

# PLACE-BASED GENRE WRITING AS CRITICAL EXPRESSIVIST PRACTICE

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In response to students' changing literacy practices within the digital age in contrast to the traditional expectations of academic print literacy, many first year writing programs have rejected expressivist approaches to teaching academic reading and writing. Instead, these programs tend to emphasize rhetorical analyses of written and visual texts, especially in the first course of an academic writing sequence. As economist Robert Reich pointed out, our global knowledge economy requires this focus on analysis. He identified the need for symbolic analysts who "wield equations, formulae, analogies, models, and construct categories and metaphors in order to create possibilities for reinterpreting and rearranging" the deluge of textual and visual data (quoted in Johnson-Eilola, 2004, p. 229).

Yet too often conventional rhetorical analysis relies more on having students consume academic texts (or public criticism in the form of op-ed pages) and only reproduce their discourse and generic forms. Rarely do these approaches aim to mediate the culture and languages from students' communities as a major pedagogical goal. So most often students remain alienated from an academic identity and purpose in these courses. As a graduate professor on the periphery of our official writing program, I hear from frustrated new graduate student teachers who wisely come to identify this problem with the program's suggested assignments. The first course in our program focuses more on analyzing advertisements and commentary pieces. Yet the program's most inexperienced teachers, unequipped with a more expansive pedagogical toolkit, inevitably revert to teaching conventional academic forms rather than creative critical inquiry.

As an alternative to these conventions of textual analysis, another smaller group of teacher-scholars have stressed rhetorical approaches through multigenre projects. As Tom Romano, Nancy Mack, Cheryl Johnson and Jayne Moneysmith, and Robert Davis and Mark Shadle have shown, multigenre pedagogy can definitely foster students' creative inquiry. While I admire much of these multigenre approaches, particularly the work of Romano and Mack, they tend to use genres to help students understand complexities of research

writing (Romano, Mack, Davis and Shadle) or argumentation (Johnson and Moneysmith). In contrast, I wanted to draw on genre pedagogy to focus on analysis to meet our writing program's outcomes for the first semester writing course in ways that might be more internally persuasive to our students. In my upper-level undergraduate rhetoric course, students learned to analyze discourse by rewriting political commentaries in other genres and then analyzing the rhetorical effects of their choices (see Seitz "Mocking Discourse"). Now I wanted to create a similar approach to analysis that could motivate and engage most first year writing students.

In this chapter, I will show how the genre writings project in my first year writing course, supported by principles of place-based education and theories of genre as textual sites of social action, helps create a more inductive approach to rhetorical analysis focused on students' languages and values. In contrast to conventional rhetorical analysis of a text, the students analyze the rhetorical choices they make when they compose in diverse genres that respond to the rhetorical situations of local place and community. I believe this approach can help open up a dialectical space through a process of "purposeful mediation" between academic rhetoric and collective rhetorics of local place. Through this approach, students often invest more in the process of their analysis, analyzing what they have accomplished rhetorically through their genre writings.

## **GOALS, ASSIGNMENTS, AND INTERVIEWS FROM A PLACE-BASED WRITING COURSE**

To better show my motives for the rhetorical moves within this project, what follows are the key goals of this course which I designed in accordance with a place-based genre writing pedagogy, an overview of the assignment sequences, and a look at genre connections drawn from interviews.

### **COURSE GOALS**

Students were expected to foster and articulate critical analyses of everyday rhetoric within social and historical contexts. They were also expected to gain awareness of how any place could be analyzed in relation to three conditions: community bonds, local history, and global influences. And I wanted students to understand how written, oral, and visual genres help enact, respond to, and complicate these three connections.

### **SEQUENCE OF ASSIGNMENTS**

Throughout the course students were required to research and write an "In-

terview Analysis Paper.” I wanted them to identify connections between place and community, and develop a genre writing for each of these connections (i.e. community bonds, local history, and global influences). Finally, they were to analyze rhetorical situations of their genre writings and their connections.

