theories and methodologies

The Ways Our Students Write Now

ANNE RUGGLES GERE

Composition studies concentrates on students, not texts. We in this field want to know who our students are. What abilities to use language do they bring to the academy? What new kinds of intellectual work are they able to do? What challenges does academic discourse pose for them? These are research questions we explore with rigor but also compassion and, sometimes, admiration.
—Patricia Bizzell (442)

IT WOULD BE EASY TO ASSUME THAT OUR STUDENTS WRITE, OR AIM TO WRITE, THE WAY WE DO. AFTER ALL, WE, THEIR INSTRUCTORS, PROVIDE them with models and sustained tutelage. Yet, while many students learn to negotiate the genres and conventions of specific disciplines as they proceed through college, their writing also moves beyond the concepts and practices we offer because they have views and desires of their own. A look at history reveals that students' concepts and practices have, in fact, long shaped the ways writing is approached in the academy, and consideration of a recent longitudinal study demonstrates some of the ways students continue that shaping process. The academy, then, offers a space of mutual influence where the expectations and goals of faculty members intersect with the interests and practices of student writers.

Take, for example, the pedagogical practices of peer review, which have appeared in classrooms from the turn of the twentieth century to the present.[1] Sometimes called writing workshops, peer response, or writing groups, these practices require students to read and critique one another's prose in order to become better writers. Peer review can be traced to students' literary societies and clubs that blossomed in the nineteenth century and continued to flourish into the middle of the twentieth. Writing in 1895, David Frankenburger described the importance of literary societies, in which students regularly shared their writing with and received critiques from fellow students: "They form a great practice department in English composition and elocution. The work is so certain, and so uniform in quality, that it may be looked upon as part, and not an unimportant part

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either, of the students' training" (138). Over time, the habits of literary societies and clubs were absorbed into the curriculum. Stephen Wilbers, for example, traces the way student clubs at the University of Iowa in the late nineteenth century required members to "read original work, after which the group would respond with suggestions," a practice eventually adopted by professors: "While there was nothing particularly unique about this approach (writers have always asked friends and colleagues for feedback), the practice formalized by these clubs provided a format that could be incorporated into the classroom" (20). Beginning in the 1970s, as a process-oriented approach to writing instruction took hold, peer review became widely used, as it is today.

To be sure, student interests and practices often combine with other forces as they are incorporated into courses and syllabi. For instance, the emergence of film studies, as narrated by Michael Zryd, was first enacted by student clubs and film societies on college campuses as well as by various film associations, film critics, and innovative films. Together these disparate influences contributed to the emergence of academic departments devoted to film studies. Similarly, for peer review, progressive instructors played key roles during the first half of the twentieth century, until the convergence of changes in theories of language, shifting views on the role of the instructor, and a move away from writing as product toward writing as process provided the momentum that made peer review a commonplace in writing studies. Nonetheless, we should not overlook the extent to which students' commitment to writing and their ways of reading and responding to one another's writing also ushered peer review into college classrooms. Such evidence of how students have contributed to the curricula of writing courses suggests that learning more about how students are writing now can help us consider the potential effects of their writing practices in the spaces of mutual influence we occupy.

Acting on the long-held assumption that students' writing development is closely linked to disciplinary expertise, we faculty members have established programs of study that begin with first-year writing courses designed to prepare students to write in disciplinary contexts. We reinforce this beginning with courses required for a major as well as capstone courses that focus on "writing like" experts in the given field. On some campuses, upper-level writing-course requirements, designed to be fulfilled in the major field of study, further support the belief that expertise in writing can be equated with knowledge of a specific field. Operating from this perspective, we consider students' writerly growth as directly linked to their developing mastery of a discipline's content, methods, genres, and epistemologies.

Currently, students are challenging this link by making choices about majors, minors, and courses, choices that can subvert the assumptions and intentions of the programs of study we have created. On my campus, for example, the upper-level writing requirement was created on the principle that disciplinary expertise and effective writing are inextricably bound and that the requirement should be "generally completed in the major" (Gere et al. 246). Despite institutional policies and the courses that enact them, we found that only fifty percent of students took the required upper-level writing course in their major. In explaining their reasons for fulfilling the requirement outside their major, students frequently said that they wanted the knowledge and skills offered by a writing course in another department, suggesting a desire for a more capacious approach to writing. Significantly, when they were surveyed about the expected role of writing in their future careers, forty-six percent responded that it would be very important.[2] In other words, students recognized the value of becoming effective writers, but many resisted limiting their writing development to the intellectual

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realm of a single discipline in favor of taking a more multidisciplinary approach to writing. Further probing showed that many faculty members and graduate student instructors who teach upper-level writing courses shared students' doubts about the assumption that disciplinary expertise and effective writing are synonymous. They questioned the goal of encouraging student writers to emulate disciplinary experts since few students will actually become experts in the field. Instead, these faculty members and instructors favored the development of more-general writing skills, thereby raising additional questions about the link between disciplinary expertise and writing development.

