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The Chicken Editorial: Which Comes First (?)

In mid 2016 we were approached by Julia Lockheart wanting to know whether we would be interested in putting together a special issue of this journal that celebrated the use of genre in offering different opportunities for writing in academia. Although coming from very different disciplinary backgrounds, our paths had crossed at the European Association of Teaching Academic Writing Conference in Limerick in 2011 where we recognised similar interests and approaches to student work. Following on from that initial meeting we have worked closely together on joint presentations at conferences and workshops and have championed the practice of using genre as a pedagogical resource. The invitation to put together this publication spurred us to set up a workshop and a conference to explore and share the theory and practice of genre and the idea of regenring within academic settings.

Regenring is a term, coined in Fiona’s (2011) book, *Student Writing and Genre*, which explores the effects of students shifting academic material from one genre to another, for instance, an essay into a play. Essentially, the process of regenring is a way of exploring disciplinary knowledge from different perspectives drawing on the communicative resources and opportunities that different genres afford. It means offering students not only the chance to work with a wider repertoire of genres but in so doing let them reflect on how those different genres allow them to make and shape their disciplinary knowledge.

(Alke's contribution to this edition, 'Embodying Regenring', provides an example of how this framework can be used and elaborated on to analyse even artefacts in her discussion of the conference bag as a genre.)

The process of regenring results in not just a simple change in form, but a fundamental change in how the content means and even in the kind of meanings that can be made. For instance, choosing to produce disciplinary content as a play instead of an essay means drawing on very different sets of representational resources (e.g. characters, places, speech) which, in turn, give rise to different interactional experiences (socialising, conversing, moving around) for the participants involved in that communicative event. This is not to say that one genre is ‘better’ than another but rather by expanding the repertoire of genres available to students, they have the opportunity to become more flexible in how they can think about their disciplines and the theories and practices that those disciplines entail. What is more, it can be effective not only in opening up the chance for different thinking but as a later study discusses can be, as a mature non-academic theatre direction student remarked, ‘*an absolutely wonderful facilitator for me and a real confidence builder*’ (English 2015: 106) after having been enabled to write the commentary to her final project work as an imagined interview with herself.

There is already a lot of experimental work going on in universities and colleges that we would argue falls within the area of ‘genre’ and ‘regenring’, but often this is not termed as such, and rather referred to as ‘redesign’ of conventional (written) assignments, use of non-traditional ways of assessment or even ‘adaptation’. With this in mind it seemed not quite right to start asking about genring and regenring practice within the context of an academic journal. So rather than putting out a call for papers straight away, we wanted to get people to share their practice in different ways and explore it from the perspective of the discussions that we had been having since our first encounter in Limerick.

We also thought that many of the people who operate within writing in creative practice might feel insecure themselves as writers, and it made sense to try to build a network or support group where people could share their ideas previous to submitting them for formal review. Initially the idea had been to have three events: an exploratory workshop that introduced regenring theory to people who might not have been familiar with it; a day of sharing in the form of delegates bringing examples of their regenring practice and talking freely about it; and a formal conference with presenters selected from people engaging with the previous two events. This plan proved to be slightly too ambitious, and we ended up with two events, the workshop (which remained very much in the format initially envisioned) and a conference, which took its starting points from the other two event ideas but then was transformed again through the involvement of Lisa Clughen who took over the co-organisation and hosting duties at TILT, the Trent Institute for Learning and Teaching at Nottingham Trent University.

The workshop took place one cold November day in 2016 at Middleport Pottery in Stoke-on-Trent. Here we introduced participants to examples of regenring and its theory making use of the factory tour on site to allow active reflection on different ways of teaching and demonstrating practice. As part of the delegate pack Alke had designed and produced a *furoshiki* (a Japanese wrapping cloth) which presented the Orientations of Genre framework by Fiona (2011) in a visual way and embodied the concept of regenring in its potential uses (for more on this see Alke’s paper in this issue).Even though there were problems with the heating, delegates seemed to enjoy the day and take home a lot of food for thought (and Clive and Angela’s paper in this issue refers to Clive’s impressions of the day).