In my course, students conducted ethnographic interviews about how a place or community has responded to change. The students’ choice of place could be a neighborhood, town, or workplace. I borrowed this emphasis on change from Julie Lindquist’s own writing course on place, which helped inspire my own. By emphasizing change, the interviews tended to focus on how the interviewee drew upon the collective rhetorics of the place and community to respond to physical and historical forces as well as the changing rhetorical influences on the place and people. These forces and influences might come from outside groups and institutions, such as the decision to move NCR (National Cash Register, a home industry in Dayton Ohio), to Atlanta. Or they might have come from smaller groups inside the larger community, such as efforts of rural towns to revitalize their downtowns during the recession in a global economy. But the project also allowed for students to demonstrate when the place and community had not changed and how, why, and to what effects. In this manner the project left open the possibility of social affirmation and critique (see Seitz, 2004). We cannot assume before ethnographic research how the interviewee and others in the community view change and stability within this place. Through the work of the interview analysis paper, students then locate three connections from their interviews that respectively address community bonds, local history, and global influences related to this place or community.

## GENRE CONNECTIONS DRAWN FROM INTERVIEWS

With regard to community bonds, some of the possible connections could be specific actions people conducted in order to create ties or social networks; specific common traditions, values, and beliefs that brought individuals together; or issues that related directly to the well-being of the local place and its residents. As for the local history of the place and community, these might be major events taking place in the community or place during a specific period and which resulted in some change. These could be political, economic, newsworthy (at least, in the eyes of the community members), or historical—that is, referencing the history of particular groups within the community. And where global influence was concerned (whether considered from state, national, or international perspectives), students were encouraged to explore the political, economic, technological, or cultural influences on the place and community.

For instance, Chelsea Presson interviewed her uncle, one of 15 remaining

employees at NCR (which he describes now as a ghost office). From her interviews and analysis paper, she identified the community bonds of strong employee relationships that NCR once nurtured through company programs and abandoned over ten years before the decision to move the company. For the local history, she emphasized the deterioration of NCR's long-standing support of Dayton's communities and small businesses. And for the global influences, she focused on the impact of the national economy that acted as the backdrop for NCR's decision to move. This analysis encourages an historical and global perspective toward the local place. Moreover, rather than the course providing pre-packaged issues, most students come to see that any place or institution is both sustained and impacted by these three connections.

Then for each connection they have identified from their analysis, the students write a text in a non-academic genre that responds to a local rhetorical situation they learned about in their interview research. This approach helps develop greater rhetorical facility (one of the main Writing Program Administrators' outcomes) expanding beyond academic genres in the larger knowledge economy. I provide the students with a vast list of possible genres to choose from, but also suggest they consider what genres community members would more likely write, read, and watch as well as what genres outsiders (state, national, international) whose actions affect this place would write, read, and watch. Through in-class activities, I get them to consider how their genre choices can help show something about each of their three connections. In this way, the activity gets students thinking about how genres enact the social roles and situated action tied to their three genre connections. Students need to also consider the rhetorical situation (considerations of audience, purpose, stance, genre, and medium/design), as defined by Richard Bullock's *Norton Field Guide to Writing* (2009) for each genre connection. When they must consider the fit of the genre choice to rhetorical situation, they begin to analyze the affordances of each possible genre choice.

So for community bonds, Chelsey composed an email dialogue between a surviving Dayton NCR employee and one who moved to the new Atlanta office, elaborating in detail on their past exploits in better company times. For the local history, she took on the voice of a Dayton restaurant owner in the city paper, addressing concerns of small business bankruptcies in Dayton since the pulling out of NCR and General Motors (supported by data drawn from secondary sources). And for the global influences connection, she took on the sunny authoritative tone of NCR CEO Bill Nuti in a slickly designed company newsletter assuring employees that the economy was turning around compared to previous recessions.

The students also had to incorporate secondary sources in the text and footnotes of their genre writings to help them relate the local situations they enacted

to similar concerns of other communities (or workplaces) and larger issues at the state, national or international level. For teaching strategies of incorporating research from secondary sources in genre writings, I have learned much from Nancy Mack's scholarship and pedagogy. Finally, as a metacognitive reflection, the students analyze and articulate all these rhetorical choices in an extensive cover letter.

