Learning to write, reading to learn: Genre, knowledge and pedagogy in the Sydney School is an invaluable resource that sheds light on the theoretical foundations and historical development of the genre pedagogy of the Sydney School. The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter provides the reader with historical and theoretical roots of the pedagogy. The following three chapters focus on the three developmental phases of the Sydney school from the 1980s to 2000, and beyond. The last two chapters adopt a pedagogical perspective that equips the reader with a metalanguage focusing on the terminology in helping teachers to teach literacy and design literacy programs.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to genre, knowledge and pedagogy in the Sydney School. The term the “Sydney School” was coined by Green and Lee (1994) to refer to systemic functional linguistics (SFL) inspired genre-based pedagogy that originated in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney during the early 1980s. However, the work that began in Sydney had reached beyond Australia, i.e., Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas, by the time the term was coined. Rose and Martin define genre pedagogy of the Sydney School as ‘the teaching strategies that were designed to guide students to write the genres of schooling’ (p.2). The main inspiration for the Sydney School was Bernstein’s (1990; 2000) ideas that suggest ‘a visible pedagogy’ to reach a more equal distribution of knowledge in schools regardless of students’ socioeconomic and cultural background. Bernstein (1990) argues that children of middle and working class parents have different language codes. While the language code spoken in middle class families represents the dominant culture, and in turn, is valued in mainstream education systems, the code used by working class families is not valued in mainstream educational contexts. In Chapter 1, Rose and Martin accentuate how the genre pedagogy of the Sydney School is the embodiment of a visible pedagogy.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 recount the historical origins of the projects that have contributed to the development of genre pedagogy, and document how genre pedagogy was used in various literacy projects by the members of the Sydney School. Chapter 2 focuses on the Writing Project and the Language as Social Power Project where the focus was on Australian primary schools. In the early 1980s, Australian primary education was influenced by progressive education, also known as process writing/whole language programs, where the emphasis
shifted from the “teacher-centeredness” of traditional education to the “student-centeredness” of progressive education. The literacy education in Australian primary schools that implemented process writing/whole language programs was favouring middle class and upper class children, as they had access to the knowledge and genres required to complete the literacy tasks at schools. However, those programs were not helping the disadvantaged, that is, children from non-mainstream cultural backgrounds, working class, and Indigenous backgrounds. In order to close the gap, the teaching and learning cycle (TLC) was born to help the disadvantaged master the genres of the primary school (Rothery, 1994), incorporating the notions of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Chapter 3 delves into the second era of the Sydney School and contemplates the Write it Right/the Right to Write Project where the focus was on disadvantaged secondary schools with a considerable population of learners from immigrant and Indigenous backgrounds. Building on the previous Writing Project and Language as Social Power Project, the Write it Right/the Right to Write Project researched the genres in English, geography, history, mathematics in association with the Metropolitan East Disadvantaged Schools Program during the 1990s. While the previous era of the Sydney School concentrated on the basic genres of the primary school, Write it Right/the Right to Write Project focused on the genres of workplaces, media, and administration as well. Building on the previous chapters, Chapter 4 outlines the third era of the Sydney School’s genre pedagogy, which was manifested in Reading to Learn. The Reading to Learn Program extends genre pedagogy to incorporate reading and writing that aims at all levels of schools and beyond. The chapter outlines how the program was developed by David Rose with examples of the teaching method, drawing on TLC and focusing on curriculum planning and evaluation, reading and writing.

Following the previous chapters that deal with the history and the development of the Sydney School’s genre pedagogy, Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on a metalanguage that helps teachers to reach a better understanding of language and pedagogy. Chapter 5 is concerned with helping teachers build a metalanguage required to teach various subjects. The chapter is divided into two sections: the first section addressing a metalanguage for the meanings in grammar (words and structures); and the second striving for a metalanguage for the meanings in discourse (meanings beyond words and structures, including paragraphs and whole texts). Chapter 6, drawing on the previous chapter, summarises a metalanguage required for the teaching of reading and writing using genre pedagogy. The chapter particularly focuses on a curriculum genre and investigates the evaluation and selection of genres for a particular literacy program that would help teachers and program developers design literacy programs.

The most valuable feature of the book is that it accomplishes its aim through the organisation of chapters and placement of sections within each chapter. The first chapter explains the historical and pedagogical roots of genre pedagogy. This is followed by the history of the
Sydney School with a particular focus on the projects undertaken in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000 and beyond. The book then continues with the last two chapters where Rose and Martin provide the necessary metalanguage for teachers and program designers to use genre pedagogy effectively. The organisation of the chapters based on the details of each project and the metalanguage for language and pedagogy with an aim to empower the disadvantage and teachers is in association with the authors’ major objective in writing the book. According to Martin & Rose:

Our commitment and belief in the potential of education for achieving social justice flows not only from our ideals, but from our work and personal relations with those who live the consequences of education’s social biases, including families, their children and teachers. To imagine schools that give every child the same opportunities instead of reproducing the inequalities of the past, we have had to penetrate deep into their processes of transmission and acquisition, to give teachers the resources to resign their practice. (p.332)

Another valuable characteristic of the book is that the authors highlight the importance of TLC in creating a visible pedagogy to empower the disadvantaged. TLC consists of three stages: deconstruction, joint construction, and independent construction. The deconstruction stage is where the teachers provide the learners with a model text and break it down to its components at whole text, paragraph and clause levels. This stage is followed by the joint construction stage where the whole class constructs a text of the same genre under the supervision of the teacher. The joint construction stage is the key to the mastery of a particular genre, as underscored by Rose and Martin. The third stage, independent construction, is where students construct another text of the same genre on their own. Rose and Martin successfully outline how the TLC is crucial to the pedagogy and adapts Vygotsky’s (1978) notions of scaffolding and ZPD into literacy instruction.

The last but not the least significant characteristic of the book is that Rose and Martin reiterate the importance of grammatical metaphor in literacy development. Grammatical metaphor, which was suggested by Halliday (1985), is a fundamental characteristic of academia where information is frequently packed into nouns and the causal relations between clauses are construed within clauses. Not only does the mastery of effective use of grammatical metaphor improve students’ linguistic abilities, but it also develops their literacy skills. Rose and Martin emphasise this in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

There is one limitation of the book regarding the representation of grammatical metaphor. Rose and Martin provide a diagram that represents a match between meanings and wordings (p.118). However, ‘figure’ and ‘activity sequence’ in the discourse semantic stratum cannot be considered meanings, as they belong to the semantic rank scale (Halliday, 1998). Including ‘figure’ and ‘activity sequence’ along with ‘process’, ‘attitude’, and ‘people/things’
in the discourse semantics stratum can be confusing for practitioners. Furthermore, the figure on page 121 that represents a mismatch between meanings and wordings does not include all types of grammatical metaphor. In my opinion, diagrams that would theorise grammatical metaphor using meanings in relation to its types, such as experiential and logical, would be more helpful and practical for literacy practitioners (see Devrim, 2013).

Overall, the book is another excellent resource for anyone who would like to learn about the theoretical and historical roots of the Sydney School, its aims and achievements, and practical applications. As genre pedagogy of the Sydney School still remains a strong alternative to traditional and progressive pedagogies, literacy teachers as well as language teachers will benefit from Learning to write, reading to learn: Genre, knowledge and pedagogy in the Sydney School to a great extent.

REFERENCES