The conference was much harder to put together and it is due to Lisa and Catherine from TILT that it became reality. The TILT involvement gave it not just funding for refreshments, so we could make it free to delegates (unfortunately we had had to charge for the workshop), but also a neat focus, so rather than just thinking about genre and regenring we were specifically concentrating on reGenring Academic Writing and Assessment. Instead of calling for papers we invited three key note presentations and put out a call for practice in order to facilitate a sharing session in the afternoon. We started the day (as we had the workshop), with a regenring-in-action session by making our own name tags and then went on to a more formal programme. The three presentations in the morning were a thoughtful discussion by Julia Molinari on her doctoral work asking what makes our writing academic, a presentation by Lisa and David Hindley on student perception and experiences of academic blogging (a paper on which is included in this issue), and Nick Sousanis talking about his reimagining of scholarship through comics with *Unflattening*, his PhD thesis which took the form of a Graphic Novel and was published by Harvard University Press in 2015. These three different perspectives on academic work and specifically writing proved to be a good base from which discussions could start, and this they did over lunch.

The Sharing Session in the afternoon was set up around posters we had produced based on submissions for the call for practice. In order to focus people’s minds on the gains and losses a genre switch afforded, a Venn diagram was used as a template, so all the posters followed a similar layout (for more details on this see Gröppel-Wegener, 2017) This part of the day had no scheduled programme and, after getting over their initial bemusement that we were not forcing them to sit through more formal talks, delegates started to move around freely and talk to each other about the posters on display and about their work with students. (Some people even took time out to enjoy the Nottingham sunshine and visit the local comic book shop, no doubt fired up by Nick’s talk.) The afternoon drew to a close with a discussion chaired by Fiona where we reflected on the day and what we had learned about regenring.

As a follow-up to these events we asked people for submissions to a special edition and were delighted to discover that we had enough material for two issues, the first of which you are now reading.

A very early idea had been to have one issue that provided the theoretical discussion and one that presented short pieces showing off different examples using the template introduced at the conference’s sharing session. While there is something appealing about producing basically a catalogue of different regenrings, we didn’t think a clear theory/practice divide would be in the spirit of the journal and of the idea of using genres. We could have split them according to images and word based submissions, but decided a mixed approach would make reading each issue a more appealing and thought-provoking experience. We also pondered splitting them according to who is doing the genring and regenring. You will find that some cases discuss something a teacher does while others have the genring and regenring centred on the students. While this was a real possibility, we in the end tried to keep submissions dealing with similar themes together, so for example the ones looking at blogging can be found in this issue, while tackling a dissertation is included in the sister issue. But most importantly we wanted to show off the range of different genres in each issue, so they both include conventional and alternative genres within the academic framework.

As there is no sequential organisation behind the order, for us there is no hierarchy. And while we realise that the journal will assign these issues different numbers suggesting that one issue comes ‘before’ the other is something we wanted to avoid as much as possible, so we took to rather playfully referring to them as the ‘chicken’ and the ‘egg’ issue respectively. So when within these pages from now on we refer to specific contributions, we will do it. We hope that you will forgive us this little joke.

Each of the two issues has its own editorial, but rather than viewing them as distinct entities, we want readers to see them as two perspectives on the same themes. In other words, each editorial covers the same ground including profiling all the contributions presented across both issues. To put our own money where our mouths are, we have ourselves done a bit of regenring whereby this editorial, the Chicken editorial, uses a more or less conventional editorial genre while for the Egg issue, we have used an alternative: the abecedary. By reading and comparing both of them, you will be able to reflect on the impact of each and any gains and losses experienced by turning one into the other and vice versa (as they were written in parallel).

