Writing in Multiple Contexts: Vygotskian CHAT Meets the Phenomenology of Genre

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Texts largely structure the activity of the modern world and--a forteriori--the post-modern world, with its reliance on hyper*textual* networks. But they do so always in con*texts*—often in multiple contexts. Texts are given life through activity, through use in context(s). And to study them without studying their contexts (as has often been the case) is to separate writing from its very being. Yet the problem of theorizing context and contexts, plural—and of operationalizing the theory in empirical research--is one of the thorniest but most important in writing studies. Sociocultural theories of literacy emphasizing the role of context and contexts have been developed in the last 25 years in North American writing research and applied in a number of fields: primarily organizational (business, technical, and scientific) communication and education (Russell, 1997b; Bazerman & Russell, 2003).

In this paper I sketch out elements of a theory of multiple contexts based on a synthesis of Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory

(growing out of his notion of tool mediation) with a theory of genre as social action (Miller, 1984, 1994) (growing out of Alfred Schutz's phenomenology). The relationship between cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and genre as social action has been developed in various ways by several North American writing researchers to provide a principled way of analyzing written texts in their multiple contexts, such as Bazerman's theory of genre systems (1994, 2004), Prior's theory of laminated activity (1998, 2007), and the Canadian genre research group (Dias et al., 1999).

My particular contribution has been to analyze the ways writing is deployed and learned across contexts by seeing genre systems operating in both the social psychological (subjective and intersubjective) plane and the sociological (objective and institutional) plane. I have turned to Vygotskian theories for the former and Schutzian theories for the latter. The key to synthesizing these two, for me, has been Miller's idea of genre as social action, drawn from Schutz. I return to Schutz's phenomenology and methodology to develop the theory of genre as social action to allow the analyst to make principled meso-level (institutional) and macro-level (ideological) generalizations based on observations of microlevel phenomena, and thus to trace the uses of writing across scales of time and level of generality.

What the synthesis of AT and phenomenological genre theory helped me to do is analyze typifications of participants operating in multiple contexts, realized and analyzable in specific and concrete ways, in relation to reading and writing, the genre systems or enduring types, and how those typifications both enable and hinder participants from mastering the situation, from learning (Russell, 1997a).

I will illustrate with examples from my group's research on higher education and workplace pedagogy: 1) studies of the genre systems of history, and 2) studies of online multimedia simulations we are developing to represent engineers' communicative activity within and between complex organizations.

Writing as tool mediation: Vygotskian CHAT and multiple contexts

In this synthesis I am developing, context is not a problem of describing what is outside of the mind, as in some AI cognitive approaches. Social context is not what contains the interaction. Context (con-text) is actually from the Greek term for weaving, as in textile, or texture. In this sense, context is what is "woven together with" (Cole, 1996) a weaving together of people and their tools in complex networks. The network is the context. And network or system metaphors dominate.

For Vygotsky and the tradition of cultural psychology he generated, that weaving together of people and tools is mediated activity. Subjects act upon objects not directly but through tools, often by marks on surfaces, writing, texts, as well as sounds in the air, both beyond and within any immediate situation (as Prior, 2007, points out). Marks on surfaces activate people's thoughts, direct their attention, coordinate their actions, provide the means of relationship. It is in the contexts of their activities that people consider texts and give meaning to texts.

Engeström's (1987) version of activity theory (Figure 1) expands Vygotsky's basic mediational triangle (subject-tools-object) to consider other essentials for making sense of activity, and Engeström calls this unit of analysis the activity system. This expanded model adds rules or norms, community, and division of labor, to provide an expanded unit of analysis for describing activity systems.

