ABSTRACT. ESP/EAP and New Rhetoric genre theory have given primary attention over the years to traditional paper-based genres such as the experimental research article, the conference abstract, and the academic essay. Meanwhile, the communication landscape has changed radically, with online genres such as email, search engines, and blogs penetrating all spheres of modern life; surprisingly, these newer genres have received relatively little attention from genre scholars. The newer genres are characterized by four distinctive features—speed, creative interactivity, a public orientation, and currency of content—all of which need to be incorporated into genre theory and analysis. I illustrate this point with reference to eight of the most widely used electronic genres and argue that they warrant explicit instruction in secondary and tertiary classrooms. The observations put forth in this paper address a number of tenets of ESP/EAP and New Rhetoric theory, including rhetorical dynamism, duality of structure, community ownership, and the interpenetration of academic and public life as noted especially in actor-network theory.


1. Introduction

For those of us who have been laboring in the vineyards of either ESP genre theory or North American ‘new rhetoric’ these past twenty years, certain genres have dominated our collective attention. I am speaking, of course, of the experimental research article (BAZERMAN, 1988; SWALES, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; SCHRYER, 1994); the conference abstract (BERKENKOTTER & HUCKIN, 1995; SWALES & FEAK, 2000; Bhatia, 2004); the grant proposal (MYERS, 1985, 1990); the PhD dissertation and defense (SWALES, 2004); the organizational memo (YATES & ORLIKOWSKI, 1992; HERNDL, FENNELL, & MILLER, 1991); the client letter (DEVITT, 1991); the advertisement and other promotional genres (Bhatia, 1993, 2004); the journal article abstract (HUCKIN, 2001); the academic essay (DUDLEY-EVANS, 2002; MYERS, 2001; BAWARSHI, 2003); the reprint request (SWALES, 1990); and the psychiatric report (MCCARTHY, 1991; BERKENKOTTER & RAVOTAS, 2002), among others. Each of these genres, and many others like them, has been thoroughly worked over – from their distinctive rhetorical ‘moves’ to their linguistic features, from their conditions of production to their expected or actual reception. To this day the pages of our leading journal, English for Specific Purposes, are replete with further analyses of these and related genres, each one teasing out more refinements of our body of knowledge. Indeed, typical examples can be found even in the latest issues of ESP: “The Textual Organisation of Research Article Introductions in Applied Linguistics” (Vol. 26, issue 1) and “Some Linguistic and Rhetorical Features of Business Reports as a Genre” (Vol. 26, issue 2).

But although these traditional genres are alive and well, still playing a central role in academia and the professional world, the communication landscape itself, driven by new technologies such as the personal computer, the Internet, and the cell phone, has been undergoing a tectonic shift to the electronic information age of the 21st century. Although the traditional genres are still very much in use, other genres associated with these new technologies have
emerged and are gaining popularity with each passing day – genres such as Wikipedia, Google, email, online argument, PowerPoint, grammar checkers, electronic thesauri, discussion boards, newsgroups, blogs. There are also new ways of implementing traditional genres. For example, research articles are increasingly appearing online, in hypertextual format, whether it’s in a major scientific journal such as Nature or a more obscure journal like Kairos. Term papers in high school and college are increasingly being created by cutting-and-pasting from Internet sources, leading among other things to an epidemic of plagiarism.

