

Genre Awareness, Academic Argument, and Transferability

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THE NATURE AND PURPOSE of the first year writing course continues to generate scholarly debate, and current administrative pressures concerning assessment and accountability raise questions about what content areas should be emphasized. At present, considerable discussion focuses on the question of “transfer,” a term that refers to the extent to which the writing taught in the first year writing class can or should help students write more effectively in other courses and disciplines. Given increased understanding of differences in writing needs across disciplines, can the writing that is taught in a Freshman Writing course, which is often a form of academic argument, help students approach writing tasks in various disciplines with greater insight?

In this essay, we discuss the results of a pilot study derived from a project titled “Academic Argument and Disciplinary Transfer: Fostering Genre Awareness in First Year Writing Students,” a study that raises important questions and possible new directions for understanding the issue of transfer. The goal of the project was to develop a curriculum aimed at helping students acquire what is referred to as “genre awareness,” the idea being that a metacognitive understanding of genre can help students make connections between the type of writing assigned in the Composition course—that is, academic argument—and the writing genres they encounter in other disciplines. The basis of the project was that when students understand writing as a genre, when they learn to view a text in terms of its rhetorical and social purpose, when they are able to abstract principles and concepts from one rhetorical situation and apply them to another, they will not only write more effectively in their composition course, but will also acquire the tools they need to address new writing situations. Our goal was to construct a curricular direction that would teach students to examine texts for what Perkins and Salomon refer to as transfer cues, so that they would be able to apply what they know to other writing genres they might encounter in other courses.

Genre Awareness as a Threshold Concept

Our focus on genre awareness as a means of enabling transfer suggests that awareness itself can be understood as a “threshold concept,” a term deriving from economics but which has been embraced by many other disciplines. According to Meyers and Land, a threshold concept may be considered “akin to passing through a portal” or “conceptual gateway” that opens up “previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something” (Meyers and Land 9). A number of features associated with the idea of a “threshold” are in accord with the idea of genre awareness, in particular, transformativity, troublesomeness, and liminality. In terms of its transformative potential, a threshold concept will change the way in which a student understands a discipline, and, according to Perkins, is likely to be “troublesome,” when it is “counter-intuitive, alien, tacit, ritualised, inert, conceptually difficult, characterised by an inaccessible ‘underlying game’, characterised by supercomplexity or perhaps troublesome because the learner remains ‘defended’ and does not wish to change or let go of their customary way of seeing things” (x). The term “liminality” too seems relevant here, defined by Meyer, Land, and Baillie as:

A suspended state of partial understanding, or ‘stuck place’, in which understanding approximates to a kind of ‘mimicry’ or lack of authenticity. Insights gained by learners as they cross thresholds can be exhilarating but might also be unsettling, requiring an uncomfortable shift in identity, or, paradoxically, a sense of loss. A further complication might be the operation of an ‘underlying game’ which requires the learner to comprehend the often tacit games of enquiry or ways of thinking. (38)

These three features of a threshold concept (i.e. transformativity, troublesomeness, and liminality) correspond to the insights into genre that students participating in our pilot study reported at the end of the semester, particularly in their reflective comments.

Genre Awareness Versus Explicit Teaching of Genre

It is important to clarify here that “genre awareness” is not the same as the “explicit teaching” of a particular genre. Explicit teaching, as Freedman and others have noted, means teaching students to write in a particular genre, and often the pedagogical approach is formulaic—a sort of “do it like this” method. Teaching students to write using a particular structure can be effective in a limited context, as the fixity with which students retain allegiance to the five-paragraph essay has demonstrated. Genre *awareness* is quite different. When students acquire genre awareness, they are not only learning how

to write in a particular genre. They are also gaining insight into how a given genre fulfills a rhetorical purpose and how the various components of a text, the writer, the intended reader, and the text itself, is informed by purpose (Devitt). Through explicit teaching of a particular genre, students may be able to create a text that imitates its form and style—sometimes quite successfully. But without genre awareness, they will not understand how the text “works” to fulfill its purpose, and when they encounter a new genre in another course, they may lack the tools to engage with it effectively, which explains why students fall back so fixedly on the omnipresent five-paragraph essay. Explicit teaching of a genre may enable students to replicate that genre; fostering genre “awareness” enables students to gain a “threshold concept.”