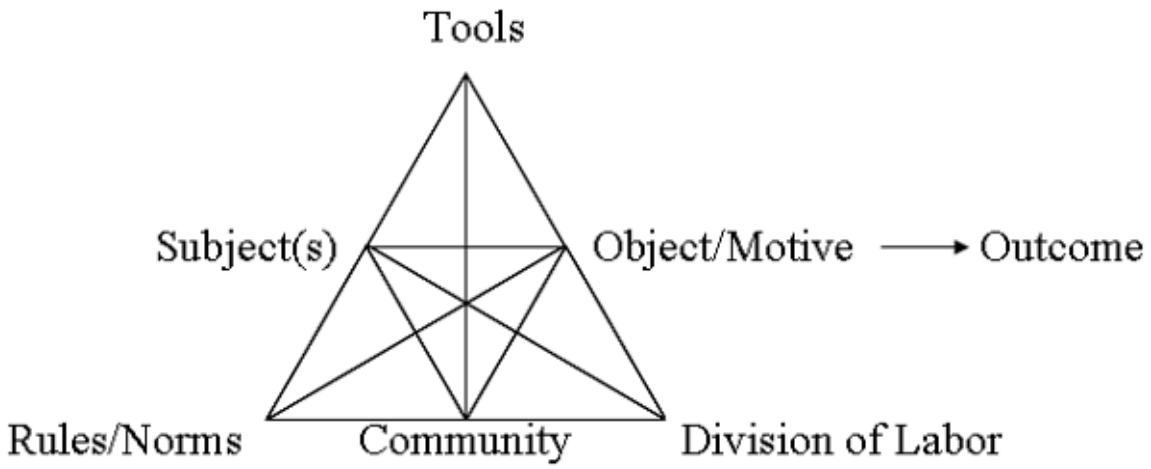

Figure 1: Engeström's (1987) expanded mediational triangle: An activity system

Note that this neat diagram describes a very messy network. The direction or motive of an activity system and its object are contested, as subjects bring many motives to a collective interaction. Indeed, the division of labor in the system itself guarantees diversity. Dissensus, resistance, conflicts, and deep tensions are constantly produced in activity systems.

In Engeström's version of AT, these tensions within and among activity systems are viewed as symptoms of deeper dialectical contradictions, "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). All human activity is contradictory at a very basic level. Human actions are at once individual and social. In each culture and each activity system specific contradictions

arise out of the division of labor. These contradictions are the source of discoordinations, tensions and conflicts. In complex activities with fragmented division of labor, the participants themselves have great difficulties in constructing a connection between the goals of their individual actions and the object and motive of their collective activity. Within these contradictions, the identities of the participants are also formed and negotiated.

But to theorize the ways texts mediate activity across different contexts, one must theorize the relations of all these elements in multiple activity systems, what Engeström et al. (1995) call polycontextuality. Participants within one activity system, one context, come from various contexts, and will enter various contexts. And they interact with subjects in other contexts or activity systems. To understand the various ways participants interpret and use the tools, object, motive, rules/norms, etc. of an activity system, it is often necessary to analyze the relations among various contexts.

We are now discussing context not in material terms alone, but also in terms of the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, whether first-person singular or first-person plural. And here concepts from phenomenological approaches to

sociology, particularly Alfred Schutz, have been helpful understanding writing in multiple activity systems or contexts.

Genre as Social Action: Schutz and Multiple Contexts

Vygotsky and Schutz, though from different fields (psychology and sociology) and traditions (Soviet Marxism and Western European phenomenology), share several crucial understandings of the relation between thought and action, communication and contexts, or situations

Vygotsky	Schutz
Tool mediation	Tool as thing-in-order-to-do
Behavior object-oriented	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

Table 1: Comparison of Vygotsky and Schutz on central concepts

For both theorists, humans act on the world using tools, including signs. "A tool is a thing-in-order-to," Schutz (1967) says. "It serves a useful purpose and for the sake of this purpose it was produced " (p. 201). A key concept for both is intentionality: consciousness and action are always directed toward something, some object. Activity is oriented to an object, as LSV insists, or as Schutz says, chosen for its relevance. It is

motivated by some need. It is, then, always related to a context/s. For both theorists, knowledge is socially derived, intersubjective. And human thought and action are deeply historical.

