

## Evolving Conceptions of Genre among First-Year Writing Teachers



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**Abstract:** Genre has emerged as a central concept in writing studies, with numerous scholars advocating for its prominent role in writing instruction. Despite this interest in genre, however, research has not explored teachers' understanding of the concept, which is critical to how they address genre in their classrooms. This study traces the evolving conceptions of genre among thirty-three new first-year writing teachers, examining their understandings--and, occasionally, tensions--at different points in time as they encounter the concept in their teacher preparation and with their own students. Through written reflections and focus group interviews, we identify key patterns in how the teachers define genre over time and some of the influences on those dynamic conceptions. Findings from this research have implications for teacher preparation and curriculum development in the context of U.S. college composition.

In the past decade, genre has become ubiquitous in scholarship and pedagogical materials for writing instruction. For example, the term appears multiple times in the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (CWPA) *Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (WPA Outcomes)* and is now commonly used as a key concept or organizing principle for composition textbooks. In writing studies, genre is considered a threshold concept (Adler-Kassner and Wardle), as it is "through genre that we recognize the kinds of messages a document may contain, the kind of situation it is part of and it might migrate to, the kinds of roles and relations of writers and readers, and the kinds of actions realized in the document" (Bazerman, "Writing Speaks to Situations" 36). Further, discussions of learning transfer often emphasize the value of developing students' metacognitive awareness of genre, which may support post-secondary students in new and unfamiliar writing (Devitt, "Teaching"; Yancey et al.).

Although these discussions of genre and genre awareness are prominent in writing studies scholarship, they may be unfamiliar to many college composition teachers, especially new graduate student instructors (often referred to as Graduate Teaching Assistants, or GTAs). GTAs come to first-year writing (FYW) instruction from fields as diverse as literature, creative writing, linguistics, or rhetoric and composition and are therefore likely to bring with them understandings of genre developed through these disciplinary orientations, and through the common uses of genre as formal categories of literature or art. At the same time, most novice FYW teachers will not have formally learned about the role of genre in writing instruction, either as teachers or as composition students themselves. As a result, FYW instructors will bring shared and divergent understandings of genre to their teaching. To our knowledge, no research has explicitly examined teachers' genre theories, despite their critical importance to how writing is taught and how writing instructors are educated. Gaining insight into teachers' evolving knowledge of genre can inform FYW teacher preparation courses, composition textbooks (which often serve as a source of teachers' knowledge of writing instruction), and scholarship on genre approaches.

Toward these goals, we traced thirty-three writing instructors' evolving perceptions of genre during their first five months of teaching a genre-informed FYW course at a U.S. university. Our aim was not to evaluate these teachers' genre theories; rather, we adopt a descriptive approach, identifying their understandings at different points in time as they encounter the concept in their teacher preparation and with their own FYW students. We begin here by considering the important role of teachers' genre theories in writing instruction. Next, we describe our study's design and findings, and, finally, we consider the implications of this research for teacher preparation and support in the context of U.S. college composition.

### The Importance of Teachers' Genre Theories

There is no single “genre pedagogy” in writing and language instruction; rather, multiple pedagogical approaches draw on the notion of genre. It is customary to refer to “three traditions” in genre pedagogy: English for specific purposes (ESP), systemic functional linguistics (SFL)/the Sydney School, and rhetorical genre studies (RGS) (see, for example, Bawarshi and Reiff; Hyon). We acknowledge that these traditions have distinct disciplinary origins and varied classroom practices, but they also share many principles. Most genre approaches consider genre to be central to understanding written communication, and they presume that engaging students with the concept—most commonly through awareness-raising activities—will facilitate the process of learning to use genres effectively. Awareness-raising is typically achieved through exploration and analysis of multiple sample texts within (and perhaps across) genres, helping writers to identify the dominant norms and conventions of the genre as well as variations. Such analysis also takes into account the rhetorical contexts of communication that shape generic norms and practices, so that learners begin to see patterns as rhetorically linked and socially situated rather than as random or decontextualized “rules.”

David R. Russell and David Fisher distinguish between teaching for “genre acquisition” versus “genre awareness.” In the case of genre acquisition, students learn the linguistic and rhetorical patterns of a genre and then aim to replicate those patterns in their own writing. In teaching genre awareness, the aim is for students to gain a sensitivity to intertwined influences of context and form, ultimately gaining a kind of “rhetorical flexibility necessary for adapting their socio-cognitive genre knowledge to ever-evolving contexts” (Johns, “Genre Awareness” 238). This latter approach has become particularly common in the context of FYW, given the unpredictable and diverse range of genres that the students in these courses will encounter. Some argue that meta-cognitive awareness about writing and language is likely to be a more transferable skill than learning specific features of genres, which will certainly vary across disciplinary and classroom contexts (Devitt, “Teaching”; Wardle).

Regardless of the instructional approach, one challenge of genre pedagogies is doing justice to the complexity of genre within the confines of a writing or language classroom—a context that is nearly always removed from the social settings in which genres “live.” In contrast to formulaic, static text types, genres are theorized as situated and dynamic. Texts are classified into genres based on their social actions (Miller) or shared purpose and community (Swales, *Genre Analysis*) rather than their forms—though genres are recognizable by their “stabilized-for-now” (Schryer) conventions, which arise from the ways in which “writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations” (Hyland, *Genre* 4). Opportunities for variation and even innovation are made possible by this durable-yet-dynamic nature of genres (Devitt, *Writing*; Tardy). Additionally, genres are inextricably tied to the communities that create, use, adapt, and teach them; they are thoroughly social and rhetorical, a “nexus of situation, culture, and other genres” (Devitt, *Writing* 25), which embed the values, beliefs, and power structures of the communities in which they are situated (Paré).

