

# Writing and Learning in the Health Sciences: Rhetoric, Identity, Genre, and Performance

IRENE L. CLARK AND RONALD FISCHBACH  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM linkages are generally acknowledged to help students improve as writers and engage more deeply in disciplinary course content. However, the extent to which the literacy skills that are taught in general writing courses transfer to the specific writing needs of a particular discipline remains a debatable issue. Referring to first year writing courses, Amy Devitt notes that writing courses “have been attacked as not useful, in part because of a potential lack of transferability of the general writing skills learned in composition courses to the particular writing tasks students will later confront” (202). Margaret Mansfield similarly maintains that attempts to reproduce real world writing in the classroom are “intrinsically doomed” (69), as do many of the essays in Joseph Petraglia’s 1995 collection, *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, which question the value of what Petraglia terms GWSI (General Writing Skills Instruction). However, an important benefit of a cross curricular model, one that receives little attention in writing across the curriculum scholarship, is that linked courses not only help students improve as writers, but they can also enable students to understand that “when people learn, they don’t take on new knowledge so much as a new identity” (Lindquist 267). Identity is closely linked with writing, but WAC tends to focus primarily on the actual writing, not on the role writers play in a discourse community.

In this essay, we discuss a successful linkage between a writing class and a class in Health Sciences that used rhetoric, with particular emphasis on the concepts of identity, genre, and performance, to help students gain insight into the role of writing in the field of Public Health and understand what it means to be a Public Health professional. Differences in students’ responses to essays written at the beginning of the semester as

compared to those written at the end indicated the following insights: that writing in the field of Public Health involves assessing a problem and addressing it rhetorically through writing, that simply providing information may not persuade an audience to change its behavior, that it is necessary to assume a more nuanced writer identity in order to have an impact upon an intended audience, and that the assumption of this identity constitutes a performance.

As is probably the case with many fruitful partnerships, the connection between the two courses began with lunch, during which the Health Sciences professor (Fischbach) consulted with the Director of Composition (Clark) about what might be done to improve the writing skills of students majoring in Public Health. Having taught courses in Public Health for over twenty-five years, during which he had been dissatisfied with the quality of his students' writing, Fischbach wanted to figure out what could be done to improve it. Fischbach noted that the writing contained many sentence-level errors, but what particularly concerned him was that his students seemed unable to think logically, to organize information in a text, and to synthesize information into a cogent argument. "In a few years, I am probably going to retire," he said, and "I want to spend those years at least trying to do something about my students' writing, not just complaining about it."

The result of that lunch and of many other conversations was the development of an integrative cross-curricular model in which Fischbach's course in Public Health Education was linked with Clark's course in Intermediate Writing, utilizing a familiar WAC model—that is, the writing course used material from the field of Public Health as the subject matter for writing assignments, and the Public Health Education course, through its syllabus and corresponding student learner objectives, lectures and assignments, focused upon the professional role of the public health worker.

### *Students Who Major in Public Health Education*

At California State University, Northridge, a major in Public Health Education is oriented toward helping students acquire the background for developing, implementing, and evaluating health education programs in a variety of settings. Jobs may be located in hospitals, non-profits, government organizations, and corporations, and although some students seek graduate degrees upon graduation, many do not. The major tends to attract students who wish to enter the workforce soon after graduation and who help the public alter their health behavior via an understanding of what is involved in living a healthy lifestyle and/or perhaps negotiating their way through a complicated health care system. Some students are already working; some have families. A number of these

students speak English as a second or third language and struggle with academic reading and writing tasks. In an attitude survey distributed at the beginning of the semester, only a few of these students indicated that they read or wrote for pleasure. Many stated that they were at least sometimes uncomfortable about writing.

### *The Writing Course as Linked to Public Health Education*

The writing course was linked to the Public Health Education course in several ways. Most of the students enrolled in Fischbach's course were co-enrolled in Clark's writing course, although a few students in the course were majoring in other subjects. Moreover, in order for students to recognize the importance of the linkage, Dr. Fischbach attended every class taught by Dr. Clark and referred to Clark's class frequently in his own class. Throughout the course Fischbach's lectures and assignments placed the student in the context of serving as a professional Public Health Educator. Students were exposed to the thinking, values, and behaviors of health educators serving in a variety of public health venues. At the conclusion of the course each student composed a grant proposal based upon the writing he or she had completed in Clark's course. The grant writing scenario placed the student in the role of a Public Health Educator in a particular community setting, requiring the student to defend the proposal before a committee of professional peers. In addition, all assignments in the writing course were concerned with issues in Public Health.