The new genres have several features that make them qualitatively different from the more traditional ones. First and foremost, they are highly responsive to time pressures. The more they lend themselves to quick production and quick reception, the more popular and useful they tend to be. This first feature, speed, is key, as it enables all the others. Second, they are highly interactive, inviting creative participation by both writer and reader to a degree far beyond that of the traditional genres. Third, they are more public. In contrast to traditional paper-based genres such as school essays, business letters, personal statements, and conference abstracts, which typically have few readers, many of the New Media genres are intended for mass availability to a potentially global audience over the Internet. This public orientation is evident not only in popular websites such as MySpace, YouTube, and Wikipedia but also in discussion boards, newsgroups, blogs, and other electronic genres. Finally, largely because of the above-mentioned features, the New Media genres have more currency of content, opening up lines of research and student interest, including civic, political, and social topics, that are unavailable in more traditional genres. This interest in issues from everyday life is leading, I believe, to a salutary blurring of lines between academia and civic life, inviting a more critical stance from teachers and from genre theorists. From the perspective of activity theory (ENGESTROM, 1987; RUSSELL, 1997), these genres partake of a multitude of different, overlapping activity systems, doing “boundary work” (GIERYN, 1983) to make them coherent. In some cases, they may participate in genre systems (DEVITT, 1991; BAZERMAN, 1994) and genre colonies (BHATIA, 2004) of the broadest scope.

Because of the emergence of these new electronic genres, these four features—speed, interactivity, public orientation, and currency of content—need to be incorporated into our theories and analyses. Speed, in particular, deserves special attention, not only because it has been understandably neglected in the past but because it has an instrumental role in the emergence of the other three features. Since Google, Wikipedia, email, and other New Media genres lend themselves to quick learning, quick use, and quick transmission, they make it easy for even novices to engage in creative, interactive exchanges. This leads to greater public participation, which in turn leads to a broader array of potential topics, including current events.

In the remainder of this paper, I want to address two questions:

1. Do these new genres warrant our attention in ESP/EAP teaching?
2. Are they actually “new genres”?

2. Do these new genres warrant our attention in ESP/EAP teaching?

An answer to this question revolves around at least two subsidiary questions:

- Are these new genres useful to the ESP/EAP student?
- Is it better to teach them explicitly or to let students acquire them through hands-on practice?

Anyone teaching at a North American university these days – and I’m sure in many other parts of the world as well – is keenly aware of how much the new, electronic technologies have
come to dominate students’ everyday communication. In the US, cell phones, iPods, laptops, and
internet connections are ubiquitous. More and more students are bringing their laptops to class. Recently I was asked by a student if he could listen to music on his iPod while taking my midterm exam.

Hult & Richins (2006) did a qualitative study of first-year university writing students in which they analyzed their students’ use of instant messaging and how it affected their ability to use stylistically-appropriate language in their formal academic writing. They found that their students did more writing than previous generations, but that much of it was in the form of instant messaging and text messaging with friends. These students insisted that their frequent IM’ing with its very casual linguistic register did not have any effect on their formal writing. Yet, a close linguistic analysis by the two researchers found quite the opposite. Incidentally, they also found that students frequently engaged in multitasking – for example, writing academic essays while at the same time text-messaging friends, sending emails, listening to music, etc. They concluded:

Instant messaging, text messaging, email, and whatever new forms may crop up in cyberspace are omnipresent and persistent. Savvy communicators know how to bounce between genres and registers without much difficulty. In fact, in one of the observations of an IM’er at work and play, the subject was simultaneously composing a rather formal letter to his grandparents (Dear Grandmother and Grandfather: Happy Anniversary! You have been such an inspiration and role model in my life) at the same time as he was IM’ing with a friend (hey, girl how are you?). As Farmer (2005) suggests, educators need to accept that these are legitimate, if different, genres of writing that merit our ongoing analysis, discussion, and experimentation; at the same time, we also need to uphold standards of effective communicative practices in other genres such as formal essays, and to make certain that our students know the difference.

More recently I conducted a survey of 112 university students in a first-year composition course at my home university, in which I posed questions such as the following:

1. Do you own a computer? If yes, desktop or laptop? If you own a laptop, do you carry it to classes with you and take notes on it?
2. When you get a paper assignment, what’s the first thing you do? Do you use the computer to help find or narrow your topic? Do you use Google or another database or search engine? Which one(s)? How clearly do you have something already in mind when you start searching?
3. When you research, are you also doing other things on the computer—emailing, IMing, talking on a cell phone, listening to your iPod?

