

That's Just a Story: Academic Genres and Teaching Anecdotes in Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Projects

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Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, scholars in academic writing have extended the discussion of narrative and disciplinary norms into the analysis of instructional “lore” and the often dialogic spaces in which instructors share personal experiences and advice with fellow instructors (Schubert 9; North 23). We have recognized that these anecdotes in themselves assume certain generic forms and narrative expectations, which are in some degree informed by larger disciplinary norms, including such elements as standards for evidence and support (Trimmer x–xi).

Those in writing studies have generally accepted the research and teaching validity of personal narratives to a certain extent (Johanek 10; Bleich and Holdstein 4–5). According to Holmsten, “we accept and honor storytelling as a valid representation of classrooms and our lived experiences there” and even “establish our communities by sharing stories” (41). However, disciplinary standards in fields outside the humanities tend to resist the extensive use of personal narrative as a tool for pedagogical inquiry, often preferring more quantitative or empirical evidence for teaching claims and rejecting stories as hopelessly subjective while not recognizing their own use of narratives to contextualize data and figures (Bleich and Holdstein 2). The assumption that “research should be objective, controlled, and decontextualized; that the researcher should be distanced and

uninvolved” has governed most traditional inquiry into teaching and most educational research (Ray 175). Thus, there is a conflict about what constitutes legitimate evidence for teaching practices at the very heart of “lore” as a mode of inquiry.

In bringing together different academic departments and disciplines, often mingling such historically estranged fields as the humanities and the physical sciences, writing-across-the-curriculum meetings between instructors create an intriguing space in which differing disciplinary expectations for writing come directly into contact and conflict. This conflict over writing expectations, which include standards of evidence and disciplinary conventions, has long been recognized as an important issue in writing-across-the-curriculum scholarship (Russell 292–3; McLeod and Maimon 580). I will argue that there is also an unrecognized conflict over teacher “lore” that can be traced back to differing standards of evidence and disciplinary conventions. We must acknowledge this conflict and its sources in order to talk to each other about teaching writing across the disciplines.

A Story

Let me start with a story, which seems appropriate given the subject of this essay. As also befits the subject of this essay, I am not going to say whether or not this story is true. Take it as a potentially true story—somewhere between an illustration and an anecdote.

We have an English graduate student working as a research assistant at a large state university. This graduate student is currently part of a two-year collaborative project with a department in the same university. The goal of this project is to increase undergraduate writing skills in General Education classes by working with instructors in other departments and discussing how they construct, structure, and evaluate writing assignments in their own classrooms. This writing-across-the-curriculum project, while it includes some one-to-one sessions and critiques between the English RA and faculty members, centers on a series of large group workshops with around a dozen faculty members and graduate students gathered in a single classroom to work on writing-related topics. They look at assignment sheets, grading rubrics, student papers, syllabi, policy statements, and other hard, print traces of the department’s work with student writing. Inevitably, they also discuss their personal experiences in the classroom. What personal issues have they encountered with writing?

Imagine that this department is in the physical sciences—an area which, at least traditionally, is far removed from the humanities training of the RA but which often finds itself the focus of similar writing-across-the-curriculum/writing-in-the-disciplines projects. As the RA works with this department, he begins to notice certain

trends in the discussions. When these faculty members and graduate students want to make a point about student writing, they focus on certain types of evidences for their claims. This evidence tends to take a numerical form. They cite grades on papers and the downward trend of these grades across several semesters to argue that student writing is getting worse. They cite the university's statistics about the high SAT scores of the incoming freshmen to argue that students are "simply being lazy" when they do not follow certain conventions about research or mechanics. They cite surveys from the discipline, scores from student evaluations, grade percentages for students who received a writing center stamp as opposed to those who did not go to the writing center—all numbers meant to empirically support their claims about student writing and student motivation. Occasionally, they will point to an exact student paper and quote from it to make some point about how their students fail to engage the material.

Now imagine that our RA from the English Department wants to make a point about student writing based on his own experience in the classroom. He wants to stress that sometimes students fail to follow writing conventions for a particular discipline not because they ignore them or even that they have not been taught them but because they fail to understand the reasons for them.

Rather than coming at this point through statistics and scores, he tells an anecdote about a student from his technical writing classroom. This student was supposed to be writing a proposal in which she suggested a new kind of research in her field. Curiously, though, this student had failed to cite a single existing study that related to her topic or even studies that showed similar methodologies, though the need for this had been stressed on the assignment sheet and in classroom activities. Disappointed by the student for not following his instructions and so receiving a low grade, the RA called this student into his office to discuss her lack of external sources. He discovered that the student had left out these sources because she thought they undermined the "newness" of her proposal. If she stressed that other people had done similar research, was she not in danger of looking like a copycat or even a plagiarist? Finally understanding the problem, the RA explained to her that such research reviews were done precisely to show that you had done your homework and could convincingly demonstrate that your research differed from others in the field. Far from making you a copycat, it established you as a competent and concerned researcher. Someone without a research review would have been more suspicious in the eyes of a disciplinary insider.