Moreover, Vygotsky describes behavior, language use, and thought arising out of concrete social interaction, as a process of internalization on the psychological plane and then of externalization in concrete social action, most importantly communication. Similarly, for Schutz knowledge developed socially is internalized through a process of what he calls sedimentation of experience in individual consciousness and then externalized through what he calls objectivation in material form, primarily communication (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

But the most important connection is that for both, thought and language are both the result of an ongoing, dynamic process of categorizations arising out of immediate experience but enduring beyond it: generalization, as Vygotsky calls it ("Word meaning is nothing other than a generalization," in his famous phrase [1987 p. 244]) or typification as Schutz) terms it. Typifications are the habitual, routinized, socially shared, intersubjective categorizations that are at the heart of social-psychological stability—and the basis of our recognition of contexts and mastery of them, our learning (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Similarly, it is the construal of the atypical that gives rise to change. It is from Schutz's

phenomenological understanding of typification that much North American writing research has taken its concept of genre.

Genre as social action meets activity theory

From the mid 1980s, North American writing research has developed the concept of genre as social action in order to analyze the role of documents (and artifacts in various media) in organizational change and learning. The concept of genre as social action originated not with Bakhtin's (1987) notion of genre (though this has proved very influential) but with Schutz's (1973) concept of typification. Carolyn Miller (1984, 1994) introduced the concept of genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (1994, p. 31). Genre is not seen as similar formal features or as packeted speech (Wertsch, 1994), but as typified actions that over time have been routinized, "stabilized-for-now" (in Schryer's phrase, 1993) in ways that have proven useful in some recurring situation—that is, in some context recognized (interpreted) as similar, as typical, by participants.

This phenomenology of genre is deeply compatible with Vygotsky's view of mediated action. Put simply, a genre is the ongoing use of certain material tools (marks, in the case of written genres) in certain ways that people recognize as having worked once and might work

again, a typified, tool-mediated response to conditions recognized by participants to be recurring. Discursive actions are not seen, in Bakhtin's metaphor, as voices ventriloquted from and contributing to social languages, but rather as motivated actions in practical activity (see Bazerman, 2004, for the relation to speech act theory).

Miller's (1984) seminal article “Genre as Social Action” emphasizes the situatedness of communication by conceiving of genre as "more than a formal entity" for classifying textual features (p. 153). Miller says, following Schutz, that situations are social constructs that are the result not of "perception," but of "definition." Because human action is based on and guided by meaning, not by immediate material causes, at the center of action is a process of phenomenological interpretation. Before we can act, we must interpret the indeterminate material environment; we define or "determine" a situation (p. 156).

According to Miller, this determination is accomplished by an attribution of "types" we assign to situations in which we find ourselves. Genre is “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159) but "what recurs is not a material situation (a real, objective, factual event) but our construal of a type" (p. 157). Miller goes on to argue, again following Schutz, that as we gain more experience in particular domains,

our stock of knowledge is usually enough to master most of the situations we "define" during our day-to-day life in the world.

Thus, genres are more than categories of tools classified according to formal features. They are traditions of using a tool or tools, "forms of life, ways of being, frames for social action" (Bazerman 1994, p. 79). A genre conveys a world view--not explicitly, but by "developing concrete examples" that allow participants "to experience the world in the genre's way" (Spinuzzi, 2003, p. 42). Genres allow subjects to recognize (in Schutz' term determine) the activity and the appropriate actions in the presence of certain constellations of tools (marks on surfaces and other phenomena). And genres make it possible to act with others over time in more or less but never entirely predictable ways, individually and collectively, institutionally and culturally.

In this phenomenological sense, genres are also central to object formation, transformation, and maintenance of activity systems. As Engeström says, "The object is an enduring, constantly reproduced purpose of a collective activity system that motivates and defines the horizon of possible goals and actions" (1999, p. 170). But the object of activity can be seen to attain its stability, reproduction, and continuity through genres, the mutual recognition (determination) necessary for joint action to occur over time. And when the object is contested (offering

potential for change), it is against the landscape of existing genres, existing typifications.

Genres are also deeply involved in the construction of motives. Genres are, in a sense, classifications of artifacts-plus-intentions. They enact social intentions, offering ways of using tools to accomplish collective activity. As Miller (1984) argues, following Schutz, "What we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or a means of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have" (p. 165). A genre offers not only a landscape of possible action but also a horizon of potential motives or direction (Bazerman, Little & Chavkin 2003). In this sense, genre provides a way of including motives in the analysis of activity. As such, genres can be seen as crucial links between subjects, tools and objects.

