The Writing Proficiency Project - Fall 2008

Linking Genre to Standards and Equity

This is an abridged version of an article by TOM FOX, the director of the Northern California Writing Project at California State University, Chico. It can be read in its entirety in the NWP's Quarterly Magazine, Vol 26, No. 4. Available online at www.nwp.org

An eighth grade teacher in California, glancing at state standards, sees her "job" in writing represented by the following list: research report, simple business letter, job application, persuasive composition, response to literature, autobiographical essay, short story, and technical report.

This prescriptive list is typical of what is going on nationally in the standards movement. The movement has largely codified writing instruction into a series of genres that students must master, typically naming forms of writing but not addressing the knowledge required to know when and why to use a particular form. This link between genre and standards is one of the reasons that classroom teachers and researchers in composition have renewed their interest in genre theory.

The origins of Genre Theory begin with Llyod Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" published way back in 1968. Bitzer attempts to define exactly what the title says. Every utterance—in our case, every piece of writing—occurs in a situation. That situation has an audience, a place, an exigency, a history of similar situations, and a set of "fitting responses" on which the speaker or writer may draw. Those fitting responses we would call genres. For teachers, these would include everything from the friendly letter to research reports to art history critiques to lab reports. The audience, place, and history are fairly self-explanatory. The concept with which Bitzer is credited, and the one that took hold in our group, is the concept of exigency.

An exigency is urgency; a requirement for action; a sense that may be ethical, political, or emotional. Bitzer's concept of exigency goes beyond choosing an appropriate form and poses a larger question, "Why write?"

PD Focus on Language & Conventions

Grammar. Many English teachers get really quiet when words like "appositive," "antecedent," and "adverbial phrase" come up in conversation. Why? Many of us have not had much explicit grammar instruction, and therefore feel we don't thoroughly and confidently understand grammar enough to teach it well.

This year's BAWP professional development series, "Teaching Language and Conventions through Writing" started in September with a group of 28 teachers looking at a few Process Writing Assessment papers with a focused eye on language and conventions. Teachers discovered what students know, where they need help, and began a conversation about how to address these needs. Following this, BAWP PD Coordinator Betina Hseih-Protzel presented a simple but powerful strategy for teaching students to use metacognition to improve writing at a sentence level.

October's release days on the 14th and 16th laid the foundation for the series.

Teacher Leaders Discuss PWA Impact

Oakland teacher-leaders of writing are vital to the Writing Proficiency Project (WPP). Recruited by principals and nominated by members of the WPP leadership team, 6th-9th grade PWA teacher-leaders keep the focus on writing at the school sites.

This fall, PWA teacher-leaders from across the District led scorings of the fall Process Writing Assessment (PWA) at grades 6-9. The fall PWA is designed to give schools a diagnostic of their students' writing in a focus genre at the beginning of each school year. Having a district-wide writing assessment with common standards of excellence for writing is critical in a time period dominated by standardized test score data.

The PWA teacher-leader network is responsible for leading site based and community based scoring of writing at school sites. Each year, we see the number of site-based scorings growing and would like to celebrate the teachers who are making this happen!

Cara Johnson, 9th grade teacher leader at Excel High School in West Oakland claims, "Participating in the PWA process has helped our English Department to reach common expectations for what excellence is in student writing by aligning our scores before assessing our students' work. This transfers into our core grade level assessment of writing once we set the standard for excellence. We are also able to collaborate around what areas of weakness exist for our student writers to make plans by grade level to support students in becoming proficient writers of different genres."

8th grade PWA teacher-leader Greg Holtz at Elmhurst Community Prep in East Oakland attests, "The Process Writing Assessment is the first benchmark I've been able to fully incorporate into my teaching practice. The test includes a day of instruction - thinking and planning - before the test, and comes with a metacognitive reflection lesson plan to help students make their scores meaningful after the test. Plus, the opportunity to come together as a grade-level team to evaluate and score student writing was invaluable - all of us will be better writing teachers this year because of it."

For teachers with tight schedules and increasing demands on their professional time, one of the greatest challenges to scoring writing collaboratively is finding time within a tight schedule for meaningful scoring sessions. Taking the time to critically discuss writing with colleagues, however, leads to new understandings and growth in students writing achievement. "One of the most useful results of scoring the PWAs this Fall, for myself and my colleagues at Oakland High," claims PWA teacher-leader Michael Jones of Oakland High, "was our realization that deciding what qualified a paper for a certain score meant getting past some deeply-ingrained biases about writing, and moving towards more objective assessment. We also came to see what a difference "voice" makes--papers of comparable argumentative quality affected us very differently depending on qualities such as control of tone, engagement of ourselves as audience, command of usage, and the confidence to occasionally risk a rhetorical flourish--even if it comes off, appropriately and often charmingly, as trying on grown-up clothes before having

quite grown into them."

