

Composition Forum 33, Spring 2016

Hidden in Plain Sight: Occlusion in Pedagogical Genres



Stephen E. Neaderhiser

Abstract: Occluded genres in academia work “behind the scenes” to support and develop an academic’s professional identity. However, while significant attention has been paid to occluded genres that support an academic’s identity as a researcher, very little scholarship examines how occlusion operates in genres of pedagogy, such as the syllabus, teaching statement, or assignment prompt. These genres promote and endorse an academic’s teacherly identity, not only by expressing a teacher’s authority and expertise in the classroom, but also by representing a teacher’s pedagogical philosophy, activity, and experience in other academic scenarios beyond the classroom. In this article, I explore the characteristics of occlusion associated with these genres as well as the implications faced when their rhetorical complexity is obscured by that occlusion. Ultimately, I argue for an increased awareness and study of the occluded contexts of pedagogical genres so that we may better understand how these genres facilitate the pedagogical activity and identities of teachers within academia.

In 1996, John Swales first made the case for occluded academic genres, calling for the study of the genres in academia that directly and indirectly “operate to support and validate the manufacture of knowledge” (Occluded 46). While the “manufacture” of knowledge might be most apparent in an academic’s scholarly contributions, in the form of published books, journal articles, or conference papers, Swales argued that a number of less obvious genres also play an important yet under-examined role in facilitating that process: genres like the grant proposal, recommendation letter, or conference proposal, which are often “hidden, ‘out of sight’ or ‘occluded’ from the public gaze” (Swales, Occluded 46). Using the example of the manuscript submission letter, Swales showed how occluded genres, which are often written for a small or selective audience, function as formal documents that are “seriously invested with demonstrated scholarship and seriously concerned with representing their authors in a favorable professional light” (Occluded 46). For example, the manuscript submission letter not only facilitates the potential publication of a researcher’s work but also rhetorically constructs that researcher’s identity in relation to the reader: through various rhetorical moves, the writer presents himself or herself as being the editor’s peer—a fellow knowledgeable member of the discourse community—while at the same time acknowledging that the editor is in a position of decision-making power who expects the writer to articulate how his or her research is a worthwhile contribution to disciplinary scholarship (and therefore should be published). Yet, even though these genres play a crucial role in developing and representing an academic’s professional identity, they often don’t receive the same level of scholarly attention as more public academic genres such as articles or conference papers—genres that may, in part, owe their existence to those occluded genres.

Swales’ call for the study of occluded genres and their role in the construction of an academic identity has increased scholarly awareness of a number of genres that otherwise would remain obscured. The attention paid to occluded genres, however, has been focused almost entirely on those that assist in the development and support of the academic research identity. Despite the fact that many academics must cultivate and maintain both scholarly *and* teacherly identities, relatively little scholarship explores the nature of occlusion in pedagogical genres like the syllabus, statement of teaching philosophy, or assignment prompt. These genres provide crucial support for an academic’s pedagogical endeavors and activity, much in the same way Swales argues that occluded research genres support and validate the “manufacture of knowledge.” Their occlusion, however, may not be as readily apparent as it is with Swales’ research genres: the syllabus, for example, is a genre with a very public presence in the classroom, and there are a number of books and articles that offer guidance on how to write one. Considering this type of attention and publicity, pedagogical genres may not seem to fit as easily with Swales’ definition of occluded genres as being inaccessible or hidden from public view. Yet what is often less visible—and

less discussed—is how pedagogical genres operate in contexts other than the classroom, where these genres might still play an important role. This would suggest a type of occlusion at play within pedagogical genres that, while not matching Swales' original definition, is still worth examining in order to provide a better understanding of how such genres support and facilitate a teacher's pedagogical activity and teacherly identity.

In order to understand occlusion in pedagogical genres, it is necessary to expand Swales' definition beyond the notion that a genre either is or is not occluded. Occlusion in pedagogical genres is not so categorical a distinction. Unlike the example of the manuscript submission letter, which Swales identifies as having a singular purpose “tightly focused on the submitted manuscript” (Occluded 47), pedagogical genres are not restricted to a single situational purpose. Pedagogical genres serve rhetorical functions both in and outside of the classroom, not only for students but for other audiences as well, as a representation of teacherly identity—the expression of a teacher's pedagogical experience and expertise, values and objectives, expectations and authority. The syllabus, for example, might appear to be a public genre due to its prominence in the classroom, where it communicates a teacher's role and expectations to students, but it also operates outside of the classroom, where it might be read by departmental or university administrators as a sign of how that teacher fits academic expectations of pedagogical activity as well as institutional guidelines. It may function as an evidentiary genre in cases of student grievances or as part of an academic's job application or tenure review file. These other contexts—with audiences separate from the classroom—are often occluded from view, overshadowed by the syllabus' public exposure in the classroom. Other pedagogical genres might not appear in a classroom at all, such as a teaching statement or course proposal, yet they can play an important role in administrative decisions that affect an individual's teaching prospects, such as course approvals or job hiring. These other situations where pedagogical genres operate, outside of and separately from how they function in classroom-based contexts, are often obscured or hidden from view due to the assumption that their primary (or singular) purpose binds them to the classroom. That assumption of explicit functionalism often leads to pedagogical genres being viewed as, in Carolyn Miller's terms, “de facto genres”: those genres that “we have names for in everyday language” (155), considered so routine that they don't warrant attention as more complex rhetorical genres. As a result, their function and role in the various overlapping contexts of pedagogy within academia become occluded, hidden in plain sight within the subsuming context of the classroom.