Polycontextuality: Multiple activity systems and complex genre systems

In complex activity systems, there are typically many written genres, typified, intersubjective understandings, which participants use together to structure (and change) their interactions within and among various contexts or activity systems (polycontextuality, in Engeström's phrase). North American writing research has developed the concept of

genre systems, following Bazerman (1994), or in Spunuzzi's (2003) formulation, genre ecologies, to understand how genres (particularly written ones) work in and between complex organizations. Bazerman defines a genre system as "interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings" (1994). In a genre system, "only a limited range of genres may appropriately follow upon another," because the conditions for successful coordinated action are conditioned—but never finally determined—by their history of previous actions (Bazerman 1994, p. 80).

Analyzing the genre systems allows us to see routine or typified interactions of reading and writing not only within but also and among contexts. For example, IRS tax form 1040 is intertextually (now often hypertexually) linked to other documents in other genres and in other contexts (activity systems): in a taxpayer's files, employers' files, bank records, government regulations, tax laws, accounting standards, addresses, calendars, and so on, and to material property (real estate, factories, farms, etc.) and concrete actions (buying, selling, renting, theft, gambling losses, etc.) that those documents in various genres represent.

Analysis of genre systems or ecologies charts horizons into which the object has expanded already though existing genres, and the territory it may expand into. For literate organizations, the expansive reach of the object and the identities of the subjects involved (actual or potential) can

be traced by following the written genres. Genre systems provide the skeleton of the structure of modern activity systems, made visible through genre systems analysis.

Example 1: WAC and the Genre Systems of (University) History

There has been a major effort in the US in the last 30 years called the Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) movement (Russell, 2002). WAC encourages university departments and teachers to improve students' writing in their disciplines and to use writing to support learning in their disciplines, rather than use writing only as a tool of assessment. Although university administrators and teachers have seen student writing as a 'problem' and had favorable attitudes toward improving students writing, WAC has encountered many obstacles and hesitations in implementation, beyond the obvious ones: lack of time and money.

Yanez and I (2003) studied a third-year Irish education history course in a large Midwestern public university (MWU), that students in fields other than history took to satisfy a university general education (GE) requirement (common in US universities to broaden students' education). We wanted to understand obstacles to WAC (and the deeper attitudes,

practices, and structures involved) in multiple contexts: the classroom, the broader university, and professional and civic contexts beyond it.

We first did an activity/genre systems analysis of the course, to construe the typifications (and thus genres) perceived by the teacher and students, drawing on classroom observations, student and teacher interviews, and documents. We found the assignment genres (book report, research paper) were defined very differently by the teacher and the students, which produced frustration in the students and tensions and disturbances in the classroom. By broadening our analysis to other activity systems (professional academic history, secondary school history teaching, and journalism) we found the tensions were symptoms of deeper contradictions between the students' and teachers' construction of the object and motive of the course. The teacher perceived the assignments as genres of professional academic history useful for deepening students critical thinking and making them more critically aware citizens. The students perceived them as linked to the activity system of secondary school history or popular history for leisure reading, and they did not perceive the genres as relevant to their diverse professional pathways or future citizenship. Students expressed their sense of "just doing it for a grade" rather than for their future involvements, and they seemed alienated by the writing tasks.

However, our analysis of the Irish History course suggests this alienation was overcome when one student, with the help of her instructor, saw the textual pathways (genre systems) of academic history were linked to the genre system of the field she intended enter, journalism.

Comments by the instructor—a graduate student--about the tensions he felt in using writing led us to gather interview data and curricular/policy documents from the department and the university written over the last 50 years, in order to extend our analysis of the obstacles to WAC to the broader institutional and cultural levels, and across wider time scales. We traced the intertextual and instersubjective links between the classroom and the institution to identify deeper contradictions underlying those tensions teacher and students felt. We were thus able to connect the micro-level classroom and faculty interview data with larger patterns institutionally (the university and the professions of history and journalism) and ideologically (Yañez & Russell, in press).

