

**A Critical Review of:**  
**‘Collaborative Authoring on the Web: A Genre**  
**Analysis of Online Encyclopedias’**

**(William Emigh and Susan C. Herring)**

Zulma Sofía Patarroyo

PGCE – Post Compulsory

Research and Development in ICT in Education

Mar - 2005

## **Introduction:**

The paper explores the degree in which editorial mechanisms determined by technical structures shape the genre conventions of two collaboratively-authored online encyclopaedias:

Wikipedia and  
Everything 2

Using the three dimensions of interrogation outlined by Brown and Dowling (1998), specializing, localizing and generalizing, my aim is to look at the claims made by the paper, how they are justified and how successful this justification is. I will do that by looking at the authors' theoretical position, methodological procedure and research findings.

Three key points constitute the authors main claims in relation to the studied collaboratively-authored online repositories of knowledge, and are neatly outlined in the paper's abstract, the researchers claim:

1. The more editorial control afforded by the system, the more formal the language.
2. People who use such systems, create the same kind of entries.
3. They suggest the introduction of the concept of sub-genres to resolve an apparent paradox in genre classification.

This paper intends to establish the degree to which these claims are justified in their research.

### **1. The research question**

In the process of interrogating the paper I will proceed by trying to determine what the authors' research question is. The authors present several questions throughout the paper (some taken from other researchers) covering a wide range of concepts and issues associated with online encyclopaedias and genres, from establishing differences and similarities between different encyclopaedic content online and offline, to the quality of the entries and looking at the social processes involved in the production of content. The following questions are presented in the introduction:

1. do online encyclopedias ‘reproduce their print’ antecedents, or are they shaped into new forms by the constraints and affordances of the digital medium? (c.f. Crowston and Williams, 2000)
2. how similar or different are entries produced in the two types of systems?
3. which system gives rise to better quality entries?
4. what social processes underlie the production of ‘good’ entries, and how do they shape the conventions of the online encyclopaedia genre?
5. do sites such as<sup>9</sup> wikipedia and everything<sup>2</sup>, which differ in their authoring and editorial mechanisms, produce communicative content that can be characterized as belonging to a single genre?

The authors claim that the paper addresses all these questions with the additional goal of ‘determining how the different mechanisms for promoting “quality” content on the two sites give rise to characteristic structural and stylistic features.’ (Emigh & Herring 2004, no page nos.)

All these questions are part of the authors’ process of interrogation, particularly in the specializing and localizing stages, and are generated as a result of the authors’ involvement with their theoretical field and the authorities that define it. These, which together with their reflections on key antecedent work give form to the problematic in which the authors are interested. When they discuss the analytical methods employed, they introduce another two questions as the “research questions guiding the statistical analysis”:

6. how does the level of formality/informality of the content of the four sources differ, if at all? And
  7. what additional factors, if any, help to explain variations in the data?
- (Emigh & Herring 2004, no page nos.)

From these questions, and from the way the authors operationalize their research and the conclusions generated as a result of their analysis, a predominant argument in their discussion is then established. The main issue that the authors are addressing is:

**The extent to which the editorial mechanisms, contribute towards and shape the genre conventions of collaboratively-authored online repositories of knowledge.**

The authors also demonstrate an interest with regard to the issue of quality, which appears as a recurrent concern throughout the paper, both in their questions and in the observations of previous relevant research work (as in Lih 2004) The authors, however,

do not make any definite claims in relation to it, and in the discussion make clear that their study did not directly investigate quality of content, and refrain themselves from giving a definite conclusion:

“which system produces better content? ... the results of the analysis suggest that there is not simple answer to this question, but rather that the answer depends on the goals and preferred styles of the users” (Emigh & Herring 2004, no page nos.)

## 2. The sampling protocol

The aim of this section is to interrogate the research paper with the purpose of finding out “how the link between the problem and the findings is established” (Brown & Dowling, 1998). The sampling regime chosen helps to resolve the theoretical problematic, localizing it into a practical setting.

### Empirical Field:

the general empirical field within which the research is located is “collaborative authoring on the web”, as presented by the authors. The paper attempts to provide some clarification of how to classify this emergent form of human communication into appropriate communicative genres.

