ABSTRACT: Confronting French and United States “writing in the disciplines” (WiD) perspectives about genre can change our understanding of how to study the relationships among student texts, academic texts, and other expert texts in a given discipline. In France, research resisting the traditional literary understandings of “genre” embedded in French school work focuses on how a given (named) genre might take completely different forms and present different features in different disciplines or for different tasks. This is a natural fit in France, where higher education writing research is always disciplinary. In US writing in the disciplines work, both traditional features-based genre theory and activity theory are prevalent for studying student and expert genres across disciplines, as is work on experts’ self-reflective understandings of genres in their own disciplines. However if we consider genre as a dynamic structure of relationship between a reader and a text, WiD researchers can complexify the understanding of student texts from different disciplines, resisting the traditional features-based approach to disciplinary genres in order to focus attention on deeper levels of construction.

KEYWORDS: genre, reception, writing in the disciplines, activity

1. Introduction

How genre is understood and configured in analyses of disciplinary texts and discourses is key to understanding the nature of student work in the disciplines. The question of genre is also intimately linked to what we know about expert texts in a discipline. These relationships have been studied for some time in France and in the United States, first through traditional-formalist frames of text types and modes, more recently through understandings of genre in social, cultural, and disciplinary contexts. Proponents of both traditional and newer perspectives appear to agree on the usefulness of genre when researchers seek to classify texts to be studied, but take fundamentally different stances (“radical reconfigurations”, to use the terms of COE, LINGARD and TESLENKO, 2002) towards how that classification might be done, as well as what the relationships are among groups of texts, single texts, and the social and political situations in which textual production and reception are carried out. Both French and United States genre theorists systematically explore disciplines and genres in higher education, using frames such as activity theory and genre systems theory in the United States and didactic-disciplinary universes of writing theory or generic reception theory in France. I will offer here only a partial review of some of the most innovative paths being taken. I will show how perspectives about genre have been evolving in both complementary and divergent ways as scholars explore the complex set of elements that make “genre” a usable research tool for studying students’ writing in the disciplines. I hope to create a space for discussion about these perspectives.

Two current higher education research projects, one in France and one in the United States, provide examples of some of the most prevalent current uses of genre in relation to studying students’ disciplinary work. The French study is a first-of-its-kind study of students’ writing and learning practices in four disciplines at three universities; the United States study is a longitudinal study of undergraduate student writing that focuses on writing in the disciplines in relation to first-year writing and uses readers from different disciplines. These two studies will serve to highlight some of the ways in which current, complex notions of genre are being fruitfully brought into play in the study of student writing across disciplines.
2. Writing in the disciplines in two teaching contexts: the United States, France

The act of writing in different higher education disciplines in the United States has always existed, of course. But this writing has been the subject of specific attention and theorized teaching only in the past few decades, as an outgrowth of the composition movement in the United States. The writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WiD) areas of research, scholarly work and teaching grew side by side as college faculty in composition and in other fields began to consider the role of writing in learning and the role of disciplinary conventions and ways of being in writing in a given field. According to Coe, Lingard and Teslenko (2002), the new genre theories that developed in the 1990s and beyond were rooted in specific concerns about writing in the disciplines and workplace writing, as well as in the distinctions between using genres and creating genres in those situations.

In France, writing as a mode of learning and assessment in every discipline has been integral to French education throughout its history at every educational level: writing as a tool for learning, for assessing learning, for processing thinking, for summarizing concisely, for responding, for developing texts in disciplinary work. But French scholars have only recently begun to focus on theorizing writing across the disciplines, as they fully recognize that writing, disciplinarity, and knowledge construction are inextricably embedded in each other. This research trend has had the effect of highlighting interest in writing in higher education, always already disciplinary even though perhaps only reductively so in the first or second year. Recent changes in higher education have also heightened awareness of student writing in general: the past decade or so of “massification” through wider access has brought new kinds of students to the University; the discipline of “French” has begun to resist being defined as the sole purveyor of writing instruction; finally, research has identified students’ difficulties in “working with sources, finding a voice, developing ideas—many of the things they haven’t worked with since middle school or haven’t worked on in terms of disciplinary conventions. WiD research and implementation of WiD work in response to government mandates is the way the conversation [about higher education writing] is moving forward” (DONAHUE, 2004).

One different developmental aspect of genre studies between the two countries, as relevant to writing in the disciplines in higher education, is based in the different types of university courses introducing students to writing in higher education. The United States version of this course, widespread and designed most often to be a-disciplinary, has led to an entrenched definition of modes of writing appropriate for academic work in general, types like the personal essay or the all-purpose “academic essay” or “persuasive essay”, posited as precursors to the types of writing necessary in different disciplines: scientific reports, philosophical explorations, lesson plans, grant proposals... Surely this instructional path influenced the way genre was considered at first in US WiD settings.

