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Hybrid Assessment Genres: New Implications of Knowledge for Writing Pedagogy

This paper reports on the nature of hybrid assessment genres emerging from new imperatives of disciplinary knowledge in the academy. Taking business studies as a case study, it also proposes some remedial measures while focusing on recent curricular changes and their accompanying assessment genres that present themselves as challenges to student writers as well as writing pedagogy. The research pertaining to this paper is based on a Sydney university, fictitiously represented here as UNIS.

The methodology used here is a qualitative one premised in the systemic functional linguistic theory, popularly known as the genre approach to language teaching and learning (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Swales, 1990; Bazerman, 1994; Eggins, 1994). Data for this research were primarily drawn from course profiles relating to postgraduate business studies programs.

The complexity inherent in student writing has in the last two decades or so assumed enormous proportions owing in large measure to hybrid assessment genres introduced to writing pedagogy. These assessment genres are directly related to discursive objectives of a particular curriculum. Contrary to relatively simple and formulaic assessment tasks, they often pose a veritable challenge to student writers grappling with disciplinary knowledge domains that are alien to them. Often students seem to be stymied by the intricate disciplinary integrations in their writing tasks (Chandrasoma, 2010).

In these environments apart from assessment genres, assessment criteria can also become complex. For example in an unusually long assignment in terms of word length, there can be a series of tasks to be accomplished by the student writer. This might enhance what I might call the ‘subjective intensity’ of a given assessment criteria.

In terms of pedagogical implications, it is fair to conclude that writing pedagogy needs to equip students with necessary tools to cope with this situation. Simplification of assessment tasks and elimination of their multifocal dimensions are worth considering for remedying multifarious difficulties encountered by student writers in these contexts.

(Key words: assessment criteria, assessment genres, disciplinary integration, disciplinary knowledge, interdisciplinarity, interdiscursivity, intertextuality, subjectivity, writing pedagogy)
Viewed from a critical perspective, student writing may well be considered a complex as well as conscious academic exercise. Knowledge domains in the academy have crossed their disciplinary boundaries at an unprecedented rate, thus adding more complexity to student writing and writing pedagogy. This interdisciplinary nature has provided disciplines with sophistication and socio-economic relevance despite its strong repercussions on consumption and strategic utilization of knowledge in the process of constructing student texts.

Recent changes brought about by disciplinary and textual dynamics to the overall academic culture have resulted in not so much regulated and structured pedagogical approaches, but rather complex developments within them. Multi skilling for example is a new imperative of knowledge based economy; hence universities are obliged to design their course to suit such developments. These developments, above all, have foregrounded new sites where ‘the superimposition of the power relations and knowledge relations assumes…all its visible brilliance’ (Foucault, 1995: 185, also see ibid: 215-305). Such changes are also reflected in diverse assessment tasks which could be investigated from conceptual as well as practical perspectives.

New imperatives of knowledge in the academy demand introduction of assessment tasks that are mostly interdisciplinary in overall constitution. New knowledge dynamics necessitate students to negotiate their cognitive faculties across several disciplines that constitute their chosen program of study. The implication here is that there is essentially an integration process involved in any interdisciplinary assessment task, and it is this process (which eventually transformed into a product) that distinguishes interdisciplinary assessment tasks from those of disciplinary ones. I will examine these intricate relationships as manifest in real assessment tasks.

It is obvious that assessment tasks are an essential part of any pedagogical as well as learning endeavor. From a conventional point of view, the main purpose of assessment tasks is to ascertain to what extent a student can utilize and expand (manipulate) in a given context the knowledge he/she has acquired in a particular program of study. Critical thinking, disciplinary knowledge, and linguistic competencies are indispensable for executing most assessment tasks in most disciplines. It seems to me that this orientation in student assessment has significantly changed in our contemporary academic contexts. The purpose of assessing students is not solely confined to ascertain to what extent they have profited from what they have learnt from lecturers and professors; it also tests students’ ability to acquire and apply on their own new knowledges in addition to what they have learnt. Hence, the strategies used for assessing students have dramatically changed from what they were two decades or so ago. This major change is characterized by the strong research element introduced to most assessment tasks, especially in business studies.

