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Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy,
Volume 25, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2014, pp. 59-70 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tnf.2014.0004>

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EMBRACING RESISTANCE

Teaching Rhetorical Genre Theory in a Christian College

Many of our claims in composition studies have developed from postmodern theories of knowledge that often trouble those who argue from a Christian perspective.

— LIZABETH RAND, “Enacting Faith”

Compositionists cannot be afraid to teach students to express their own values and ideas in the rhetoric of academic, cultural, or disciplinary discourse and to resist the unthinking acceptance of the values these discourses promote.

— JOE MARSHALL HARDIN, *Opening Spaces*

After completing my graduate work at a large urban, state university in the Northwest, I experienced culture shock when I took a job teaching writing at Cedarville University, a small, private, conservative, Christian university in the Midwest.¹ Although I am an Evangelical Protestant myself, and grew up in a conservative church, I had never taught students who were outwardly religious and displayed and discussed that in class. Religious identity was surely important to many of my students at the public university, but it was not openly discussed. At Cedarville, however, religious discussions are not just encouraged, but mandatory. Professors are required to integrate faith and learning in all of their classes: the students’ course evaluations assess them on their ability to do so, and they are required to write a formal research paper on their integration practices. When I began teaching at Cedarville, I was surprised that the theories that my pedagogical practice was based on—theories that were readily accepted, at least outwardly, by my students at the public university—were challenged by my Christian students. Although, as most composition teachers have experienced, “to teach composition is to encounter resistance on multiple levels, arising in response to a multiplicity of variables” as Karen Kopelson notes (116), the particular kind of resistance I felt from students at the Christian university was new to me. In this article, I add my voice to the ongoing conversation about resistance in composition, and discuss my experience moving from a secular institution to teaching at a conservative, evangelical Christian university and the resistance students exhibited in my composition classes. I will then discuss how I attempted to work with rather than against this resistance, by integrating Christian faith

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¹ When I say “Christian,” I am referring to conservative, evangelical, Protestant Christians in North America, and do not mean to imply that the beliefs discussed here are universally accepted by all Christians.

perspectives with rhetorical genre theory. I have found that by embracing the resistant nature of Christian identity and encouraging evangelical students to think critically about this resistance, writing instructors can help their evangelical students see where they fit within the wider academic community and how they might positively engage with communities that hold to ideologies with which these students may disagree.²

2 In general I would not say that the goal of composition should necessarily be to encourage dissent, and I am not arguing for resistance pedagogies *per se*.

Resistance Pedagogy and Composition

A long history of scholarship in composition studies (and English studies more generally) investigates how to teach with and against student resistance (Hurlbert and Blitz, Greenbaum, Kopelson among others). Scholars such as Gerald Graff have argued that rather than running from conflict in the classroom, we should attempt to turn conflicts into positive and productive educational moments. Others argue for critical pedagogies that explicitly teach students strategies of resistance to cultural ideologies. For example, Joe Marshall Hardin defines resistance pedagogy as a “critical activity that promotes resistance to the unconscious reification of ideological values as they are encountered in text” (5), and argues that “teaching resistance as a part of writing instruction is, in fact, an ethical and necessary activity” (5). Similarly, Geoffrey Chase distinguishes between resistance and oppositional behavior, which he defines as moments when students fail to engage in activities that would enable them to learn what we are teaching them. He argues that oppositional behavior is often an unconscious failure to learn, and is seen in students “who claim that they cannot, or do not want, to learn how to write following certain conventions” (15). Resistance, on the other hand, is performed consciously and is often, according to Henry Giroux, closely tied to “moral and political indignation” (*Theory and Resistance* 107). Chase, following Giroux who argues for the “pedagogical value of resistance” (“Theories of Reproduction” 292), finds resistance to be an “extremely valuable behavior because in it we see more clearly the links between the social processes of a particular discourse community and the larger processes which characterize our culture. Moreover, it is a behavior that actively works against the dominant ideology” (15). Resistance, as Chase explains, is often misrepresented as a negative behavior when, in actuality, it signifies students’ refusal to accept ideologies with which they disagree. Therefore, although oppositional behavior may need to be countered, resistance can be used to help students think critically about the subject positions they hold and the values and beliefs on which those subject positions are based.

