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9-30-2010

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Burkholder, Joel M., "Redefining Sources as Social Acts: Genre Theory in Information Literacy Instruction" (2010). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. Paper 413.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/413

Library Philosophy and Practice 2010

ISSN 1522-0222

Redefining Sources as Social Acts: Genre Theory in Information Literacy Instruction

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Introduction

While the concept of the rhetorical situation is regularly used in composition instruction, its value to information literacy instruction has rarely been addressed. As defined by Bitzer, the rhetorical situation consists of three interrelated elements: an exigence, an audience and a set of constraints. The exigence is the problem, described as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be." An audience is the group "to be constrained in decision and action" by the introduction of some discourse. The set of constraints is "made up of persons, events, objects and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence." (1968, p. 6). In addressing a given rhetorical situation, a writer must consider each of these elements to effectively communicate a message, since each element influences the appropriate response. I suggest that this rhetorical situation is of critical importance to the researcher, as well. In describing the constraints of the situation more thoroughly, Bitzer suggests that understanding the relevant "beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like” are essential in motivating audiences into action (1968, p. 8).

In *Information Literacy as a Liberal Art,* Shapiro and Hughes argue that being information literate implies a responsibility to active citizenship, using information “to be intelligent shapers of the information society rather than its pawns" (1996). The skills of information literacy are not limited to the world of scholarship; they are essential for all citizens in a democratic society. Information-literate individuals must consciously identify situations and the possible means of dealing with them. This process is more complicated than simply locating and evaluating relevant and credible resources. It requires a meta-awareness of how the selection of appropriate resources aids in the formulation of proper responses to any situation. In teaching the research process, librarians have tendency to overlook the selection of sources as a matter of rhetorical choice. However, Hendricks and Quinn assert that students are usually unaware of how citations are chosen "to persuade readers of their argument and to give their statements greater authority" and "to supply evidence and demonstrate that writers are familiar with the field" (2000, p. 451). It is unfortunate that to date little research has been conducted which investigates how students utilize their sources rhetorically (Petric, 2007). More effort has been devoted to simply counting the number and type for sources appearing in student bibliographies (Davis, 2002; Hovde, 2000).

When selecting sources, students may be lazy, opting for the path of least resistance by choosing Web sites over journal articles. Before we settle too quickly on this single conclusion, we might also consider that students are confused—or worse—unaware of the rhetorical implications of their choices. Several individuals in the library literature have commented on how students tend to view all sources as equivalent in type and/or quality (Hall, 2001; Brabazon, 2006). More information literacy instruction is the

obvious response to improve students' source differentiation. However, I suggest that there is a fundamental flaw inherent in that response. That flaw involves what we currently define as *sources.*

As part of the information literacy initiative, librarians teach students how to develop a critical awareness of the sources used in their research. Unfortunately, we seem to ignore this particular advice in our current definition of sources. What are *sources* ? We speak of them quite often, instructing students how to locate sources, evaluate sources, select sources, and use sources. We use the term unquestioningly, as if its definition was obvious and its utility proven. But what exactly are they? As a term, it is a generic classification that encompasses an impossibly broad range of material; encompassing countless information types, and formats. There is little indication of the varying quality and content a student may discover. By meaning so much, it means very little. The term describes an idealized version of reality and cannot account for the overwhelming complexity of the information environment; nor can it possibly illuminate the rhetorical nature of sources.

For reasons that appear to be born out of convenience and expedience, most attempts to define sources do so by describing aspects of their physical natures. Due to our increasingly digital environment, these kinds of definitions are becoming much more difficult to defend. First, students engaging in the actual research process encounter an overwhelming number and variety of sources; not everything can be easily identified as a specific information type or format, let alone classified as such. In his criticism of format-focused instruction, Swanson asserts, “a single article may exist on a Web site, in print, or a subscription database” (2007, p.327). Clearly identifying a source presents practical challenges in the process of research. The larger problem with definitions that focus on sources as mere objects is that they neglect their significance as communicative acts.

