

21 Genre and Disciplinary Work in French Didactics Research

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INTRODUCTION

How genre is understood and configured in analyses of disciplinary texts and discourses is key to understanding the nature of student work in the disciplines. The question of genre is also intimately linked to what we know about expert texts in a discipline. These relationships have been studied for some time in France, first through traditional-formalist frames of text types and modes, more recently through understandings of genre in social, cultural, and disciplinary contexts. Proponents of both traditional and newer perspectives appear to agree on the usefulness of genre when researchers seek to classify texts to be studied, but take fundamentally different stances (“radical reconfigurations,” to use the terms of Coe, Lingard and Teslenko, 2002) towards how that classification might be done, as well as what the relationships are among groups of texts, single texts, and the social and political situations in which textual production and reception are carried out. Currently, many of the French genre theorists in the field of *la didactique de l'écrit* (the field of discipline-based theory about the teaching and learning of writing) systematically explore disciplines and genres in higher education, using the frames of theories of didactic-disciplinary universes of writing, discourse communities, or generic reception theory. I will offer here a partial review of some of the more innovative paths being taken, showing how perspectives about genre have been evolving in both complementary and divergent ways as scholars explore the complex set of elements that make “genre” a usable research tool for studying students’ writing in the disciplines. A current higher education research project in France, a first-of-its-kind study of students’ writing and learning practices in four disciplines at three universities, will serve to highlight some of the ways in which current, complex notions of genre are being fruitfully brought into play in the study of student writing across disciplines.

WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES IN THE FRENCH TEACHING CONTEXT

In France, writing as a mode of learning and assessment in every discipline has been integral to French education throughout its history at every educational level: writing as a tool for learning, for assessing learning, for process-

ing thinking, for summarizing concisely, for responding, for developing texts in disciplinary work. But French scholars have only recently begun to focus on theorizing writing across the disciplines, as they fully recognize that writing, disciplinarity, and knowledge construction are inextricably embedded in each other. This research trend has had the effect of highlighting interest in writing in higher education, always already disciplinary even though perhaps only reductively so in the first or second year. Recent changes in higher education have also heightened awareness of student writing in general: the past decade or so of “massification” through wider access has brought new kinds of students to the University; the discipline of “French” has begun to resist being defined as the sole purveyor of writing instruction, and this, at every educational level; finally, research has identified students’ difficulties in several areas of writing, including source integration, voice, and development, at the college level. Students work on some of these issues in middle school but only occasionally in high school (Donahue, 2004).

In French introductory courses, more unevenly offered at the start of post-secondary education, and often more focused on initiating students into both writing and research, issues in the discipline have been foregrounded, and the features of the text types students learn have thus been more discipline-specific¹. The real initiation into the advanced writing of a field occurs when students begin what is called “researched writing” at the end of undergraduate studies and the beginning of graduate work. Researched writing is specifically defined as “any academic writing that includes a research question (*problématique*) and situates itself in the context of the discourse of others. Researched writing is thus a component of academic writing, a broader term that designates, for us, all of the written products a student must master in order to progress in his or her studies, to receive positive evaluations of his or her work, and so on” (Delcambre & Boch, 2006). Delcambre & Boch have suggested the following range of the most likely pieces students will produce before arriving at the researched writing that represents the discipline more fully:

- analysis of documents/commentary
- discussion of opinions/judgments
- essay based on a general statement
- essay based on a quote
- observation report
- case study
- book report/summary
- long final report
- multiple choice test

- question asked in class
- internship report
- theme to explore based on a general statement
- theme to explore based on a reading or a document
- theme to explore based on a quotation
- document synthesis
- text to be commented on (answering a set of questions)
- text to be commented on (based on a proposed theme)
- text to be commented on (no questions or theme)
- summary of a text
- theme to develop (subject provided in a couple of words)
- research work, studies