Here is a summary of their key responses:

1. Of the 112 surveys, 92% of students indicated that the own a computer and 20% of students indicated that they use the school computers. Most who owned laptops did not bring them to class.
2. 95% used an internet search engine (overwhelmingly Google), rather than traditional library resources, to find and research a topic. 76% used the internet to research/narrow the subject.
3. Most students said they multitasked by listening to music while writing (41%), instant messaging (19%), talking on the phone (12%), or emailing (10%). Only 25% did not multitask.
These findings are broadly representative, I believe, of today’s college students in the US and indeed are part of a general trend toward the use of electronic media in higher education around the world. So the answer to the question, “Are these new genres useful to the ESP/EAP student?” is Yes. Students are increasingly using these new genres both in and out of school, and we need to get on board.

As to whether students benefit from explicit teaching of these genres, one is reminded of the contrasting views taken between the Sydney School (in favor of explicitness) and various British and North American scholars favoring a more inductive approach. Freedman 1994 exemplifies the latter position, advocating a “Restricted Hypothesis” according to which explicit teaching and conscious learning, while perhaps useful in certain restricted circumstances with certain kinds of learners, are generally not necessary or effective. In contrast, Carol Berkenkotter and I in our 1995 book took a position close to that of the Australians, one that sees the acquisition of genre knowledge in socially-oriented Vygotskian terms. In this view, students learn genres best through situated learning (LAVE & WEGNER, 1991), when as members of communities of practice they can experience and use genres in specific contexts of situation, guided by explicit instruction (BERKENKOTTER & HUCKIN, 1995, chs 7-8). I suggest that the New Media genres under discussion here—online forums, online argument, Google, email, and the like—are prima facie examples of the Vygotskian paradigm in that when properly used in an academic context they combine spontaneously-learned concepts from everyday experience with concepts explicitly taught by trained instructors. The answer to the second question, “Is it better to teach these genres explicitly or to let students acquire them through hands-on practice?” then, is Both. Today’s students learn much about the New Genres outside of class, but they need additional guidance from faculty if they are to use them effectively in academic work.

With these considerations in mind—the academic usefulness of the genre and its need for explicit instruction—let us now look at the eight New Media genres I’ve singled out for attention here:

- online forums
- online argument
- email
- PowerPoint
- Google and other search engines
- Wikipedia
- electronic spellcheckers and grammar checkers
- electronic thesauri

All of these genres are either heavily used by students and faculty, or could be heavily used. Let’s go through them one by one.

**Online forums.** Discussion boards, newsgroups, blogs and other asynchronous, online forums are useful genres for students and faculty either through the Internet or through a class intranet such as WebCT or Blackboard. They are fast and interactive, though not as much so as instant messaging or texting. Unlike email, which can appear to be private, online forums are explicitly designed to engage a public audience, albeit a highly restricted “public” in the case of intranet forums, registered newsgroups, etc. To promote participation, users can hide behind noms de plume. Online forums are especially given to discussing current events, and can be as broad in scope as their users desire, to a degree that sometimes requires policing by administrators. They can be put to great use in the ESP/EAP or composition class in giving students practice in online argument (see below), especially if the instructor provides explicit instruction in managing topicality, setting context, making points, and arguing (using rhetorical
strategies, logical reasoning, etc.). Teachers can also draw attention to politeness, tactfulness, and other aspects of interpersonal communication, instructing students in all the complexities of netiquette. [see Miller, this volume, for more on blogs]