Sources—from personal blogs to television news stories to scientific journal articles--are different, because they address different rhetorical situations. To perform as recognizable examples of a particular type of source, writers must make appropriate rhetorical choices that suit the purposes and the audiences they are addressing. Traditional definitions identify particular features of a source after it has already been created. They cannot adequately explain why the community--or context--that produces the text influences the choice of, and provides meaning to, the formal choices that are used in its construction. Moreover, traditional definitions cannot fully describe the ideological components of sources. A community's choice of a particular form sets and reinforces expectations in the readers of its communicative acts. Without understanding the expectations of the context, readers may have difficulty in forming responses that are appropriate to the situation. To address these issues, a more dynamic and robust definition of *sources* is needed.

Modern genre theory may provide us an answer by bridging the gap between what a form really is and what it is actually designed to do. In this theory, genre is no longer solely about the traditional classes of literary texts or other forms of art. It is about how people use language to accomplish specific tasks.

Genre Theory

In her essay “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller defined genres as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (1984, p. 159). These actions are language based and conducted for specific purposes. Their full meaning is contextually dependent and can only be understood by looking at the “situation” and the “social context in which that situation arose” (Miller, 1984, p.163). As described by Miller, these situations are “social occurrences,” not the “material configuration of objects, events and people” (1984, p. 152). The key element for genre formation is reoccurrence. Within discourse communities (e.g. scientists, journalists or gossip columnists), certain situations (e.g. the need to report on scientific findings, breaking news or celebrity gossip) reoccur with some regularity, demanding some kind of typified response. These typifications (e.g. the scientific method, the inverted pyramid, anonymous sources) are chosen for their consistent ability to address the situation. As more members of the community adopt these responses, formal conventions develop that place constraints on who can

contribute, what they can contribute, when they can contribute and how they can contribute. These are not formulaic responses. Acculturated "[g]enre users can choose among obligatory moves—those aspects of a genre that are essential to others' identification of it as a genre—and optional moves—those aspects of a genre that are more flexible" (Dean, 2008, p. 14). As social responses, genres are situation and context specific, different communities will use different language, and therefore different genres, to fulfill different purposes in addressing the similar situations (Devitt, 2004). If we define our genres as "acts" that are socially constructed, it becomes possible to understand them as "a collection of communicative events,"' that share a "set of communicative purposes" within discourse communities (Swales, 1990, p. 46). Selecting appropriate sources must become a matter of understanding various purposes and not strictly matching needs to arbitrary content types or forms.

Genre theory offers us the potential to transform our understanding of sources. But while we are changing our definition of sources, we must also change our *understanding* of genres. Many libraries still view genres in the classical sense—convenient categories to classify films (California State University, San Marcos, 2008) and music types (University of Arizona Library, 2009). This may partially be the reason why only Simmons has argued for the use of genre theory in library instruction. Her application, however, is limited to helping students understand the genres of academic, disciplinary discourse as "social constructions that have developed in response to social need" (2005, p.302). While helpful in allowing students to understand the generic ways information is communicated in their field of study, it does not address the social nature of other types of sources.

