

# Rhetorical genre theory and academic literacy

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New theories of genre have looked beyond repetition in textual features to consider the social conditions that produce and result from standardised discourse. These theories seek to understand patterns in the production, distribution, and interpretation of certain texts. One such approach, rhetorical genre theory, views standardised texts as one element in larger patterns of social action—that is, as part of collectively organized strategies to get something done. From this perspective, it is possible to see that the situations to which generic texts respond, and the consequences they produce, are likewise regulated and regularized. This article takes a look at academic literacy through a rhetorical genre lens. In particular, it considers the doctoral thesis and asks what consequences result from the typified rhetorical action associated with that text.

**Key words:** genre, rhetorical situation, exigence, audience, agency, academic literacy, doctoral writing.

## 1. Introduction: A sociocultural theory of genre

The human need for a frame of reference lures the mind to generic classification. (Jamieson, 1973, p. 167)

Repetition is clearly a desirable quality. In both performance and perception, we seek regularity, consistency, and predictability. Across a wide range of human activities, we impose order on the flux of experience: routines, regulations, habits, procedures, and schedules. Our ability to categorise – to identify similarities and differences – allows us to reduce a potentially infinite number of instances into manageable classifications (Bowker & Starr, 2000). Because we perceive a situation as similar to previous situations, we know how to think and act. Without this ability, we would spend our days re-inventing not only the wheel, but most other human achievements as well.

Language offers fascinating opportunities to study this human inclination to typify. For many years, taxonomies of various sorts have been used to classify literary genres (e.g., Frye, 1957), but generic texts and textual practices outside of literature have more recently drawn the attention of researchers and teachers from a number of different traditions, and at least three schools of genre theory have developed (Hyon, 1996).<sup>1</sup> Each offers a complementary but slightly different perspective on academic literacy. One perspective, rhetorical genre theory (RGT), is most closely associated with work in North America composition and rhetoric, which itself was a response to concerns about academic literacy in American universities in the 1960s and 70s. RGT has roots in classical rhetoric, but is most influenced by what has been called the New Rhetoric (e.g., Burke, 1941; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This reinvention of rhetoric expanded the focus of study from formal or textual features of speaking and writing to

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<sup>1</sup> In commenting on Hyon's (1996) paper, Swales (2012) suggested that Brazilian debates about genre, as well as other contemporary perspectives on genre, might constitute separate schools of thought.

the social actions that discourse performs. RGT, then, is interested in how humans create, maintain, and participate in repeated discourse practices – from casual conversations to doctoral theses – and in what consequences those generic actions have.

In this paper, I offer a brief overview of rhetorical genre theory, with a focus on some of its key terms and concepts, and I consider some of the ways in which RGT invites us to think about pedagogy and research in the field of academic literacy. My examples come largely from doctoral writing, with a particular interest in the PhD thesis,<sup>2</sup> and I limit my consideration of genre to print texts. There is a growing field of academic writing in blogs, wikis, and other emerging forums; and although digital rhetoric is as prone to the formation of genres and generic practices as print rhetoric, I focus here on the print world. Despite these restrictions, I hope my comments will resonate with anyone studying and teaching academic literacy.

## 2. “Genre as social action”: Towards a definition

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. (Bazerman, 1997, p. 19)

In most accounts, RGT is traced back to a seminal article: Carolyn Miller’s “Genre as social action”. In that paper, Miller (1984) insisted that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centred not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (p. 151). Her injunction encouraged researchers and theorists to look beyond the text and writer to the situations in which texts function and to the work that they perform. Her argument came at a timely moment in North American composition and rhetoric: after rejecting the form-focussed pedagogy of the mid-1900s, often referred to as the “product approach,” researchers and teachers in the 1970s had zeroed in on the individual writer’s process, which produced a renaissance of sorts in the study and teaching of composition. But by the mid-1980s there was considerable dissatisfaction with the so-called “process approach” – based largely on its foundations in what was considered an overly-narrow cognitive theory of writing and a consequent failure to account for a wider social context (e.g., Berlin, 1987; Bizzell, 1982; Faigley, 1986).