These principles of genre theory are valuable for both researchers and teachers, as such theories inform our understanding of language, writing, communication, and learning. Yet, as Ann M. Johns (“Destabilizing”) has pointed out, the richness and complexity of scholars’ genre theories is often at odds with classroom instruction, where teachers tend to emphasize stability over dynamism and convention over variation. She also notes that student theories of genre tend to be more simplistic and rigid than scholarly theories; in her view, it is the job of teachers to “destabilize” students’ genre theories, to “enrich their views of the complexity of text processing, negotiation, and production within communities of practice” (“Destabilizing” 240). Johns’ argument rests, in part, on the assumption that teachers already hold the complex genre theories found in scholarship—an assumption that could be problematic in contexts like a FYW program, in which novice teachers often make up a substantial proportion of the instructor population and may have little or no prior exposure to non-literary theories of genre.

Some scholars have also noted that teachers’ understandings of genre can play a central role in how genre pedagogy is carried out. Without a rich, socio-rhetorical conception of genre, teachers may be more likely to teach genre as static formulas or templates (Devitt, *Writing*; Hyland, “Genre Pedagogy”). Ken Hyland argues that knowledge of genres is especially important for writing teachers because it raises their awareness of how texts create meanings and carry out goals, while also giving them a way to “understand, deconstruct, and challenge texts” (“Genre Pedagogy” 151).

Given the relative importance of genre to writing instruction, the lack of research into writing teachers’ personal genre theories is somewhat surprising. In the K-12 context, researchers have examined teachers’ understandings of SFL theory and its related genre pedagogy. Meg Gebhard et al., for example, followed ten pre-service teachers in an MATESOL program through a semester-long course on language and language learning, examining their changing understandings of how language makes meaning through various classroom genres. They found that, over time, the teachers’ conceptions of grammar became less traditional and more functional, increasingly connecting language to register and genre. In other words, teachers’ knowledge of language, as it relates to genre pedagogy, was dynamic and was directly influenced by instruction.

Dorothy Worden’s study of teacher content knowledge is also noteworthy, though it examined teachers’ developing understanding of parallelism rather than genre. Following two pre-service writing teachers in a methodology course for teaching English as a second language (TESL), the study found that the teachers’ knowledge of parallelism did change over time through structured application activities and expert guidance. Importantly, though, the two teachers developed somewhat different understandings despite participating in the same activities and encountering the same instructional websites on the topic. Possible reasons for these individual differences, Worden suggests, include their prior understanding of the topic, their investment in the learning activities, and their beliefs and values about writing and language. In sum, teacher knowledge of writing-related concepts might be characterized as dynamic, complex, and individualized.

Though it has yet to fully explore teachers’ developing genre knowledge, research in rhetoric and composition has provided valuable insight into the influences of graduate education, professional development, and teaching experiences on new FYW teachers’ developing awareness of academic discourse (Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman), theories of language (Powell et al.), and uptake of classroom and teaching genres (Dryer). Many of these discussions acknowledge the “middle space between teaching and learning” that new writing instructors occupy (Restaino 113-114), as they are often newcomers to both the profession of teaching and to composition theory (Hesse). Through in-depth qualitative analyses of GTA experiences, this body of research has led to new understandings of GTA resistance (to teacher preparation and composition theory) and heuristics for improving teacher support. Our study also offers insights into the first year of new FYW instructors’ learning and teaching experiences as they attempted to develop their own theories of genre and pedagogical approaches. Indeed, the instructors in our study occupied a “middle space,” and much of their understanding of (and, at times, resistance to) genre theories and pedagogies was complicated by this positioning. As Kathleen Blake Yancey suggests, there is still much more to investigate in terms of how graduate students teach and learn to teach, and we hope that our study contributes to these important conversations as the field continues to move toward genre-informed pedagogies in FYW. Our research was motivated by an interest in understanding the potentially diverse genre theories that relatively new writing instructors bring to their teaching and how those theories may shift or evolve as the teachers engage in genre-informed writing instruction. We explore this issue within the context of a U.S. university first-year writing program in which new teachers arrive with a range of disciplinary, educational, personal, and professional backgrounds.

## Methodology

In order to understand the genre theories that GTAs bring to their writing instruction and how those theories might evolve over time, we examined the following research questions:

1. How do new teachers of FYW understand genre before teaching?
2. Do these teachers’ understandings change while they’re teaching? If so, how?
3. What are some of the influences on these teachers’ understandings of genre?

To answer these questions, we followed a cohort of new GTAs through their first five months teaching in a FYW program at a research university in the southwestern United States in Fall 2016. The findings we share here are part of a larger research team’s study that explores teachers’ developing genre theories and their perceptions of genre in FYW. The research team for this part of the project consisted of an associate director in the writing program and three advanced PhD students in rhetoric and composition and applied linguistics; none of the researchers were involved in the GTA preparation.

## Participants

The thirty-three GTAs in our study were enrolled in master’s or PhD programs in applied linguistics, creative writing, literature, or rhetoric and composition. A survey completed on the first day of GTA orientation identified their previous experiences in teaching FYW as well as their prior educational and pedagogical experiences with genre. As Table 1 illustrates, the GTAs’ backgrounds in these areas were diverse, though only a minority of them had previously taught FYW or had integrated genre in some way as a writing instructor. More than one-third of the teachers had completed a course about genre; these courses primarily focused on literary categories such as film or nonfiction.

