SECTION TWO

Genre Awareness Contributes to Student Writing Development

The field of writing studies has given considerable attention to genre in the past few decades. Spurred by Carolyn Miller’s theorization of genre as a communicative act rather than merely a formalist term, scholars including Charles Bazerman, Anis Bawarshi, Amy Devitt, and David Russell, among many others, have contributed to the ongoing discussions of genre as social action. Scholars such as these have described genres as habitual responses to specific rhetorical contexts. The subfield of rhetorical genre studies emerged as these discussions continued, delineating the ways that social, cultural, institutional, and disciplinary forces shape writing into recognizable forms that are stabilized by repetitive social actions. With the recognition of genre as social action has come attention to the ways genres are both shapers of and shaped by those who use them. A genre tells us what members of its discourse community expect us to know and do, whether filling out a form or giving an academic paper, and we in turn can conform to or push against the genre, adding categories to the form or challenging academic expectations. Although the implications of this mutual process of shaping have been explored in multiple contexts, relatively little attention has been given to the specific ways students participate in this process.

Disciplinary forces have been given special attention in discussions of genre as social action, usually by crediting the discourse community of a discipline with shaping its genres. Bazerman, for example, explains how scientific practices interacted with writing in creating the article form common in scientific journals. In his telling, the recurring pattern of introduction, methods, results, and discussion in scientific research shaped the format for scientific articles. Ken Hyland and Carmen Sancho Guinda point to citation practices—the use of parentheses, footnotes, or attribution—as another indication of the shaping force of disciplines on genres, arguing that each practice reflects disciplinary values. At the same time, scholars such
as Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki have emphasized that disciplinary knowledge-making is an ongoing process that responds to changing norms and technologies.

The concept of genre has also figured prominently in discussions of transfer, particularly the extent to which writing knowledge gained in a first-year composition class transfers to successful writing in other academic contexts. Amy Devitt, among others, suggests that such courses can foster genre awareness or a critical consciousness of the ideological effects of genre forms. Elizabeth Wardle, for example, employs the term “mutt genres” to argue for the futility of assuming that first-year writing courses can teach genres or even awareness of them and should instead focus student learning on writing about writing or general principles of writing. These discussions of transfer have decreased the emphasis on addressing disciplinary genres in first-year composition, or even attempting to address them.

With regard to writing development, however, most scholars hold that expertise in disciplinary genres is essential. Anne Beaufort, for instance, claims, “What writing expertise is ultimately concerned with is becoming engaged in a particular community of writers who dialogue across texts, argue, and build on each other’s work” (18). The conceptual model she offers embeds writing expertise in discourse community knowledge and includes subject matter knowledge among its features. Beaufort is not alone in describing a tight linkage between writing development and disciplinary expertise. Indeed, as Ryan McCarty notes in his chapter below, “The centrality of this conflation of [writing] development and [disciplinary] expertise can be found in some of the most important work of the discipline” (p. 114).

Scholars such as Mary Soliday, Chris Thaiss and Terri Zawacki, and Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz all argue for the importance of guiding students toward disciplinary expertise, toward understanding the content, methods, and epistemologies of a given area of inquiry to develop them into effective writers. The students in our study complicate these assumptions with both their actions and assumptions.

While students in our study did not entirely dismiss the importance of taking up the discourses of specific disciplines as part of their writerly development, they complicated this equation in two significant ways: they challenged the boundaries of disciplines, and they created their own categories for describing genres. Students challenged disciplinary boundaries as they created their own programs of study, combining majors and minors, selecting specific courses, and participating in extra-curricular activities. These challenges led to others as students drew on multiple fields and activities to develop ways of writing that they saw as important to their academic success as well as to their future selves. In creating their own categories for genres, they focused on the purposes the given piece of writing was designed to fill, and they also noted how it did or did not allow them to grow on their own terms.
Many students in our study did not see any one discipline as an area for exclusive focus. They declared various combinations of double majors or majors and minors, often to achieve goals they defined for themselves, and they did not necessarily seek to apprentice themselves to any one discipline. All of the writing minors, of course, majored in a field other than writing, and a significant majority of all participants (142 of the original 183 who signed up for the study) had either a double major or a major and one or more minors. Of the 64 minors who remained in the study, 26 had either one major and two minors or double or triple majors and one minor. Among the 104 nonminors, all but 36 had some combination of double or triple majors or a single major with one or more minors. One reason many students put together combinations of majors and minors was because they saw the mixed perspective as more valuable, and they testified to that value in interviews where they recounted the various sources—majors, minors, specific courses, instructors, and multiple extracurricular experiences—that supported their growth as writers.

Even students who had a single major were likely to see other fields as central in their writerly development. Kris, for example, a student who appears in both Ryan McCarty’s and Anne Gere’s chapters, combined philosophy courses with her biology major because she found that philosophy gave her a way to think about and assess the science she was studying: “The philosophy course provided more of a contrast, I think more of a development, because it was a different form of writing. It also helped me reflect upon the way we write in science” (p. 122). Kris also participated in collaborations with physicists, and learned, among other things, how the standards for “proof” varied across the two fields: “From the physics standpoint, they’re like, ‘We’ve got this number here. The number is solved. The equation is set. We’re good.’ At least, that’s how we perceive their side. We’re like, ‘But the number is not of biological relevance unless we put it in this framework.’” As McCarty puts it, “For Kris, then, development as a writer certainly involves the goal of developing expertise in one disciplinary discourse. But her understanding of that development is distinctly not isolated to her discipline. Instead, she sees her disciplinary expertise developing in dialogue with her other writing experiences” (p. 122).