One population of students that is often discussed in investigations of resistance is evangelical Christians (Hashimoto, Vander Lie and Kyburz, Coley, Neumann). In *Teaching as Believing: Faith in the University*, Chris Anderson argues that “what defines Christianity is resistance” (186). Because evangelical Christian beliefs are radically incompatible with much of the ideology prevalent in contemporary culture, Christians spend much

of their lives resisting (and at the same time attempting to influence) culture. As Chris Anderson argues, one of “the aims of Christianity...is to exist in creative opposition to power” (8). For example, in Ephesians 6:11–17, the apostle Paul compares the Christian life experience to a battle in which they must take up weapons of war. Throughout the Scriptures there are references to resistance, the need for Christians to guard their hearts and minds to keep from being deceived and falling into false beliefs.³ Although composition scholarship has focused, in most cases, on how to counter the resistance Christian students often exhibit (Goodburn, Downs, among others), Lizabeth Rand argues that appealing to the transgressive nature of Christian subjectivity might help these students think more critically about their faith. She maintains that if writing instructors start from the assumption that Christian discourse reflects a critically resistant position, they “can call upon a richer understanding of the language of Christian faith to engage students in further conversation about the complex negotiations of selfhood that they undergo” (361). To facilitate this kind of complexity, instructors should ask their Christian students to explain how their resistance to cultural ideologies has influenced their lives and what responses they get from people outside of their Christian communities. Here, I discuss the ways in which rhetorical genre theory can encourage evangelical Christian students to engage in the kinds of complex conversations about cultural and ideological resistance that Rand suggests, and thus more critically participate within their chosen disciplines. I will begin with a discussion of the kinds of resistance my Christian students exhibited. I go on to explore how rhetorical genre theory can help students think critically about their resistance, and how instructors can encourage students to engage with their chosen disciplines even when those disciplines hold to ideologies with which these students disagree.

Critical Resistance through Rhetorical Genre Theory

In my writing classes, I base my pedagogical approach on the principles of Rhetorical Genre Theory (RGT).⁴ In RGT, genres are not seen as merely classifications of text types; they are not just “containers” for knowledge that is produced independently of those genres. RGT scholars see knowledge as arising out of the rhetorical situation and shaping and being shaped by the genres used to present it.⁵ Therefore, knowledge is never objective because it is always dependent on the genres used to convey it. Anis Bawarshi, for example, in *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*, argues that genres are flexible and changeable, based on the knowledge they are conveying and the rhetorical situation to which they are responding. Knowledge is thus constructed through the rhetorical interactions of people within situations and through the use of certain genres appropriate to those situations. For example, the information presented in a eulogy would not come across in the same way if it was presented in song, and may not

3 This battle metaphor has been taken up in contemporary Christian discourses such as the “warriors for Christ” discourse that is found on the websites of multiple different Christian ministries: www.warriorsforchrist.net, www.christswarriors.org, www.warriorsforchrist-online.org, www.warriors-for-christ.com, etc.

4 The texts discussed here (Bawarshi, Fish, Devitt, and Johns) are all text that my students read and so the discussion here is intended to exemplify what I hope my students will gain from their reading of these texts.

5 I am basing my use of the term “rhetorical situation” on Lloyd Bitzer who defines the phrase as any situation in which rhetoric is used to serve some purpose for the writer or speaker.

even be recognized as a eulogy by the audience members if thus presented. This understanding of genres is based on Carolyn Miller's foundational definition of genre as a "typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations" (159). As rhetorical situations recur, responses to them are temporarily stabilized as genres which, in turn, constrain future responses to the same situation. Rather than types of texts, defined by their formal features, genres are defined by the functions that they perform for specific communities of readers and writers at specific historical moments. Genres are therefore products of communities of users who have, over time, agreed to produce those genres in certain ways. This conceptualization allows us to see writing as a product of community consensus rather than judging it by absolute standards of good and right. "Correct" writing is only correct for a particular community at a particular point in time because every community "owns" different genres, and those genres change over time.

In using Bawarshi's text in my writing classes at both the public university and the Christian university, my goal has been to help students understand the way that writing works throughout the university, and to use the concepts of genre theory to figure out the appropriate writing conventions for different rhetorical situations they might encounter in their university experience. At the Christian university, however, students resisted this approach. Their push-back focused on the social and relative nature of knowledge and truth of genre theory and sparked a heated discussion of epistemology, and the nature of T/truth, reality, and knowledge.

