Norms and Power in Learner Genres
and Workplace Genres

1. Norms for educational and professional genres

A common view of a genre (Swales 1990, 2004; Bhatia 1993, 2004) is that it is a class of texts or communicative events with shared purposes, forms, and sociocultural conditions. Hence, if we are to teach genre usefully we have to teach not only the forms, but also their relation to purposes and sociocultural conditions. Furthermore, a genre is an indeterminate class and may consist of subgenres and local, company, or disciplinary variants. As time passes genres and subgenres change and develop. So ideally our teaching gives our students not so much skills with the formal and structural norms of a particular set of genres but a generic competence that allows them to adapt their writing to the situation and its generic requirements. In practice constraints of time and student attention may make this difficult, but institutions of higher education do typically offer various types of practically oriented writing training.

Inside the education system there are sets of genres used to enable students to learn content and skills: lab reports, essays, presentations, etc. (Swales 1990), which we can call learner genres. The important audience for such texts is a teacher or examiner who has the right to assess them, and the writer’s aim is often largely to achieve this audience’s approval by meeting norms for form and content set by the audience itself. The writer’s aim to conform is admittedly usually accompanied by a sense of integrity and

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1 Thanks to Birgitte Norlyk, Miguel Ruiz-Garrido and Paul Gillaerts for inspiring commentary.
ownership, which may lead to texts which deliberately deviate from meeting the assessor’s known or presumed criteria. Thus Beaufort (1999: 158) cites a professional writer who says of her university writing “I was very good at writing what the teacher wanted, and I could have written what he wanted, and I didn’t want to”. But generally speaking the aim is to meet teacher-set criteria, and failure to do so will usually be evidence of lack of skill. Power, knowledge of content and disciplinary values, and communicative skill are unequally distributed and the rather simple action intended to result from the text – setting a grade – is entirely in the hands of the knowledgeable, powerful and skilful partner in the interaction, the teacher. Consequently the norms for these genres are set by the teacher alone and it is therefore not surprising that teachers often emphasize the importance of meeting the audience’s expectations, since in learner genres this largely coincides with achieving the writer’s aims, and with meeting the teacher’s prescriptive norms.

In professional writing, however, knowledge, power and skill may be distributed in any number of ways, and the intended action is likely to be complex, in terms both of norms and of purposes (Artemeva / Freedman 2001).

First, in the work place there are competing genre norms. These may represent competing cultures within the company. Norlyk (1996) describes how engineers and sales department staff in a Danish engineering company had different expectations about appropriate content for a sales leaflet. The norms may also reflect differing perceptions of text audience and of the amount of effort required. Parks (2001) describes a situation in which a Canadian nursing school taught nursing students to write explicit care plans for patients, but once in practice nurses learned from colleagues to write the plans in a less explicit way, which relied on the shared knowledge of nurses in the institution for effective communication. These more embedded plans were adequate for their colleagues and reduced writing time and effort. However, they were disapproved of by senior staff, who visualized a wider audience for the plans and in fact liked the model taught by the school better. Senior staff thought that the more implicit later versions used by nurses in practice were evidence of deterioration and “bad habits”.

Second, in workplace genres like those just discussed the notion of purpose is more complex and not separable from power distribution. Winsor (1999) shows how documentation is intended to get things done, to assign responsibility and to create authoritative accounts of what may have been unclear events. In writing minutes or reports, for example, the professional creates a significant account out of a mass of material which includes the insignificant, the irrelevant, and the inappropriate. While this account might be challenged, it is very likely in practice to stand, and thus the writer is able to exercise power through the act of writing.

Such contextual differences are reflected in the differing grounds for judgement of text quality found by Abbott and Eubanks (2005). Academic writing teachers in their focus groups offered quality judgements based on general principles like providing topic sentences, while practising engineers offered similar judgements but based on “speculations about the particular context and the effect the memo might have” (2005: 201).

2. Text-structures and genres in a report-writing course

Despite these differences of situation and evaluative stance, teachers of writing in technical universities or colleges have a double task. Their students’ immediate needs are for academic writing skills and knowledge of genre norms which should enable them to write reports and dissertations, but they also aim to inculcate transferable skills which will enable students to write effectively in the workplace, and employers look to them to provide such skills. The notion of transferable skills is inevitably more associated with general conceptions of a well-written text than with achieving very specific aims.