In French introductory courses, more unevenly offered at the start of post-secondary education, and more focused on initiating students into both writing and research, issues in the discipline have been foregrounded, and the features of the text types students learn have thus been more discipline-specific. The initiation into the advanced writing of a field occurs when students begin what is called “researched writing,” specifically defined as “any academic writing that includes a research question (problématique) and situates itself in the context of the discourse of others. Research writing is thus a component of academic writing, a broader term that designates, for us, all of the written products a student must master in order to progress in his or her studies, to receive positive evaluations of his or her work, and so on” (DELCAMBRE & BOCH, 2006). The current study of student writing that I am using here as an example of French attention to writing in the disciplines has identified the following as the
most likely pieces students will produce before arriving at the researched writing that represents the discipline:

<table>
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<th>Analysis of documents/commentary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion of opinions/judgments</td>
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<td>Essay based on a general statement</td>
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<td>Essay based on a quote</td>
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<td>Theme to explore based on a quotation</td>
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<td>Document synthesis</td>
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<td>Text to be commented on (answering a set of questions)</td>
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<td>Text to be commented on (no questions or theme)</td>
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<td>Summary of a text</td>
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<td>Theme to develop (subject provided in a couple of words)</td>
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<td>Research work, studies</td>
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3. Traditional theorizing of genre in relation to writing in the disciplines teaching and research in France and the United States

Earlier work exploring genres in different educational settings in both France and the United States was based on traditional literary or rhetorical versions of genre. The literary versions of genre offered characterizations of different text types based on various schemes of classification (see for example the Russian formalists or E. Benveniste). The rhetorical approaches of the same time period, rooted in centuries of thinking about types of texts not necessarily seen as part of poetics, defined major types based on text function and the features associated with a function (as in the work of J. Kinneavy (1971) based on Jakobson’s and Buhler’s earlier work, or the first phase of J.M. Adam’s genre and text type work, 1992).

Genre work building on the “classificatory” role of genres across disciplines initially focused extensively in both countries on characterizing the features of various kinds of writing in order to help students to better understand how they might write in a given disciplinary context. This work has included prolonged and careful study of expert texts and student texts. J. Swales, for example, has used his work to assist students from different cultural contexts to understand and use the typical moves of a particular writing situation by studying and making explicit those moves. The central objective of *Genre Analysis: English in Research and Academic Settings* was to identify, through extensive and detailed analysis of expert texts, the conventions of certain kinds of written academic discourse, in order to concretize its features: introductory and concluding “formulas”, useful schemas for organizing research writing, suggested verb tenses and other modalities.
Explorations of the disciplinary groups for which the student’s writing was intended complemented the research about the texts themselves. In the 1980s and 90s in the United States, the metaphor of “discourse community” introduced by P. Bizzell and developed by several scholars enabled this kind of discussion about students’ entry into the community of a particular discipline or sub-discipline. Every discipline or sub-discipline had its own register, terms, syntax, preferred logic, aspects that are difficult for non-members to manipulate (BRITTON, 1992). T. Becher noted that publications in a field in particular played their formative role in the identity and functioning of a discourse (ctd. In BRITTON 1992). C. Geisler’s rich work on expert and student texts in philosophy, *Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise*, exposed philosophers’ ways of writing, thinking, and being, in relation to the discursive moves of students writing in philosophy courses (1994). Geisler noted that C. Berkenkotter’s exploration of the genres used by philosophers and scientists pointed to discursive ways of being they co-construct and the ability of members of a discourse community to perceive apparently similar situations as variables in flux (1994). This frame served to further the sense that belonging to a community meant knowing and appropriating the features of its written and spoken texts.

More recently, some researchers have deepened the exploration of disciplinary natures and texts connected to those natures by carrying out longitudinal studies. While not all of these studies have targeted disciplinary questions, three completed ones in particular have added to our understanding of students’ progressive initiation into a discipline’s discourse. N. Sommers’ study of students at Harvard has highlighted the changes in students’ discursive strategies as they move into disciplinary discourses. A. Herrington and C. Moran’s focused study of four students at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and A. Beaufort’s thorough depiction of a history student making his way through his degree program have offered insights into the change in students’ control over writing as they acquire domain knowledge. As these scholars followed students through two to four years of college study, moving from generalized first-year courses in “college writing” and a range of other subjects into the more specialized coursework of their disciplines, they have described the genres (in the traditional sense) that students produced and the academic and socializing behaviors students slowly adopted along with specific ways of writing.