We actively encouraged contributors to submit their work using alternative genres, a task which some found quite difficult to do even though some of them had been encouraging their students to dip their toes into the regenring pool. There is an irony here, of course, that the very people who have been giving permission to their students to explore scholarly knowledge using alternatives to conventional essayist genres were hesitant to take the permission that we editors had given them to do the same. Was this because of the fear that these special issues of the journal would be seen as novelty publications rather than serious ones (for UK contributors, anxiety around non-REF-ability looms large)? Our intention with these issues is to show how different genres can be used to explain the issues under discussion in more than one way. The choice of genre may be determined by the kind of discussion desired, systematised and analysed, as demonstrated by the more traditional genres included, or enacted, embodied or shown as some of the other genres used. Where we felt it was possible and appropriate to push the boundaries of convention, we gave a nudge to contributors to experiment a bit more with their content and have a bit more regenring fun.

Of course we were also bound by the limitations of the format of an academic journal. After all, this was meant to exist within the constraints of the printed page and its electronic cousin. We knew we wouldn’t be able to include films, for example. But we tried our best to be as accommodating as possible. For example, instead of being able to present the last ‘image’ in Sarah and Sheila’s conversation (E) as the dynamic gif it originally was, we presented, the two images that the gif flipped between side-by-side as a compromise solution. David and Lisa’s piece (C) would have been much more authentic if we could have presented it as an actual blog, complete with hyperlinks. However, they wrote it in a blog style, presenting posts as well as ‘about’ and ‘home’ sections and, although for ease of reading they chose to present the posts in chronological order rather than the reverse order of a live blog, it retains the blog-like quality of the genre they actually are writing about. For most of the ‘alternative’ submissions we kept the format of bookends of an abstract and coda to give readers a short context before they dive in and reflection after, but for some pieces that approach seemed to make little sense. Lisa’s letter (E), for example, doesn’t really need an abstract or keywords. Perhaps the most significant editorial decision we took was to ask Sandra, Sandra and Tom to submit short case studies which we use to run through the Egg issue. Again, it didn’t make sense to have a formal abstract and coda for each of them, so instead there is a contextual introduction providing signposting for the reader along with the references and the contributors’ details with the other five examples being interspersed throughout the issue.

So, what will you actually find in these issues? In this, the Chicken Issue, you will find Alke using the *furoshiki* produced for our workshop as an artefact to embody regenring, and in a meta moment using Fiona’s Orientation of Genre theoretical framework visually represented on the Japanese wrapping cloth to analyse both the visual representation and the artefactual aspects of the *furoshiki*. As a consequence she suggests some ways to extend Fiona’s framework to allow it to easier embrace visual aspects of genres.

Paul Christie explores the subjective nature of training actors with a piece of creative writing that gives voice to the body and not just the mind. This works as a fascinating reflection on how to teach processes.

Annabel Smith shows through a comic why she started to present a series of comic books to her students to teach them about the business side of working within fashion. Now, the students engage with the issues by following the story of the comic’s protagonist.

There are two papers that explore blogging as a resource within teaching. Like Annabel, Mhairi had to find a way to make standard textbooks more accessible to her students. Rather than drawing a comic, she turned the required reading for her lectures into blog posts for the students, regenring the textbook sections into both blog post and lecture slides. David and Lisa, on the other hand, got the students to write the blog posts for a communal blog and as preparation for their essays. This project is presented in the form of a blog itself (or, as we have pointed out above, as close to a blog as was possible within the confines of the journal format).

Shaun and Karl explore a number of different exercises for Fine Art Year 0 students that explore the ‘troublesome knowledge’ of the traditional contextual studies content. They use the concept of de-orientation and destabilising tasks to get their students to see knowledge and knowing from different perspectives and use this to start a reflective and critical process.

Robin shares his process of using autoethnographic vignettes as part of his doctoral research – and the frustration of fitting process into the forms required as part of the PhD institutional progression report. The contrast of both creative writing and institutionalised language provides an interesting study of regenring and questions the usefulness of rigorous forms to document creative and research processes.

