"Expanding Communicative Possibilities" in the Public Writing Classroom

Alisa Russell

This article develops a pedagogical approach to increase students' ability to locate and (re-)create publics for the issues about which they care most. By drawing Rhetorical Genre Studies into public sphere theories, this approach blurs the boundaries between widely-dispersed genres (those with large readerships across communities) and narrowly-dispersed genres (those with smaller readerships within singular communities) to show that almost any genre can contribute to public (re-)creation when it encourages public uptakes. The article first explores how these public uptakes work with a case example before turning to pedagogical examples, which include the strategies of (1) mobilizing known genres, (2) selecting concrete locations, and (3) tapping into an ecology. Expanding our understanding of how genres across blurred dispersions can (re-)create publics ultimately expands our students' possibilities for authentically locating, engaging, and (re-)creating these publics.

Rhetoricians, rather than advocating for ideals of citizenship rooted in idealized historical models, may be more effective in keeping open the possibilities of citizenship by noting the current opportunities for civic participation, the consequences of those forms of participations, and the protean shape of the several and evolving public spheres … in this way, we may be able to make local suggestions about expanding communicative possibilities.

Charles Bazerman, "Genre and Identity," p. 34

Across the public turn in rhetoric and composition, instructors have re-imagined the writing classroom as a space for civic participation, community partnerships, and authentic engagement (Ackerman and Coogan; Burns; Cushman; Farmer; Holmes; Kuebrich; Mathieu; Weisser; Welch; Wells). Although written in 2002, Charles Bazerman's call in the epigraph to keep "open the possibilities of citizenship" has never felt so pressing; perhaps this is how every individual on the edge of history feels, but the need for rhetorical engagement seems more abundant than ever. On any given day, our students face a host of public issues that compel them to speak up on behalf

of their communities. Just in the last semester, some of these public issues my students have chosen to write about include:

- Hijab as choice
- LGBTQ+ representation in media
- Discriminatory dress codes
- Disparate education funding across gerrymandered districts
- Teen mental health crises in competitive academic environments
- Communicating climate change to children
- Oil spill legislation
- Sanitary napkin vending machines
- Poverty gaps and food insecurity
- Monopolies driving up prices

However, finding the "forms of participation," in Bazerman's words, that allow students to authentically engage these public conversations is perhaps easier said than done ("Genre and Identity" 34). Jenny Edbauer explains that one cannot rely on the usual sender-receiver models of the rhetorical situation for publics because those models connote a "scene of already-formed, already-discrete individuals" (7). Instead, when it comes to publics, "*the elements of the rhetorical situation simply bleed*" (9, emphasis in original). If we understand these bleeding publics as multiple, dynamic, and emergent, how do students locate and situate themselves among those publics that most affect their lived experiences? How do they authentically engage "the invisible presence of these publics that flit around us like large, corporate ghosts" (Warner, *Publics* 7)?

Writing instructors have responded to the challenge of locating and authentically engaging publics primarily in two ways: The first is to introduce students to public genres that they can reasonably author and distribute. For example, a student may not have the authorial power to publish an opinion-editorial in a national newspaper, but they can engage what Nancy Welch calls "rhetoric from below," which might include "speeches, placards, poetry, murals, chants, handbills, slogans, music, comic strips, street theater, newspapers, and pageants" (480), with the classic example being the letter to the editor (e.g., Branson; Gogan; Weisser). The second major way writing instructors have responded to this challenge is to broker community partnerships or service learning projects (e.g. Mathieu). These partnerships build in entry points and goals for students to engage publics through already-formed organizations or projects. Both of these pedagogical approaches for public writing are highly creative solutions, but, like all pedagogical approaches, they come with their own drawbacks, especially when students develop a savior complex (Cushman); create more confusion and labor for community organizations (Mathieu); move

out of the course before projects can be completed or rhetorical effects can be realized (Gogan); or even face legal repercussions (Welch).

I would like to highlight an additional drawback with these public pedagogies: Assigning what we think of as the usual public genres (like speeches or letters to the editor) may allow students to write about the issues they care about, but students can struggle to locate emergent publics in which these genres can act. Even Welch's "rhetoric from below" leaves students with the task of discursively locating themselves among wide readerships across numerous communities. For example, Welch describes how her student composed poems, but then the student faced the daunting task of "creating rhetorical space where public discussion and debate of the poem's issues could actually take place" (485). Any student can draft an open letter and submit it for publication, but that does not mean that they are able to enact the heavy work of carving out a public conversation among a highly distributed readership and layers of publishing gatekeepers. On the flip side, service learning projects may allow students to easily locate publics by plugging them into an organization's ongoing work (Coogan; Crisco; Flower; Mathieu), but students may not be as engaged because the partnership may not be addressing issues that concern their own lived experiences. Basically, one approach has authentic engagement without a clear location, and the second approach has a clear location without authentic engagement.

