Writing and thinking

Genre theory has a dominant influence on literacy teaching in schools. Myra Barrs assesses its influence on children's thinking and writing

Genre theory has been a seminal influence on the teaching of writing in the UK for the past ten years. How did this come about? In Australia, as Cope, Kalantzis et al (1993) explain in their historical account, the genre movement began as a group of academic genre linguists who were critical of 'progressivist pedagogy' in teaching writing. They argued successfully for the adoption of a genre-based approach to writing in curriculum documents produced for the New South Wales region. They opposed the then prevailing Gravesian 'process writing' approach in which children are encouraged to choose their own topics for writing and develop their texts through drafting and negotiation. The genre linguists went on to generate genre-based curriculum resources, training materials for teachers, and a set of textbooks that were distributed in tens of thousands of Australian schools. These developments aroused international interest, especially in the UK, the USA and Israel.

The dominance of genre linguistics in literacy teaching has coincided with a period of increasing determination on the part of governments, in Australia, the UK and

elsewhere, to intervene more in the curriculum and pedagogy used in schools. As Frances Christie notes in the book *Literacy and Schooling* (1998), both the New Labour government elected in 1996 in the UK and the Labour government which came to power in 1997 in Australia made literacy a key political theme. In the UK, the Australian genre linguists' approach to the teaching of writing, already reflected in the English National Curriculum and the LINC project, was taken up more systematically by the National Literacy Strategy. Their categorisation of school genres and their model of genre literacy pedagogy both clearly influenced the National Literacy Strategy (NLS).

Before the 1980s writing was an undertheorised and underdeveloped aspect of literacy, particularly in the primary school. To appreciate this one only has to compare the teaching of writing with the teaching of reading. Reading has been the focus of a whole reading industry with a massive research literature and a mountain of methods, instructional materials and assessment practices. It's long been centre stage in discussions of literacy; until the introduction of the National Curriculum and its accompanying assessments, the usual way of gauging children's literacy levels was through their reading ages.

Writing, by contrast, was not routinely assessed (until age 16) and no well-developed criteria existed for its assessment. Nor did any systematised approaches to teaching writing exist, though 'methods' proliferated for the teaching of reading. But the realisation was growing that writing was a key area of literacy learning and an essential route to educational achievement. The genre theorists, with their clear agenda and map of the territory, their pedagogical model, their linguistic criteria for assessment, their research literature and their track record in the Australian educational system, appeared just at the right time. For quite a while now, they have been the only paradigm in town.

Genre literacy teaching also answered a call, which became particularly strident in the mid-1990s in the UK, for the 'direct and explicit' teaching of grammar. This was part of the back to basics agenda, strongly promoted by Chris Woodhead, the then Chief Inspector, which gave rise both to revisions of the English National Curriculum and to the National Literacy Strategy, with its strong emphasis on phonics, spelling and grammar. In Australia the genre linguists presented themselves as an alternative to progressivism in literacy teaching. But they have also been careful to define themselves as just as much of an alternative to 'traditional' teaching approaches. Cope and Kalantzis assert: 'Far from being part of the "back to basics" movement, genre literacy teaching objects equally strongly to both traditional and progressivist pedagogy.' (p.6: 1998) However, the genre school's most vitriolic criticisms have always been reserved for progressive education:

'Because it has turned its back on language, progressive education is in a very poor position to take up this challenge (of direct teaching of genres) It lacks the tools to analyse and construct the curriculum genres that could be used; and it lacks the tools to monitor children's speaking and writing to see if development is taking place.' (Martin, Christie and Rothery p.78: ND)

Writing, speaking and reading

Writing is a skill that is acquired more slowly and with more difficulty than reading, as the SATs results at KS2 are beginning to demonstrate. It involves dealing with so many different things at once. Marlene Scardamalia observes:

'Even a casual analysis makes it clear that the number of things that must be dealt with simultaneously in writing is stupendous: handwriting, spelling, punctuation, word choice, syntax, textual connections, purpose, organisation, clarity, rhythm, euphony, the possible reactions of various possible

readers, and so on. To pay conscious attention to all of these would overload the information-processing capacity of the most towering intellects.' (quoted in Bereiter p.80: 1980)

Until they have achieved an almost unconscious control of some of these elements, children are working overtime as they write, juggling all of these demands.