When a pedagogical genre's dimensions that operate outside of the classroom are occluded, the perception of how it functions is restricted to how it speaks directly to or about the classroom rather than how it might also represent a teacher's pedagogical identity in those other contexts. Its full rhetorical complexity is stripped away, and its multiple purposes are flattened to the single conceptual space of the classroom, ignoring the many other academic arenas that both influence and are influenced by pedagogical documentation. The genre can also become a site of tension when those contexts conflict, especially for initiate members of academia who might not yet fully understand how pedagogical genres play a role in constructing and representing their teacherly identities. Dylan Dryer, for example, discusses the anxieties of new teaching assistants as they struggle with their complicated and simultaneous identity positions as teachers and students, noting the number of genres that new TAs find at their disposal as part of their pedagogical activity: “rosters, syllabi, notes on office doors, assignments, in-class exercises, and comments on student papers” (442). All of these genres help generate teacherly identities for new TAs, yet they are often “routinized” so that the pedagogical purposes and goals associated with the genres become “commonsensical, transparent, or otherwise beneath notice” (442). Without a critical awareness of how pedagogical genres operate not just as routine genres related to a teacher's classroom activity but also as crucial constructors of that individual's identity as a teacher, writers (and readers) of those genres are kept from fully understanding the rhetorical conventions and expectations that shape the genre, in the different (and sometimes multiple) academic contexts within which they might appear.

The analysis of occluded pedagogical genres should be further explored and encouraged, especially within composition studies where our pedagogy is often centered on teaching students not only how to *write* various genres but also how to analyze the ways that genres operate, the roles that readers and writers play in those genres, and the rhetorical conventions that enhance (or inhibit) those genres' efficacy. Although some scholarship has sought to analyze how genres function within classroom settings, the nature of occlusion that hides other rhetorical purposes and effects of pedagogical genres—not just bound to the classroom—remains under-examined. In this essay, I argue that occluded pedagogical genres would benefit from increased genre analysis, allowing us to “deroutinize” the genres that construct and support our teacherly identities. In what follows, I offer a perspective on the nature of occlusion in pedagogical genres, expanding on Swales' definition to account for how different uses and situations of a genre might be occluded as opposed to treating the entire genre as occluded. In addition to addressing the nature of occlusion in pedagogical genres, I also discuss the stakes involved with these genre occlusions as well as the tensions of audience and purpose that arise when the rhetorical activity of pedagogical genres like the syllabus is relegated strictly to the classroom. Many composition teachers and scholars already recognize the value of genre awareness when it comes to our students, as a way to “help

students understand the differences in rhetorical situations and contexts while using the familiar to acquire the unfamiliar” (Devitt 208). I conclude by arguing that it is imperative that we apply that same practice to the genres we write *for* and *about* teaching in order to understand how those genres inform our teaching as well as how they act as lenses through which various audiences might view us as teachers.

The Nature of Occlusion in Academic Genres

When Swales introduced the notion of occluded academic genres, his intent was to bring to light the genres that are often overshadowed in academia, even though they play a strong role in enabling the scholarly activity in which we participate. Such genres typically operate behind the scenes to endorse an academic and his or her work, and individual instances of the genres are not often visible to a broader public audience. For example, the manuscript submission letter, which Swales uses to exemplify his point, is rarely distributed to anyone other than the editorial staff who might be considering the manuscript for publication. Yet the submission letter can play a vital role not only in capturing an editor’s initial attention but also in providing a rhetorical framework that promotes the scholarly merit of both the manuscript and its author. Even though any academic seeking publication might benefit from understanding how the submission letter operates as a rhetorically and contextually situated document, Swales notes that no body of scholarship has treated the genre as a topic worthy of serious study. Most academics, therefore, are faced with the challenge of figuring it out for themselves when they begin sending out their work for publication—sometimes through trial and error and sometimes (if they are lucky) with assistance and examples provided by colleagues or mentors (who were likely in the same position themselves, earlier in their own careers).

Along with his analysis of the manuscript submission letter, Swales offers a partial list of other occluded genres, including research proposals, recommendation letters, book or grant proposals, and evaluation letters for tenure or promotion. In the years since, that list has grown even longer: in addition to revisiting the manuscript submission letter (Shaw, Kuteeva, and Okamura), scholars have also analyzed other occluded genres, such as manuscript reader reviews (Hewings; Matsuda and Tardy), graduate application material (Brown; Samraj and Monk), dissertation acknowledgments (Hyland, Dissertation), reappointment-promotion-tenure reports (Hyon), article and conference abstracts (Lorés; Yakhontova), and even individual academics’ profiles on university websites (Hyland, Individuality). While much of the research has adhered to Swales’ description of occluded genres as being hidden or inaccessible to novice members of a discourse community, some scholars have also expanded the definition of occlusion to acknowledge its variable nature. For example, in his study of the MBA Thought Essay assigned to first-year business students, Brandon Loudermilk points to how occluded genres can be “un-occluded” when novices are granted institutionalized access to examples of unfamiliar genres, arguing that occlusion is “rarely a matter of black or white, public or occluded” (203). Similarly, Betty Samraj and Lenore Monk conclude in their analysis of personal statements for graduate applications that some genres “may possess different degrees of occlusion,” even within instances of the same genre, based on the genre’s situational context (199).

Noticeably absent from the expansive list of occluded academic genres is the inclusion of genres pertaining to an academic’s activity as a teacher, despite the fact that many—if not most—members of academia are expected to interact with pedagogical genres in some capacity. This hasn’t been an entirely accidental omission. From the start, Swales and others have been specifically interested in studying “research-process genres” (Swales, Occluded 46) in order to see how those genres actively promote the academic research identity. Even though pedagogical genres might serve a parallel purpose for an academic’s teacherly identity, they are often assumed to be tied exclusively to the classroom as their primary social context. Since the classroom is seen as a more public site, and one that is often addressed in scholarship and literature on teaching, pedagogical genres are not often seen as being hidden or occluded in the same way as Swales describes for occluded research genres.

