

## Review of *Student Writing and Genre*

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**English, Fiona (2011) *Student Writing and Genre*. London: Continuum, pp. 256, \$140.00, ISBN 1441171614.**

In the humanities and social sciences, the essay still presents the most common form of evaluating students' learning and familiarity with course contents, readings and academic debates. Fiona English acknowledges the value of this 'default genre' (Womack 1993: 43) but problematizes its dominance as it privileges particular ways of knowing and expression to the detriment of others. At times, she argues, it might even deny students opportunities for learning and understanding.

In her book, the author engages in depth with different genres and the affordances they offer for students to engage differently with disciplinary content and debate. She divides her argument into eight chapters, beginning with a theoretical discussion about the relationship between genres, academic knowledge, assessment and learning (chapters one to three). English moves away here from traditional approaches to teaching academic writing that view genre as the pedagogical goal and the learner as not yet capable of applying specific generic conventions and hence in need of remediation. Instead, the author regards genres as pedagogical resources that can enhance learning. Different genres, she argues, offer different communicative possibilities for students to debate, report, create, narrate, synthesize, analyze, critique and understand issues. They thereby allow learners to develop a greater sense of ownership over the knowledge they produce. The author is particularly interested in the effect of non-academic genres on learning and presents examples of her students who used such genres to re-write (or 're-genre' as English calls it) essays they had previously written (chapters five to seven).

Genres hence affect what students write, what they pay attention to, how they articulate their ideas, and how they position themselves as 'knowers'. Essential to this view is the notion of *affordance*, a concept that the author adopts from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) and Kress's (2010) work on the 'affordances of modes' (understood here as speech, writing, gesture, visual imagery etc.). It foregrounds the relation between participants, e.g. readers and writers, their respective purposes and expectations, the resources available to them, the environment they encounter themselves in and the choices they make. Genres, like modes, are regarded as organizing categories that mediate between ideas and their articulation by taking into account the social context and available resources. In order to capture the affordances of genres and how they affect students' disciplinary writing, learning and knowing, English explores the concept of *orientation* as an analytical tool in chapter four. Genres orient their users in terms of the actual resources that can be employed, such as possible topics and their organization (*thematic orientation*) and possible modes, media or textual resources (*semiotic orientation*). At the same time, genres orient people towards particular context-specific behaviors, forms of interactions and experiences (*contextual orientation*) and particular forms of discursive identity and agency (*discursive orientation*).

In chapters five to seven, texts students created are presented and analyzed according to the framework outlined above. These students had been asked to rewrite essays they had previously produced for different course modules and transform them into non-academic genres, such as, for example, plays, radio programs, a conversation with a child, newspaper reports, etc. They had to use the same references to works cited as in their original essay and deal with the topic in a way that reflected the original essay questions. By shifting from academic genres to everyday forms of interaction, from secondary to primary genres (Bakhtin 1986: 62), from writtenness to spokenness, the texts showed a greater engagement and dialogue with the respective content knowledge. Rather than displaying 'facts' in an assertive voice (a position that students are often required to adopt in conventional essays), learners seemed to have developed their own understanding of the content material through the recontextualization of the material and a more analytical and negotiated interpretation of meaning. Unconventional genres might hence, as English argues in her last chapter about the future of genre pedagogy and theory, be able to enhance understanding through connecting academic knowledge with the everyday life experiences of students. In addition to this, the juxtaposing of different ways of making meaning can foster a more general critical awareness of, and reflection on, genre conventions and their role in the production of knowledge construction.

Overall, the book is very well written and provides a wide range of inspiring ideas and theoretical discussions substantiated by examples and analyses of students' writing. It can provide an invaluable resource for teachers across disciplines and in academic writing courses who attempt to create alternative forms of communication and interaction that allow active appropriation and construction of knowledge among their students. It is here where English's work, which is limited to traditional print-based forms of texts, could be fruitfully extended to the use of digital genres as they enhance interactivity and creativity and thus contrast sharply with the rather conventionalized forms of academic writing normally required from students. Media technology obviously widens the range of semiotic resources that students may draw upon. It allows students to link these multimodal texts to a myriad of other texts and sites (hypertextuality). In addition to this, digital genres are produced and used by a variety of audiences across institutional and cultural boundaries and have, therefore, to some extent surpassed the traditional notion of genres as 'owned' by particular discourse communities. Given the increasing numbers of international students and the attempts at internationalizing universities, the concept of genre could thus become a centerpiece in pedagogy at the tertiary level.

## References

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