

# LIS and Genre: Between People, Texts, Activity and Situation

by Jack Andersen

## Bringing Genre into Focus

A couple of years ago I taught a master's course in knowledge organization. In the Danish context, students in a master's program work full-time and study on a half-time basis. Most of the students had educational backgrounds as librarians, and all of them held jobs that had to do with knowledge organization work. On a particular day the topic was genre theory. At the outset I asked the students what they were working with in their jobs. The orchestrated reply was, "We work with information!"

I asked them, "Information – just like that?"

"No," they said. "We work with various forms of information."

"Do you mean various forms of texts, I asked?"

"Yes," they replied. "Now you got it! We work with annual reports, schedules, records, project plans, strategy reports, memos, agendas and other sorts of texts performing certain actions in our work places."

I replied that these forms of texts are what I would call genres, and that I had no idea why they call them information. The point is that the particular workplaces where they work will probably not refer to all these forms of texts as "information," but rather by their names (annual report, projects plans). This exercise is a first step in making people think in genre terms, to call texts and other forms of communication (genres) by the name they are given by the users of these texts. The next step is to begin to see what sorts of actions these genres accomplish on behalf of their users in a given setting – that is, to see genres as means to an end. Thus, genres are forms of communication used by people in particular contexts and situations to accomplish something particular in the activities with which these people are involved.

Jack Andersen is associate professor at the Department of Information Studies, Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, Denmark, and can be reached at [jan@db.dk](mailto:jan@db.dk)

How do we frame genre in the context of library and information studies (LIS)? Let us assume that LIS as an academic field is the study of (1) how and with what means professional, scholarly, cultural and social knowledge as materialized in documents (print or electronic) is communicated in society and (2) what function libraries and other similar knowledge organizing institutions or activities have, or are supposed to have, in these communications. Professional, scholarly, cultural, organizational and social communication accomplished by documents comprises a diversity of genres: work orders, newsletters, recipes, bibliographies, articles in literary-cultural journals, surveys, chronicles, technical reports, governmental reports, scholarly articles, book reviews and so on. Many people educated with a background in LIS probably work in some way with such genres.

As LIS is interested in how knowledge in documents and other artifacts is organized, genre theory is a productive perspective. Studying genres reveals that genres and human activity are important organizing factors of communication and knowledge. It tells us what kinds of genres various people and institutions in various communicative contexts prefer. A genre view of these communicative activities provides a means to systemically examine document production and use and the organization of document production and use. Thus, using genre as an analytical concept in LIS would help us understand how professional, cultural and social communication is carried out by a diversity of people via genres. It would also enable understanding of how genres organize activity, texts, knowledge and people.

Moreover, a genre perspective would not only focus on the people and the production and use of various documents, but would also stress the typified activities, the work, in which people are discursively engaged. From a genre point of view, then, document production and use is not viewed as an end in itself but in terms of how documents help people do their work. If

LIS by means of theoretical and empirical studies can gain a more thorough understanding of situated and typified document production and use, then we may also be able to have a more informed understanding of the ways in which information systems help or do not help people do their work. This goal implies that we must view information systems not as an end in themselves but rather as a means to an end. We must focus on what information systems *do*, as tools to be used in goal-directed activity. It may be that such a view has been present in LIS but formulated in other ways. However, what has been missing is the genre perspective.

But why should LIS want to know about genre? A genre-theoretical approach to LIS research problems provides an opportunity to connect to other theoretical discourses, in particular in the humanities. Moreover, genre can provide LIS with a concrete object of study. In fact, Phil Agre has suggested that genre, rather than information, be used as a focal point in LIS [1]. Genre theory is not about text types in isolation, but rather about the fact that recognizing (as both producer and user) a particular text type means recognizing a particular communicative situation and activity in which that type of text (genre) is used to accomplish a given task. Bazerman [2, p. 16] puts it this way:

Genres help us navigate the complex worlds of written communication and symbolic activity, because in recognizing a text type we recognize many things about the institutional and social setting, the activities being proposed, the roles available to writer and reader, the motives, ideas, ideology and expected content of the document, and where this all might fit in our life.

Take the example of the digital library. The digital library is a textual place on the Internet which helps us "...navigate the complex worlds of written communication and symbolic activity..." When we recognize a given digital library as such, we also know what to expect of it, that is, what it can do for users and what users can accomplish by using a digital library, as compared to other textual places on the Internet that perform similar actions. A genre understanding of digital libraries thus provides a means of understanding matters of knowledge organization, communication of symbolic activity and information seeking. Generally, genre broadens our

understanding of how knowledge is organized and communicated by means of recorded discourse as articulated through some generic form.

What is most important to know about genre is that, first and foremost, genre studies are not primarily concerned with text types, but with how different human activities involving the use of texts become typified as a consequence of the production and use of recorded discourse by different agents. Typified human activities reveal what kinds of paths and access to knowledge are considered legitimate or appropriate in particular contexts, and thus also what kinds of information seeking strategies are employed and why they are employed the way they are. By taking up a genre approach, LIS researchers and practitioners are capable of producing an understanding of the institutional and social setting in which the communication and organization of knowledge, culture or information take place. It can also lead to an understanding of why this activity has the shape it has and what impact it may have on human activity.