In response to these drawbacks, I propose a public pedagogy that may increase students' ability to locate and authentically engage the (re-)creation of publics for those issues about which they care most. This approach relies on a conception of genre dispersion, which characterizes how widely or narrowly a genre is meant to be read and/or distributed. For example, a widely-dispersed genre might be one that is intended for a large readership across numerous communities, while a narrowly-dispersed genre might be intended for a smaller readership within singular communities. By drawing Rhetorical Genre Studies into public sphere theories, I blur the boundaries of genre dispersion to show that almost any genre can contribute to public (re-)creation when it encourages public uptakes. Uptake is defined by Anis Bawarshi as "the taking up or contextualized, strategic performance of genres in moments of interaction" ("Between" 45). That is, uptake describes what can happen in the wake of a genre's social action—the responding or subsequent genres, social actions, events, or other forms of engagement. Strategically encouraging these public uptakes from a range of genres increases students' options for locating and authentically (re-)creating the public conversations they care most about.

To demonstrate how a range of genres might encourage public uptakes, I first turn to a case of the Association of English Graduate Students (AEGS) at State University (SU) fighting for their health insurance. Describing this

case with a genre study exemplifies how a community—quite similar to those in which our students participate—can find itself threatened, mistreated, or underrepresented. Thus, engaging public conversations becomes an essential response, and it can be done authentically when narrowly-dispersed genres encourage public uptakes. I then apply the principles of this case back to the public writing classroom to offer pedagogical examples of (1) mobilizing known genres, (2) selecting concrete locations, and (3) tapping into an ecology.[1] Overall, expanding our understanding of how publics are (re-)created opens up, in Bazerman's terms, "communicative possibilities" for our students in this age when the need for rhetorical interventions pile up around us, but the location of these interventions is seemingly everywhere and nowhere.

Blurring a Continuum of Genre Dispersion

To understand how a range of genres might (re-)create publics through public uptakes, we can look to Rhetorical Genre Studies' characterization of genres as dynamic social actions. In her groundbreaking article, Carolyn Miller defines genre as "typified action based in recurrent situations" (159). Genre, then, is not a mere set of formal features into which content is poured; instead, a genre's formal features are its "traces," while the genre itself is a response to and construction of a rhetorical situation (Devitt, "Generalizing"). Genres may develop as an appropriate response to a recurring situation, but genres in turn shape how we go about defining the situations we encounter. As Bazerman puts it, genres are "forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action […] Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact" ("The Life of Genre" 19). Since genres are social actions within particular contexts, some have raised the question of whether genres can be taught in a classroom setting at all (e.g., Freedman; Wardle). While a number of genre pedagogies have been explored in the wake of these critiques (see Devitt, *Writing*; Reiff; Reiff and Bawarshi, "Tracing"), one response has been the integration of public writing in the classroom.

Although rarely described in terms of genre, per se, public sphere theories have long recognized the vital role of textual actions in public (re-)creation (Asen; Hauser; Warner, "Publics"). Susan Wells describes public discourse as "a complex array of discursive practices, including forms of writing, speech, and media performance, historically situated and contested" (328), and Michael Warner describes publics as "the concatenation of texts through time" ("Publics" 420). These descriptions of the public sphere imply that an assemblage of genres as social actions are the backbone of public (re-)creation. Even from a classroom setting, students can hypothetically access and engage public genres more authentically than, say, workplace genres or disciplinary genres because these public genres are not necessarily confined to a singular

setting or community of practice. For example, Paula Mathieu describes the public turn in composition as a way to "connect the writing that students… do with 'real world' texts, events, and exigencies" (1); Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff trace public genres as a way to create "more authentic contexts for writing or authentic engagement of writers" (*Genre: An Introduction* 206); and Christian Weisser advocates for public writing since it is "often directed toward a particular audience who might be influenced by a student's writing" (92).