More rare in the United States have been the explorations of faculty representations of writing in their disciplines. A seminal work was J. Monroe’s 2001 *Writing and Revising the Disciplines*, in which scholars from a variety of disciplines at Cornell University spoke with candor about the role of writing and the construction of genres in their disciplines. This was followed by *Local Knowledges, Local Practices*, which explored perspectives by Cornell faculty from various disciplines about their writing work with students. More recently, C. Thaiss and T. Zawacki (2006) spent a year exploring faculty perspectives on their own writing, their discipline’s conventions, the relationship to knowledge construction in the field, and their expectations of students. They were particularly struck by their colleagues’ sense of fluidity in the generic constructions they used, with some disciplinary situations allowing for “creativity” far more than others. These depictions of academic writing by experts in their fields afford unique insights into the relationship between writing and disciplinary knowledge-making, as well as the fluidity of genre types and boundaries for members of the field, while highlighting genre features (textual and social).

In France, traditional genres as stable entities were the bedrock of teaching writing at all school levels in the 1970s and 80s, and traces of the typologies of texts from those years are everywhere, in particular in teaching practices, school textbooks, and official curricula. The traditional genres are quite similar to those considered in the US scholarship, influenced by literary history and theory as well as by R. Jakobson’s early division of texts into various functional types. The 1970s and 80s were dominated by the work of J.M. Adam who single-
handedly set the parameters for the discussion of text types and prototypes for years: how to describe them, how best to teach them, how to think about them. While Adam later reworked his perspective, shifting attention to the flexibility we need when talking about text typologies and the importance of seeing a text as only more or less typical of the prototype in a particular genre, his influence on French understanding of genres and type remains prevalent.

Plane (2002) reminds us of the importance, during the 1990s, of the definition of textual or discursive objects imagined through the lens of teaching and learning, with two key hinges around which the research has gathered, the narrative text [...] and the argumentative text. We can see the evolution of these as objects of research unfolding through the special issues of the journal Pratiques (Masseron, 1992, 1997, and Schnedecker 1994). On the fringes of these major themes, other relevant themes concerning more limited objects became the object of specific research projects of their own in la didactique de l’écriture, such as the summary (Charolles and Petitjean 1992) or the explicative text (Petitjean 1986, Garcia-Debanc 1990, Repères 69, 72, 77) or the descriptive text (Petitjean 1987, Reuter 1998).

The textual emphasis began to be replaced in France by an emphasis on discursive communities in the late 1990s, which simultaneously encouraged a new perspective on genres in different disciplines. Donahue (2004) credits the explanation of these disciplines as “different expert rhetorical communities into which non-expert students must be initiated, presented as stable communities where access is made possible through a student’s knowledge of the rules and conventions” to M. Jaubert, M. Rebière and J.P. Bernié, working at the Université de Bordeaux II, although other researchers followed. This frame of discursive communities opened up discussions about the heterogeneity and conflicted nature of a given disciplinary “community”, as researchers turned an eye to the intellectual, practical, and ideological negotiations carried out in their own research groups. Most of the research about these disciplinary discursive communities in France focused on school-aged students and the ways in which students navigate the various groups and knowledge communities, described as “internally plural in that the practitioners in a discipline are often not the same as the instructors, for example, and researchers are at odds with each other” (DONAHUE 2004).

In France, F. Boch, F. Grossmann, and F. Rinck have studied students’ difficulties entering a discipline’s research work from a textual perspective, focused on academic articles in literature and linguistics and on students’ research “mémoires” in linguistics and education. I. Delcambre and F. Boch, principle investigators of the French study mentioned earlier, report in their research proposal that

…students must learn to position themselves as authors, express, nuance, or reinforce their point of view, make their place in the multiplicity of voices, orchestrate the polyphony, and learn to use the signals that guide readers through these texts…. [Boch and Grossmann] seek to describe the norms characterizing the different genres of research writing, in particular those that regulate enunciative dimensions (in the act of drawing on others’ discourse). Boch and Grossmann’s theoretical frame conceives of a student’s entry into research writing in terms of acculturation into genres of research writing (Swales 1999), but their didactic frame draws them to taking into account students’ specific writerly practices. For them, acculturation into research writing should not only be imagined in terms of mastery of a new genre. Students’ specific practices contribute no doubt to the construction of a “researcher identity”.

(Proposal to the Association Nationale de Recherches 2006).
Of particular interest in this description is the suggestion that genres of writing and other research practices are distinct. This separation is carried forth in recent work on genre construction by Y. Reuter, which I will cover in part 4.

