

WORKSHOP: GENRES IN ACTION

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Rhetorical Habits for Transfer: Rethinking Genre Pedagogy

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1. Main Claim: Genre pedagogy should teach good rhetorical habits, not longer and longer sets of genres and decontextualized lists of conventions (as is the current mode given a survey of current genre textbooks and composition syllabi).

2. What we know: A common criticism of genre-based writing pedagogy points out that students often fail to transfer knowledge from the writing classroom into other areas (in school and beyond) where writing is asked of them. Wardle notes that “the literature on transfer does not support this assumption [of knowledge transfer] and, in fact, suggests that such ‘far transfer’ happens rarely (Perkins and Salomon, “Science,” “Transfer,” sec. 2; McCarthy)—at least without specific features built into the [composition] assignment to encourage useful transfer.”²

3. A Proposal: Return to the ancient and pragmatist notion of Habit, in particular, “rhetorical habit.” When concerning ourselves with “transfer” of genres to other writing environments, we should think in terms of the rhetorical habits that our students will gain with the assignments we create. What “features” (to use Wardle’s term) will encourage strong rhetorical habits?

4. WPA Habits of Mind: The notion of habit has come to the forefront recently with the WPA’s and NCTE’s 2011 publication of the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” which includes a list of eight “habits of mind.”³ As Kristine Johnson puts it in a

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² Elizabeth Wardle, “Mutt Genres” and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University? 60 *College Composition and Communication* 765, 775 (2009).

³ Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project, *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (WPA Council, 2011). The eight habits of mind are (1) curiosity, (2) openness, (3) engagement, (4) creativity, (5) persistence, (6) responsibility, (7) flexibility, and (8) metacognition. *Id.* at 1. Their named primary audiences are “instructors who teach writing and include writing in their classes at all levels and in all subjects. Additionally, because writing is of concern for those inside and

recent issue of CCC, “The Framework projects a broad vision that encourages rhetoric and composition to address gaps in American education by reinvigorating elements of ancient rhetoric and the liberal arts tradition.”⁴ Johnson lists the multiple ways that the ancients encouraged the development of rhetorical habits, including the notion that “[r]hetorical invention for Aristotle is a practice that both requires and fosters flexibility—the habit of mind that enables rhetors to act in kairotic moments and persuade various audiences.”⁵

5. Jamesian Habit: I’m more interested today in discussing a slightly more contemporary notion of habit, that put forward by William James. In his discussion of habit in the *Principles of Psychology*, James made a few observations.

(a) Two results of habit: For James, “[t]he first result of it is that habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue” (112). “The next result is that habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed” (114).

(b) Purpose of Education: For James, the purpose of education “is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.” In short, habits can be good or bad: “For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague.” (122)

(c) Summary of Jamesian Habit: It makes our lives easier by automating certain tasks, but at the same time can lead to an imprisoning complacency.

outside education, audiences beyond the classroom—including parents, policymakers, employers, and the general public—also can use this document.” Id. at 2. The perceived purposes for the habits are broad: “To describe the habits of mind and experiences that are central to success in college and beyond, this document uses language and ideas from research in academic fields such as composition and rhetoric, writing across the curriculum, and English education that focus on the development of writing, reading, and analysis abilities inside and outside of school.” Id. at 2.

⁴ Kristine Johnson, *Beyond Standards: Disciplinary and National Perspectives on Habits of Mind*, 64 *College Composition and Communication* 517, 524 (2013).

⁵ Johnson at 525.

6. Bad Rhetorical Habits: What are the “Bad Habits” of less successful genre pedagogy?

- (a) **Arsenals of Genres:** In less successful pedagogy, teachers try to provide students with an arsenal of genres for every rhetorical situation they might encounter. As Borges⁶ demonstrates, this is an impossible task.
- (b) **Templates:** Templates form bad rhetorical habits. Some genre pedagogies teach students to look for templates of conventions to follow to write decontextualized genres. But, in the future, if there is no template when the writer encounters a new genre, the writer is stuck.

7. Examples of Less Successful Pedagogy:

- (a) **More and More Genres each Semester:** Administrators push writing teachers to teach more genres in a semester. (I am speaking from experience here. We just went from three to four major genres per semester as a way to providing a measurable “gain” in writing experience for our first-year law students.)
- (b) **Textbook Design:** Publishers push for more genres in FYC textbooks. New editions add more and more genres; accompanying websites provide a dizzying array of more.

8. A Better Question: What needs to happen when students encounter an unknown genre for the first time, after they have left our care? What rhetorical habits do they need to have?

9. Good Rhetorical Habits: The purpose of learning genres is not to learn the genres themselves (a curricular question that often bogs down teachers and administrators, as above), but rather to learn how to approach unfamiliar genres in the first place.

10. Genre Pedagogy as a Process of Discovery: What are the rhetorical habits that effective genre pedagogy would teach? What pedagogy would “encourage useful transfer” per Wardle, above?⁷ When students encounter a new genre after they have left our care:

⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, *On Exactitude in Science*, in *Collected Fictions* (Andrew Hurley tran., 1999). (“In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.”)

⁷ Wardle at 775.

- How to identify a document *as a genre*. (Presupposes that the assignment is a genre in the first place, not a "mutt genre" per Wardle.)
- How to find examples of the new genre.
- How to study examples of the new genre to identify conventions, style, and tone.
- How to identify the discourse community of the genre and locate oneself within it.
- How to put these "discoveries" together and write the new genre. (Here is where less successful pedagogy often *begins*.)

11. What will this look like? Every genre assignment needs to incorporate these habits. This might mean fewer "large" assignments per semester, but each of these tasks is an important step. With practice, by the end of a semester of writing instruction, students might gain these rhetorical habits.