These discussions continued when students read Stanley Fish's "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One." I assign this text in my classes to help students understand the ways that genres contribute to interpretation. Whereas Bawarshi focuses on the social nature of writing, Fish argues for the social nature of textual interpretation, arguing that "meanings are the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of independent readers, but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and the texts those activities produce" (322). Fish relays a teaching experience in which he told his religious poetry class that a list of names was a poem and then set them to work interpreting the "poem." As he explains, when the students "were aware that it was poetry they were seeing, they began to look with poetry-seeing eyes, that is, with eyes that saw everything in relation to the properties they knew poems to possess" (330). The students came up with an elaborate interpretation of the religious themes of the poem, causing Fish to conclude that "interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (327). I want the students to understand from this that the genre name, "poem," prompted a particular type of interpretation, and that in their own writing, they therefore need to be deliberate when choosing the genres in which they write, and to make sure that they use genres in ways that help their readers interpret their work in ways they intend. However, my

Christian students took the discussion of this text in a very different direction than the students had at the secular university.

Fish uses his classroom example as evidence that texts do not have inherent meaning, but gain meaning only through their interpretation by a community of readers who collectively agree on that interpretation. For Fish, there is no “true” meaning or “correct” interpretation but only consensus. He does not mean that each individual is free to interpret texts however she or he wants, however. Rather, Fish distinguishes between individual or universal beliefs and the social activity of interpretation based on community conventions. These were the points that my Christian students wanted to discuss. The social nature of interpretation Fish assumed seemed to them to discount any belief in an objective reality or an Absolute Truth, and so was difficult for them to accept. They had been taught to be skeptical of anything that implies a plurality of meaning, or the possibility of multiple truths/realities, or that Truth is not Absolute and universal. Because they believe that relativism is counter to the practices, beliefs, and values of Christianity, many of the Christians at my university dismiss it altogether.

The students’ resistance to Fish seemed to be *oppositional* (as defined by Chase) because they did not understand his ideas. Therefore, my first goal when encountering their opposition was to try to help students understand that there are different kinds of truth, and to help them see that a belief in cultural truths, consensus, and other kinds of “temporary truths” does not discount their belief in Absolute Truth. To help students understand the different kinds of truth, I used simple examples of social construction. For example, I wrote on the board, “men should not wear skirts/dresses,” and asked students if they believed this statement was true. After they agreed it was, I pointed out that men in Scotland have historically worn kilts which are just like skirts. I also mentioned that in the Biblical-era, Middle Eastern men wore what we would now call dresses. This simple example helped students to see that there are things that we agree to be “true,” that are what I call “temporary truths” (following Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*). The point I was trying to get students to understand was that just because something advocates for multiple truths/realities, it can coexist with their belief in an Absolute Truth. This realization led students to think about writing in more complex ways. They began to see that “good” writing is a temporary truth, only “good” for one community, one situation, at one period in time. For example, one student paper argued that “writing is not universal, but subjective and flexible because different discourse communities use different genres [and] the conventions of writing constantly change depending on the context.” Students learned that because each community has different standards of the good and the right when it comes to writing, they would need to learn to be flexible with their writing in order to figure out what counts as good writing in each new community for which they would need to write.

As we continued to work through Fish's idea of interpretive communities, I asked students how they might think about interpretive communities in light of their belief in an objective truth. If texts have no inherent meaning and meaning only comes through interpretation, what if the text we are talking about is the Bible? My students believe there is an inherent meaning in the Bible, but they could see how community interpretation has created meanings out of the text that have been believed by millions of people, such as those that led to the Crusades, or the witch trials, or the racist and sexist beliefs held by some Christians today. Students often answered that those interpretations are just wrong, and I pushed them to think about the fact that those interpretations were believed to be Absolutely True by those people for that point in time. Although I didn't want to dissuade them from believing that the Bible is Absolutely True, I did want my Christian students to think critically about that belief and to understand that all interpretation depends on community consensus rather than absolute fact.

About three weeks into the course, after reading Bawarshi, Fish, and others and learning about the social nature of textual production and interpretation, students write a short (3-4 page) extended definition of the term "genre." Although they had been resistant up to this time, by the point of writing this paper, most of them seemed to have come to a more nuanced understanding of genres as evidenced by their discussions in this paper. My next goal was to have students think about their own writing and use the theories discussed in class to critically participate within their chosen disciplines through the use of genre analysis and critique. However, considering the critically resistant stance that my students had so far been exhibiting, I embraced the idea of resistance throughout the rest of the class, and the rhetorical genre theory that I had already been using proved to be an excellent match for this critically resistant pedagogical approach.

