Raising awareness of writing practices and genres in English

(Despertando a consciência de práticas de escrita e gêneros em inglês)

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Abstract: This article describes three approaches to teaching advanced academic genres to post-graduate students and scholars, particularly those in the disciplines of education, psychology and science/engineering. These approaches grow out of social practice approaches to understanding and teaching academic writing, which align well with genre theories of writing. The article discusses the topics of a series of writing workshops offered to graduate students in education, a genre-based course, "Communicating Science," for PhD students in science/engineering, and a heuristics approach to supporting scholars in writing for publication.

Keywords: academic writing, social practices, genre approaches

Resumo: Este artigo descreve três abordagens para o ensino avançado de gêneros acadêmicos para estudantes de pós-graduação e demais acadêmicos, particularmente aqueles que estão em disciplinas nas áreas de Educação, Psicologia e Ciências/Engenharia. Essas abordagens surgem a partir de abordagens sobre a prática social para o entendimento e ensino da escrita acadêmica. Tais abordagens se relacionam com teorias sobre a escrita. Este artigo discute os tópicos de uma série de *workshops* sobre escrita, oferecidos para estudantes de pós-graduação na área de Educação, em específico, em um curso sobre gêneros do discurso *Communicating Science* para doutorandos em Ciência/Engenharia. O artigo também discute uma abordagem heurística no intuito de oferecer suporte para acadêmicos na escrita para publicação.

Palavras-chave: escrita acadêmica, práticas sociais, abordagens sobre gêneros.

In this article I discuss some approaches to supporting post-graduate students and scholars in understanding the practices and genres of what some have called "advanced academic writing" or academic literacy in English. I draw in particular on my experiences working with students and scholars from the disciplinary areas of education, psychology and science/engineering. The paper begins by present the theoretical frameworks that support these approaches, then elaborates on the specific approaches to providing such support. Broadly speaking, the theories I draw on here are social practice (STREET, 1984; Lillis, 2001) and genre theories (HYLAND, 2004; Swales, 1990, 2004) of academic literacy/writing. Social practice theories originated in the discipline of anthropology (e.g., STREET, 1993). An anthropological/practice perspective enables us to consider academic writing, as part of academic communication more broadly, as taking place within various social contexts. More specifically, the notion of practices refers to the patterns of activity that people engage in on a regular basis. While these patterns become routinized into conventions, at the same time there is always room for change. Social practices also entail power dynamics that can take place across a range of scales (BLOMMAERT, 2010), from personal (in academic writing contexts, for example, including the dynamics among colleagues or between student and supervisor) to disciplinary (in terms of the conventions of the communications within a discipline) to global (in terms of the power dynamics of English as one of the dominant languages of academic communication) (LILLIS; CURRY, 2010).

Connections have been made between social practice theories and the circulation of genres in particular contexts. Miller's (1994) frequently cited definition of genre as social action relates well to the understanding of academic literacy as a set of social practices. Social action occurs in different ways even within a narrow academic context, for example, in how different academics assign somewhat different genres to students as writing tasks. But because the same terminology is sometimes used to refer to different genres/actions, it can create confusion among students and scholars. For example, in noticing how genres are used in my graduate faculty of education, it is clear that understandings of specific genres vary considerably between colleagues in the same department as well as across departments or institutions – as well as among students. Thus, for instance, while we might call something a PhD thesis, when we analyze actual examples of theses, faculty members as well as students often have different conceptions of what the genre looks like – and does – that is, the textual embodiment of the genre. Such variations in understandings appear not only in the text itself, but also in discourses relating to the text, that is, in how faculty members discuss the target texts (genres) with students and how students talk about the texts with faculty members and with each other.

The same variation can happen when we consider less regulated and less formal genres, such as, in my context, teaching genres we call 'reflection papers' or 'critical commentaries', which signal different things in different professors' courses. Thus neither the practices of academic writing broadly nor the specific genres we might directly teach about are univalent or static, even though it can be convenient to portray them by using a kind of shorthand – and the use of labels such as 'critical commentary' can make these genres appear to be fixed and static. In addition, without bringing to bear a critical dimension on how we approach the notion of genre, we risk transmitting what can appear as static models of writing that lose their connection to the social contexts in which they emerged – risking becoming models for students to imitate, but without exploring their function as 'action'.

Not only are genres of academic writing dynamic, who student are has become increasingly varied, both in the United States and increasingly around the world as access to higher education grows. In the United States, there are distinct yet overlapping populations of students learning and engaged in a range of academic writing genres. These include 'American' or 'domestic' students, who might be monolingual but also could be bilingual students from immigrant backgrounds, 'international' students who use English as an additional language, and students from all of these categories who may be learning the practices and genres of specific new disciplines for the first time. Indeed, we can identify a continuum of student experience with understanding genres in terms of purpose, audience, and formal structure as well as in sentence- and word-level articulation of ideas. Thus while many – but not all – 'monolingual' 'American' students may (or may not) have fewer problems with sentence-level mechanics than might students using English as an additional language, these 'American' students may be as unfamiliar with the specific genre expectations of a discipline, particularly in terms of less traditional academic genres such as blog posts and reflection papers.