A related clarification is needed for the term “genre.” “Genre” in the context of this project derived from rhetorical genre theory, which defines genre not simply in terms of the formal features of a text, but also by the *function* for which texts are used (Miller ; Russell ; Devitt). Many genres are easily recognized, and we can readily understand their function because they are part of our everyday world—bills, advertisements, invitations, for example. Academic genres, however, are often unfamiliar to students (Graff; Clark).

The Controversy over Transferability

The extent to which the genre of academic argument, as it is taught in a stand-alone writing class, can transfer to other writing venues has generated and continues to generate considerable debate. Essays in Joseph Petraglia’s 1995 collection, *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, suggest that general writing skills instruction or GWSI is unlikely to enable transferability. For instance, David Russell’s piece, “Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction,” claims that although FYC courses have the potential to make students “more aware of the uses of written discourse in higher education” (51), the goal of teaching students how to write in the genres of various disciplines is “over ambitious.” Russell maintains that instructors should not feel the need to teach students how to write in other disciplinary genres, because one learns by participating in the activity systems of a particular discipline. In other words, unless the students are immersed in a discipline, they cannot learn how to write in the genres of that discipline. All they will be doing is mimicking a form, not really engaging with the genre.

Thais and Zawacki’s 2006 study *Engaged Writers, Dynamic Disciplines* affirms the difficulty of defining academic writing and notes the problem of attaining agreement about the requirements of writing across the disciplines, a perspective that is echoed in Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle’s 2007 article “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning First Year Composition as ‘Introduction to Writing

Studies.” Although Downs and Wardle acknowledge that transfer of writing knowledge can happen, they maintain that it is difficult to achieve. More recently, in “‘Mutt Genres’ and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?,” Wardle argues that the first year writing class is unlikely to prepare “students to write at the university and beyond” (765). Referencing a number of Composition scholars, Wardle affirms that genres are context-specific and “cannot be easily or meaningfully mimicked outside their naturally occurring rhetorical situations and exigencies” (767).

Actually, even if one supports the notion that writing is situated and can only be learned through incorporation in a particular discipline, the term “discipline,” itself, is difficult to define, given the burgeoning of new disciplines and sub-disciplines in every field. In their discussion of the term “discipline,” Thaiss and Zawacki cite Toulmin’s definition of discipline as “a collective human enterprise” in which a “shared commitment to a sufficiently agreed set of ideals leads to the development of an isolable and self-defining repertory of procedures” (359). However, Toulmin also notes the variation in the relative stability among disciplines. Some disciplines, he maintains, are “compact,” meaning that there is a high level of agreement about the processes of intellectual inquiry. Toulmin asserts other disciplines are diffuse, meaning that concepts are still evolving, while others are “quasi,” with unity and coherence preserved across ever changing techniques (qtd. in Thaiss and Zawacki 14). Moreover, disciplinarity does not necessarily correspond to traditional departmental designations or majors, which are, themselves, being redefined, another factor that complicates decisions about the first year writing course and about what it means to teach students to write.

Scholars who highlight how writing differs between and within disciplines dismiss the possibility of teaching students to write in a stand-alone course and emphasize the necessity of teaching writing in a disciplinary context. But if teaching writing in a disciplinary context is not possible, given the types of writing that occur even in one discipline and the lack of preparedness (and sometimes willingness) of disciplinary faculty to teach writing, how should writing be taught?