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2 “The hand that writes the minutes rules the world” as a university administrator once remarked to Shaw.
Where text-types are distinguished from genres, text-types are defined by more strictly linguistic criteria, as in Werlich (1976). Categories of text-types are incommensurate with categories of genre, because they are defined by formal features rather than purpose. Thus a genre like a political speech (Andeweg / de Jong, this volume) may contain elements from several of the major text-types: description, narration, exposition, argumentation, and instruction. Furthermore, there are other cross-cutting categories: text-structure types like cause-to-effect and effect-to-cause (Werlich 1976: 184) can be used in the text-types narration, exposition and argumentation. The complexity and abstractness of linguistically based text-type analyses (Muntigl / Gruber 2005) has meant that simpler analyses like that of Trimble (1985) have been more influential in pedagogy, with simpler, if descriptively less accurate categories like cause-effect, comparison, or description. These seem most like Werlich’s text-structures. By contrast with the various levels and dimensions of text-structures, genre instances are necessarily whole texts in practical use and typically include text segments with many functions. Thus an engineer’s report is likely to contain stretches of a variety of text-structures or even text-types: cause-effect, description, argument, and speculation.

Courses in academic and professional writing (Swales / Feak 1994, Huckin / Olsen 1991) often aim to move from text-structures like cause-effect, problem-solution, etc. – the writing of which is seen as giving enabling skills – towards writing more specific genres which make use of the text-structures.

As noted above, the student writing situation is very different, and in many ways less complex than, the situations graduates encounter in the workplace. In this situation, one might think that the more generic skills represented by text-structures might actually be more useful than the apparently more practical genres, practice writing of which in artificial situations might actually distract students from the real issues in the workplace. The less replicable the future writing situations of the learners, the more useful it is to focus on the generic skills, one might think.
Nordberg teaches a Swedish-language technical writing course of this kind. The aim of the course is stated thus (translated from Swedish):

The course enables the students to acquire the writing skills required for more comprehensive reports, e.g. the undergraduate thesis. It also increases their knowledge of the character of business prose, in particular technical prose. Tasks are built around four text-structures or text-types (cause analysis, problem solution, argumentation, literature report) and two genre tasks (letter of application + cv, technical report) with the notion that the early tasks prepare for the report; they require the writing of text-structures integrated in most reports. A process writing approach is used (first draft → peer response → second draft → teacher response → final text). Topics are general and the report is on a topic related to students’ specialist subject. Evaluative criteria are based on general prescriptions about well-written texts as well as on genre-specific norms.

3. Aims and research questions

Given the literature contrasting academic criteria with those of the workplace (Dannels 2000, Abbott / Eubanks 2005), we decided to test to what extent the assumption about transferable skills was true. Nordberg’s students study a variety of engineering and computing subjects and we had the opportunity to study writing in an engineering company in Sweden, and (for comparison) a software design company in England. Our overall aim was to identify how a writing course can teach the norms of academic genres and still provide transferable skills which are relevant in professional life.

Our research questions were designed to give information that might lead to a course which was more effective in achieving its dual aims of enabling students to complete their learning tasks and preparing them for real-world writing as engineers. They were as follows:
1. Text-structures and genres
   a. Are text-structures and genres perceived as equally transferable to the writing the students face in the ‘real world’?
   b. Do practicing engineers write whole documents that correspond to the text-structure cause analysis?
   c. Do they use it as part of a specific practical genre?

2. Potential differences in sociocultural environment between learner and workplace genres
   a. To what extent is there consensus about the purpose and audiences of the documents written?
   b. To what extent do actors share a writing culture?

In terms of text-structures we focused on cause-effect, which we hypothesised might make up a large part of incident reports.

4. Methods of investigation

In relation to the immediately relevant Swedish situation, we tried both to get a general picture and to focus on a particular case, investigating the relevance and effectiveness of the course in relation to its wider aims.

To get a general picture, we distributed a small-scale questionnaire to former students on their current use and retrospective view of Nordberg’s course. The rest of the investigation was carried out in an established Swedish high-tech engineering company with an R&D section and a production section. Although this was a potentially bilingual situation (with dealings with overseas customers in English), the discourse community we examined wrote entirely in Swedish. We heard a one-hour account by a middle manager in the R&D department of the writing tasks and problems he and his staff encountered and discussed the issues with him afterwards; we spoke more briefly to other members of staff in his department during a course Nordberg gave specifically for this group; and we also
examined the very small number of real texts to which we were given access.

Data from the the British software company also enabled us to judge how far our Swedish case was typical. They very generously sent us a CD-ROM with individual examples of many of the genres they used, but also agreed to give one of us (Shaw) information in an interview. He read the documents and then spent some two and a half hours at the company’s offices, talking mainly to one senior figure there and for a few minutes to another. On this basis we decided to investigate the software design proposal genre and were given a number of examples to work from (Shaw 2003).