Problems with our Current Definitions of Sources

To help students select sources, librarians have a long tradition of collecting and classifying physical objects. Unfortunately, none of them focus on the social nature of sources. We have developed rules that define sources by classifying their actual content and/or their material form. Content is the measure by which call numbers and subject headings are assigned to provide convenient order and access. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign describes their ability to "identify and pull together under a common umbrella information about a given subject" (2009). The Duke University Libraries instruct students "Take Advantage" of how "Libraries Classify Books" (2009). We tend to divide sources based on format. According to Bolner and Poirier in *The Research Process: Books & Beyond,* "The term format refers to the general physical quality or appearance of an information source" (2007, p. 2). In this way, formal differences are the means to tell one type of source from another. There is no definitive list of extant formats, but there does seem to be some general consensus of those that are acceptable: books, serials, Web sites and multi-media materials (Bolner & Poirier, 2001; Quaratiello, 2007; Riedling, 2002). What most closely resembles actual library practice, however, is a classification system that combines both approaches. For example, books are usually considered fiction or non-fiction; serials are usually defined as scholarly, popular and trade (Skyline College, n.d.). While each of these systems serves the functional purposes of offering a library service, they may not serve our pedagogical needs so easily. They cannot account for the sheer diversity of available sources, nor can they account for their communicative power. According to Berkenkotter and Huckin, "Traditional generic classifications are pitched at such a broad level that they can describe only the superficial parameters of form and content" (1995, p.14). If this is the case, then it seems that the best we can offer students is superficial understanding of the sources they find. Despite our best efforts, it seems likely that they will continue to misunderstand and misapply them. Before we can redefine sources as genres, we must first explore why our current conceptions are inadequate.

A Class Definition

Classification schemes that organize content (e.g. fiction/nonfiction, scholarly/popular/trade, case study/review/clinical trial) suggest that there is some uniformity, as all members must possess the same content-based characteristic to be considered members of the group. Classifying objects is something librarians know well. It aids in our retrieval and understanding of their general value. (e.g. "Books on the American Revolution are on the second floor." Or "Articles on constructivist education can be found in the

ERIC database.") These schemes are largely arbitrary, since they depend on the specific features that are being classified. Focus on a different feature and by necessity, a different classification scheme is required. To borrow an example from Devitt: an "article in the *New York Times Book Review* can be classified as a review, an essay, a review essay, a magazine article, or journalism" (2004, p. 7). Another example is Viktor Klemperer's, *I Will Bear Witness.* It is a harrowing, personal account of Jewish life in Dresden during Nazi rule. What are its subject headings?: French teachers--Germany--Diaries and Philologists--Germany—Diaries. A student looking for books on German Jews, the Nazi era or the Holocaust may not discover this source simply because of the way it is classified. By limiting the entirety of work to a singular focus, we potentially limit its usefulness and our ability to clearly identify its type.

None of these classifications are inherently wrong. Depending on the circumstances of need, they can be extremely helpful in locating material. As a universal identification tool, however, they are unable to account for the staggering diversity of forms that students may encounter in their research. You can label something, but depending on the purpose for doing so, it can always be labeled something else. Devitt writes, "Defining genre as a kind of text becomes circular, since what we call a kind of text depends on what we think a genre is" (2004, p. 7). This may be why we experience a kind of genre confusion when the differences between classes of sources are blurred. Consider *Dutch,* Edmund Morris's biography of Ronald Regan, in which he describes the president's entire life from a fictional, first-person perspective. Our confusion is the result of not knowing into which category it should be placed. Morris's approach violates the basic objectivity of biographies. Is it a biography? Is it fiction? Should it be considered something entirely new? Depending on your purpose, all three responses may be appropriate. This example suggests that there are no characteristics that can definitively and clearly delineate one group from another.

These definitions and distinctions work for those that understand and use them. Conceptually, separating fiction from non-fiction, Shakespeare's tragedies from his comedies, or the free Web from subscription databases makes perfect sense. It allows us to stratify information, making it easier to isolate specific sources in a larger body of literature. Dividing periodicals into classes such as scholarly, popular and trade can provide a rough idea of the standards that are used in their construction. But while these schemes make sense to our profession, they may not be so clear to our students. As Hoskisson indicates, "The fact that library items are arranged by the call number system is only obvious to us" (1997, p.71). Research has found that students are not always familiar with "library-specific and computer-specific terms" or their definitions (Hutcherson, 2004, p. 253). This problem is compounded by the fact that librarians—at least in the reference interview--often use library jargon without proper definition (Hoskisson, 1997). The other issue involves are use of common terms, like *article* or *index.* If a student does recognize a term, it is often because they are able to recognize it from other, non-library contexts (Chaundhry and Choo, 2001). Though each of these studies is more about the recognition of library jargon than source differentiation, they should raise questions about a classification scheme's ability to clearly define the nature of sources to students.