A possible response to this question may be found in the concept of genre awareness as a means of facilitating transfer from one writing context to another. Anne Beaufort maintains that students need to acquire a metacognitive understanding of how the elements of a familiar writing context can transfer to another less familiar one. In her longitudinal study of one writer’s transfer of skills, Beaufort advocates the importance of “genre knowledge as one of the domains or mental schema that writers invoke as they analyze new writing tasks in new contexts—a domain that can bridge rhetorical and social knowledge” and argues that “talking about genres can facilitate students’ meta-cognitive

reflection” (188). Amy Devitt also calls for helping students acquire genre awareness, defined as “a critical consciousness and ideological effects of genre forms” (192). Devitt argues that the concept of genre awareness can not only benefit students in first year writing classes but also students in all disciplines. Finally, in “Pedagogical Memory: Writing, Mapping, Translating,” Susan Jarratt et al. recommends helping students translate discourse about writing from one site to another. Jarratt and her colleagues conducted a research study at UC Irvine that involved interviews with students several semesters after they had completed a first year writing course to determine the extent to which they were able to transfer what they had learned to other writing tasks. What Jarratt discovered through the interviews is that although many students across the disciplines had “internalized the idea of writing as a process and a mode of learning . . . even the most successful . . . lacked fluency in basic writing terminology” (2).

As we will discuss, the students’ perspectives obtained in this project provide evidence for both sides of the controversy over transferability and raise a number of questions and potential new research directions. While some student perspectives are concerned primarily with surface and relatively superficial levels, on the positive side, a number of the students’ reflections indicate developing genre awareness. Moreover, responses to surveys distributed to students at the end of the semester indicate that they all found their understanding of genre useful for approaching writing tasks in other disciplines and that this understanding made them less anxious about writing in general.

Subjects and Assignments Used in the Project

The project involved a first year writing class of 24 students, all of whom had declared History, Political Science, Psychology or Sociology as a major. The project utilized several assignments designed to maximize transferability through genre awareness. The first assignment was an academic “argument” essay on a subject of general interest, the goal of which was to enable students to develop a metacognitive understanding of how writer, audience, text, and rhetorical situation interact with one another in constructing a genre. Students were asked to compose an evaluative argument of the effectiveness of two texts based on a particular set of criteria. The second assignment required students to select a genre associated with another discipline, preferably one they plan to enter, analyze the features that characterize that genre, and write a text in that genre focused on the topic of censorship in the form of banned books. Half of the class was assigned to write a historical analysis and the other half were assigned a sociological literature review. The third assignment was a reflective essay in which students compared the disciplinary genre to the genre of academic argument of the first assignment and discussed the insights they had gained into genre transferability.

How does a piece of writing demonstrate an awareness of genre? As Downs, Wardle, Russell and others have noted, a definitive answer to this question has yet to be discovered. Indeed, we too found the process of determining whether a particular text exhibits genre awareness to be quite complex, and we, therefore, focused exclusively on students' *perceptions* of the extent to which they felt that genre awareness had occurred.

Methods

At the beginning of the semester, the students completed a survey that included questions concerning the students' past writing experience, both in and outside the academic setting. Students were asked about writing genres in which they had previously written and the extent to which they predicted that these genres would be of use in college. The students were also asked to rank their ability as academic writers and the extent to which they experienced anxiety when they were asked to write for a class.

At the end of the semester, students completed another survey in which they were asked about which genres they had found most useful for them in other courses and to indicate the usefulness of the genre based curriculum. They also wrote a reflective essay in which they commented on how useful the genre based curriculum had been for them in other courses and to identify additional insights into genre transferability. In these reflections, students were instructed to comment on the similarities and differences between the two assignments and to discuss the knowledge they had gained about writing in another discipline.

Results Obtained from the Surveys

Students' responses to surveys distributed at the beginning and end of the semester are indicated in three tables included at the end of this article. However, because of the limits of the sample, we do not claim that these results are statistically significant or generalizable. Moreover, because several students were not present in class when the surveys were distributed at the end of the semester, there were fewer responses at the end than there were at the beginning. Such a decrease is not unusual in survey research. However, since the study was concerned with only one class, the decrease is apparent.