Even though Swales’ strict definition for occluded genres does not account for pedagogical genres, I would argue that the concept of occlusion can be expanded to understand the more variable and contextual nature of occlusion as it occurs in pedagogical genres. Pedagogical genres may often get treated as public genres due to their association with the classroom, but they actually function in a number of conceptual sites, intended for audiences invested in reading an individual’s teacherly identity for more than one purpose. Assuming that pedagogical genres only operate within the classroom simplifies and restricts their complex rhetorical nature to that single location and audience. In classroom settings, for instance, a teacher may share a grading rubric with students as a way to foreground the students’ understanding of the criteria by which their writing will be graded. However, in addition to acting as a reference and guide for students, the grading rubric also works “behind the scenes ... to mediate between the genre of a student’s paper and its uptake in the genre of the instructor’s feedback on the student’s paper” (Bawarshi and Reiff 89).^[1] The grading rubric, then, acts to organize and facilitate the teacher’s pedagogical perspective in a way that can be expressed in his or her feedback (the genre that will ultimately be

visible to students). It also might exist as an institutional document, in cases where a department or school requires that all teachers use a common rubric or shared set of grading criteria, thus representing a teacher's participation in or affiliation to an institution. Yet even though the grading rubric might function as a genre for all of these contexts, its apparent role in the classroom may obscure the presence or visibility of the other situations within which it operates as well as the tensions that might arise when the expectations or goals of these different situations conflict.

Those tensions can become apparent, for instance, when institutional expectations conflict with how the rubric is expected to operate in its classroom setting. As a personal example of how this conflict may occur, a colleague of mine, whose department requires all teachers to use a shared rubric, recently had a student question their paper's grade. Despite the end comments that explained how several different problems had resulted in the lower grade, the student argued that their paper matched the description provided in the rubric for a higher grade. While my colleague upheld the original grade, it was necessary to acknowledge that when the department had developed the rubric, a certain level of intentional ambiguity was inserted into it in order to allow for variances in how different teachers might assign the same type of paper. That ambiguity, however, did not align with how the rubric was perceived to function in the classroom, where the student expected it to act as an explicit classification of the possible grades a paper could receive, based on how closely it met the listed criteria.

While some pedagogical genres may be seen as being primarily situated within the classroom, thus occluding the expectations (and possible tensions) that might stem from other potential audiences and situations within which the genres might function, other genres experience occlusion due to their role *outside* of the classroom setting. For example, an academic's statement of teaching philosophy, or teaching statement, may never be seen by his or her students in a classroom. Instead, the teaching statement is frequently described as being a more personal document, offering teachers the opportunity to consider their own pedagogical practices and ideals, to "reflect on their growth and renew their dedication to the goals and values that they hold" (Chism 1). However, despite claims that it is primarily a personal reflective document, the teaching statement more commonly operates in situations where an academic's (public) professional teaching identity is being evaluated, for instance as part of a faculty job application or during reappointment-promotion-tenure (RPT) review. In those contexts, which are typically confidential evaluative processes, the teaching statement's operative role is not as easily visible.

The situations in which pedagogical genres function outside of the classroom are often obscured from a more public view. And even though such genres might have multiple purposes or audiences, this does not mean that they are more *public*. These other situations typically have smaller audiences and distinctly separate purposes than those associated with the classroom, and they are often confidential or restricted in visibility—administrators evaluating a teacher, departmental members seeking to establish common grading policies, or even a single teacher representing (or defending) his or her teaching practices. As a result, these situations are overshadowed by the more public functions a pedagogical genre might perform in the classroom and are thus treated as more functional documents with "obvious" conventions and expectations (for both writers and readers), when in fact they carry implicit assumptions that are hardly intuitive. Not only can this occlusion impair teachers from meeting the expectations of those hidden readers, but it also can negatively impact the classroom—the more "public" arena for pedagogical genres. Irene Clark speaks to this issue in her analysis of the writing assignment prompt, which she argues "does not consist of a simple, straightforward list of instructions." Clark suggests that the writing prompt "is a genre that seems more transparent than it actually is," and calls for analysis of the genre in order to help teachers better identify the assumptions hidden within the genre, especially in how the writing prompt might include technical language that is shared by the academic discourse community represented by the teacher and his or her colleagues—a community and language that is not yet visible to or accessible by students. Without a critical discussion of how a genre operates, the genre appears to be straightforward and "obvious" in its construction. Accordingly, the nature of pedagogical occlusion can lead to some of the same consequences Swales observes with occluded research genres, in that "newcomers to the field, such as graduate students or junior staff, may have particular difficulties in matching the expectations of their targeted audiences" (Occluded 46). Swales may have been thinking about occluded research genres, but the consequences he describes can be attributed just as much to the occluded contexts of pedagogical genres.

The Metatemporal Stakes of Occlusion

One of the prevailing characteristics of occluded academic genres is that they tend to be associated with fairly high-stakes situations. In 2009, Swales analyzed another occluded genre, the personal statement or statement of purpose (PS/SOP), and he comments that its occluded nature means that an initiate, with little exposure to such types of writing, has a lot to lose: "A 'wrong' PS/SOP could block initial entry to an academic career" (Worlds 7). This seems to be the case for many occluded genres; Huiling Ding notes that grant proposals can have a serious

impact on a researcher's success, since they "determine not only what research projects get funded but also who gets tenured and promoted" (12), and in her study of reappointment-promotion-tenure (RPT) reports, Sunny Hyon observes how some reviewers use humor in their review comments as an effort to reduce the inherent tension of the RPT process (187). These various occluded research genres might represent different stages of an academic's career, with each genre having its own stakes and goals (getting accepted into graduate school, being published, receiving grant funding, achieving tenure). However, what's really at stake for all of those occluded genres is the simultaneous present and future success of an individual academic's identity as a researcher and scholar.

The stakes at play for occluded genres create a unique tension, wherein past and present activities or achievements are often balanced against future expectations or evaluations. Ken Hyland observes how dissertation acknowledgements, as an occluded research genre, "often play a metadiscursive role in being physically set apart from the main social and textual product yet function to both facilitate the construction of this product and to comment on it" (Dissertation 244). As much as occluded genres operate "metadiscursively" (for instance, acknowledgments helping to construct the dissertation while simultaneously commenting on it), they also often exist in a "metatemporal" position, in relation to the author's academic identity. Occluded research genres like the PS/SOP or the grant proposal must show how the author deserves attention based on his or her current knowledge and preparation, but they also give readers a vision of the potential value and benefit that would develop in the future, should the readers make a decision in favor of the author today. Hyon's analysis of RPT review comments exposes the same tension: a reviewer's comments are not only conscientious evaluations of a RPT candidate's present identity as an academic and a colleague but also self-conscious acknowledgments that the candidate's future identity will be affected by the RPT review, for better or for worse.