**Table 1.** Participants’ disciplinary, teaching, and educational backgrounds

Degree Program	# of participant	# with FYW teaching experience	# who have taken a course on genre	# who have taught about genre in a writing classroom
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MA Applied Linguistics	5	0	0	0
PhD Applied Linguistics	3	2	1	2
MA Literature	3	0	2	0
PhD Literature	5	0	2	0
MA Rhetoric and Composition	2	0	0	0
PhD Rhetoric and Composition	5	3	2	3
MFA Creative Writing	10	0	6	1
Total	33	5	13	6

## Curriculum

All participants were engaged in teaching English 101, the first course in a two-course FYW sequence. This curriculum used insights from Mike Palmquist's textbook *Joining the Conversation* (2nd edition) and included a series of scaffolded assignments: a literacy narrative, genre analysis report, and community profile. Though the textbook does not explicitly advance a genre-based pedagogy, it is informed by principles of genre theory with a primary emphasis on the relationship between genres and rhetorical situations. As stated in its introduction, the textbook highlights how "purpose and genre are inextricably linked, by showing how a variety of genres can serve the same purpose and consequently how genres change and respond to a writer's purpose or role" (ix). Genres are introduced as both "general" and "highly specific" categories of documents, as social inventions subject to change, and as closely related to design. Throughout the assignment chapters of the book, readers are asked to "consider genre and design" simultaneously, potentially conflating the two terms for readers. Examples of genres throughout the book include infographics, press releases, magazine articles, and brochures.

In the English 101 course that our participants taught, genre was most heavily emphasized in the second assignment, in which students were asked to write an "analytical report" about a genre used by a community or organization on campus or in the local community. Students were asked to gain insight into the community context by interviewing a genre user and analyzing samples of the genre, using a heuristic for genre analysis similar to that found in Devitt et al's *Scenes of Writing* (93-94). Brochures and pamphlets used by campus or community organizations were provided as examples. The assignment aimed to analyze how a genre functions for the community and to lead into a subsequent community profile project. Although GTAs were given some freedom to make alterations to the assignment, the standard prompt defined genre as "more than just format, tone, and style; genre is a response that developed in relationship to a specific rhetorical situation. We think of genres as forms of social action that help readers act on information."

Throughout this article, we refer to this curriculum as adopting a "genre-informed approach," as genre awareness was not consistently or thoroughly emphasized, but genre did play a central role in at least one assignment and was a key term used in instructional materials and in teacher preparation. GTAs were also introduced to some basic principles for teaching genre awareness, though these principles and related practices were not discussed in depth. As our analysis will show, the definitions of genre introduced in the textbook and genre analysis assignment sheet were influential for many of the GTAs in developing their own theories of genre.

## Teacher Orientation and Preceptorship

Before the Fall semester began, all new GTAs met for a one-week orientation to the writing program and the English 101 course that they would be teaching. Much of this preparation included information for novice teachers, but it also included a brief introduction to genre theory and pedagogy, as well as an activity analyzing lesson plans as a genre. Teachers also read the article “Navigating Genres” by Kerry Dirk, which shares a general overview of genre theory from an RGS perspective written for FYW students; the reading would later be assigned to students in English 101. The new GTAs were also required to participate in a teaching preceptorship that met for two and a half hours weekly throughout the semester and involved both large group meetings and smaller breakout groups with mentors (experienced faculty and administrators in the writing program). Much of the content of the preceptorship involved discussions and readings about composition theory and teaching. As part of the preceptorship, the GTAs also completed their own genre analyses to use as models for their students.

## **Data Collection**

To understand the participants’ genre theories before, during, and after they taught English 101, we collected written reflections at three points: on the first day of GTA orientation in August; mid-semester, shortly after completing the genre analysis assignment in English 101 in October; and in the last week of the Fall semester, in early December. In each reflection, participants were given the same prompt: “How do you define genre? Include some examples of genres. Explain whether and/or how you see genre to be relevant to teaching first year writing. Write as much as you can.” Writing was submitted online; to protect the participants’ anonymity and allow for tracing across individual responses over time, email addresses were collected through the online submission and then replaced with a number assigned by one member of the research team.

In addition, we conducted focus group interviews (FGIs) just prior to the start of the second semester in January, about one month after the Fall English 101 course had finished. Out of the thirty-three participants, thirteen volunteered to take part in the FGIs and were divided into three groups by discipline (four in rhetoric and composition; five in applied linguistics; and three in literature combined with one GTA in creative writing). We grouped the GTAs in this way to help them feel more at ease with familiar peers and also to explore possible disciplinary variation in GTAs’ genre theories. The FGIs lasted approximately one hour (see [the Appendix](#) for questions) and were conducted and transcribed by the graduate student members of our research team. The transcribed data were later linked to the participants’ written reflections. All thirty-three participants were assigned a gender-neutral pseudonym and are referred to with singular “they” throughout our paper. All participant identities were kept anonymous from faculty members and writing program administrators.

## **Data Analysis**

The research team began data analysis by inductively examining data from just three participants to identify provisional codes in the participants’ genre theories (e.g., tied to literary form, social and/or rhetorical, dynamic) (Miles and Huberman). These provisional codes were then discussed, refined, and articulated through a coding table with descriptions and examples. We then applied the codes to the entire data set using qualitative coding software. Next, we double-coded a (larger) subset of the data, refined our codes again, and then collectively coded the entire data set. The research team met at least two times per month for seven months in order to discuss and analyze the coded data. While the participants’ written and oral discussions represent only a partial picture of their genre theories, they do provide insights into some of the prominent ways in which these teachers understand genre and allow for us to see how these conceptions change over time.

## **Findings**

### ***How Do New Teachers of FYW Understand Genre Before Teaching?***

We began our study with the assumption that all teachers would have some existing interpretation of the term *genre*, though these understandings may be contingent and uncertain, linked to general or scholarly uses. The initial reflections, written on the first day of GTA orientation, confirmed this assumption, demonstrating that everyone came to their new position with some understanding of genre. Most of the reflections (61%) defined genre as a category or type of text. This characterization was especially frequent amongst those studying applied linguistics and creative writing and less so amongst the GTAs in literature and rhetoric and composition. Less common were references to various levels of genre, with one-fifth of the teachers mentioning “genres and sub-genres.” Formal conventions were especially prominent in the August reflections, with nearly all of the teachers (88%) making reference to conventions such as style, word choice, structure, syntax, and format.