I might mention here that the two phrases ‘assessment topics’ and ‘assessment tasks’ are often used interchangeably in academic literature. One might be inclined to distinguish between these two since they invoke semantically two different phenomena. By assessment
topic, we usually refer to the wording of a given assignment title; in other words a topic is born of on the strength of the lexicogrammatical choices being deployed in it in the context of disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity. They involve among other things, specialized terminology and varied questioning techniques. An assessment task on the other hand is generically realized and defined; in fact it is the materialization of an assessment topic that gives rise to an assessment task. Such genres include essays (explanatory, argumentative, descriptive, critique etc), reports, presentations, case studies, theses, class exercises (short pieces of writing). It is also evident that both assessment topics and tasks are closely interrelated; hence I would prefer to use the phrase ‘assessment task’ inclusive of its accompanying assessment topic as part of it.

New and emerging assessment tasks within interdisciplinarity (and, I believe in general, too) may be classified into five types: closed, extended, allegorized (or scenariorized), and technocentric. There are two main criteria for this categorization; first it is centered on the ways in which students (individually or in group) are required to manipulate multiple discourses in executing a particular assignment task. Second, it also takes into consideration the physically prominent aspects of a particular assessment task, eg. the length, the mode of delivery. There could still be significant overlappings between these categories. In order to fulfil the requirements of all these categories, students are required to be engaged at varying degrees in some form of research related to primary and secondary sources.

If we take a closer look at closed assignment tasks, we may invariably begin to realize that they are concise, and have often strong orientation in theory or concepts. That is students are required to explicate some understanding of a concept akin to a particular discipline or disciplines. And it is not easy for students to deviate from the thesis statement/s encountered in most closed assignment tasks. Most of these questions or statements in the form of questions are straightforward. They also have a unilateral focus, and intricate relationships are rarely encountered. Very often closed questions are framed with statements derived from disciplinary texts. The following assignment topic in the course, Law for Management, exemplifies the closed type:

Larsen (2002) stated that ‘Australia’s current financial reporting framework is recognized as amongst the world’s best, but this obviously did not and cannot offer immunity from corporate failure’ (UNIS, 2003: 25).

Here Larsen’s thesis is a solid one that has to be adhered to by students in analysing the financial reporting system. Interdisciplinarity seeps into this task through its intertextual links with company and commercial law. Although this is not a complex task, some closed tasks can be complex, too. For example, let me analyze an assignment tasks in the course Auditing, Professional and Ethical Practice (Accounting ACCT20040):

‘There is a growing awareness of business ethics and the need to reinforce ethical behaviour in the corporate sector (Griggs et al. 2003, p. 558)’ As the CEO of a business, how would you implement policy to reflect this emphasis on ethical business behaviour?’ (Accounting, 2003: 22).
Here the question is framed in the form of an extract from a disciplinary text, *Managers and the law—a guide for business decision makers*. The brevity of this assignment task by no means masks its complexity within interdisciplinary contexts. However, the thesis statement of the task, I believe, is unambiguous and clear: students are required to investigate the significance of ethical behavior in business environments, and develop strategies for implementing policy decisions to ensure ethical behavior in a selected business organization. The task is complex in the sense that it at least explicitly involves two disciplines: business studies and ethics. Its complexity also emanates from intertextual relations between implied texts and very often such texts pave the way for interdiscursive relations.

I would also consider some multiple choice questions (non-allegorised ones) as closed tasks. They too have a question or a statement followed by several (usually four or five) options to choose from. These types of questions at times could be ambiguous through the calculating way in which linguistic resources are manipulated. The following is a typical example of a closed type multiple choice question in the subject International Contracts and Business Transactions:

‘You are required to select the one (1) correct answer from each of the following and explain why you believe that answer is correct…

xii. The title of the goods sold in a documentary sale is transferred through
a) Negotiation of the document only
b) Delivery of the goods only
c) Negotiation of the document and delivery of the goods
d) Title to the goods is not transferred in a documentary sale’

(UNIS, 2002:26- LAW 20055)

This task obviously has two parts: first is to select the most appropriate answer, and the second is to explain why it is the most suitable option.