In a longitudinal study that followed students' development as writers across their undergraduate years, several colleagues and I found even more evidence that students wanted to create their own multidisciplinary paths toward effective writing (Gere, *Developing Writers*). Interviews with a subset of the 169 students in our study yielded many accounts from students who, having achieved competence as disciplinary writers in one field, sought to combine it with competence in another field. Stephanie, for example, was an English major whose honors thesis on *The Fairie Queene* had been commended for its considerable research, demonstration of original thinking, and expression of complex ideas in lucid prose. She described writing as having "huge importance in my life. I'm an English major. . . . I'm always writing essays. I'm always researching. I'm always thinking about how to interact with the writers I'm reading about." But Stephanie also majored in actuarial math and went on to a career in insurance underwriting. In reflecting on how she saw the relation between her two majors and their effect on her writing, she said, "The math side helps me weave from step one to step two to step three, whereas the English has helped me say *why* that is step one. Why step two follows step one" (Gere, "Writing"). For Stephanie, effective writing integrates the logical delineations of mathematics with the literary capacity to interpret and explain complex relationships.

Many of the students in our study selected a multidisciplinary path, instead of concentrating on a single discipline, as they traveled toward greater expertise in writing, but they expressed various motivations for their choices. Stephanie's explanation of decisions about her two majors emphasized pragmatic issues. She knew that writing in actuarial math could strengthen her analytic capacities, and she found great pleasure in the insights gained from writing required by her English major. For Kris, a biology major, the route toward effective writing grew from a desire to make science more accessible: "One of my goals is to be able to communicate with people who aren't in academia but need access to scientific information. . . . We need to be able to communicate our research to these people. I'm from a rural community myself, and I want to make science accessible to people there" (Gere, "Writing"). Kris became a writer through philosophy. She did not find the required first-year developmental writing course particularly inspiring, but she was drawn to philosophy because it gave her a different way of thinking and provided insights into how scientists write. She found she could write about science using philosophical principles, as she did in writing a philosophy paper about the faulty arguments of the antivaccination movement. Ultimately, she wrote a thesis in biology and a successful National Science Foundation application, but she credited philosophy with helping her explain scientific concepts to colleagues in science and to nonscientists. In these, as in the many other cases we investigated, students chose majors, minors, and courses to prepare for the types of work and writing they imagined for themselves.

Student goals, like explaining scientific concepts or fine points of actuarial math to nonspecialists, raise questions about how

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written genres function in the mutually influencing spaces of the academy. We faculty members continually reimagine, write about, and discuss genre. As *Remapping Genres*, a capacious collection of essays in the October 2007 issue of *PMLA*, shows, literary-genre studies moves in many directions and raises fascinating questions for scholars in a range of fields. Rhetorical-genre studies, as articulated by scholars like Carolyn Miller, Amy Devitt, and David Russell, frames genre as social action, recognizing the complex interactions of factors like the social, cultural, institutional, and disciplinary forces that shape writing, and it has added a dynamic dimension to the ways scholars in writing studies think about texts. Both literary- and rhetorical-genre studies speak to a seemingly basic need to classify writing. Few undergraduates have read genre theory of any sort, but many respond to the need for classification by developing their own systems. When Heather Lindemann asked four of her students (college seniors) to sort selections of their own writing into categories, they focused on the goals or purposes of their writing rather than on its formal features or recurring patterns. CJ sorted texts into those that open conversations and those that close discussion, while Robert grouped his texts into "writing for a grade," which was not particularly important to him; "writing for money," such as scholarship applications; and "reactionary writing," in which he was deeply invested. All the students in Lindemann's study developed new and form-based categories for their writing, demonstrating an understanding of genre in terms of the rhetorical purposes it serves, not merely the textual conventions it displays.

Faculty-created writing assignments likewise lead students to consider and develop categories of writing that often challenge academic language about genre. In their analysis of a collection of interviews in which undergraduates talk about assignments and the writing they elicit, Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson found that students tend to divide writing into two apparently mutually exclusive genres: "academic," which communicates thought through reproducible forms, and "creative," which enables the generation of thought. A few, however, understood their writing as a combination of the two, as Grace did: "my writing had always been really formulaic, but writing is a kind of art and shouldn't be so formulaic. It's something that has to be creative . . . but it has to be organized, and I'm always trying to figure out how to match the creativity with the organization." Students like Grace and her many peers often see writing assignments as focused on conventions, precluding the "creative" writing that helps them generate ideas. In response, they resist some of their convention-bound writing assignments because they have not been helped to see the rich rhetorical knowledge that producing academic writing can engender. Some, like Grace, come to understand how the two genres can be integrated in an "academic-creative hybrid," but many continue to see and produce writing framed in dichotomous terms. Students' impulse to create categories or taxonomies to describe their writing and their perceptions about assignments suggests the value of learning more about how they think about genre and of involving them in discussions of genre, often considered the domain of academics.