When providing examples of genres, teachers tended toward literary texts; three-fourths of all teachers included literary genres like fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. More specific examples—such as “gothic and slasher” or “avant-garde language poetry”—were also provided, illustrating again that many teachers saw genre as operating at various levels of categorization. It is notable that a majority of GTAs from all disciplines included literary texts in their genre examples. At the same time, half of the teachers did share non-literary examples in this reflection, suggesting that many of them had already encountered non-literary uses of the term. Our later FGIs suggest that, for some teachers, this prior knowledge was developed through coursework or previous teaching experiences. Teachers’ disciplinary backgrounds also seemed to play some role. Non-literary genres were least common in the creative writing GTAs’ reflections, with only three of the ten teachers’ including them. Just four teachers (one from each disciplinary background) provided *only* non-literary examples, suggesting that, overall, teachers’ early conceptions of genre were influenced more by literary uses of the term than by rhetorical or linguistic uses that extend to “everyday” genres.

Scholarly genre theories tend to emphasize the dynamic and variable nature of genre, but only a small number of the teachers (15%) discussed this characteristic in August. The minimal attention to variability and change is notable because of the concern that teachers may hold static views of genre and inadvertently teach genre as rigid formulas or templates (Freedman). To be clear, our data do not indicate that teachers saw genres as static templates; however, they do suggest that variability was not a prominent feature of genre for most of these teachers at this time. There were, on the other hand, five teachers who described genres as dynamic and emphasized its evolving nature, blurry boundaries, or variations of conventions. Three of these teachers were studying creative writing, and their reflections seem to react specifically to the idea of “genre writing” being formulaic, noting that (literary) writing often, in fact, transcends or mixes genres:

...the distinctions between genres can blur at times (e.g., a creative nonfiction writer may borrow from conventions in poetry or fiction). (Drew, MFA Creative Writing)

In my own writing and the works I like to read, genre is a blurry concept: a nonfiction essay can be lyrical, verging on poetic. (Parker, MFA Creative Writing)

Notably, only one teacher who mentioned non-literary genres in their first reflection also described genres as dynamic. In other words, in these first reflections, the dynamic nature of genre was associated primarily with literary categories. We suspect that these associations reflect, at least in part, the teachers’ prior exposures to and experiences with the term genre in their disciplinary contexts.

Though literary categories and formal conventions were prominent in the first reflections, a majority (70%) of teachers also defined genre as having a social or rhetorical nature. Most common were discussions of genres as being “categorized differently according to the purposes, audiences” (Shawn, PhD Literature) or as “speak[ing] to different audiences” (Hunter, PhD Rhetoric and Composition). While references to purposes and audiences were relatively common, references to the community, settings, or rhetorical situation (concepts commonly noted in genre theory) were very rare, a point we return to below.

Overall, then, a majority of the teachers seemed to understand genres as categories of texts that have shared formal conventions and are written for specific audiences and purposes. Most linked genre to literary texts, though about half also saw it as applicable to non-literary communication. These general understandings demonstrate that many teachers are bringing to their teaching a foundation for viewing genre rhetorically. At an individual level, however, teachers varied—sometimes substantially—in how they described genre, as is evident from the contrasting excerpts below:

Genre is a literary term for a categorization of form and the conventions that guide or govern that form of writing and language. (Jaime, MFA Creative Writing)

Learning environment, socio-political, socio-historical, and other factors of society, citizenship, and economics, among others, along with the individual per se influence the concept of “genre.” “Genre”, to me, evolves and its common trend is the majority of common elements shared within works, intent of the author, and recognition by the audience, which varies in many ways including time, location, and context. (Dana, PhD Rhetoric and Composition)

Genre is a mode of writing which appeals to a community of similarly-minded people, using specific conventions of rhetoric and construction toward accomplishing a specific end. Examples of genre include science fiction, fiction, environmental writing, op-ed writing, political discourse, poetry, and fantasy, among many others. (Harper, MA Literature)

As these excerpts illustrate, new FYW teachers can have very different starting points for understanding genre and

teaching it to their students. These starting points are likely to influence a teacher's classroom practices in terms of how they describe genre and how they see its importance for novice writers. At the same time, instructors' genre theories are unlikely to be static, especially as they encounter approaches to genre through their teaching and teacher support. We turn now to explore such changes.

### ***How Do These Teachers' Understandings of Genre Change While They're Teaching?***

Throughout the Fall semester, the teachers' definitions of genre shifted in interesting ways. Most visible was their move away from more static or literary categories of texts and the increased use of scholarly language in their definitions. Overall, it appears that the GTAs' genre theories became increasingly sophisticated or multi-dimensional, though in some cases this destabilization of their existing conceptions resulted in some confusion or even frustration.

The teachers' discussion of genre as a category decreased over time, with less than one-third mentioning text type or category in the December reflection, compared with almost two-thirds in the August reflection. This shift may reflect a move away from common or lay definitions of genre as more of the teachers became familiar with rhetorical genre scholarship, as it was discussed in the textbook (Palmquist) and course reading (Dirk). In Reflections 2 and 3, some teachers also linked generic categories to socio-rhetorical expectations, a pattern not apparent in the first reflections. They noted, for example, that genres develop as "a response to a recurring rhetorical situation" (Morgan, MA Rhetoric and Composition, Reflection 2) or that genre provides a way to help student writers think about the purpose of writing. Perhaps related were the increasingly specific levels of categorization included in some of the later reflections. While the August reflections primarily included broad-level categories ("fiction" or "blogs"), later examples were often tied to context and purpose in very particular ways ("holiday party flyers" or "a Facebook post about Hillary Clinton as the Democratic Nominee for President 2016").