But in addition, putting thoughts into writing involves embarking on what Vygotsky calls 'the longest journey that thought has to travel'. Translating inner speech, which is condensed and abbreviated in character, into writing, the most elaborate and detailed form of language, requires the writer to spell out meanings as well as words.

'The change from maximally compact inner speech to maximally detailed written speech requires what might be called deliberate semantics – deliberate structuring of the web of meaning.' (Vygotsky p.182: 1986).

Of course, as Vygotsky points out, between inner speech and writing stands oral speech or talk. Talk is the half-way house between thinking and writing, and once we appreciate this fully we have a better way in to the teaching of writing. The genre theorists however (and this is one of the most troubling things about them) are intent on drawing a sharp distinction between spoken and written language, rather than looking at the continuities between them. And while they acknowledge that young children's writing is likely to be close to speech, they see learning to write as a completely different kind of process from learning to speak:

'Children cannot be expected to understand in their own spoken words what generations of scholars have interpreted in writing.' (Martin, Christie and Rothery p. 67: ND) *'Learning to speak and learning literacy are simply not comparable processes'*, (Cope and Kalantzis p.61: 1993).

This is an unfortunate position because it suggests that children's speech resources are not going to be particularly useful to them in learning to write, which is manifestly not the case. It ignores some of the most important work on the development of written language in young children that has been achieved in recent years, including the work of James Britton and his associates. Britton argued that Sapir's theory of the essentially expressive nature of all speech was the key to the beginnings of writing; when they begin to write children's first resource is their speech, and the language they write is expressive language, close to speech. While concurring with the fact that early writing is based on speech, the genre linguists do not see speech-like writing as something to encourage and build on, but rather as something to discourage and move children away from.

Nor do the genre theorists see reading as a centrally important way of learning written language. A recent classroom-based research project by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education and published as *The Reader in the Writer* (Barrs and Cork, 2001) found that children readily took on the language of literary texts that they had read, or that had been read to them, picking up on the rhythms and patterns of texts in ways that were easily trackable. Writing in role, as one of the characters in the book, they were able to access areas of language and feeling that they might not normally be thought to be aware of. Analysis of their own texts showed them gaining control over their narratives and their invented worlds, taking on a narrative voice more confidently, and developing a heightened sense of a reader and of a reader's needs. They echoed the tunes of the texts they read, sometimes showing a chameleon-like ability to imitate a style. There is no need to suppose that this kind of learning (which was largely unconscious in character) could not occur just as easily in the context of reading well-written information books, but this is an area that genre theorists leave relatively unexplored: their focus is on teaching rather than learning, and writing rather than reading.

The transmission teaching of genres

Genre theorists see learning to write as, above all, learning to master key written genres – those which are important in school (not necessarily outside it). The key genres that they have identified are: report, explanation, procedure, discussion, recount and narrative (all terms familiar to British teachers from their use within the NLS). Because they believe that children cannot acquire these key school-related genres on their own, the genre theorists put a very heavy emphasis indeed on the need for transmission teaching of the features of the genres.

J.R.Martin's 'wheel' model of genre literacy pedagogy begins with modelling: presenting a text as an example of a genre and then analysing its generic features (which may include function, structure, language, grammar, use of tenses and so on). Modelling is followed by 'joint construction of a new text in the same genre' (or shared writing) and then by 'independent construction of text', where pupils write their own texts within this same genre. Although there is the recognition that the spaces in between these stages will need to be filled with some attention to the curriculum and to the actual content of the writing, most of the focus of this approach is on teaching the generic structures themselves. Again, the pedagogic sequence here is familiar to British teachers from its use in the NLS, where however it has often been

abbreviated and accelerated because of the demands of the over-stuffed NLS Framework.

The genre linguists argue that only this kind of linear transmission pedagogy is effective as a way of inducting pupils into unfamiliar generic structures. They also maintain, naively, that direct and explicit teaching is needed in order to support pupils from working-class and linguistically diverse backgrounds who have less opportunity to pick up 'socially powerful' genres: 'the broader the access to a variety of linguistic genres, the broader the social access' (Cope and Kalantzis p.68). But some disagree – there are growing differences between members of the genre school – and among these is Gunther Kress, one of the earliest genre theorists. Kress seems to have become increasingly dissatisfied with an approach to genre literacy teaching that is so focused on form and so didactic in nature. He observes:

'A pedagogy which is satisfied to leave knowledge of forms – even where this is accompanied by explicit discussions of the social and cultural effects and effectiveness of forms – as a sufficient goal will fail in terms of ...larger pedgagogic and social aims. This is quite apart from the fact that a curriculum based on knowledge of form is always more disposed to be taught via a more authoritative and teacher-centred, rather than a less authoritative and child-centred, pedagogy'. (Kress, p.31: 1993)

Genre, the new formalism

The authoritative (or authoritarian) and teacher-centred nature of genre literacy teaching is apparent. Genre linguists really do believe that there is only one way to teach writing, and they tend to be contemptuous of anyone who disagrees with them. But as Kress suggests, the main drawback of the new formalism that genre literacy teaching represents is that it puts so much emphasis on form and structure and so little on content. The aim of the classic approach to genre teaching represented by Martin's 'wheel' model of pedagogy is to teach the class to produce a generic text type – not to enable them to use writing for sorting out and setting out their ideas. Terry Eagleton, in writing about the Russian Formalists, literary critics who put all the emphasis on form, says:

'Far from seeing form as the expression of content, they stood the relationship on its head: content was merely the 'motivation' of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise.' (Eagleton, p.3: 1983)

This is rather how the genre linguists look today. Their reductionist view of what is involved in writing and in teaching writing puts all the emphasis on textual structures and linguistic features. It leaves out the most essential element of writing: the writer's subject, the content, what is to be communicated. The genre theorists would strongly dispute this. They assert that 'genres make meaning; they are not simply a set of formal structures into which meanings are poured ...language *makes* meaning, and dualising meaning and form is fundamentally misleading.' (Martin, Christie and Rothery, p.64: ND) But this is still to put the cart before the horse. As Bakhtin puts it: *'In practical communicative language the meaning of the communication (content) is the most essential element. Everything else is a means to this end.'* (Bakhtin p. 87: 1978)

The effects on pedagogy of formalism can be deadening. Some of the writing cited by the genre theorists may be exemplary of writing in a particular genre, but they are still not interesting examples of pupils' writing. For instance, a text entitled 'The Vet', composed by an early-years class with their teacher, reads like an exercise in imitating a rather dull information book:

The Vet

The vet looks after all sorts of animals, including pets and wild animals like those in the zoo, circus and farm animals.

The vet makes sick animals better by giving them medicine, injections or pills. Sometimes he has to put them to sleep and operate on them. If the animals are too sick he gives them a needle which puts them to sleep and they die.

The vet wears a clean, white coat and when he operates he wears rubber gloves and boots and a mask over his face ...'

The commentary which follows, by Frances Christie, seems to be telling us what it is that genre linguists would admire in this text:

'The first stage offers a generalisation of a kind which classifies the occupation of being a vet, hence marking it out as different from other occupations. This is built through some important linguistic choices. First an opening topical theme ('the vet') serves to mark the topic of the first element of the genre. Second, there are two process choices of importance: the vet 'looks after'

animals 'including' the various ones listed. The first of these, a material process, tells us what the vet does, while the second, an identifiying process, helps to establish the animals with which he deals. Thus is provided crucially important information about what a vet does. The subsequent elements all build description of different aspects of the vet's behaviour … In general … the language has been used confidently to build the various stages of schematic structure and thus to serve the overall function of reporting on the responsibilities of the occupational group known as veterinarians.' (Christie, p.176: 1998)

This rather plodding evaluation focuses entirely on how this writing conforms to certain formal features of a schematic structure. But what I think we miss in the writing is any indication of the children's engagement with the topic, any individual flavour, any evidence that these are young children whose own words are being used, any sense of whether the children were drawing on direct experience as well as secondary sources. The text is devoid of affect ('he gives them a needle which puts them to sleep and they die' seems a bald way for young children to sum up this aspect of what a vet does). It appears to be completely shaped by the teacher, and by the generic form.

Genre and learning

It now seems to be generally accepted that the original version of the Literacy Hour did not support children's writing development well, especially at KS2. It allowed too little time for extended writing and for the development of a text. The influence of genre theory on the NLS Framework compounded these difficulties. A rapid gallop through different text types is no help to children trying to distinguish between different forms of writing and internalise their features. Weaker writers barely come to grips with one genre before they are faced with the next one.

