literacy tools are shared among the participants as part of ongoing and "stabilized-for-now" practices, though the literacy tools and practices are interpreted in different ways, used in different ways.

A course also has an object (the content or object of the discipline) and motive, though here we get into difficulties because the teacher and the students sometimes have very different—even contradictory—motives. There are the official motives, the "competencies," and so on; but students and teachers may have their "own" motives as well. So we have a potential contradiction in motives.

There is a division of labor. The teacher does certain things and the students do other things. One has more power than the others. There is a community in the classroom, though the kind of community differs in different classrooms. There are rules, both official rules and unofficial, unwritten rules or norms. Some of these rules or norms are

conventions for using writing in the university or in the discipline or in other systems of activity beyond schooling. Finally, the activity system produces outcomes. People are potentially different when they leave, one way or another, individually and perhaps collectively. Learning (a kind of change) went on—though not always in ways that the teacher, much less the students, had in mind.

Activity theory, then, sees human activity (including communication and learning) in broader—and messier—terms than transmission models. Higher-order learning (unlike rote learning or mere imitation) is not viewed as something passed from sender to receiver, teacher to student, and transfer is not viewed as viewed as knowledge or know-how (skills) carried from one context to another. Rather, learning is viewed as expanding involvement with others over time, developmentally, in a system of social activity (activity system), mediated by tools, including texts, and practices. This is what Cole & Engestrom (1993) call *learning by expanding*.

Similarly, transfer is viewed in terms of expanding involvement across contexts—horizontal as well as vertical development. Learning is viewed in both individual and collective terms. Individuals expand their knowledge and know-how through involvement with others, but collectives (whether members of the class, an organization or discipline, an institution) may expand their involvements and reorganize their activity as well.

An analogy will illustrate this central difference between learning by transmission and learning by expanding. In basketball, players (subjects) use a ball, a hoop, and a lined floor (tools) to try to score more points than the other team (the object of the activity or game) (Russell, 1995).

Notice that learning is not neatly "transferred" from one activity to another. A lot of games are played with a ball, just as a lot of fields use literacy tools, texts read and written. But the ball is different, the rules of the game are different, the object of the game is different. And knowing how to shoot a basketball (or read and write in one way, one genre, one literacy practice) doesn't mean you know how throw a baseball (or read and write in a different activity or genre). Learning a new game (or academic field and its practices of reading and writing) means participating in a new activity, and using tools (including the tool or technology we call writing) in different ways. Knowledge and skills are not things to be transferred between individuals through a conduit but social accomplishments developed through joint activity with mediational tools (Russell, 1997a).

But to theorize expansion through different contexts, one must theorize the relations of all these elements in *multiple* activity systems, what Engestrom et al. call polycontextuality, the "third stage" of activity theory (Engestrom, Engestrom & Kärkkäinen, 1997). Participants within one activity system, one context, come from various contexts, and will enter various contexts. To understand the various ways participants interpret and use the tools, object, motive, rules/norms, etc. of an activity system, it is often necessary to analyze the relations among various contexts.

Figure 4, for example, is a diagram of a university course in Irish history we recently analyzed (Russell & Yañez, 2003), showing some of the activity systems that participants mentioned as affecting their behavior in the course.