However, we should look more closely at which genres—and which genre dispersions—we consider capable of connecting our students to the publics they wish to enter. To locate the shaping role of genre as social action in the (re-)creation of publics, most scholars focus on widely-dispersed genres, like patents (Bazerman, "Systems") or zoning codes (Dryer). Loosely characterized, these are genres whose actions are meant for a large readership and which are distributed widely across community contexts. These genres also require the composer to discursively locate themselves beyond their usual communities, experiences, and/or knowledge since widely-dispersed public genres work across these boundaries (and can act meaningful across different communities). For example, in Reiff and Bawarshi's recent edited collection, *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, the contributing authors each focus on widely-dispersed genres such as science blogs, YouTube videos, activist websites, news magazines, dictionaries, petitions, vocational guides, jury deliberations, and documentaries. Warner additionally hints at the "publicness" of certain genres when he writes, "[a public] exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, websites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced" ("Publics" 413). The far-reaching readership across communities is part of why these widely-dispersed genres seem so successful in (re-)creating publics.

Perhaps this is why many public pedagogies incorporate widely-dispersed genres. As examples, Richard Coe assigns political briefs; Trimbur assigns news articles plus another appropriate genre (brochure, pamphlet, flyer, poster, video, radio announcement, website, etc.); and Gogan assigns letters-to-the-editor. While students can (and perhaps even should) compose these widely-dispersed genres, this option is perhaps more complicated than it seems because students still must contend with how to locate and meaningfully engage the emergent public they wish to enter. For example, Tyler Branson shows that just because students compose these widely-dispersed genres (in his case, editorials) does not mean they "count" as public discourse since they are still decontextualized in the classroom; he instead describes emergent public literacies in which students use these classroom opportunities to play with what it might mean to (re-)create publics (130). I would add that focusing on one of these widely-dispersed genres in isolation could miss an ecological, networked view that is so essential for public (re-)creation.

As a counterpoint, recent literature calls into question whether it is only these widely-dispersed genres that can contribute to the (re-)creation of publics by pointing to genres at the other end of the dispersion continuum—narrowly-dispersed genres whose actions are meant for a smaller readership and are distributed within singular communities—as essential for public (re-)creation. In "Ecological, Pedagogical, and Public Rhetoric," Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber argue that we have focused too heavily on locating publics in "monumental" texts to the ignorance of myriad "mundane" texts that also (re-)create publics. They examine the Montgomery Bus Boycott to exemplify how

> a complex concatenation of texts and rhetorical acts, both mundane and monumental, propelled the movement—logistical and organizational texts to keep the boycott going, information and motivational texts to inspire the boycotters, and advocacy, public relations, ally building, fundraising, and legal texts to represent the movement to various other publics. (200)

Rivers and Weber, then, expand our conception of publics beyond widely-dispersed genres only. Publics don't exist only in the newspaper advertisement, but also the private correspondence and invoices that made the newspaper advertisement possible. Likewise, Graham Smart traces the Bank of Canada's Communications Strategy, which is the collection of widely-dispersed texts that directly construct and interact with the public, such as the annually-published *Monetary Policy Report*. What Smart finds is that he cannot fully understand these widely-dispersed genres without also examining "behind-the-scenes" genres, those "not visible to the outside world" (21). That is because these behind-the-scenes genres allow for the creation of the widely-dispersed genres. The meetings with writers and editors about the *Monetary Policy Report* are just as essential for the (re-)creation of that public as the report itself. It seems, then, that narrowly-dispersed genres deserve our attention in the public writing classroom just as much as widely-dispersed genres.

In fact, narrowly-dispersed genres and widely-dispersed genres may not be as concretely stationed at two edges of a continuum as they may seem (which is why I've gone for loose characterizations of these terms as opposed to concrete definitions). Instead, each genre's distributed readerships and community boundaries become blurred when we understand the genres, actions, and events that (re-)create publics as ecologically bound (and simultaneously extended) by uptake. Introduced by Anne Freadman, uptake focuses on what happens at the boundaries of genres and the interplays between genres. In public sphere theory, the relationship between texts, actions, and events that uptake describes is essential for the (re-)creation of publics. As Warner explains:

> Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption. (*Publics* 16)

Thus, genres that are narrowly-dispersed, widely-dispersed, or somewhere in between can all contribute to the (re-)creation of publics when they secure public uptakes. These public uptakes may take the form of other texts, but they can also take the form of additional actions, events, entities, or even simple attention. For example, while Rivers and Weber do not use the term uptake explicitly, they evoke it when they observe, "Meetings and meeting minutes become as rhetorically influential as the actions they spawn, and the rhetoric that gets an audience to a speech and motivates them afterward must be considered as important as the speech itself" (197). Here, we see uptake happening between and at the edge of narrowly-dispersed genres (meetings and meeting minutes) to encourage participation in a widely-dispersed genre (speech), which then assumedly encourages attention and actions that further sustain the public conversation.

