

BEYOND GENERALIST VS. SPECIALIST:  
MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN GENRE THEORY  
AND WRITING CENTER PEDAGOGY

Layne M. P. Gordon  
University of Louisville  
lmp06@louisville.edu

Following the trend in composition scholarship of the 1980s and 90s toward theorizing about genre as a social and rhetorical construct, several colleges and universities across the nation have worked to implement genre-based curricula in their writing courses. From first-year writing classes to writing across the curriculum programs, instructors have steadily recognized the benefits of genre pedagogies and asked their student writers to compose in a variety of genres. However, while genre theory has found a home in several college classrooms, very little attention has been paid to the potential application of genre theory to writing center pedagogy.

I suggest that other scholars have shied away from discussing how writing tutoring can employ genre due to anxieties about such strategies devolving into "directive tutoring" methods. Talking about genre explicitly may be associated with prescribing rules for writing or lecturing students rather than conversing with them—two pitfalls that many writing centers work hard to avoid. While these concerns are certainly valid, I argue instead that genre is a powerful concept that has a place in the writing center because of the opportunities it affords regarding the teaching of writing as well as its social implications. The writing center is a place where students can meet with peer tutors and receive direct feedback on their writing. Students can also ask questions that they might not feel comfortable asking their professors. The writing center, furthermore, offers students more exposure to the academic community while giving writing tutors the chance to augment students' sense of agency in this academic community. These opportunities make writing centers unique services on college campuses and exemplify how genre theory can help us reach our pedagogical and social objectives in the writing center. This essay offers a theoretical framework for understanding genre theory, which can shape and enhance writing center pedagogy and help writing tutors better conduct their tutoring sessions.

### **Theorizing Genre for the Writing Center**

In order to understand how we might apply genre theory to writing center pedagogy, it is first necessary to define genre and describe what it can do for writers. One of the foremost voices in contemporary genre theory is that of Carolyn Miller. In her seminal essay "Genre as Social Action," Miller explores how genre should be conceptualized, grounding it in a social and rhetorical understanding of language. She claims that genre is "a typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations" (Miller 159), and argues that:

...what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have: we learn that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another .... We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potentials for failure and success in acting together. (Miller 165)

For Miller and the scholars who support her claims, genre is a way of making meaning out of our social situations. This definition implies that genre is also a locus of power. In other words, when we learn a genre, we learn what power we have as actors in a social setting. We learn not only what ends are in our grasp, but also the power that our communications may have. Therefore, within the context of the writing center, educating students about the power behind a given genre would also bolster their sense of agency as writers and their interest in the project of writing. By helping student writers learn specific genres, a writing tutor helps them understand the situation in which they are being asked to write as well as their power within that situation.

Miller's theory illustrates the potential that genre theory holds for increasing students' sense of ownership over their writing and improving their understanding of the conventions expected in academic discourse. Jeanne Marie Rose explains this point in reference to a first year composition course in her article "Teaching Students What They Already Know: Student Writers as Genre Theorists." Rose argues that "composition courses serve students best

by calling attention to the habitual language choices that students at all levels undertake as part of their daily lives and making active theorizing about these choices a feature of the writing process" (28). In this sense, the goal of genre pedagogy is to make students aware of their own agency when they select certain discourses and give them the tools to critique these choices. Rose also notes that "composition teachers can help students to recognize that they already possess the practical consciousness needed to respond to a number of language situations" (33). One could easily swap the term "composition teacher" here for "writing tutor." In the writing center, tutors can not only frame discussions of students' writing by talking about the affordances of a given genre, but also emphasize the power of choice that their students possess. Student writers often face anxieties about entering into an academic discourse and "getting it wrong." I have worked with several students who feel that there is a key to academic writing they simply can't access. Using genre can help ease students out of this fear by emphasizing that they already have the power to make such decisions.