TRADITIONAL THEORIZING OF GENRE IN RELATION TO TEACHING AND RESEARCHING WRITING IN FRANCE

Earlier work exploring genres in different educational settings in France was based on traditional literary or rhetorical versions of genre. The literary versions of genre offered characterizations of different text types based on various schemes of classification (see for example the Russian formalists or E. Benveniste). The rhetorical approaches of the same time period, rooted in centuries of thinking about types of texts not necessarily seen as part of poetics, defined major types based on text function and the features associated with a function. These traditional perspectives have been reviewed—and critiqued—by many scholars, including Bakhtin (see, for example, “The Problem of Speech Genres” p. 61). The first phase of French linguist J.M. Adam’s genre and text type work, in the 1970s and 80s, was key to the entrenched relationship between text types and writing instruction in France. Adam single-handedly set the parameters for describing, teaching, and thinking about text types and prototypes for years. He developed a language around the construction of genres in “textual sequences,” defining texts as “complex hierarchical structures made up of N elliptical or complex sequences, of the same type or different types” (cited in Canvat, 1996, p. 4). Adam’s system of classification included three levels: “genres” as sub-classes of discourse (literary discourse, for example), “text types” which are the components of discourses and genres (the “story” for example can be a component of advertising texts, literary texts, political texts, etc.), and finally “sequences,” both prototypical and as components of a given text.

These distinctions allowed Adam to work on genres of discourse, textual genres or types of texts, and to account for textual heterogeneity, dominance of a particular sequence in a given text, or the occasional “pure” genre. His model includes identification of texts by their conventional schemas, each with its own

rules of connection, development, continuity and so on. These conventional structures can be, he suggested, regrouped into “superstructures” that are learned through cultural exposure, such as the argumentative or narrative superstructure (Adam 1992). While Adam later reworked his perspective, shifting attention to the flexibility we need when talking about text typologies and the importance of seeing a text as only more or less typical of the prototype in a particular genre, his influence on French teaching of genres and types remained prevalent.

Genre work building on the “classificatory” role of genres across disciplines initially focused extensively on characterizing the features of various kinds of writing in order to help students to better understand how they might write in a given disciplinary context. This work has included the study of the classificatory act itself (see for example the special issue of *Recherches* 42, 2005, titled *Classer* and featuring articles about text typology and school activity around genre classifications) as well as prolonged and careful study of expert texts and student texts, such as the work by F. Boch, F. Grossmann, and F. Rinck, focused on academic articles in literature and linguistics and on research “*mémoires*” in linguistics and education at the graduate level. J. Swales is one of the anglo-saxon scholars cited in French analysis of writing in different disciplines (in particular in the sciences) in higher education, as is K. Hyland. These authors’ frames are used to identify, through extensive and detailed analysis of expert texts, the conventions of certain kinds of written academic discourse, in order to concretize its features: introductory and concluding “formulas,” useful schemas for organizing research writing, suggested verb tenses and other modalities.

Traditional genres as stable entities were also the bedrock of teaching writing at all school levels in the 1970s and 80s, and traces of the typologies of texts from those years are everywhere, in particular in teaching practices, school textbooks, and official curricula. The traditional genres are quite similar to those considered in the US scholarship, influenced by literary history and theory as well as by R. Jakobson’s early division of texts into various functional types. Plane (2002) also discusses the evolution, during the 1990s, of text typologies in the discussion of genre in France. According to her introduction to a special issue of the journal *Repères*, attention remained focused on

the definition of textual or discursive objects, imagined through the lens of teaching and learning, with two key hinges around which the research has gathered, the narrative text . . . and the argumentative text. We can see the evolution of these as objects of research unfolding through the special issues of the journal *Pratiques* (Masseron, 1992, 1997; Schnedecker 1994). On the fringes of these major themes, other relevant themes concerning

more limited objects became the object of specific research projects of their own in *la didactique de l'écriture*, such as the summary (Charolles & Petitjean 1992), the explicative text (Petitjean 1986; Garcia-Debanc 1990, *Repères* 69, 72, 77) or the descriptive text (Petitjean 1987; Reuter 1998).

While these categories may sound familiar, one key organizing difference is the long-standing classification, in French scholarship, of two meta-genres: *récit* and *discours* (story and discourse), a distinction developed by E. Benveniste in his influential work on verb tense as indexical.