The "social turn" in composition, according to Bawarshi, "recognizes that there is more at work on the text than the writer's seemingly autonomous cognition; there are also various social forces that constitute the scene of production within which the writer's cognition as well as his or her text are situated and shaped" (5). One major "social force" that influences genre use is community ideology. Genres are ideological formations, sites where "ideology is naturalized and realized in specific social actions, relations, and subjectivities," as Bawarshi notes (7-8). A community's ideology is articulated through the genres they use and the ways those genres have developed over time. For example, the scientific community typically believes in the objective nature of knowledge: knowledge is observable and it is the job of the scientist to find and record that knowledge as objectively as possible. This belief informs the genre of the scientific research article, with its use of passive voice verbs (it doesn't matter who conducted the experiment or from what perspective; the results would be the same no matter who repeats it), its heavy reliance on experimental and quantitative data, and its strong emphasis on objectivity

and repeatability. On the other hand, those in the humanities have generally placed more emphasis on perspective: it matters who is speaking and what perspective the writer takes. Therefore, writers in humanities tend to rely on argument genres, use active voice verbs and value qualitative data because they believe it is important to show the experiences and perspectives of different people.

Because genres reflect the ideology of the community, genre theorists emphasize the need to analyze and critique genres so that writers understand the ideological assumptions behind the genres in which they write. As Amy Devitt argues, critical awareness of genres can help writers more consciously accept or resist the ideologies of the genres they are asked to write in, and thus can help counter the possible ideological effects of those genre (192). If writers are not aware of the ideologies expressed in the genres they use, they may inadvertently articulate ideologies with which they disagree. As Bawarshi explains, within “larger spheres of language and activity, writers negotiate multiple, sometimes conflicting genres, relations, and subjectivities, so that there is always the potential...for generic resistance and hybridization.... The articulation of genre is also the possibility of its transformation” (11). Therefore, it is important for students to learn to investigate the ideological assumptions behind the genres they write so that they can resist or transform those with assumptions that go against their beliefs, whether or not those beliefs are religious.

However, how could genre analysis help my students discuss their writing in relation to their sense that their Christian identity was transgressive? In their genre analysis, I asked students to “figure out the kinds of professional writing that are done within [their] major[s] and how that writing is used: what genres are important, what is the purpose of those genres, why they are written the way they are” (assignment prompt). Students collected three examples of a professional genre used in their chosen major or profession, and “examine in depth how the genre as a whole functions within its rhetorical situation.” They were to explain the strategies and tactics of the genre they chose, its characteristics, its purpose, how it works, why it works, to whom it is addressed, and in what context it works. This genre analysis allowed students to investigate the requirements for writing as a member of the professional community that they intend to join. Students had to explain how the expectations for a particular document corresponded with what they know about the context that informed the production of the genre and how the features of the genre help the genre achieve its overall purpose. Students also explained what participants have to know or believe in order to understand or participate in the genre and “what values beliefs, goals, and assumptions are revealed through the genre’s patterns.”⁶ Students thereby investigated the ideologies behind these genres, and thought about the social nature of writing and the specifics of the ways writing works within their chosen discipline. This work was the first step towards getting them to think more critically about their beliefs and how they could enact those beliefs in all areas of their lives.

6 Some of these questions are from Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi’s composition textbook *Scene of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres*.

This assignment also gave them access to the ideological assumptions behind the genres they would need to write so that they could push back against those assumptions if they felt they needed to.

Students collected genres such as scientific research reports, engineering project reports, nursing charts, and social work case studies. Students then discussed how these documents are written, why they are written the way they are, and what goals these documents help the community to fulfill. Students had varying degrees of success in thinking through how the ideology of the community is portrayed through these genres. Some students noticed how scientific research reports articulate the belief in the scientific method as the best way to discover the truths of the universe; other students discussed the belief in the value of objectivity/neutrality that nursing charts and social work case studies reflect. Students came to see both the ways writing is used in the different academic disciplines, and that genres are ideological configurations not just neutral containers of the knowledge they are conveying. They were thus prepared to discuss what they should do if the genres they want to use expound ideologies they disagree with.

To consider how they enact their beliefs through writing, and how they productively resist disciplinary ideologies with which they might disagree, students read texts such as Richard Edlin's "Keeping the Faith: The Christian Scholar in the Academy in a Postmodern World," a scholar who considers how people of religious faith can work within disciplines that rely on secular theories. Edlin argues that there is no such thing as neutrality, that everyone has faith whether or not they are religious. Therefore, Christianity should be accepted in the academy just as all other subject positions are accepted. Students read this text alongside texts by scholars who discuss problems associated with Christians in higher education, such as Sharon Crowley who argues that Christians are intolerant and dogmatic and can't argue logically, and therefore cannot participate effectively in the academic disciplines ("Tolerance and the Christian Right"). Student responses to these articles included such argument as, "Christian beliefs should be valued and considered just as other beliefs," "Christianity has merit and can be highly beneficial to academics," and "Christian scholar have the ability to think and reason critically."