### *The Assignments*

The writing course required four fully revised assignments and two essays written in class, one at the beginning of the semester, the other at the end. The in-class essays served in a limited way as pre- and post-term assessments, although it was recognized that this form of writing assessment might not yield useful results. Both the first in-class writing assignment and the first revised writing assignment were concerned with the topic of obesity as a Public Health issue. The in-class essay asked students to consider whether the government should impose a tax on high-calorie foods, and the first revised essay asked students what issues should be considered in attempting to solve the problem of obesity. The second assignment allowed students to select a health issue that affects university students and asked them to examine the extent to which the university can or should assume responsibility for addressing this issue. In the third assignment, students refocused their second assignment toward the needs of freshman students and gave a presentation on that topic to a class. The fourth involved the writing of a grant proposal to a fictitious Public Health oriented organization. (See appendix for assignments.)

### *Rhetoric and Identity*

Since an important goal of Public Health Education is to provide information to the public about issues in Public Health, that is, to persuade the “public” to adopt a healthy lifestyle, it was decided that rhetoric should be a central focus in the writing course, with particular emphasis on the concepts of genre, identity, and performance. In fact, the most important insight that has emerged from two iterations of this model is not simply the well-documented benefits of WAC—that students are likely to write more successfully about what they “know,” care about, or are currently studying—but also that in order for students to write for a particular field or profession, students must assume a new “role,” or identity—in this case, that of a Public Health professional. It was the assumption of this “role” and what that role entailed that enabled students to gain insight into the rhetorical situation inherent in the field of Public Health Education. Thus, a significant outcome of this cross-curricular model was the realization that a successful WAC linkage involves teaching students how to “perform” as writers and speakers within a particular field or profession. Another was the understanding that the suitability of an identity and the appropriateness of a “performance” in a professional sphere are closely connected with the concept of genre.

### *Rhetoric and Genre*

The word “genre” in the context of rhetoric does not refer to its more traditional association with the form of a literary work (a sonnet, an epic, a novel, etc.). Rather, the term refers to a reconceptualization of genre as a typified social action that responds to a recurring situation—that is, “that people use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose) and that these ways of acting become typified through occurring under what is perceived as recurring circumstances” (Devitt, “Integrating” 698). Carolyn Miller’s article titled “Genre as Social Action” (1984) redefined genre by building on earlier work in twentieth century rhetorical theory, first drawing on Kenneth Burke’s discussion of rhetorical acts in terms of responding to particular situations and then referring to Lloyd Bitzer’s definition of the rhetorical situation as a “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations” presenting an “exigence” or necessity (Bitzer 5) which the rhetorical act addresses.

This reconceptualized view extended notions of genres beyond their association with a relatively stable set of discourse conventions. By defining genres in terms of exigence, purpose, and action, this perspective provides a framework for understanding text as a typical rhetorical interaction that is situated within a social context. In the case of the writing class for Public Health Education students, the exigence, purpose, and

action derives from the need to “educate” the public about health issues, certainly not a straightforward or easy task.

### *Genre and Academic Writing in the Linked Courses*

Given this concept of genre, one of our first concerns in forging the cross-curricular link was to determine whether the genre of writing that is taught in most writing programs—academic argument—would be appropriate for the sort of writing expected from Public Health Education professionals. This was an issue that needed considerable clarification, since we recognized that the term “academic argument” may be viewed differently according to disciplinary perspectives. In *Clueless in Academe*, Gerald Graff affirms “the academic centrality of persuasive argument” (22) and uses the term “Arguespeak” as the pervasive genre of academic writing. Nevertheless, Graff qualifies that “the Arguespeak of literary studies, philosophy, or history, is very different from the Arguespeak of mathematics or chemistry, which is different in turn from the Arguespeak of the social sciences, economics, or computer science” (22). Other scholars addressing the issue of transferability raise similar questions (see Freedman and Adam, Hill and Resnick, Mansfield, Petraglia, among others). As Jonathan Hall maintains, “All too often . . . the freshman writing program and the writing courses in the disciplines have operated with little or no coordination, as though they were taking place at different institutions” (5).