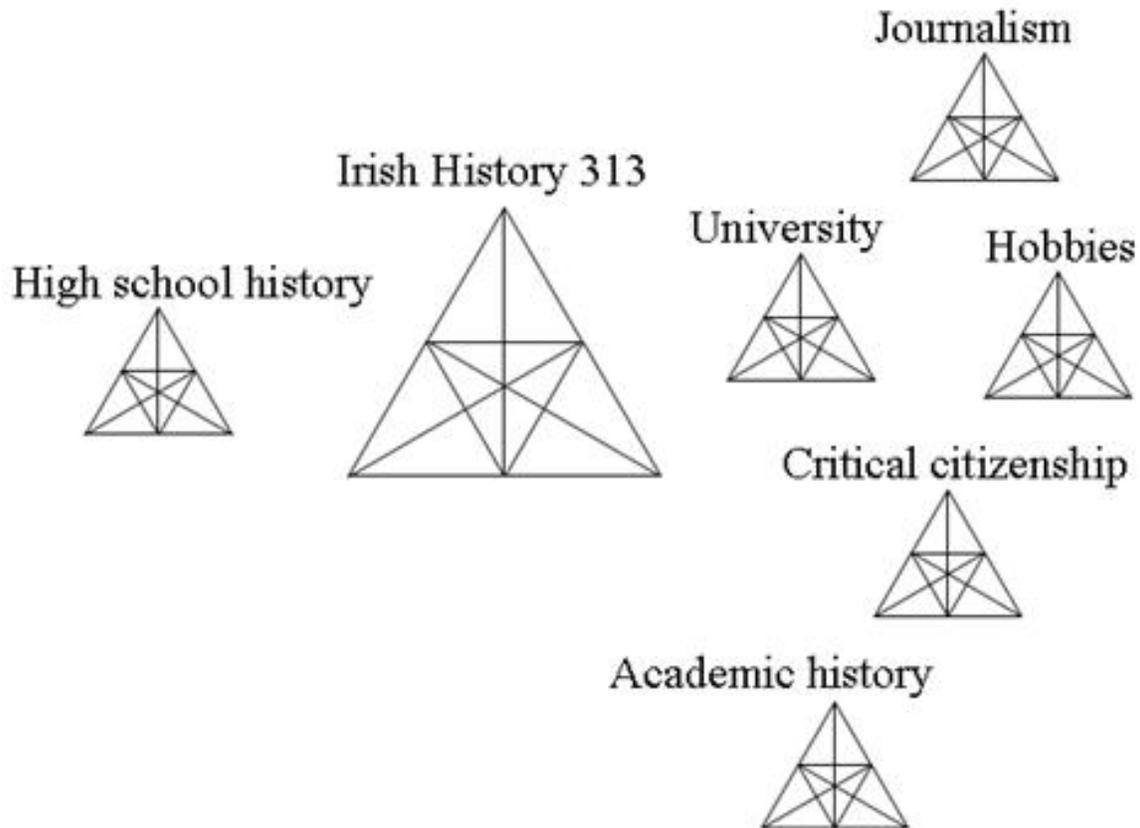


Figure 4: Polycontextuality: Diagram of salient activity systems of an HE Irish history course

All of the students in the university Irish history course had learned history in secondary school, but none of them were planning to become academic historians. They interpreted the activity system and literacy practices of the course differently, in light of the activity systems that they had previously been participants in, or the activity systems they would enter, and/or the activity systems they would continue to be participants in: the university, or careers (Journalism for some) or hobbies (a love of things Irish), or critical citizenship (the then-current political controversies in Ireland). So students saw the tools, object, and motive in different ways and read and wrote differently than the teacher expected.

The direction or motive of an activity system and its object are contested, as individuals bring many motives to a collective interaction. Indeed, the division of labor in the system itself guarantees diversity. Dissensus, resistance, conflicts, and deep contradictions are constantly produced in activity systems. These differences in participants' perceptions of the object and motive, within and among activity systems, means that people are often at cross-purposes. The object and motive of the activity system are inevitably resisted,

contested, and/or negotiated. Similarly, the tools, rules, community and division of labor are often perceived differently, and thus also resisted, contested, and/or negotiated—overtly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously.

In Engeström's version of AT, these tensions within and among activity systems are viewed as symptoms of deeper dialectical contradictions, "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). All human activity is contradictory at a very basic level. Human actions are at once individual and social. In each culture and each activity system specific contradictions arise out of the division of labor. These contradictions are the source of discoordinations, tensions and conflicts. In complex activities with fragmented division of labor, the participants themselves have great difficulties in constructing a connection between the goals of their individual actions and the object and motive of their collective activity. Within these contradictions, the identities of the participants are also formed and negotiated.

Engeström (1987) argues that the fundamental contradiction of educational activity in capitalist societies is that of exchange value versus use value (socialist education has its own contradictions, which require a different analysis). This contradiction, he says, produces alienation, as in many other activity systems in capitalist societies. Are students just 'doing school,' doing it 'for the grade,' which will be exchanged or cashed out later? (The motive of a grade within the activity system of the university.) Or are they doing something for which they can see some use value in their lives, now or in the future? (Activity systems of hobby, career, citizenship, etc.)