However, some multiple choice questions, especially in business law, contain a series of scenarios preceded by the choices. I will discuss these allegorized multiple choice questions under the allegorized type.

Lengthy assessment tasks, sometimes running into several pages, providing additional information on how to interpret the task and negotiate meanings, could be classified as extended topics. The ensuing example (UNIS, 2002, ECOM 29008) introduces the task in closed form, and provides crucial information relevant to the task: ‘[Prepare] a detailed design and implementation plan for your chosen organization and e-commerce trading system model’ (p. 23). This is followed by four paragraphs (approximately 460 words) devoted to explaining how to execute the assignment providing more details:

‘…Where applicable, you are encouraged to substantiate your recommendations with the careful use of diagrams, figures or other schematics; these will not only add visual impact to your report, but may also enhance its readability and credibility…’ (ibid p. 24, original italics).
Narrations of this nature are an essential ingredient of extended assignment tasks. Some assignment tasks, especially in accounting, contain lengthy tables of information for working out and applying concepts such as depreciation, trial balance, bank reconciliation etc. as part of an assignment. These also come under the rubric of extended tasks since such prolonged information is crucial for executing a task.

Extended assignment tasks are complex, hence explanations are crucial in understanding and interpreting such tasks. Sometimes such explanatory information adds to the complexity of the task itself.

I use the term ‘allegorised’ here to mean a series of simulated scenarios as part of an assessment task. A scenario usually contains a simulated story or a chain of events relating to one or several contexts. The length of a scenario may vary from one discipline to another; allegorized assessment tasks in business law for example are prohibitively longer than those in other disciplines. They are usually presented in two ways: they can have a question or a statement, preceded by one or more scenarios, or vice versa. The, latter, where scenarios are used as a prologue to a particular assessment task, however, appears to be more popular than the former.

Allegorized assessment tasks are frequently used in case studies, which entail the use of scenarios. In fact, it is difficult to visualize a case study without a scenario. A scenario may range from a simple situation where a student has been asked to interview someone for information as part of a research project to lengthy narratives often of episodic nature. Their main purpose however is to establish contextual reference/s in relation to a given question or a statement.

The following is part of a five-page-long case study in taxation law, which contains a scenario with four closely connected episodes. In the interest of brevity here, I will quote the opening sentences of each episode:

‘John Winter has approached you for preparation of his 2001/2002 tax return, and determination of his tax liability…John has been living in Fiji since 1 February 1999…On his return to Australia John was approached by an Australian radio network…John owns a retail store in Cairns which sells surf gear and clothing…(UNIS, 2002 LAWS 19033, p. 25-26). This is followed by several tables of accounting information highlighting John’s financial transactions, all being part of the scenarios (ibid 26-29). The topic ends with two questions: ‘1. Set down in statement form full details of John’s assessable income and allowable deductions for the 2001/2002 year of income…2. Determine the net amount of income tax payable by John for 2001/2002’ (ibid. 30).

It is also worth mentioning here that, under the subheading ‘assessment criteria’ a ‘reference system’ has been introduced: ‘The footnote or endnote system is the preferred method of referencing in legal writing…When making a reference, cite the original source or
authority in preference to a secondary source such as the textbook especially when you are discussing various sections of the legislation…(ibid, 30).

This allegorized task is too long and complex that most students make notes to simplify it and follow the sequenced information without which they cannot construct the required context or contexts. It is also pregnant with intertextual resources. Question one demands a complete narration of John’s complex transactions, both in Fiji and Australia, which then have to be interpreted against the taxation law. What we witness here is the confluence of three disciplines: business studies, accounting, and law.

What is implied in the section on assessment criteria is the use of the legal language; that is students are required to conform to the linguistic resources frequently encountered in legal discourses. Perhaps more importantly, in order to comprehend a variety of texts of the legislative literature (e.g. Trade Practices Act 1974), students need to have superior linguistic competencies.