Notably, references to literary genres decreased throughout the teachers' three reflections, while inclusion of non-literary examples increased, as illustrated in Figure 1. Several teachers explicitly noted in the reflections or FGIs that their definition of genre had expanded beyond a literary understanding. For example, Shawn explained:

at the very beginning of this first semester, for me, genre was something like literary genres, movie genres, music genres, etc. But during this semester, especially when I was teaching the second unit Genre Analysis, I [became aware of] the new/practical/working definition of genre...Almost everything around us can constitute a genre. (PhD Literature, Reflection 3)

Shawn, like other participants, had begun to see genre everywhere, no longer limited to particular literary texts or art forms.

While the general trend in our data was toward an understanding of genre less exclusively tied to literary texts, four of the GTAs (three in creative writing and one in literature) did continue to describe genre from a literary perspective. These teachers consistently excluded references to non-literary genres across their three reflections. It may be that the teachers' disciplinary affiliations and identities played an important role in their conceptions, even as they were introduced to rhetorical approaches to genre. Given the range of disciplinary backgrounds amongst FYW instructors, influences of various scholarly traditions on the teaching of writing is an area worthy of closer study.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of participants including literary and non-literary examples in the three reflections

Formal conventions of text continued to play a visible role in teachers' understandings of genre in Reflections 2 and 3, with a majority (82%) mentioning formal conventions at least once, just slightly less than the 88% who had mentioned conventions in August. In fact, all of the GTAs referenced formal features of genre in at least one of their three reflections, suggesting that these visible features of form were important to teachers' genre theories overall. Given the teachers' roles in supporting students' writing development, attention to formal conventions is not surprising. Genre is not form alone, but formal conventions are certainly part of what makes genres recognizable, and violation of those conventions is often of particular concern for FYW students and teachers.

Though form remained prominent in the teachers' genre theories throughout their first semester, more GTAs highlighted the dynamic and variable nature of such conventions as the semester progressed. Only five teachers explicitly described genres as dynamic in August, but ten did so in December, possibly influenced by the course materials (Dirk; Palmquist). In these later reflections, the teachers typically discussed genre variation in terms of audience and context or in the possibilities for re-mixing or creatively shaping non-literary texts. This contrasted with Reflection 1, in which variation was primarily associated with literary categories. This shift suggests that teachers' genre theories were expanding, with more teachers identifying variation as a prominent characteristic of genre while also seeing genre as operating in multiple domains of communication.

Throughout their reflections, most of the GTAs shared some understanding of genre's social and rhetorical nature, typically associating genre with purpose or audience. References to these socio-rhetorical aspects of genre increased slightly over the semester, with almost all of the final reflections including such references. This shift to a more socio-rhetorical emphasis was most pronounced amongst the creative writing graduate students, with only three of the ten describing genre this way in August, but eight doing so in December. The changes in these teachers' conceptions shows an openness to modifying and expanding existing genre theories as they encountered new knowledge and experiences. Even more interesting to us, though, were the qualitative changes in how the GTAs described genres as socio-rhetorical. While their early reflections linked genres to purpose and audience, later reflections emphasized genres as shaped by context and community, concepts that might be considered somewhat more robust and complex. For example, while audience and purpose can be constructed in singular or relatively homogenous ways (that is, a single audience or a primary purpose), context and community can imply more layered and heterogeneous influences on texts. Audience and purpose identify the readers or goals that shape a text, but context and community describe the complex environments in which texts are produced and distributed, developing their own social histories. We cannot know from our data whether these teachers' shifts in terminology reflect a fundamental shift in understanding, but the vocabulary change is noteworthy, as it reflects a move toward the kinds of terminology used in rhetorical genre studies.

Another notable shift was the teachers' later tendencies to associate socio-rhetorical aspects of genre with its



relevance to teaching first-year writing. For example, Jaime noted in the third reflection that:

Some students were able to connect with the idea that every piece of writing emerges from a template framework—that a résumé is a genre and the individual producing their own résumé is imbuing that genre with their individualized rhetorical situation. (MFA Creative Writing)

Like Jaime, many of the teachers connected socio-rhetorical genre features to their classrooms, frequently mentioning the value of helping students understand how rhetorical situations shape genres and, in turn, written texts.

At the same time, some teachers, including Jaime, questioned the relevance of genre in FYW because of its abstract nature. Our data suggest that as these teachers' genre theories became destabilized and complicated, they were also grappling with how to present these complex ideas about genre to students in ways that were appropriate and effective. For some teachers, this challenge caused understandable frustration, evidenced in these comments from the FGIs:

We were all exasperated, and we even talked about that in our [preceptorship]. I had a talk with the students and said, "Look, I understand you're frustrated. I'm frustrated too. It's ok." (Dana, PhD Rhetoric and Composition)

I think that another really hard part of it was helping them figure out how to be concise enough about genre when I myself was struggling with this dialectic [laughs], you know, yes, that's a genre, but then, you know, when they give me an interesting alternative idea, I'm like, "I can see how that's a genre," alright, and then you get to the point where you yourself are starting to just kind of question it. (Casey, MA Literature)

Teachers negotiated this challenge in different ways, with some acknowledging that there could be multiple definitions or theories of genre. For example, in the FGIs, some teachers drew distinctions between their personal definitions of genre, the definitions they shared with students, and the writing program's definitions. In the end, it seemed that some teachers were more comfortable than others with the ambiguity and slipperiness of the concept, and many felt that more support in this area would be helpful for them as teachers.