These various interpretations of the activity may give rise to alienation (Engeström, 1999, p. 173). But contradictions also present a constant potential for change in people and tools (including writing)—for transforming—re-mediating—activity systems. Thus, there is always potential for expansive learning, both individual and social, for becoming a changed person and changed collectives, with new identities, new possibilities—often opened up (or closed down) through reading and writing in various genres. These deep dialectical contradictions within and among activity systems profoundly condition (but never finally determine) the what individual teachers and students do (and do not do)—and what they learn (and do not learn) (Engeström, 1987)

Research on reading and writing practices have for almost twenty years now found that people have great difficulty coming to write and speak the specialized ways demanded by the complex division of labor, within or across activity systems (McCarthy, 1987; Dias et al., 1999). And this is true even of highly placed insiders in an activity system who are called on to write or speak in new ways, as in Smart's (2000b) study of a Canadian central bank manager forced to write a new genre. Not much seems to "transfer" (a finding as old as Judd) (Tuomi-Grohn, 2003). And this has led some (Dias et al., 1999) to argue that formal education, because of its different social motives and organization, simply cannot prepare people for new workplace literacies--that only situated learning or apprenticeships (learning by doing) can provide the specific knowledge and know-how necessary for specialized literacy in the workplace.

Yet there are perhaps ways of analyzing the textual relationships among activity systems that would allow for restructuring (re-mediating) formal education to facilitate learning by expanding in more or less formal ways.

One useful theoretical concept is that of boundary objects, material or conceptual tools that bridge the chasm and provide pathways to mediate expanding involvement (Starr, 1989). One sort of boundary object that has been fruitful in some research is texts, and particularly texts in systems of genres.

North American Genre theory: Systems of genre/activity

One way that researchers in North America have tried to systematically understand learning across contexts is through genre. In North American genre theory (Freedman and Medway, 1994a, 1994b; Russell, 1997a), genres are understood not merely as formal textual features, textual conventions. Genres are also seen as expected ways of using words to get things done in certain recurring situations—literacy practices in and among activity systems. This brings into genre analysis questions of social motive and identity—the why and who of genre. For genre expectations enact the division of labor, define roles, and, in Miller's (1984) phrase "signal what intentions we may have."

To analyze the ways texts mediate activity, one must go beyond the conventional notion of genre as a set of formally definable text features that certain texts have in common across various contexts, however defined, and consider genre in relation to social action and social motives in specific contexts, specific literacy practices. North American genre theory defines genres, following Miller (1984), as typified ways of purposefully interacting in and among some activity system(s). Genres are not merely texts that share some formal features; they are shared expectations among some group(s) of people. Genres are ways of recognizing and predicting how certain tools, in certain typified—typical, reoccurring—conditions, may be used to help participants act together purposefully. In this sense, genres, as Bazerman (1994) says, are not best described as textual forms, but as "forms of life, ways of being, frames for social action. They are environments for learning" and teaching (p. 1). As "forms of life," genres and the activity systems they operationalise are (temporarily) regularized, stabilized, through routinized tool-use within and among groups. Thus, "context" is an ongoing accomplishment, not a container for actions or texts. The behavior of individual writers/subjects is constantly recreated through the specific actions of people together. And thus, genres are always only "stabilized-for-now," in Schryer's apt phrase (1994).

This more dynamic and situated theory of genre has been developed to see the relationships among genres, in and across contexts, as knowledge and know-how (as well as structures of power) are re-inscribed in new genres. Bazerman's genre systems theory (1994) (or Spinuzzi's (2003) related genre ecologies theory) analyze the ways genres form systems that follow and mediate the work pathways within and among activity systems. Systems of genres realize social motives, focusing attention and coordinating action, and they shape (and are shaped by) the identities of participants. In a hospital, for example, medical records in a huge range of genres are all intertextually linked (now on computer): medical histories, test results, prescriptions, insurance forms, and so on

coordinate the work and shape the identities of patients, nurses, technicians, bureaucrats, researchers, advocacy groups, and so on (Bawarshi, 2003). To take another example, in a university, assignments produce student writing, comments on papers, etc. Grades are entered on grade forms and then transcripts and eventually produce diplomas, one hopes, and resumes and so on, each linked intertextually.

