

Genre-Hopping: Teaching Writing Reflexivity in First Year Seminars

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To teach writing is to teach critical thinking – that is the worthy foundation of our discussions at this institute. In order to facilitate a writing intensive course, I spend a good portion of my time as a teacher, writing assignments and responding to student work. About three quarters of the time, my responses are directed towards the students' ideas and arguments as opposed to writing techniques. Since styles of writing vary from student to student, I find myself spending less time adjusting rhetoric and style in each student's writing. However, elements of style are equally revealing of the writer's depth of understanding of a certain subject. Often what distinguishes maturation of writing is the writer's grasp of interpretation rather than mastery of grammar and syntax. What is also significant to the development of writing skills is reflexivity about one's own writing process, that is, the ability to be critically aware of one's own writing. An awareness of one's writing strengths and weaknesses can focus one's writerly voice and make students more confident of expressing their critical thinking through their chosen genre. The challenge is to not only make writing an essential part of how a student's intellectual progress is evaluated, but to convince students of the value of

writing as an intellectual process in and of itself.

To that end, my course goals look a little different for a writing seminar than a topics course. The following ruminations may work best for the Freshman Seminars, although I imagine they could be adjusted for the Advanced Seminars.

Course Goals

- To develop critical thinking skills and generate theoretical discourse about subject.
- To develop a distinctive intellectual voice or perspective.
- To develop writing skills in a variety of genres that can be employed for critical analysis and interpretation.

My problem has been drafting the kind of writing assignment that requires the student to not only do some research or critical thinking to complete, but also some reflection on the process of writing that particular assignment as well. The goal of incorporating a self reflexive element is perhaps two-fold, in that it spares the professor some of the exclusive burden of pointing out individually to students what works stylistically and what doesn't, and also cultivates an editorial

reflex in the student writer. Throughout the June 2013, institute I have been thinking about how to craft a series of assignments that will help students focus their existing writing skills, while developing experience with others. For instance, students might be well-versed in churning out five-paragraph essays, which are sound and perfectly pithy, but lacking in perspective or critique. I would perhaps ask them to re-imagine the five-paragraph essay as a satirical take focusing on one aspect of the subject they wanted to critique. What this assignment does is introduce satire as a form of critical writing, while at the same time asking students to make a critical interpretation of the subject they are to satirize. Since one of my course goals is to explore various styles of writing, this strategy pairs critique with an appropriate genre.

Assigning writing in order to teach a particular method of analysis seldom retains the students' interest or skills. Instead, once students perceive that analysis can be formulaic, they feel encouraged to reproduce forms rather than engage in interpretation (which would lead to an appropriate form). One strategy is to respond to that impulse towards formula – I would assign a genre that is relatively fixed or identifiable in terms of its form. Using this structure as a base, I would ask the students to present an argument or critique in this style.

For example, I would ask them to write a manifesto to promote one side of a cultural debate – say, sex work. By using the inherent qualities of the manifesto, students will be able to express strong opinions that they have to put some thought and consideration into. It is often too easy for students to take the softer route of indecision and relativism at the expense of critical engagement. Requiring them to adhere to the specific parameters of a particular style or genre might give them the freedom to experiment with

ideas without being hindered or inhibited by (a lack of) form.

Genre-hopping

Genre-hopping is one such method of developing content and voice through a fixity of form. While it may be noted that writing strictly within genres such as satire, propaganda, argument, formal request, or plea, encourages a blind reproduction of formulaic writing, I argue that the fixing the parameters of a particular form allows students to focus less on aesthetics and more on content. This is not to say that style and improvisation in writing are not valued, rather that at the freshman level, the focus should be on cultivating scholarly thinking in addition to mastering a particular style of writing. By limiting the field of form, students are encouraged to use familiar styles of writing to explore the directions their critical voice can take.

For instance, I may ask students to write a letter to their congressman commending or vilifying them on their position on immigration rights. Here I am limiting the form of the letter by suggesting they 1) write a direct address to a particular individual, 2) adopt one of two positions congratulating or denouncing a political issue, 3) offer reasoning for the congratulations or denouncement. What this kind of assignment will hopefully accomplish is 1) recall established writing skills, 2) force students to choose a critical position (without succumbing to a relativist cop-out), and 3) process their choices introspectively. So, while students gain confidence from familiarity with a writing convention, they can be pushed harder to question and develop their critical stance.

From a professor's point of view, evaluating a letter offers the opportunity to address inconsistencies in voice, tone,

credibility, persuasive argumentation, etc rather than on basic writing issues such as sentence construction, passive voice, word choice, syntax, etc, which no doubt strengthen writing, but only address issues with the writing and not the content. By taking the focus off strictly writing issues as the basis for success, students may find that they automatically develop better writing styles based on how reflexive they are about the content they include. The more invested students are in the content of their writing as it pertains to them, the more care they will take to present their perspectives in a compelling and ultimately more readable form.