The expansive view offered by rhetorical genre theory allows theorists, researchers, and teachers “to connect a recognition of regularities in discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use” (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 1). This wide perspective leads RGT proponents to be concerned with the social and cultural forces that create and exploit repeated texts, and with the consequences of their use. In other words, RGT is principally a sociocultural theory. RGT researchers are interested in texts as linguistic and rhetorical artefacts, of course, but their primary attention is on a host of regular patterns surrounding the texts: the provenance, variability, and relative stability of standard and standardised texts; repetitions in the production, distribution, and interpretation of those texts; the regulated roles, relationships, and responsibilities of the texts’ writers and readers; the customary function of the texts in the ongoing work of the communities in which they operate; the typical outcomes of the texts; and so on. In addition, a critical RGT approach investigates who benefits from the standardisation of discourse, who can and cannot participate in genres, and who has the power to create or alter them.

Rhetorical genre theory also gained prominence in North American writing studies during the 1980s and 90s because of its affinity with other social theories of the time, such as Giddens’ (e.g., 1984) notions of structuration, Bourdieu’s (e.g., 1977) accounts of *habitus*, the focus on situated learning (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and distributed cognition (e.g., Hutchins, 1995), and Vygotsky-inspired Activity Theory (e.g., Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Russell, 1997). These theories are, in part, attempts to account for the ways that humans are able to organise and act collectively by creating sufficient consensus around the

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<sup>2</sup> The final paper in doctoral studies is variously called the *thesis* or the *dissertation*, depending on jurisdiction; in this paper I will use the term *thesis*.

interpretation of and response to situations. The regularity of a genre depends on mutual agreement that *this* moment requires *this* particular discursive response, and RGT proponents have linked this consensual basis of genre to broader theories of repetition in cultural and social dynamics. As repeated means of shaping human action, genres fit Giddens' (1984) definition of structures – “Rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems” (p. 377) – and Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* – “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

The participation of genres in the creation and maintenance of regularised human activity is evoked in Bazerman's (1988) definition of genre as “a socially recognized, repeated strategy for achieving similar goals in situations socially perceived as being similar” (p. 62), and echoed in Smart's (1993) definition: “a broad rhetorical strategy enacted, collectively, by members of a discourse community in order to create knowledge essential to the community's aims” (p. 124). RGT-inspired studies of academic, professional, and disciplinary writing have demonstrated how human collectives develop routines in the production and use of texts as a way to harness group energy in pursuit of shared goals.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have referred to “genre sets” (Devitt, 1991), “genre systems” (Bazerman, 1994), “genre repertoires” (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994), and “genre ecologies” (Spinuzzi & Zachry, 2000) in an effort to capture how texts and textual practices are embedded in and constitutive of habitual patterns of action and implicated in the accomplishment of material and non-material ends that advance the work of the collective. These studies and others have also demonstrated how repeated texts exist in reciprocal relation to each other. As Anne Freedman (1994) suggested, it is best “to think of [genre] as consisting, minimally, of two texts, in some sort of dialogical relation” (p. 48).

Once again, the repeated textual artefact at the heart of generic rhetorical activity is part of, and inseparable from, a broader collective strategy, and cannot be fully understood outside of that broader strategy; however, it is but one generic element in a complex of patterned actions and practices that comprise the strategy. When we look at academic settings, for example, we can see how the regular academic texts of both students and faculty are tied to recurring strategies of teaching, learning, assessment, accreditation, and knowledge-making. Any given text emerges from a sequence of more-or-less predictable actions (literature reviews, note-taking, data collection, drafting, peer review, etc.), comes to life within the customary forums and practices of the academy (courses, exams, conferences, journals), and has consequences within the constraints of disciplinary and institutional cultures (grades, credentials, tenure, etc.). We know from textual analyses that the documents at the heart of academic genres display similarities (e.g., Giltrow, 2002a; Hyland, 2004; Swales, 1990), and RGT encourages us to search for patterns in the activities that comprise the production, function, and distribution of those texts – that is, in the full scope of the strategy that is a rhetorical genre.