**Online argument.** Traditional argument conforms to a communication model whereby a writer or speaker constructs an entire argument and then presents it to a passive reader or listener for his/her consideration; this is true to a large extent even of court cases and academic or political debates. Online argument, in contrast, which occurs most commonly on discussion boards, listservs, blogs, and other online forums, depends on an interactive, dialogic, turn-by-turn exchange in which participants are under great social and technological pressure not to dominate the floor. In such a conversation-like environment, it is practically impossible to lay out a complete argument in one piece, and participants can do little more than make one point at a time. Another type of online argument can be found on Websites, where the argument is dispersed over hypertext links. The main claim may be found on the opening page while supporting evidence is located on other pages or other sites. Although less obviously interactive than the discussion type, Website arguments require viewers to navigate the site using their own discretion. Both types of online argument are obviously public, and both are open to an indefinite range of potential topics including current events. And, as with the other genres we are discussing, they are both useful to the ESP/EAP or writing student and they both benefit from explicit instruction. In the case of online forum arguments, the person making the argument must learn to assess what’s been said on the topic up to that point, must provide sufficient context for his/her point of view, must limit each of his/her turns to a single screen, must concisely make a clear main point, and should consider adding links to Websites that provide good supporting information (HULT, C; HUCKIN, T., 2008, p. 170). With Website arguments, since parts of the argument are dispersed over multiple pages and sites, the arguer has less control over how the viewer accesses these parts and must therefore provide various navigational means that induce the viewer to follow the intended path. These include: (1) making the opening screen visually appealing and textually cogent, (2) providing clearly labeled links on the opening screen, (3) clustering claims and evidence so that each page has unified content, (4) using graphics only as needed for argumentative support, not for decoration, and (5) adding a “For Further Reading” link to other Websites where extra evidence and alternative views can be found, increasing the arguer’s credibility (ibid., p. 171).

**Email.** Email is a ubiquitous genre, used by virtually everyone on the Internet for intercommunication, for information gathering, for paper review, etc. Devitt (2004) notes that “Since people call the discourse ‘e-mail’ or an ‘e-mail message,’ it seems so far to be perceived as a single genre. Over time, though, I would expect different kinds of messages to gain labels reflecting different genres.” (DEVITT, 2004, p. 45). For many ESP/writing instructors, including myself, it has become indispensable. Email’s popularity springs from its speed, making it possible to compose, send, and receive messages in seconds; its ease of use; and its technological richness, incorporating computer-based features such as wordprocessing and document attachments. It is highly interactive. And it is often used to address current events. Although ostensibly private, email is more open to the public than most of its users realize; indeed, a standard caution found in the business literature goes something like this: “Assume that your email communication will be read by people other than your addressee.” Or this, from a current college writing handbook:

Electronic communication often blurs the line between what is a private and what is a public conversation. Sometime we act as though everything we say online is private,
between ourselves and our immediate correspondent. However, you should remember that email, instant messages, and chat-room conversations are in a sense ‘public,’ since they can be archived on someone’s computer, forwarded to others, and even subpoenaed in a court of law. Take particular care not to write anything from a school’s computer that you don’t want made public—because it just might end up that way. (HULT & HUCKIN, 2008, p. 537)

Cutting-edge handbooks also include various email conventions (called “netiquette”), at least for more formal types of email. This kind of advice points to the need for students to receive some explicit instruction in the use of email. If you have had email exchanges with your students, I’m sure you’ve noticed how infelicitous it often is.

**PowerPoint.** PowerPoint has become the most popular format for computer-assisted oral presentations, both in school and in the workplace. Enabled – or constrained, if you will – by Microsoft templates, it is a genre unto itself. Its main advantage is speed, as it facilitates quick production and efficient presentation. It is also superior for large, public presentations, as evidenced by Al Gore’s documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. It can be used with virtually any topic. PowerPoint is not interactive, however, and this is where ESP/EAP instructors and writing instructors can help. To increase interactivity, i.e. audience interest and participation, users of PowerPoint are often cautioned (a) not to let the slides do all the talking, (b) not to use features that are just distractingly fancy, and (c) not to use only written text and bulleted lists. ESP/EAP and composition instructors can show students how to avoid these errors.

