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"GENRE MEANS . . . ": A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF FOURTH GRADE TALK ABOUT GENRE

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This action research study investigates how genre theory can be integrated into the practice of a writing enrichment program and how the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Analysis can help assess and improve both student learning and teacher practice. A multilayered exploration of teacher-student discourse in an urban public elementary school in the Midwest United States discloses the various ways in which the concept of genre is both successfully and unsuccessfully constructed among fourth-grade students. Grounded in sociocultural and genre theory, I define and develop a three-way understanding of the word genre: genre as a literary term; genre referring to the analytical tool used in CDA as developed by Fairclough; and Genre, *referring to pedagogical theories which suggest that social purpose is at the heart of all text making and must be considered and made explicit when teaching about genre.*

Cool November sunlight streams through the ten-foot windows of the second floor classroom where, as a professional writer and teacher researcher, I conduct a writing workshop in an urban elementary school in the midwestern United States. Down on the street below, plastic bags and leaves blow along the gutter. Dogs bark. Single-family houses line the neighborhood; some are in good repair, most are not. My students label their community "the 'hood."

I have invited my fourth-grade class to discuss with me what they know and remember about the concept of genre. We first began discussing this subject 10 months ago, when I introduced the idea in third grade that writing "can come in different forms." Although this phrase is simple and sufficient for classroom use, it is in fact a distillation of decades worth of sociocultural linguistic

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and composition theory regarding language in use and drives to the very heart of my pedagogical purpose and my own practices as a writer.

Broadly conceived, genres are kinds of texts, and ''texts are different because they do different things'' (Cope & Kalatzis, 1993, p. 7). The reasons for textual differences can be located in the social purpose for each text (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Christie, 2002; Callaghan, Knapp, & Noble, 1993). Developed by genre theorists, this concept is especially generative in the larger purpose of my program, which emphasizes the choice-making power of any speaker or writer who considers sociocultural context and purpose before producing a spoken or written text. My long-term and ongoing investigation of bidialectal teaching practices is rooted in my attempt to encourage students to style shift as needed in order to construct the meanings and convey the identities they wish to express.

Traditionally, the word genre is used and understood as an important term in literary criticism. In this sense, genre stands for particular categories of forms such as poetry, fiction, biography, drama, how-to, nonfiction, and so forth. This meaning and use of the word genre was the subject of my classroom conversations and lessons. It is the meaning most familiar in traditional English or literature classrooms, and one my students will no doubt encounter as they progress into higher grades. Seemingly stable, the meaning of the word genre has nevertheless been subjected to scrutiny and analysis by researchers such as Chapman (1994) who was interested in how and when children begin to compose in recognizable and distinguishable text types. Taking up sociocultural theory generated by Bakhtin (1986), Chapman developed a working definition of genre as ''a typified form of discourse or way of organizing or structuring discourse, shaped by and in response to recurring situational contexts'' (p. 352).

My working premise throughout this study was that students benefit from a self-conscious ability to manipulate a variety of expressive and communicative styles and codes (or genres). The pedagogical treatment analyzed in this study aimed to solidify student understanding of the word genre and presents an important extension of genre theory into the dynamic environment of an actual classroom. How have my students made meaning of the

concept of genre? How is the concept of genre constructed? How does the feedback they receive from their teacher and classmates affect classroom discourse, as that discourse pertains to the concept of genre? To approach these questions, I call upon the tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as outlined by Fairclough (1992) and of multimodal analysis as presented by Norris (2004). At the moment I am simultaneously posing questions, attempting to follow up appropriately, maintaining class behavior, and getting the whole messy experience on videotape.

''What does genre mean?'' I have asked Darrion (all names, including the school name, are pseudonyms), a sprightly, good-natured boy who loves to write made-up stories. Darrion is stammering good-naturedly over the word ''genre.'' He tips forward with every other emphatic utterance of the syllable ''gen,'' which he pronounces (as I do) in the French manner. He tosses and flips a pencil. He squeezes his eyes shut and tilts his face up into the sunshine. He bites his lip. He opens his eyes to glance at me and smile. He keeps saying ''gen,'' and ''genre means.'' There he is stuck. Over and over again he repeats the syllable ''gen.'' Two seconds pass. Ten seconds pass. On the other side of the viewfinder, I wonder what will happen next.

Context and Participants

For 20 years, I have been a professional journalist, fiction writer, editor, and ghostwriter. In 2005, I launched a pilot residency program at Hutsch Elementary under the auspices of a regional arts and cultural enrichment organization. Designed to bring students to an independent, writer-staffed classroom once a week, the writing lab is a place where literacy—word sense—is considered and practiced in a variety of forms: spoken language, written language, critical thinking, and reading. In every lesson I make time for each of these modes. Allowing for conversation is particularly important at Hutsch, where a strictly scripted writing and reading program mandated by the school district leaves minimal opportunity for spontaneous, meaningful use of the students' own experiences and language. My workshop curriculum evolves directly out of my experience as a writer and in response to the sense I have of my students' individual abilities and needs.