A Formal Definition

If classification cannot make sense of the overwhelming variety and complexity of sources available, what about the forms they take? When we advise students to find the best sources, we often tell them to find "containers" of information: references materials, books, journals, newspapers, magazines, or Web. Their format is determined by the presence of specific "formal markers" (Devitt, 2004). Using forms to define sources becomes a paradoxical. A journal article can be identified because of its features (e.g. "scholarly language," "writers are experts," "references" and "long, detailed articles"). But these features only have substantial meaning if the source is already defined as a journal article. Forms are a feature of a source, not the source itself.

A container approach is problematic for other reasons. First, a container implies that sources are simply molds of similar type and quality. Content—and any meaning that might result from it—is a secondary concern and simply a feature of the form. It cannot account for the various kinds of content

that may be found within (e.g. interview/feature story/hard news or research article/clinical trial/case study/review of the literature). Second, if a formal marker can be consistently identified in a source, it suggests that forms are relatively static in their composition. As cultures change, so do its media of communication. Serial novels and pulp fiction magazines are two historical examples that were once popular, but have largely vanished. The transformation of HTML Web sites to Web 2.0 applications is a contemporary example.

When we ask students to evaluate sources through a checklist method, we are, in large part, asking them to locate formal indicators that are typical of high-quality information. Below are a few questions from California State University, Chico's CRAAP test:

- Who is the author/publisher/source/sponsor?
- Are the author's credentials or organizational affiliations given?
- What are the author's qualifications to write on the topic?
- Is the information supported by evidence?
- Has the information been reviewed or refereed?
- Are there spelling, grammar, or other typographical errors?
- Do the authors/sponsors make their intentions or purpose clear?
- Does the point of view appear objective and impartial? (2004)

Some of these forms (e.g. peer review, objectivity, or references) are more commonly associated with higher quality sources, like journal articles, books and government documents. Unfortunately, their presence in any given source is not always a consistent method for differentiating types of sources or establishing their quality. As Swales notes, “Exemplars or instances of genres vary in their prototypicality” (1990, p.49). Prototypes are essentially idealized versions of a genre. In actuality, examples may vary considerably in their resemblance to the prototype. To illustrate, consider what the prototypical scholarly journal article may look like. Though it will depend on the discipline, it will most likely contain a number of obligatory components: an investigative method, disciplinary discourse and referencing. But how that information is presented may vary. Authors may use MLA, APA or Chicago styles of citation. They may use footnotes or endnotes. Each choice is a different path to the same goal. All articles are variations on a theme, some seeming more like the prototype than others. Thus, a source may be considered a member of the genre by being similar to the prototype, but not sharing every single characteristic with it.

This kind of classification may be helpful, if we have a clear idea of what those prototypes are supposed to look like within the context of a particular discipline. For scholars and scientists, “[u]nderstanding the genres of written communication in one's field is…essential to professional success;” (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995, p. 1) “they must know how to strategically utilize their knowledge” to “make things happen (i.e., to publish, to exert an influence on the field, to be cited)” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 3). Through immersion in their disciplines, scholars and scientists are granted privileged experience to recognize genre examples and their key quality indicators (i.e. recognized authors in the field, disciplinary discourse appropriate to the discussion, references to previous research). With this baseline, they can easily select the source that will help them succeed in their purposes.

