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'Adjacent worlds': An analysis of a genre at the intersection of academic and professional communities

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ABSTRACT

Two concepts – genre and discourse community – have been at the core of discussions about language and learning within the disciplines since John Swales integrated the two into ESP pedagogy. While in his earlier work, Swales (1990) proposed a relationship of genres 'belonging' to discourse communities, he later (e.g. 1998) understood discourse communities as sometimes cohering around genres, suggesting a more open-ended relationship between the concepts. This paper takes up the issue of this relationship, and reports on a recurrent event in architecture education. The data is drawn from a project on postgraduate design studio pedagogy at a major Australian university. The focus was the weekly activities in a studio taught by a senior academic. Working primarily within a rhetorical genre framework, this paper explores the desk-crit genre from two angles – its evolution over time and its performance in a contemporary studio session. The paper shows how a 'situated genre analysis' contributes to an understanding of the interconnections, tensions, different discourses of the academic and professional architecture communities, characterized in this paper as 'adjacent worlds'. The paper concludes that this type of analysis helps us understand genre as a space in which multiple discourse communities interact.

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1. Introduction

In applied linguistics, an important part of the thinking around text/context relations has been accomplished through the social constructs of 'genre' and 'discourse community'. In particular, these two constructs have been central to discussions of language and learning within the (context of the) disciplines since John Swales integrated the two into a comprehensive approach to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy. In his earlier work, Swales (1990) viewed the relationship between genre and discourse community as relatively fixed, with genres 'belonging' to discourse communities, and with their function being to assist members to realize a community's shared communicative purposes. In later work, Swales (e.g. 1998; 2004, Askehave & Swales, 2001) came to understand the relationship between genres, discourse communities and their communicative purposes as more complex, less transparent, and subject to a range of factors including the social and political hierarchies within communities. Swales also came to understand that the process of enacting genres might generate or organize discourse communities, and thus that the relationship between the two constructs could be, in theoretical terms, more open-ended.

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The current paper takes up Swales' ongoing interest in the viability of 'discourse community' as a useful heuristic in genre analysis and genre pedagogy. It does this through a case study of a hybrid, spoken genre in the design studio component of an architecture degree. The spoken genre – the 'desk-crit' – encompasses the routine weekly discursive events in the design studio, in which students firstly present their design artifacts and secondly the teacher provides feedback and guidance on students' in-progress designs (more of this later). In interpreting these events, there are a number of communities that are potentially relevant.

Principal among the communities engaged in the desk-crit are the academic and professional architecture communities, whose relationship has been identified as *the* central problem in architectural education since the academy took over primary responsibility for the training and preparation of architects (Mewburn, 2009; Webster, 2007). The design studio is firmly situated within the academy, and yet a significant proportion of the teachers of design studios are industry-based professionals, valued for their contribution to the 'authenticity' of pedagogical practice and their practitioner identities. The current study was thus primarily concerned with the extent to which these two communities shape the design studio curriculum – the tasks set, the way the desk-crit is performed, the criteria for assessment – in short what counts as architectural knowledge in the design studio. However, beyond the boundaries of these two main communities, there are other communities with a stake in the products of architecture, including structural engineers, public authorities, planners, contractors, clients and users. The study was thus also concerned with the ways in which these communities might influence the design studio genres. In addition, the extent to which the studio class could be said to be operating as a local discourse community in its own right with its own particular patterns of communication (Cf. Swales, 1990) was another focus of the analysis.

This paper explores the relationship between the desk-crit genre and its communities through a 'situated' genre analysis' conducted within a critical rhetorical genre framework. Such a framework invites us to explore how different communities participate in the rhetorical situation of a genre, including which community's exigencies are prioritized, and which community has the power to alter the genre (Cf. Paré, 2014). The analysis reported on in this paper takes two forms: a socio-historical tracing of the design studio genre over time and a close study of an extract from a contemporary performance of the desk-crit. Underlying these analyses is an understanding drawn from rhetorical genre studies (e.g. Devitt, Bawarshi, & Reiff, 2003) that the process of genre analysis has the potential to enrich our notion of 'discourse community'. In the current paper, the analyses highlight the dynamic, complex and layered nature of the relations between the communities involved in the design studio. In particular, the paper suggests the idea of 'adjacent worlds' instead of 'worlds apart' (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999) as a way of foregrounding the interconnections and tensions between the academy and the profession.

2. Background: genres and communities

The concepts 'genre' and 'community' are well-established frames for the interpretation of teaching and learning practices in the academy. Following Bauman and Briggs (1990), the current paper treats these two concepts not as unproblematic frames or tools, but as ambiguous and dynamic and thus requiring careful consideration according to the needs of each study.

The concept of discourse community can be traced back to the early 1980s. Prior (2003) tells us that the idea was "in the air" at that time, with a number of scholars theorizing academic writing as situated within a community of sorts (e.g. Bartholomae, 1983; Bazerman, 1981; Bizzell, 1982). Bizzell (1999) explains that the concept was promoted as a counter to the prevailing model, which attributed student failure to intellectual and linguistic deficits. Anticipating the more recent Academic Literacies approach to language and learning in the academy, Bizzell further explains that the concept of discourse community allowed students' difficulties to be seen as related to their unfamiliarity with the norms, values, epistemologies, and textual products of particular disciplines.

John Swales has been a central figure in developing a theoretical framework that integrated the concept of discourse community with the concept of genre. For him, it was a way of rendering intelligible "the myriad communicative events" that constituted academic life (1990, p. 1). In proposing his framework, Swales (1990) sought to distinguish discourse communities from the well-established notion of speech communities. He argued that speech communities described groupings that were local, based largely on face-to-face interaction, and primarily concerned with the needs of socialization and group solidarity, whereas discourse communities described groups formed around shared communicative purposes, with a focus on written texts and allowing for communication across time and space. This last was in recognition that much of academic research is a dialog with previous research and with scholars in distant countries working in related fields. Swales' (1990) theorization of genres as 'belonging' to discourse communities was a move primarily intended to clarify that genres were social rather than individual in nature.

There is no doubt that the linking of these two concepts – genre and discourse community – has been extremely productive in focusing attention on the shared languages, beliefs, and practices of groups, including disciplines. Highlighting the discursive homogeneity of academic discourse communities (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002) has enabled EAP practitioners to provide students with useful targeted information about patterns and expectations of academic writing in specific disciplines. It has also provided a counterpoint to generalist approaches to EAP pedagogy that imply that academic discourse is universal and transferable. There is also a sense, however, that ESP genre scholarship has become overly dependent on the notion of discourse community, and that discourse communities are too often assumed to be the 'given' context within which genres work to accomplish their communicative purposes (Cf. Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). The critique leveled at discourse community includes both a lack of consensus around what is considered to be an academic discourse community as well as the sense that it indexes an entity that is "too utopian, hegemonic, stable and abstract" (Devitt et al., 2003, p. 541). What this means is that it

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