While empowering student writers as individuals is one positive aspect of using genre theory in writing center pedagogy, there is also a communal aspect to genre that tutors can use to their benefit. One of the most interesting developments in contemporary genre theory is the recent turn towards considering genre as crucial to the formation of discourse communities, bringing the social and communal dimensions of genre into even greater focus. In his article "Genre in Discourse, Discourse in Genre: A New Approach to the Study of Literate Practice," Ross Collin builds on Miller's definition of genre as social action and makes use of James Gee's Discourse Theory to construct an understanding of genre as a means of identity formation, which is bound up in the creation of discourse communities. He observes that "genres may be understood as sites where individuals constitute themselves and are constituted as ideological subjects-in-worlds" (Collin 84). Collin's theory has several implications for the writing center. Not only can consultants have conversations about the ways in which students' positions as individuals change according to a given genre, but they can also have conversations with students about the ways in which certain genres view the world and what they prioritize as a result of that perspective. Participating in a genre means taking an active role in a given discourse community, and talking with students in the writing center about what that community values can help them see their own work in light of what it contributes to that group.

Although thinkers such as Miller, Rose, and Collin are not addressing the context of the writing center directly, their ideas provide the groundwork for understanding how genre theory can shape writing center pedagogy. Genre does not simply refer to a category or type of writing, but instead genre carries with it certain social and rhetorical possibilities that can help tutors foster a sense of agency and ownership in student writers as well as a sense of belonging within the academic community.

## **The Existing Debate about Genre in the Writing Center**

Those scholars who have written about genre in the writing center have often focused on the question of whether writing tutors should be specialists in particular genres or disciplines or generally knowledgeable about writing. In "The Debate over Generalist Tutors: Genre Theory's Contribution," Kristin Walker explains that those arguing in favor of the specialist position think it is crucial for tutors to understand discipline-specific rhetorical expectations and strategies in order to talk with students about them effectively (27). On the other hand, those who advocate for tutors as generalists claim that students benefit most from an exchange in which they are the ones who must articulate the knowledge and conventions of their discipline rather than having it articulated for them by the tutor.

Walker, however, takes the middle ground, arguing that "genre theory, as it has evolved from social constructionism, provides 'generalists' and 'specialists' with a tool to analyze discipline-specific discourse" (28). She concludes that "each student must learn for him/herself the processes of becoming initiated into a particular discourse community; this is where a writing center tutor can be most helpful by serving as a guide in this process" (Walker 32). This statement echoes Collin's theory and the emphasis on the communal aspect of writing. In a writing center session, the tutor can simulate a variety of discourse communities for students in order to educate them about their own positions in those communities and the ways in which they can exercise agency within them. For example, students in the invention stage of writing a literacy narrative can benefit immensely from a discussion of genre in personal writing as well as genre in literacy narratives, helping guide them toward an understanding of what they can accomplish in that project. The strength in Walker's discussion therefore lies in being able to look outside the traditional generalist-specialist debate and make concrete the ways in which genre theory can have a real place in the

context of both writing center pedagogical theory and praxis.

### Some Suggestions for Teaching/Using Genre in the Writing Center

The genre theorists discussed thus far offer some helpful considerations for writing center pedagogy, but it is important to think about some specific ways that genre can be applied to writing tutoring. Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought regarding the teaching of genre: those who support its explicit teaching and those who are against it. One of the formative moments of this debate came with Aviva Freedman's 1993 essay "Show and Tell? The Role of Explicit Teaching in the Learning of New Genres." Freedman argues against explicitly teaching genre, a strategy that she defines as "explicit discussion, specifying the (formal) features of the genres and/or articulating underlying rules" (224). She offers two responses to the idea of explicit genre instruction: the Strong Hypothesis, in which explicit teaching is neither necessary nor useful, and the Restricted Hypothesis, in which Freedman "acknowledges... the potential for harm in such teaching," but admits that it can be useful in some situations and for some learners (Freedman 226).