4. Complexifying understandings of genre and discipline in France and the United States

While descriptions of genres in different disciplines as collections of identifiable features and conventions persist, in both teaching and research about writing in the disciplines in the United States and France (and in particular, in the research in contrastive rhetoric...), new ways of thinking about genre have influenced the study of student writing in the past decade. I turn to these now in order to explore several paths in France and the United States that have been part of the “radical reconfiguration” of genre announced by Coe, Lingard and Teslenko, genre theories that have begun to enable an understand of both the sociality of genre and the ways in which individual texts (and their authors and readers) negotiate, appropriate, and modify those genres. Both French and US theorists have moved systematically towards understanding the disciplines in higher education, in particular in their socio-cultural forms, through these recent evolutions.

In 2003, C. Bazerman stated: “I could not understand what constituted an appropriate text in any discipline without considering the social and intellectual activity which the text is part of. Too much of the texts directly invoked and acted against these contexts to treat the features of texts simply as isolated conventions […] the rhetorical gist of entire texts evoked the larger framework of meaning within the active disciplines”. Bazerman was working here within an understanding of genre and activity systems that requires us to interpret features of texts in terms of their social use and context. The development and influence of activity theory in the 1990s was rooted in C. Miller’s initial proposal that genre is a socially standardized strategy, a useful rhetorical activity that responds to a recurring social situation. In this perspective, focus shifts from the text itself to the situation in which it acts. Both text types and the situations in which they do their work are recurrent; “genre” as social institution and context evolve together. This perspective was further developed by D. Russell (1997) in his definition of genre as a typified response to a repeated activity that, over time, shapes responses and expectations. For Russell and Bazerman (2002), as the signs on a page mediate between relationships and people, so do genres; texts are “attended to in the context of activities” and can only be studied in their “animating activities”—production, reception, meaning, and value, “embedded in people’s uses and interpretations”. Bazerman (1994) suggests that genres appear in particular contexts but then become themselves part of the context and can in fact be resisted as much as other forms of disciplinary apparatus can be. If we see texts as mediating artifacts, we move into looking at the work they do in a context as more relevant than a description of their features from what used to appear to be a stable, knowledgeable perspective. This also makes membership and initiation far more subtle, complex configurations.

While in French school systems, pre-university, “text types” remain solidly in place as teaching tools, recent evolutions are moving away from a features-based understanding of genres in the research about writing in different disciplines. This genre work has its roots in the University of Geneva school in the 1990s. B. Schneuwly introduced genre primarily as a psychological tool, a material and symbolic mediator between the student subject who integrates the schema of use of the genre, and the situation. J.P. Bronckart, summarized here by D. Bucheton, proposed that textual genres are “sociolinguistic formations, organized according to heterogeneous modalities related to heterogeneous determinations”. Discourses and texts were thus, for him, socially motivated and oriented (ctd in Donahue, in press). In this frame, text typologies became interactive, taking into account extralinguistic parameters,
surface textual features, and production operations. Genres as cultural tools of teaching and learning could thus act as tools for entering a particular discipline, when the discipline is seen as a social set of ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, a bakhtinian sphere of activity (JAUBERT, REBIERE, et BERNIE ctd in REUTER, 2007).

Concepts of disciplinariness thus began seeping in to the French genre work focused on school and university settings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Researchers identified in particular the interest in understanding how the classroom community in different disciplines can construct shared objects of study through particular discursive procedures. Research teams worked with the notion of “argument”, for example, as shaped and produced differently in different disciplines: as “justification” for a process leading to an answer in mathematics, as explication showing cause and effect in history, as based specifically on aspects of plausibility and refutation in physics/chemistry, and as a restricted set of moves grounded in Aristotelian logos in the discipline of French (DONAHUE, 2004).

B. Latour’s work became quite influential in understanding disciplinary differences in the genre of argument in expert and student work. See for example J. Biseault’s work applying Latour’s description of professional science research groups to analysis of negotiations in classroom situations of knowledge construction, collaboration, and peer review: “Biseault concluded that argument in science is a social act, not a text type, and so learning in the sciences implies understanding how to inhabit this social behavior” (DONAHUE, 2004).