Some multiple choice questions with allegorized contents may also be regarded as allegorized tasks. Consider the following from the subject International Contracts and Business Transactions:

‘xix. An importer in Germany requires a price quotation from a cotton broker in Memphis. The broker wishes to place the cotton in the hands of a multimodal terminal operator in Memphis for shipment through the port of New Orleans. He will pay the freight charges through to the German airport, but he wishes the risk of loss to the cotton to pass to the German importer as soon as he places the cotton in the hands of the multimodal terminal operator in Memphis. The broker should quote his prices for the cotton:

CIF Germany
FOB New Orleans
CPT New Orleans
Ex Factory
None of the above’

This is a relatively new mode of presenting multiple choice questions where students are required to interpret one or more scenarios against several choices, and explain in detail as to why they make a particular choice. In fact, this task combines the knowledge domains pertaining to three disciplines: accounting, business studies, and law.

The use of new technologies of communication is mandatory for fulfilling some assignment tasks. Technocentric tasks are the ones in which the use of new technologies of communication is an integral part of the topic itself. They have close affinity with both allegorized and extended tasks in many ways, except that the use of one or more software products is unique to them. These are the new and emerging breeds of assignment tasks of the soft technoculture.
One major characteristic of this type is that a lengthy introduction is provided for explaining software related information that is crucial for executing the assignment. The following is a technocentric assignment topic for a course in Financial Accounting:

‘For the month of July only, you are entering the transactions for the firm, Video Matrix, using Version 12 of MYOB [mind your own business- a popular accounting software package] test drive (or Trial Evaluation).

Do not use the manual accounting system to complete the transactions for July. Do not complete any transactions for the month of August.

Use the 2CDs included with “Video Matrix” text. You must purchase this text which is available from the UNIS bookshop. One CD contains the computer program for MYOB …and the other … the Data File for the firm Video Matrix. The correct version of MYOB is required. Earlier versions will not allow the Video Matrix data files to be opened.

Read all the instructions included in the Video Matrix BEFORE you commence loading your files or entering transactions.

You must complete reversing entries on 1 July 2002…
Transactions for weeks 1, 2, 3, and 4 in July 2002
Adjusting entries as required on 31 July 2002…
You must print the following reports …
Transaction report…’ (UNIS, 2002 - ACCT20052 : 26-27)

I have reproduced here only half of the assignment task (the full length of this task is approximately 700 words!). It is evident that the first four paragraphs provide a lengthy introduction by way of instructions without which the assignment cannot be completed. Much of the information, however, in these introductory prerequisites is related to application software products (eg. MYOB). It is fascinating that this software acts as preliminary contexts to the task as well as tools for accomplishing the task. This certainly exemplifies the new dynamics of textual practices in the culture of student assessment. The rest of the topic contains a series of sequenced tasks to be completed using electronic resources meticulously. This is a truly interdisciplinary assignment where some selected concepts of accounting are fused with the application software products of information technology.

It is perhaps bewildering to perceive the relationship of this course to other courses: according to the course profile, ‘This course is for postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business and Law who have no background in Accounting’ (ibid, p. 2). Hence, one might notice that this is an extremely challenging, if not cumbersome, assignment for most business students whose knowledge of accounting and information technology is meagre.

Assignment topics relating to presentations (group or individual) also come under the umbrella of technocentric topics. In presentations, students are required to use visual graphics effectively and this necessitates, and it is often compulsory, the deployment of electronic means such as the Powerpoint.
The following assignment task is for a 20-minute-long group presentation in which the use of the Powerpoint is compulsory:

‘You are to develop a Powerpoint presentation and present it to the class for this assignment… You are to create an imaginary company with a product to sell. The company wishes to use E-commerce to market the product. Develop a Powerpoint presentation describing how you will use the E-commerce tools that you have learnt about in this course to market the product and organize your business.