Feedback, as well as the grades given to writing, evokes emotional responses in faculty members and students. As Paul Reid reports, grading has elicited feelings of resentment from some instructors since at least 1876, when Francis J. Child, Harvard's Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, exclaimed, "'Twenty-five years [grading themes]' and then . . . kicked his chair halfway across the room" (274). Over the years, scholarship has provided instructors with best practices for giving feedback (Brannon and Knoblach; Connors and Lunsford; Sommers; Sprinkle), and it has been assumed that feed-

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back is successful when students make the recommended changes in their texts, but no attention has been given to the ways students understand and feel about the comments they receive. In their analysis of the perceptions that students articulated in survey responses, interviews, and reflective writing collected during the longitudinal study, Emily Wilson and Justine Post found both acceptance of and resistance to instructor feedback, but, surprisingly, acceptance in itself did not guarantee progress. Instead, in many cases, uncritical acceptance led to a lack of confidence and an inability to discern quality in writing. Lauren, for example, gladly accepted instruction: "Instructors are going to be the people that are going to be grading your paper, so like if you get feedback directly from them, you cannot go wrong, because you just follow what they say." By simply following directions, Lauren could not benefit from her instructor's influence to develop an understanding of how to write more effectively the next time.

According to Wilson and Post, students who engaged critically with instructors' comments developed awareness of the various purposes writing serves beyond the assignment at hand and of an audience broader than the instructor. Critical engagement also took the form of questioning or disagreeing with instructor feedback. More commonly, though, critical engagement led students to new insights about their text and writing more generally. Dariella, for instance, explains, "Professors give out the goal of the paper. You [the student] know what you want to get out of a research paper, who your target audience is, and the best way to write to them." Dariella outlines the mutual influence that emerges from critical engagement, as the student negotiates conventions and expectations, on the one hand, and more individuated responses, on the other, producing writing that Child would be happy to grade.

Perhaps our most common response when we consider the ways our students write today is to remark on their digital writing, particularly on social media. It is true that many students use various forms of digital writing and that many go on to take jobs that require them to convey information in digital form. But the bigger story is that the status of writing itself is shifting, and our students are on the leading edge of that shift. Deborah Brandt came to this perception by studying the writing that is part of the everyday working lives of millions of people in our information economy. She asserts, "As writing takes up more time and mental energy, it changes ratios between reading and writing in people's daily literacy experiences. Increasingly, reading occurs within acts of writing and often as an interaction between one writer and another" (13). Counterintuitive as this argument may sound, it begins to make sense when we think of the changing nature of many jobs, the influence of social media, and the many online platforms where writers share their work. When informants are asked about writing, they may not think to talk about reading, but in our study, it was striking how few students mentioned reading as important to their writing. Looking specifically at young adults aged fifteen to twenty-five, Brandt contrasts their "writing-based literacy development outside of school with the kind of reading-based literacy development that is both presumed and promoted by the school, one in which writing ability is treated as a subsidiary or an outgrowth of reading ability" (14).

Our longitudinal study of student writers confirmed the significance of extracurricular writing-based literacy development. Personal blogs; online platforms like *Tumblr*, *Facebook*, *Fanfiction*, and *Twitter*; campus magazines, both print and online; social clubs; religious organizations; political groups; student government; e-mail; internships; campus newspapers; and jobs—these were some of the places students said they were writing (Gere, *Developing Writers*). The category of jobs is especially capacious, since students included

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both on- and off-campus work, as well as research and assistantships that were often unpaid but sought-after since they offered valuable experience and résumé building.

Brandt explains the motivations of young adults as entailing "vocational aspiration—a growing awareness of how writing is associated with occupations and life work" (14), and this, too, aligns with what students said in the longitudinal study. When asked about writing in the discipline in which they fulfilled their upper-level writing requirement, students frequently summoned the word *professional*, which appeared to be shorthand for many features of style and convention in addition to a range of rhetorical strategies that could prepare them for life after college (Gere, *Developing Writers*). An English major, for instance, noted that "it is important for all university students to know how to write in a professional manner because writing is a part of our everyday lives and is necessary in almost any career," and a student in archaeology and anthropology asserted that the upper-level writing requirement "gives me an opportunity to look at the writing styles and thought processes I will use in my future job" (qtd. in Gere et al. 259). This emphasis on writing's importance for future employment characterized the responses of many students and demonstrates, especially since our subjects were being asked about a specific course, the extent to which students' vocational aspirations shape the ways they understand and practice writing.

Attending to student voices and texts illuminates the potential benefits of mutual influence, if we faculty members are willing to listen. The institutional formations of disciplines, manifested in departmental structures, appear to be at some distance from the epistemologies that lead students to chart their own multidisciplinary journeys as writers. Current scholarly discussions of genre, especially the speculative boundary-stretching conversations, remain largely inaccessible to students, but they could inform pedagogy, enabling students to exercise their predilections for classifications and social action. The human costs of providing feedback on student writing could pay higher dividends if students were enabled to call on strategies of critical engagement as they respond to instructors' comments and suggestions. More students might enroll in the humanities if we faculty members attended to their perceptions of the importance of writing to their futures, while also taking full advantage of the spheres of mutual influence on our campuses.

Notes

1. I narrate this history in *Writing Groups*.

2. For a full explanation of the study that yielded these statistics, see Gere et al.

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