When I designed this course, I knew I wanted students to address place as a generative theme, but I hadn't read much on theories of place-based pedagogy, which is mostly a rural K-12 movement. Now I look back at the students' projects over four years of classes and see how much these theories support my approach.

## **PREMISES OF A CRITICAL PLACE-BASED WRITING PEDAGOGY**

Illuminate the concept of Intradependence (of place, community, and self).

—Paul Theobault

Support sustainability of civic life at local levels (not migratory culture and rhetoric).

—Robert Brooke

Examine, celebrate, and critique the literacy practices that create local knowledge, culture, and public memory.

—Charlotte Hogg

Foreground connections to global, national, and regional development trends that impact local places.

—David Gruenwald

Robert Brooke has asserted pedagogical approaches of place-based education share common ground with the tradition of expressivist pedagogies that explore self and society (2003). As defined and articulated by Paul Theobault, place-based education should illuminate the concept of intradependence, the connected relationship of place, community and self. To seek intradependence means to “exist by virtue of necessary relations ‘within a place’” (quoted in Brooke, 2003, p. 7). Brooke claims “Theobault wants an education that immerses learners into the life of human communities while they are still in school, thereby teaching the practice of civic involvement” (2003, p. 6).

Most of the students who work on this project in my class begin to practice forms of intradependence when they choose to interview their grandpar-

ents about the losses of a viable, walkable downtown life; their parents about the relationship of their workplaces to their home communities; people with institutional roles in the town, such as teachers, coaches, or ministers, about the local effects of demographic shifts; or people in professions that motivated some students, such as law enforcement and nursing, where they learn about the positive and negative impact of new technologies on employee interaction in these workplaces.

Brooke rightly maintains that writing classes which emphasize rhetorical forms and argumentative strategies regardless of local cultures and community issues encourage a migratory culture that disconnects the self from place and does not support sustainability of civic life at local levels. “As educators,” Brooke writes, “all of us are implicated in the destruction of small communities” (2006, p. 147). Most American education now serves to create an “identity not linked to a specific place, community, or region but instead to the identity of the skilled laborer, equipped with the general cultural and disciplinary knowledge that will enable the person to work wherever those skills are required”; paraphrasing the naturalist writer Wallace Stegner, Brooke stresses how this kind of migratory living can lead to “harsh exploitation of natural and cultural resources—if you don’t plan to live somewhere more than a decade, it doesn’t matter in what condition you leave it in” (2003, p. 2).

Instead, Brooke, along with other place-based educators, calls for imagining an education that fosters regional identity of “civic leadership, knowledge of heritage, and stewardship” (2006, p. 153). “It is at the local level where we are most able to act, and at the local level where we are most able to affect and improve community” (Brooke, 2003, p. 4). While the place-based genre writing project in my class doesn’t lead to immediate civic action, it does make students think more about establishing a regional, rather than solely migratory, identity within their acts of writing.

But as Charlotte Hogg’s scholarship on rural literacies suggests, along with that of her colleagues Kim Donehower and Eileen Schell, place-based education needs to critique as well as celebrate local narratives of place. Hogg’s research of Nebraskan women’s roles as informal town historians highlights alternative narratives in contrast to the more patriarchal models of the agrarian movement which emphasize the self and the land and tend to neglect the everyday practices of towns that sustain local community. Hogg reminds us the goal is better models of cultural sustainability rather than preservation of a particular version of the past: “local narratives are not static artifacts for preservation, but openings for delving into questions of power and representation” (2007, p. 131). Moreover, the project in my course supports David Gruenwald’s call for a teaching approach that is “attuned to the particularities of where people actually live, and

that is connected to global development trends that impact local places” (quoted in Hogg, 2007, p. 129).

In the course of this project, the interview analysis activities help most students move toward the kind of analytical complexity suggested by Hogg, Gruenwald, and other scholars of critical pedagogies of place. The scaffolding of the interview analysis activities, along with other analysis activities using readings and movie clips, encourages students to discern social patterns and tensions from their interviews related to a community’s cultural values and responses to change.