The PWA teacher-leader network supports both veteran and novice teachers, recognizing that Oakland teachers of all levels have leadership qualities and the potential to make a difference. Middle school teacher Mary Young reports, "As a new hire, PWA sessions helped me determine how to judge student samples and assign levels that will be consistent with other schools in our district." Developing District-wide standards for writing proficiency is just one of the goals of the Writing Proficiency Project.

This year PWA teacher-leaders have received leadership training to support collaborative reviewing and evaluating of student writing at their school sites during the course of the school year. In addition, teacher-leaders review integrated prompt design, holistic scoring guides, strategically selected anchor papers, and best practices for writing instruction. Training for PWA Teacher-leaders results in leadership practice, improved teaching, and a deeper understanding of the complexity of assessing student writing. Teacher-leader workshops help teachers to facilitate the inquiry cycle around writing at their school sites during the course of the year.

Informed and guided by the principles of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP), which advocates a teachers-teaching-teachers approach, the PWA Teacher-leader Network intends to support all teachers interested in furthering their leadership potential as teachers of writing. We focus not only on reviewing student work, but on supporting teachers' identities as writers.

BAWP PD on Language and Conventions (cont...)

Presenters Greta Vollmer and Jenn Lutzenberger shared their approaches to teaching language while providing us a thorough background in the philosophy and politics surrounding grammar, and how this has affected teaching and learning. Highlights of the two days included modeling of strategies from H. Noden's "brushstrokes" and Jenn's favorite book, Breaking the Rules; Liberating Writers through Innovative Grammar Instruction, by Edgar H. Schuster. Next month we look forward to a presentation from Catherine Floresca, a BAWP consultant and teacher in Richmond who will show us how to teach basics of grammar and sentence structure in ways that are engaging and easily digestible for students. To see information about the BAWP PD series and materials/lessons that have

been presented, please go to www.oaklandwrites.org.

Linking Genre to Standards and Equity (cont...)

We write because we are in a situation where urgency requires us to act—to use writing to address the exigency. We write because someone doesn't know that Lyme disease is caused by tick bites; because someone doesn't believe that it is important that all people vote; because someone, perhaps even ourselves, needs to know the circumstances that caused the Civil War. In other words, we write to inform, to argue, to learn, to humor, to mourn, to prove, or to choose—among other purposes.

But if Bitzer's article answers the question why write, genre studies poses another question: "Why write a particular form?" The old genre theory simply identified text types and made generalizations about their usual forms. For instance, proposals start with background or context, academic articles begin with an abstract, friendly letters start with "dear," persuasive compositions have their claim near the beginning (usually). The new genre theory emphasizes that genres are the result of writers' choices in common situations, choices that are shaped by exigencies and geared toward action. The following quotation, from Carolyn R. Miller's article "Genre as Social Action," sums up this view:

. . . what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have: we learn that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another, instruct customers on behalf of a manufacturer, take on an official role, account for progress in achieving goals. We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potential for failure and success in action together. . . . [F]or the students, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community (165).

What the new genre theory emphasizes is that teaching genres is not primarily about teaching form: it is, broadly defined, about teaching children how to "participate in the actions of the community." It is at this point that questions of exigency and genre need to be considered in the context of standards and equity. As I've made clear at the beginning of this article, California state standards in writing are a checklist of genres: letters and narratives, research reports and responses to literature, persuasive compositions, and business letters. In the curriculum guides, these genres appear as lists of things to do. What's often missing is any consideration of *why* we write these genres—their purpose. Purpose requires exigency, and for students to feel exigency they need to be connected to and to be able to "participate in the actions of the community." For instance, the following point from California writing standards (California State Board of Education, 2004) is clear enough on the "how" but ignores the "why."

1.2 Create multiple-paragraph expository compositions:
a. Engage the interest of the reader and state a clear purpose.
b. Develop the topic with supporting details and precise verbs, nouns, and adjectives to paint a visual image in the mind of the reader.
c. Conclude with a detailed summary linked to the purpose of the composition.

