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Writing like a builder: Acquiring a professional genre in a pedagogical setting

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ABSTRACT

Vocational students' writing has received little scholarly attention. This article investigates a key written genre produced by carpentry trainees: the Builders' Diary. This is a professional genre that has been adapted for pedagogical purposes. Both quantitative corpus methods and qualitative methods (interviews and textual analysis) were employed. Our corpus included Builders' Diaries written by students during an initial on-campus year, and ones written during employment in later years. A range of grammatical features was investigated including use of: personal pronouns, passives, imperatives/bare infinitives and obligation modals. Findings indicate a developmental trend from personal narrative writing in the first year reflecting how trainees' identify as carpenters and situate themselves in the profession, to concise impersonal writing in later years as trainees mature into carpentry professionals.

1. Introduction

> I reckon, like, you know, you look like a builder, you walk like a builder, you might as well talk like a builder, you know what I mean, and that way we can have a conversation, we can get into the conversation, how builders talk. Builders have their own sort of language.

This quotation, from an interview with a carpentry tutor, reflects the importance of language in establishing and displaying an authentic identity as a professional builder. In this article we seek to investigate how builders express this 'own language' in writing. Our focus is the Builders' Diary, ideally a daily account by trainee carpenters of the work they have done on building a house. The Builders' Diary is a genre that has been adapted from the related professional Builders' Diary for use in the pedagogical context of carpentry courses taught in Polytechnic institutions in New Zealand. Our study contributes not only to the sparse literature on language use in the trades, but also to the literature on genre, specifically pedagogical genres and how they are acquired. The context of our study is a polytechnic institution in New Zealand.

In the last few decades, university students' writing has received much scholarly attention, writing being central to assessment at university. Recent examples of this scholarship in academic settings include Flowerdew (2016), Gardner and Nesi (2013), Hardy, Römer, and Roberson (2015), and Street (2015). Writing in vocational settings, however, has received

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far less attention. One exception is a large-scale ethnographic study of British vocational education (Ivanic et al., 2009), which found that use of speech and writing in the trades of childcare, hospitality, painting and decorating, and bricklaying was diverse and complex. As part of this study, Smith et al. (2008), studying childcare, found a 'multiplicity and abundance of literacy practices' (p. 375) compared with the more specific practices' of higher education. This ethnographic study also considered hospitality (Edwards, Minty & Miller 2013), and found, for example, that, in a single assessment, students produced texts as diverse as menus, ingredients lists, customer feedback forms, time plans and cost sheets. In addition, assessment drew on both pedagogical and professional genres. This has some relevance for our study in that the pedagogical genre that is our focus, the Builders' Diary, is adapted from a professional one.

Although there is little research to date specific to writing done by students while at vocational colleges, there is some literature on spoken on-site interactions on building sites of engineers (Handford & Matous, 2011; 2015) and carpenters (Holmes & Woodhams, 2013). Handford and Matous (2011) report the prevalence of the personal pronoun, *we*, and the frequency of obligation modals *have to* and *need to* in negotiating power over actions during verbal problem-solving interaction on construction sites. Holmes and Woodhams (2013) focus on carpentry apprentices and their socialization into the community of practice of construction and carpentry. Comparing interactions with a supervisor by two apprentices: one more and one less experienced, they found a gradual socialization into building site practices indexed by knowledge of jargon and technical skills, ability to respond to implicit directives versus needing explicit instructions, and degree of integration into the community as measured by participation in humorous interaction.

Before moving on to examine the Builders' Diary and its role in students' journey towards becoming a professional Carpenter, we first consider the notion of genre, on which we rely in this article. Miller (1984) describes genre as 'social action', and characterizes genres as arising in response to a recurring need for a particular action, performed in a particular context, for a particular audience. Through repeated use, genres become the accepted way of achieving this social action. As Miller notes (p. 152), this accepted way of achieving a social purpose or 'typified rhetorical action', encompasses the form of texts, accounting for the strong similarities texts bear to other members of a genre in both organization and linguistic features. This typified way of communicating becomes taken-for-granted by the genre's users (Lingard, Garwood, Schryer, & Spafford, 2003, p. 603). It even becomes the 'right' way to achieve a particular social purpose. Users come to have expectations not only of specific textual organization (Swales, 1990), but also, as Bhatia (2004, p. 23) points out, of the 'lexico-grammatical as well as discoursal resources' that are employed. Investigation of these linguistic resources is an aim of the study outlined in this article; we expect this investigation to shed light on the social and communicative purposes (Bhatia, 2004; Swales, 1990) of the genre.

The question of how stable genres are has been a controversial issue amongst genre theorists. In general, though, there is broad recognition that genres are not fixed, that they change in response to changing context and their users' changing needs and values (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, p. 478). They are at best 'stabilized for now' (Pérez-Llantada, 2013; Schryer, 1993, p. 200). Nevertheless, except in diachronic studies (e.g. Bazerman, 1984; Biber & Clark, 2002), researchers who work with the writing of expert practitioners are, for the most part, able to treat the genres on which they are working as relatively stable.

This notion of 'typified rhetorical action' that is 'stabilized for now', which users employ because of the familiarity gained through repeated exposure to instances of the genre, works well for genres to which users do have repeated exposure. Examples are news broadcasts, interviews, and workplace meetings.

This familiarity, however, is less likely with pedagogical genres, the texts that students produce to earn grades in their courses, and which for the most part do not exist outside educational settings. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993, p. 487) characterize pedagogical genres as 'institutional or curriculum' genres 'containing some of the textual features and some of the conventions of disciplinary genres' (or in the case of the Builders' Diary, of a professional genre).

Disciplinary instructors are likely to have a very clear idea of the purpose, audience and rhetorical and language features of the pedagogical genres they set their students to write. These genres embody values dear to the instructors such as critical thinking in essay writing and objectivity in laboratory reports. Student writers, however, may have had little prior exposure to examples of the genre before having to produce the genre themselves, and little insight into the value systems that inform their disciplines. In producing them, they may rely on writing guidelines from instructors, published grade descriptors, instructors' feedback, or examples provided by fellow students.

Familiarity with and exposure to instances of genre is fostered by participation in disciplinary or professional activities. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993, p. 478) draw on the principle of situatedness, which sheds some light on how users develop knowledge of a genre:

> Our knowledge of genres is derived from and embedded in our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life. As such, genre knowledge is a form of "situated cognition", which continues to develop as we participate in the activities of the culture.

This provides an explanation for how students develop genre knowledge as they participate increasingly in the activities of their disciplines. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993, p. 478) also note that genre conventions express the discourse community's norms, values and ideology. Similarly, Martin (1984, p. 25) characterizes genres as activities in which speakers (and writers) engage 'as members of their culture'; in this case the culture is a professional one, that of carpentry. As writers' knowledge of and participation in these norms and values grows, so too will their knowledge and use of the genre conventions.

As Berkenkotter and Huckin point out, because written genres inevitably reflect the contexts in which they are produced, and because the contexts and purposes for which they are used are not identical in pedagogical and professional contexts, some genre theorists (for example Freedman, [1993]) have questioned the extent to which a professional genre can be learned