Our analysis suggests that writing at MWU is marked by strategic ambiguity. When convenient, writing is conceived in terms of unproblematic transmission: a container or conduit for thought. "Content" is placed into written "form" and sent. Writing is a generalizable set of discrete skills necessary for critical thinking and democratic life. Students do not have to understand the relationship between the practices of

academic history and their own pursuits. Citizenship is not a social practice into which one is enculturated but an accumulation of knowledge and skills taught to the masses—an ideology of mass education. But when convenient, writing is alternatively conceived as a tool of enculturation in some specific social practice, such as the activity of doing professional academic history—an ideology of elite, meritocratic education. This strategic ambiguity allowed MWU to pursue contradictory motives in general education without confronting their consequences at the human level of teaching and learning. The strategic ambiguity made it possible for faculty and administrators to alternatively invoke one and ignore the other of these two official motives when necessary or convenient in working out the division of labor. Graduate students, for example, taught the general education courses, freeing tenure-line faculty for teaching majors and doing research. Not having to examine the relation between GE courses and students in terms of the writing (and share clear goals and expectations for the GE mission of the department) allowed administrators and faculty much more flexibility in apportioning faculty and TAs time for teaching and research. And the contradiction in motives allowed writing realize both motives, at least in terms of faculty discourse and official documents.

However, this strategic ambiguity over conceptions of general education and writing left the instructor, and his students from many disciplines (none in history), to wrestle with the consequences. Despite the instructor's best attempts, the institutional and disciplinary contradictions operated so powerfully that it was difficult at best to use writing as a tool of learning. In this analysis, then, classroom contradictions are linked intertextually to genres and activities of departmental, university, and professional academic history and the wider institutional and ideological contradictions beyond.

Example 2: Multi-modal simulations of professional contexts

In the next example of our research, we used the synthesis of AT and genre to construct a fictional context to represent, for the participants in one context (an engineering classroom) the activity systems and genre systems of another context: the engineering organizations toward which the students are headed. We researched and created multi-modal simulations of professional contexts, using the affordances of the world-wide web (Fisher, 2006, 2007; Fisher, Russell, Williams & Fisher, 2008; MyCase, 2006).

We are developing and researching these multi-media simulations using a content management system (CMS) to model the circulation of documents within or among fictional organizations, represented by fictional internet and intranet sites. Students in professional curricula (business administration, bio-systems engineering, and genetics, thus far) role play as they collaboratively engage in workplace-like activities using the sorts of tools and genres typical in workplaces (databases, files of documents, meeting minutes, videoed meetings, synchronous and asynchronous communication, etc.). This is radically different than genre pedagogies that either teach students the genres "in" the classroom (Swales, 1990; Martin, 2000) or those that send students to do "ethnographies" of genre in situ (Devitt, 2004; Johns, 2002).

Students play the role of consultants to a fictional organization, such as Omega Molecular, a start-up biotechnology company used in the engineering simulation. The teacher plays the role of the engineering students' boss, the lead consultant. They must produce texts in a range of genres, oral, written, visual and electronic, which are submitted to characters in the simulation, such as the CEO pictured here in a video. And the characters reply to the students-as-consultants through email (though it is actually—as the students are told--the teacher who is replying, using a special role-sensitive email system).

The simulation also contains a universe of documents placed in a company document server, arranged in various departments, and linked intertextually, so that the students can (re)construct the history of the organization, its problems, its directions, its crimes, even (which we have "seeded" into the simulation). And in the actions of characters and students-as-consultants, that document universe is brought into circulation through the genre system, where students must act on deadlines, face ethical dilemmas "seeded" into the simulation, and deal with the dialectical contradictions among motives, tools, rules, and objects that we constructed.

To create the simulations, we used something like Schutz's sociological research method. We conducted interviews, videotaping, and participant observation at similar real organizations, then constructed what Schutz , following Weber (Hekman, 1983), calls an "ideal type" of such engineering organizations—a generalized summary of the typifications of participants, checked against their understandings. Schutz refers to these ideal types as 'puppets' created by the social scientist (1962, p.41). And it is these "puppets" that the students are manipulating, with the goal of constructing for themselves the typifications, the genres, of the target professional activity system as they write. But they do so not in the

lifeworld (the classroom context) but in a play world, what Schutz (1962) calls an alternative reality.