COMPLEXIFYING UNDERSTANDINGS OF GENRE AND DISCIPLINE IN FRANCE

While descriptions of genres in different disciplines as collections of identifiable features and conventions persist in both teaching and research about writing in the disciplines in France (and in particular, in the research in contrastive rhetoric), and while in French school systems, pre-university, “text types” remain solidly in place as teaching tools, new ways of thinking about genre have influenced the study of student writing in different disciplines in the past decade. I turn to these now in order to explore several paths in France and Switzerland that have been part of the “radical reconfiguration” of genre announced by Coe, Lingard and Teslenko, genre theories that have begun to enable an understanding of both the sociality of genre and the ways in which individual texts (and their authors and readers) negotiate, appropriate, and modify those genres. French theorists have moved systematically towards understanding the disciplines in higher education, in particular in their socio-cultural forms, through these recent evolutions.

The new genre work has some roots in the University of Geneva school in the 1990s. B. Schneuwly and J. Dolz (1997) introduced genre primarily as a psychological tool, a material and symbolic mediator between the student subject who integrates the schema of use of the genre, and the situation. J.P. Bronckart (1996) proposed that textual genres are sociolinguistic formations, organized according to heterogeneous modalities related to heterogeneous determinations. Discourses and texts were thus, for him, socially motivated and oriented. In this frame, text typologies became interactive, taking into account extralinguistic parameters, surface textual features, and production operations. Genres as cultural tools of teaching and learning could thus act as tools for entering a particular discipline.

Concepts of disciplinarity through this lens thus began seeping in to the

French genre work focused on school and university settings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Researchers identified in particular the interest in understanding how the classroom community in different disciplines can construct shared objects of study through particular discursive procedures. Research teams worked with the notion of “argument,” for example, as shaped and produced differently in different disciplines. It might be, for example, “justification” for a process leading to an answer in mathematics, explication showing cause and effect in history, a form of plausibility and refutation in physics/chemistry, or a restricted set of moves grounded in Aristotelian *logos* in the discipline of French (Donahue, 2004).

The textual emphasis began to shift towards an emphasis on discursive communities in the late 1990s, which simultaneously encouraged another perspective on genres in different disciplines. M. Jaubert, M. Rebière and J.P. Bernié (2003), working at the Université de Bordeaux II, treated disciplines as discourse communities, each with its own social set of ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, although this research group was not working on writing at the university level². In a move to reject structural linguistics and to differentiate themselves from the Genevan school, which they consider too focused on the formal aspects of genres rather than their nature as psychological activity (p. 71), Jaubert et al. reflected on school situations by working through a series of notions: context, tool, posture and genre—both discursive genre and genre of activity (2003, p. 51). They describe discourse genres as “recognized modes of expression” that “signal . . . belonging, inscription in a world of values, beliefs, practices, in a community that gives them meaning, . . . crystallizing values, enunciative positions, and specific social practices” (pp. 68, 71). For the Bordeaux group, the frames of primary (in the moment of production) and secondary genres (removed from the moment of production) as presented by Bakhtin are the key components for both the analysis of genres and the work of teaching writing in different disciplines. Jaubert et al. suggest, citing both Bakhtin and Voloshinov, that students must adopt positions of relative exteriorization that enable them to traverse various contexts through a continuous decontextualizing and recontextualizing of knowledge and know-how. Secondary genres are, in the Bordeaux team’s perspective, the ones that do the work of a disciplinary discourse community, while primary genres are what students bring with them into school or disciplinary settings. The work of schools is not to teach students about what secondary genres look like or how to construct them, but to teach students the activity of *secondarizing* (p. 68).

Other French researchers followed and developed this path. The frame of discursive communities opened up discussions about the heterogeneity and conflicted nature of a given disciplinary “community,” as researchers turned an eye

to the intellectual, practical, and ideological negotiations carried out in their own research groups, inspired in part by the work of B. Latour. His work became quite influential in France in understanding disciplinary differences in the genre of argument in expert and student work. For example, J. Biseault's work (2003) applied Latour's description of professional science research groups to analysis of negotiations in classroom situations of knowledge construction, collaboration, and peer review. Biseault suggests that argument in the science classrooms he studied is not a text type but a social act of knowledge negotiation, and learning to "write science" is thus learning the social behaviors involved.

