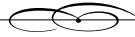


EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



Great Expectations

Local expectations play an important role in how one's performance is judged by others. If a man attends a black tie dinner wearing a plaid jacket and string tie, most in attendance might characterize him as socially illiterate, poorly mannered, plainly lost, or any of a variety of other descriptors, none of them flattering. What makes our apparel-challenged visitor appear so out of place at this event is his violation of the conventions anticipated by the genre of the situation.

Genre conventions establish the expectations for appropriate or acceptable behavior in any setting. Focusing on the utterance, Bakhtin (1986) offers the construct of *speech genres* as "*relatively stable types of . . . utterances*" linked to a family of utterances distinctive in terms of thematic content, style, and compositional structure (p. 60; emphasis in original). To Bakhtin,

Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his own and others'—with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another. . . . Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances. (p. 69)

In Bakhtin's (1986) conception, then, one's history of experiences in social engagement with others provides a set of cultural schemata that suggest a set of situated expectations for how new social interactions will unfold. While each encounter within given settings is new and will likely involve variation and new juxtapositions of content, style, and structure, those encounters tend to follow the conventions established through the history of interactions in similar settings. Thus, Bakhtin argues that

Speech genres organize our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the very first words If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible. (pp. 78-79)

The man in the plaid suit thus does not enter a pristine environment in which no conventions govern expectations, but rather enters the historically-established social practices of which this black tie dinner is but one instantiation. If the man in the plaid suit went to the dinner in the hopes of closing a business

deal, impressing a prospective employer, or attracting a date, he would likely find few takers.

He might, however, be wearing this suit to challenge the conventions of the gathering. In so doing he might incur condescension or outrage for his efforts, or he might introduce changes in the customs of black tie dinners, as often happens when new practitioners and practices enter existing environments. For instance, in perhaps as discordant a fashion as our plaid-attired exemplar, in the 1950s Ornette Coleman introduced *free jazz* to an audience that largely rejected his atonal improvisations. In time, however, many viewed him as a genius worthy of a MacArthur Fellowship and a trailblazer who freed the jazz genre from its prevailing conventions of harmony, rhythm, and melody. Genres, then, are not static but are open to “the realization of specific social ends in a variety of creative, emergent, and even unique ways” (Bauman, Irvine, & Phillips, 1987, pp. 5-6; quoted in Wertsch, 1991, p. 61).

Like any setting, schools rely on historically-engrained social practices to suggest to their participants conventional ways of acting. Schools have unique codes of behavior that are rarely instituted in other settings, governing dress, speech, adherence to schedule, attendance, address of adults, and other facets of relational life. Schools also follow unstated rules established by tradition, enculturation, and routine, including the patterns of speech genres such as the Initiation/Response/Evaluation pattern noted by many observers (e.g., Cazden, 1988).

In this issue of *RTE*, we present three articles that investigate teachers’ and students’ genre expectations for engagement with texts and one another in the social setting of the preschool or elementary classroom. Each study involves an effort to understand the schematic expectations that different participants bring to joint activity in literacy practice. As is true at the black tie dinner, authority is invested in someone to determine what is acceptable and appropriate and what is not, with the historical practices of the setting suggesting which conventions should be followed. Different, though, is the fact that in school one individual, the teacher, is designated as the arbiter who may decide which genre expectations matter most. Each of the three studies provides a different lens through which teachers can examine their assumptions about how to respond appropriately to texts. Together, these studies raise questions about widely held beliefs that govern classroom interaction and curricular choices in preschool and elementary school classrooms.

Pauline Harris, Jillian Trezise, and W. N. Winser analyze teachers’ assumptions about students based on their participation during classroom interactions. Harris, Trezise, and Winser argue that teachers often misunderstand and underestimate the classroom participation of young students whose contributions are condensed and cryptic. Without a high degree of intersubjectivity—that is, when participants share the same understanding of the genre of an activity—teachers may have expect-

tations that are not realized in students' performances, or so it seems. Harris and her colleagues term these occasions *intertextual conflicts*: interactions in which the social practices and experiential associations that teachers and students invoke are different and in opposition. Harris and colleagues' careful study of these interactions highlights the kinds of schematic expectations that different participants bring to joint activity. The differences in their expectations for performance create tensions that can be detrimental to students if teachers interpret students' performance as insufficient. This study raises important questions about whose meanings get voiced and whose meanings count when the speech genre of the classroom is determined and maintained by teachers who do not engage with students on the students' own terms.

Cathy Tower questions field-wide assumptions about whether natural development or social exposure and engagement accounts for students' genre preferences in reading. Tower argues that many teachers, along with much of the field, assume that young children have a natural predisposition to relate to and understand narratives before they can understand other genres such as information books. Tower counters this belief through a careful analysis of the responses made to three typical information books by a group of children in a Head Start program. She finds that the young children's responses to the books suggest an awareness of the genre of the texts they were reading and that this awareness had an impact on the speech genre of the read-aloud. Her analyses

challenge the belief in the developmental appropriateness of narrative for young children that leads teachers to provide insufficient contact with other genres. Instead her study suggests that narrative, rather than having developmental primacy, is more likely the genre young children have most frequently encountered.

Charles Elster and David Hanauer also investigate the impact of a text's genre on the speech genre of classroom discussion. In their analysis of how teachers and students read and talked about stories and poems, Elster and Hanauer find that different genres suggest different patterns of social interaction. Classroom readings of poems differed systematically from readings of stories and were characterized by an expressive reading style, multiple readings of a poem in one sitting, children's active participation in reading along, and discussions that were aesthetic and open-ended and that focused on linguistic features of the texts. Like Tower's study, their study suggests that reading different text genres with children results in expanding the speech genre of talk about texts. Their findings support a multi-genre perspective on literacy development that recognizes variations in literacy experiences according to different text and activity genres.

These studies are important because they highlight the expectations that teachers have about how students perform and what accounts for their performance, expectations that have critical consequences for what students are allowed to do and how they are assessed for doing it. If teachers do not

establish intersubjectivity, then they may make errors of interpretation in their assessment of students. If teachers make assumptions about the primacy of narrative, then they may impose a curriculum on their students that affords them too little exposure to other genres that later are key to students' success. If teachers do not recognize variation in speech genres that accompany literary genres, then they may view reading as a monolithic process and not be responsive to the need for different teaching and learning strategies in different activity contexts.

Taken together, these studies direct attention to the relational nature of literacy practice. Teachers and students converge in the classroom, often bringing various experiences and cultural schemata to their engagement with one another. To many, school is a site of socialization where students learn how to be productive members of their communities writ large and small. As such, school serves to initiate and apprentice students into culturally val-

ued ways of knowing and being. At face value, this endeavor is critical to establishing the kinds of discourse communities implied by Bakhtin's (1986) description of speech genres: communities of practice in which people recognize and take up the discourse of those with whom they engage. The careful studies in this issue of RTE suggest that teachers need to be aware of what kinds of communities of practice and discourse they are initiating students into. The questions they collectively raise include: What is the basis for beliefs about the primacy of particular communities of practice and discourse? When teachers apprentice students into a particular way of viewing literacy, what other avenues are then closed off? How should teachers respond when learners thwart their expectations? We believe that these are provocative and important questions for any educator to consider when setting a direction for the learning of others.

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