The participants included 20 fourth-grade students, most of whom I had been teaching since they were in second grade. About half of the teachers and staff at Hutsch are African American and the other half are White; all of the students are African American and live near the school in a severely under-resourced and culturally and ethnically isolated part of town. The language they are most comfortable speaking is what linguists call African American English (AAE), a patterned, rule-abiding dialect of English that evolved from Southern English, and one that manifests particular phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical features described in detail by Rickford (1999). To offer but one example, a student once said, ''Ms. Schaenen, you always be wearin those same shoes.'' Two AAE features are evident here: the verb ''be wearin'' indicates an action that is usually and routinely done (compared with mainstream American English: ''You always wear those same shoes''); and the pronunciation of ''wearin'' will lack the engma sound of mainstream pronunciation (compare to mainstream ''wearing''). Although their spoken dialect is primarily AAE, the students understand both forms of English aurally, and many of the students can and do write in mainstream American English, a dialect characterized by its lack of stigmatized features. Often my students' writing exhibits characteristics of both dialects.

For the most part, my spoken language conforms to the patterns of mainstream English. Raised in New York City among a privileged Jewish family that provided me with various enrichment activities valued in that social milieu, I always sensed that fate, luck, and timing had very much to do with determining outcomes in life. As a writer, I am especially interested in the details that reveal how people both shape and are shaped by the larger world, and how language contributes to the construction of social identities.

Methods

Research Design

Over the weeks leading up to the days analyzed in this study, my classroom practice included direct instruction, casual conver-

sation, reading, writing, reading aloud, and oral reflection. The resulting conversations and activities—so fleeting in real time—seemed rich with meanings relevant to my students' understanding of genre. I recorded particular lessons in order to return to these classroom moments and investigate more deliberately and systematically what was going on and to try to make sense of the students' understanding of what I thought I had taught them. Analyzing the data with the goal of improving my practice (an intention fundamental to action research), I sought to understand complicated classroom dynamics in a way impossible to do in situ. As I watched and listened to the recordings with the tools of critical discourse analysis and multimodal discourse analysis at hand, the data seemed to prompt and address the following research questions: How can genre theory be used to teach an important academic concept in an enrichment environment? Post-hoc, how can critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis be used to assess the teaching and learning that transpired? Yet another purpose of this study was to subject my performing classroom self to critical analysis using the multimodal interactions observed during two particular lessons, attending to the verbal interaction between me and a few individual students selected as examples. To prompt this reflexive exercise, my operative questions were: ''What did I do and say? What were the consequences of what I did and said in terms of what the students did and said? The answers to these questions would indicate both replicable practices (and practices to avoid) for other teachers and enrichment specialists.

This action research study is an example of qualitative, interpretive inquiry. In other words, to guide and support the construction of my hypotheses, I conducted an in-depth study of a small group of people, two classes of 10 students each (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Because the results of qualitative research are descriptive rather than predictive, I have attempted methodologically to embrace the ''ambiguities, uncertainties, and diversities'' of my participants' experiences (E. W. Saul, personal communication, 2008).

As action research, this study was conducted in accordance with the ethical considerations and constraints proposed and detailed by Zeni (2001), which assert, among other considerations, the importance of making explicit the researcher's own

relationship to the participants. In this regard, my students and I clearly experienced our shared time from different sociocultural and socioeconomic perspectives. Furthermore, as an adult with considerable professional expertise, I embodied and enacted authority throughout our encounters. Power in the classroom was not evenly distributed. Although the student participants had some agency in our shared classroom experience and were often encouraged to identify and implement alternatives (Mirón & Lauria, 1998) when working on assignments or responding to me, we all knew that they were expected to do what I said, follow directions, and behave ''appropriately'' according to my sense of that word. In accordance with what Cope and Kalantzis (1993) outline as one among their five ''Basic Principles of an Explicit Pedagogy for Inclusion and Access'' (p. 78), I customarily and intentionally situated myself as a person ''in a position of knowledge—a person of social authoritativeness'' (p. 79). Third, because I consider myself to be engaged in a praxis as defined by Freire (1990), my intention is to act and reflect upon my actions in the world (and classroom) with the intention to transform it. Subjecting all the language in the classroom, my own as well as that of the student-participants, to critical discourse analysis was vital to this process, for as Freire insists, ''those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly'' (p. 60).

Data Collection

The texts I have selected for analysis are snapshots, representative episodes in the life of the writing lab in January and November 2007. As such, the data for this study are part of a larger longitudinal project that focuses on how bidialectal teaching practices, that is, lessons and activities that include and affirm vernacular linguistic patterns in addition to standard customs, can affect achievement.