But most of the research about these disciplinary discursive communities in France focused on school-aged students and the ways in which students navigate the various groups and knowledge communities, described as heterogeneous because the scholars, teachers, and other practitioners of a discipline do not form a block of unified thinkers. Research about writing and academic discourse communities at the post-secondary level tends to cite non-French authors of reference such as J. Swales.

F. Boch, F. Grossmann, and F. Rinck have more recently studied students' difficulties entering a discipline's research community from a textual perspective, focused on academic articles in literature and linguistics and on students' research "*mémoires*" in linguistics and education. I. Delcambre and F. Boch note that

. . . students must learn to position themselves as authors, express, nuance, or reinforce their point of view, make their place in the multiplicity of voices, orchestrate the polyphony, and learn to use the signals that guide readers through these texts. . . . [Boch and Grossmann] seek to describe the norms characterizing the different genres of research writing, in particular those that regulate enunciative dimensions (in the act of drawing on others' discourse). Boch and Grossmann's theoretical frame conceives of a student's entry into research writing in terms of acculturation into genres of research writing (Swales 1999), but their didactic frame draws them to taking into account students' specific writerly practices. For them, acculturation into research writing should not only be imagined in terms of mastery of a new genre. Students' specific practices contribute no doubt to the construction of a "researcher identity." (Proposal to the *Association Nationale de Recherches* 2006)

Of particular interest in this description is the suggestion that genres of writing and other *practices* are distinct. Some research groups in France, part of the research community of "*didacticiens*" whose focus is on theorizing the teaching

and learning of disciplinary knowledge and know-how, have more recently theorized “genres” in relation to “practices”: genre as the apprehension and categorization of objects and products, practices as the apprehension and categorization of activities, production, and doing. Genres are thus objects that regulate the interactions among actors and between actors and knowledge (Reuter 2007), while practices are (linguistic or non-linguistic) activities that do the same. For Reuter, genres constitute themselves as structural elements of key didactic functions through the relationships they have with practices. Genres are regulators in the learning process, organizing the work of didactic subjects, influencing teaching and evaluation (2007, p. 15).

In the disciplines in particular, for Reuter & Lahanier-Reuter (2008) genres become part of a set of frames used to analyze writing in a discipline that also includes the “disciplinary configurations” in which a text is constructed and the “disciplinary awareness” of the writer. A traditional picture of genre is thus destabilized by its entirely different set of features in different disciplinary settings as it works with different actors and knowledges. While the key goal of a “description,” for example, might always be “to give the reader the impression that he can see” what is being described (Reuter 1998), the descriptive discourse activity involves different values, forms, and modes when it is used in scientific description, sociological accounts, or literary analysis; it has different intellectual and ideological purposes and is situated in a different network of other genres, activities, and recipients.

For Reuter & Lahanier-Reuter (2008),

Genres are . . . discursive units, belonging to a given socio-cultural sphere, which determines and constrains (by its key components) the forms chosen. The components are:

- its materiality (for example, in writing, the medium, the size, the ways it is presented);
- its peritextual indicators (in the way Genette, 1982, 1987, describes these, as for example any identification of the author, the recipient, the date . . .);
- its linguistic actualization (lexical, syntactic, rhetorical . . .);
- its enunciative markers (explicit or implicit control over the discourse, announced subjectivity or not, organization of content through, for example, modes of linkage or hierarchization . . .);
- the thematic domains and the “treatable” contents in those domains, in terms of specific conditions of production and reception (categories of authors, relationships among these, implied

temporality, specs, functions, stakes, and types of evaluation in play . . .). (p. 32)