Many user studies have been carried out over the years trying to determine how people use the kinds of information and information systems they do. But rarely has emphasis been put on the artifacts that materialize and configure information, and the effect of artifacts on the use of information (see [3]). Although genre is much more than text type, the text as a social and material object is nevertheless important for theoretical and methodological reasons. Therefore, a genre approach to LIS would imply a greater focus on the study of texts and on how and why they accomplish what they do on behalf of the people producing and using texts in human activities. In short, user studies would be genre studies. Traditional user studies have focused on how people seek information and what sources they use and do not use. Important insights have been gained here. But the starting point has been people's information need and consequently how they have tried to fulfill this need. Genre studies would start with the genre and then move backwards to ask questions like, how has this particular text come to look and be used like it has and by whom? To which actions, or goals, is the text intended to contribute? Who is involved in producing and using this text? What kind of larger textual and activity system is the text a part of?

Thus, to study a genre is to study how knowledge is regulated, codified and altered by people and their communicative activities. One might even say that a particular genre defines an information need. For instance, a fishing guide cannot fulfill the need for information concerning how to prepare a sushi dinner. The fishing guide and its informative potential is not unlimited. This limitation exists because a genre, and the form of knowledge it materializes, is defined and constrained by the activity it is used to accomplish.

A major issue in genre theory is how to recognize and understand various types of texts and what they accomplish in different human activities based on the production and use of texts. In this way genre theory is concerned with much more than mere text types and their formal textual features. An approach that only studies text types and their formal qualities does not allow for inquiry into the discursive activities performed by texts.

Generally speaking, the concept of genre covers the characteristics that differentiate texts (verbal or written) from each other. But this differentiation is not a matter of recognizing purely textual and formal features. To recognize a particular text type is to recognize a particular communicative situation and activity in which that type of text (genre) is used to accomplish a given task. In our everyday interaction with texts as producers or recipients, genres are means of orientation. Our knowledge of genres determines the means and modes of the production and use of texts and what we expect of them in professional as well as everyday life. Genre becomes a kind of textual existentialism and hence connected to literacy, as the more we know about the communicative activities we are involved in, the more we also know how to understand and use the texts produced by these activities. This also explains the view on texts and contexts in genre theory. Texts and contexts are *not* considered two distinct categories but the text is integral to both context and action. To produce and use a text is to be situated in a context with socially and historically developed typified activities of producing and reading texts.

For example, a scientist cannot just invent his own way of reporting experiments to colleagues, if he wants to be taken seriously. He has to know how to apply some conventions for presenting the experiment setup, evaluation

methods, results, etc. On the other hand, the reader of a scientific article has to know something about the tradition of reporting such experiments in order to understand and evaluate the contents of an experimental article. This was what Bazerman [4] showed in his study of the experimental article in science. Bazerman paid particular attention to how this genre emerged historically and how it was, and is, shaped by the recurrent typified communicative activities of writers (scientists reporting their experiments) and readers (evaluating and learning from the experiments of others) and how the genre shaped the knowledge producing activity into a typified activity (the writing and reading of an experimental article) as a product of its history and agents. Thus Bazerman's study demonstrates how we may conceive of genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" [5].

In connection with genre and written communication the concept of typification becomes even more critical. Given that writers and readers are separated in time and space, a means is needed to communicate appropriately and avoid, or minimize the risk of, misunderstandings. In a typified communicative activity certain actions are carried out in certain situations following certain forms of communication, leading to the ability to recognize and understand particular standardized practices and activities [6]. Thus, typification is what allows one to recognize and identify a particular context and its particular forms of communication, i.e., its genres.

### End Remarks

Genre makes us see how communication and knowledge are structured, stabilized and codified by people, situations and activities. To observe genres in action is to observe the work they are performing on behalf of their users. Thus, we gain an understanding of how and why certain people are using certain forms of communication in certain recurrent situations. We learn to see how it is that practices become stabilized, i.e., typified. More importantly, we learn to see the knowledge work performed by librarians and other information professionals as part of a larger activity in which knowledge is produced circulated, stored and used.

Authors Note: This article is a heavily condensed version of my recent article for the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* [7]. ■

## Resources Mentioned in the Article

- [1] Agre, P. (1997, Spring/Summer). The end of information & the future of libraries. *Progressive Librarian, Iss. 12/13*, 1-6.
- [2] Bazerman, C. (2000). Letters and the social grounding of differentiated genres. In D. Barton & Nigel Hall (Eds.) *Letter writing as a social practice* (pp. 15-29). Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. (*Studies in Written Language and Literacy, 9*).
- [3] Frohmann, B. (2004). *Deflating information: From science studies to documentation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- [4] Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping written knowledge. The genre and activity of the experimental article in science*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press. Electronic version retrieved April 22, 2008, from [http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bazerman\\_shaping/](http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bazerman_shaping/).
- [5] Miller, C. R. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 70*, pp. 151-167.
- [6] Bazerman, C. (2004). Speech acts, genres and activity systems: How texts organize activity and people. In *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices*, pp. 309-339 Ed. by Charles Bazerman & Paul Prior, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 316.
- [7] Andersen, J. (2008). The concept of genre in information studies. In *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, Volume 42*, pp. 339-367