5. Results

The first group of research questions, about text-structures and genres, was answered partly by the questionnaire and partly by examination of the texts.

The questionnaire was sent out to former students, most of whom are now working at different companies, mostly in jobs they have been educated for, e.g. consultant in the real estate business, program developer, development engineer. 32 questionnaires were sent out, and 17 responses were received after a reminder. This means that the results described below come from a small sample which is likely to represent the more enthusiastic participants.

Table 1 shows that most reported spending much of their time in writing (mentioning generalized genre-names like reports, memos, minutes, instructions, surveys), so writing is a useful skill for most graduates. 80% of the respondents said they wrote in Swedish and only about 25% (also) wrote in English. This corresponds quite well with figures from larger surveys like Johansson (2006). Nickerson (2000: 78) found roughly equal use of English and Dutch in a much larger survey of business in the Netherlands, which may be a somewhat more internationalized environment. In any case writing in Swedish is (still) a key skill for Swedish engineering.
Percentage of time spent writing | Respondents
---|---
0 | 2
1–25 | 6
25–50 | 6
50+ | 3

Table 1. Percentage of time spent writing.

The more the respondents write the more positive answers they give about the skills and text-structures/genres taught in Nordberg’s course, whatever the relations of cause and effect are here. They tended to consider the genre tasks to have been more useful than the text-type ones (Table 2). In particular they considered the integrated ‘technical report’ and ‘letter of application’ tasks to have been more useful than the more decontextualized ‘cause analysis’ and ‘literature report’ ones. One interpretation of this would be that the integrated and genre-oriented tasks had most face validity, even in retrospect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text-type</th>
<th>very useful (%)</th>
<th>useful (%)</th>
<th>not so useful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cause analysis</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem solution</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>argumentation</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literature report</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter of application + cv</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technical report</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Evaluation of usefulness of tasks (figures rounded to nearest whole number).

The documents we were allowed to see in the company were Technical Reports: a fairly familiar genre. Typical section headings were Summary, Background, Procedure, Results, Conclusion, Discussion, reflecting an underlying Problem-Solution-Evaluation pattern (Hoey 1983). We did not find any stretches of text that corresponded to the models of the cause-effect text-type that had been taught, but of course cause-effect expressions occurred in the Results, Conclusion and Discussion. Very little in this R&D environment corresponded to the incident reports we had visualized. At the level of
vocabulary and notion we focused on cause-effect expressions, and found that a wide range were used appropriately. For example we found the Swedish equivalents of *the result showed*, *an analysis showed that*, *a lot of use has been made of*, *is caused by*, *resulted in*, *one major cause is*, and *be strongly influenced by*, showing that the register taught to students was of use in a professional context.

The Swedish in the reports was often incorrect by prescriptive standards. It seemed to be a widespread belief in the company that the linguistic quality of reports was declining. A librarian/archivist said that the reports were getting “worse” and this was because of technological change and less generous staffing. “Previously” secretaries had checked reports before they were submitted to managers and managers had had time to review them before they were archived. The meaning of a belief of this kind is unclear, of course, but an interpretation is hazarded below.

As to the potential differences in sociocultural environment between learner and workplace genres, our primary informant, whom we shall call Andreas, was an engineer in a fairly high position in the R&D section. He described in some detail how this section worked in project groups set up to develop a particular product. The project groups have links outward to clients and upward to management. They have a definite life from a few months to a few years and this life is marked by production of a series of documents which determine the fate of the project. There are downward-going documents from senior management, setting targets and deadlines and assigning resources, project-internal ‘horizontal’ meeting minutes and technical reports of tests, etc., and at predetermined intervals upward-going Status Reports. All these documents are in Swedish.

Status reports (similar to the progress reports described by Barabas (1990), cited in Abbott / Eubanks (2005)) were produced according to a template set by company policy and formulated as part of a project handbook. Unfortunately, like much in competitive R&D-oriented companies, this template was confidential, and all we could find out was that Status, Planning, Activity, Resources, and Time were the main content.

Andreas considered that in this company, involved in quite basic research, goals were set on the base of anticipated demand rather
than customer order, and the viability of projects was judged by senior management in terms of their chances of producing a saleable project. Hence the Status Reports were important and influential documents, and in writing them the project members had an opportunity to define reality in such a way as to influence the decisions made. Andreas’ position meant that he had to receive Status Reports from a number of project groups and pass on summaries and recommendations to a senior management committee.

Andreas focused on these Status Reports (rather than the downward-going goals and plans he himself had a hand in writing, for example). It was the hope of the company, he said, that structured communication would lead to structured work routines, and that better knowledge of what was going on in the company would lead to greater commitment on all sides. He emphasized that report writers must keep in mind the communicative aim and not merely follow the format.