To the RA, this story has demonstrated his point about students failing to follow writing conventions not out of laziness or due to inattention but because they have not been shown the practical reasons for such writing choices. He is quite pleased with

himself. And then a hand comes up in the back of the teaching workshop:

“Do studies show that this is a common problem?” the graduate student asks.

“I don’t know,” the RA says, “I’m offering a personal example.”

The graduate student persists. “How many students on average do you think this problem might affect in a semester?”

“I couldn’t say,” the RA replies. “This is one student I’ve encountered.”

Now the graduate student looks honestly confused. “But that’s just a story”.

Several heads nod in agreement to this. That is just a story. Maybe what you would expect from those humanities folks but not hard evidence.

The RA tries to carry on but at this point everything he says becomes automatically suspicious. If this is the type of proof he has to offer, how are we going to judge anything he tells us?

The workshop stumbles along.

Teaching “Lore”

For the sake of illustrating an issue, I may be exaggerating here. Certainly not all such discussions are so easily divided. Humanities scholars have been known to get empirical. We quote studies, cite statistics, and conduct surveys. Those in the physical sciences have been known to tell an anecdote and even to make a joke or two. Indeed, much of the educational research in the physical sciences over the past decade has centered on the role language and discourse play in learning and practicing scientific literacy, including the active investigation of differing modes of inquiry and standards of belief (Yore and Treagust 307–8). The movement to include humanities training and the “formulation of concepts such as narrative competence” has become a well-known trend among medical schools in particular (Strickland, Gambala, and Rodenhauer 264). I do not want to perpetuate an either/or stereotype in which one camp has gotten it completely right. Rather, I want to observe certain trends about how instructors and facilitators present their teaching lives for discussion in such writing-across-the-curriculum environments in order to suggest that we look for negotiations between the supposedly mutually exclusive approaches of empiricism and anecdote.

Such a negotiation is intimately related to the expanding but sometimes controversial area of composition and educational research known as teacher lore. According to Schubert’s definition, “teacher lore” is a vast and yet highly specific field of inquiry which focuses principally on autobiographical narratives from the classroom:

Teacher lore includes stories about and by teachers. It portrays and interprets ways in which teachers deliberate and reflect and it portrays

teachers in action. Teacher lore refers to knowledge, ideas, insights, feelings, and understandings of teachers as they reveal their guiding beliefs, share approaches, relate consequences of their teaching, offer aspects of their philosophy of teaching, and provide recommendations for educational policy makers. Teacher lore can be presented through teachers' own words, and through the interpretations provided by experienced teacher/researchers who interview and observe teachers. (9)

The concept of teacher lore as a central part of training and professionalization has gained increased acceptance (Johanek 14). A large part of becoming teachers is spent listening to, analyzing, and finally contributing to discussions of what actually goes on in the classroom and personal encounters with students and problems as opposed to the analysis of conceptual or abstract theories (North 22–24). According to Stephen North, such “lore” is characterized by “pragmatic logic” and “its structure is essentially experiential” as opposed to the more intentionally “rigorous”/scientific modes of inquiry available (23). The recognition that these informal stories and discussions are part of the teaching environment is a crucial one, as it places new emphasis on the interaction of teachers both within and across disciplines.

Yet lore has not been without critics and opponents in composition and educational research—many of whom have focused on an angle not dissimilar from “that’s just a story” by contrasting lore to more established modes of inquiry. Trimmer summarizes some of these misgivings in his introduction to an anthology about teaching lore, while also stressing the central attraction of lore:

We love to set the scene, quote the students, and reveal the trick we used to resolve the plot. We repeat these stories in the coffee room, embellish them in convention bars, and collect those that hit the mark or bring down the house. But while we treasure such stories for their wit, we do not trust them to convey knowledge. They are merely entertainment, comic relief in the high drama of academic discourse ... Most of our professional training has debunked teaching stories. They are not reliable. They are not verifiable. They are not statistically generalizable. We can use them as anecdotes, as introductions ... but this is simply a hook—a rhetorical device ... to attract our audience’s attention. (x–xi)