Genres thus format, for Reuter and his research group, what can be said and its shapes in a given social space. In this framework, “genre and practices function in interaction with each other in order to enable us to understand the diversity and the modalities of actualization of writing and of written texts” (Reuter 2007). Genre is, for Reuter, the constituting element of functions within didactic spaces; genre is in turn constituted by the interactions among the school system (institutions), the pedagogical system (teaching and learning forms), and the disciplines themselves (knowledge and know-how) (p. 16). Reuter (2007) does mention that school genres do not exist independently of extra-scholastic genres, in the scientific, private, or professional domains. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of characterizing genre in terms of its place in the didactic system, its disciplinary status, and its stability and history in relation to other genres (p. 13). In some ways this dynamic description does complement activity theory perspectives of genre, in particular in its insistence on genres as belonging to socio-cultural spheres, formatting the “sayable and its forms” (p. 14), and in its assertion that “genres exist only inasmuch as they take their place in systems, in a [disciplinary] configuration that determines their status” (p. 14).

But it also creates other distinctions and emphases. The list of characteristics Reuter (and, in another article, Reuter and Lahanier-Reuter) offers remains resolutely text-based and leaves minimal place for the sociality of genre in disciplinary work, including it only in “conditions of production and reception.” And as much as this exploration of genre emphasizes generic heterogeneity, that heterogeneity is largely internal to the text’s construction, even if in relation to factors of context and production. Finally, in every way, Reuter’s theorization of genre considers practices as separate, as formatting genres and vice versa, interdependent but still separate (for analysis and for teaching and learning): “the genre . . . determines the practices that generate it; the practices produce the genre as both example and category” (p. 15).

Consider in contrast the exploration of genre provided by Bazerman (2004): an utterance embodies a speech act, a “meaningful social action being accomplished through language”; these acts are “carried out in patterned, typical, and therefore intelligible” genres, textual forms that are self-reinforcing because they are recognizable in a given setting. In this, activity theory perspectives on genre are closer to the Bordeaux team’s construction than to Reuter’s construction. Bazerman is careful to say, however, building again from Bakhtin, that genres typify not only textual forms but also social activities (or that at the very least we cannot separate these two). If we focus on the regularity of generic forms for

carrying out similar tasks, a routine Russell (1997) first highlighted, we see that teaching writing in the disciplines can clearly be carried out as a method for introducing these regular forms and enabling students to practice them, but it can just as well be an exploration into the meaningful social actions being carried out, the sources of recognition, the purposes and situations of utterances, and so on. In fact, if “genre helps locate [a] text in some familiar social arrangements and activities” (Bazerman, Little, & Chavkin, 2003), we might suggest that teaching has more to do with making sure students are in fact familiar with the social arrangements and activities of a discipline or sub-discipline. In addition, there is room here for the student-utterer to modify or transform the genre, and its work as mediating artifact (Bazerman & Prior, 2005) in a context of shared expectations allows for a valuing of student discourse that we rarely find in the French scholarship.

Even with this framing, however, much of United States activity theory work in recent years has focused on production, on the social relationship between genre and context, in spite of its recognition of “texts in use” as the key to interpretation or identification. French genre theory in “*la didactique de l’écrit*,” as embodied by Reuter and his research team’s analytic frame, has largely focused on research about the shapes of genre: the explanation, description, and analysis of textual objects in different contexts; the Bordeaux team has largely focused on the student-producer and his or her relationship to others in the community (students and teachers). All of these perspectives allow the role of the recipient of discursive acts to remain in the background, relatively unexplored in analysis even as it is acknowledged as central. I do not mean the recipient’s role in the rhetorical sense (the writer considers the potential reader; the speaker considers the potential listener). Instead, I mean the role of the recipient in defining or redefining the genre of a text (always generic-specific in some form) based on its reception, its use for a particular recipient who is himself a generic-specific member of a particular context.

The genre of a text, in this case, exists only in the relationship between the reader or recipient and the text. That relationship is a dynamic activity of reception. The reception of a text is not, however, an arbitrary anything-goes. Readers or recipients are themselves constrained participants in any number of spheres of activity. We might explore, for example, the reception of a text by a participant in a discipline, but the specificity-heterogeneity of that participant constructs his or her “disciplinarity” and affects the nature of the relationship. In addition, a recipient is no more stable a member of a sphere of activity than a text is permanently identifiable as a genre.