Others, however, maintain that several modes of thought and conventions associated with academic argument do pertain in other contexts, both within and beyond the university. Susan Peck McDonald argues for the pervasiveness of “problem definition” in multiple academic venues, noting that “the subject of academic writing either already is or is soon turned into a problem before the writer proceeds. No matter how tentative the solutions are, it is problem-solving that generates all academic writing” (p. 316). This perspective is supported by Graff, who affirms the importance of problematizing (45) as a requirement for all academic writing. Similarly, in a comparative study of two hundred essays, Ellen Barton (1993) discussed the importance of “evidentials” as a distinguishing mark between arguments written by experienced academic writers and those written by students. In the context of the academic argumentative essay, Barton’s essay is noteworthy for two claims: first, that evidentials reveal underlying differences in epistemological stance; and second, that although each field is defined by its own special patterns of rhetoric, “argument is more unified than is commonly understood and far more unified than the fragmentation of academic fields might imply. Every scientist or scholar, regardless of field, relies on common devices of rhetoric, on metaphors, invocations of authority, and appeals to audiences” (4).

Even Peter Elbow, whose work is characterized by concern with enabling students to find a voice through personal writing, has acknowledged the existence of “academic writing in general,” which he characterizes as the

giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences: being clear about claims and assertions rather than just employing or insinuating; getting thinking to stand on its own two feet rather than leaning on the authority of who advances it or the fit with who hears it. In describing academic discourse in this general way, surely I am describing a major goal of literacy, broadly defined. Are we not engaged in schools and colleges in trying to teach students to produce reasons and evidence which hold up on their own rather than just in terms of the tastes or prejudices of readers or how attractively they are packaged? (140)

Elbow’s perspective is similar to that of Mike Rose, who writes in *Lives on the Boundary* of the importance of “framing an argument or taking someone else’s argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue, or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying a theory to disparate phenomena, and so on” (188). Moreover, as Graff points out, citing Jerry Bona, head of the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Mathematics department, “mathematics journal editors are impressed by article introductions that define an issue broadly and indicate what is at stake in the writer’s argument, what difference it would make to discussions in the field” (23).

Given the uncertainty about whether strategies associated with academic argument are relevant to the writing in other disciplines, it was important for Clark and Fischbach to clarify what sort of writing Public Health students are likely to need. But since they both strongly recognized the relevance of problem-based argumentative writing as a means of influencing the public about health-related concerns, that issue was easily resolved. An important component of Public Health work involves communication—that is, helping the public gain a better understanding of how to engage in a healthy lifestyle and avoid behaviors that are likely to interfere with that goal. Therefore, Public Health professionals can be viewed as rhetoricians, who must become skilled in persuasive argument or what Graff refers to as Arguespeak. Thus, it seemed reasonable, in fact, even necessary, to include a significant rhetorical component in the writing course, both in terms of the Aristotelian concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos, but also in the context of Quintillian’s notion of the successful rhetor as a “good man speaking well”—goodness in this context equated with credibility.

If Public Health professionals can be viewed as rhetors, the effectiveness of their work, as evinced in their writing and speaking, derives from their ability to convey information persuasively to an audience, convincing people that what they have to say

is worth considering, and motivating people to change behavior, a goal that is never easy to achieve, neither in oneself, nor in others. This goal of generating trust and initiating change raises again a question raised some years ago by Wayne Booth in *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*: “How should men work when they try to change each other’s minds?” (12). This was a question that generated a rhetorical focus for class discussions and directly impacted various writing assignments.

### *Performing the Role of a Public Health Professional*

Booth’s question became particularly relevant when our students wrote their first essays, the in-class writing as well as the first assignment, both of which were concerned with the topic of obesity and intended for parents of school-age children. When this topic was first announced, their hands waved enthusiastically because many of them knew a great deal about it. They were convinced that obesity constitutes a serious health problem and that it causes a number of health problems in the community, health problems they could name. They also felt strongly that it is necessary to get the message out about the importance of cultivating healthy eating habits and the dire consequences to society of an overweight population. Our students were pleased to share what they knew—facts, charts, consequences, and figures, but not one began by considering the audience for which this information was intended, and not one viewed the assignment in the context of a rhetorical situation, of understanding the “problem” of obesity in American society in terms of a “situation” or “problem” within a scene (other than the fact that people eat poorly). As a result, their first essays tended to present a great deal of information, but were not focused toward the needs of a particular audience. Students did not think about Public Health work as a rhetorical situation, nor of their work as Public Health professionals as having a rhetorical goal.

The essays written on the topic of obesity contained a great deal of information. However, they were not effective because they were not persuasive. In fact, what soon became apparent in students’ responses to these first assignments was that they were writing not as Health professionals, but as *students* who were responding to a question on an essay exam, the goal being to “show the teacher what you know.” Thus, the persona or identity that most students assumed in these initial assignments was that of a student who had memorized a great deal of information, and, as such, their essays did not problematize the topic or acknowledge the complexity of the situation (that it is sometimes difficult for working parents to put together a nutritious meal, that cultural factors sometimes dictate food choices, that it is sometimes inconvenient or expensive for working and/or underprivileged parents to purchase nutritious meals on a regular

basis, etc.). There was no counter argument—no awareness of the difficulty of making this sort of lifestyle change.