Because uptake can both bind and extend genres within and across dispersions, students can authentically engage publics that relate to their own lived experiences by encouraging public uptakes from whatever genres are already accessible to them based on their communities, experiences, and/or knowledge. This means composing genres with which students are already familiar, or to which they already have authorial access, or within which they can discursively locate themselves among a vast ecology. Opening these possibilities in the public writing classroom increases students' ability to authentically (re-) create the publics they care most about while still recognizing the ecological complexity of these publics.

In the next section, I follow Rivers and Weber's model of presenting a case from which we can extract pedagogical possibilities. In an IRB-exempted genre study of the Association of English Graduate Students (AEGS) fight for graduate student health insurance, I examine how genres across dispersions can secure public uptakes. This case example provides foundational principles for how we might teach and assign public writing in our classrooms.

A Case Study: AEGS and GTA Health Insurance

On September 28, 2016, all graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) at SU received a shocking email announcing that a recent federal ruling meant the university could no longer subsidize health plans for graduate students. On receiving this email, AEGS members did not engage in any widely-dispersed

genres as traditionally conceived: no letter-writing campaigns, no news articles, no university-wide meetings, no letters to the editor. Instead, they encouraged public uptakes from the extant, narrowly-dispersed genres of their organization: Facebook posts, listserv emails, and in-person meeting agendas. As a member of AEGS, I was initially drawn to the range of genres AEGS used to engage the GTA health insurance issue. I formalized this genre study by drawing on Anthony Paré and Graham Smart's guidelines to study genres as social actions. They describe four dimensions of genre regularities: (1) textual features, (2) social roles, (3) the composing process, and (4) reading practices. These complex and situated dimensions of genre invite a wide range of data collection techniques beyond analyzing texts alone. As Bazerman explains, especially when researchers are users of the genres they study, they must work at "increasing our knowledge and perspective through research such as examining most texts in a more regularized way; interviewing and observing more writers and readers; and ethnographically documenting how texts are used in organizations" ("Speech Acts" 321-22).

Toward these ends, I collected and analyzed all of the texts that engaged the public issue of GTA health insurance from its start with the original inflammatory email from HR on September 28, 2016, to the reversal of that inflammatory email by October 24, 2016. Textual analysis alone only reveals traces of a genre (Devitt, "Generalizing" 575); therefore, I interviewed five AEGS members (Table 1) to learn more about how these genres usually act within AEGS, how they were used to encourage public uptakes, and what public uptakes they did or did not secure. These participants were chosen because they represented a cross-section of AEGS members during the graduate student health insurance conversations.

Table 1: Participants in the AEGS interviews

Participant	Track and Standing	AEGS Position	University Health Insurance
Liz	MA Literature (3rd year)	Co-President (high involvement)	Enrolled
Kenneth	MA English Language Studies (3rd year)	Member (limited involvement)	Not enrolled
Pam	MA Rhetoric and Composition (1st year)	Member (limited involvement)	Enrolled
Leslie	PhD Rhetoric and Composition (2nd year)	First- and Second-Year English Committee and Fundraising Committee (high involvement)	Enrolled
Dee	PhD Rhetoric and Composition (1st year)	First-Year Liaison for Rhetoric and Composition (high involvement)	Enrolled

Overall, AEGS members (re-)created this public conversation with three genres that were already part of their usual repertoire and narrowly-dispersed within their organization: (1) Facebook page posts, (2) listserv emails, and (3) a monthly in-person meeting. (Re-)creating the public conversation around GTA health insurance with these genres became possible when they encouraged public uptakes. Recall that public uptakes may take the form of other texts, but they can also take the form of additional actions, events, entities, or even simple attention. In the following sections, I briefly treat each genre for its usual purpose, the ways in which it encouraged public uptakes, and the public uptakes it did or did not secure.