Like each of my lessons, the January hour began with a casual circle-time conversation. Next, I introduced the lesson of this particular day—broadly defining the literary concept of ''genre,'' with which some of the students were fuzzily familiar, and which I defined as ''different forms of writing.'' The students then got

quietly to work. During the final 15 minutes of the hour, the students shared their writing aloud. The genres represented by the students included nonfiction, fiction (fantasy), drama, poetry, and how-to. After each student's share-aloud performance, I conducted brief post-performance interviews, which I recorded using a small cassette tape recorder. The purpose of these interviews was to help the students understand at a metacognitive level something about the choices they made with respect to shaping and presenting their material according to the conventions of a particular literary form, or genre.

Nine months later, when the students were fourth graders, I used a videorecorder to capture both our classroom talk about genre and my one-on-one conversations with students who had looked over the transcripts from nine months earlier. For a few weeks before the recording was made, we had been talking about genre, making lists on flip charts of various genres, and situating compositions throughout the year in particular genres. On the day examined in this study, I began by asking students directly, ''What does genre mean?'' Although I typically began by asking one student, often one or more peers contributed to the responses heard on the tape. After 10 minutes or so of these open-ended interviews, I turned off the tape recorder and spent 10 minutes engaged in direct instruction—defining genre as ''different forms of writing, such as fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, biography, autobiography, sermons, how-to, and so forth.'' Playfully, and emphasizing the rote answer that I now expected, I asked the students to repeat this statement over and over again, both in chorus and individually. Next I asked them to spend a few minutes composing raps that incorporated this ''definitive'' statement about genres. They broke into groups and then performed their genre raps, setting them to a widely known line-dance step popularized by Soulja Boy, a contemporary rapper.

Analysis

Definitions

Because genre is a word with multiple meanings, for the purposes of this analysis I will distinguish three ways of using the term. Just

as researchers grounded in sociocultural theory and practice have come to understand and represent the respective connotations of discourse and Discourse by the use of lower and uppercase Ds (Gee, 1996), so I propose to differentiate between three connotations of the word ''genre'' by means of typographical distinctions.

By genre (in lowercase), I mean the traditional literary term that stands for particular categories of forms as detailed above. By *genre* (in italics), I mean the word in the sense of the so-named analytical tool used by Critical Discourse Analysis practitioners (Fairclough, 1992; Rogers, 2004), among others, who use *genre* as an umbrella-descriptor for the constellation of questions they ask about how utterances and texts convey ways of interacting. Originating in the concept of ''tenor'' as theorized in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1989), *genre* signifies one aspect of the relationship between form and function in language (Rogers, 2004). When I see in my own classroom talk, for example, that I am speaking and behaving with the microphone like an emcee holding forth before a studio audience, I might say that the *genre* of my discourse is patterned after a talk show host, that my way of interacting calls upon the emcee's kind of talk.

Finally, by Genre (with an uppercase G), I mean the term in the broadest pedagogical sense established by genre theorists. All texts are made in context. The nature of the context and the purpose of the text-maker within a context shape both the form and the content of a particular text.

This analysis is theoretically grounded in the work of the Genre theorists whose work reflects the theories and methods of Systemic Functional Linguistics offered by Halliday (1994). Since the 1980s, Genre theorists have posited the importance of making text types and their social purposes accessible to students, particularly those who are traditionally disadvantaged in school systems (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). It is not enough, these researchers argue, for teachers simply to transmit to students a list of stable categories or forms. Interrogating the goals and purposes of the various genres must be integrated into classroom practice. Theoretically, all curricular decisions made in the interest of foregrounding student understanding can emerge out of the principles of knowing how different kinds of texts come to be constructed *on* purpose and *for* a purpose. ''In princi-

ple, an understanding of the text type and its overall structure should enlighten and empower, not least because it draws attention to the socially constructed nature of much of experience'' (Christie, 2007, p. 37). Crucial to the teaching of genre as a concept is the goal of making explicit the socially purposeful nature of various genres. ''Genres themselves need to be sequenced into the fundamental structure of literacy and the process of learning to write at school,'' according to Cope and Kalantzis (1993, p. 80). Students with limited access to power and other social goods

> ''especially need to be exposed to learning experiences in which they work their way through explicit analysis of generic features, critical appraisal of the social function of the genre, and then writing in the genre. This means that teachers have a lot more to do than simply make space for their students' voices.'' (p. 85)

Some researchers might question this premise, arguing that students' own ways of doing, thinking, and being offer sufficiently flexible and generative tools for the mastery of school discourses (cf. Lee & Majors, 2003). In response to this critique, and from the perspective of a professional writer and teaching specialist, I reiterate the central purpose of my practice and the subject of this study: to help students understand the meaning of the word genre as it is used in academic contexts and to expand their ability to manipulate a variety of expressive and communicative styles and codes (or genres).

Furthermore, as analytical tools, the concepts offered by Genre theory are congruent with those entailed by Gee's use of Discourse, which, beyond text-making, attends to multimodal ways of expressing identity through gesture, posture, gaze, proxemics, kinesics, and other paralinguistic channels. How, when, and why do particular genres call upon various modes of expression?