At each group meeting you should record the tasks that have been delegated, the person to whom they have been assigned and the date the task have [has] been completed. These records MUST be submitted along with the Powerpoint file, before the end of the presentation. If you do not hand in your meeting minutes and the presentation slides all the group member will receive a ZERO for Assignment 2.

In your presentation, describe how you will address:
The practical implications of transaction processing and how it is related to enterprise resource planning
Knowledge management in terms of business process reengineering
The use of networked computing in terms of e-commerce’ (UNIS, 2002: 14, E-commerce Applications COIS 13034, original capitalization and emphasis).

This task, to be accomplished in groups of three, reveals the extensive use of new technologies of communication not only at the time of the presentation, but during the scheduled meetings prior to that. Another important characteristic is the submission of as part of the task a series of soft copies relating to these meetings to the lecturer prior to the presentation. Here both knowledge strands of business studies and information studies coalesce into one on a soft copy to produce an interdisciplinary task.

The task ends with three main requisites, which also reiterate the use of software products as part of the assignment, in order to elucidate the business transactions to be accomplished through electronic means. The use of phrases such as ‘practical implications of transaction processing’, ‘knowledge management’, and ‘networked computing’ illustrates the combination of the sociology of soft technoculture as well as its practical applications.

Another important aspect of these technocentric assignment tasks that distinguish themselves from the other categories I referred to earlier is the diverse ways in which conceptualization can occur in the mind of the student. There are, I believe, at least two ways of conceptualizing a similar task. First, it is the primary conceptualization process, which instigates the initial organization and application of required knowledge. Then it leads to the secondary conceptualization process, which entails the manipulation of the new technologies of communication. Within technocentric tasks, student writers are required to juxtapose these two modes of conceptualization using diverse software products.
Some technocentric assignments could be highly complex when they are accompanied with extended types. To satisfy the requirements of ECOM (UNIS, 200109 Autumn 2002-Electronic Commerce Project- Part B) students have to write a twenty-five-page report on the ‘factors that need to be considered when purchasing …e-commerce software packages, and why they are important’ (UNIS, Course profile 2002: 6). There are nine recommended factors to be included: ‘business models catered for, size of application aimed at, cost, hardware needed, maintenance, cost of modifications, security, electronic payment mechanisms, and connectivity to other systems’ (ibid 6). This assignment obviously has a heavy focus on information technology, but it contains equally strong focus on business studies and accounting. For example, the first and sixth factors merit a discussion centered on business studies whereas the eighth one on accounting practices.

This report should also include an ‘evaluation of the software required for developing the proposed WIS based on the framework developed by’ the student (ibid). While writing this report students are also required to concentrate on two basic models of e-commerce: business-to-business and business-to-consumer. The recommended text for this assignment is *Electronic commerce: a managerial perspective* (Turban et al 2000). More importantly, I might add that this textbook contains no information about accounting or business studies; rather its focus has been on developing web information systems. As I have already mentioned earlier, this is an instance where students are required to cope with new knowledges through research.

The complexity of the instructions is another difficulty for students. First, the section on the factors that need to be considered before purchasing the e-commerce packages in fact is where students are required to focus on needs analysis from two perspectives: technological and business. Perhaps the most daunting task for the business student would be the section of the report that should deal with the required software for developing the web information system.

Students are greatly facilitated if lengthy assessment tasks are made simple and short with few focal points to be adhered to. Subjective intensity adumbrated in lengthy assessment tasks is often a bottleneck in formulating realistic criteria for assessment. This becomes even more complex within interdisciplinary contexts where intersubjectivity could well be prominent in assessment tasks.

Assessment tasks are the nexus where consumption and appropriation of knowledge meet in student writing. Hence, understanding of the contents of assessment tasks is vital for the success or failure of student writers. By making instructions easily comprehensible and less complex, students can figure out with ease target points in lengthy allegorized assessment tasks. When the narration of a particular task resembles more or less a short story, it is hard not to believe that students often spend too much time on comprehending its contents with resultant confusion and frustration. This becomes even more cumbersome in disciplinary contexts that are not familiar to students.
References