In the case of occlusion as it occurs in pedagogical genres, the stakes are similarly high, and they can influence both the occluded contexts and the more public situations where those genres might operate. The syllabus, for example, lays the fundamental groundwork for other genres in a classroom, and it initiates the transformation of a classroom's basic physical dimensions into "a socially bounded, ideological space marked by course goals, policies, assignments, and course schedule" (Bawarshi and Reiff 80-81). As part of that transformative moment, the syllabus also becomes an entry point by which a teacher's identity begins to crystalize for a new group of students: "one of the very first impressions we give our students is provided by our syllabus. It is the one piece of evidence our students can hold in their hands at the end of a day filled with the jumble of confusion" (Baecker 59). This can be particularly relevant for new teachers, such as graduate teaching assistants, who themselves might not yet be wholly convinced of their teacherly identity: the formal nature of the syllabus lends credibility to the status of the teacher, becoming "one of the first places we assert our authority as teachers" (Baecker 59). The syllabus, then, acts metatemporally to assert the teacher's ethos by way of expressed authority, past experience, and planning, while providing students a view of future expectations—not only what will be expected of them but also what they can expect of the class and their teacher.

Even beyond the classroom, pedagogical genres carry metatemporal stakes—in fact, the stakes outside of the classroom can carry even more weight. In the case of the syllabus, at the same time that it might be establishing a teacher's identity for a new class, it is also foregrounding any future interpretations of that teacher's pedagogy. The syllabus becomes part of an institutional record that accounts for the teacher and his or her pedagogical practice. This record might be consulted in specific cases that refer back to concrete classroom incidents, as in the case of a student grievance, or it might become support material used to evaluate or assess the teacher's overall pedagogical identity, when he or she is being evaluated for reappointment or tenure. In some cases, the syllabus may even parallel the role of occluded research genres like the PS/SOP or grant proposal in presenting a compelling case of support for a teacher's future pedagogical activity. Course proposals submitted for administrative approval may require a syllabus that shows how the course—not even yet taught—will be conducted and how it meets various pre-established objectives. [2](#) The syllabus can also become part of the materials used by a hiring committee, as part of the ambiguously stated request for "evidence of teaching excellence," thus playing a role in enabling an individual's future career. The assumption that a syllabus—or other genres, like the writing assignment prompt or course description—is primarily for the students of a given class can distract a teacher from considering how the document might be used by other audiences, outside of the classroom, to interpret or evaluate that teacher's pedagogical identity. The stakes associated with the syllabus, in fact, are highly illuminative of the tensions between a pedagogical genre's role in the classroom and the role(s) it might play in other contexts. As I discuss in the next section, when other contexts of a syllabus are occluded, its rhetorical functions are collapsed into its singular classroom function, obstructing how other stakeholders might seek to use it.

The Syllabus as both Meta-Genre and Occluded Genre

The syllabus stands as an example of how a pedagogical genre may function in different capacities that cannot be limited to the single context of the classroom. As a classroom genre, the syllabus is what Janet Giltrow identifies as a “meta-genre,” organizing and positioning other genres and activities within a shared social context (196). As the meta-genre of the classroom, the syllabus articulates how teacher-student interactions will occur via other classroom genres (like teachers’ assignment prompts and student essays), while also “establishing the ideological and discursive environment of the classroom” (Bawarshi 119). However, despite the fact that the syllabus may be a meta-genre within the classroom, its activity as a pedagogical genre beyond the classroom is still very much occluded. Charles Bazerman states that the classroom is always a site that must be constructed by genre: “There are genres that flow from the surrounding institutions into the classroom to regulate it; there are genres within the classroom that carry out the mandate of the regulation; and there are genres that flow out from the classroom that represent the work and competence of teacher and student” (60). The syllabus’ occlusion, in some ways, is due to its role as a document whose multifarious purposes might fit any (or all) of the distinctions made by Bazerman. It may be the meta-genre that “regulates” the genres and environment of the classroom, but it is also a pedagogical genre that “flows” to and from other social contexts outside of the classroom. As Amy Devitt notes, the syllabus may perform different functions for each of these contexts:

Within a class, for example, the syllabus sets the rules for the collective’s interactions and defines the nature of their common endeavor, as well as defining the teacher’s and students’ roles. Within a department, the syllabus reflects the rules of the department and university and particularizes the department’s course description and curriculum, as well as defining the professor’s role as a teacher among colleagues. (Devitt 224)

Students might read a syllabus in the context of how it gives them expectations about their specific experience in that classroom as well as how it asserts the teacher’s authority and knowledge related to the course subject (Fuller and Lutz 368). A departmental administrator will see that same syllabus as a record of the teacher’s pedagogical activity and affiliation as evidence of how the teacher is endorsed by the department. Departments may also keep course syllabi on file for reference in case there is a student grievance or a question about course equivalency (Eberly, Newton, and Wiggins 57). Even before a class comes into existence, a syllabus might be included with a new course proposal in order to show that the teacher has made the necessary preparations for the proposed course, in adherence to departmental guidelines and expectations. This single document has multiple potential purposes as a pedagogical genre, each with an audience restricted to the context in which it is being read.