At the time of the January lesson, I intentionally attempted to practice a form of critical pedagogy affirmed by the Genre theorists. In other words, I was trying to create and sustain what Pappas and Barro Zecker (2001) called ''a figuring-things-out atmosphere'' in the classroom, offering the students an opportunity to ask authentic questions and open our discourse from the monologic Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) model to a more

dialogic one. McVitte (2004) describes three kinds of discourse—disputational, cumulative, and exploratory. She proposes that the best conditions for learning occur in classrooms in which tentative, wondering, and open exploratory talk prevails. Borrowing from these and other theorists, I attempted to create an atmosphere ripe for exploratory talk about genres. I did so because I feel it is in the best interest of all students to be able to work consciously within and between genres in a local (personal) way as individual writers, as well as at the institutional level (throughout their school day in other classes) and, ultimately, at the societal level when the time comes to manipulate and interpret text types in the wider world among people from diverse communities. As a teacher and writer, my goal is to empower my students to know, as Pappas writes, ''how to resist and challenge the historically entrenched coercive macrointeractions in the broader society'' (Pappas & Barro Zecker, 2001, p. xii). Creating a culturally and linguistically interactional classroom, one that openly embraced and affirmed the linguistic skills and customs of its students, was to be the first step toward talking frankly about the choices all people make in their use of written and spoken language. I viewed conversations and lessons about linguistic choice making as one strand within the complex weave that Genre theory offers to critical pedagogical practice.

At the time of the November recording, I increasingly viewed talk about genre in the context of Genre and consequently as part of the broader goals of my enrichment program. I was beginning to see how contrastive analysis—a basic tool used to help students understand the differences between mainstream and vernacular forms of English and an important step toward making style shifting a more conscious act—might be viewed as fitting into Genre theory. Thinking about which language form is right for which sociocultural context fits nicely with the questions about social purpose posed by Genre theory. It seemed to me that my students would be well served if they could come to understand the categorical meaning of genre even as they learned to manipulate and play with particular genres.

In addition to Genre studies, I drew upon research that demonstrated the positive effects of classroom practices, which made purposeful use of students' cultural funds of knowledge (Godley, Carpenter, & Werner, 2007; Lee, 2006; Martinez-Roldan,

2003; McVitte, 2004; Meier, 2008; Mirón & Lauria, 1998; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Rowsell & Rahl, 2007). I actively sought ways to appreciate, embrace, and make pedagogical use of concepts and speech patterns that came into my classroom ''free of charge'' and ''no questions asked.'' Following the Genre theorists' call to practice a classroom discourse as ''a subtle dialogue between students' various linguistic and cultural backgrounds and the culture of schooling with its language of schooled literacy'' (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993), I looked for ways to align and marry curricular content (such as the learning of the meaning of genre) with the ways of being, doing, and thinking my students came to school already knowing and practicing.

Analytic Procedures

Audiotape procedures. Guided by the tools of CDA as outlined by Rogers (2004), I read through the transcripts of the January episodes dozens of times and listened repeatedly to the audiotape of the class. I coded this data for the three analytical categories of *genre*, Discourse, and style—or ways of interacting, ways of representing, and ways of being.

First, attending to *genre*, I coded the transcript for examples of spoken text—whole clauses or bits of clauses—that seemed most salient with respect to ways of interacting. I looked in particular for moments when the structures of what was said by me contributed or did not contribute to the students' understanding of the literary use of genre, and moments when what was said by the students indicated comprehension, noncomprehension, or something in between relating to the concept of genre. I also attended to the ways the language seemed to construct and also reflect my relationship with the students.

Next, I coded for examples of Discourse, or the ways in which meaning was embedded in the choices of representing. I tracked the number of statements and questions, the use of pronouns, the formality of vocabulary, and the information about perspective and relationships conveyed by the theme and rheme of the clauses. As with *genre,* I scrutinized the data for moments when my linguistic choices did or did not lead to student understanding, the ways in which my language influenced the clarity and shape of

my teaching about the literary concept of genre. In the students' language, I looked for clues and illustrations about the state of their understanding at individual turns. What was not said but might have been?

Attending to style, or ways in which values and ideologies were embedded in the verbs, modals, and grammar of the language, led to many of the same points where notions of genre were addressed by the data's *genre* and Discourse—fruitful places to enter into an analysis. Interestingly, they happened to be the postperformance interviews, when my intention was to clarify the meaning of literary genre.

At times, I relied on the methods of inquiry and analytical tools developed by Gee (2005), especially the building tasks of situated identity, situated meaning, and Discourse models, which help reveal the meaning-making work that is done by every utterance.

Videotape procedures. I began by viewing the November data and reading through the multimodal transcript several times. In addition to coding and analyzing linguistic expression for genre, Discourse, and style in ways detailed for the January data, I examined the nonverbals for ways in which these modes expressed ways of interacting, representing, and being. What meanings seemed to be conveyed by a gaze in a particular direction, by a smile, or by rhythmic bobbing? How were certain words stressed by physical moves or gestures of the dance, and what might this have to do with understanding of the word genre?

