

Interrogating Our Schemas for Discipline-as-Category

Gwendolynne Reid, gcreid@ncsu.edu
 North Carolina State University

Since disciplines are like genres in that they are learned cultural categories, the discussion about the disciplinary identity and status of rhetoric and composition might be informed by a look at the approaches to categories and classification that have been useful in genre studies. While many approaches to classification exist, two main approaches stand out as particularly relevant: (1) the closed or “container” approach derived from Plato and favored by biological taxonomists until Darwin and (2) the open or “family resemblance” approach derived from Wittgenstein and supported by research in cognitive psychology. The closed approach, based on essential features and pre-existing categories, produces a hierarchical system of closed categories with specific criteria determining membership and clear boundaries between containers; the open approach is organized around socially perceived similarities based in multiple shared traits, but no rules defining membership and no single feature necessarily shared by all members. This latter approach leads to open categories without predetermined boundaries and, in the context of genre studies, has been favored recently as affording a more dynamic view of genres in their social context (Bazerman & Prior 2005; C. R. Miller, in press). Closed categories, in trying to hammer criteria and boundaries down, tend to give us static taxonomies that do not reflect cultural variation and historical change, and therefore tend to be more limited in the insight they offer about the functions and consequences of categories such as disciplines. We suspect that the debate about disciplinarity suffers from an anxiety stemming from tensions between these two approaches.

As we engage with the issue of our own disciplinarity and where and how to set disciplinary boundaries (and potentially where and how to define our subdisciplines), it seems worth considering what model of categorization we are using and whether our model is likely to lead to the sorts of insights and results we desire. A closed system, for example, may lead to a focus on defining traits of disciplinary membership inclusion and exclusion that belie the diversity of disciplinary work and lead to counterproductive debates over what authentic membership consists of. An open system, on the other hand, may allow for greater diversity in what disciplinary membership and participation looks like. Putting category theory in conversation with discussions about disciplinarity, we specifically ask what an understanding of discipline as open, evolving, networked category might afford. Picking up Toulmin’s concept of “diffuse disciplines,” we conclude that this may be a better model of the sort of disciplinarity we might aspire to.

Closed Categories

- “Container”
- Shared, essential features
- Checklist of membership criteria
- Unified category
- Closed, known borders
- Static
- Clear boundaries with other categories
- Can lead to hierarchical system of categories
- Categories can appear “natural” (objectivist)

Open Categories

- “Family resemblance”
- Network of similarities
- No checklist of membership criteria
- Gradient categories (prototype logic)
- Open, permeable borders
- Evolving and dynamic
- Overlapping/networked with other categories

Talk Based On

Gwendolynne Reid and Carolyn R. Miller. “Classification and its Discontents: Making Peace with Blurred Boundaries, Open Categories, and Diffuse Disciplines.” In *Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity: Shadows of the Past, Issues of the Moment, and Prospects for the Future*. Eds. Rita Malenczyk, Susan Miller-Cochran, Elizabeth Wardle, and Kathleen Blake Yancey.