With these qualifications, the most thought-provoking information obtained from the surveys is as follows: Table I shows that 50% (10 of 20) of the students predicted that the 5-paragraph essay would be useful or very useful for them in their college courses, whereas at the end of the semester, 8 of 13 indicated that they had found it useful, an increase of 11.5%. Table II indicates that at the beginning of the semester, 21 of 22 students or 95% predicted that the genre of argument would be very "useful," a percentage that

was substantiated by 100% of the students' responses at the end of the semester, 9 of 13 students indicating that it had been "very useful," and 4 of 13 indicating that it had been "useful." Table III indicates that students' understanding of genre has been helpful in their becoming less anxious about writing, 11 of 13 students indicating that it had been "helpful" or "very helpful," and 2 of 13 indicating that it had been "somewhat helpful." Despite the limited sample, one might make the case that a decrease in writing anxiety, unto itself, is likely to contribute to students' ability to grapple with writing tasks in other classes, a research direction worth exploring.

Comments Obtained From Particular Students' Reflections

The beginning and end of semester survey results offer some insight into the extent to which students perceived the genre of argument taught in the writing class to be useful in other courses. However, we found additional and perhaps more interesting observations pertaining to the issue of transferability in the comments students made in their reflective essays, some of which we cite below. These comments represent reflections from *particular* students and are not intended to be indicative of *all* students in the study, or, indeed, of students in general. They are included here because they may indeed reflect ideas that other students share and suggest interesting directions for further research.

AUDIENCE

The reflections of three students out of thirteen demonstrated an awareness of the concept of *audience* (Bartholomae; Berkenkotter). One student wrote, "Understanding your audience is crucial when doing any sort of writing because you'll most likely change the way you write according to who is going to be reading it." A second student similarly wrote, "Before this class, I was still writing at a high school level where I didn't really consider the audience. Now I force myself to consider whom I am writing to, what level the vocabulary of my audience is, and how I can convince them of what I am trying to say." Speaking of Assignment #2, a third student cautions other writers to "keep your audience in mind. They are expecting to read a legitimate paper written about a certain topic from a historical point of view. Meaning it is unbiased, and full of past or present facts."

AUTHOR PERSONA

Similar to how the concept of audience was perceived, the comments of two students focused on the importance of taking on a more disciplinarily appropriate writing stance or author persona for Assignment #2 than was necessary for Assignment #1. When referring to Assignment #2, the first student states, "As a writer you have taken the position

of a historian, be aware of how you are presenting this information to your reader.” Adding to this sentiment, a second student similarly claims, “When writing a paper from a sociological point of view it is essential to keep a formal tone. You must write your paper as a sociologist.”

PURPOSE

While the course emphasized that all writing genres have a purpose, the comments of three students indicate that they did not grasp that different genres could have similar purposes. For example, one student referred to Assignment #1 as “opinion” based, while Assignment #2 was considered “fact” based. When discussing how the two assignments differed, this student wrote, “In a historical essay you’re not really being argumentative and trying to be persuasive as possible to convince the reader to your side, but you’re just giving a historical analysis of what issue there is to show the reader why you should agree with your viewpoint.” Another student adds:

The rhetorical situation was different in both essays primarily because they had different purposes. [In Assignment #1] our mission was to persuade our reader to agree with our conclusion . . . it wasn’t too research focused as our second essay was. [Essay #2] had to support [the thesis] with research and facts. The second essay’s purpose was mainly to explain and inform.

What seems to be the case with these statements is these students did not view information-based or informative texts in terms of argument. They equated the purpose of persuasion with opinion-based or reflective writing but felt that genres outside of English were not “persuasive” because they required research. Apparently, these students were of the opinion that genres outside the discipline of English were given legitimacy in different ways. As a third student notes:

Papers in other fields rely much more heavily on research. The writer doesn’t take risks in the same way. Although there may be controversy, the controversy is backed up by scientific evidence and not just by logical reasoning.