After sharing my November data with university colleagues, I asked further questions concerning the *genre* of my pedagogical practice, in particular the ways in which I both participated in and constructed the discourse of ''getting to the meaning of'' the word genre. Was I engaging in IRE patterns of inquiry? What exactly might have been entailed by what Macbeth (2003) terms ''third-turn responses,'' in which I shifted my attention from the student who originally responded to another student, thereby inviting participation in the ongoing discussion?

Finally, as recommended by Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), I have for the most part used the past tense in this analysis when describing and interpreting the language, behavior, and character of the participants outside of the data. As these researchers

suggest, the present tense conveys a sense that ''this is just the way things are and will always be'' with respect to individuals. Using the past tense in an analysis locates the actions of the participants in a definite time and allows for the possibility that people may be very different some other time. When describing and interpreting the data, however, I use the present tense in the conventional style of the literary or art critic, under the assumption that the data constitute a relatively stable artifact for analysis and interpretation.

Findings

Did our classroom interactions help generate a more accurate and deeper understanding of literary genres among my students? Did my contributions during the post-hoc audiotaped interviews productively scaffold the students in their zone of proximal development—what Vygotsky (1978/1934) defined as the distance between what a student understands without guidance and what she can understand with the help of a teacher—in a way that led to more stable conceptual thinking about genres as socially purposeful constructions of language?

Considering only the data collected in January, my findings suggest that my initial interactive practices did not offer my students any lasting or meaningful conceptual purchase on genre as a literary term. CDA of our classroom talk at that time showed that, above all, it was the particular clusters of linguistic choices I personally made that tended to lead us astray from rendering the concept of genre meaningful.

In general, throughout all of the January interviews I tended to privilege the dynamic, lively experience of the interview process itself—one-on-one conversation with a tape recorder in hand, minding manners, listening and taking turns, giving enthusiastic applause and public affirmations, making the writing lab a happy place—over digging down to the conceptual heart of the lesson I had originally envisioned. My initial interview questions all shared a particular pattern:

How did you think up to do this?
W-how did you come to choose to write a play in your genre?

How did you come to think about doing a how-to with so much imagination and how did you even learn about armadillos?
How did you come to think up your story?
So, you wanna say something about losing your tooth, why you chose that?
Do you want to mention why, are you learning about killer whales, how you chose that genre?

The patterns revealed in my way of posing questions led to student responses characterized by generalities, dysfluencies, and borrowed utterances. Table 1 presents a sampling of how the individual students spoke about genre before the November lesson.

In contrast to the tightly controlled teacher-centered talk that characterizes the January episode, our classroom environment in November was noisy, de-centered, and complicated as I attempted to simultaneously teach, interview, and tape. Nevertheless, this hour brought the students closer to a meaningful understanding of genre than the earlier lesson. As a teacher, I was beginning to understand what to ask, how to ask, and some of the stages of understanding to look for in my students along the way. Although confined to a small group of students, these findings do suggest how the activities and lessons that ''teach genre'' among similar populations of students might look and sound.

In this section I will describe and interpret my interactions with two individual students and in small groups.

Darrion

A small, energetic boy with bright eyes and a ready smile, Darrion had chosen to write in his favorite genre, what he called a made-up story, what he was learning to call ''fiction.'' His story related the survival adventures of an armadillo whose plane crashes in dinosaur land. After fighting off a terrible meat-eater king, the armadillo returns home.

After listening to Darrion read his story, I participated in the general classroom applause and remarked, ''That's good.'' Tape recorder in hand, I probed for evidence of metacognitive thinking:

TABLE 1 Summary of Participants Discussed

Participant	Characteristics	Genre of composition	Excerpt of reflection upon genre choice (if available)	Comments on the meaning of genre, when asked before rap lesson
Darrion	Boy. Energetic; happy in class; aimed to please	Fiction: Story about an armadillo who crashed his plane and landed in Dinosaur Land	"Cuz, uh, cuz writing is my favorite subject"	"Gen, gen, genre; Gen, gen, gen, genre, genre means"
Elijah	Boy. Playful; support at home; inclined to write on his own outside of school	Drama: Play about three friends hearing scary music and investigating it	"I was tryin to express the worl::"	"The word genre, genre to me, the word genre means all kinds of word, one word for all other kinds of words"
Shante	Girl. Leaderly, quick, savvy	How-to: How she would build a colorful house out of blocks	"Because . . . we on the subject of imagination, *so:*, I thought of imagination and I have a lot of it"	"It's different kinds of ways of talking, writing."
Tyrone	Boy. Methodical, moody, bright	How-to: Sequenced directions to a game involving an armadillo protagonist, a quest, and a battle	"I learned about armadilloes because armadillo is very interesting animal and we're on the subject imagination in our room."	"Look, Shante, it's genre means a different kind of way to talk"
Kenesha	Girl. Capable; midrange skills; very aware of others	NA	NA	"Genre means . . . and plays, poems, writing"

IS: Darrion's gonna
maybe add something about
why he chose
to write a made-up story like that.
How did you think up to do this?