One problem with a consideration of genres, however, is that their very status as custom makes them seem inevitable; like other aspects of culture, they can be viewed as just the way things are done. The tendency of regulated typification to render the constructedness of human practice invisible has long been of interest to sociologists. As McKinney (1969) argued, “types and typologies are ubiquitous, both in everyday social life and in the language of the social sciences. Everybody uses them, but almost no one pays any attention to the nature of their construction” (p. 4). And in their highly influential book, *The social construction of reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) noted that institutional typifications “have coercive power over [individuals], both in themselves, by the sheer force of their facticity, and through the control mechanisms that are usually attached to the most important of them” (p. 78). Many genres have an ancient lineage and predate their contemporary participants, who have inherited rather than designed them. Typical discursive practices in law and governance, for example, many of them antique, are shaped by regulations about who can speak, to whom, about what, for how long, in what circumstances, and so on. Academia, too, polices its discourse: the doctoral thesis, for example, has roots in the medieval German university and is governed across jurisdictions by a variety of

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<sup>3</sup> A critical RGT perspective would raise questions about just how “shared” some communal goals really are.

similar regulations and procedures. The form and rules have evolved, to be sure, but much about the product and process of the thesis has remained stable across centuries. An RGT analysis allows us to look at what we do as regular practice in academic literacy and ask some hard questions. It attempts to make the usual strange. In the remainder of this article, I will consider some of the key concepts within rhetorical genre theory, and explore the implications of those concepts for the study and teaching of academic literacy.

### 3. The rhetorical situation: Response to exigence

An exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency. (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6)

A central notion in RGT is the *rhetorical situation*, which Bitzer (1968) defined as “a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance” (p. 5). Others have challenged or amended that definition (e.g., Consigny, 1974; Miller, 1984; Vatz, 1968), but the concept remains central if somewhat ambiguous in RGT and in North American writing studies more widely. For pedagogical use, the rhetorical situation is usually described as including a text, an author, an audience, a purpose, and a setting or circumstance (e.g., Purdue Owl, n.d.), and some of those features are elaborated below, but to develop an operational definition of the *rhetorical situation*, it will help to start with one key element in Bitzer’s definition – *exigence*:

An exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be. In almost any sort of context, there will be numerous exigences, but not all are elements of a rhetorical situation – not all are rhetorical exigencies... An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse. (Bitzer, 1968, pp. 6-7).

So, according to Bitzer, rhetorical situations arise in response to something “which is other than it should be”, something that is “waiting to be done”. To be considered rhetorical, however, an exigence must be susceptible to change or resolution through discourse.

Some de-mystification might be helpful here. The term *rhetoric* can evoke images as widely divergent as grand orators and mealy-mouthed politicians. In its classical sense, *rhetoric* is the high discourse of governance, the law, and ceremony; in its debased contemporary sense, *rhetoric* is the deceptive or empty language of the sly and devious. But a New Rhetoric perspective sees all language as rhetorical, as the deliberate use of discourse to achieve some end. A simple request to a clerk for information about a train schedule creates a rhetorical situation. The exigence, or need, is a lack of information; it is, in Bitzer’s terms, the “thing which is other than it should be”. The properly formed question will elicit the information, thus allowing discourse to positively modify the exigence.<sup>4</sup>

Things get substantially more complicated, of course, when we consider complex utterances – the doctoral thesis, for example: to what exigence does a thesis respond? What “thing which is other than it should be” is positively modified by the thesis? As Bitzer (1968) notes above, “In almost any sort of context, there will be numerous exigencies”, and the thesis clearly responds to a number of different needs. Primary, of course, is the oft-repeated disciplinary requirement that a PhD thesis make a contribution to knowledge – that is, fill a gap in the community’s account of whatever phenomena it studies. As an academic genre, though, the thesis also responds to a dual need within the academy: first, as part of an educational process, the thesis responds to the institution’s need to provide students with a learning experience and, second, it answers the institution’s need to evaluate and either fail or credential the individual. Where the doctoral study was part of some form of action research – within a school system, for example,

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<sup>4</sup> *Exigence* is distinct from *purpose*, although the two are clearly related. Whereas the rhetor – speaker or writer – has a degree of control over the purpose or intention of the utterance, the exigence is socially determined, as discussed below.

or community group – the thesis might also respond to an urgent need for local or organisational analysis and change. In each case, the thesis responds to a different exigence and operates in a different rhetorical situation.