This is the central complaint: teaching lore is not empirical, is highly subjective, and thus cannot be used to support larger claims. It is entertaining but it is not useful. Other critics have been less sure of its relative benignity. Even North was critical of lore, contending that it is not “methodologically self-conscious” and strains for an unlimited

authority (54–5). Johanek has argued that the popularity of teacher lore and personal stories has virtually erased other means of research in the field and has caused a backlash against non-narrative research claims (11). While supporters of teacher lore such as Lewiecki-Wilson have seen it as a celebration of individual voices over an oppressive and alienating social system, Gray and Young have both contended that these individual stories are repressive and oppressive of anything that does not easily fit into the status quo or the constructed community of the story (99; 51–2; 300). According to Young, if your teaching story is too far outside of normal expectations for such stories, no one is going to listen to you. If this is true, can teaching lore be seen as such a positive practice?

Obviously, I do not have the time or space available to answer all of these objections. I point them out for two reasons. First, I want to demonstrate that objections to stories as a form of evidence are not limited to fields outside of the humanities, just as the use of stories as a tool for pedagogical inquiry is not limited to the humanities. Though the substance of these objections might be slightly different, their existence is not and rightly so. We should be concerned about what types of evidence influence how we act in the classroom no matter what field we are in. If we can question empiricism for its assumption that numbers and figures illustrate the totality of truth, we can certainly question narratives about their often implicit conclusions and morals. Second, I want to argue that, rather than being a stumbling block, this skepticism about stories might be seen as the central element of a positive negotiation between the humanities and the physical sciences in dialogic spaces like writing-across-the-curriculum projects. Rather than running from a confrontation about the worth of stories as evidence, we should embrace it. We should ask our colleagues what they mean when they dismiss something as “just a story” and perhaps we will wind up examining our own assumptions about their stories.

Lore Across the Disciplines

Our colleagues in the physical sciences certainly are telling us stories in return, though they might resist the traditionally pejorative connotations of that word. All of these facts and figures are being used, in essence, as empirical anecdotes to illustrate a point. If the stereotypical humanities story is a touchy-feely narrative of pedagogical exploration and success, the stereotypical scientific story is a cold, analytical statistic. Yet the use of these statistics in the writing-across-the-curriculum space makes them into mini-narratives. You tell me a story about human interaction to make your point and I will tell you a number. Each follows the disciplinary conventions we have been trained in.

Of course, these disciplinary conventions are adaptable. Indeed, many practitioners of the “narrative competence” movement within medical training have adapted this “pedagogy of discomfort,” this adoption of individual stories into the curriculum, precisely because they bring into question “consideration of how these attitudes and behaviors are enacted in the rituals, policies, attitudes, and protocols of medicine” (Wear and Aultman 1058). It is precisely through actively engaging stories that these practitioners are hoping to counter the perceived coldness or clinical detachment of medical students and encourage medical students to critique the larger social practices embodied in medicine (Wear and Aultman 1057). A perception that examining our stories may help us to better understand our own disciplines and practices is not limited to the humanities. Indeed, this growing trend from within the sciences is crucial to a negotiation between traditionally estranged disciplines.

Consider MacDonald’s continuum of disciplinary knowledge—a spectrum of disciplinary approaches that classifies each discipline according to how new disciplinary knowledge is created and accepted within it. On one end, we have the sciences, where “new knowledge is accepted on the basis of often quantifiable experimental proof” and this proof depends on hypothesis and experimentation. On the other end, we have the humanities, where “knowledge about a subject is accepted or rejected on the basis of how well argued a case is” (Coffin et al 47–8). Central to this conception of a disciplinary continuum is the idea that practitioners and specialists within a discipline become insiders who know how to use these types of knowledges in their writing. Also central to this conception is the idea that these learned knowledges are largely implicit—we do not think about how we have been trained into creating and expressing knowledge in certain ways and not others (Coffin et al 47–8). Much writing-across-the-curriculum scholarship has focused on the need for facilitators to make faculty aware of how learned but often invisible disciplinary conventions influence their approach to student writing and the teaching of student writing; if we are to improve writing in the disciplines, we have to explicitly examine how those disciplines evaluate writing by certain conventions and standards of evidence (Russell 292–3; McLeod and Maimon 580). I would argue that the implicit conventions surrounding teacher lore in various disciplines also need to be made explicit in order for such projects to work.