Since students are not yet fully situated within the activities of a discipline, they may have difficulty intuitively telling the differences between sources. While convenient, the CRAAP questions imply that high-quality sources are recognizable because they are constructed according to a rigid set of guidelines. Evaluation is reduced to a simple formula and reinforces the belief that the indicators ARE the source, not simply a feature of it. Meola criticizes the checklist method of evaluation for this very reason, arguing that it “can give the impression that the checklist is a kind of machine that spits out correct web-site evaluations when given the right input” (2004 p.337). Unless we teach the exceptions, as well as the rules, we cannot begin to account for all deviations from the prototype. Certain markers, like references, can be adopted by sources of suspect information, like Wikipedia. Other markers, such as identifiable “single” authors, may not be included in sources of high-quality information, like government Web sites. A

student can find technically “correct” answers for every question and still arrive at a false conclusion. Teaching evaluation in this way forces us to make caveats: “Few sources will meet every criterion in the list, and even those that do may not possess the highest level of quality possible. But if you learn to use the criteria in this list, you will be much more likely to separate the high quality information from the poor quality information” (Harris, 2007). If we view the inclusion or exclusion of forms as a matter of rhetorical choice, than we must understand why those choices are made. This can only be done by understanding the context in which the source operates.

The Reciprocal Relationship between Form and Context

Forms can be important elements in determining any source's overall usefulness and credibility. However, when we separate them from their individual contexts, their meaning may not mean the same thing in every circumstance. In genre theory, form and context are intimately connected; a user cannot understand a form's meaning without looking at the context of its creation. Context is a difficult term to define. In genre theory—and in this paper--it typically refers to the discourse community that produces the genre. However, this may be an oversimplification of a complex issue. As Devitt contends, “Communities…are better defined by their common goals, values or identities than by their common discourse” (2004, p.39). However the context is defined, the culture--“loosely defined as a shared set of material contexts and learned behaviors, values, beliefs and templates”—imposes constraints for and dictates meaning to all its generic forms (Devitt, 2004, p.25). This relationship is reciprocal; context supplies the needs of the form and the form matches the needs of the context. Generic features are chosen for their ability to effectively respond to a recurrent situation and fulfill the expectations of targeted audiences. Being aware that context plays a role in the choice and construction of forms, can help students recognize when certain responses are appropriate and when others are not.

A source's social action, and therefore, its meaning, can only be understood in the context of the culture that created it. Divorced from context that creates them, forms can have no meaning. Divorced from context, all forms are the same, accomplishing the same task through the same means. They become mere objects. This has not stopped librarians from artificially ranking the perceived authority of forms, with library materials at the top and free Web resources at the bottom. Reifying forms encourages grand statements, like “the best place to *begin* your search is your school library's online reference catalog” (Tensen, 2007, p. 20). In the desire for some kind of universal order, this statement ignores the rhetorical implications of using one type of source over another. It also ignores the specific contexts and specific purposes of forms, making it much harder to strategically use them. To say a journal article is good because it has taken the form of a journal article is a circular and pointless definition. If a scholarly article deserves its top-tier reputation, it is not because it is peer-reviewed, but because the community of scientists and scholars behind the process has determined that peer-review is a meaningful and necessary constraint in the situation of sharing new discoveries and knowledge. Without context, assigning meaning to any form and any choice is impossible. A container model of meaning says nothing explicit about communicative purposes or the reasons particular forms are chosen.

Understanding how context constructs meaning and how meaning supports context are necessary steps in learning how to select appropriate forms. Any change to the context will change the selection of and meaning of forms. To illustrate, consider the examples of Encyclopedia Britannica and Wikipedia. They both have similar purposes: Britannica's is “to take all human knowledge, organize it, summarize it, and publish it in a form that people find useful;” Wikipedia's is “to have articles that cover existing knowledge.” (n.d.) Their contexts, however, could not be more different. Unlike Wikipedia, where “Visitors do not need specialized qualifications to contribute”(n.d.), “Britannica has an Editorial Board of Advisors, consisting of “Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners, the leading scholars, writers, artists, public servants and activists who are at the top of their fields. They meet regularly to share ideas, to debate and to argue” (2009). In this way, participation of the public is limited and content is strictly controlled. Because the process strives to be authoritative, the public's knowledge on any of these topics is discounted as unreliable. Because the process strives to be comprehensive, it takes the form of a massive, multivolume collection of books. (Britannica has a Web site, but is essentially the same content