At first glance, exigence and situation appear to exist in a call-response pattern: a rhetorical situation arises to address a need that can be ameliorated through discourse. The discourse responds to or takes up the invitation or prompt to utterance presented by the exigence. To fully grasp RGT, however, a closer look at that relationship will help, since it might not be as chronologically or causally sequential as a call-response relation suggests. In fact, in the RGT account, exigence is not independent of or prior to rhetorical situation but an essential part of the situation itself.

#### 4. The genrefication of situation

Recurrence is an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence, and cannot be understood in materialist terms. (Miller, 1984, p. 156)

Although Miller's (1984) paper was the first to begin an inquiry into the relationship between rhetorical situation and genre,<sup>5</sup> Bitzer (1968) did anticipate the question of typification in discourse: "From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established" (p. 13). Bitzer seemed to be suggesting that rhetorical exigences and the situations they spawn have some form of objective reality. However, RGT theorists, starting with Miller (1984), have argued that exigence and situation are social constructions, neither "natural" nor material:

Exigence must be located in the social world, neither in a private perception nor in material circumstance...Exigence is a form of social knowledge – a mutual construing of objects, events, interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need. (Miller, 1984, p. 157)

In the RGT account, exigence is a socially agreed-on invitation to discourse – "an objectified social need" – and the rhetorical situation that responds is likewise collectively determined. As Miller (1984) says, "What recurs is not a material situation (a real, objective, factual event) but our construal of a type" (p. 157). Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) concur: "the social construction of situation is bound up in the social construction of exigence. How we define and act within a situation depends on how we recognise the exigence it offers, and this process of recognition is socially learned and maintained" (p. 70).

In other words, members of a collective (culture, discipline, institution, etc.) jointly interpret a particular combination of "objects, events, interests and purposes" (Miller, 1984, p. 157) as an exigence requiring response, and likewise share some sense of what constitutes an appropriate discursive reaction. In effect, there is an effort to hold constant or *genrerify* the situation itself, and thus the discourse the situation invites or evokes. For this sort of consistency to occur, the discourse must be beneficial to the community, or to some powerful sub-set of the community; it must be discourse that produces useful consequences. This mutual agreement occurs day in and day out, of course, and even our most mundane exchanges are governed by tacit rules that recognise the nature of the exigence, the ensuing situation, and suitable discourse. The train station clerk anticipates a range of exigences having to do with travellers, schedules, costs, and so on, and would be nonplussed by a request for pizza.

In order to guarantee consistency in their rhetorical strategies, collectives establish rules for identifying the appropriate occasions for discourse and the proper conduct of the participants in the discourse. So, for example, the legal community carefully regulates the conditions under which a trial may be held – that is, determines when the complex rhetorical strategy called a

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<sup>5</sup> Miller built on the work of a number of rhetoric scholars whose discussions of genre still resonate, particularly Jamieson and Campbell (e.g., Campbell & Jamieson, 1978; Jamieson, 1973).

“trial” is appropriate. It then controls the performance of that strategy by deciding who can enter the rhetorical situation, what relationships they might have with others present, what power they might wield, what they are permitted to say, and so on. Likewise, strict regulations control generic discursive strategies in human governance, many codified in *Robert's rules of order*.<sup>6</sup> While other genres are perhaps not so precisely regulated as those of law and governance, all collectives exert some control over their discourse by reaching (or imposing) agreement on the exigence-situation relationship and genrefying it. Consistency in understanding and responding to conventional rhetorical situations insures communities that their discourse practices will produce the desired social actions.

The disciplinary communities that comprise academia display variations in the genre of the doctoral thesis within and across institutions and territorial jurisdictions (Swales, 2004). Nonetheless, certain combinations of elements are common, both in the doctoral journey and in the thesis itself: comprehensive papers, research proposals, internal and external reviews, and vivas are regular features of the doctoral experience and constitute what might be called the “genre set” (Devitt, 1991) of the PhD. The text itself, and the process of creating it, show remarkable consistency across locations, with both implicit and explicit regulations about sequence, content, methodology, style, and rhetorical strategy.