It was interesting, in the light of a view of documents as sites of struggle for power, that Andreas’ main worry was about the quality of these reports. He underlined the importance of meeting audience expectations. He thought that reports were often too detailed and too technical, insufficiently focused on the key information that would allow appropriate decisions to be made. He received reports starting in “atomic detail”, he complained, and “I get telephone directories for reports.” Writers often produced a diary of what they had done or long accounts of technical problems, rather than focusing on what they hoped to achieve – the intended decision of the management committee. The significance of such complaints is discussed below.

The professionals who produced these texts at the project level did not always recognize Andreas’ description. They thought that detail was necessary to give an accurate description of the status of their project. The issues involved could not be understood without some detailed background. They also, perhaps disingenuously suggested that length was a positive feature in reports. One participant in the seminar Nordberg conducted for report writers working in this department, a former student at our own university, said: “At KTH [i.e. in engineering classes] we are instructed to write ‘at least 5 pages,
at least 8 pages’, and I always think ‘Is this enough?’ when I write reports here”.

A number of comments from the British software company can be related to these points. First, power clearly resided in the way documents were formulated. Informants expressed this by saying that proposals in response to invitations to tender (the genre on which we focused in that context) have several purposes. One is persuasive or promotional – to persuade the client to buy the package. Another is regulatory – to ensure that both sides have the same understanding of the bargain, and in particular that the client will provide the access required for successful design. Another is the interesting function of knowledge-transformation (Odell 1992), using the text to reformulate and redefine the situation. Informants said that the client typically comes with initial requirements which are both incomplete, in the sense that simply constructing a program to meet them will not achieve the client’s real aims, and ill-formed, so that they are not organised in a way that makes sense to the programmers. It is therefore necessary to negotiate a reformulation of the requirements into a form that is meaningful to both partners, which an informant described as “what they told us but in our own words”. The composition of the proposal involves knowledge transformation and the document records it. The regulatory and transformative functions of the proposals are examples of the way documents wield power. Because the ‘struggle’ in this case is with outside partners, it can be discussed openly.

Second, writing training at university seemed here too to influence workplace writing in a way that might not be helpful. Software designers in the British company observed that their training in natural-science departments in university led to a writing style dominated by impersonality and passives, while their colleagues in the marketing department preferred a style with more active verbs and interpersonal markers.

Third, companies often make similar somewhat arbitrary efforts to control the texts produced by their employees. A parallel to the confidential Status Report template used in Sweden was a design proposal template which had both company-prescribed headings (and boilerplate text) and a particular style. Markers of epistemic modality
and plain futurity (described as words like may, can, will, probably etc.) had to be avoided in released texts, producing a characteristic promotional discourse in which one-off procedures and future events are represented as repeated and factual. Furthermore price was to be avoided and replaced by cost so that The total cost of the development is meant ‘The total price for this development will be...’.

6. Discussion

On the text level we can conclude that even practicing engineers see genres, with their greater face validity, as more transferable than the more abstract text-types. Furthermore there are no identifiable documents or even parts of documents that correspond to the ‘pure’ text-type cause analysis. This is not to say that text-type tasks are in fact irrelevant, but it confirms that they are mere enabling tasks which do not provide holistic practice in workplace writing skills.

The differences in sociocultural environment between learner and workplace genres are indeed considerable and one can pick out three which became salient in our investigation.

First, workplace writers often have to conform to local norms that may not be extremely well-grounded linguistically (being determined by other factors) and learn to make use of them to achieve their aims.

Second, it looks on the surface as though there is some rather negative transfer from learner tasks to workplace writing. A Swedish report writer claimed that he had learned that length was a virtue from knowledge-display tasks in which the more knowledge is displayed the better, and the British programmers maintained that they brought a positivistic ‘impersonal’ scientific writing style from their university studies. How far these are genuinely transfers from writing learner tasks, and how far they actually reflect the writing cultures of the departments in the company we do not know.
Third, the primacy of audience expectations is even more questionable than in the learner genres. The software designers were quite explicit about the role of their documents in defining tasks in terms they could understand rather than the terms the clients would spontaneously use. The purpose of the texts was to educate the audience to understand the writers’ interpretation of the situation.

A similar desire to fight on one’s own ground might lie behind the difficulties with Status Reports. Andreas’ complaints were exactly those of the American supervisors in Barabas (1990): good reports contained processed information and poor ones contained too much unprocessed material, presenting as conclusions what the supervisors considered to be just data or findings. These are very common complaints in relation to upward-going texts, and they are normally assumed to reflect skill differences. However, there is less discussion of problems in downward-going documents, which suggests that another factor may play a part here. It seems possible that the writers of the reports gave technical details because that emphasized their superior knowledge and ability in the particular areas involved. Put another way, they were trying to educate their audience to understand their interpretation of the situation, but as they were relatively lacking in power, their interpretation was not treated as valid.