We have here a genre, expository composition, and some characteristics: a beginning that usually occurs in expository compositions, a middle, and an ending. But the essential element, the exigency or purpose of the writing, is not considered. As teachers, before we direct our students toward ways to engage the interest of the reader and state a clear purpose, we have to engage the interest of the *writer* in a real purpose. Once the writer feels a sense of exigency, he or she will be able to more effectively meet this standard.

Standards need to be embedded in good teaching; it's not a simple matter of checking off the list of genres. A couple of years ago, I was at a professional development meeting of teachers in a rural, high-poverty district. The fourth grade teachers had been constructing a comprehensive writing program for their district that met and exceeded the genre requirements for the California state standards in language arts. But the teachers were worried about the fourth grade writing exam. They had heard the powerful but inaccurate rumor going around our service area that that year's exam was going to be a summary. In midyear check, teachers in this district all decided to have their students write an essay that would give them a sense of where their students were compared to each other and compared to the beginning of the year. The prompt was to write about a struggle. Chuckling, one teacher read Ryan's essay:

My struggle is summaries. I hate writing summaries. I have been writing summaries every day for the last whole year. We write summaries of everything. We write a summary and then we write another summary. If I have to write one more summary, I'm going to explode. My struggle is that I can't write any more summaries.

I'm not worried much about this as a "struggle" essay. Frankly it seems pretty

Creating the PWA for Kindergarten—3rd Grade

At the heart of each PWA prompt is a good topic. A good topic will appeal to a broad range of children, tapping interests close to their hearts and experience. Also, its strong links to California standards make it more likely to intersect with the curriculum, materials, and teaching expertise in classrooms all across Oakland.

Each PWA begins with lessons designed to generate interest in the assigned topic by tapping into and developing prior knowledge. As in other fields of study, writers learn more about their craft by studying examples of good writing, so the introductory lessons also include exposure to examples of literature that showcase relevant elements of craft and genre.

An important common thread throughout the prompts is the development of a writing community. Opportunities to share ideas and work with peers on pre-writing activities give students the benefit of oral language development, and also create a shared sense of excitement about the writing project. This component especially supports the English language learners in the classroom by creating opportunities for them to build essential knowledge and vocabulary before putting pencil to paper.

Explicit focus on the writing process lends authenticity to the prompt, elevating it beyond a simple assessment. Students generate their own ideas about the topic, organize their thinking prior to drafting, and write for an identified audience. Although the first draft is collected for assessment, students are invited to begin thinking about revising and editing as soon as they finish writing it. Extending the lessons through a formal revision, editing and publishing process will double the impact of the prompt, as students will end up with authentic pieces of quality writing which they will be proud to share.

Over the course of a year of administering the PWA, teachers will have the opportunity to explore many elements of a quality writing program. In addition to the creation of a writing community and an emphasis on the writing process, each PWA also highlights one or two effective strategies in the teaching of writing at the primary level: shared writing, interactive writing, modeled writing, etc. The prompts are designed to be as teacher-friendly as possible. Very intentionally, the lessons include clear, explicit guidelines for materials, activities and language to use, yet also retain the flexibility to invite teachers to adapt them for their own classes and teaching styles.

Finally, the creation of the PWA itself honors the writing process. A community of teachers and writers helped to shape the prompts at every stage, from brainstorming, formatting and organization, to final revision, editing and polishing.

Forming Interpretations and Revising Meaning

Carol Booth Olson's book, *The Reading/Writing Connection: Strategies for Teaching and Learning in the Secondary Classroom,* introduces many cognitive strategies to help students make meaning of text. Here is one template she suggests (p. 21.)
_____

When we focus on what the text says, on what is literally happening or being said, we are reading. When we focus on what the text means, what its message is, we are interpreting. Interpretations are created by the reader in response to the writing of the writer. What is your interpretation of the meaning of the text you have just read?

* What is the message or BIG IDEA of all or part of this text, in your opinion?

* What in the text made you come up with the message or BIG IDEA that you did?

* Did your sense of the meaning of this text stay the same as you read or did your interpretation change? You might respond to this question by saying, "At first I thought_____, but then I _____.

When you read something that has a deeper meaning and you figure out what it means to you, how does that make you feel as a reader?

Linking Genre to Standards and Equity (cont...)

solid. The author has a clear audience (his teacher), a powerful exigency (to stop writing summaries), a commitment to the community (his fellow students), a stunningly effective use of repetition to simulate the experiences of writing too many summaries in the middle section, and a strikingly clear solution. My worry is not about this particular performance; it's about the droning meaninglessness of all those summaries.

