

## ACADEMIC GENRES AND LITERACY PRACTICES IN A COURSE OF TEXTILE ENGINEERING

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### Résumé

*Genres académiques et pratiques de littératie dans un cours d'Ingénierie*

Dans ce texte on présente les données préliminaires d'une recherche qui a pour objectif principal la caractérisation des différents « patrons de littératie », dans un cours d'Ingénierie d'une université portugaise. Les données ont été obtenues au moyen de collecte de documents, d'observations sur le terrain et d'entretiens. Des résultats préliminaires montrent l'existence d'une multiplicité de genres qui fonctionnent comme « médiateurs conceptuels et procéduraux ». Le genre par excellence dans ce contexte est le « rapport de projet » qui diffèrent des autres rapports produits pour quelques disciplines du cours non seulement en raison de sa structure textuelle distincte, mais aussi parce qu'il doit être produit de deux façons : à l'écrit et à l'oral. En raison des attentes des professeurs relatives à ces rapports nous pouvons conclure que les deux modes ont des « caractéristiques cachées » que les étudiants apprennent par la pratique et en se référant aux années précédentes.

### Literacy in academic contexts: a case study in Portugal

The main goal of this text is to present preliminary data from a wider research project on academic literacies which is being developed at the University of Minho, Portugal. For this first year of research, the focus is on genres that specialise reading and writing practices in the second year Course of Textile Engineering.

The current research builds on the assumption that a university course is a social and cultural context that implies specific social practices (Gee, 1999, 2001) where genres have a determinant role and play specific functions as 'mediators' (Bazermann & Prior, 2005).

What genres are to be used to acquire and to produce knowledge? How do students cope with genres generalities and specificities? are some of the questions that guide this phase of the research.

The adoption of a socio-cultural approach to literacy and genres (Lea & Street, 2006) justifies the

ethnographic methodology of the research which involves, until now: document gathering (lists of texts for reading; curricular forms; instructional materials; students' written works) and field notes; classroom observations; semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with students and teachers.

### Genres in the Course of Textile Engineering

The analysis of the several data sources – institutional and teaching documents; students' written works and curricular documents; students and teachers interviews – allows the identification of diversified genres that may be considered as belonging and specializing different discursive spheres in this context.

As a preliminary result, it can be said that genres in this Course are organised in two big interrelated groups: one that mainly contain texts that structure and organise the teaching and learning processes – lessons' outlines and summaries; manuals; reports; tests and exams forms; problems; definitions; teachers' and students' presentations in PPT format; minutes of meetings; memos; and another one that mostly relates to the technical and business sphere, although also as a source for acquiring and presenting disciplinary knowledge: equipment and textile catalogues; technical books and documents; technical procedures. Digital is the most common format of the texts of this group.

According to the different roles and positions that these genres have in the “mediation” of the complex socio-cultural interactions that occur in the Course, the genres of those two groups serve different aims in the process of acquiring and producing knowledge about textile engineering. Specifically they act as “conceptual mediators” (Fischer, 2007) - when they serve to build or expand knowledge and metaknowledge, and mediate the acquisition of theoretical and scientific content; among these we find: technical multimodal texts, students' notes and summaries, teachers' instructional materials. From the point of view of both teachers and students these are the “preferred” genres of the course. On one hand, students recognise that these genres are essential for assessment; on the other hand, teachers value these text materials as the ones that students should take into consideration for their reports (of laboratorial procedures and of companies' visits, for instance). Genres as “procedural mediators” – genres that aim at regulating the learning process – are also very frequent in this course that has among its pedagogical principles the promotion of autonomous students: home and class work reports; minutes of students work groups; diaries and agendas. For the writing of these procedural genres teachers usually provide text models that students reproduce all over the course.

### Reports and the Project Report

The genre that emerges as most important, frequent and specialized one in this Course is the 'report'. Almost all disciplines require it as one assessment element. Because of this systematic presence teachers assume that this is a genre that students already know even before coming to their disciplines: "with the laboratory report, students have to recur to the procedures of laboratorial activities that I gave them... but they already have a former notion about how that should be done (2<sup>nd</sup> year teacher 1). Indeed, in these particular cases, what is given to students are guidelines about laboratorial procedures, not exactly about content, structural composition or linguistic resources, for instance. Because of this uncertainty regarding the way to write the report, students look for models in past years reports: "we adapt, and we try to use more or less the same rules". Even though, students acknowledge that reports are not the "same" in the several disciplines.

Particularly different from those disciplines reports, is the Project Report, that, in this course, every semester, students have to produce integrating knowledge from that semester's disciplines. This practice has to do with a "project oriented pedagogy" adopted by almost all engineering courses. The importance given to this Project Report is such that particular tutorial sessions are organised for students to present their drafts and supposedly to receive feedback. In this Project Report students describe all the procedures and supporting theory for a "product" they created. But to be successful, it is necessary to go beyond the descriptive structure. Indeed, what seems to be expected is also an argumentative line of reasoning. This is one of the "hidden features" (Street, 2009) of the genre which has to be inferred, since there is no explicit instruction for this. Students do not seem to be particularly aware of this structural feature of the genre; but seem sensible to other "hidden features" such as 'agency', 'person', 'voice', together with originality and creativity: "The project report is a creation of our own; it is our idea".

This Project Report is also distinct from other reports, so constituting a different genre, because it has to be produced in two modes: written and oral. This double nature also duplicates the "hidden features" of the genre. The "recontextualization" (Cassany, 2006) that the written text suffers to become an oral presentation is to be assessed by means of different criteria, which means that students have to give evidence of another "text" when presenting it to teachers and colleagues; a second text that must appear in another "social language" with proper linguistic and non-linguistic devices because of its different aims. In a certain sense, the academic discourse of the written report is transformed by means of appealing strategies.

While sometimes the list of features that must be taken into account for the written Project Report is provided to students, no instructions are given for the oral mode of the text. Students then learn "by doing" and by being corrected during the several tutorial sessions, without any kind of metalinguistic knowledge. Recurring to past years reports and presentations is also another strategy (a very frequent one) that students find to cope with this challenging and mysterious task: "If it has been approved by teachers last year, why not to use it too?".

## Conclusions

Due to the strong orientation adopted by the Course towards the work field academic genres such as essays or dissertations are scarce. Genres from the work sphere become in this course "conceptual mediators", although mainly for knowledge acquisition, because for presenting knowledge students are still much confined to assessment oriented texts, such as tests. The pedagogical aim of making students more active in their knowledge acquisition process, put in evidence in this first phase of the research several "procedural genres".

The different textual composition and disciplinary aims of the Reports that appeared as the most frequent texts that students have to produce allow the conclusion that in this course there are distinct genres that take the same "name". One way that students find to cope with this is using as text models reports from previous years.

Particularly distinct is the Project Report that besides requiring an argumentative stance (which is not required in other "descriptive" reports) has to be produced in two modes: a written and an oral one. The difficulties found by students mainly with the oral mode, is giving origin to teachers complaints about their students oral competencies, and specific "remediation" courses are being organised. Since students are expected to produce both forms without explicit instructions, it can be said that the hidden features of academic writing duplicate in this particular case.

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