For example, Zachary Rapp comes from a working class town in southern Ohio. As a proud high school athlete, he wanted to interview his basketball coach. In the course of his analysis, Zach zeroed in on an unexpected tension within the school and town community. Zach’s coach explained specific ways this working class community deeply supported the athletics programs as a source of community pride. But he also referred to the teachers’ frustration over poor funding and repeated failed levies. In his interview analysis paper and then his genre writings, Zach had to wrestle with another side of this multifaceted story that he had not encountered before. As he began to question the commitment of his neighbors to the full education of the town’s children, he certainly considered issues of the town’s greater sustainability and the larger national issue of funding for education. But he also recognized, and wanted to explain the daily sacrifices that families made for the children’s athletics, and he wanted to celebrate that story, especially in contrast to the attitude of outsiders that his town was a wasted dangerous place which he claimed was part of its local history from the viewpoint of neighboring towns with greater wealth.

In this regard, Zach took up the dialectical positions that Charlotte Hogg encourages—to both celebrate and critique the literacy practices that make up public memory of small town life. While the interview analysis paper gave Zach a genre form to address the significance of both perspectives within an academic frame, the genre writings gave him the opportunity to isolate and emphasize the voices and genres that both supported and challenged the cultural values that made up these aspects of the town’s civic life. So Zach writes in the voice of an injured local college athlete in a college application essay to show the community bonds forged at the town football games. He addresses the local history of rumors perpetuated by neighboring towns through a series of email exchanges between a prospective resident who asks a longtime volunteer booster about the town’s darker reputation. The booster’s replies speak to the town’s working class pride. But Zach also writes in the voice of a newspaper editor from a neighboring city paper that urges this local community to put as much emphasis on academic funding in their public schools as they do athletics.

So when students’ rhetorical choices of genres (and their purposes and au-

diences) derive from the ethnographic analysis of these three connections to a local place or community, the students tend to better understand genre as situated social action. As with the place-based pedagogy, I had not read deeply into rhetorical theories of genre when I designed the project. Now I see how these theories support a view of students inhabiting roles and situations they have researched first hand from their interviews.

## PREMISES OF RHETORICALLY-BASED THEORIES OF GENRE

Genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community

—Carolyn R. Miller

The work of Carolyn Miller, Charles Bazerman, Catherine Schryer, Amy Devitt, and Anis Bawarshi, among others, reminds us that genres work to perform situated social actions and relations, enact social roles, frame social realities, and mediate textual and social ways of knowing and being. When we learn genres, we learn to inhabit “interactionally produced worlds” and social relationships, recognize situations in particular ways, and orient ourselves to particular goals, values, and assumptions.

Apart from the genre pedagogy created by Devitt, Bawarshi and Reiff (2004), many teachers emphasize genre as forms, rather than situating the writing of various non-academic genres within the study of place and community. Rhetorical genre theorists instead view genres, such as a community newsletter or a company brochure, as “sites of social and ideological action” (Schreyer, 1993, p. 208). As Bawarshi sums up the importance of genres, “they embody and help us enact social motives, which we negotiate in relation to our individual motives; they are dynamically tied to the situations of their use; and they help coordinate the performance of social realities, interactions and identities” (2004, p. 77). Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff have stated that the term “discourse community” and the relationship of subjectivity to discourse community remain too vague. Instead, along with Miller, Bazerman, and others, they argue that it is the process of genres (within various modalities) that “organize and generate discourse communities” (2003, p. 550) and shape strategies of social action within these rhetorical situations.