As Diann Baecker points out, the syllabus represents the collision of theory and practice, which can lead to a document “rife with contradictions” (58). Its role as a classroom genre may conflict with its role as a genre in various other contexts related to a teacher’s pedagogical identity and activity. One example of this tension is evident in how advice texts address the possibility that a syllabus might be used by departments or schools to resolve formal student grievances. According to Bazerman’s classification, the syllabus in such a scenario would qualify as a genre “flowing out from the classroom”: the audience is typically administrative in nature, as opposed to a classroom of students, and the syllabus’ purpose in this context is to help administrators (such as members of a grievance board) decide whether a teacher’s pedagogical practice corresponds with the expectations presented to a student—or, in some cases, whether that practice is pedagogically sound. However, advice texts still treat the syllabus as if it has only one possible audience: students in the classroom, who are a product of a culture that is “increasingly consumer oriented and litigious” (Grunert O’Brien, Millis, and Cohen 7). Instead of acknowledging how the particularities of the syllabus might be read differently in this administrative context as opposed to the classroom, the literature recommends that teachers preemptively resolve this tension by treating the syllabus as if it were a contract *within the classroom*, rationalizing that “the syllabus has evolved into a *binding contract* between the instructor and the student, with all the implications we typically associate with that term” (Lyons, Kysilka, and Pawlas 51, author’s emphasis). The role of the syllabus as an evidentiary genre in a student grievance case is therefore subsumed back into the classroom setting—effectively transforming the classroom meta-genre into a legal document—even though the administrative audience isn’t located in the classroom and even though their objective is to establish a decision that might have ramifications for the teacher (and student) beyond that single classroom. In so doing, the rhetorical nature of the syllabus as a pedagogical genre with multiple purposes (and accompanying tensions) is occluded behind a façade of functional oversimplification.

The syllabus as a critically understood genre often takes a back seat, especially in the midst of the many responsibilities faced by teaching faculty. Instead, since its rhetorical complexity is often occluded, many members of the pedagogical community might believe that template-styled formats or pre-existing versions are sufficient for their purposes. As a result, the same syllabus (just updated with new dates or course numbers) might be passed down, “from one generation of faculty to the next with the established format, adhering to departmental tradition and/or custom” (Eberly, Newton, and Wiggins 71). This is a characteristic shared by many occluded genres, in fact, although it has rarely been addressed even in scholarship on occluded research genres: the potential vein of

incestuous reproduction that can proliferate when a newcomer to the genre, unfamiliar with its conventions and forms, creates a facsimile based on a pre-existing sample. A syllabus, for instance, might be based on a previous example, which itself was based on an even earlier example, with each new iteration “inheriting” the same problematic genre characteristics. This may be exhibited by department-wide use of a “shared syllabus,” or it can occur on an individual basis, when teachers might model their syllabi after ones that they themselves received as students. While the use of a pre-made form can help ease an initiate into a new genre, the wholesale replication of a single example can reproduce—or even exacerbate—problematic rhetorical constructions present in the “original” document. It can also obstruct a teacher’s ability to represent his or her own pedagogical identity, since the apparent functionality of the replicated genre can mask the identity stakes at play for the individual teacher.

In his discussion of the manuscript submission letter, Swales notes that one of his chief motivating concerns is that newer members entering academia might struggle to anticipate and meet the “unspoken” expectations of occluded genres (Occluded 46). The stakes associated with occluded genres—both research-based and pedagogical—are often high, so this struggle is a real concern. In the case of the syllabus, an understanding of the genre’s rhetorical complexity can shape the classroom experience a teacher will share with his or her students, but it can also influence how other readers outside of the classroom perceive that teacher’s pedagogical practice and identity. It is important to further research and study occluded pedagogical genres in order to assist members of the academic community seeking to develop and express their teacherly identities most effectively. In the absence of such research, what remains is the body of “how-to” literature: advice texts whose guidance can be compromised by their own inability to “part the veil” that occludes these genres.

The “How To” of Pedagogical Genres

If a teacher is confronted with an occluded context for a pedagogical genre, his or her lack of knowledge of the genre’s occluded functions can make him or her more inclined to follow the guidance found in the advice texts, guides, or workshops that treat pedagogical genres strictly as classroom-based documents. There are actually quite a few advice texts and resources available to teachers seeking guidance on how to write pedagogical genres: books like *The Course Syllabus: A Learner-Centered Approach* (Grunert O’Brien, Millis, and Cohen) or *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors* (Nilson), as well as a plethora of articles with functional titles like *Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy* (Coppola), *Preparing an Effective Syllabus* (Slattery and Carlson), or *Grading According to a Rubric* (Harrell). In fact, I would suggest that the abundance of advice texts for such genres is a testament to the high stakes typically associated with them. However, such advice texts tend to focus on highly formulaic structures and templates without an attention to the rhetorical considerations of the genres, which can lead to potentially risky consequences. For example, as previously discussed in regards to syllabus construction, a number of advice texts envision the syllabus as a contract, glossing over the occluded context of administrative review by stating that treating the syllabus as a classroom contract will prevent any possible tensions in how the document might be read in different contexts. Additionally, there is the risk that advice texts might perpetuate certain rhetorical and textual conventions that are contradictory to the teacher’s pedagogical ideals.

Without a more developed body of knowledge that shows the interaction between occluded genres and the audiences that receive them, the advice of formal guides might come from anecdotal and personal experience more than from a serious rhetorical study of the genres. In the case of the statement of purpose (as an occluded research genre), for example, Samraj and Monk observe that the anecdotal strategy of the “hook,” which was being taught in workshops for medical students as a way to catch a reader’s attention, conflicted with the expectations held by disciplinary specialists in the medical community who were reading the statements (194). A similar situation can be found with the statement of teaching philosophy. Even though this pedagogical genre might not appear within the classroom, advice texts like Helen Grundman’s “Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement” advise teachers to imagine the teaching statement as a direct snapshot of the classroom: “If at all possible, your statement should enable the reader to imagine you in the classroom, teaching. You want to include sufficient information for picturing not only you in the process of teaching, but also your class in the process of learning” (1331). Instead of considering how evaluative readers might look to the teaching statement as a document that communicates an individual’s teacherly identity and pedagogical values, not only in past experiences but even as a future projection of teaching practices, Grundman—as well as other authors of similar advice texts—perpetuates (and reinforces) an assumption that the teaching statement should be a flattened, monologic classroom reenactment wherein the reader is only meant to be a viewer of the depicted scene. In being treated as a strict depiction of the writer “in the classroom, teaching,” the teaching statement may no longer provide a reader on a reappointment review or job search committee with a view of the writer’s broader teacherly identity, or how that identity has been influenced by disciplinary scholarship. An increased rhetorical study of the occluded contexts of pedagogical genres like the teaching statement would help highlight these moves in ways

that aren't accounted for by advice texts. Not only would this benefit new teachers, strengthening their ability to create (and analyze) pedagogical genres, but it would also better inform advice texts in methods to acknowledge the multiple functions of pedagogical genres, including those occluded from regular view.