The two exemplars of collaborative-authored online encyclopaedias that have been selected by the authors to be analyzed in the research are:

Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) and  
Everything 2 ([www.everything2.com](http://www.everything2.com))

No explanation is given as to the reasons behind the choice of these two specific sites. Other examples that utilize similar technical and editorial systems are also mentioned, and the researchers seem to suggest that wikipedia and everything2 are the two most widely used and recognized so it could only be assumed that that is in fact the reason for their choice of the two sites that constitute the empirical setting for the research.

The paper provides a description of the two online encyclopaedias, presenting the specific features of editorial control in the two sites, and giving a lot of emphasis to the social guidelines associated with the use and production of content in this media. This interest in the development, implementation and impact of social norms is reinforced by the inclusion in the paper of findings from previous research conducted by other

academics who looked at quality of content and social processes in one of the encyclopaedias (wikipedia).

The data utilized for the study consist of matching node headings from the two sites. The final selection of nodes comprised 15 across a range of topic categories. The nodes were arrived at through a process of initial random selection followed by further selections to ensure a substantial and representative similar sample from both encyclopaedias.

No explanation was given for the sampling method, it most be assumed that the sample size was sufficient for the analytical methods carried out later as several statistical tests were applied and in fact significant differences found. However, it would have been useful to have had the sample size justified. In addition the final selection was purely subjective, supposedly to “represent a range of topic categories”. This, non-random final selection, together with the non-explanation for the chosen sample size does raise some doubt as to the efficacy of any findings.

After a process of stratification the final nodes were selected and analogous content from two additional sources was added to the final corpus used for the data analysis. One of these sources, the discussion pages of wikipedia seemed an obvious and convenient resource, the discussion pages provide a means for the contributors to comment on the inclusion and content of a particular node. The second additional source was sixth edition of the Columbia encyclopedia, the reason given for its selection was because it is an example of a “traditional (expert-created) encyclopedia” content. No reason was given for its selection over other traditional encyclopaedias.

The inclusion of these additional sources is interesting in that it provides a possibility of comparison, especially with the traditional print encyclopaedia. However, as not all the nodes were present in the additional sources, this poses an inconsistency of the setting, which nevertheless does not have a major impact on the results as the main comparison is between the two online encyclopaedias.

### **3. The research claims**

As mentioned in the introduction, the research presents the reader with three main claims:

1. The more editorial control afforded by the system, the more formal the language.
2. People who use such systems, create the same kind of entries.
3. They suggest the introduction of the concept of sub-genres to resolve an apparent paradox in genre classification.

The study does give sufficient evidence and justification for the first two claims. The third point, however, presents certain inconsistencies which I will cover next.

At the beginning of the paper, as part of the **specializing** stage of the research, the authors introduce the theories of Yates and Orlikowski as a fundamental theoretical theme to their research. They draw upon Yates and Orlikowski's approach to communicative genres to develop their own problematic in relation to emergent digital communicative genres. This becomes an important element in the authors process of establishing a theoretical field. The authors succeed in presenting the problematic based on key antecedent work both in the theoretical and methodological approach. I do, however, question the accuracy of the way in which they have used Yates and Orlikowski's theories to justify some of their conclusions; specifically where they attest that the two repositories of knowledge belong to a single communicative genre.

It would perhaps have been useful had the authors explained, more clearly, Yates and Orlikowski's definition of genre, as this is a fundamental part of their construction of the problematic. Some of the language used in their introduction unnecessarily obscures the meaning of Yates and Orlikowski's thesis.

They take the following observations made by Yates and Orlikowski:

'human communicators, through their patterns of use grounded in recurring situations, shape the characteristics of communicative genres over time....' (Emigh W. & Herrig S. 2004, no page nos.)

'The medium with which a genre is conventionally associated ... may imbue communication in that genre with certain structural properties (formatting, stylistic features, etc.) (Emigh W. & Herrig S. 2004, no page nos.)

which they present as a justification for considering wikipedia and everything2 as belonging to the same communicative genre, as they affirm in their discussion:

“wikipedia and everything2 have functional and structural characteristics in common...these commonalities justify considering the two sites as exemplars of a single genre, according to the standard definition of a genre as recurrent communication characterized by common purpose, structures, and participant roles(cf. Yates & Orlikowski, 1992)” (Emigh W. & Herrig S. 2004, no page nos.)

