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## Genre as Social Action: A Gaze into Phenomenology

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*David R. Russell*

Genre as Social Action opened up a whole new connection for me, which even now, some 20 years later, I am still exploring. That connection is between genre and everyday human activity, especially the relation between schooling and the other social institutions beyond it. In the early 1990s I was very taken with Bazerman's idea of genre systems (1994), based on Miller's 1984 article. I went around the house, the office, the kids' school activities, imagining genres working together in my (and their) everyday life—including going to the store with my daughter, Madeleine (then 10). She loved using our new homemade grocery list, arranged by aisles and printed on our brand new printer, for our trips to Save-U-More. Diagrams of genre systems and activity systems danced in my head for months.

The great insight Miller had, in that article, was to bring Schutz's concept of typification, and with it the western European tradition of phenomenological sociology, to North American rhetoric and (professional) communication and composition. Schutz took from the German anti-positivist sociologist Max Weber the concept of Ideal Types, which was for Weber a methodological tool to help sociologists identify the patterns of activity that people in some society recognize. But Schutz developed it into a phenomenological concept, typification, which he argued all people engage in all the time (not just sociologists doing research). We all always perceive the world in terms of types—what we see as typical. That's a big idea. It connects the psychological with the sociological, and it connects both with human communication as activity, writing as doing in the world (See Bazerman).

But I wanted a theoretical framework to connect genre with human development—education and schooling. I turned to activity theory (AT), which uses Lev Vygotsky's Marxist psychology to analyze tool-mediated social activity. Vygotsky and his Eastern European AT tradition are about patterns of human socio-cognitive development, an educational psychology. Miller and her North American rhetoric and communication tradition are about patterns of human communication, rhetoric and composition. By combining the two, I was able to think about how genres and peoples' socio-cognitive development are connected in terms of writing.

I was surprised to find that Vygotsky and Schutz share many deep assumptions (see Russell, *Writing*) that are relevant to schooling. Thinking is social and active for both, and learning is social and active for Vygotsky. Both resist to their core the Cartesian split between mind and world. Here are some key concepts from both that are in many (though not all) ways similar, starting with the key role of tools:

Vygotsky	Schutz
Tool mediation	Tool as thing-in-order-to-do
Behavior object-oriented	Intentionality: Actions chosen for relevance
Knowledge intersubjective	Knowledge intersubjective
Society historical	Society historical
Internalization of social	Sedimentation of experience
Externalization	Objectivation
Generalization	Typification
Language central to thought	Language central to thought

My 1997 article was about one of those meditational tools (thing-in-order-to-do): the marks on surfaces we call

writing, and how people perceive and typify them (genre) and use them to mediate/construe/construct their worlds together (social action)—and the ways those worlds intersect dynamically with schooling (of which “transfer” is only one dimension).

There’s a big messy diagram in the 1997 article (p. 535) that shows on the left, from bottom to top, the development of students from secondary school to adulthood to civic life (developmental psychology). And it shows in the rest of the diagram a whole range of social institutions that have to do with the discipline of biology, from research labs on the bottom to legislatures and voters of the top (phenomenological sociology). The lines sketched between those social institutions are intertextual links among genres. The genres are typical ways of using texts to carry out joint action—typical because people typify them. And so those lines, those connections among genres, are pathways for learning to act in and among those institutions, to develop as human beings. And what counts in the modern world (and the very counting) is what is put into writing.

The empirical work I’ve done since has been exploring that connection Miller made for me (Russell, Kind-ness; Russell and Yañez; Russell and Fisher; Yañez and Russell; Russell and Tachino). My new theoretical work goes further into Schutz, exploring his use of Vygotsky, to understand how typification works at the neural level (as I suggested in footnote 8 of the 1997 article). The window onto phenomenology that Miller gave North American genre research in 1984 has only begun to be opened.

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