**Search engines.** Google and other search engines are overwhelmingly popular among both students and scholars for online research. They are incredibly fast – Google can produce more than 20 million hits in less than two-tenths of a second. They are highly interactive, allowing users to guide a search through successive follow-up search commands. They are available to the public on virtually any computer terminal. And they are quickly updated to include current events. Google and other high-quality search engines are indisputably useful to academics in a variety of ways, from doing an initial “lay of the land” search to finding more detailed information. However, they can easily overwhelm users with a deluge of information, most of it irrelevant or unuseful. While students can intuitively learn the basics of search engines on their own, they need guidance from teachers about the existence of specialized variants (such as Google Scholar, which includes only scholarly literature and sorts results by citation indexes), the precise use of search terms, an awareness of how results are ordered, and the critical evaluation of these results. Otherwise, students may conduct sloppy searches and just use the first items that pop up.

**Wikipedia.** Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that combines the virtues of comprehensive encyclopedic information on single topics and hypertextual links for further information. It is exceptionally quick, making extensive information available within 1 second. It is also interactive on two levels: (1) allowing users to access information either at the primary site or at secondary, hyperlinked sites at their discretion, and (2) allowing users to contribute information via the open-source, wiki format. It is a free, publicly accessible website, and it covers the widest range of topics possible. Thus it exemplifies the New Media genre characteristics of speed, interactivity, public accessibility, and currency of content. Wikipedia is not, strictly speaking, subject to the highest scholarly standards of peer review and quality control. Nonetheless, it is surprisingly accurate in its content and its administrators are careful to issue cautions about any material that is at all controversial. Thus it highly useful to both students and scholars, provided they take account of the fact that the information it contains is not definitive and indeed may be
quite erroneous. Students quickly catch on to the mechanics of Wikipedia, but they can benefit from explicit guidance from teachers regarding the site’s reliability.

**Electronic spellcheckers and grammar checkers.** These two editing tools have taken the place of traditional spelling and grammar handbooks for most students. They are much faster, they invite interactive participation from users, and they’re available to virtually anyone with access to a personal computer. At the same time, they are notoriously flawed. Spellcheckers, for example, cannot identify misspelled words that happen to be correct spellings of other words; the problem is especially acute with homophones such as *there*, *their*, and *they’re*. Grammar checkers lack sentence parsing abilities and thus rely on brute-force pattern matching, making their “analyses” highly oversimplified. They overlook many errors on the one hand and mistakenly flag many non-errors on the other. In my experience, students clearly benefit from explicit instruction on the pros and cons of these two electronic genres, and on the subject matter (properly spelled words, spelling conventions, grammatical rules, principles of style) that these tools attempt to address.

**Electronic thesauri.** Electronic thesauri are a built-in feature of many wordprocessing programs and can be of great use to students and scholars. Their big advantage over traditional book-style thesauri is again speed: the user can highlight a word, type out a 2-stroke macro command (SHIFT + F7 on MS Word), and immediately get a list of possible synonyms – all within one second. Furthermore, by using hypertextual links, it is easy for the user to trace a search path through the field of candidate words. These two features of course promote interactive use. To the extent that wordprocessors are in common public use, the online thesaurus is ipso facto a public resource. And the coverage of topics (words) is virtually as broad as the traditional Roget’s. Despite all these advantages, however, I find that my students, despite being heavy computer users in general, are unaware of their electronic thesaurus and need instruction on how to use it properly.