My choice to ask about *his* choice about genre wound up casting the content of the text in shadow during this brief, post-hoc interview. Looking closely at Darrion's answer, it is clear that he tried to answer what I asked:

DB: Cuz, uh, cuz writing is my favorite subject,
and uh, I can express myself
er-uh writing about stuff
non-fiction, *FIC*tion.

Although I vaguely sensed that Darrion was not answering precisely what I asked, I did not fully understand the nature of his response until I subjected it to deeper analysis. Darrion used generic comments, that is, what he *thought* he was supposed to say, to reply to me. With regard to *genre*, the abstraction of my question was met with dysfluencies, abstractions, and borrowed phrases (e.g., ''my favorite subject'' and ''I can express myself'' seem to be ventriloquations from regular classroom discourse). Ultimately, Darrion concluded by totally mixing up the genres as he accidentally misnamed his fiction nonfiction and had to emphatically self correct.

None of this had much to do with his actual story about armadillos, sons being captured, and plane crashes. In other words, instead of asking Darrion about his fiction as a piece of fiction, I asked him an abstract set of questions concerning ''why'' and ''how'' he chose to write in the genre of fiction (''a made-up story'') in the first place. The reach of my question led to muddled, nongenerative thinking on Darrion's part.

For these reasons, Darrion's understanding of the meaning of genre was not entirely (or even partially) complete when I asked him to define genre nine months later. He read through the January transcript of his read-aloud and commented that now, as a fourth grader, he no longer stuttered. Darrion's cheerful good nature as he attempted to respond to my question—the smile that played on his lips, his steady repetition of the first

syllable of the word—reflects perhaps his desire to answer me, even as his fidgety gestures and inability to finish the sentence expressed his being at an utter loss for what to say:

IS: Darrion, what does genre mean?
Darrion: Gen, gen, genre
Gen, gen, gen, genre [*smiling, smile widening as he continues to stammer; Darrion flips his pencil with right hand, dropping it once but then catching it over and over again.]*
Genre means *[Darrion rocks forwards in rhythmic beats as he utters each syllable. Eventually he closes his eyes, bites his lower lip, and tilts his face up towards the ceiling, the in-streaming sunlight shining on his face]*
Gen,
Genre means

After 15 seconds, two of Darrion's classmates, Shante and Tyrone, begin to answer for him. Darrion welcomes their help good-naturedly, and I encourage their participation.

Elijah

For another student, the concept of genre evolved more significantly over time. An affectionate boy, Elijah often wrote lovingly about his grandmother and siblings. Elijah had a gentle manner and a sly sense of humor.

In January, Elijah wrote a play in which he and his two friends hear mysterious music, follow the sound, and discover a dead body. They contact the police and win $20,000 for having helped. When Elijah was finished reading, we all applauded. Then I said:

IS: Elijah, tell me
w- how did you come to choose
to write a play
in your genre?

EJ: I choose to write a play
in my genre
because I was trying to express the worl::.

In a manner of speaking, this story *was*, in fact, his attempt at ''tryin to express the worl,'' but Elijah also had a winking awareness (he giggled over my repetition of his comment) that this was,

with respect to *genre*, a highflown and ''borrowed'' utterance. He knew that I knew that ''expressing the world'' was something big and important, that as a small person, he was stepping into large shoes to declare that degree of intention. Elijah's's voice dropped as he shaped that phrase with a preacherly contour, making use of an African American English (AAE) feature known as tonal semantics (Lee & Majors, 2003; Smitherman, 2000). Between the first and second clause of his reply, his whole Discourse shifted perceptibly from a school discourse model into a recognizably AAE pattern.

In other words, Elijah knew that he was supposed to feel that writing is a way to express the world, but he was sharp enough to know that his play was simply play. He was playing with a story and telling it in a dramatic form for fun. Post hoc, he went along with me to the extent that he repeated the words of my question precisely in the role of ''good student,'' constructing for himself an identity (a way of being, or style) as an expert in the code of academic success, even if that meant not shifting the verb into the past tense:

IS: W-how did you come to choose to write a play in your genre?
EJ: I choose to write a play in my genre . . .

This turn of Elijah's also demonstrates his understanding of the interactional patterns (the *genre*) entailed by traditional classroom discourse. When a teacher asks a question, a student is supposed to answer it, ideally by embedding as much of the phrasing of the question as possible in the response.

Part of the problem here may have been the awkward, unnecessarily complicated, and perhaps unfamiliar verb structure I used: W-how did you come to choose . . . ?'' Judging from that initial ''W,'' I may have started off asking ''why did you choose?'' but then switched at the last minute to ''how did you come to choose?'' Perhaps I expected (or hoped for) an answer that I, or any writer, might offer for choosing to compose a particular story in dramatic form: I wanted to concentrate on what the characters did and said, and to have them speak for themselves directly to the reader/audience in dialogue without any narrational presence reporting what ''he said'' or ''she said.'' In retrospect, it is obvious that the ability to make this sort of distinction was not in

Elijah's zone of proximal development at that moment in third grade.