### ***Individual Illustrations of Changing Genre Theories***

The findings above show general patterns of change in the teachers' genre theories, but a closer look at individuals demonstrates how the expansion or destabilization of these conceptions may play out differently for teachers. Here we trace how three teachers' uniquely developed their understandings of genre and teaching.

Hayden, a PhD student in literature with previous experience teaching outside the U.S., moved from defining genre as a "medium writers choose to express their writing" (Reflection 1) to connecting genre to "community" and "rhetorical situations." While Hayden's first reflection included only literary examples of genre, such as poetry, drama, and novels, later reflections included syllabi, resumes and playbooks. Hayden also moved beyond seeing genres as templates to being potentially malleable or subject to change. In all three reflections, Hayden saw genre as relevant to teaching because it can help students see "how writing works" and the "connection between genres and rhetorical situation," noting that an awareness of both is "important."

In the focus group discussion, Hayden acknowledged that preceptorship and classroom experiences helped them see a connection between genres and the rhetorical situation, explaining that in a sort of "chicken or the egg" scenario, "genre responds to this rhetorical situation or this rhetorical situation responds to genre." Teaching and experiences in preceptorship also led Hayden to see the relevance of genre in the classroom and to students' lives as they write in "specific genres."

Riley is a PhD student in rhetoric and composition who had already completed a Masters degree in the field and taught first-year writing but had never taught about genre. Riley began the Fall semester with a view of genre as tied primarily to audience and mode; in Reflections 2 and 3, Riley extended this understanding to "something that can be used for the same purpose across different communities," sharing examples like classroom-based genres (e.g., assignment sheets) as well as vaccine posters and arrest reports. A more significant change is seen in Riley's understanding of genre in relation to teaching. Initially, Riley described genre as "extremely relevant" to writing instruction, but later stated that the "word [genre] itself is detrimental to the overall unit for both freshmen and instructors." Several times in the focus group interview, Riley mentioned that a lack of "formal education about [genre]" was a source of confusion. Riley also expressed confusion about the program's goals in teaching genre and seemed frustrated by a perceived lack of teacher support. Riley's experience highlights the frustration that can arise

when novice teachers feel under-prepared and encounter competing conceptions of genre.

Bailey is a first-year Master's student in applied linguistics, with an undergraduate degree in creative writing and English. Despite reporting no prior teaching experience or coursework in genre, Bailey's pre-semester theories suggest a different starting point than many participants, as they demonstrate some previous knowledge beyond common lay definitions. Bailey built on this previous knowledge and developed an increasingly coherent and rhetorical framework for understanding genre and related concepts. This prior knowledge was apparent in Bailey's first reflection, which stated that genre was not limited to literary categories and that it might operate at different levels of specificity. At this early stage, Bailey was already familiar with the term "register" and saw it as somewhat overlapping with genre. By October, Bailey's definition of genre had incorporated some common scholarly principles and terminology and as "not strictly formulaic," stating that writers can intentionally break from conventions for rhetorical effect. Bailey's definition had become more rhetorical in nature and placed more emphasis on the role of writer agency. In December, Bailey explained that their definition of genre had become "more concrete" and also attempted to reconcile earlier confusion between genre and register, stating that "I think the term register can also be explored to help define genre as understanding the levels of formality in certain genres helps give more context to rhetorical situation."

In the focus group discussion, Bailey explained that it was through teaching that they began to understand that "genres arise from specific purposes." Teaching also led Bailey to feel more confident in understanding the relationship between concepts like genre, rhetorical situation, and analysis. Bailey also described genre as useful for students because it can help them understand rhetorical context, audience, and purpose.

These three illustrations demonstrate a general shift toward a more rhetorical perspective of genre over time, though the teachers highlighted different characteristics of genre, all common in RGS. Despite their similar definitions, however, these teachers developed distinct attitudes toward genre teaching during the course of our study. Hayden and Bailey identified genre as valuable for instruction and credited preceptorship with developing their understanding. In contrast, Riley began to question how genre should be incorporated into FYW instruction and identified preceptorship as a source of tension and confusion. Comparison of these three GTAs' experiences suggests that teachers have different needs for developing confidence and expertise in implementing a genre-informed pedagogy. Their unique histories and trajectories indicate a need for teacher educators to be familiar with teachers' starting points and evolving conceptions and experiences.

### ***What Are Some of the Influences on These Teachers' Understandings of Genre?***

In their reflections and focus group interviews, participants identified some of the influences on their evolving genre theories prior to, during, and after teaching their first semester. These included the participants' past experiences and identities, theories and scholarship, experiences in preceptorship, and teaching. Though this list is not exhaustive or representative of *all* participants' experiences, it does help illustrate the complex web of what shapes teacher learning.

#### ***Past Experiences and Identities***

The participants in this study had a broad range of prior educational, professional, and personal experiences. Some teachers claimed that their understanding of genre had been confirmed or left unchanged over the course of the semester, due in part to these prior experiences. Robin, an applied linguistics student with prior teaching experience with and exposure to genre, stated:

I don't think my understanding of the concept has changed so much. I think I had a pretty good understanding of genre before coming here. I mean I've read about it in the past, and in my teaching I've definitely used it, although not as explicitly as I did here. (FGI)

Other participants had also read about genre in other settings, and some indicated specific scholars or texts that had shaped their understanding of genre. A literature PhD student, for example, referenced Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" in one of their written responses. A creative writing MFA student explained that the work of Lauren Berlant, a scholar of English and Gender Studies, influenced their definition of genre. In their final reflection, they remarked, "I think I was obnoxious in my last version of this survey, writing that I like Lauren Berlin's [sic] definition of genre...which I think I sorta misquoted. But basically, that genre is whatever organizes expectations as experience unfolds. I still like that definition" (Devin, MFA Creative Writing). These examples show how the participants used related scholarship to make sense of genre and how prior knowledge remained influential even as new experiences and texts contributed to their understanding.