Students next considered their own disciplines, the theories on which those disciplines are based, and how they could effectively participate in those disciplines. We discussed how they might respond to ideologies they disagree with, and especially with regard to their writing. If a genre expresses an ideology that they disagree with, then the common sense reaction would be to not use that genre, or try to change it. For example, if writers believe that objectivity does not exist and want to be honest about that, they might try to work against the genre of the scientific research report by adding narratives of the experience of the researcher. This is how genres eventually become transformed. However, there can also be consequences for that: they might not be taken seriously within their disciplines; they might not get their work published; they

might have a hard time convincing people that what they say is true. Reading Ann Johns' "Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice: Membership, Conflict, and Diversity," which emphasizes that it is often only the senior members of a professional community that are given the freedom to resist genre conventions and ideological views in their writing, led students to discuss how to resist without being removed from the community, being seen as "rebellious" (as Johns discusses), and other consequences that may occur because of resistance. For example, the medical students discussed the consequences of refusing to perform abortions. Although technically there are laws that protect medical staff in these situations, students discussed several news stories they had read about nurses who had been fired or reprimanded for this refusal. Through all of this discussion, students gained what composition scholars call "genre awareness": they thought about the purposes and ideological assumptions behind the genres they are asked to write; they analyze and critique those genres, and think about how to manipulate those genres to more effectively reach their rhetorical purposes without giving in to assumptions with which they disagree.

In the course's final major paper, students developed their earlier analysis and critique of writing in their disciplines to discover how they might actively resist the specific ideologies and assumptions held within those disciplines and the possible consequences of that resistance. They also wrote about how they might integrate their faith into the work of their disciplines and what the reaction to that integration might be. For example, my nursing students often focused on the medical community's commitment to patient autonomy, the idea that patients have the right to decide for themselves the medical treatments they will or will not have. Students wrote about ways that belief might be expressed through genres such as consent forms. Christian students might feel they need to resist this position in cases such as abortion or right-to-die issues. Students also discussed some of the consequences of that resistance, such as discrimination and being looked down upon by their colleagues.

In general, students found many more ways in which their faith connected to the work of their disciplines than areas in which they might need to resist. They found that their faith could inform their work within their chosen fields. The nursing students, for example, wrote about how the mission to "do no harm," aligned with Christian values of kindness, compassion, and helping those in need. Although my science students wrote about their fundamental disagreements with secular scientists about the origins of life, they noted their agreement with their disciplines that knowledge is objective and were comfortable with the ways that this belief is expressed in scientific research articles. This culminating assignment drew on student resistance to engage students with the ideas of genre, ideology, disciplinary writing, and resistance, and to continue to examine the ways that their faith both varied from and connected to the work of those disciplines. For this assignment, one student,

looking at the education field, argued that “members of communities should seek to understand their profession and the ideologies that the community holds to. Further, members should learn which ideologies they must resist in order to stay true to their own personal beliefs and learn what their beliefs can contribute to their profession.” She went on to argue that much of the education system is based on the educational theory of behaviorism which is, in many ways, counter to Christian beliefs in free will and choice, and how she might resist that theory in her own teaching.

In my course, I wanted my students to see how their faith informs everything they do. I wanted them to make conscious decisions about the genres they write in and the disciplines they are attempting to enter. I wanted them to interrogate those genres and disciplines and have the courage to resist the ideologies that they believe are antithetical to their Christian beliefs. And yet I also wanted them to positively engage and understand how they fit within their chosen disciplines. Because of the social nature of writing and the relationship between genres, ideology, and community consensus, learning to write for a particular community is a process much more tied to faith than students understand when first coming to my course. Because Christianity can be a critically resistant stance, embracing this sense of resistance can allow Christian students to express this resistance to create critical dialogue between student peers and teachers. Many professors have the explicit goal of making their classes safe spaces where students are not afraid to express their opinions, and yet many Christian students in secular institutions still feel that they need to check their religious identity at the door for fear of judgment and ridicule. In this paper, I have offered rhetorical genre theory as one way in which instructors can allow for religious articulations of resistance in writing classes (and other classes that require writing), and so give space for expressions of faith identity in the classroom.

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