Jonah, another student McCarty discusses, also looked beyond his major to foster his writerly development, but rather than another academic discipline, he looked to multiple locations, including the extracurricular world of online gaming, to develop fluency and dexterity as a writer. Although he became competent in writing about science, he did not see that as his main goal. He wanted, instead, to develop a repertoire of writerly capacities so that he could, as he now does in his
role as a professional writer, respond effectively in a variety of rhetorical contexts. As McCarty says, “For Jonah, like many students, the ability to write with dexterity across a range of situations is more valuable than disciplinary expertise” (p. 128).

Other students put two majors or a major and minor together for specific purposes. Stephanie, a student who appears in Anne Gere’s chapter, majored in both math and English, and explained that the combination of the two made her a better student in both. The precision of math enhanced her focus and organizational skills in English, and the interpretive aspects of reading literature led her to seek more complex explanations in math. With these and other configurations of majors, minors, and courses, many students in this study demonstrated the benefits of moving beyond discipline-based expertise and constructed their own versions of writerly development.

Given the very close connection between disciplines and genres, it is not surprising that students’ challenge to disciplinary boundaries extended to academic genres. Since genres constitute the means by which members of discourse communities—disciplines in the academy—demonstrate their affiliation, students who challenge disciplinary structures also challenge genres. If students don’t want to become part of the discourse community of a discipline, they can respond by resisting its genres, as David Russell and Arturo Yañez found. In their case, students in an introductory history class did not aspire to become historians and resented the instructor’s expectation that they adopt the genres of that disciplinary discourse community: “These are his writing tasks and he wants me to write in his way” (NP). Russell and Yañez conclude that genres can be sites of contestation because “the expectations created by the genre may not allow one to do the kind of work—or learning—that one wants or needs to” (NP).

The contestation Russell and Yañez describe is somewhat different from what we found in our study. Student participants had chosen majors, an indication that they wanted to become part of that discourse community, and many of them became competent writers in the appropriate disciplinary genres, but they sought access to a broader repertoire. The success they achieved is evident in data from a survey of all participants. Responding to a survey question asking about their ability to write in different forms, all students showed a statistically significant ($p$-value 0.007) increase between the entry and exit survey. Both minors and nonminors felt they had learned to write in many different rhetorical contexts—in many different genres—as a result of their college writing experiences. Responses to a related question about their ability to “approach new kinds of writing” also showed statistically significant growth ($p$-value 0.033). The entire group of study participants indicated an increased confidence in their ability to take on new kinds of writing as they left
the university; they apparently felt the repertoire of writing strategies they had developed as undergraduates would serve them well in new writing contexts.

In their search for a more extensive array of genres of writing, students did not use traditional terminology to describe the writing of various discourse communities, but even without benefit of a social activity theory of genre, they effectively conveyed their understanding of the forces shaping genres. In their chapter, Hutton and Gibson draw on students’ own talk to explain how students tended to categorize their writing into two main and apparently mutually exclusive categories. Students used “academic” to describe writing that communicates thought through reproducible forms, and “creative” to describe a context-transcending writing that focused more on invention. As Hutton and Gibson explain, students understood these two macro genres to “enable different types of transfer—one reliant on recurrent written forms, the other on a durable writerly self” (p. 92). Unlike the macro genres described by Michael Carter, which focused on the knowledges and activities characteristic of writing within clusters of disciplines, or the more traditional genres associated with specific disciplines, the genres identified by students were defined by what they aimed to accomplish. Like the students interviewed by Heather Lindenman, who described genre in terms of what they saw as its central activity, such as “writing for a grade,” “writing for money,” or “reactionary writing” (NP), the students in this study framed types of writing in terms of goals. The overall categories spoke to the extent to which the task fostered writerly development; what they called “academic” did not and “creative” did.

Hutton and Gibson recount that only a few students appeared to embrace the possibility of a third approach to writing as a hybrid of these two conceptions. These were students who could, as Hutton and Gibson put it, “negotiate between views of writing and their writerly growth as entailing both generative activity and adherence to communicative norms, instead of viewing these approaches as requiring an either-or-choice” (p. 105). In describing their experience of writing, these students looked to “kinds of writing” neither as repetitive practice of narrowly framed forms nor as less structured generative strategies. Rather, they framed writing in more flexible terms, as a set of understandings and abilities that could be easily transferred across various contexts and forms. In some sense these students were able to look beyond the details of one piece of writing toward a more holistic and positive view of themselves as writers and of the ways writing figured in their lives. As Hutton and Gibson note, the largest number of students who fell into this category were writing minors, and one explanation the authors offer is the minor’s curricular emphasis on a wide range of genres, on reconceptualization of writing, and on considerable reflection, as described in appendix 2. As Hutton and Gibson
are careful to note, however, some nonminors also arrived at the more integrated stance, which suggests the value of looking carefully at other factors.

One factor that merits more attention is the nature of the assignments to which students write. The urgency of attending to the quality of assignments is underscored by students such as Katie, who appears in McCarty’s chapter and who says, “I guess maybe that’s what developed me into the writer I am today, the different assignments and the different maybe audiences that I’m supposed to be writing to, the different purposes of the assignments” (p. 117). Recent attention from scholars such as Dan Melzer and the collaboration of Paul Anderson, Robert Gonyea, Chris Anson, and Charles Paine suggests that faculty in all disciplines can improve the quality of assignments. Assignments offer one way for instructors to foster student awareness of genres and their roles in disciplinary discourses—and for students to identify the activity systems in which discipline-defined genres function, even if they choose to move beyond them. The two chapters in this section not only interrogate the conflation of writing development and disciplinary expertise, they include hints about ways that assignments can foster the development of student writers.

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