While it is the nature of genres to show constancy across iterations, it is customary for RGT proponents to resist an overly deterministic view of the concept. In Schryer's (1993) much-cited formulation, genres are “stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action” (p. 200). Current attempts to encourage students to publish during the doctorate (e.g., Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010) indicate a desire to change the social and ideological action of the thesis, and also demonstrate that the thesis is not immutable. Indeed, the collective effort to transform the doctoral thesis into a more publishable document shows that genres are a form of social contract, an agreement to proceed in a particular way, and like other contracts they may be re-negotiated. (This raises the question of agency, addressed below). I now turn to an element that has been largely missing from the discussion of genre so far: people.

## 5. Audience? Or writers, readers and, relationships?

The typified situation, including typification of participants, underlies typification in rhetoric. (Miller, 1984, p. 157)

The notion of an “audience” – with its Latin roots in *audientia*, meaning *to hear* – points back to the classical origins of rhetorical study, when the focus was on oral texts. As Park (1982; see also Paré, 1992) has noted, the term might misleadingly suggest “all those folks out there in chairs” (p. 249). But a number of factors – including the contemporary rhetorical focus on texts, an appreciation for the complexity of institutional practice, and a recognition of the writer/reader co-construction of meaning – complicates the notion of an *audience* and the relations among persons in a rhetorical situation. Moreover, we are now far more likely to talk about *community* than *audience* when we consider where the meaning of a text arises. John Gumperz (1971), a linguist, used the concept of *speech communities* to define “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage” (p. 114). Literary critic Stanley Fish (e.g., 1980) coined the term *interpretive communities* to describe collectives that were able to draw on common interpretive assumptions in their readings of literature. Cognitive anthropologists Lave and Wenger (1991; see also Wenger, 1998) coined the term *communities of practice* to refer to groups who organise and coordinate activities, or practices, that allow them to perform complex work together. But it was the notion of *discourse communities* (Swales, 1990; see also Bizzell, 1992; Porter, 1992) that had the most influence in North American writing studies and, thus, on RGT.

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<sup>6</sup> *Robert's Rules* are what Giltrow (2002b) has called “meta-genres”: the implicit and/or explicit expectations that govern the production and performance of genres.

When *discourse community* replaces *audience*, the rhetorical situation suddenly becomes quite crowded. In fact, rather than conceiving of rhetorical situations as *encompassing* an audience, we have begun to understand that discourse communities (disciplines, institutions, organisations, affinity groups, etc.) actually encompass many different types of community-specific rhetorical situations. In addition, the various readers of a text, participants in the rhetorical situation, may all have quite different relationships to the writer, each other, the topic, and the social action the text is meant to produce. Consider the different ways in which a defence lawyer, a crown prosecutor, a judge, and a defendant might react to a report from an expert witness, and consider too the ways in which their different relationships with each other might be played out through that text.

As colleagues and I have argued elsewhere (Paré, Starke-Meyerring, & McAlpine, 2009), the doctoral thesis has a complex set of readers and locates the student in a number of different relationships, both within the intimate communities represented by a student's writing group or doctoral committee and within the far-flung and disbursed community of a discipline. There might be other readers, as well, including perhaps the study's participants, administrators at research sites, a disciplinary sub-group, and publishers' acquisition editors. In many cases, as Miller (1984) has suggested, the "typified situation" includes the "typification of participants" (p. 157). So, for example, according to Green (2005), the doctoral supervisor "represents, or stands in for, the Discipline itself, and also the Academy" (p. 162). Naturally, internal and external examiners read as judges, and that role requires a typified stance towards the text, the writer, and possibly the supervisor, since the supervisor is also being evaluated in the rhetorical situation that encompasses the thesis.

This shift from *audience* to *community* reminds us that the readers of a text are not a monolithic or passive entity that simply absorbs the available meaning but, rather, a collection of individuals with assigned or selected roles and with varied reasons for reading the text. They do not *receive* meaning, but re-construct it based on their own needs, roles, and backgrounds; most importantly, as the widespread focus on *community* reminds us, textual meaning arises within particular collectives with histories, ideologies, established practices, mutual goals, and both implicit and explicit regulatory policies. The status of genres as collective strategies, and the joint creation of meaning between writers and readers in discourse communities, complicates another element in the rhetorical situation: the writer's purpose.