Learning to function in some workplace is to know how discourse circulates in genre systems, where one stands in relation to the literacy practices, and how to realize the motives, individual and/or collective, through reading and writing in certain ways, as well as acting in certain ways—and being able to negotiate the conflicts and changes with the "stabilized-for-now" structure.

Moreover, the genres of workplace practices are intertextually linked to the genres of formal schooling. The textbook representations of a field are related to those of research reports in the disciplines and professions. The genres research reports written by professionals in workplaces are linked, intertextually, to classroom genres of research papers (as they are called in the US), the laboratory reports of lab technicians to the lab reports of students, through citations, allusions, references, organizational structures, and so on. Similarly, the genres of workplace activity and formal education are intertextually linked to genres of mass communication (news reports on scientific findings, for example). The rhetorical life of information is one of continual textual transformation as it moves through various contexts in systems of genres. Sometimes these are regularized formally or even legally (e.g., food labels). Sometimes they are less formal (web blogs and other more personal genres). But these transformations, and powerful networks through which these systems function, can become resource for analyzing and changing teaching and learning (for example, by introducing into formal education genres other than the essay—and with it the essayist literacy practices so entrenched in higher education) (Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

Through the boundary of classroom genre systems, one can construct a model of ways classroom writing is linked to writing in wider social practices and rethink such issues as agency, task representation, learning and assessment (Russell, 1997a). Genres and their systems help us make sense of what's happening. They allow participants to do certain kinds of work that are otherwise impossible (imagine a hospital without medical records). But of course they can also be constraining (they are expectations, rules, norms). Teachers and students may potentially follow these genre pathways to new ways of getting involved with others, new ways of living, new identities, as students come to read and write similarly to some and differently than others, expanding their involvement with some activity systems and perhaps restricting or resisting their involvement with others.

There have been many studies over the last 20 years of the reading and writing practices of organizations, of informal learning in workplaces (e.g., internships), and of transitions from formal education to workplaces, that use genre theory, often combined with activity theory, situated learning, or distributed cognition, to analyze the ways cognition in organizations is enacted, preserved, communicated, and renegotiated through written texts, in systems of genres that mediate the routine actions (Russell, 1997b). I do not

have space here to recount them. But I will conclude by mentioning some experiments that have grown out of research on activity and genre in the New Rhetoric.

The Challenge: Re-mediating teaching and learning

The most difficult challenge for any theory of context is to restructure learning environments, formal or informal, based on theoretical analysis. From an AT perspective this restructuring might be thought of as *re-mediating* (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) learning and teaching. Re-mediation not in the sense of remediating a deficit, but rather finding new mediational tools, often new texts and genres, that will make the intertextual and genre connections within and among activity systems more evident, less transparent, and provide a critical space for negotiating the contradictions of education. The idea is to move from an autonomous to an ideological view of literacy, in Street's terms.

One approach is to systematically cycle the learning that students do on internships and work experiences into vocational and professional curricula and pedagogy. Teaching staff sit down with recent interns and alumni from the program (and, sometimes, their workplace mentors) to explore the intertextual and genre links between reading/writing practices in the activity systems of the educational program and the workplaces students from the program have entered (or likely will enter). The idea is *not* that the workplace experiences of students or workplace practices should determine curriculum, but rather that the contradictions between school and work would be exposed and literacy practices critically examined in dialog. (Smart, 2000a).

Another approach, called communication across the curriculum, is to have departments in higher education, working with a communications consultant, rethink their curriculum and pedagogy in terms of what they wish students to be able to do when they leave the program (not simply what they want them to know), then examine the genres students read and write and the teaching and assessment practices associated, to re-mediate the textual tools used (Anson et al., 2003). These approaches are very similar to the *developmental work research* (DWR) Engestrom has developed to work with participants to improve organizational learning in continuously-changing, complex environments. But these are focused more explicitly on literacy practices than in DWR.