For students to become aware of their critical voice, it is imperative to teach self-reflexivity and self-evaluation as a crucial component of writing. The ability of the students to edit and evaluate their own writing results in the two-fold pedagogical triumph that I discussed earlier – that is, to place the burden of justification (of a grade or a perspective) on the student writer, and also to cultivate the student writer’s own editorial reflexes. By asking students to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their writing invokes their own agency in determining their successes or shortcomings in the course. Of course, much of student energy is focused on getting the grade, but when students farm out the potential for success (a good grade) onto their professors, the tendency is for them to resent or argue over a grade rather than trying to understand whether the grade was deserved or not. By requiring students to evaluate their own work, some of the burden of justification is placed on the students, hopefully attuning them to the challenge, as it stands, of anticipating of external reviews and responding to them during the process of writing.

Half the battle is generating interest in the process of writing something. Students must see themselves as writers

already, then recognizing what kind they are, and playing to those strengths or strengthening the weaknesses. In order to make the process of writing as alluring as the subject matter, I am proposing the following strategy for designing writing assignments. It looks something like a survey course of both subject matter and writing styles. As I said before, this would work best for a First Year Seminar since the skills we are developing are basic academic skills that will benefit students throughout their college careers.

Designing Assignments

The following discussion takes my upcoming FSEM on “Public Cultures” as the context for assignments.

Survey of Genres: Each week, students will be required to write a short assignment of about two pages in a prescribed style. Depending on the course content for the week, students will be asked to summarize the scholarly theses, positions, arguments, and contradictory perspectives they read about and encounter, in a particular style. A request, a plea, a complaint, a manifesto, a declaration, a guilt trip, an announcement, obituary, and a joke are some of genres we might explore.

For instance, if we are reading and discussing public protests one week, I may ask students to write a social media announcement inviting people to join in a protest they wish to mount. This is a task in persuasion and raising critical awareness that places the onus of forming a justifiable opinion on the student, rather than reproducing an opinion they have encountered in the readings (as fostered by writing prompts such as “Do you agree or disagree with the author’s argument? Why or why not?). Students are also held accountable by their potential audiences, which would be a varied public and not just their professor.

Another assignment might look like this. If during one week, we are learning about the purposes and socio-cultural outcomes of public parades, I may ask students to complete the following writing assignment:

- You have been selected to represent your student club, organization, or committee at the planning session for Denver's 4th of July parade. Draft a persuasive speech of about 5mins (two pages, double spaced) convincing the planning committee to include your organization in the parade. Address the following issues in your speech:
 - Why is it important for your organization to be represented at a city-wide event?
 - What is the significance of marching in the parade, as opposed to setting up a stall or demonstration along the parade route?
 - How will including your organization in the parade help the culture of Denver as a city?

Writing Reflexivity

Students will also be required to keep a writing journal, in which they will respond briefly to their experience with every weekly assignment. They should address such questions as: What did you like about this assignment, genre, and critical experience? What does that tell you about the kind of writer/thinker you are?

The purpose of maintaining this journal is to allow students to reflect on why they enjoyed a particular writing task, or why they disliked it. The intent is not to evaluate students' expertise in each genre, rather to foster reflexivity in students

about their scholarly choices. Answering questions about the level of pleasure or pain in completing an assignment may well demonstrate for the students how to process their emotions, academic anxieties, or discomfort while dealing with particular form and content. Suppose that a student reflects that he or she disliked writing a concert advertisement for an indie band. The reasons they give for disliking the assignment may well reveal that the task was distasteful to them not because of the form, but because the form did not match the content (writing a commercial advertisement for a band that shuns commercialism). Reflecting on the process of writing this advertisement may actually reveal for the student where their criticism lies (not of the form, but of the interplay between form and content), allowing them to get further in tune with their own critical voice and perspectives.

Setting up Future Writing Success

A larger final project may take the form of a formal scholarly research. By saving this important assignment for last, I am hoping to capitalize on the quarter-long critical explorations students have been engaging in. In trying out different styles within which to locate their critical skills, students will hopefully enter this final assignment with some measure of confidence about their scholarly and writerly capabilities – identifying a topic, locating the ongoing conversations around it, and suggesting ways of intervening in a conversation. This assignment does what the previous ones do not – teach a particular genre of writing. Having explored the many other styles of writing, students will be able to understand the limits (and possibilities) of scholarly writing, and what distinguishes good scholarly writing from other types of “good writing.” Again, this will not be a research project, but rather an exercise

establishing a genre of writing, by framing a research topic, problem, or argument.

As I mentioned in earlier sections, this format of teaching reflexive writing praxis through genre-hopping was designed primarily with the First Year Seminar in mind. This survey style of writing pedagogy works best in introductory college curriculum as its major goal is to help students transition from viewing high school training in genre adeptness as proficient writing to viewing genre-specific writing as sites of possibility for rich and complex critical thinking. This course design anticipates the challenges students will face in writing for

other college courses, and attempts to set up writing as a favorable and exciting hermeneutic tool. When students re-envision themselves as writers as well as students, they place different stakes in their (re)production of knowledge and enter into the academic milieu with more agency and investment. And finally, this first year course design will hopefully set up a foundation for students to not only be proficient and comfortable in at least a couple of chosen styles of writing by the time they take the Advanced Writing Seminar, but also grow to be inquisitive, adventurous, and rigorously engaged in their studies through writing praxis.