Working across disciplines

In this section I give specific examples of the ways that I, working with others, have introduced notions of genre and social practices of academic writing in different disciplines – in some cases based on empirical research and in others based on the research literature in the field. I begin with education (CURRY; OH, 2011), then discuss a course I developed for PhD students in science and engineering called Communicating Science (CURRY, 2012), and end with a discussion of the practices of scholarly publishing in research I have conducted with colleague (CURRY; LILLIS, 2004, 2010; LILLIS; CURRY, 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2013).

I first discuss the approach underpinning a series of five or so workshops that I developed for our Writing Support Services (CURRY; OH, 2011). The first principle of this approach is that academic reading, specifically, deconstructing texts, becomes a powerful starting point for academic writing. Students tend to enter our graduate programs already proficient at reading to identify content; they can find the main message or research findings in a text, including academic articles and book. Our first workshop focuses on the deconstruction of texts through the use of questions that help students move from reading for content to identifying how an author(s) 1) situates a text in the academic field by discussing and referencing previous work; 2) constructs an argument; 3) uses theory and evidence to support an argument; and 4) realizes other aspects of research articles. Figures 1 and 2 show activities in this workshop that help students deconstruct certain article sections and ask critical questions.

Step 1: Skim the following parts of the article.

- Publication information: author, contact information, year, title, source (e.g., journal, book, encyclopedia)
- Abstract: may state broader or narrower contexts, purpose, methods, conclusions (perhaps challenging existing views or proposing something new)
- Headings/subheadings: a road-map to the structure of the text
- References: establish credibility; identify influences on author's thinking and those with whom he/she is in conversation
- Introduction: may change shape from broad to narrow; may situate research in larger social context; may state research questions/purpose; may give rationale/explanation for research; may state "gap" in research (Swales, 1990); may introduce claims and evidence.
- Conclusion: may reiterate research question/purpose, claims and evidence; may suggest directions for future research.
- Main text/body: states and elaborates on claims and evidence.

Step 2: When you finish reading, think about what stays in your mind. What questions arise?

Step 3: Read the entire text closely—if possible, and if you have determined that it's worthwhile to do so—and try to answer your questions.

Figure 1. An approach to analyzing academic texts

1. Who is the author of the text? What kind of authority does she/he have? How do you know?
2. What can you tell about the author's opinions, positions, etc.? Identify any words or phrases that indicate the author's subjectivity.
3. Who appears to be the audience or "ideal reader" for this text? How can you tell?
4. What is the purpose of the text? What are its goals? What is its argument/message?
5. What is excluded, or not discussed in the text? Is this exclusion stated explicitly? If not, why do you think something might be excluded?
6. What questions do you have after reading the texts? What, if any, arguments or agreements do you have with the author?

Figure 2. Guiding questions for academic reading

The second workshop helps students to analyze the genres common in the graduate school of education. We begin by considering examples from real life such as apartment rental advertisements, poems, wedding invitations, personal advertisements (for dating), and catalog marketing copy, taken from Roe and den Ouden (2003). By identifying these different genres, students articulate their intuitive understandings of how genres operate in our daily lives. We then discuss their ability to identify this range of everyday genres by examining the text and by bringing to bear contextual knowledge. To transition to thinking about academic genres, students then brainstorm the range of academic genres they have already written or those they know about but have not yet tried. They categorize these genres as analytic, reflective, or professional. Figure 3 shows some of the genres categorized in these ways.

Analytic	Reflective	Professional/Public
• annotated bibliography • book review • comprehensive examination • critical commentary (summary/ critique/analysis) • doctoral dissertation/thesis • ethnography • literature review • master's essay • presentation (in class) • term/research paper • synthesis • video analysis	• auto-ethnography • personal narrative (for master's teaching certificate and doctoral portfolio) • reflection/journal entry • blog posts	• abstract (conference, paper, article) • journal article (for publication) • poster presentation • proposal (e.g., research, conference, grant) • speech/talk • report

Figure 3. Academic genres at the Warner Graduate School of Education

The categories presented in Figure 4 function to help workshop participants explore these genres and their interpretive contexts. The category of "purpose" focuses students' attention on reasons for writing a text. The category of "audience," which students know

often signals the university instructor who assigns particular texts to be written, may also include secondary audiences such as peers. The "argument/claims" category is perhaps the most familiar to students, as it covers a text's knowledge and propositional content. In the category of "register/style," we highlight language use in terms of (in)formality, hedging, usage of pronouns, lexis, disciplinary terminology — all aspects that help characterize particular genres. We discuss how these texts function in academic communication, including the power dynamics involved in writing for different professors.