Our research into students' learning in this environment (using observation, surveys, focus groups, hit counts, and textual analysis of student work) suggests that they are much more likely to attribute their learning in the online simulation environment to contexts of professional work than to contexts of schooling, as compared to their attributions of other parts of their courses that use more traditional learning environments (e.g., WebCT and face-to-face instruction) (Fisher, 2006). These attributions seem to be shaped by the changes in classroom rules, division of labor, and community that the simulation affords, and by the contradictions between the activity systems of schooling and workplace (mediated by the simulation as teaching tool). For example, in the engineering and business simulations, students draw freely from each other's work as it is posted to a shared file space, and from the student work published in the simulation (students add to the simulation over time). This literacy practice is extremely atypical in classroom settings, but is extremely typical in the workplace, where people often draw from a common pool of documents and where documents cycle through multiple readers in the division of labor.

Conclusion

I have outlined here a way of theorizing multiple contexts that synthesizes activity theory and a phenomenological approach to genre theory. It tries, like several other theories, to incorporate both the phenomenological first-person point of view, whether first-person singular or first-person plural, and generalizations that reach beyond that—though still rooted in the subjectivity (or rather intersubjectivity) of participants studied. Schutz's sociological phenomenology was crucial to the development of two central methodologies for contemporary writing research: Garfinkle's ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis--as well as to linguistic anthropology. Yet it is important to return to Schutz's sociological phenomenology as more than an interesting antecedent**.** These successors of Schutz focus on examining micro-level interactions, and the research of Prior (1998) and his group (2006) suggests how useful this can be to writing research in their analysis of the *lamination* of contexts. But here I am returning to Schutz's phenomenology and methodology to quite explicitly make meso-level (institutional) and macro-level (ideological) generalizations, as he did and as many activity theorists do (e.g., Engeström, 1987, 2001). Despite the limitations of this kind of generalization (Garfinkle, 2002) of puppet-making, if you will, we have

found it useful in understanding writing across contexts, and in creating environments for researching and teaching writing in use.

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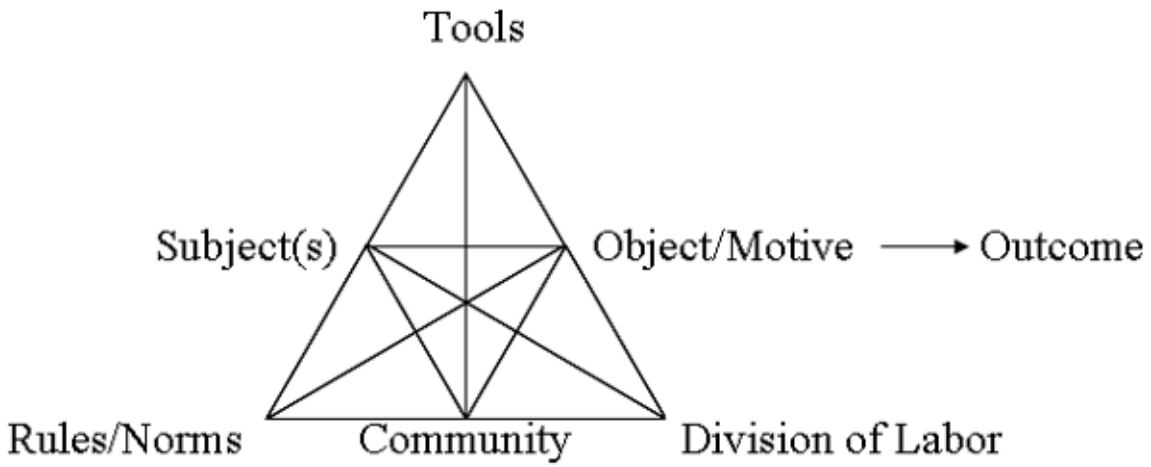

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