## 6. Rhetorical purpose: Agency, action, and authorship

... agency exercised by persons is collective in both its sources and its mode of exercise. (Sewell, 1992, p. 21)

Extreme versions of discourse theory, including stark accounts of RGT, can portray individuals as mere scribes, free only to create the texts dictated by their communities, and unable to break away from the social, linguistic, and rhetorical structures within which they exist. Critics of such extreme structuralist accounts (e.g., Sewell, 1992) have argued that deterministic views of social practice ignore the fact that human agency is required for change to occur, and that change is undeniable. Likewise, most RGT theorists have embraced Schryer's (1993) description of genres, mentioned above, as "stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action" (p. 200) – a description that leaves room for change and thus, presumably, human agency. Although habitual practice can and does ossify, the pragmatic, social goals of genre mean they are subject to revision when they fail to produce desired outcomes, and such revisions must be done by people.

However, much RGT-inspired research has focussed on collective practice within institutions, disciplines, or organisations, and in such settings it's apparent that individual writers may have little control over texts. This observation follows from early studies of workplace writing (e.g., Doheny-Farina, 1985; Knoblauch, 1980; Selzer, 1983) that demonstrated the extent to which organisational texts are the result of group action – with rhetorical intention, format, style, and content determined by collective rather than individual decisions. Not only is co- and multi-authorship a fact of organisational life, but even when a single person composes, they do so

within the constraints of shared beliefs and practices. Dorothy Winsor, whose studies of writing in engineering did much to reveal this phenomenon, put it this way:

Collaborative writing at work doesn't just mean more than one person working on a report. It means that any individual's writing is called forth and shaped by the needs and aims of the organization, and that to be understood it must draw on vocabulary, knowledge, and beliefs other organization members share. Writing at work is firmly embedded in a social web. (Winsor, 1989, p. 271)

Clearly, writers cannot do or say anything they want when composing the standardised texts that circulate within discourse communities, so the idea of individual agency – and thus rhetorical purpose – becomes problematic in RGT. In certain legal, commercial, medical, and scientific contexts, constraints are so tight that there is no room for personal expression, variation, experimentation, or dissent, but in settings where disagreement and debate are recognised as motors of change – and that would (or should) include all the academic disciplines – the individual is expected to stake out a position, to make unique claims, to exercise a form of free agency. And yet, within the collective rhetorical strategies that are genres, what room is there for such personal freedom?

This, of course, is the perennial problem expressed by many doctoral students, who often – in my experience, at least – resent and resist what they see as disciplinary conventions while also seeking to make themselves heard and to have an impact. The solution, I believe, is to view agency not as freedom from regulation, but as the ability to act effectively and collaboratively within the structures of a community. In Sewell's (1992) words:

Agency entails an ability to coordinate one's actions with others and against others, to form collective projects, to persuade, to coerce, and to monitor the simultaneous effects of one's own and others' activities. Moreover, the extent of the agency exercised by individual persons depends profoundly on their positions in collective organizations. (p. 21)

This view of agency does not preclude the possibility of challenging the actions that one engages in as a member of the collective, although it does suggest that doing so requires position and power within the community. It also indicates that agency is something we exercise *with others*, rather than alone. For example, the scholar with no literature review, relying on no existing theory, and employing no recognisable methodology might be exercising a form of agency, but is unlikely to be effective or to promote change. In the disciplinary literature that constitutes a field's ongoing historical debate, authority is granted to those whose contributions display a knowledge of previous work and a position that locates them with and against others. As repeated rhetorical strategies employed by collectives to advance their ends, academic genres require collaboration.

So, what rhetorical purpose might an individual fashion in such collectivist projects as scholarship, and – indeed – what claim of authorship might they make? Of course, the romantic concept of the author that we inherited – the struggling writer alone in a loft, seeking inspiration – has been thoroughly trashed by any number of contemporary theorists and researchers. As with the expansion of *audience* into *community*, we have expanded our thinking about whose voice speaks in the text, and now refer to intertextuality, subject positions, ventriloquation, polyphony, discursal identities, heteroglossia, and other concepts to capture the multi-voiced nature of all discourse.