as the physical reference material. Since users cannot modify entries, similar constraints exist.) Wikipedia's desire to use the wisdom of the masses requires a form that allows the virtual participation of everyone. The open, collaborative structure of the wiki technology matches the needs of this context. The static permanence of a book would do little to aide in this effort. To gain credibility, Wikipedia has adopted semantic and syntactic constraints similar in style to Britannica's entries. They have also utilized references to support claims. The context that creates Britannica has a cultural reputation that is recognized and acknowledged by members and non-members of the community, thus providing authority to the form. The context of Wikipedia, on the other hand, is still the subject of much debate. Forms are constantly evolving, changing as communities respond to different situations. As forms lose their effectiveness, new choices are made (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). It is possible that Wikipedia's practices will become the standard method for sharing the whole of human knowledge. Forms are not simply static and unvarying features of a text; they are chosen for the specific and unique ability to achieve the communicative purposes of a community.

The Responsibilities of the Writer and the Expectations of the Reader

In the process of research, choosing appropriate resources establishes a writer's credibility in the minds of readers. Therefore, selecting sources is not a value-neutral proposition. If we acknowledge that sources are genres and that genres are “social actions,” then that implies that a source is a writer's attempt to exert some kind of influence over a reader. If there are motives, then there must be some kind of ideology governing the selection and use of genres. (In this discussion, ideologies are neither good nor bad; they are simply the result of working with genres.) The conventions developed by a community represent the typified, normal response of a community to a situation. They are the etiquette that members (and non-members) must follow to be taken as writers to elicit appropriate responses in readers. If we treat sources as isolated, static objects, that level of understanding is difficult to achieve. Genre theory can help bridge selection and use by considering the rhetorical nature of each source.

As readers, whether we are conscious of it or not, we respond to genre expectations--and therefore, genre ideologies--all of the time. For example, the formal marker “This just in,” signals breaking news. We are not surprised when the story that follows offers few details about the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of the event being described. “Once upon a time…” heralds the beginning of fairy tale, in which wizards and unicorns do not seem out of place. These are two obvious examples. Not all genre markers may be so easy to identify. “Picking up a text,” Devitt asserts, “readers not only classify it and expect a certain form, but also make assumptions about the text's purposes, its subject matter, its writer and its expected readers” (Devitt, 2004, p. 12). This works, but only if the reader is familiar with genre. In theory,students should be able to classify the conventional differences between a scholarly journal article and a Web site. In practice, it involves a significant amount of disciplinary knowledge and experience. Students possess these in varying degrees. Expectations can be the result of exclusive experience, situated within the daily activities of a discourse community. Recognizing conventions, community insiders understand the options available in responding. Outsiders may not possess such privileged knowledge (Swales, 1990). Research demonstrates that genre expectations can affect the comprehension of a text (Zwaan, 1994). It stands to reason that confused expectations of a genre could also limit comprehension. If students are uncertain of their roles as readers, then how can they be certain of their roles as writers?

By choosing “to write within a genre, the writer has selected the situation entailed in the genre” (Devitt, 2004, p.20). If students cannot comprehend the situation and the context it is a part of, they cannot construct appropriate responses. This genre confusion is most evident in the completion of the research project. An entire bibliography of Web sites is clearly not an accepted convention in the communities established by teachers and librarians. Rhetorical considerations, such as expectations of the audience and the appropriate means for motivating them into action, are clearly not being considered. The result is a collection of sources that are often unsuited to the situation. We need to be careful, however, about labeling all of these choices as “bad.” Web sites and magazine articles may simply be rhetorically inappropriate in the context of an assigned task,lacking in the ability to exert the proper

ideological influence on the reader. Genre expectations are frustrated and as writers, the students' credibility is damaged. We must teach students how to connect their source selections with an intended communicative purpose by illustrating how genres can help writers convince readers that they are members, or at least apprentice members, in a discourse community.