On the other hand, some participants felt that their *lack* of exposure to scholarly genre theories prior to teaching influenced their developing understanding, similar to Riley (discussed above). Dana, a student in rhetoric and composition with a prior advanced degree in another discipline and no prior teaching experience, explained that “Generally my concept hasn’t changed; in part, I think it’s because I’m approaching it as somewhat of an outsider. I’ve been working. I really haven’t had to think about these sorts of things” (FGI). For Kendall, a creative writing student, a lack of prior experience with genre created feelings of skepticism, rather than the openness that Dana expressed: “In my time in school, we never used the word genre like this, and I think it is overly confusing” (Kendall, Reflection 2). Thus, feeling like an outsider helped some participants remain open to new interpretations of genre, while others were perhaps more resistant because new conceptions did not reflect their previous experiences.

The participants’ disciplinary backgrounds also seemed to shape their definitions of genre. Jesse, for example, attributed their “firm grasp” on the concept of genre to their background in applied linguistics. For a few of the participants with creative writing backgrounds, genre was a familiar term and an integral part of their disciplinary identity. As one participant explained, “The word ‘genre’ is ubiquitous in MFA applications. In every application there’s a checkbox at the top for genre: fiction, nonfiction, and poetry” (Parker, MFA Creative Writing, Reflection 1). Others found that their disciplinary background provided them with terms and concepts that helped them make sense of genre.

### ***Teacher Development***

Preceptorship influenced teachers in different ways. Some participants felt that discussions with instructors, mentors, and fellow teachers contributed to their understanding of genre. Others were more strongly influenced by particular presentations and readings from orientation and preceptorship, such as “Navigating Genres” (Dirk) and a PowerPoint presentation on literacy. Writing a genre analysis like the ones their students would produce, a key assignment in preceptorship, also gave teachers first-hand experience with analyzing genres. As one teacher explained, “doing the genre analysis helped me...to wrap my head around this term” (Alex, MA Applied Linguistics, FGI).

But the teacher support provided through preceptorship was not uniformly met with positive reactions, as suggested earlier in this paper. Some teachers felt that their preceptorship caused more confusion than clarification. As Riley explained:

I guess my concept of genre since August has changed, but not because of preceptorship ... Preceptorship only complicated it...The way it was presented in preceptorship was that we needed to teach [students] what genre is and then they had to do the genre analysis and that was very complicated and not effective. (PhD Rhetoric and Composition, FGI)

There may be numerous reasons why these teachers described such different reactions to their teacher support--varying expectations, levels of confidence, disciplinary backgrounds, different mentors, and prior teaching could all contribute to their perceptions of preceptorship and how it influenced their understanding of genre, as well as other aspects of writing instruction.

### ***Teaching and Course Materials***

For several participants, working through the definition of genre with their students, and sometimes struggling alongside them, contributed to their understanding of the concept. The act of articulating genre in the classroom helped make some teachers, like Jesse, more confident in their own understanding. “I can say conceptually I understood it, but after teaching it I feel like I know it. Which was cool” (Jesse, PhD Applied Linguistics, FGI).

The way genre was introduced in the English 101 textbook (Palmquist), genre reading (Dirk), and genre analysis assignment seemed to have shaped the teachers’ understandings of genre as well. For example, the textbook emphasized the connection between purpose and genre, and it described genres as general and specific categories of texts. The genre analysis assignment defined genre as a response to a rhetorical situation, rather than simply a form, and situated genres within communities. We saw traces of these terms and descriptions in the teachers’ own reflections on genre.

For some teachers, however, the course materials also contributed to confusion or frustration. For example, in the rhetoric and composition focus group, Taylor described the genre analysis assignment as “artificial,” and Riley expressed frustration with it as “really complicat[ing] things for me” in part because “there is no concrete definition [of genre] that I could give. I couldn’t find one. We couldn’t come up with one.” Given the at-times contradictory definitions of genre in the course materials and reading, these teachers’ negative experiences are not surprising. While some struggle with defining complex concepts can be productive, ambiguity may be more frustrating for newer

teachers who are learning a curriculum along with principles of writing instruction and more general classroom management skills.

## Understanding and Supporting Development of Teachers' Genre Theories

Scholars in writing studies have already brought attention to the importance of understanding students' prior genre theories (Reiff and Bawarshi; Rounsaville; Rounsaville et al.) and using these as a starting point for instruction that ultimately enriches and expands existing knowledge (Johns, "Destabilizing" 246). So far, however, almost no attention has been given to the role of *teachers'* prior and evolving genre theories, despite the centrality of such theories to writing instruction, as is evidenced by the frequent use of the term in the CWPA learning outcomes. Findings from our study suggest that even novice FYW teachers do come to their instructional role with prior understandings of genre and that they are typically open to expanding and shifting these conceptions as they encounter new definitions, theoretical perspectives, and teaching practices. Like the teachers in Gebhard's study, whose understanding of "language" shifted as they encountered conceptual knowledge and gained teaching experiences, the GTAs in our study held dynamic genre theories that evolved throughout the five months of our study. Two of the most common changes were toward what many teachers described as a "wider" understanding of the concept (moving from seeing genres as literary forms to a wider range of communicative actions) as well as a "narrower" or "more specific" understanding (as broad as "flyers" but also as specific as "holiday party flyers"). Many of the teachers also began understanding genre as richly rhetorical, situated, and complex.