By contrast, Andreas’ enthusiastic endorsement of the idea that reports should contain only the information that their audience needs might reflect his desire to move them on to the ground of strategy and resource allocation which were his strength. Because he was in authority, his interpretation of a ‘good text’ was the relevant one.

The Status Reports may actually embody a struggle to represent the project as insiders see it, rather than merely describing the aspects management wishes to highlight. Like the student cited by Beaufort, perhaps, the project leaders could write as Andreas wants them to, but prefer not to. Correspondingly, Andreas’ attitudes might be a transfer of responsibility from the reader downwards in the hierarchy. He describes the reports he reads as badly written – but a similar analysis is not applied to the downward-going documents he writes.

The archivist’s complaint about the quality of the reports might also be a territorial marking of this kind. Just as subordinates always write bad reports, and always have, so standards of literacy are always
declining and have been doing so since Aristotle and Confucius. One can imagine that it is demoralizing to work with highly technical reports of which one understands only a little, and tempting to assert one’s expertise in an area where the technical staff probably feel themselves vulnerable.

One need not question that there are good and bad or effective and ineffective texts in purely linguistic terms, but one cannot deny that evaluation of texts is affected by the power relations of reader and writer and the agendas of each. We can in fact visualize a text in a technical business-communication situation as the focus of six forces. It will be affected by:

1. the writer’s skill and experience, or skill deriving from experience (Winsor 1999) in communication;
2. the writer’s communicative habits or background, including training, disciplinary culture, etc.;
3. the writer’s presuppositions and expectations about the reader’s requirements;
4. the public purpose of the text (for example to give an account of the present state of the project). This is presumably often the ostensible purpose of the genre being written;
5. the writer’s private purpose (to please the reader, to assign blame, to ensure continuation or abandonment of the project, to reveal or conceal what is perceived as the truth, etc.);
6. house styles or requirements.

However, the discourse available to our informants to discuss these issues seemed to focus on items 1, 4, and 6 and to neglect the possibility that a sense of dissatisfaction might come from conflicts around factors 2 and 5 within the engineering group. As for audience expectations, conformity to these seems to be too dependent on power-relations for them to be unambiguous guides.
7. Conclusions

We have already noted that text-type tasks do not represent the textual norms of actual writing tasks required in the workplace, although there is no particular reason to believe that they are not useful enabling tasks. This principle can actually be extended to the sociocultural norms of genres. It seems likely that there is not much consensus about the purpose and audiences of the documents written in some companies and that actors often do not share a writing culture. However, workplace writers may have rather little meta-language for describing conflicts on the sociocultural level, even if they have considerable awareness of the sociocultural aspects of the genres they use (Abbott / Eubanks 2005). New engineers would be better prepared for the writing situations they find themselves in if as well as enabling tasks for achieving the textual norms of genres, they were offered enabling tasks for discussing their sociocultural norms. This implies providing language for discussion of the relation of texts to their purposes, and audiences, and the kind of conflicts that may arise on this level. One could discuss reasons why a student’s work could fail to conform to a teacher’s expectations and generalize from that to the conflicts that might arise in the workplace. One could consider how the ‘report’ as a learner genre can look very similar to a workplace report and yet be subject to very different norms because of its sociocultural context (Ruiz-Garrido 2005).

These factors mean that the rhetorical question asked by Abbott and Eubanks (2005: 173): “Who…..would disagree that a text should be clear, concise, accurate and geared towards the needs of its readers?” could be answered “Someone who does not prioritise the writing task highly or someone whose purpose is better served by not giving the readers what they ask for.”

We cannot teach the norms of workplace writing as a pendant to a course aimed at learner genres. They are too various and complex, and vary too much across companies and industries. In this sense text-type tasks may indeed be complementary to genre tasks, whose face
validity is probably not as transferable as students may believe. But the advantage of genre tasks is that they provide an opportunity to provide a transferable discourse for identifying the real causes of workplace conflicts around texts. Just as text-structures provide a tool-
box from which texts conforming to any genre norms can be assembled, discussion and meta-analysis of the sociocultural norms of any genres – even learner ones – can provide a toolbox for identifying and clarifying the sociocultural norms of any new genre. So perhaps when students are asked to write a text with cause-to-effect or effect-
to-cause structure, they should be told to write two versions, pointing the blame in different directions.

References


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