Some research groups in France have more recently theorized “genres” in relation to “practices”: genre as the apprehension and categorization of objects and products, practices as the apprehension and categorization of activities, production, and doing; genres are thus objects that regulate the interactions among actors and between actors and knowledge (REUTER, 2007), while practices are (linguistic or non-linguistic) activities that do the same. In the disciplines in particular, for Reuter & Lahanier-Reuter (2007) genres become part of a set of frames used to analyze writing in a discipline that also includes the “disciplinary configurations” in which a text is constructed and the “disciplinary awareness” of the writer. A traditional picture of genre is thus destabilized by its entirely different set of features in different disciplinary settings as it works with different actors and knowledges. While the key goal of a “description” might always be “to give the reader the impression that he can see” what is being described (REUTER, 1998), the descriptive discourse activity involves different values, forms, and modes when it is used in scientific description, sociological accounts, or literary analysis; it has different intellectual and ideological purposes and is situated in a different network of other genres, activities, and recipients.

For Reuter & Lahanier-Reuter (2007),

Genres are […] discursive units, belonging to a given socio-cultural sphere, which determines and constrains (by its key components) the forms chosen. The components are:

– its materiality (for example, in writing, the medium, the size, the ways it is presented);
– its peritextual indicators (in the way Genette describes these, 1982 and 1987, as for example any identification of the author, the recipient, the date…);
– its linguistic actualization (lexical, syntactic, rhetorical…)
– its enunciative markers (explicit or implicit control over the discourse, announced subjectivity or not, organization of content through, for example, modes of linkage or hierarchization…);
– the thematic domains and the “treatable” contents in those domains, in terms of specific conditions of production and reception (categories of authors, relationships among these, implied temporality, spec, functions, stakes, and types of evaluation in play…).

(REUTER & LAHANIER-REUTER, 2007).
Genres thus format, for Reuter and his research group, what can be said and its shapes in a given social space. In this framework, “genre and practices function in interaction with each other in order to enable us to understand the diversity and the modalities of actualization of writing and of written texts” (REUTER 2007). But the list of characteristics Reuter offers leaves minimal place for the social nature of genre in disciplinary work, including it only in “conditions of production and reception”. While in some ways this dynamic description thus complements activity theory perspectives of genre, it creates other distinctions and emphases.

Consider in contrast the exploration of genre provided by Bazerman (2004): an utterance embodies a speech act, a “meaningful social action being accomplished through language”; these acts are “carried out in patterned, typical, and therefore intelligible” genres, textual forms that are self-reinforcing because they are recognizable. Bazerman is careful to say, however, building from Bakhtin, that genres typify not only textual forms but also social activities (or that at the very least we cannot separate these two out). If we focus on the regularity of generic forms for carrying out similar tasks, a regularity Russell (1997) first highlighted, we see that writing in the disciplines teaching can clearly be carried out as a method for introducing these regular forms and enabling students to practice them, but it can just as well be an exploration into the meaningful social actions being carried out, the sources of recognition, the purposes and situations of utterances, and so on. In fact, if “genre helps locate [a] text in some familiar social arrangements and activities” (BAZERMAN, LITTLE & CHAVKIN, 2003), we might suggest that teaching has more to do with making sure students are in fact familiar with the social arrangements and activities of a discipline or sub-discipline.

Much of United States activity theory work described to this point has focused on production, on the social relationship between genre and context, in spite of its recognition of “texts in use” as the key to interpretation or identification. French genre theory in “la didactique de l’écrit”, as embodied by Reuter and his research team’s analytic frame, has largely focused on explanation, description, and analysis of textual objects in different contexts. Both of these perspectives allow the role of the recipient of discursive acts to remain in the background, relatively unexplored even as it is acknowledged as central. I do not mean the recipient’s role in the rhetorical sense (the writer considers the potential reader; the speaker considers the potential listener). Instead, I mean the role of the recipient in defining or redefining the genre of a generic-specific text based on its reception, its use for a particular recipient who is himself a generic-specific member of a particular context. The genre of a text in this case becomes the relationship between the reader or recipient and the text, the dynamic activity of reception in the genre relationship. The exploration of how texts are received and taken up is a far cry from the earlier depictions of texts as collections of fixed features, and is a complement to seeing genres as mediators, tools, and activities. It also leaves us with the question, in academic-disciplinary settings, who are these recipients and how are they “disciplinary”?