Teacher lore exists in other disciplines—it simply takes different forms and applies different standards of evidence. It may not be clear to the physical sciences graduate student why he insists on empirical data for such an anecdote but this insistence is grounded in his own professionalization. He expects the kind of knowledge and evidence that is accepted by the discipline and is suspicious of anything else. Just as

the humanities and social sciences practice different genres of writing, they practice different genres of teaching lore. As Jolliffe notes, “genres are not simply empty shells into which ‘contents’ can be poured willy-nilly. Instead, genres are psychological and social meaning-making templates that help writers understand rhetorical situations and that give shape to their intellectual work within them” (103). Learning and using genres is a large part of the process of joining a discipline. These are not hollow conventions but established standards for social and pedagogical interaction. It literally means learning to speak in the discipline in a way that the discipline validates.

If you cannot speak the language, you cannot make your point. You also need to recognize when you are not speaking the same language. WAC theorists such as Jones and Comprone have long stressed the necessity of learning disciplinary conventions for writing as a crucial part of the process of negotiating and rhetorically examining them (65). Yet very little WAC research has focused on the idea that dialogic spaces like inter-departmental workshops might involve spoken interaction using alien disciplinary conventions. It is implicitly assumed that while we might write differently, we all speak about teaching and writing in the same way. As Gallagher, Gray, and Stenberg have pointed out, this lack of serious discussion about how teaching stories differ may be the major gap in such research:

teacher narratives have rarely been placed in critical dialogue with one another. Instead, representations of teaching—much like teaching itself—tend to be treated as “private property,” the domain of a single teacher behind a closed door. Others may read teacher narratives for how they “resonate” with their own experiences, but rarely are those stories critically engaged. When teacher narratives are brought together at all, the prevailing principle of knowledge-making is accretion: each narrative simply adds to the knowledge created by others, rather than complicating or challenging it, as is typical in other forms of scholarship. (32–33)

We must recognize that teacher narratives do not all make the same point or approach making their points in the same way. Indeed, as Miller has suggested, one of the major benefits of teacher lore as a form of evidence is its contention that knowledge is “provisional” and that “shifting relationships and larger contexts” may affect how our stories are made and changed (14). It is a group of genres that explicitly recognizes that different contexts give rise to different stories. If we are going to use them purposefully in a dialogic space that stresses disciplinary differences and gaps, then pointing to those differences and gaps is not an unfortunate negative side effect but a crucial part of the process.

Returning the Question

I am not suggesting that we try to convince our colleagues in the physical sciences that our stories are true or generalizable in a traditional, empirical sense. Alternately, I am not suggesting that we try to convince them that the traditional, empirical sense is incorrect or oppressive. While either viewpoint may have validity, these are rather larger arguments than can be comfortably encompassed in a short paper focused on teaching and writing issues. Rather, I am going to borrow Spigelman's contention that the important test of teacher lore and teaching narratives is not necessarily established correctness but rather the story's usefulness for examining certain assumptions (81).

As I have tried to argue, it is the implicit disciplinary conventions and standards of evidence embodied in these different genres of teacher lore that must be examined. We are each telling stories. But how did we arrive at the specific story we are telling? How and why are these stories different? What do we each assume about our audience and our context when we begin to tell our versions of personal experiences? Rather than assuming that each side of the conversation is instantly dismissing the other, we should look at why we are dismissing the other. Hopefully, by doing so we will be able to negotiate some of the problems such stories encounter. According to Mortensen, "studying talk about writing allows for the discovery of unexpected openings among people, ideas, and discourse" and shows us "how these openings permit both the consensus and conflict that ... make and break the bonds of community" (124). By recognizing that our talk about writing has opened up a disciplinary conflict within our writing-across-the-curriculum projects, we can move toward a discussion of our talk itself that may prevent such a break.

Imagine a return to our possibly hypothetical workshop and our graduate student in the physical sciences telling our woe-begone RA that his personal experience is "just a story."

What could our RA say in response? Perhaps he could reply with a simple question of his own:

"Maybe it is. But what exactly do you mean by 'just'?"

I do not know how our graduate student in the physical sciences will respond. He may be confused. He may dismiss the question as irrelevant. The important thing is to have asked the question, though maybe this question should be returned even closer to home. Why does our RA automatically turn to his own teaching experiences and narrate them at this point? Why does he adopt a mode of inquiry that he knows from previous encounters may alienate his audience or automatically shift the conversation into controversial areas?

Perhaps, rather than insisting on the correctness of his own storytelling or agonistically interrogating his counterpart, he should ask for the teaching stories of other people in the workshop. By encouraging the sharing of these stories, he can let other teaching lives be heard and find in them Mortensen's "unexpected openings" and a common ground rather than a battleground. After all, the responsibility for hearing and understanding the other side should not solely be the participants'. If we are telling stories to each other, we should ask ourselves what those stories sound like. We may find that these stories do not sound so different after all.

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