

Social Approach to Genre in a Cooperative: An Overview

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Cooperative documentation has meaning beyond words on a page; texts are not neutral documents. Paying attention to drafting, revising, and interpreting processes can give insight to underlying personal dynamics, revealing tension, disagreement, exclusions, or contradictions.

In this presentation I share data from a longitudinal study of a cooperative where I analyzed texts written by founders, the Board of Directors, and staff. My study shows the texts' social effects extended for years, often largely invisible to those involved, but before I go in depth with my findings, I want to give a brief overview of why we should start thinking of texts as social actions rather than neutral objects.

The texts we write have meaning beyond the words on the page, but their significance extends to issues of identity, power, and community consequences. That is, **texts are not neutral documents**, and paying careful attention to the processes of drafting, revising, and interpreting can give insight to underlying dynamics of a cooperative. Rhetoricians would say that we should not only pay attention to *what* we say, but *how* we say it, *why* we say it that way, and *what* are the social effects of our language. Organization documents—codes of conduct, incident forms, budgets, handbooks, bylaws, etc.—are fundamental to the identity of an organization, with long-lasting effects on identity and power within that organization. So then, rather than seeing texts as neutral objects, a rhetorical analysis understands these texts as acts of persuasion—as social actions with social consequences. Organizations like **cooperatives are rhetorically constructed and reconstructed through interactions of people and texts**.

When group agreement is central to functionality and viability, as in a cooperative, genres play a central role in creating and stabilizing a group for coordinated action. Texts stabilize relationships and regulate actions of heterogeneous groups so they can work together “because texts produce a stable representation of shifting reality” (Winsor, 2007, p. 3). **Texts can be imparted with normalizing power**. Working together, people stabilize and cohere by establishing genres that put boundaries on group behavior with goals, rules, and roles. Looking at texts through their social, persuasive elements provided us with the two keys to understanding the role of texts in an organization:

First, many organizational texts are responses to recurring social situations. Importantly, **a rhetorical analysis of genres looks more on their social effects (what actions do they allow/disallow), rather than its discrete, taxonomic features**, i.e. what constitutes a bylaw, a code of conduct, an employee handbook.

Second, a social theory of genre supports an analysis of texts as **powerful stabilizing forces, but only temporarily** (Miller 1984; Winsor 2003, 2007). As Schryer says, genres are “stabilized-for-now” as the genre and its social effects are always in flux (1994; Winsor, 2007, p. 3). Understanding the social situations genres respond to—and stabilize—is key to investigating systems of power in an organization, one undergoing evolutionary changes and tensions.

Like all organizations, cooperatives are social by nature, built and sustained by social connections in which stability in the form of either hierarchy or genres are necessary. In a cooperative, where hierarchies may be intentionally undermined or avoided, texts become the source of power, made to carry the burden of unpleasant tasks. **Texts can become the “heavy,”** and if so, it's even more important to living out our values of cooperation to make sure those texts are inclusive, transparent, and democratic.