Moreover, these exercises in writing in particular genres lack a convincing curriculum context. 'Procedures' or instructions could often be better taught in the context of science or design and technology; 'arguments' could find better starting points in history classes. This is becoming more generally accepted now, to the benefit of children's learning across the curriculum as well as their learning of genres.

Some revisionist genre linguists in Australia are promoting a more curiculum-based way of working: in Callaghan et al's 'process-based' approach to teaching genre *'the aim is not just to teach the class to produce a generic text type. Rather it aims to use language to help teach the abstraction of the content knowledge and the skills of generalising and synthesising and hypothesising.'* (Callaghan et al, p.201:1993)

This recognition that writing has an important cognitive dimension, and is a basic means of thinking and learning, is a positive move.

Writing across the curriculum

In the UK, educationalists like Christine Counsell, are leading the way in showing how writing can be developed as part of children's learning of history. Counsell (1997) sees that teaching writing is a key part of teaching thinking: she provides students not with structures for writing, but with structures for thinking about history topics. Some of these structures involve pupils in literally manipulating evidence, for instance by grouping and classifying statements presented on cards, and discarding those they think are irrelevant to the question under discussion. Some of her activities involve using diagrams, like grids, to generate ideas around a particular topic. Many of the tasks are intended to be collaborative in character. As they talk together, children draw together what they have learned, generate ideas, and begin to construct a convincing argument based on evidence.

Counsell teaches children how to structure an argument by asking them to identify their 'big points' in turn, and then to back each of these up with 'little points', or detailed evidence. This emphasis on the big points helps pupils to see the wood despite also looking at the trees, and to keep the main line of their argument in mind. It also works as a route into structuring paragraphs – Counsell places due importance on the paragraph as a building block in constructing a written argument. But it's important to note that Counsell focuses on teaching the thinking behind the written forms. She isn't presenting a ready-made writing frame, she's helping young writers to clarify their ideas and argue them convincingly. Her work fits easily into the kind of work on thinking skills that concerns readers of this journal, but it is also an important contribution to the literature on teaching writing within a curriculum context.

Stories

Learning to write, in Halliday's words, is 'learning how to mean' – on paper. Meaning-making is at the heart of the process, and since these are the learner's meanings we are talking about, the learner needs to be engaged with the learning and with the writing. Very often the genres that engage children most readily are stories, for reasons that are not hard to seek and that have been explored by many thinkers including James Britton, Shirley Brice Heath Barbara Hardy, and Harold Rosen. The genre theorists don't like the dominance of story as a genre in the primary school, but they ought at least to look at why it has come about, and at the role of narrative in learning and thinking. By

turning their backs on both spoken language and on story they have ignored the two main routes into written language that are readily available to young children.

Genre theory contains some undoubted insights that are relevant to everyone concerned with teaching literacy. Some of its ways of looking at texts and at language are potentially, in Geoff Williams' words, helpful 'tools for reflection'. At best, these tools could help learners to look at writing and texts in more critical and also in more inventive and playful ways. Cope and Kalantzis do point out that *The Jolly Postman* is one of the liveliest examples of a text which plays with and disrupts genre distinctions and exploits intertextual references. Children enjoy taking on other voices, other personae, and other genres, and their capacity for creative imitation with language needs to be exploited in the teaching of writing. So theories of genre need to be part of the repertoire of literacy teachers – but not the whole agenda.

Writing and thinking

Writing is an amazing technology for thinking. When we write, we can literally, perhaps for the first time, 'see what we mean.' Taking the thoughts out of your head and putting them on paper enables them to be viewed, reviewed, worked on and changed. Janet Emig in *The Web of Meaning* (1983), describes writing as the 'complex evolutionary development of thought, steadily and graphically visible and available throughout as a record of the journey from jottings and notes to full discursive formulation. ' This focus on the development of a text, viewed not as routine drafting but as the development of thinking, suggests why a 'process writing' approach could be a helpful part of learning in any curriculum area. One problem with school writing, and with genre theory, is that both are too concerned with finished texts and not sufficiently concerned with thinking, or with the kind of 'jottings and notes', lists, memos, and interim texts which can really help to move thinking forward.

Once we learn to use writing to construe experience and develop ideas, writing and thinking can have a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. When we consider how useful writing is for thinking and learning it would seem a waste if it were locked into exercises in reproducing genres, with little personal engagement or commitment from pupils and little time available for developing texts and ideas.

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