In this frame, we have a rich repertory of genres that we practice, even though neither their use nor their acquisition is necessarily conscious. Monolithic sets of literary or rhetorical genres were fragmented through Bakhtin’s frames of genres as multiple sets of relatively stable forms of utterance associated with different spheres of human activity. But this association does not limit a text produced in a sphere of activity from meaning something in another sphere. We rediscover in this way the zones of contact that meet up, intersect, or bump up against each other, creating a whole new set of “negotiating” genres that have neither one nor the other set, only, of features—these homogeneous genres, we already know, don’t fly in contact zones (they aren’t “read”). As disciplines evolve and change, people write in contact zones, moving across borders, and so older features-based versions of genre simply don’t work (and of course things like multi-modal texts further complicate all this).
The genre theory work done by Bazerman and Russell, as described here, has opened up new ways of working through these complex writing in the disciplines questions. French linguist F. François’ set of conceptual frames for considering the more fluid aspects of genre provides another way in to this complexity. François, whose genre work has not evolved in a “didactique” vein but rather a broadly-applied analytic vein, develops the socio-discursive notion of “reprise-modification” as a way to pinpoint aspects of a dynamic understanding of the textual genres that we read and write, here applied to what students produce and professors read. He does this by positing “reprise-modification” (literally, re-taking-up-modifying) as the essential discursive act, whether in the production and reception (acts which cannot be separated) of a word, a sentence, a genre—an utterance, in short. From the specific point of view of a text’s reception, François (1998) distinguishes discourse, text, and corpus, with implications for how we might thus consider genres: discourses are the essential simple acts of language use (someone speaks to someone else as a social activity); texts are the “secondarized” versions of discourse, the versions in which an utterance moves from a bakhtinian primary genre (in the moment of production) to a bakhtinian secondary genre (removed from the moment of production) and are thus redefined by their modes of reading or reception; a corpus is a quasi-object, a set of utterances that have become objects of research study. What is particularly relevant to the discussion here is his insistence that a single utterance or group of utterances is, in the context of being in the world, constantly moving among these places. A given text, say the Bible, may be a corpus to analyze, but is a different text in each of its multiple socially situated receptions. Both producing and receiving text are discursive acts of reprise-modification. François (1998) points out, “Fixing a genre is thus never an end to itself. It is a way to highlight the relationships that cannot be pure identity, among a general framework for uttering, a general form, and the variations of production and reception—the circulation.” A focus on reception is not meant to imply a focus on “individual readers” in the way that reader-reception literary theory, for example, encouraged. On the contrary, the reader-recipient is as much a social entity who both shares common features with other readers/sets of readers and has a specific “style” in what her or she does with a text. This part of genres in relation to disciplines in higher education is less frequently explored.

5. Two studies of student writing across disciplines

A “school” text is, of course, most often received as such, by the teacher, and so already we can study that particular relationship. The “disciplinary” school context is a slippery one, as students are both proving knowledge and trying on disciplinary discourse. Both of the research projects I will now use as examples are seeking a deeper understanding of these issues through the concrete texts they collect, the students’ discourse about text and context, the faculty discourse, and the analyses being carried out by readers who are both teachers across disciplines and researchers representing disciplines. The objectives of both can be read through the genre theory lenses we have seen thus far. Both of the studies described here focus on writing in the disciplines in higher education; both share the objectives of better understanding the genres of writing students produce across years of study, and both involve researchers from a variety of disciplines. Each study, given the national context, the research frames, and the individual researchers’ areas of expertise, is pursuing different sets of analytic questions.
Studying writing across disciplines through comprehensive data collection: France

The French project, *Les écrits à l’université: Inventaires, Pratiques, Modèles* (University Writing: Inventories, Practices, Models—EUIPM), is led by researchers I. Delcambre (Université de Lille III) and F. Boch (Université de Grenoble II). It uses surveys, interviews, student writing samples, and faculty focus groups as methods for collecting data. The project was initially developed to address two gaps in French research about writing in the disciplines in higher education. Delcambre and Boch (2006) report:

- There is little sustained, systematic knowledge about genres of writing in postsecondary education or about the relationship of these genres to the genres and genre expectations (implicit and explicit) students bring with them to the university or, finally, about the relationship of these genres to genre expectations (implicit and explicit) teachers offer students.
- There is no widely adopted theoretical model in France for conceptualizing writing at the university. There is an abundance of available work conceptualizing writing in primary and secondary school situations, work that proposes several models in confrontation: cognitive models, the model of “discourse community”, the model of “literacy” and so on.

(Proposal to ANR, 2006)

Delcambre and Boch hypothesize that writing difficulties are intrinsically linked to new discourse objects, the academic discourses themselves, that students discover at the university. They thus hypothesize that difficulties are associated with the content of discourse, but we might also consider the relationship between the content and the new genres. Research in what is named the “didactics” of writing, the theory of teaching and learning writing, supports the idea that

writing difficulties can not be considered simple technical difficulties, but are tightly linked to writers’ representations (their representations of writing and of themselves as writers, of academic expectations about the writing to be produced, etc.), to the expected text genres, and to the frames these genres propose for written production, in particular with respect to discourse content and types of knowledge, and finally to the forms of support and evaluation that accompany the learners’ writing, forms that are themselves based on teachers’ representations of writing and learning.