Yet another approach is to critically examine some genre system of formal schooling in light of qualitative research on literacy practices in higher education and in other linked activity systems (home, workplaces, etc.) then re-mediate learning environments using internet technology. The most demonstrably effective example is Labwrite, an online program to teach students the processes of laboratory practice and lab report writing (Carter, 2004). The lab report is a genre common in workplaces for scientists, engineers, and technicians, but a genre whose classroom version often degenerates into a cookbook or worksheet formulaic genre. Drawing on workplace studies of professionals writing lab reports, classroom/laboratory practices, and students' literacy practices in writing reports outside of classroom/laboratory, the researchers developed a web-based learning environment that, in quasi-experimental quantitative studies, proved significantly better

than traditional instruction in improving students understanding of specific scientific concepts, understanding of the scientific method, and attitudes toward lab work.

My own research group (Fisher, 2007; MyCase, 2005) is developing and researching computer-mediated multi-media case studies that use a content management system (CMS) to model the circulation of documents within or among fictional organizations, represented by a fictional internet and intranet sites. Students in professional curricula (business administration, biosystems engineering, genetics) role play as they collaboratively engage in workplace-like activities using the sorts of tools and genres common in workplaces (databases, files of documents, meeting minutes, videoed meetings, synchronous and asynchronous communication, etc.). The computer-mediated case exists explicitly as a boundary object between two “real” activity systems of school and workplace. The cases provides students with experiences that may be more closely aligned with their motive for being in school. But at the same time it is explicitly not work; it is playing at work. The social motive of schooling continues (epistemic learning). And students are also doing the sorts of reading and writing assignments that mediate formal schooling, along with the case assignments. Thus, the case study CMS exists in a space where students and teacher can critique both, potentially, and these spaces for critique are built into the learning environment to systematically exploit the contradictions between school and work in order to encourage learning by expanding (Russell, 2001).

Our research into students’ attributions of their learning in the online case study environment as compared to other parts of the courses that use more traditional CMS learning environments (e.g., Blackboard) and face-to-face instruction, suggests that students in professional curricula attribute extra-classroom significance to the activities they undertake in the classroom when those actions are mediated by a tool in which workplace, rather than school practices seem to be crystallized, such as the case study CMS. (Attribution research in social psychology, brought to our attention by Simon Pardoe’s work (2000) at Lancaster, has proved useful for gauging students potential for ‘transfer’ or expansive learning.)

Our activity theory analysis suggests that these attributions result, in part, from the shaping of, in the case of individual activity, classroom actions by the way the mediating tool (CMS) is configured (i.e., with its representation of workplace genres, its dynamically circulating texts, and its affordances for participation in workplace-like activity). At the same time, these attributions seem to be shaped by the changes in classroom rules, division of labor, and community that the case study CMS affords. For example, in our engineering and business case study CMS’s, students draw freely from each other's work as it is posted to a shared file space, and from the work published in the case study. This literacy practice is extremely unusual in classroom settings (traditionally governed by rules for academic quotation/citation and individual assessment) but is extremely common in the workplace, where people often draw from a common pool of documents and where documents cycle through multiple readers in the division of labor. Students saw this feature of the class as something unique in their school experience and many felt that such activity would be something they would need to know how to do in

their careers. Thus, several suggested that assignment sharing was a feature that made them feel as if the simulation were a realistic representation of workplace practices.

Conclusion

I have tried here to suggest the importance and usefulness of literacy approaches for theorizing context in post-compulsory education, particularly activity theory and genre. The units of analysis that activity theory and genre construct are 'squishy,' but they have proved helpful in approaching the complexities of "transfer," which is enormously difficult to analyze. These approaches offer space to accommodate insights from other theoretical approaches, such as distributed cognition, constructivism, social constructionism, sociology of science, Bakhtinian dialogism, and situated learning. And they offer a principled way for researchers to bring texts, literacy practices and genres into analyses of teaching and learning, while providing a basis for practical change efforts.

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