EMPHASIS ON FORMATTING AND CITATION

Whereas the comments cited above focused on audience, author, and purpose, the comments of five other students (5 of 13) referred to the differences between the two genres primarily in terms of the formal elements of documentation styles without

evinced an understanding of why certain disciplines follow particular conventions. One student wrote:

I learned that when writing in APA, you'll write mostly in the third person point of view and will usually write actions in the past tense. I also learned that because APA style is used when writing papers on projects or experiments, it's important to make sure that you're being very clear and concise. I also learned that it is crucial to use scientific language to avoid coming across as too casual or poetic.

Another student lamented:

Each discipline has its own citing techniques; a history paper is required to be written in Chicago style... Trust me when I say the internet is great for many things, but it is not helpful for learning the Chicago citing style.

In their reflective essays, these students discussed formatting at great length and seemed to think that each genre could be defined by their documentation style alone. When considering how Assignment #1 and #2 differed, a third student plainly states, "A history paper is very different than an English paper just for the simple fact that it is not MLA documentation." These three students placed so much importance on documentation that they seemed to believe that formatting conventions alone would ultimately lead to a well-written paper. As a fourth student claims:

When writing an essay of another genre, it is significantly important to focus on the requirements, characteristics and conventions of the essay. By focusing on these, your essay will be properly written and significantly more likely to be passed by your instructor.

Similarly, a fifth student remarks, "Following the conventions of the discipline you are writing in is key to developing a clear paper."

STRUCTURE

Three of these five students also commented on structure. But their comments suggest that they did not realize that formal features have a rhetorical purpose rooted in disciplinary issues. One student wrote: "Papers in the sciences tend to have paragraph headings to highlight purpose. The headings tend to be standard and the sequence of the headings is also standard." When comparing the structure of both assignments, another student notes:

Both had a solid thesis statement, an intro paragraph, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. All of these things make an essay. The similarities aren't that big, but are little things that most essays have in common. For the most part they were pretty different.

A third student claimed:

The only thing ... that was similar is the way it was formatted. What I mean by that is that they were both in an essay format. They both had paragraphs and in those paragraphs they both explained how they related to the thesis statement. They both explained their thesis statement throughout the essay. They both had an introduction, body paragraphs and a conclusion.

THE 5-PARAGRAPH ESSAY

Perhaps the most significant finding in regards to structure was the tenacity with which a significant percentage of students held on to the 5-paragraph essay form (Crowley 1990). Table I presents students' predictions at the beginning of the semester about how useful they thought the 5-paragraph essay would be for them in their college writing versus how useful they found it to be. At the beginning of the semester, 50% of the students (10 of 20) predicted that the 5-paragraph essay would be "useful" or "very useful," 2 said it was likely to be "somewhat useful," and 8 or 40% predicted that it would not be useful. Since the emphasis in the course was to wean students away from the 5-paragraph essay, one would have expected that the percentage of students indicating that it had been useful would have decreased significantly, particularly if one expects students to respond as they think their instructor expects or wants them to respond. Yet, at the end of the semester, 8 out of 13 or 61.5% said that it had been "useful" or "very useful," 5 students felt it had been "somewhat useful," and no student felt it had not been useful.

One explanation for this result is that writers of all levels, but particularly novice writers, have a great need for form. The history of rhetoric suggests the role of form in helping students craft an effective text, and Kerri Smith in her article "In Defense of the Five-Paragraph Essay" notes that students like the 5-paragraph essay because it is safe. Another factor may be the necessity for students to take a timed essay exam, the Writing Proficiency Exam, in order to graduate, and it may be that they view the 5-paragraph essay as a useful tool in fulfilling this task. Finally, we realized that although Compositionists overall disdain the 5-paragraph essay and an emphasis on form or formula for its own sake, colleagues in other departments may value the 5-paragraph essay for its easily discernible structure and ease of processing.