Facebook Page Posts

Figure 1. "Initial post and responses about graduate student health insurance on the AEGS Facebook page"

The AEGS Facebook page is a closed group to which all members who have a Facebook account are added when they are admitted to the graduate English program. Liz described the Facebook page as the "dialogue hub of AEGS," and all of the interviewees agreed that the Facebook page serves as an informal space for members to ask questions, share information, and express emotions. They described the Facebook page as a "casual space" (Leslie) that serves both "academic and social" (Pam) needs. The usual generic actions of the Facebook page remained intact during the graduate student health insurance issue—different members asked questions, shared information, and expressed

emotion. However, unlike usual Facebook posts, all twelve posts about graduate student health insurance directed AEGS members to take up genres or actions that would allow them to enter the larger public conversation. These public uptakes were encouraged through announcements, shares, or links. For example, the initial post about graduate student health insurance directs members to an email from the Office of Graduate Studies (Fig. 1). Examples of other posts include a link to a petition generated by the university's Graduate Affairs Director, an announcement of the time and location of meetings hosted by human resources, and links to a university climate survey from the Chancellor's Office.

Some AEGS members engaged in these public uptakes and others did not, which is why Bawarshi refers to uptake as a site of agency, or "ideological interstices" and "choice points" ("Genres as Forms" 80, 88). Bawarshi persuasively argues that, in moments of uptake selection, elements like "history, materiality, embodiment, improvisations, and other *agentive* factors" come into play ("Accounting" 188, emphasis in original). What genres are taken up, by whom, and how will always be shaped by these agentive factors. For example, because Kenneth was not enrolled in university health insurance and because he is not active on Facebook, he did not engage with any of the posts. Similarly, Pam clicked links on the Facebook page to primarily gather information, and, though she also watched Dee's video and completed the AEGS survey, she did not attend the human resource meetings or engage in active resistance. On the flip side, Leslie followed every link, took every survey, signed every petition, and attended every meeting because she wanted "to do everything [she] could as an individual" to let as many people as possible know that "this is not okay." She explained that part of why she started her PhD program at the time she did was because she was turning 26 and would need health insurance, so she was rather angry that her insurance was being threatened. Dee also took the surveys, but unlike the other interviewees, she did not use the Facebook page as her main source of information and involvement because she was a member of the Graduate Teaching Assistant Coalition (GTAC; the graduate student union) and got most of her information there. Overall, we see that in the wake of the graduate student health insurance issue, the AEGS Facebook posts—instead of securing uptakes solely focused on usual AEGS business—encouraged public uptakes that gave members an entry into the public conversation about GTA health insurance. Some AEGS members seemed to mostly join this public by "mere attention" (Warner, "Publics" 419), but other members seemed to become active in the (re-)creation of the public from there.

Listserv Emails

The AEGS listserv, the second rather narrowly-dispersed genre that encouraged public uptakes, primarily worked in concert with the Facebook posts. Unlike the Facebook group, which is characterized as a communal space, the listserv was described as a formal, official genre that "seems like commands from on high" (Liz). Although anyone can send messages through the listserv, Pam recognized it as the Co-Presidents' space since they are almost exclusively the only AEGS members who use the listserv—usually to send out announcements, meeting minutes, or other important information—and that she did not feel she had the "authority" to post through the listserv. Liz made it clear that the listserv is a "holdover from older academic traditions," but that AEGS keeps it in use for those members who do not have Facebook. In fact, many announcements are cross-posted to both the Facebook page and the listserv, and both Leslie and Dee recognized that one source of information will usually remind them of the other since they frequently check both.

Like the Facebook page, the listserv was also repurposed to encourage public uptakes. Three emails sought to secure public uptakes that would lead AEGS members to engage with both SU Human Resources and GTAC, and the fourth email (sent by Liz) was the same message she posted on the Facebook page linking to the AEGS survey. She explained that her choice to cross-post the survey was to "reach the maximum amount of people" because "some people check their emails more frequently than they check Facebook." She reflects, "Hopefully, I've at least caught everyone at some point." Kenneth was the only interviewee whose uptake of the listserv differed from his uptake of Facebook. He explained that he sees "emails more often than Facebook just because I check my email more regularly than I check my Facebook account," so he is "85% certain" he took the survey from the listserv instead of from Facebook. Like the Facebook posts, then, we see that this narrowly-dispersed genre, operating only within this insulated organization, also encouraged public uptakes.