Instead of replying, ''I came to choose to write ...'', a construction nobody would ever say, Elijah simply dropped the auxiliary and said, ''I choose to write ...'' This is a logical choice on his part for a spur-of-the-moment reply. Given more time, he might have switched the verb tense and said, ''I *chose* to write a play because ...''

Finally, I may have confused him by saying ''a play in your genre.'' The play *was* the genre. Or rather, a play is a form in the genre of drama. I think I was simply trying to insert the word genre into the lesson yet again.

Nine months later in November, I called upon Elijah to help Darrion define genre.

IS: Elijah, what is, to you,
when you hear the word genre,
we've been talking about genre,
what does [genre mean?

EJ: [The word genre,
genre to me
the word genre means
all kinds of word,
one word for all other kinds of words.

IS: Huh. One word for all other kinds of words.

As it had been in January, my formulation of the question is itself confusing, overwrought with multiple rephrasings. Still, Elijah's response is rather more precise than Darrion's. First, anticipating my question, Elijah cuts me off. He knows me well enough to know what I am asking even if I cannot get my tongue around it. Like me, he takes two clausal stabs before forming an answer on the third try:

EJ: The word genre,
genre to me,
the word genre mean

During this turn, however, Elijah is backing up toward a seat, settling himself down on camera to perform his reply in what might be termed a more ''schoolish'' way of being, or style.

Having to get his body into a ''formal'' position to answer may be one reason he takes a while to organize his answer. Considering his turn as a whole, what Elijah seems to be trying to say is this: Genre means one word for all other kinds of words. Conceptually, this is not too far astray. He has the sense that genre is a catch-all word, one that stands for ''all other kinds of words.'' These ''all other kinds of words'' (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, biography, autobiography, interview, drama, poetry) happen to be listed on two flip charts within view in the classroom, which Elijah can see. In speaking about genre as a word in relation to ''other kinds of words,'' Elijah has made a cognitive move toward the abstract. He has classified genre as a word, and in the taxonomy he is constructing, genre is a word that represents ''all other kinds of words:'' One word *for* all other kinds of words: this reply is evidence that this genre lesson contributes a great deal to Elijah's development as a schooled person. In the context of learning and acquisition of understanding, Elijah's answer is perhaps an important sign that he is not only on his way to fully grasping the meaning of genre, but he also is on the brink of thinking abstractly about how words come to mean what they do in relation to each other.

Scrambling Toward Meaning

The sequence of turns that began with Darrion's relatively solo November interview becomes raucous and generative as more students literally ''enter the picture.'' Eventually, six students are involved in our conversation, either talking or watching and listening in an engaged way in the background. Kenesha, Tyrone, and Shante are all jostling each other good-naturedly to be in the foreground in the picture as they continue to spin out ideas. Eventually, Kenesha and Shante playfully push and lean, shuffling each other into and out of the foreground, until finally stumbling into a conclusion:

IS: Well, Tyrone's getting to something
when he says it's different kinds of ways of what?
Kenesha: Genre [means
Shante: [It's different kinds of ways of *talking*=
Kenesha: =and plays, poems, [writing.
Shante: [writing.

This minute or so of relatively free talk and large movement has allowed for the co-construction of meaning. On their own as individuals, the students skidded figuratively and literally around the perimeter of a definition of genre, sometimes piping in from outside the frame of the videorecorder, sometimes inserting themselves into the picture. By the end of the episode, responding to guiding questions from me and working off each other playfully, they collectively and collaboratively worked up a definition:

> Genre means different kinds of ways of talking, writing.

What had seemed like borderline pandemonium actually resulted in the students' stating the clearest possible definition of genre.

In November I drew upon the call-and-response and choral aspects of AAE (Smitherman, 2000), as well as theories of funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) and *habitus* (defined as ''ways of being, doing, and acting in the world across generations, time, and space'' (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007. p. 391, citing Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). I called upon every single student to repeat this definition of genre verbatim, and invited the whole class to repeat it in chorus. The genre raps that resulted from this drill demonstrated to me a literal embodiment of the meaning of the word genre as we had come to define it that day. It seemed to me that many of the students now understood that genre was an umbrella term that covered particular forms of writing.

Leading two other girls, Shante's rap demonstrated mastery of the definition of genre.