In my course project, the interview process and the three connections help to physically situate the cognition required to know what genres might be appropriate at what points in time and space within the local rhetorical situation. Because students encounter the use of various written genres in their interviews and in actual community contexts, they are exposed to genres not only as indi-



vidual forms but as what rhetorical genre theorists call systems of genre sets. As a result, they must consider what affordances particular genres might offer within the range of appropriate genres in a given system that can best demonstrate the perspective of each chosen connection. As Anne Freedman and other rhetorical genre theorists have argued, the acquisition of genre knowledge includes “up-take”—knowing which genre to use based upon the rhetorical moves of earlier genres in a given system. While my first-year writing students do not explicitly study this genre knowledge or truly embed themselves in the practices of a community’s genre systems in ways that lead to full acquisition of genre knowledge, through this project they are more likely to see genres as more than just forms and conventions, and as the “lived textualities” that enact relationships and power relations within community bonds, local histories, and global influences.

Katie Shroyer came to understand these intersections of power relations and genre knowledge over the course of her project. Katie interviewed her mother, a pastor of a local branch of the Christian Family Fellowship Ministry. To show the connection of local history, Katie composed a eulogy for John Shroyer, her grandfather, the founder of the local ministry. In this text, the speaker recounts the specific ways John Shroyer helped build the social environment of the congregation over forty years. What strikes me here is how much her purpose resembles the rhetorical view of epideictic rhetoric—that is, the speech itself is meant to develop identification and persuasion to the values of the larger congregation. To address the connection of community bonds, she took on the voice of her mother in the Ministry newsletter which is distributed to numerous communities. The article addresses the growing movement advocating for home fellowships in small groups compared to the greater anonymity of megachurch models. In her cover letter, Katie claims that this particular genre of the newsletter serves “as a bonding agent” to these different communities, developing a series of “mini support systems.”

To examine global influences, Katie refers to a conflict between her mother and the leader of the Fellowship within a semi-formal business letter. As the church has expanded since the days of her grandfather, it has pursued international outreach. To encourage this national and global outreach, the leader has encouraged the production and distribution of service teachings on CDs. Katie’s mother repeatedly challenges what she sees as the impersonality of this approach and instead argues for the necessity of physical interpersonal relations in fellowship. Taking on the role of a Congregationalist in Bristol, England, Katie writes a letter to persuade Pastor Shroyer, her mother, to visit their fellowship, so they can gain much more than they can with her CDs. Now, to some composition scholars, this may not seem a strong critical rhetorical move, but to me it does suggest efforts to consider sustainability of the fellowship in the

midst of global and technological change. I would also suggest that because the project allowed Katie to demonstrate the strengths of this fellowship community, she was probably more willing to reveal dissent in the church with regard to change as well. Moreover, Katie clearly chooses these genres, in her words, “to serve as keys to participate in the actions of a community,” and she analyzes these rhetorical choices very well in her cover letter.

Finally, I believe this teaching approach follows in an expressive tradition because it’s about mediating identity and addressing places as communities, however flawed, and recognizing a range of agency within these communities. This pedagogy also draws on assumptions of critical teaching in that students must examine power relations within local communities and their relations to larger global influences.

Genre writings can mediate academic and public rhetorics tied to place and community, thereby creating a dialectical space. The students’ interview papers mediated an academic analysis with the interviewee’s voice, which spoke from a collective rhetoric of place and community often tied to the student’s sense of self. The students’ genre writings translated academic insights of cultural, historical and socio-economic analysis into genres and voices of public rhetorics, often situated in place and community. And finally, their cover letters translated the implicit rhetorical analysis behind the creation of their genre writings into explicit demonstrations of analytical choices and use of secondary sources.

In these ways, genre writings can act as a mediating force between the cultures and communities outside and within academe as students analyze place and change from academic perspectives, and then re-integrate those perspectives into the language and genres of public communities. In this sense, my use of the term “translate” is only partially accurate because when we move between these public and academic rhetorics, there is no direct correspondence of meanings—just as when I plug in a French phrase into a digital translator, I will not receive an absolutely English equivalent. So while I do see the process as a kind of partially accurate set of translations, the term mediation suggests a more dynamic fluidity that often takes place. In the process of this project, students gained experience mediating identities, communities, genres, and rhetorical assumptions and strategies—rhetorical experience that can hopefully serve them well in their communications outside the classroom, in their dealings with academic writing, and possibly well into their future lives.

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