Because students were writing as if they were taking an essay exam and were apparently unaware of the rhetorical demands of academic argument, these early essays were unlikely to persuade an audience of parents to reconsider their food choices. Academic argument is characterized by a nuanced approach to a topic, acknowledgement of complexity, and awareness of audience. But students wrote without making use of these elements. They seemed not to realize that information alone is unlikely to convince an audience to change behavior or a lifestyle, particularly if the effects of that change would not occur immediately.

### *Performing the Role of a Public Health Educator*

As the semester proceeded, an important focus of the course was on helping students understand that Public Health professionals must be skilled “performers.” Performance became an important component of the course, a means of enabling students to assume the persona of a Public Health Education professional. It is a role that is both constrained and constructed by genre, which provides a context for the appropriateness of a particular speech or text. What does performance have to do with rhetoric and genre in a writing across the curriculum context? The answer is—a great deal. The word “performance” has recently become a scholarly buzzword. However, the term has long been associated with Composition theory and pedagogy, especially in the context of Burke’s Pentad and with the concept of discourse community. In his frequently anthologized essay, “Inventing the University,” written in 1985, David Bartholomae makes the following observation:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion . . . The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (134)

The terms “learning to speak our language” and “trying on ways of knowing and arguing” in Bartholomae’s essay suggest the concept of role playing or, one might say, “auditioning” that informs any situation in which novices enter a new discourse community. Bartholomae’s idea of “inventing the university” was concerned with the difficulties first-year college students experience when they write academic essays, but the point it makes about novice writers entering a new discourse community pertains to all novice/expert situations. To participate in the discourse community associated with a particular field, students must assume an appropriate role, “perform” that role within a

scene, and address a rhetorical situation or problem within that scene. As a performer, a student who is new to a field may not be able to interpret the scene as insightfully as an insider can, and, understandably, might be unsure about how to play the role.

### *Role Playing Within a Scene*

This idea of role-playing within a particular discourse scene is addressed in *Scenes of Writing* by Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi who develop the idea that writing involves role-playing or a performance. Addressing their intended student audience, they write:

You are an actor. Each day of your life you play a variety of roles or “parts” . . . and you act out these parts in a variety of scenes . . . .As in the scenes of a movie or play . . . you take your cues for how to act from the scenes you act within. Each of these scenes is different; each requires you to play a different role, which requires different strategies. (3)

Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi further note that when one is acting within a familiar scene, the performance of an appropriate behavior is intuitive and effortless. But when one enters a new or less familiar scene, the performance must be conscious, based on deliberate decisions about how to act. Assuming the role of a Public Health Education professional, then, involves reading a scene, not only listening to the conversations of the discipline, but also observing the scenes that characterize that discipline. Or, to use another metaphor, before one begins to listen to the conversations in the Burkean parlor, one must observe the scene, which Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi define as “a place in which communication happens among groups of people with some shared objectives” (7). A scene provides the context for what they refer to as a “situation,”—that is, “the rhetorical interaction happening within that scene.”

### *Changing Behavior on the Basis of Information*

What Public Health Education students did not seem aware of, or what they were unable to read from the scene initially, was that simply presenting information does not, in and of itself, result in changed behavior. But as the semester progressed, with the focus on rhetoric, genre, identity and performance, students began to recognize that human beings tend to resist behavior change if the motivation for that change is based on a consequence occurring in the distant as opposed to the near future. For example, if someone were to hold up a vial of amber liquid and tell us that it is highly poisonous, we would be unlikely to drink it, no matter how tantalizing it might look or smell. But if we are told that eating French fries for lunch can (but not necessarily will) cause health problems in thirty years, one might be tempted to eat at least one or two, perhaps more.

This focus on the human “scene” enabled students to realize that although it is important for a Public Health Education professional to be well informed, the role involves a dramatic or rhetorical element. To reach an audience, the person playing the role of a Public Health Education professional must present an idea in such a way that the intended recipient will actively want to own the idea. In other words, to write successfully in the scene of Public Health involves rhetorical interaction with an audience, and this is where the concept of performance becomes a mechanism for moving students to abandon the former role they have been playing, the role of student taking an essay exam in order to dump a lot of information, and assume another one, the role of Public Health Education professional writing a persuasive argument in order to motivate individual behavior change and in so doing alter the collective health of the community.