When advice texts comprise the bulk of the literature on pedagogical genres, otherwise unquestioned assumptions can perpetuate to such a degree that they become considered the "conventional wisdom," even when that wisdom drastically differs from what is found in actual examples of those genres "in the wild" (actively operating in their situational contexts). The analysis of occluded genres and their contexts can bring those differences to light. As an example, in the past few years I have been studying a number of teaching statements I collected as part of a larger project. One of my findings has been that an overwhelming majority of the teaching statements make effective use of disciplinary metaphors when the teachers describe their pedagogical approaches and identities as composition teachers. This stands in stark contrast to the fact that nearly all advice texts on teaching statements maintain that metaphors should be used sparingly and only as figurative devices to help "stimulate thinking, whether or not the metaphor is actually used in the statement" (Chism 2). The assumption made by advice texts is that the mere presence of a disciplinary metaphor is the equivalent of jargonistic name dropping (Beatty, Leigh, and Dean; Kearns et al.; Kearns and Sullivan; Lang; Meizlish and Kaplan). However, this did not seem to be the case in my study: instead of treating metaphors as a decontextualized figurative device, the teaching statements showed an active use of discipline-specific metaphors, such as WRITING-IS-PROCESS or WRITING-IS-A-CONVERSATION, in order to describe a teacher's pedagogical values and identity. This would appear to be a more productive way to show a teacher's link to disciplinary knowledge, as opposed to the suggestion James Lang makes in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece, 4 Steps to a Memorable Teaching Philosophy, which is simply to "cite your sources" as if the teaching statement were simply another form of a scholarly article (Lang). The writers of the teaching statements that I analyzed engaged in the constructive use of metaphors almost as a seamless form of citation, wherein disciplinary metaphors were invoked and actively built upon as a way to show how the teachers' personal pedagogical philosophies were informed and endorsed by concepts of writing and teaching prevalent in composition scholarship.

The occlusion of the situations in which a pedagogical genre may function can result in people even questioning the existence or usefulness of the genre, as can be seen in numerous blog posts and articles on the *Chronicle of Higher Education* website discussing the statement of teaching philosophy (Marcus; G. D. Clark; Clay; Haggerty; Vick and Furlong; Montell, How to Write). The challenges of writing a teaching statement are often compounded by the lack of any consistent expectations from hiring committee readers: some readers state that they do not value the teaching statement but are required to collect them from applicants, while others admit that they don't even know or see the point of requesting statements at all (Montell, What's Your Philosophy). Some even question the value of the genre altogether, such as Kevin Haggerty, who gives away his article's thesis in its title: Teaching Statements Are Bunk. Haggerty enumerates the many reasons he finds teaching statements to be useless, including their formulaic nature, generic themes, empty platitudes, and lofty philosophical notions. Although he may be willing to dispose of the teaching statement entirely, many of Haggerty's complaints illuminate how, in the absence of a more rhetorically nuanced understanding of how the teaching statement operates as part of a job application file, advice texts instead offer generic, "one size fits all" recommendations for teachers writing their statements. Even though there are discipline-specific advice texts for fields ranging from chemistry to political science, they nearly all reproduce a similar discourse that relies on rubrics, template-styled structures, and ambiguous statements tantamount to saying "be yourself." The knowledge that would be generated from the rhetorical analysis of genres like teaching statements, as well as the many other pedagogical genres within academia, would provide a more solid foundation for initiate writers who find themselves needing to write in those forms. It would also increase the genre awareness that readers may have, allowing them to better understand their own roles and expectations when they are reading those genres for their own purposes.

The Imperative of Researching Occlusion in Pedagogical Genres

As I have argued, the nature of occlusion can lead to potential challenges for teachers seeking to produce pedagogical genres most effectively. How these genres operate outside of the classroom may not be readily apparent, but the stakes associated with them can be quite high, and tensions can arise when they have multiple audiences—each one limited and separate, with its own expectations that may not be immediately obvious. By emphasizing the importance of genre analysis with pedagogical genres, we can develop a stronger awareness of how these genres operate rhetorically, not only in the classroom but also in the other academic contexts within which teacherly identity plays a role. Bawarshi and Reiff argue that "one way to construct useful guideposts for navigating academic culture is through demystifying classroom genres, like the teacher's end comments on student papers, the student-teacher conference, writing assignment prompt, and the syllabus" (198). While, as I have already claimed, pedagogical genres can extend well beyond the classroom, I would echo Bawarshi and

Reiff's call for demystification. In some ways, that work can be done as part of graduate preparation, as Dryer suggests when he offers strategies for making the teaching practicum, often required for new TAs, a site where the routine genres of teaching can be "deroutinized" through a genre analysis that interrogates "the interdependent systems of documents that scaffold the seemingly autonomous figure of 'the teacher'" (443). It is also important, however, that we make it a priority to deroutinize pedagogical genres in our scholarship as well, by way of further research and analysis, in order to make visible those otherwise occluded situations of pedagogical genres.

An increasing number of writing teachers already place a value on genre analysis in the classroom: the textbook *Scenes of Writing*, for example, guides students through the analysis of unfamiliar genres with the following steps:

1. Collect samples of the genre
2. Identify the scene and describe the situation in which the genre is used
3. Identify and describe patterns in the genre's features
4. Analyze what these patterns reveal about the scene and situation (Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi 93-94)

Irene Clark, in discussing assignment prompts, offers additional questions that students can use to understand the genres they are expected to write:

- For whom is the genre written?
- What role must the writer assume in writing this genre?
- Whose interests does this genre serve?