(DELCAMBRE & BOCH, 2007).

Existing research about university students’ difficulties has largely not considered the discipline in which the writing was studied as a variable but as a given, a descriptive piece of the framing for the research; this project aims to move beyond that to considering the discipline, its ways of knowing, its content as a key variable.

Studying writing across disciplines through longitudinal tracking: United States

The United States longitudinal study was developed to address questions at a particular institution, the University of Maine-Farmington, in the larger frame of a national trend towards longitudinal studies and the questions they raise about student writing development, transfer or generalization of writing knowledge and ability, and the nature of student writing across disciplinary contexts. This study is largely text-based, with some interview and survey data collection. The particular aspect that is relevant to the subject of this article is its use of readers from six disciplines to carry out the analysis of student work; this enables a meta-analysis by the principle investigator, a study of the readers’ reception of the texts through their coding and their discussions.
The project has reviewed the literature in the area of longitudinal studies and developmental theory. Existing studies (there are surprisingly few published studies—Rogers (in press) reports only 11 such studies in the past few decades) have been reviewed for strengths, insights into methodology and terminology, and potential gaps or weaknesses. A review of the literature of discourse analysis as it has been developed in the United Kingdom and France, in particular in the fields of socio-linguistics, theory of teaching writing, and social literacy theories, has informed the project as well. These fields have only recently been applied to writing in higher education in these two countries, and they offer insights into detailed, concrete, and yet culturally-informed analysis of students’ texts. Finally, the literature on transfer theory offers insight into the general lack of available research about student success in generalizing writing knowledge or skills across different disciplinary contexts.

Genre and studies of student writing in the disciplines

In what ways do these two studies offer examples of fruitful thinking about current genre theory and student writing in the disciplines in higher education? The US longitudinal study and the French study share the preliminary corpus-based task of cataloguing types of writing students produce in different disciplines, as defined largely by the task objective, the disciplinary course, and the external textual features, although for different purposes: for the longitudinal study, general groupings of writing types are used to organize ways in which students’ writings change or remain stable in six categories of textual construction (intertextuality, coherence strategies, subject positions, etc.). In France, the genres are being used to inventory shared or different types of writing in the different disciplines.

Beyond this step, however, both studies seek a deeper understanding of the dynamic social nature of the disciplinary work being done. This complicates at least two existing processes:

1. research methods for studying student writing across disciplines, and
2. approaches for teaching student-initiates the ways of working with text production and reception in a discipline. For this presentation I am focusing on the first issue, but I will end with a few thoughts about implications for the second.

The research being done is leading to a systematic construction of the ways in which different texts are being produced and received in different contexts, and are in fact woven into these contexts and their knowledge bases. The interviewing, focus group work, and textual analysis provide multi-point sources of data for understanding how students and faculty in different disciplines use genre as what D. Russell (personal communication) reminds us is “both a constraining mould and an affording landscape for communication”. Both studies get at what D. Russell highlights as the strategic agency of participants, “who further their interests through mutually recognized, genred action, within the moments of utterance, though always constrained by the degree of congruence in their understandings, and always open to difference” (personal communication). This strategic—perhaps negotiating—agency exists for both the student participants and the teacher participants and, we might add, the researcher participants. That is, the “socially shared repertoire of genred actions” that Russell, building on Bazerman (2006), describes would seem to include all three sets of participants. Both studies explore aspects of how teachers, students, and researchers develop these repertoires.

As we look at each study, I would like to emphasize that this is meant to be only a partial accounting of what these studies offer. The French study seeks to understand texts produced by students in a particular discipline as situated in social and intellectual disciplinary activities. It does so by asking students and faculty to describe not only what texts
they produce or require, but how each text fits into and negotiates the discipline’s work. The study posits the genres it is inventorying as social institutions, as recurrent activities doing the work of the discipline, and in particular activities by students who are beginning to do the work of the discipline. The student entering the discipline’s sphere of activity and work is doing so through the specific activity of “researched writing” (the focus of the study’s deeper analysis) with its polyphony, its complexity, its intertextuality and modes of thinking. The interviews with French faculty to hear their accounting of successful writing in this context will produce variant “readings” of the same texts. Researchers analyze the disciplinary perspective but also hear their own expertise in studying and understanding language use. For current versions of genre, this is key. The discipline’s members, as we are reminded by J. Monroe (2007), own the writing in the field, even as researchers might offer methods and insights for understanding the genres being studied. The French study’s focus on both texts and practices helps to bring out the relationship between them.