It is perhaps a useful reminder that these teachers were learning about genre in order to teach it; it was not expected that they develop sophisticated abstract theoretical knowledge of genre (though such knowledge may have been valuable). Rather, they were developing pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), a knowledge of a disciplinary concept specifically as it relates to teaching, including "an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult" (Shulman 9). One challenge, however, was that the teachers were asked to develop such knowledge while trying to navigate a new teaching context with only a limited introduction to genre studies and writing studies in general. The teachers were not required to read disciplinary scholarship about genre but instead relied on their prior knowledge, a single secondary source defining genre, preceptorship experiences, a composition textbook and course materials, and their classroom teaching. These various sources of PCK at times offered competing conceptions of genre--e.g., genre as design, genre as response to a rhetorical situation, genre as text type, genre as mode. As Worden notes, when teachers encounter multiple conceptions of writing, especially those that contradict their existing conceptions, they may feel confused or even resistant toward the new knowledge (28). We noted such confusion and resistance in several of our participants' reflections and FGI comments. In their third reflections, for example, Rowan wrote, "I have a real problem with this new technical definition of this word," Darcy stated, "I'm still confused about genre," and Riley commented that, "We never really got a good grasp or solid understanding of genre, so it was very difficult to teach." These uncertainties in conceptual knowledge would likely further complicate instructors' experiences teaching for genre awareness in their FYW classrooms.

While genre awareness should, in our view, play an important role in FYW, our research shows that assuming teachers' PCK of genre may be problematic in many institutions. Teaching for genre awareness requires that instructors hold a fairly sophisticated understanding of genre *and* of how the concept may be best approached in a classroom with novice student writers (who themselves may hold limited genre theories that need to be challenged). Few of the GTAs in our study began their teaching with this kind of knowledge, and we suspect that they are typical in this respect. Our research also suggests that developing such knowledge can be a complex process.

Writing programs that wish to teach for genre awareness will benefit from clearly articulating program goals and identifying the pedagogical content knowledge needed to teach toward these goals. Reading scholarship on genre approaches may have helped the teachers in our study develop content knowledge along with specific strategies for addressing genre with their students. Such work related to FYW instruction does exist (for example, Aull; Bawarshi; Devitt "Teaching"; Johns "Genre Awareness"; Tardy), but it tends to emphasize conceptual understanding over practical implementation. As a whole, we feel the field may benefit from more teacher-oriented resources in this area--that is, texts that introduce teachers to theoretical concepts with the specific intent of supporting their pedagogical strategies. Additionally, programs wishing to implement genre-informed pedagogy should consider how well the teacher educators are supported in this endeavor. For example, not all teacher educators may have expertise in genre teaching, though our data suggest that such expertise will be beneficial in providing clear and specific guidance to novice teachers. At least some of our participants' frustrations, it seems, stemmed from challenges in navigating the various definitions of genre found in their course materials and preceptorship discussions. As our program transitioned to a genre-informed curriculum, our more experienced teacher educators were suddenly providing guidance in a teaching approach that may have been new to them as well. Expertise in supporting novice teachers through these challenges will come with time, but providing such support may be challenging initially.

In the absence of strong teacher-oriented resources (and time to devote to those), instructors may develop their genre theories in part through the course materials that they use, as our participants seemed to do. Unfortunately, although genre is prominent in many current textbooks, the definitions are often simplified, offering limited support for instructors. Further, most composition textbooks emphasize the acquisition of genre features (usually through very broad genres like argument or analysis) rather than developing students' genre awareness. There is, in our view, a clear need for more nuanced, accessible writing textbooks that engage students in exploring genres through systematic frameworks and consistent metalanguage. Theoretically informed textbooks like Devitt et al.'s *Scenes of Writing* could support teachers in their own development of genre theories that are also linked to pedagogical concerns.

Even with a more robust pool of resources, however, teachers are still likely to encounter contradictory conceptions of genre, potentially leading to frustration and resistance. Several of our participants acknowledged that multiple genre theories exist, and that perhaps they may reasonably co-exist, a position also taken by John Swales (*Research Genres*). Reflective writing can provide one means for novice teachers to make sense of these competing definitions (Worden) and to begin to articulate their own theories of genre and of writing--both in an abstract sense and specifically related to instruction. Reflection has been described as a valuable metacognitive tool for student learning as well (Rounsaville, et al.; Yancey, et al.), and the benefits for teachers should not be overlooked. After all, teachers occupying the "middle space between teaching and learning" are engaged in the challenging process of developing new knowledge and adapting it to unfamiliar and unpredictable contexts (Restaino 113-114) while also being positioned as "experts" in writing classrooms (Dryer 425). Given the unique paths that teachers can take in understanding new concepts (as shown through our illustrations of Riley, Hayden, and Bailey), reflections may also provide teacher educators with a valuable tool for tracing where teachers are at different points in time, and when different kinds of support may be needed.

The research shared here represents only one cohort of new GTAs, and our findings are shaped by the local context, including the course curriculum and the kinds of teacher preparation and support offered. In this case, the curriculum was still relatively new and is continuing to be revised to be more suitable for students and teachers. But while our findings are contextually situated, we suspect that the teachers' evolving conceptions of genre--and the tensions that can accompany such development--may not be uncommon. We hope that future research continues to examine the critical role of teachers' genre theories, including the important influences on those developing theories and the ways in which teacher educators can support instructors in this process.

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## Appendix: Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Has your understanding of the concept of *genre* changed from last August to now? If so, please explain how you understand it now and how that understanding has changed since August. What kinds of things do you think influenced changes in your thinking?
2. If your understanding of genre did *not* change this semester, please describe how your understanding was confirmed through your experience teaching this semester. [might need less time than other questions]
3. To what extent do you think genre is (or is not) a useful or relevant concept for teaching first year writing or for student writing development more generally?
4. Did you have any challenges in teaching genre as a key term and assignment in your English 101 course? If so, please explain them.
5. Did you or will you incorporate genre into your 102 or 107 course for this semester? If so, how and why? If not, why not?
6. Can you share any other reactions to your experience this semester in teaching with genre?

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