**Other electronic genres.** There are various other electronic genres that, although not having direct academic relevance, can provide good practice material for critical reading/evaluation. Three such genres are phishing scams, urban legends, and viral marketing. **Phishing scams** are disguised as conventional email messages from seemingly legitimate businesses entreating recipients to respond by providing personal, confidential information such as financial information, identification numbers, or passwords. Although superficially they appear to belong to some legitimate business letter genre, their actual purpose puts them in a different genre, that of the phishing scam. An ability to detect such scams can save students untold trouble. I have found that devoting class time to helping students identify phishing scams is much appreciated. **Urban legends** are fabricated stories and rumors circulated via email or other Internet channels. (Example: “Using cell phones while they are being recharged poses a serious danger of electrocution!”) Although typically somewhat outlandish (and thus attention-getting), many are also just plausible enough to fool innocent readers, even sometimes well-informed, normally skeptical readers. More than once have I had such stories sent to me by sophisticated friends, and more than once have I referred them to the Urban Legends Reference Pages at [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com) -- much to their embarrassment. Urban legends have been studied by scholars, who point out certain characteristic clues to look for. Students would benefit from such instruction. (A cousin of urban legends is **fake news**, as found for example in The Borowitz Report or The Onion on the Web or in TV programs such as The Daily Report or The Colbert Report. Such ‘news’ items can be incorporated into classroom instruction for comic relief.) **Viral marketing** is the use of the Internet by private interests (business corporations, political parties, special interest groups, etc.) to get people to unwittingly pass along a message to others, resulting
in the rapid proliferation of the message to thousands or even millions of people. The message may be in the form of a funny video clip, an interactive game, a striking image, a text message, or something else that recipients might want to pass on to friends. Sometimes the message is blatant, sometimes it is very subtle. A recent example is the video clip of a woman throwing a sledgehammer at a Big Brother-like image of Hillary Clinton that circulated via YouTube. It is said to have been seen by millions and may even influence the upcoming US Presidential election, yet its source remains unknown. Students, who are probably the main targets of viral marketing, should be encouraged to apply critical reading/viewing skills to such forms of viral marketing.

3. But are they ‘new genres’?

The eleven electronic genres just discussed have much in common, especially speed, creative interactivity, a public orientation, and currency of content, which combined separate them from traditional paper-based genres. They are all of use (or potential use) in ESP/EAP or composition courses. Although students usually learn these genres to some extent on their own through repeated exposure, they can also benefit from explicit instruction.

But are these new genres actually new genres? One could argue that they are just traditional genres dressed up in electronic new clothes. Wikipedia, for example, is clearly related to the encyclopedia genre; online argument has much in common with traditional argument; spellcheckers have a strong family resemblance to spelling handbooks. If genre is defined by purpose, couldn’t one say that these new genres have the same purposes in life as the old ones but just accomplish those purposes faster?

My response is that although these new genres resemble traditional genres in certain respects (main purpose being one of them), the way users interact with them is radically different. It’s more than just speed -- although that’s the most fundamental difference, from which much else flows-- it’s also the creativity that users bring to bear. Plus the more public nature of these genres, and the currency of the information (which can be a major kairotic element). All of this, and more, calls for them to be considered new genres, not just new technologies.

Take Wikipedia as an example. When I want to consult an encyclopedia, I have two choices: I can either (a) get up and walk into our living room to consult our 30-volume, 25-year-old Encyclopedia Britannica, select the right volume, find my way to the right page, read the desired entry, then return to my office; or (b) sitting at my computer, I can simply open Wikipedia, type in the search term, and hit Enter. The desired entry comes up in less than a second. I can then read the desired entry and click on whatever links I please (internal cross-links or external links to other sites) for further information. Indeed, time permitting, it’s not uncommon for me to wander serendipitously all over the place at this point. If I want to copy or print out any of the material, I can do that. If I wanted to challenge the information in the entry, or add to it, thanks to the Wikipedia’s open-source wiki architecture, I could do that as well. When done, I just close the site with one click and return to my other work. The entire process is vastly quicker, more convenient, and more creative than with the Britannica, and the information I can obtain is far more voluminous and up-to-date. It is very dynamic, giving me options at every turn, fully in keeping with our postmodern world (DE ZENGOTITA, 2005).

