

Institutional Rhetorical Genres: Implication and Identity

By Victoria Krzpiet

Edited by Amy Hinz and Emma Sonnenberg

Editors' note: One of our favorite parts of line-editing Victoria's piece was getting to experience the author/editor relationship. We especially valued meeting with Victoria to find out what we as her editors could do to help her achieve her goals with her work. We were impressed with how Victoria incorporated our edits into her piece, especially in how she offered further evidence of rhetorical genres by incorporating testimonies from workers who are negatively affected by rhetorical genres, and in ensuring her piece was polished and ready for publication. We feel very grateful to have played a part in helping Victoria bring her excellent work to fruition.

What exactly are rhetorical genres and how do they affect the personal and professional lives of people who use them? We can think of rhetorical genres as different types of writing for different rhetorical situations. It is important to note that each rhetorical situation has a distinct purpose, audience, topic, writer, and context (University of Illinois Springfield). For example, professional communities in medicine, law, media, or social work have their own genre with specific discourse conventions that contain established practices of communication. Medical consultations, legal contracts, news reports, or social work assessments all have different methods and styles of writing. These conventions often represent various social, political, ethical, and philosophical ideologies that are “naturalized and commonsensical” within their institutions or disciplines (Fairclough 94).

Ideology and language are heavily intertwined and often shape professional perceptions and relationships. Subsequently, genres and discourse conventions embody certain beliefs and social positions, and individuals who partake in them can become implicated in the ideologies. There are certain situations where subject positions are “ideologically incompatible” within the

institution or the subject's own beliefs or affiliations, and these contradictions are often disguised by the "naturalness of daily practice" (Fairclough 42; Paré 61). Norman Fairclough reiterates that "in the process of acquiring the ways of talking which are normatively associated with a [particular] subject positions, one necessarily acquires also its ways of seeing, or ideological norms" (94). While rhetorical genres serve many practical purposes, they can affect power relations within an institution and compromise the identity of the individual using them.

In "Genre and Identity Individual, Institutions, and Ideology," Anthony Paré explores the complexities of workplace genres and how they affect dynamics within an institution. Although institutional genres contain textual practices that have proven to be successful, they are not equally effective for all professions and communities. When assessing the efficacy of these genres, it is important to question how they were constructed and for whom. As Paré suggests, "discourse conventions may cloak vested interests or imbalances in power" (60). To further explore this topic, we will focus on Paré's personal experience with teaching a professional writing course to female Inuit social workers.

Although these Inuit women carry a "full case load" and are an essential force in Northern social work, they are called "social assistants" and are supervised by non-Aboriginal social workers (Paré 62). Their job title of social assistant rather than social worker demonstrates the way language can shape professional identity and limit institutional power. The use of non-Aboriginal supervisors exemplifies the influence of Southern ideologies in Northern practices. Paré's goal was to help these women with their social work record-keeping, which was not up to institutional standards. The supervisors were dissatisfied with the workers' English writing skills, claiming it affected the workers' ability to provide detailed reports, while the social workers claimed their supervisors wanted to know far too much information about their clients (Paré 62).

To break the ice, Paré asks the Inuit social workers to write about their own culture and one of the women writes about using a deceased dog's hair to trim parkas. She notes that when a white person's dog goes missing in the North, "the white folks look to see who among the Inuit has a new parka" (Paré 63). This story illustrates the "gap in knowledge and trust" between different cultures and communities, which is something that is also evident in work genres. As Paré urges the social workers to be generous with detail and explanation in their writing, he is met with reluctance. The workers reveal that such explicit and detailed record-keeping exposes their clients to "white authorities"—clients who are often friends, family, and acquaintances (Paré 63). As Elisuaq, one of the workers, states, detailed record-keeping is like "stealing someone's life" (qtd. in Paré 63). Paré emphasizes that social work documentation can be used as evidence in abuse cases, can justify the removal of children from their homes, can disclose a patient's psychosocial contexts, and often contributes to police reports and psychological and medical assessments (62). In other words, the details social workers write hold a significant amount of power and can change the trajectory of their client's lives.

For these women, writing detailed assessments, case recordings or court reports, could mean putting one of their relatives through the court system, sending them to the hospital, or taking custody away from one of their close friends. The Inuit social workers expressed that one of the most difficult aspects of recordkeeping is that it reduces their client's lives to "narratives of failure" and classifies them into dysfunctional cultural groups (Paré 63). In "Genre as Social Action," Carolyn R. Miller states that the constitution of a genre may fail if there is "inadequate consideration of all the elements in recurrent rhetorical situations" (163). In the Inuit workers' case, cultural and social elements are not considered as they are essentially coerced into a position where they must choose between their community and their role as a "professional

representative of the colonial power” (Paré 63). Miller also argues that genre claims may fail if “the cultural forms in which they were embedded provided conflicting interpretive contexts” (164). In Northern social work, we see these conflicting contexts as the workers are unable to adequately serve their communities because they are forced to use rhetorical conventions created in the urban South (Paré 63).