When genres get divorced from meaningful situations and powerful exigencies, as in the case with the seemingly hundreds of summaries about which Ryan is complaining, then the students whom we most want to reach are precisely those who are disenfranchised. These are students who are least comfortable in school, least likely to play the games of school, and most likely to believe that school is not connected to a meaningful future.

Genre theory has to do with equity precisely because it focuses on the idea of exigency, on urgency. Students such as Brian, who have trouble with school, are typically disengaged, convinced that school is either meaningless or perhaps even antagonistic to them. Some rural poor families become skeptical of all institutions, worried that their values or their families aren't supported by them. Many have had negative experiences that support their feelings. Writing, for children who live in poverty, has to be a means to address real-life exigencies. If they only learn formulas for genres, if they only learn forms and not their purposes and uses, if they only cover the list of standards, then students like Brian will continue to struggle in school. Similarly, if Brian isn't taught any forms, anything concrete about genres, he will remain disengaged, convinced that writing is a meaningless act. Both the formulaic ideas of teaching genre and the form-follows-content notion disenfranchise students equally. Students, especially students whose communities are far from centers of power and agency, need to master the genres in the state standards. They need to know how to structure a persuasive letter and an academic essay. We can teach them these with informed and thoughtful pedagogies, using whatever means necessary: models, direct instruction, and maybe even some formulas. But what students need even more than an understanding of *how* to write a persuasive letter is an understanding of *why* write a persuasive letter. If we are to see our classrooms and our schools as forces for democracy, then our instruction of genres has to do more than teach students how to write in these categories; it must also help them use writing to participate in the actions of the community.

The implications of genre theory:

- Genres are taught best when they are embedded in meaningful situations.
- Genres emerge from an exigency that varies from situation to situation.
- The characteristics of genres—their parts—can and should be directly taught but not apart from a meaningful situation or apart from students' experience of exigency.

The teaching of genre, enriched by ideas of exigency and community, is one place to work, to think, and to improve. If we identify genre as embedded in rhetorical situations that spring from exigency, then we stand a better chance of making school a place where the urgencies of our students' lives can be addressed. The teaching of writing is always a political act insofar as the choices we make as teachers of writing affect students differently. Children who live in poverty need hope, a sense of the future, a sense of involvement, and a sense of agency. They need school writing to be purposeful. The thoughtful teaching of genre—its exploration by teachers of writing—is no easy trick that will transform schools. But enriching our ideas of teaching genre is one part of our steadfast efforts to make schools live up to their democratic promise.

References

Bitzer, L. 1968. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (January): 1–14.

California State Board of Education. 2004. "Grade 4: English-Language Arts Content Standards," *http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/enggrade4.asp.* (accessed November 2004).

Miller, C. 1984. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70: 151–67.

Essential Ideas about Writing

In addition to a sequence of writing types and features, the Writing Proficiency Project promotes these essential ideas about writing:

- Writing is a complex activity; more than just a skill or talent, it is a means of inquiry and expression for learning in all grades and disciplines. Writing is the most visible expression of what students know and how well they have learned it. Students write to learn.

- Writing helps to develop higher order thinking skills: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and interpreting.

- Writing is inquiry, problem solving, and discovery. Writing can deepen learning.

- Writing is a powerful tool to communicate one's ideas, experiences, and personal struggles.

The Writing Proficiency Project promotes these ideas about writing instruction:

- In the classroom, there should be a balance of on-demand and student-generated writing and there is a balance between direct and process-based instruction.

- Students need support through all stages of the writing process. Teachers ought to plan using the gradual release of responsibility model.

- Second language learners and struggling writers receive differentiated instruction and frequent, consistent feedback.

- Writing instruction happens on a daily basis.

- Students analyze and talk about their own and other students' writing.

- Teachers need support to develop themselves as writers and learn the craft of writing.

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Please send us comments, feedback, and articles you would like to see in the next newsletter! We really want to hear from you! Amy, Sarah, Steph, and Mary

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Timeline

2008-2009   THIS YEAR

- PWA administration grades 6-9 with collaborative scoring and teacher inquiry around writing instruction

- PWA in grades 4 and 5 at 20 schools

- Field test of PWA grades K-3 in six schools

2009-2010   NEXT YEAR

- PWA administration grades 6-9 with collaborative scoring and teacher inquiry around writing instruction

- PWA in grade 4 and 5 in 20-40 schools

- PWA in grades K-3 in select schools (TBD)

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