What I have just described illustrates another important aspect of electronic genres, namely, their independence from what Carol Berkenkotter and I have called “community ownership” (BERKENKOTTER, C.; HUCKIN, T., 1995, pp. 21-24). New Rhetoric genre theory and ESP genre theory have always been grounded in the fact that genres are the product of
discourse communities, social networks, disciplines, and other forms of social or professional collectivity (see DEVITT 2004 for a good review). Surely such a social perspective is the most appropriate point of departure for understanding how genres come into the world, how they are used, and how they evolve. But the New Media genres that I have been discussing in this paper (with the possible exception of highly customized discussion forums) do not belong to any particular community other than “computer users” or “Internet users” – designations so broad as to exclude any sense of shared “norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology” (BERKENKOTTER, C.; HUCKIN, T., 1995, p. 4). Instead, they belong to a global public, an amorphous, anonymous, unquantifiable number of individuals whose sole common denominator is that they happen to have access to an Internet-linked computer. Anarchy reigns, or in the words of one social critic (Thomas Homer-Dixon), “Right now, the Internet is a cacophony of narcissism.” So we may want to broaden our view of genre to include not just community-based genres but more individual-driven ones as well, such as these new electronic genres. It would make sense, too, to see them simultaneously as universal, since they transcend the sorts of boundaries we associate with community-based genres.

Although all of these new genres share the distinctive qualities of speed, creative interactivity, publicness, and currency of content, they do so to very different degrees. Spellcheckers, for example, may be as fast as blogs but are in a different league when it comes to the other three qualities. Indeed, some may think of spellcheckers, grammar checkers, electronic thesauri, PowerPoint, and even Wikipedia and Google as mere tools compared to online forums, online argumentation, and email. Such an indictment might be expected especially from activity theorists, who tend to see genres in general as tools: “As R. Engestrom (1995) argues, ordinarily a genre is analyzed best at the level of operation, as a routinized use of some tool(s) or some mediational means to carry out a typified, routine action” (RUSSELL, D., 1997). Devitt (2004) resists such a general characterization, arguing that “to the extent that genre becomes a tool, it loses its rhetorical nature” (DEVITT, 2004, p. 48). At the same time she resists going to the other extreme, seeing genres as agents independent of human operators. Instead, she opts for a middle ground, using Giddens’ concept of duality of structure to advocate seeing genre “as both tool and agent, both constructed and constructing” (ibid., p. 49). I agree in general with Devitt but would argue that the space between the two poles (tool and agent) is made up of a continuum on which some of the new electronic genres are located more toward the “tool” end and others toward the “agent” end, reflecting the fact that some are more rhetorical than others.

On the other hand, given the powerfully interactive nature of these new genres, I think activity theory would be very useful in tracking the ways in which they empower the human agent. The same can be said for actor-network theory (LATOUR, B, 1987; MYERS, G, 1996), which studies situated interactions to learn how links in a network empower each actor in that network. As such, ANT bestows agency not only on humans but on texts and even inanimate objects that participate in communication networks. On this view, the computer and the Internet, for example, would be seen as agents, not just passive tools. Although they lack intentionality, the computer and the Internet still have power of ‘persuasion’ by virtue of their technological advantages, and as such they enroll individual humans into their networks. Although ANT theorists have not to my knowledge talked about genre per se, they do give prominent attention to texts; and from there it is a short step to genre. Most importantly, by taking a very broad view of the relevant social context, ANT addresses important civic, political, and social issues. Thus, ANT models on the one hand the sort of linkage that I see between genre, autonomous individual users, and computer-mediated technology, and on the other the need to accommodate increasing pressure by students to bring aspects of the outside world into the classroom.
For me, the key contribution of actor network theory to rhetorical studies is to make me see the physical world of organisms and technologies to be part of persuasion...[and how] it links writing to technology, politics, and society” … Rhetoric has always seen audiences in terms of the controlling powers of producers of texts. It is harder for rhetoric to deal with the constructive powers of consumers who may take a text into new contexts, play with it, ironicize it, reproduce it. But it is this sort of active audience that is important in issues like toxic wastes, global warming, or Chernobyl. (MYERS, 1996, pp. 21, 36)

References