While these approaches to genre analysis are not intended to address occlusion as such, they can be built upon to increase the visibility of pedagogical genres and make them more accessible to members of the academic community. In addition to analyzing the patterns and rhetorical moves in a pedagogical genre, a study of occlusion would also seek to identify and analyze what expectations and assumptions might emerge that suggest situational contexts or audiences beyond the classroom. Also, such an analysis would interrogate and expose what tensions might arise in how the genre is expected to operate in those different contexts, and how various rhetorical moves might reveal the stakes associated with the genre's occluded contexts. For example, a number of scholars have analyzed the use of contractual language in syllabi, focusing primarily on how that language is received by students (Baecker; Fuller and Lutz; Parkes and Harris). However, if we ask who *else* this genre is written for, and what stakes are involved with that audience, then another context emerges, related to how teachers imagine their syllabi might be read outside of the classroom as part of an administrative review of a student grievance, or even as the basis for a lawsuit. This context is often occluded, however, as previously discussed in regard to how advice texts treat the syllabus as a uniformly functional document singularly meant for the classroom: even when this "non-classroom" situation is acknowledged, the context and stakes are redirected to the classroom itself. Thus, the syllabus appears to be directed solely and primarily at students rather than any outside reader. Analyzing the patterns of syllabi can reveal tensions in how the syllabus genre functions in different contexts—as a classroom meta-genre and as an evidentiary document—and the complications that might arise when legalistic or contractual language conflicts with a teacher's pedagogical ideals or intended teacherly identity. Not only would an analysis of occlusion in pedagogical genres, like the syllabus, help teachers learn how to write such genres effectively, but it would also help us better understand how those genres both reflect and shape our identities as teachers in academia.

In his book *The End of Composition Studies*, David Smit offers a hypothetical scenario where a university faculty member is faced with the need to write a formal thank-you letter. Even though the faculty member may otherwise be a fluent academic writer, he or she may be unfamiliar with the context of writing thank-you letters. Smit posits that this faculty member would not immediately think to turn to a colleague in composition studies in order to help him or her tackle this relatively uncommon genre, thus leading him to ask, "when we claim to be writing teachers, just what sort of expertise are we claiming?" (164). Even though Smit is using this scenario to argue for a much broader consideration of the expertise held by writing teachers, his thought experiment resonates for me in how we, as compositionists, are in a position unlike many academics. When we engage in dialogue with teachers in our field as well as others throughout the university—in scholarship, faculty development workshops, or individually—we can apply our knowledge and expertise in genre analysis to provide insight and support to our colleagues who, like us, must write and revise pedagogical genres not only for the classroom, like syllabi and assignment prompts, but also for "extracurricular" contexts where our teacherly identities and goals play a role, like teaching statements or teaching observation letters.

As I have noted, some work has already been done in this vein, on genres like assignment prompts, syllabi, and teaching statements, but there are still opportunities even within those three genres for research to identify and analyze the patterns and features of their activity within academic contexts of pedagogy. Additionally, there are many other pedagogical genres that warrant attention, including course proposals, class descriptions, teaching

observation letters, departmental teaching handbooks, or learning outcomes. These genres, and others like them, all exhibit our pedagogical identities in action. If we in composition studies study how these pedagogical genres operate as rhetorically situated documents of identity, not only will we be able to identify and address the possible tensions within these genres when they are expected to satisfy multiple purposes and audiences, but we will also be more able to share and promote the pedagogical ideals endorsed in these genres with other members of academia—initiates newly joining the academic community as well as those who are already here.

Notes

1. Bawarshi and Reiff also indicate that “the teacher may have access to grading rubrics that are *invisible to students*” (89, emphasis added). This suggests that the rubric may be in line with Loudermilk or Samraj and Monk’s notion of variable occlusion, since the rubric’s occlusion within the classroom may depend on institutional requirements or, in absence of such requirements, the teacher’s personal choice to share the rubric with students. This possible occlusion, however, would still be distinct from the occlusion of the rubric’s other roles outside the classroom. ([Return to text.](#))
2. At my own institution, where online course offerings are increasing, any faculty member who wants to teach online writing courses must submit a course plan and rationale for administrative review, along with a syllabus that shows how the class will operate in the online environment. In cases like this, a teacher’s opportunities to teach are strongly linked to how effectively a syllabus (or other pedagogical genres) can support and “preview” that teacher’s pedagogical ability and foresight. ([Return to text.](#))

Works Cited

- Baecker, Diann L. Uncovering the Rhetoric of the Syllabus: The Case of the Missing *I*. *College Teaching* 46.2 (1998): 58-62. Print.
- Bawarshi, Anis. *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2003. Print.
- Bawarshi, Anis S., and Mary Jo Reiff. *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2010. Print.
- Bazerman, Charles. *Constructing Experience*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1994. Print.
- Beatty, Joy E., Jennifer S. A. Leigh, and Kathy Lund Dean. Philosophy Rediscovered: Exploring the Connections Between Teaching Philosophies, Educational Philosophies, and Philosophy. *Journal of Management Education* 33.1 (2009): 99-114. Print.
- Brown, Robert M. Self-Composed Rhetoric in Psychology Personal Statements. *Written Communication* 21.3 (2004): 242-260. Print.
- Chism, Nancy Van Note. Developing a Philosophy of Teaching Statement. *Essays on Teaching Excellence: Toward the Best in the Academy* 9.3 (1998): 1-2. Print.
- Clark, George David. Beyond the Teaching Statement. *The Chronicle of Higher Education Blogs: On Hiring* 29 Oct. 2013. Web. 12 Aug. 2014.
- Clark, Irene. A Genre Approach to Writing Assignments. *Composition Forum* 14.2 (2005): n. pag. Web. 24 Apr. 2015. <<http://compositionforum.com/issue/14.2/clark-genre-writing.php>>.
- Clay, Jeremy S. Everything But the Teaching Statement. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 7 Feb. 2007. Web. 28 Feb. 2015.
- Coppola, Brian P. Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy. *Journal of College Science Teaching* 31.7 (2002): 448-54. Print.
- Devitt, Amy J. *Writing Genres*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2008. Print.
- Devitt, Amy J., Mary Jo Reiff, and Anis Bawarshi. *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres*. NY:

Pearson/Longman, 2004. Print.