The issue closes with an account of using visual journals and sketchbooks as an integral part of business education. Clive and Angela give an overview of the state of play in their area and use Clive’s visual notes from his attendance at the reGenre workshop at Middleport as an example of the potential this genre has for encouraging reflective thinking.

The first contribution to the Egg issue is a piece by Fiona which explores the concept of transformation. Using a mix of genres, it offers a multi-layered reflection on an art-piece which has regenred a process in the field of physics from the different perspectives of the physicist-artist and the non-phyisicist viewer. This is followed by the first of the series of case studies we referred to above that are sprinkeld through the second issue. These are provided by Sandra, Sandra and Tom, who show off their creative and innovative practice with how-to’s on using collage, cabinets of curiosities, games, digital storytelling as opportunities for students to explore their knowledge, all ending in celebrating the work in a multimodal exhibition.

Polly and Julian share their case study of The Us in Museum, describing their collaboration with the staff, resources and facilities of the Museum of St Albans. Using the research around actual artefacts and then designing an exhibition for them, engaged students in the historical and contextual aspects of their design practice much more than research for writing previously had.

Sarah and Sheila have a conversation about the potential posters have for presenting academic knowledge, and Peter and Grace’s article takes this issue further.Using a multimodal framework, the latter analyses the student poster and poster conference genres from the perspectives of design, production and distribution. They explore how the students involved in their study experienced the whole process and what can be learned from this in terms of pedagogical practice.

James offers a piece of creative writing calling for visual essays with the voice of Nottingham local Arthur Seaton from Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. It seems Seaton would not have been too impressed with scholarly essays!

Both Pat and Will describe dissertation equivalents that Seaton might have approved of more than the academic behemoth. Pat’s report reflects on a module that introduces particular emphasis on the readership of research writing by getting students to see the purpose of this dissertation equivalent as an article with a readership that they themselves decide on. Will, on the other hand, describes an initial struggle of convincing students that the partially practical option they were given was NOT devaluing their degree – and the consequence of making this compulsory rather than optional as a result.

Emma describes how she uses a set of postcards produced by Alke as workshop prompts to get students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to academic writing, and to get them to regenre their own writing tips into the postcard format.

We end on an open letter by Lisa Clughen, our collaborator for the conference, calling for academia to consider the essay as one genre, but not the only genre, capable of expressing academic thought. She argues that the introduction of other genres as options for students will lead to greater student engagement and ultimate success.

Throughout the process of putting these two special issues together, we have been struck by the willingness of the contributors to think about *how* they want to say what they want to say. For some the most appropriate way has been to work with the traditional academic paper genre because they needed to provide a systematic and more linear account of the work involved. For others, the alternative genres have enabled them to incorporate, often highly subjective, perspectives that more conventional approaches would preclude. The interactions between ourselves and contributors has been instructive and rewarding and we have learned a lot about what it means to use different genres, the gains and losses that are incurred in the process and the professional risk involved in producing for public scrutiny seemingly unacademic writing for an academic purpose. It seems that it is one thing to get our students experimenting with different genres in the closed context of coursework, and quite another to get professional academics doing the same in the public domain of an academic journal! It makes us realise, though, that for our students, using unconventional genres will also seem risky in the high-stakes environment of assessment.

Getting to the point of readiness has not been a straightforward journey. We have had to cajole some of our contributors into being more daring while also reining in one or two extreme flights of fancy and we have had to ask others to make substantial reductions in the length of their submissions. We have also had to think about the kind of contributions we wanted to make in our own right and whether we wanted to push the boat out in terms of alternativity. In the end we have done a bit of both. Ultimately, the aim of these two special editions, Chicken and Egg, is to present a range of thought-provoking and original intellectual discussions. What these collections show is that creative practice is to be found in all fields of study and that it provides ways of thinking, learning and teaching valuable to all.

We hope that you will be as inspired reading these pages as we have putting them together.

References

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