

Assigning Multiple Genres of Writing in an FSEM Course

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Writing Program

In my FSEM entitled *Literary Depictions of Madness*, writing will serve many purposes, and it will come in many forms. In weekly assignments, students will summarize the content of novels, memoirs, short stories, films, TV shows, and critical essays involving “mad” characters. In informal writing posted to Blackboard, they’ll consider what patterns exist (or not) in how the mad are depicted, and how those patterns align (or not) with arguments made about this issue by scholars. In short answer exams, they’ll demonstrate that they’ve learned this basic course content. In peer review, they’ll write to each other with feedback on their formal writing. And in a final paper, students will write for an outside group, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one of whose stated goals is the promotion of accurate depictions of the mentally ill.

Across all this reading and writing, I hope students will see changes in how madness has been depicted over the last sixty years, concurrent with major changes in treatment and treatment facilities for the mentally ill happening at the same time. I want to get students to the point of seeing that such things are within the realm of scholarly debate at the university level, and that writing is one of the chief ways in which these debates play out. Ultimately, once I’ve exposed students to a base amount of content and critical

thought on these issues, I hope students will have an understanding of how texts and films actually can and do shape public perception in meaningful ways. The final formal assignment for NAMI, which I’ll describe in more detail shortly, will give students a chance to perform that knowledge for a particular audience in a way that’s meaningful not only for what it says about what they’ve learned, but also for what it might help an outside organization do.

Writing Challenges

And so, in each of these many writing assignments (reading responses, short-answer essays, peer reviews, the paper for NAMI), a different genre is assumed, and with each of them come different expectations for what the audience and context are, what the purpose is. I face the challenge, then, of deciding how much time to dedicate to explicitly discussing these differences and their implications for students writing—especially given that I have ten short weeks, the self-imposed content obligations I’ve mentioned above, and a larger set of FSEM goals to fulfill. While it’s true that, as FSEM teachers, we’re free from the burden of covering a set amount of material, I see a possible tension between “teaching toward my passion” and teaching to make students better writers. I’m not sure that that

second goal necessarily always aligns with the goals of FSEM. Certainly, foregrounding genre differences for students in FSEM may in some ways contribute to broader goals, but there will likely be choices that we as teachers must make between, for example, class time devoted to writing-specific concerns and class time devoted to how some particular insane character relates to classic depictions of insanity. This might clearly be a false binary for *us*, but I can imagine some students pushing back (fairly, and distractingly) against too much emphasis on composition issues in a course advertised and promoted as being about something else.

Perhaps the biggest difference across all these assignments is audience. My students' final paper is for an outside organization, their peer reviews are for each other, their short answer exams are for me, and their posts to Blackboard are both for other students and for me. I look forward to exposing students to this range of writing, as I think it will both provide them a number of avenues to explore and understand the class material, and also expose them to a range of writing tasks likely to be asked of them throughout the course of their college careers. I do worry, though, as I mention above, at how asking students to negotiate so many different types of tasks might distract them from learning what I want them to learn about how the mad have been depicted.

The NAMI Assignment

Perhaps a closer look at the NAMI assignment will help concretize how this issue might play out in a single assignment. Here is a brief description of that prompt:

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is a group that advocates on behalf of those afflicted

with mental illness and their families. One of the stated missions of this group is to “aggressively respond to current events ensure accurate portrayals of mental illness.” For this paper, choose a current event related to mental illness. Find some substantial piece of writing or video footage that addresses that current event. Then, using what you’ve learned about how madness has been depicted in literature and film, make a case for how that writing/video portrays the mentally ill similarly to or differently from those texts we’ve encountered in class. In a 5-6-page paper, make specific connections between how mental illness is portrayed in certain films/novels you’ve encountered this quarter, and how it’s portrayed in the writing you choose for this assignment. Ultimately, your goal is to make an argument that connects media representations of a current event associated with the mentally ill to the literary depictions we’ve studied.

To give students the chance to perform well on this task, a fair amount of scaffolding might be necessary: Who, exactly, is NAMI? What sorts of efforts do they typically make to combat inaccurate portrayals of the mentally ill? What style is appropriate here that wasn’t appropriate in earlier assignments meant for me, or for other students? How is writing for NAMI different from writing for their high school English teacher? How should it be different from writing in a major course in English? These would all be valid concerns a student could have about this assignment, and yet, because there are so many other types of writing going on in the class, and because there is a fair amount of content to cover, I wonder how and how much to

foreground these kinds of audience-related questions explicitly with students.

So, then: given those many issues, why not just have them write a standard scholarly paper about literary depictions of madness? Or a popular article for a magazine like *The Atlantic*? What's the value of this kind of writing over and above these others?

Writing for Tweeners

The short answer is that, while those genres might seem straightforward to us, they're just as fraught for students in terms of audience and expectations as the above assignment. The long answer is that I hope that the NAMI assignment gives students a chance to write for a "tweener" audience, somewhere between the two kinds of mentioned above (scholarly, and something *Harper's*-like). In my experience, the problem with asking students to write as if for scholarly publication is that they know instinctively that this will never happen for them. This exercise, then, becomes a classic game of guessing what the professor wants, as students bring little to no prior understanding of what the larger goals of such a paper might be in a real context for academic. The results often approximate what Bartholomae has discussed in "Inventing the University," where students' genuine attempts at playing the academic game overwhelm their genuine thinking about the material of any given course.

In a strange way, the problem with getting students to write as if for *Harper's* or some such publication is similar. That is, while such magazines are perhaps more "relatable" to students, this is still as far-fetched a notion to them as is the idea that they'd be published in *Modern Language Quarterly*. Freshmen at DU, by and large, are not regular readers of magazines like *Harper's*, and so, while it

may seem somewhat natural for *us* to imagine what that writing would look like, I don't think it's actually so easy a move for students to make. And given the other goals of the course, I'm not sure that it makes sense to block out time to have them become familiar with the ins and outs of such a journal.

And so, by asking students to write for a "tweener" audience, I hope that they'll implicitly begin to see that what they're learning about—literary depictions of madness—can have very real consequences for some specific population. NAMI provides an exigency for the writing situation of the formal paper that goes beyond "showing my professor that I'm learning the tricks of the academic trade." Perhaps, through such an assignment, students will sense that the content they're studying might have application beyond the academic contexts in which they're studying it, and that the purpose of such writing (to articulate clear and accurate analysis of trends in literary texts) might nicely align with what English professors would want from majors—but in a way commensurate with the experience level of freshmen.

My hunch is that I won't have enough time to articulate the subtleties of NAMI-as-audience to students as fully as I'd want. There will likely be some hand-wringing from students about how to fulfill this kind of assignment, and also some consternation over having to, one more time, account for a new audience and a new purpose that are different from those audiences and purposes that they've had to write for earlier in the quarter. And I won't have time as I would in a writing-centered course to fully teach how to account for such shifts. But I hope that, by constantly exposing them to various assignments for various audiences and purposes throughout the quarter, I will have at least accustomed them to importance of thinking about those

things, no matter what the prompt. And in that way, I'll have exposed them to the content that's important for me to cover, at the same time that I've exposed them to something important about writing at the college level in general, as well.