- Ding, Hailing. The Use of Cognitive and Social Apprenticeship to Teach a Disciplinary Genre Initiation of Graduate Students into NIH Grant Writing. *Written Communication* 25.1 (2008): 3-52. Print.
- Dryer, Dylan B. At a Mirror, Darkly: The Imagined Undergraduate Writers of Ten Novice Composition Instructors. *College Composition and Communication* 63.3 (2012): 420-452. Print.
- Eberly, Mary B., Sarah E. Newton, and Robert A. Wiggins. The Syllabus as a Tool for Student-Centered Learning. *The Journal of General Education* 50.1 (2001): 56-74. Print.
- Fuller, Mary J., and Jean Ann Lutz. Constructing Authority: Student Responses and Classroom Discourse. *Discourse Studies in Composition*. Ed. Ellen L. Barton and Gail Stygall. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002. 353-375. Print.
- Giltrow, Janet. Meta-Genre. *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*. Ed. Richard M. Coe, Lorelei Lingard, and Tatiana Teslenko. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002. 187-205. Print.
- Grundman, Hellen G. Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement. *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 53.11 (2006): 1329-1333. Print.
- Grunert O'Brien, Judith, Barbara J. Millis, and Margaret W. Cohen. *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008. Print.
- Haggerty, Kevin D. Teaching Statements Are Bunk. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 19 Feb. 2010. Web. 29 Aug. 2014.
- Harrell, Maralee. Grading According to a Rubric. *Teaching Philosophy* 28.1 (2005): 3-15. Print.
- Hewings, Martin. An 'Important Contribution' or 'Tiresome Reading'? A Study of Evaluation in Peer Reviews of Journal Article Submissions. *Journal of Applied Linguistics* 1.3 (2004): 247-274. Print.
- Hyland, Ken. Dissertation Acknowledgements: The Anatomy of a Cinderella Genre. *Written Communication* 20.3 (2003): 242-68. Print.
- . Individuality or Conformity? Identity in Personal and University Academic Homepages. *Computers and Composition* 29.4 (2012): 309-322. Print.
- Hyon, Sunny. Convention and Inventiveness in an Occluded Academic Genre: A Case Study of Retention-Promotion-Tenure Reports. *English for Specific Purposes* 27.2 (2008): 175-192. Print.
- Kearns, Katherine D. et al. A Scoring Rubric for Teaching Statements: A Tool for Inquiry into Graduate Student Writing about Teaching and Learning. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 21.1 (2010): 73-96. Print.
- Kearns, Katherine D., and Carol Subiño Sullivan. Resources and Practices to Help Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows Write Statements of Teaching Philosophy. *Advances in Physiology Education* 35.2 (2011): 136-145. Print.
- Lang, James M. 4 Steps to a Memorable Teaching Philosophy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 29 Aug. 2010. Web. 13 Aug. 2014.
- Lorés, Rosa. On RA Abstracts: From Rhetorical Structure to Thematic Organisation. *English for Specific Purposes* 23.3 (2004): 280-302. Print.
- Loudermilk, Brandon Conner. Occluded Academic Genres: An Analysis of the MBA Thought Essay. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 6.3 (2007): 190-205. Print.
- Lyons, Richard E., Marcella L. Kysilka, and George Pawlas. *The Adjunct Professor's Guide to Success: Surviving and Thriving in the College Classroom*. Allyn & Bacon, 1999. Print.
- Marcus, Jeffrey. A Teaching Statement. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 9 Oct. 2001. Web. 29 Aug. 2014.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei, and Christine M. Tardy. Voice in Academic Writing: The Rhetorical Construction of Author Identity in Blind Manuscript Review. *English for Specific Purposes* 26.2 (2007): 235-249. Print.

- Meizlish, Deborah, and Matthew Kaplan. Valuing and Evaluating Teaching in Academic Hiring: A Multidisciplinary, Cross-Institutional Study. *The Journal of Higher Education* 79.5 (2008): 489-512. Print.
- Miller, Carolyn R. Genre as Social Action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70.2 (1984): 151-167. Print.
- Montell, Gabriela. How to Write a Statement of Teaching Philosophy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 27 Mar. 2003. Web. 13 Aug. 2014.
- . What's Your Philosophy on Teaching, and Does It Matter? *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 27 Mar. 2003. Web. 13 Aug. 2014.
- Nilson, Linda Burzotta. *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*. 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2010. Print.
- Parkes, Jay, and Mary B. Harris. The Purposes of a Syllabus. *College Teaching* 50.2 (2002): 55-61. Print.
- Samraj, Betty, and Lenore Monk. The Statement of Purpose in Graduate Program Applications: Genre Structure and Disciplinary Variation. *English for Specific Purposes* 27.2 (2008): 193-211. Print.
- Shaw, Philip, Maria Kuteeva, and Akiko Okamura. Submission Letters for Academic Publication: Disciplinary Differences and Promotional Language. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 14 (2014): 106-117. Print.
- Slattery, Jeanne M., and Janet F. Carlson. Preparing an Effective Syllabus. *College Teaching* 53.4 (2005): 159-164. Print.
- Smit, David W. *The End of Composition Studies*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2007. Print.
- Swales, John M. Occluded Genres in the Academy: The Case of the Submission Letter. *Academic Writing: Intercultural and Textual Issues*. Ed. Eija Ventola and Anna Mauranen. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamin, 1996. 45-58. Print.
- . Worlds of Genre—Metaphors of Genre. *Genre in a Changing World*. Ed. Charles Bazerman, Adair Bonini, and Débora Figueiredo. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse, 2009. 3-16. Print.
- Vick, Julie Miller, and Jennifer S. Furlong. Writing Samples and Teaching Statements. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 20 Dec. 2010. Web. 12 Aug. 2014.
- Yakhontova, Tatyana. 'Selling' or 'Telling'? The Issue of Cultural Variation in Research Genres. *Academic Discourse*. Ed. John Flowerdew. NY: Routledge, 2013. 216-232. Print.

Hidden in Plain Sight from *Composition Forum* 33 (Spring 2016)

© Copyright 2016 Stephen E. Neaderhiser.

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License](#).



Return to [Composition Forum 33 table of contents](#).