Shante: This is the girls' group talkin about the genres
and our version of the dance.
OK, so here it is, Ms. Schaenen, and (.2) other people.
[*A girl in the group bends to tie her shoe.*]
OK here it is. Ready.
Five, six, <u>sev</u>en, eight. (.2)
<u>Gen</u>res are different forms of <u>wri</u>ting
Such as poetry, <u>fi</u>ction, <u>non</u>-fiction and
<u>Dra</u>ma::: [*sliding to the right*]
I said <u>ar</u>guments [*sliding to the left*]
I said <u>in</u>terview [*sliding to the right*]
I said <u>how</u>-to [*sliding to the left*]

I said sermon.
I said biography
I said genres are different forms of writing
Say what
I said, boom [*she slips down into a split on the word "boom"*]

Shante's side-to-side slides were initiated upon the utterance of the first syllable of each new genre. She managed to keep the rhythm going throughout the rap, fitting the syllables and motions into the already known pattern of the Soulja Boy dance. To maintain the beat, she had to insert the series of ''I saids,'' which also happen to construct a familiar African American English pattern of repetition. Near the end, she embeds a call-and-response term (''say what?'') and closes with an emphatic move to the ground (''I said, boom''). The general good cheer and whoops of applause that followed this performance indicated that the students felt good about the direction class was moving in. The declarative, clear structure of the lyrics of Shante's rap, what she built from the simple definition we had repeated over and over again minutes before, further suggests that Shante now understood what was meant by the word genre. Everything she did in her genre rap was a far cry from her initial definition of genre earlier in the hour, when she had said, ''Genre is like a biography of someone, using another word.''

Impressions, Implications, and Ideas

With respect to my role as a teacher, my findings are cautionary and humbling. In the future, I must attend to my responses so that they lead to recognition of complexity rather than acceptance of superficial understanding. I must also remember the deep understanding that emerged from classroom practice that blended various and collective ways of being. Having seen my students energetically work themselves toward a passable understanding of the very term I had been unsuccessfully trading with for months inspires me to create the kind of collaborative, dialogic classroom discourse (or *genre*) proposed by Pappas and Barro Zecker (2001).

Before trying again to build a series of lessons around the literary concept of genre, I will think through the social and

practical considerations that go into a decision to present a text in one form or another. What is the real purpose of the communication? What is the author trying to ''get done?'' It might be helpful, for example, to break the initial lesson into stages—one stage to unpack and examine choices about content (''what do I want to say/express?'') and a second stage to think about the social purpose of conveying the content and how that purpose determines or does not determine the genre (i.e., the form, the text type) a writer chooses for her/his material.

On the other hand, with respect to my role as an educational researcher, the results of this analysis are hopeful and inspiring. This study indicates ways in which any teacher might do a more effective job of teaching the concept of genre. Exploring the processes theorized by Genre scholars might be one way to approach this same activity. Furthermore, as Christie (2007) and others suggest, if our collective goal as teachers is to create and nurture a classroom dialogue between the culture/Discourse of school and the culture/Discourse of students, Genre can and should be understood as an institution, one that is ''a socially sanctioned means of constructing and negotiating meanings, functioning so that it mediates the operation of other social institutions, taking its place in the complex interconnecting series of activities and events that constitute social life'' (p. 29). All teachers can look for ways in which this highly generalized and theoretical concept of Genre can be applied meaningfully to the study of genre so as to empower students to move comfortably between and among text types as readers, writers, and speakers. Using the analytical tools of *genre*, Discourse, and style within the overarching framework of Genre theory is one way to mark the winding path toward this goal.

Another way of addressing the concept of genre lies with funds of knowledge as theorized by Moll and Gonzalez (1994), among others, who focus on ''how becoming literate means taking full advantage of social and cultural resources in the service of academic goals'' (p. 441). Citing Greenberg (1989) and Moll and Greenberg (1990), these authors define ''funds of knowledge'' as ''those historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being'' (p. 443). Lee (2006) sug-

gests Cultural Modeling as a way to link ''everyday knowledge with learning academic subject matter, with a particular focus on racial/ethnic minority groups, especially youth of African descent'' (p. 308).

The multimodal nature and strengths of African American English are well documented. Meier (2008), using the term Black Communications, identifies such forms, or genres, as rapping, testifying, preaching, signifying, and call-and-response (among others) as individual types of speech acts. In an elementary school classroom, it seems reasonable to introduce these and other embodied forms of expression as different genres. Already familiar with the categories, it is likely to be easy for younger students to compose or describe exemplars. Once understood as forms of verbal expression, these genres might be analyzed in terms of their social purposes in accordance with both Genre theory in its broadest sense and in the context of culturally responsive teaching practices (Lee, 2006).

Rooting my November practice in the prior knowledge of my students, I made room for two key aspects of Black Communications: call-and-response discourse and rhythmic physical expression. I used the first to communicate an explicit classroom definition of the word ''genre.'' The second aspect I used as a way for students to share with me what they retained of the authoritative definition (an assessment). Among other things, this study has shown what can happen when a White teacher incorporates Black Communications in an urban classroom of African American students.

Future genre-related questions suitable for elementary students might call upon more specific genres from students' lives. A rap, for example, is made the way it is because it needs to express a particular set of meanings having to do with identity, feeling, rhythm, rhyme, story, and ideas, among other things. As a process as well as a product, it represents the performer in ways particular to the genre of rap. From here it seems a natural cognitive step to the notion that any speaker or writer has the power and freedom to consider sociocultural context and purpose before producing a spoken or written text. Function shapes and is shaped by form. Genres are simply forms which are taken up in the processes of making meaning.

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