Argument, Genre Awareness, and Transferability

TROUBLESOMENESS

The comments of several students indicate that they found the disconnect between academic argument and writing tasks in other disciplines to be “frustrating,” a term associated with the troublesomeness characteristic of a “threshold concept.” One student wrote that, with Assignment #1, it was “easier to understand what had to be written in order to complete the paper’s purpose, while the essay in another discipline left me confused at the beginning of the writing process.” Another student finds little connection between the two essays. “The first essay of the semester was an argumentative, persuasive essay,” this student wrote. But “the second essay of the semester focused on writing in a different discipline, this essay was very difficult and confusing. We had to basically forget all we had learned about writing and learn to follow new conventions.”

A third student expressed discomfort with learning how to write for a discipline other than English. One student wrote, “Writing varies from discipline to discipline. After writing in a different discipline, I find that writing the English discipline is easier for me. I find it easier because it’s a type of writing I’m used to.” Still, another student welcomed the exposure to genres from disciplines other than English, noting, “We have been taught how to write English essays for the most part of our education but I thought it was really interesting to learn how to write in a different field.” From these comments, one might make the case that however “troublesome” students found the differences between assignment 1 and assignment 2, they were at least beginning to think about those differences, a dawning awareness that might become useful for them as they develop as writers and students.

POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The comments from the reflective essays cited above support what Russell and others have noted—that when students are taught genres outside of their context, they will focus more on surface and structural elements rather than rhetorical features. Also of potential relevance here is the caution noted by Russell and Wardle and Downs—that the instructor’s own lack of expertise in writing in other disciplines may have resulted inadvertently in the genres being taught as a set of conventions, divorced from content. The comments cited above thus focused primarily on the surface features of these genres, rather than on more substantive disciplinary differences.

We recognize that the sample was limited and that a great deal of additional work needs to be done. Still, we were fortunate to be able to work with a cohorted group of students, a structure that allowed us to focus on particular disciplines. In the more usual

first year writing class, students' majors are far more diverse, and, indeed, many students enter the university without having selected a major at all. Would a genre/rhetoric based curriculum yield similar results with this more varied group? And do the insights at least some of the students expressed in their reflections result in their being able to write more successfully? As Artemeva and Fox maintain, "students' ability to successfully identify and characterize rhetorical and textual features of a genre does not guarantee their successful writing performance in the genre" (476).

The results of this pilot study raise many questions and suggest a number of possibilities for further inquiry. Is self-reporting a valid indication of what students really think? Is self-reported insight associated with enhanced ability? Is it possible to discern genre awareness from a given text? The self-reported decrease in writing anxiety noted in this pilot study is an avenue worth exploring. But is the ability to grapple with new genres due, at least in part, to emotional or psychological factors as well as to a student's level of maturation, as Perry's scheme suggests? These are exciting new research questions which may lead to redefinitions and understandings of transfer. At present, the results of the surveys and the glimmer of genre awareness evinced in the comments of individual students in their reflective essays suggest new directions for refocusing the first year writing course and for further research. In fact, it may be the case that genre awareness, unto itself, constitutes a threshold concept that is necessary for students to master before they can proceed to write effectively in other contexts.

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TABLE I

PREDICTED USEFULNESS OF 5-PARAGRAPH ESSAY VERSUS HOW USEFUL STUDENTS FOUND IT IN
THEIR COLLEGE COURSES

Predicted N=20

End Responses N=13

	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
Predicted	8	2	4	6
End Responses		5	2	6

TABLE II

PREDICTED USEFULNESS OF ARGUMENT VERSUS HOW USEFUL STUDENTS FOUND IT IN
THEIR COLLEGE COURSES

Predicted N=22

End Responses N=13

	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
Predicted		1		21
End Responses			4	9

TABLE III

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF GENRE HELPED YOU BECOME LESS ANXIOUS
ABOUT WRITING?

N=13

	Not Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful
Predicted		2	4	7