Freedman ultimately privileges learning genres in context. She argues that "teaching in the workplace, or in a writing center, or during an internship provides an ideal locale for this immediate kind of intervention because students are involved in authentic tasks and authentic contexts when the teaching takes place" (244). In other words, writing should be a highly situated activity. Freedman's understanding of teaching writing is that it resembles the relationship between a master artist and an apprentice. In this arrangement, learning occurs through observation and practice. This quotation also reveals that the writing center, in Freedman's view, is a place where students can learn about genre while they are actually in the process of writing. Tutors can thus provide an "immediate intervention" that will improve students' understanding of genre and of writing in general. Freedman would likely envision this intervention taking the form of Socratic questioning, modeling, and other non-directive tutoring methods. For example, a tutor could ask such questions as: "I notice in this section of your rhetorical analysis you start to use the first person. I think that's sticking out to me for some reason. Why do you think that might be?" Although this question does not directly address the conventions of the genre of rhetorical analysis, the tutor still calls the writer's attention to something that seems

anomalous for the assignment, and hopefully guides the student to a more complete knowledge of the genre at hand.

The other school of thought, however, maintains that there are many benefits of pedagogical strategies that explicitly discuss genre. In "Genre and Rhetorical Craft," Jane Fahnestock responds to Freedman's article and argues for the productive potential of explicit instruction. Fahnestock also counters Freedman's claim that teaching writing is like teaching a craft, and argues that "there is no craft or 'art' without an explication of its principles so that they can be applied across situations" (269). For Fahnestock, genres must be taught directly in order for students to operate as writers within them; students need to be told their options so that they can employ them with success. Several of my own experiences as a writing tutor have illustrated this fact. For example, I have worked with several students in the beginning stages of writing a personal statement who are struggling significantly to understand the genre. It has been beneficial in my experience to begin the session with a discussion about the genre of the personal statement, along the following lines: "Based on what I know about personal statements, it's a genre that really prioritizes applying your unique experiences and goals to a certain position (*etc.*). So, knowing that, would you like to talk through an outline and then we can discuss some ways to address those conventions?" Although this language is more explicit, and perhaps more directive, it nevertheless maintains the writer's agency and empowers the student by fostering an understanding of the genre itself and providing a platform to discuss creative options. Such a strategy ideally would also scaffold the student's learning by first discussing what kinds of personal writing the student had done in the past and then working to build off those experiences to increase an understanding of the genre. Both explicit and non-explicit approaches, therefore, have valuable applications for writing center pedagogy and can achieve similar goals.

Taking this fact into consideration, then, one of the ways that writing tutors can make use of genre is by talking with students about what certain genres value and how genres understand the world in various ways. In *Genre*, John Frow illustrates the importance of this strategy by claiming that "far from being merely 'stylistic' devices, genres create effects of reality and truth which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or philosophy or science, or in painting, or in everyday talk" (19). A chosen genre is therefore indicative of how that specific discipline, subject, or person understands the

world. A writing tutor can therefore explain this kind of worlding to students and enable them to see their own work as something larger than a singular assignment—as something that is part of a tradition of looking at the world in a particular way. A tutor could explain that a personal narrative, for example, understands the world as one in which individuals have deeply meaningful experiences that can be remembered and recreated for a reader to then experience vicariously and learn from. Frow goes on to assert that “genre guides interpretation because it is a constraint on semiosis, the production of meaning; it specifies which types of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context, and so makes certain senses of an utterance more probable” (Frow 101). Genre therefore gives clues about what is acceptable in a certain situation, which can allow writing tutors to have conversations about why a particular meaning is expected from a given genre. Discussing genres as situations in this way also opens the doors to helping students feel that they are members of discourse communities and can make meaningful contributions within those communities.