This exploration of how texts are received and taken up is a far cry from the earlier depictions of texts as collections of fixed features, and is a complement

to seeing genres as mediators, tools, and activities. In this frame, we have a rich repertory of genres that we practice, even though neither their use nor their acquisition is necessarily conscious, as Russell suggested in 1997. The monolithic sets of literary or rhetorical genres were the norm in France until their closed “set” nature was fragmented in the 1990s, partly through Bakhtin’s assertions, widely taken up and far too briefly summarized here: “The wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex” (1986, p. 60). What Bakhtin describes as the “extreme heterogeneity of speech genres” includes the most everyday category of utterance alongside the most literary or scientific, and allows for the study of language data from any context, in “typical forms of utterances,” and with the potential for greater or lesser degrees of individual style depending on the sphere and its constraints (p. 63). But the fact that a text is produced in a sphere of activity does not prevent it from meaning something in another sphere. We rediscover in this way the zones of contact that meet up, intersect, or bump up against each other across spheres of activity, creating new “negotiating” genres that constitute neither one nor another set of features or typical forms.

The genre theory work done by Bazerman and Russell, as evoked above, has opened up new ways of working through these complex questions in the US. I turn now to another French scholar, linguist F. François, and his set of conceptual frames for considering the more fluid aspects of genre. He provides another way in to the complexity we need to both recognize and study. François, whose genre work has not evolved in a “*didactique*” vein but rather a broadly-applied analytic vein, develops the socio-discursive notion of “*reprise-modification*” as a way to pinpoint aspects of a dynamic understanding of the textual genres that we read and write, here applied to what students produce and professors read. He does this by positing “reprise-modification” (literally, re-taking-up-modifying) as the essential discursive act, whether in the production or reception (acts which cannot be separated) of an utterance. From the specific point of view of a text’s reception, François (1998) distinguishes discourse, text, and corpus, with implications for how we might thus consider genres: discourses are the essential simple acts of language use (someone speaks to someone else as a social activity); texts are the “secondarized” versions of discourse, the versions in which an utterance moves from a Bakhtinian primary genre to a Bakhtinian secondary genre and are thus redefined by their modes of reading or reception; a corpus is a quasi-object, a set of utterances that have become (temporarily) objects of research study. What is particularly relevant to the discussion here is his insistence that a single utterance or group of utterances is, in the context of being

in the world, constantly moving among these places. A given text, say a novel or a student paper, may be a corpus to analyze, but is a different text (in fact, a different *object*, if we consider Russell's point that a particular text might be, in another circumstance, a doorstep) in each of its multiple socially situated receptions. Both *producing* and *receiving* text are discursive acts of reprise-modification. François (1998) points out, "Fixing a genre is thus never an end to itself. It is a way to highlight the relationships that cannot be pure identity, among a general framework for uttering, a general form, and the variations of production and reception—the circulation." A focus on reception is not meant to imply a focus on "individual readers" in the way that reader-reception literary theory, for example, encouraged. On the contrary, the reader-recipient is a social entity who both shares common features with other readers/sets of readers and has a specific "style" in what he or she does with a text. This way of thinking "genre" in relation to disciplines in higher education has been, to date, less frequently explored.

A STUDY OF STUDENT WRITING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

A "school" text is, of course, most often received as such by the teacher, and so already we can study that particular relationship. The "disciplinary" school context is a slippery one, as students are both proving knowledge and trying on disciplinary discourse. The research project I will now describe is seeking a deeper understanding of these issues through the concrete texts it collects, the students' discourse about text and context, the faculty discourse about these, and the analyses being carried out by readers who are both teachers across disciplines and researchers representing disciplines. The objectives of the study can be read through the genre theory lenses we have seen thus far. The study focuses on writing in the disciplines in higher education, seeking to better understand the genres of writing students produce across years of study, and involving researchers who are themselves steeped in the ways of thinking and doing from a variety of disciplines.