Implications for Information Literacy Instruction

It is not enough to simply replace our old definition of sources with a new one. Research is needed to test the practical ways genre awareness can be applied to information literacy instruction. To improve our students' repertoire in writing, it has been argued that a “conscious critical awareness of how genres work” must be developed (Devitt, 2004, p.200). Through awareness, students can witness how countless genres work in their daily lives. Paying attention to context, they can witness how different communities use different genres (some academic, but mostly not) are required to complete different tasks. Choosing appropriate forms is less about matching a particular form or content to a need, and more about using its rhetorical nature to address a situation. Students must be aware that alternatives are possible. By comparing choices and constraints each genre offers, students can begin to understand why some genres are better responses to certain situations than others.

There may be challenges in applying genre theory to our instruction. The first problem involves how teaching librarians employ the concept of context. Standard one, performance indicator two of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, states that the information literate person “[k]nows how information is formally and informally produced, organized, and disseminated” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000). In teaching the importance of context we seem focused only on its relationship to a source's quality. The answers to the evaluative questions, like “Does the source have an author?” and “Is the author qualified to write on this topic?” point students to a potential context. The value of this context remains obscure if students are not asked to reflect why the community behind the source has chosen to include or exclude an identifiable author. The answer may tell us something about the quality of the form, but context suggests that they will mean different things to different communities. To describe this complexity, librarians need to move the discussion of context beyond the evaluation paradigm and look at how context influences the creation and selection of all rhetorical forms.

Accepting a broader definition of context raises another concern. As researchers, students may encounter countless genres. Miller notes, “the number of genres current in any society is indeterminate and depends upon the complexity and diversity of the society” (1984, p. 163). Even within a community, “no two situations are identical in either their material or constructed reality. Even the most closely allied situations will vary from one another” (Devitt, 2004, p. 20). It is impossible to expose students to every genre and every example within a genre. Yet, it may be possible to help them understand the plethora of genres that exist. Assuming librarians engage in a program of genre awareness, we are still faced with the amount of time they have to teach it to students. Simple descriptions are often all we are able to offer. To develop critical thinking and encourage life-long learning in our students, we must equip them with an understanding of how all sources are potentially related to a communicated, rhetorical purpose. We need to be careful that we are not overly prescriptive in the generic possibilities we present to students. Every genre can tell us something:

To consider as potential genres such homely discourse as the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper, as well as the eulogy, the apologia, the inaugural, the public proceeding, and the sermon, is not to trivialize the study of genres; it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves (Miller, 1984, p. 155).

As we begin to teach sources as genres, we must also gain a better understanding of how--or if--students select sources for their rhetorical value. Rather than looking only at citations, choices need to be evaluated within the context of students' actual work. We should not assume that all of their choices are

careless. In a study conducted to determine if the use of the Web is affecting the quality of student research, Robinson and Schlegl suggest that the "Web gives students ready access to such information which libraries do not tend to collect," such as "timely, nonscholarly sources like newspapers and magazines or the philosophies, policies, or activities of individuals and organizations active in the relevant area" of study (2003, p. 10), There are times when Web sites may be rhetorically appropriate. Thus, the inclusion of Web sites in a bibliography is not an automatic indication of poor source-quality or a careless research strategy. Still, many students may be completely unaware of a genre's expectations. If they cannot understand what is expected of them as readers, it is unlikely they will effectively challenge conventions as writers.

An effective and efficient research strategy is worthless, if students cannot effectively and efficiently use the sources they located. Organized by content types and forms, sources are familiar, but ultimately limited in their ability to represent the variety and complexity of potential purposes students may encounter. As organized by the social acts they perform, sources are something much more daunting, but much more promising in their ability to prepare students for actively living in an information-rich environment. As responses to reoccurring rhetorical situations, sources gain new meaning by connecting the selection of sources to the fulfillment of a specific purpose. Genre theory can provide crucial direction by helping students become critically aware of why forms are chosen and their roles in responding to them.

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