In the localization of their research, the authors proceed guided by studies carried out by other academics in the classification of genre in other modes of human communication (such as those of Biber, 1988, 1995; Heylighen & Dewaele, 1990). The data analysis is concerned with the degree of formality encountered in the different entries; and is carried out using a range of methods, viz, corpus analysis, factor analysis, regression, and ANOVA. The purpose of these quantitative methods was to test for any differences in formality and to use these as indicators of genre distinction. The tests involved searches for words such as personal pronouns which are indicative of informal writing and suffixes of words such as -ment, -(t)ion, -ity, which are accepted by Biber etc. as indicators of more formal writing.

In addition to these quantitative methods, the authors also employ qualitative observations of the nodes. These are also concerned with the level of formality or informality encountered in the four sources of data. These qualitative observations form a large contribution to the overall paper (approximately two pages). This dual approach is applauded in many circles as a safe and robust research mechanism. The tendency to rely upon measurable data and achieving a statistically significant result can some times engender a false sense of security. If the researchers troubled themselves to make qualitative observations they may well find them to be at odds with the apparently significant findings, the converse is true, researchers concentrating solely on the qualitative might miss important measurable data which conflicts with apparent observational study. An efficient method of qualitative observation is to create an “elaborated description”. Brown and Dowling (1998, 83). This is a presentation of argument based upon observation of, in this instance, the node texts and discussion which should establish the validity of their interpretation.

The qualitative observations in this case establish that the wikipedia entries are “stylistically homogenous”, generally presented in a formalized structured setting,

whereas the everything2 entries “make use of informal and colloquial language” often including humorous content and having a variable structure.

The researchers satisfactorily demonstrate that the differences in the editorial mechanisms offered by the systems do in fact have an effect on the linguistic choices of the people who participate in the creation of content; they coherently present their findings supported by Yates and Orlikowski’s own thesis, “properties of the medium can shape genre conventions; in this case, editorial mechanisms shape characteristics of formality and variability” (Emigh W. & Herrig S. 2004, no page nos.).

They demonstrate that wikipedia, which uses an editorial system, allowing contributors to edit other people’s entries, making the linguistic style of the content greatly controllable by those who have the time and the interest to constantly monitor it (giving more editorial control), does present a higher degree of formality of language (to the extent of making it stylistically indistinguishable from an expert-created encyclopaedia). They provide evidence, by means of factor analysis and ANOVA, that establishes significant difference between wikipedia and everything2 in terms of formality. This evidence is insufficient, they say, to establish a genre difference between the two repositories.

They show that wikipedia users tend to create a similar kind of formalized entry and that everything2 generate their own stylistically (more informal) similar content, which is again determined by the differences in editorial structures of the systems.

The degree to which the researcher’s operationalization gives them sufficient grounds to classify wikipedia and everything2 as examples of a single communicative genre, is however, debatable.

Going back to Yates and Orlikowski’s definition of genre we see that they present it as:

“a distinctive type of communicative action characterized by a socially recognized communicative purpose...”

which is what Emigh and Herring have used to justify their classification of wikipedia and everything2 as being part of the same genre. However, a closer inspection of Yates and Orlikowski’s thesis makes evident that what they claim, their hypothesis, is that:

“given a socially recognized need to communicate (i.e. a purpose)” (which, according to Emigh and Herring, the people who participate in the creation of content in the online repositories do share) “individuals will typically express similar social motives, themes and topics in a communication **with similar physical and linguistic characteristics (i.e., form) that is they will communicate in a recognized genre.** Yates, J., & Orlikowski, W. J. (1992)

I think this failure to establish a genre difference is wrong. I believe they have provided evidence to show a difference and that the establishment of sub-genres, as they suggest is misleading. I believe they have fulfilled Yates and Orlikowski’s criteria for genre difference.

It is not true that Yates and Orlikowski will classify communicative genres only by grouping forms of communication characterized by common purpose and structures, but that they claim that human communication that has common purpose and structures will generally generate similar physical and linguistic characteristics, and that is what makes them part of the same genre, not the fact that they share a purpose or have functional and structural characteristics in common.