Type of text (sample genres)	Purpose	Audience	Argument/claims	Register/style
Critical commentary/ response paper	- Identify key points in an argument and discuss their significance - Highlight strengths and weaknesses in the argument or extend it.	- Instructor - Peers - Members of online discussion forum or blog	- Signal the writer's perspective - Deconstruct the assumptions underlying the argument -Evaluate, critique, and make suggestions	Formal Synthetic Analytic Critical
Reflection/ journal entry	- Discuss issues and arguments from a text or an experience - Explore issues deeply in relation to personal opinions	- Instructor - Peers - Oneself	- Explore one's ideas and initial thoughts - Develop one's ideas critically - Reflect, aiming for deep insight and careful consideration - Observe one's process of thinking and critique - Represent one's ideas, thoughts, values, and commitments	- Informal - Summary - Commentary - Opinion

Figure 4. Categories for analyzing academic genres

Based on the success of the genre identification activity in the writing workshops, in designing the Communicating Science course I created a similar activity that incorporates sample genres from 'text sets', which are groups of related documents (Swales [1990] might call these 'genre networks'). To create text sets I collected from engineering faculty members any documents they had that were related to the same research project. These include, for example, a grant proposal, different types of research publications, a press release, and a public talk about nanoscience that a faculty member gave me permission to video-record. Working in pairs, students in the course identified examples of genre extracts ranging from the quotidian (job opening and apartment rental advertisements to more specialized academic genres in science/engineering). The much subtler distinguishing features of related academic genres such as a grant proposal and a research article made the task of identifying the components of each text set much more challenging for science/

engineering PhD students than for the education graduate students identifying daily genres. In this case, while the technical terminology in related documents may be similar, other textual features, such as verb tenses may differ. For example, in a grant proposal, more conditional and future tenses are used, whereas in a research report, more past and present tenses are used.

After this introduction to genre, I introduce them to Swales's (1990) move structure analysis as applied to grant proposals (CONNOR; MAURANEN, 1999). This is followed by an analysis of the move structures of introductions to research articles. Students then watch the videotape of a professor's public lecture and explore related press releases written by the university's publicity staff, who come as guest speakers. Students also examine referees' reports for a submitted conference paper by the nanotechnology professor. Each of the three faculty members who provided me with the text sets has come as a guest to the course, typically on the day that groups of students who have been assigned to analyze each professor's texts are presenting their analysis, which generates questions for the professor. Interwoven into these discussions are activities on the use of register, terminology/jargon, nominalization, voice, and first person pronouns across different texts in the sets (CURRY, 2012).

Finally, I discuss the social practice approach to supporting multilingual scholars in writing for publication, particularly in English-medium journals published in high status indexes, an approach I have developed with *Theresa Lillis in A Scholar's Guide to Getting Published in English: Critical choices and practical strategies (*CURRY; LILLIS, 2013). In this book we take what we call a 'heuristics' approach to demystifying the social practices of scholarly publishing. Rather than focusing on the textual features of academic articles written for publication, what aim to help scholars understand the often-implicit practices of publishing such as: identifying the 'conversations of the disciplines' (BAZERMAN, 1980), choosing a target journal, understanding and responding to reviewers' comments, working with 'literacy brokers' (LILLIS; CURRY, 2006), participating in academic research networks (CURRY; LILLIS, 2011), and taking on editorial roles in journals. We draw on data from a nine-year ethnographic study we conducted with 50 academics working in Spain, Portugal, Hungary and Slovakia (LILLIS; CURRY, 2010). We use scholars' experiences and perspectives as starting points for the heuristics, to ask readers to connect their experiences with those of the scholars in our study and to reflect on their options for publishing. Figure 5 shows some parts of the heuristic we created to help readers reflect on this topic.

Chapters … include these sections:

- **Chapter focus—** a discussion of the main focus which arises from research findings and is connected to the research data presented in the next section
- **Data, questions and comment—**research data that support reflection and, for readers working with others, discussion about the chapter focus, such as artifacts (e.g. institutional documents about how publications are rewarded, authors' publications records, extracts of texts written for publication, and extracts of correspondence with journal gatekeepers), questions that prompt readers to analyze and reflect on the focus of the chapter, followed by a comment on the data and issues presented
- **Thinking about your practice —** questions to link readers' reflections on the data to their current or future participation in the practices discussed in the chapter
- **Suggestions for future action** — ideas for how readers might respond to the issues raised in each heuristic and learn more about the publishing practices and available resources in their contexts
- **Useful resources** — books, articles and websites and other materials related to the focus of each chapter
- **Related research** — other scholarship on the topic of each heuristic, often from contexts other than those represented in our data

Each chapter ends with an **Information Box** — background about a key topic related to the focus of the chapter.

Figure 5. Heuristic for supporting multilingual scholars in writing for publication

All of these approaches have a number of points in common. A key shared principle is a stance of descriptivism rather than prescriptivism, perhaps unusual in the area of teaching academic writing. The goal is for students and scholars to come away with an idea of what is actually going on in the texts, genres, and social practices related to academic writing and publishing. We avoid telling writers *what to do*, but rather help them understand how to analyze texts and practices, what some of the choices available in certain rhetorical contexts might imply, and from there to make decisions about what they want to achieve with their writing. Ideally, this approach leaves space for writers to question and challenge existing practices, rather than feel they must conform to what is already being done. These approaches include, rather than avoid, discussions of power and dominance – particularly in terms of the current and growing linguistic dominance of English and Anglo-American rhetorical and generic conventions both in higher education and in the global publishing marketplace.

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