The French project is titled *Les écrits à l'université: Inventaires, pratiques, modèles* (University Writing: Inventories, Practices, Models—EUIPM), and is led by researchers I. Delcambre (Université de Lille III) and F. Boch (Université de Grenoble II), each working with a team from her institution's research group, with input from two consulting teams, one from the US and the other from the UK. It uses surveys, follow-up interviews, student writing samples, and faculty focus groups as methods for collecting data. The project was initially developed to address two gaps in French research about writing in the disciplines in higher education. Delcambre and Boch (2006) report in their project proposal:

- There is little sustained, systematic knowledge about genres of writing in postsecondary education or about the relationship of these genres to the genres and genre expectations (implicit and explicit) students bring with them to the university or, finally, about the relationship of these genres to genre expectations (implicit and explicit) teachers offer students.
- There is no widely adopted theoretical model in France for conceptualizing writing at the university. There is an abundance of available work conceptualizing writing in primary and secondary school situations, work that proposes several models in confrontation: cognitive models, the model of “discourse community,” the model of “literacy” and so on.

Delcambre and Boch hypothesize that writing difficulties are intrinsically linked to new discourse objects, the academic discourses themselves, that students discover at the university. They thus hypothesize that difficulties are associated with the content of discourse, but we might also consider the relationship between the content and the new genres. Research in what is named the “didactics” of writing supports the idea that

writing difficulties can not be considered simple technical difficulties, but are tightly linked to writers’ representations (their representations of writing and of themselves as writers, of academic expectations about the writing to be produced, etc.), to the expected text genres, and to the frames these genres propose for written production, in particular with respect to discourse content and types of knowledge, and finally to the forms of support and evaluation that accompany the learners’ writing, forms that are themselves based on teachers’ representations of writing and learning. (Delcambre & Boch, 2006)

Existing French research about university students’ difficulties has largely not considered the discipline in which the writing was studied as a variable but as a given, a descriptive piece of the framing for the research; this project aims to consider the discipline, its ways of knowing, its content as key variables.

The study’s preliminary stage is the traditional corpus-based task of cataloguing types of writing students produce in different disciplines, as defined largely by the task objective, the disciplinary course, and the external textual features; genres are being used to inventory shared or different types of writing in the different disciplines. Beyond this step, however, it seeks a deeper understanding of

the dynamic social nature of the disciplinary work being done. This complicates at least two existing processes:

- (1) Research methods for studying student writing across disciplines, and
- (2) Approaches for teaching student-initiates the ways of working with text production and reception in a discipline. For this article, I am focusing on the first issue, but I will end with a few thoughts about implications for the second.

The research being done is leading to a systematic construction of the ways in which different texts are being produced and received in different contexts, and are in fact woven into these contexts and their knowledge bases. The interviewing, focus group work, and textual analysis provide multi-point sources of data for understanding how students and faculty in different disciplines use genre as what D. Russell (personal communication) reminds us is “both a constraining mould and an affording landscape for communication.” The study gets at what Russell highlights as the strategic agency of participants, “who further their interests through mutually recognized, genred action, within the moments of utterance, though always constrained by the degree of congruence in their understandings, and always open to difference” (personal communication). This strategic—perhaps negotiating—agency exists for both the student participants and the teacher participants and, we might add, the researcher participants. That is, the “socially shared repertoire of genred actions” that Russell, building on Bazerman (2006), describes would seem to include all three sets of participants. The study explores aspects of how teachers, students, and researchers develop these repertoires.

As we look at this study, I would like to emphasize that what I report here can only be a partial accounting of what it offers. The French study seeks to understand texts produced by students in a particular discipline as situated in social and intellectual disciplinary activities. It does so by asking students and faculty to describe not only what texts they produce or require, but how each text fits into and negotiates the discipline’s work. The study posits the genres it is inventorying as social institutions, as recurrent activities doing the work of the discipline, and in particular as activities by students who are at different stages: beginning to do the work of the discipline, nearing the end of undergraduate work, and in MA-level work. The student entering the discipline’s sphere of activity and work is doing so through the specific activity of “researched writing” (the focus of the study’s deeper analysis through follow-up interviews and text analysis) with its polyphony, its complexity, its intertextuality and modes of thinking. The interviews with French faculty to hear their

accounting of successful writing in this context will produce variant “readings” of the same texts. Researchers analyze the disciplinary perspective but also hear their own expertise in studying and understanding language use. For current versions of genre, this is key. A discipline’s members, as we are reminded by J. Monroe (2007), own the writing in the field, even as researchers might offer methods and insights for understanding the genres being studied. The French study’s focus on both texts and practices helps to bring out the relationship between them.