Southern conventions are often clinical in nature, and professionals are usually detached from their client’s lives outside of work — these conventions reflect urban lifestyles and beliefs that do not always work in cross-cultural settings. Here we begin to see the disadvantages of institutional genres: they can place individuals in positions of power that may conflict with their personal values. The detached professionalism that is often required in Southern rhetorical genres is not effective or culturally appropriate for tight-knit Aboriginal communities. Evelyn, one of the workers, reveals that she feels the need to appease both the “paper-work culture [white bureaucracy]” and her own culture – the way they are and the way they talk (qtd. in Paré 63). Evelyn concludes that “If I become a professional person with my family. I’m not going to have any more family...I’m going to push them away” (qtd. in Paré 64). In this case, discourse conventions within the social work genre are ideologically incompatible with the individuals that are using them and the communities they are meant to help.

The influence of colonization adds another level of ideological tension that hinders the efficacy of established rhetorical strategies. It is unreasonable to expect secluded, Northern Aboriginal communities to operate in the same way as Southern, metropolitan cities. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect Northern social workers to document problems associated with poverty, addiction, illness, abuse, education, or unemployment in the same way. Alyssa Speicher argues that context is the most important aspect of rhetorical genres as it allows them to have

meaning (8). Speicher asserts that “genres affect and are affected by the communities where they function” and they “become a symbolic structure and tool” (8). When it comes to social work genres, the ideologies embodied within the conventions lack context for the specific rhetorical situation they are designed to help. Therefore, the textual practices do not serve as a communal tool but rather a hindering force.

In *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, J.P. Gee stresses that discourses are “ways of being,” and not only do they represent social texts and beliefs, but they integrate actions like gestures, body positions, and even clothes (127). These integrations can create something that Paré calls the “divided self,” where participation in workplace genres can produce a dual identity (Paré 64). He concludes that the Inuit workers’ reluctance to conform to conventional strategies is partly due to the forced use of English, and the impersonal, professional persona that they are expected to embrace (Paré 64).

In a workshop Paré conducted in an urban, state-funded, health and social service agency, he presented the workers with two fictional documents: one with statements like “I believe” and “I recommend,” and the other with impersonal statements like “It is recommended” (Paré 64). The consensus among the workers was that first-person pronouns sound too personal or unprofessional in official documents, but more importantly, one of the workers pointed out that the “I” in the record is not the same “I” that “sits at home on the couch” (qtd. in Paré 64). This lends itself to the notion that the Inuit workers were struggling with— the idea that workers must choose between “lived experience of their daily lives” and the “disembodied experience of institutionalized collective life” (Paré 64). Southern rhetorical conventions prompt workers to emotionally separate themselves from their clients, but for smaller Aboriginal communities, this is not an easy feat. Social work itself is especially complex because multiple institutional

communities are involved that create an “overlapping of jurisdictions,” and a blurring of boundaries (Paré 61). This renders social workers powerful *and* powerless as the use of any genre is “both an act of and a response to authority” (Paré 61).

In an interview excerpt, a hospital social worker explains how doctors may have an idea of what is best for the patient, while the social worker may have their own, and sometimes these ideas do not coincide or work within that institution: ““you’re dealing with a structure, an institutional structure where there are rules and regulations about how long a patient can stay etc. So it puts pressure on your job...”” (qtd. in Paré 65). Likewise, a social worker within the juvenile justice system states that their personal reports will be ““totally dissected, usually by two lawyers, a judge, the parents, and the kid; so you have to write this report with shields all around you”” (qtd. in Paré 65). Subsequently, this “shield” the social worker mentions brings up another valid point regarding institutional genres: they do serve as a form of protection against ideological tensions (Paré 65-66). In this sense, the social worker is merely the narrator, rather than the actor, and this can help them maintain objectivity and professionalism in documentation (Paré 66).

Discourse conventions “function to legitimate, naturalize, or disguise the inequities they sustain” (qtd. in Paré 68). Although there are pragmatic reasons to participate in workplace genres, it does not mean that they should not be questioned or challenged. As Ross Collin states, “It is up to specific actors to meet or defy expectations as they adapt genres to organize and maneuver through new conjunctures of experience” (82). Collin suggests that knowledge from communal experience can help “create a background of expectation against which new action may be generated and made meaningful” (85). Henceforth, Paré concludes that subversion is not always easy, but it is possible, as he relays that the Inuit workers have begun to develop their

own “cultural and rhetorical traditions” (68). Ultimately, there will be conflicting ideologies across all genres as they transform and adapt to new rhetorical situations, but it is important to foster and maintain a “critical consciousness” among those who establish and use them (Paré 69).

Works Cited

- Collin, Ross. "Genre in Discourse, Discourse in Genre: A New Approach to the Study of Literate Practice." *Journal of Literacy Research*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2012, pp. 76–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X11431627>.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman, 1995, London.
- Gee, J.P.. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. 2nd ed., Falmer, 1996, London.
- Miller, Carolyn R.. "Genre as Social Action." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 70, no. 2, 1984, pp. 151–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686>.
- Paré, Anthony. "Genre and Identity: Individuals, Institutions, and Ideology." *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre*, edited by Richard Coe, Lorelei Lingard, and Tatiana Teslenko, Hampton Press, 2002, pp. 57-71.
- Speicher, Alyssa. "Rhetorical Genre Theory and Workplace Adaptation for Modern Professional Writers." *Professional Writing and Information Design Capstone Projects*. 3, 2017, http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/communication_professional_writing_capstone/3.
- University of Illinois Springfield. "The Rhetorical Situation." www.uis.edu/learninghub/writingresources/handouts/learninghub/rhetoricalsituation#:~:text=The%20rhetorical%20situation%20can%20be,writing%20choices%20in%20your%20work. Accessed 26 Oct. 2023.