So far I have discussed some ideas for incorporating genre theory in writing center pedagogy in two ways: by scaffolding a writer's learning through discussing (whether explicitly or implicitly) the conventions of a given genre and by discussing genres as an opportunity for the writer to exercise agency and make meaning. I suggest a third and final way that writing tutors can use genre is by discussing how to break generic conventions. Such strategies expand on the idea of using genre to talk about a writer's options by discussing the rhetorical power of going against a reader's expectations and making anti-generic moves. For example, a student I worked with on a personal statement for an application to a business school had decided to frame his essay as if it was a letter to a future roommate. He had consciously decided to do something other than the traditional entrance essay and wanted to make sure that his voice as an individual was heard by the selection committee. Over the course of the session we were able to have a highly productive conversation about his choice to go against these generic conventions and what such a decision could achieve. Marc Hummel addresses a similar phenomenon in his article, “Community Writing Centers and Genre Literacy.” In his discussion of youth community writing centers, Hummel claims that “an understanding of how genres function... enables [children] to become successful writers more quickly, as they both conform to the conventions of genres and invent new uses to suit their needs” (59). Although it is debatable what is meant here by

“successful writers,” it is evident that genre-intensive pedagogy is beneficial not only because it gives students the tools necessary to operate within a certain discourse, but also because it offers them options for exercising creativity and going against the conventional uses of these tools. Writing tutors can thus serve as crucial mediators in the student's process of understanding and adopting generic conventions as well as breaking them for their own creative and rhetorical purposes.

## Moving Forward with Incorporating Genre in the Writing Center

Genre theory offers some important possibilities for writing center pedagogy that have not yet been widely considered. I suggest that more research should be done on how genre is currently used in writing centers so that both directors and tutors can gain a better understanding of how to further implement genre theory and genre-related pedagogical strategies. While training tutors in genre-specific conventions may require more time and resources, tutors will be able to guide a student writer's learning. What is important to keep in mind is that when we teach writers about genre in the writing center, we are teaching them “what ends [they] may have;” we are teaching them about the “situations in which [they] find [themselves] and the potentials for failure and success in acting together” (Miller 165). Using genre to guide our pedagogical strategies in the writing center can be an excellent way to achieve the goals of scaffolding students' learning, enhancing their sense of agency, and reaffirming their membership in the academic community.

### Works Cited

- Artemeva, Natasha. “Toward a Unified Social Theory of Genre Learning.” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 22 (2008): 160-185. Print.
- Clark, Irene L. “Addressing Genre in the Writing Center.” *The Writing Center Journal* 20.1 (1999): 7-31. Print.
- Collin, Ross. “Genre in Discourse, Discourse in Genre: A New Approach to the Study of Literate Practice.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 44 (2012): 76-96. Web. <<http://jlr.sagepub.com/content/44/1/76>>.
- Devitt, Amy J. *Writing Genres*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.
- Fahnestock, Jeanne. “Genre and Rhetorical Craft.” *Research in the Teaching of English* 27.3 (1993): 265-271. Print.
- Freedman, Aviva. “Show and Tell? The Role of Explicit Teaching in the Learning of New Genres.” *Research in the Teaching of English* 27.3 (1993): 222-251. Print.
- Freedman, Aviva. “Situating Genre: A Rejoinder.” *Research in the Teaching of English* 27.3 (1993): 272-281. Print.

- Frow, John. *Genre*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Hummel, Marc. "Community Writing Centers and Genre Literacy." *Young Scholars in Writing* 9 (2011): 58-63. Print.
- Hyland, Ken. "Genre-based Pedagogies: A Social Response to Process." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 12 (2003): 17-29. Print.
- Jordan, Jay. "Competence: Learning from 'Learners'." *Redesigning Composition for Multilingual Realities*. Urbana, IL: Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English, 2012. 50-84. Print.
- Miller, Carolyn. "Genre as Social Action." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70.2 (1984): 151-167. Print.
- Rose, Jeanne Marie. "Teaching Students What They Already Know: Student Writers as Genre Theorists." *Issues in Writing* 14.1 (2003): 2-44. Print.
- Thompson, Isabelle. "Scaffolding in the Writing Center: A Microanalysis of an Experienced Tutor's Verbal and Nonverbal Tutoring Strategies." *Written Communication* 26 (2009): 417-453. Print.
- Walker, Kristin. "The Debate over Generalist Tutors: Genre Theory's Contribution." *The Writing Center Journal* 18.2 (1998): 27-32. Print.