A classroom activity in the writing course that helped students develop this awareness involved asking students the following questions after they drafted their essays:

1. Describe the scene or setting to which this essay is addressed. What is happening in society that motivates this essay?
2. Describe the specific situation or problem you are addressing.
3. Who is your audience? What are their primary concerns? How can you affect their thinking?
4. Describe your role as an actor. When you say you are playing the role of a Public Health Education professional, what do you mean?

Eventually, students began to consider how a performance based only on the presentation of information would be viewed by an intended “audience,” an insight that was particularly important for the third assignment, which required students to give a health-oriented presentation to a Freshman class. That assignment, which involved assessing the reactions from a “real” audience, contributed significantly to their growing understanding of the rhetorical elements in their profession and of the necessity of performing a role within that profession. Students thus began to see Public Health Education as a “scene,” and the task of writing within that scene as a response to a rhetorical situation. In their final in-class writing assignment, which required students to respond to the question, “What can a university do to reduce binge drinking among its students?” the responses were a great deal more thoughtful and nuanced than they had been in at the beginning of the semester. Students did not simply list the dangers of binge drinking, although some of that information was included, nor did they off-handedly advocate draconian punishments for students who drank excessively. Instead, they acknowledged that the problem was difficult to solve, discussed possible causes for

student drinking, noted that psychological causes were pertinent, suggested informational solutions, and generally indicated that they understood the complexity of the problem. Their writings, as manifested in paragraph development and sentence-level competence, were not flawless, but they were able to read the scene and had begun to perform the role of a Public Health Education professional.

Similarly, a classroom activity in the public health education course required that students role-play the presentation of their written grant proposal before a committee of professional public health education peers. Both presenting students and students serving as reviewers on the professional public health education peer committee were cast in roles that required them to assume professional identities heretofore largely unfamiliar to the participating students. During a debriefing session students expressed new insights into both the cognitive and somatic meaning of being a public health educator. Some students stated that for the first time that they believed they had a concrete professional goal to which they could direct their educational efforts.

#### *Insights Gained from the Course Linkage*

The most important insights derived from the linkage of the course Public Health Education with the course Intermediate Writing were as follows:

- that successful writing within a field or profession, particularly one of education, involves the ability to assess a rhetorical situation, which includes an awareness of scene, audience, and problem;
- that merely providing information as a means of solving a problem may not be effective, particularly when the information pertains to future consequences;
- that entering a profession or field requires playing a professional role, one which may be quite different from the role of student;
- that progress in a linked course may be viewed not only in terms of “writing,” but also in terms of students’ ability to assess a scene and perform an appropriate role within that scene.

Role-playing, performance and identity are crucial, but as yet under-realized elements in implementing a successful Writing Across the Curriculum linkage, particularly one that involves a profession, such as Public Health Education. But of course, Shakespeare was way ahead of us. The famous line from *As You Like It* refers to the world as a “stage/ And all the men and women merely players./ They have their exits and their entrances,/ and one man in his time plays many parts.” Helping students understand the performative nature of writing and the ways in which writing assignments require students to play a role within a scene is an important benefit of WAC linkages.

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## APPENDIX

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### Assignments

#### *First In-Class Writing*

Should the government impose a tax on sugary or fatty foods?

#### *Assignment 1*

What issues should be considered in attempting to solve the problem of obesity?

#### *Assignment 2*

Choose a health related issue that affects CSUN students (alcohol, drugs, sleep deprivation, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health). To what extent should or can CSUN assume responsibility for addressing this issue for its students?

#### *Assignment 3*

Addressing the issue you wrote about for Assignment 2, construct a 3–4 page publication intended for Freshmen students. The goal is to help 18–20 year old students realize that they should be aware of this issue, and to accomplish this goal, you can use headings, bullet points, pictures, graphs, or charts. As part of this assignment, you will be presenting your work to the class.

#### *The Oral Component*

Prepare a ten-minute presentation intended for Freshmen (18–20 year olds) that alerts them to the Public Health issue you are writing about. Make this presentation as compelling as possible. You are welcome to work in groups or on your own for this part of the assignment.

#### *Assignment 4 Writing a Proposal*

A campus organization, the Public Health Initiative Fund (PHIF), is sponsoring grants of \$10,000 to improve the effectiveness of an existing organization in the field of Public Health. To obtain a grant, applicants must complete a three-page narrative (outlined below) and present a budget on the fourth page.

Please submit a three-page narrative that includes the following sections: Title, Proposal Narrative, Budget.

*Final in-class essay*

What can a university do to reduce binge drinking among its students?