From an RGT perspective, writers are participants in some form of collective activity. Their contributions make sense, and have value, only insofar as they resonate with others, add to an ongoing dialogue, acknowledge the thoughts and thinkers that have come before them. Bakhtin (1986), whose work has had a deep influence on RGT, is typically eloquent on this point:

...any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and



others' – with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances. (p. 69)

Membership in collective activities, however, does not mean that individuals are robbed of agency, or that they cannot make individual contributions. Although established genres – such as the academic journal article, grant proposal, or book review – already have relatively well-defined, community-imbued rhetorical purposes, the ways in which they are deployed, their strategic role in ongoing debates, their innovative interpretation of data, and the insights they offer can make any given contribution stand out. Purpose and authorship, in the RGT account, are shaped through collaboration and participation. Academic writers exercise agency by joining others in an ongoing inquiry, by adding their voices to the disciplinary conversation.

## 7. Implications of RGT for the study and teaching of academic literacy

What does all of this mean for those of us who teach and study academic literacy? Perhaps the most important lesson of RGT is that the repeated texts we assign or investigate are merely the centre of much larger patterns of typified action. RGT invites us to ask questions about the provenance of such texts, their variation over time and location, the habits of production, distribution, and interpretation that support them, the roles and relationships they assign to writers and readers, the regular outcomes they produce, and so on. RGT also assumes that those patterns of typified rhetorical action are constructed to serve particular ends, to have certain consequences, and may be both questioned and revised.

As teachers, for example, we can speculate on the roles given us by the texts we assign, and by the relationships those texts create for us with student-writers and with our institutions. How do we take up our students' texts? How do we respond (with what reciprocating genres)? How free are we to vary the rules of exchange? With our essays, lab reports, term papers, theses, and other assignments, what outcomes do we seek, what consequences result (and for whom)? In considering the design of school writing tasks, we might well ask whether the institution's need for assessable evidence of learning trumps the students' need for exploration, risk-taking, and discovery. That is, do our school writing tasks invite students to challenge themselves, to take chances with their thinking and expression, or do they require the mere reiteration of course material as a means of simplifying institutional surveillance? Whose exigence has priority in the academy's rhetorical situations?

Considering school writing from an RGT perspective also raises questions about the typical activities that precede and follow the actual writing of texts. What rituals of reading and research do students perform as preambles to composition, and are they shaped by the exigence of learning or the exigence of assessment? If they respond to both, how does that dual need affect the writer and the text? How might typical pre-writing activities be varied? Once a text is created, what regularities and variations can be seen in the distribution and reading of that text? What rhetorical purpose does it fulfil? That is, what does the text actually *do*? Does it persuade, inform, propose, report, or otherwise seek to influence readers? Indeed, what readers are present within the rhetorical situations we create for students? The doctoral thesis is a complex genre, and serves many ends and many readers; consideration of that complexity may help us understand why doctoral students often struggle.

Those of us who research academic literacy are reminded by RGT that schooling is a cultural practice, with variations across disciplinary communities. As a result, our approach to the study of writing and reading might proceed anthropologically, as investigations into the situated activities of collectives with a history, shared beliefs and goals, common practices, and other aspects of cultural life. With that in mind, we might expect to find that community members are skilled in the performance of the collective's activities but not necessarily in a critical and detached analysis of those activities. Elsewhere (Paré, 2010, 2011), I have reported on research into supervision and the doctoral thesis that indicated that even well-published scholars may have difficulty articulating their concerns about student writing. As Bazerman (2009) has said

about such colleagues: “Although they have learned the genres of their profession and are successful in them, their reflective ability to manipulate them is limited because of a lack of linguistic and rhetorical vocabulary and analytical methods” (p. 289). Simply put, knowledge that allows us to proceed or perform is not necessarily expressible knowledge. Like language itself, rhetoric is learned less through direct instruction than through participation.

As literacy teachers and researchers, however, we want to get below the surface of discourse to its roots; we want to understand its origins, dynamics, and outcomes. Whether we are primarily concerned with student learning or with adding to the growing body of research on academic literacy ourselves, we need to see beyond the everyday to the factors that shape our literate practices and that allow us to live as social beings. Rhetorical genre theory offers a way to look at literacy and to draw connections between repetitions in our distinctive utterances and corresponding patterns in our disciplinary communities. By seeing texts as manifestations of larger social forces, RGT gives us a wide and encompassing view of academic literacy.

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