This seems to evidence a contradiction with the authors’ findings and consequently their generalizations, as it suggests a flaw in the relationship they claim to establish between their concept variables and indicator variables which constitutes an issue of validity.

As Brown and Dowling (1998, p.139) state, “the concepts involved in the problem should be developed to a degree which enables their empirical measurement or operationalization”. If Emigh and Herring take Yates and Orlikowski’s thesis as the central theoretical theme for their interrogation of emergent digital communicative genres, it would seem that classifying wikipedia and everything2 as exemplars of a single communicative genre is in contradiction with what Yates and Orlikowski state in their studies. It is true that the participants in the creation of content for the two encyclopaedias share a common purpose, and that the structure and participant roles share similarities, but what the authors are clearly demonstrating is that they are in fact stylistically and linguistically different, which means that they should not actually belong to the same communicative genre.

As stated above, the authors do acknowledge the linguistic differences of the two encyclopaedias, and present it as a classification paradox. However the research seems to demonstrate that there are not sufficient grounds to locate a wiki system and a bulletin board system such as everything2, under the same communicative genre, as their study demonstrates and evidences many more differences than similarities in relation to linguistic characteristics.

### **3. Conclusion**

The three findings claimed by the authors as mentioned in the introduction need evaluating, firstly the authors claim that the more editorial control afforded by the system the more formal is the language used, it seems as if the authors have demonstrated this conclusively, the quantitative analysis demonstrates a clear difference between the wikipedia and everything2 repositories. This is reinforced by the identified similarities between the wikipedia and traditional Columbia online encyclopaedia, both are formal stylised systems in contrast to the more colloquial entries found in the everything2 system.

The authors second conclusion that, people who use these systems create the same kind of entries is again supported by the evidence, the quantitative analysis mentioned above in addition to the qualitative observation show a more free-flowing and chatty style of entry with few formal structures in the everything2 repository. Similarly the wikipedia entries tend to be associated with a formal style of language and be more academically informative.

The third conclusion, however, that the study of the two repositories warrant the introduction of a sub-genre concept, is not supported, in my view, by the evidence. Genre distinction in digital communication must, by necessity follow an evolutionary line, brought about by usage and time. There must, by logical reasoning, be intermediate stages within this evolutionary process, and although I do not dismiss the authors concept of a sub-genre category in principle, in this particular instance I think they have shown sufficient evidence to classify wikipedia and everything2 into separate digital communicative genres.

This support for, and disagreement with the findings of the research necessitates the acceptance of the general pattern of the research, I think the general shape of the research is sound, but there are some flaws. The first point is the selection of the online repositories and their establishment as “encyclopaedias” no definitive reasons are given

for the selection of the two repositories although as previously mentioned they do form two prime examples of user contributed entries.

The authors established their central problematic upon the examination of the interaction between the patterns of use in human communication within a recurrent situation to shape a communicative genre, and the effect of the genre medium in establishing structural properties within a communication genre. This examination took the form of testing for genre difference between two online encyclopaedias, which formed the concept variable. The direct test chosen for this, the indicator variable, was formality of language used within the encyclopaedic nodes. The mechanism of the choice of the node sample shows a degree of subjectivity (the final choice of the 15 selected nodes), which otherwise stemmed from a realistically objective sample. I don't think this approach can completely underwrite the validity of the indicator variable findings. In other words the formality or informality of the nodes in the two repositories must be open to some question.

In general the research chooses an interesting research topic, and displays a coherent approach to resolving the problematic, there are, as mentioned one or two flaws, but these do not have a significant destabilizing impact on what is overall a well founded and thought provoking piece of research.

**Bibliography:**

Brown, A., & Dowling, P., (1998) *Doing Research/Reading Research: A Mode of Interrogation for Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Emigh, W., & Herring, S. C. (2004). Collaborative authoring on the Web: A genre analysis of online encyclopedias. *Proceedings of the Thirty-Eighth Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-38)*. Los Alamitos: IEEE Press.

Yates, J., & Orlikowski, W. J. (1992) Genres of organizational communication: A structural approach to studying communication and media. *Academy of Management Review*, 17 (2), 299-326.