A FEW CONCLUDING REMARKS

F. François offers “style” as an alternative term for the “genre” of an individual text when we explore the work it is doing, rather than seeking to fix its membership in a category. Style is, in this case, the intersection of specific-particular and shared-common textual movements. What does this mean for studying student writers? We see in their texts both existing (disciplinary) generic frames and individual texts that themselves both take up and don’t take up the recognized regularities that are part of a genre. François proposes that student writing thus modifies the very constraints the genre might usually impose.

The French study explores that situatedness by using different disciplines as variables in the study and by involving students and faculty in collecting and discussing the work. The various sources of information collected and pulled together, layered, account for the animating activities around (student) production and (faculty) reception as specific to disciplinary contexts.

In this way, the study takes apart disciplinary genres, questions their homogeneity, angles to understand the ways in which the disciplinary sphere and its genres enable student work. The study represents students’ work as part of the discipline, although only that part we see in schooling. But even this study does not, and in fact nor does any other study of which I am aware, consider fully the question of genres of reception. It is not focused on genre as the dynamic activity of reception (for example, reception by a teacher of a student’s piece, or reception by a researcher of a text that is part of a corpus).

Bazerman, Little and Chavkin’s rich example of a text as a piece of paper that can reappear in almost any situation anywhere and can, because of its genre, be located in “familiar social arrangements and activities” that enable meaning-making, does not directly explore what happens—textually—when a recipient does not recognize the genre but still uses the text. Where, that is, does the orienting genre come from? Considerations of intent might be particularly tricky in the academic situation of student writing, in which intent is a multilayered weave of student writer’s intent, teacher-assigner’s intent, institutional intent, and student “voice” as the carrier of these intents (and others not yet articulat-

ed). In a research situation, might we (in particular if we do not want to return to discussions of authorial intent or purpose as the source of “actual” meaning) consider the act of research as a genre destabilizer?

Perhaps the most encouraging feature of the EUIPM study is its resistance to rushing to pedagogical applications. Results of the analyses will likely complicate the teaching and learning relationship in higher education work in the disciplines: teaching students to “write a genre” promises to become more difficult than ever. In the current shifting French context of higher education, this is a critical point. Rather than acquiring conventional moves, learning disciplinary genres can be considered a progressive adopting-questioning-modifying that entails critical membership in the fullest sense of the term. Writing in the disciplines work needs to account for all of the ways genre is in play: as sets of recognizable features, as social and thus ideological acts to be adopted-resisted, as complement to activities, and as a relationship with a particular reader. In French higher education, teaching writing in the disciplines does not appear to take this complex critical approach to understanding disciplinary, genred writing. But the field of *la didactique* expressly resists “*applicationisme*” and so the work of research and theory is slow to influence practice, perhaps valuably slow. Both French and North American genre theories require us to account for multiple social, cultural, organizational, linguistic and textual phenomena that simply do not allow for understanding the genres of the disciplines as stable entities in stable fields into which students must be acculturated. In addition, the theoretical strands presented here offer insights in ways that become clear as we see how the French research project might benefit from North American genre theorists and vice versa in a fruitful exchange.

NOTES

¹ This is not uniformly true; the technical higher education tracks include required writing courses designed to improve students’ abilities in reading and synthesizing material from multiple documents. In 2007, a new law was passed that will reform higher education in several ways, including focusing far more attention on student success in the undergraduate cycle. Campuses are already developing first-year composition courses, with a focus on skills and generic writing ability.

² In fact, the discussion about writing and disciplinary knowledge developed around primary and secondary education well before it became a subject of research interest in terms of university students in France.

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