The US study explores texts’ situatedness through placing them in the larger context of four years of higher education writing work while tracing development of individual students moving through those years. This study is more text-based. The question of practices arises in interviews and annual surveys, but these tools are less central. The genre frame Reuter offers for seeing genres as presenting different features in different contexts is particularly useful for longitudinal study work focused on understanding the texts students produce, classified as the “same” types but in fact negotiating different spaces and thus being produced, recognized, and received differently.

The US study analyzes six categories of textual work: recognizable subjectivities, macro-coherence, micro-coherence, intertextuality, argument construction, and error. These are “in” the texts but are simultaneously received by readers who must account for them—and are what leads to a complex description of the work a particular text appears to be doing. The textual markers are not studied for their presence, ultimately, but for the way they contribute to the textual movements that work for a reader, seen in acts of reprise-modification.

F. François offers “style” as a different way to talk about the “genre” of an individual text when we explore this work a text does, rather than seeking to fix its membership in a category. Style is, in this case, the intersection of specific-particular and shared-common textual movements. What does this mean for the studying of student writers? If we study “genre” in this way, François proposes that it is working with both existing generic frames (disciplinary) and individual texts that both take and don’t take up the recognized regularities that are part of that genre, thus modifying the very constraints the genre might impose in order for a text to be heard.

The US study highlights texts that are produced in one context (the classroom situation), and then read in another (the study situation). We can thus also ask, what then is the relationship between the text and the study? How is the object another object once it is in a study? This question leads us away from features enumeration, certainly (as the primary focus) towards a rendering of the typified responses to repeated school activities in disciplines, but also towards an accounting of the “animating activity” that is the reception and study of the genres in question.

The French study explores that situatedness by using different disciplines as variables in the study and by involving students and faculty in collecting and discussing the work. The various sources of information collected and pulled together, layered, account for the animating activities around (student) production and (faculty) reception as specific to disciplinary contexts.

In this way, both studies take apart disciplinary genres, question their homogeneity, angle to understand the ways in which the disciplinary sphere and its genres enable student work. Both studies represent students’ work as part of the discipline, although only that part
we see in schooling. But neither study, and in fact no other study of which I am aware, considers fully the question of genres of reception. Neither is fully focused on genre as the dynamic activity of reception (for example, by a teacher of a student’s piece, or by a researcher of a corpus text). Bazerman, Little and Chavkin’s rich example of a text as a piece of paper that can reappear in almost any situation anywhere and can, because of its genre, be located in “familiar social arrangements and activities” that enable meaning-making, does not directly explore what happens—textually—when a recipient does not recognize the genre but still uses the text. Where, that is, does the orienting genre come from? And in a research situation, might we (in particular if we do not want to return to discussions of authorial intent or purpose as the maker of actual meaning) consider research as a genre destabilizer? Considerations of intent might be particularly tricky in the academic situation of student writing, in which intent is a multilayered weave of student writer’s intent, teacher-assigner’s intent, institutional intent, and student “voice” as the carrier of these intents (and others not yet articulated).

6. A few preliminary concluding remarks

Perhaps the most encouraging feature of both studies is their resistance to rushing to pedagogical applications. Results of the analyses will likely complicate the teaching and learning relationship in higher education work in the disciplines; teaching students to “write a genre” promises to become more difficult than ever. Rather than acquiring conventional moves, learning disciplinary genres becomes a progressive adopting-questioning-modifying that entails critical membership in the fullest sense of the term. Writing in the disciplines work needs to account for all of the ways genre is in play: as sets of recognizable features, as social and thus ideological acts to be adopted-resisted, as complement to activities, and as a relationship with a particular reader. In French higher education, teaching writing in the disciplines does not yet take this approach (or perhaps it is the ultimate embedded, opaque approach), but the field of la didactique expressly resists “applicationisme” and so the work of research and theory is slow to influence practice, perhaps valuably slow. In the United States, teaching students the writing of their chosen field is a heterogeneous affair, and the theoretical explorations described here are not necessarily informing the average college writing situation either. Both the French and the North American genre theories presented here require us to account for multiple social, cultural, organizational, linguistic and textual phenomena that simply do not allow for understanding the genres of the disciplines as stable entities in stable fields into which students must be acculturated. In addition, the theoretical strands presented offer insights to each other in ways that become clear as we see how the French research project can benefit from North American genre theory and the US research project relies on frames that have come out of at least two key schools of genre theory in France. This should mark the start of fruitful exchange.

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