Monthly In-Person Meeting

A third narrowly-dispersed genre that encouraged public uptakes into the GTA health insurance conversation was a monthly in-person meeting that took place on September 30, 2016. All monthly meetings follow a rather set structure: the Executive Board members share their reports one by one, then the committees share reports one by one, and finally the Co-Presidents open the floor to follow up on old business and introduce new business. These meetings mostly focus on the work of different committees within AEGS, and then the meetings open up to other issues graduate students in English would like to discuss–most involve the English Department. For the Sep-

tember 30 meeting, though, Liz notes that this was one of the only times she was aware during an AEGS meeting that there was a "serious and heavy issue" to be addressed, and 30 AEGS members attended. Instead of using the meeting to simply hear from the committees, members wanted "to know what they could do to help, or what they could do to make some sort of difference" (Liz). Liz stressed the importance of this non-digital forum for AEGS members to "actually talk" about the graduate student health insurance issue, and Leslie likewise noted that she remembers a lot of emotion in the room; the meeting provided a space to share their frustrations and find general agreement in their worry. Thus, a visiting GTAC representative and a lengthy Q&A were features of the meeting that encouraged public uptakes.

To draw attention to the sheer amount of public uptakes this conversation encouraged, I've underlined other genres, actions, entities, or events that were evoked or presented as possible uptakes in this excerpt of the meeting minutes:

> Liz: As of August, [the university] is doing away with subsidies for our health insurance. We don't have enough info yet, but [English Director of Graduate Studies] is working with department heads to see if there can be an internal solution. We're also setting up a survey where we can gather information about how we rely on our insurance, how many are considering leaving [university] because of the lack of insurance subsidies, etc. so we can inform the department. The English Department has the most GTAs at [university], so we need to get together.
>
> Leslie: There's a campus climate survey, so complain about what we have to deal with—be vocal about everything, guns, insurance, etc.
>
> Student #1: [English Department Chair] and [English Director of Graduate Studies] were at the meeting and are advocates; they have our best interests at heart. We recommend that GTAs find out how much your premium would be per month at ACA [Affordable Care Act] so we have facts.
>
> Question posed: Is the ACA marketplace our only alternative?
>
> Student #2: The health insurance plans that we have will still be available, but won't be subsidized.
>
> Student #3: The lack of subsidies will quadruple what we currently pay.
>
> […]

Student #5: The main thing is that it's not our fault, so we should try to get people to go to the next [university] HR [human resources] meeting about health insurance.

Co-President: The next meeting is 4:45 to 6 on October 5.

Student #5: At the last meeting, HR said that [university] is meeting with other institutions and that the policy started in February, but [university] got extra time to work on implementing it, so a working group is dealing with this issue. It's unclear if there's going to be graduate student representation, and we don't know who is in the working group or what they're doing—haven't had their first meeting yet—this never came up during contract negotiations in May.

Student #7: Similar things are happening at [another state university], and graduate students are suing the university.

Student #2: We're in touch with union organizers.

Student #4: I was a union organizer, and I've looked at our GTA contract. Regarding the clause about benefits, [university] is within its rights to do this, but there's nothing in the contract that says we can't take action. Going the legal route of suing can take a lot of years and the university has a lot more money.

Liz: The AEGS executive board is asking you to come to us so we can pass your concerns to the department so we can advocates and faculty support.

Student #5: I've talked to [English Director of Graduate Studies], and he's 100% committed.

Student #4: Would it be helpful to circulate a sign-up sheet for the upcoming HR meeting to have people sign up en masse? A lot of people are interested in going. I'll post something in the group and email in the AEGS page.

[…]

Student #9: We should have people record the upcoming meeting so we can keep it and AEGS can have it on file. We should record from different points in the room.

Student #4: We should check to see if doing that is legal—reasonable privacy?

Student #1: The upcoming HR meeting should be open/public information.

Student #5: The working group, however, is closed, which isn't fair. We could put pressure on [university] for that, and can file for open records.

Student #10: I talked to [Writing Center Director]. She was involved with faculty at [another state university] and is upset on our behalf. She sent various sites/rulings that we can look at, and I'm going to extract and post them.

Student #4: We should send an email trying to start coordinate who is going to go—avoid showing up angry and disorderly.

I hope this excerpt makes clear the sheer number of public uptakes—in the form of subsequent genres, actions, events, entities, and attentions—that were encouraged in this meeting. These public uptakes include submitting responses to the university campus climate survey; investigating ACA rates and regulations; attending and recording the university HR meeting; submitting a file for open records; and exploring other rulings from similar university situations. Even the uptakes that were not explicitly public were still ultimately in service of the public conversation, e.g., sending an email to coordinate attendance at the human resource meetings and then posting the meetings on the Facebook page afterwards. Though I do not have exact numbers on how many students engaged these public uptakes, I can say anecdotally that the HR meetings were packed with English graduate students, and around every corner of the English department hallways I would find GTAs recapping, in fervent tones, what they had laid out in the university climate survey.

Here is what I hope one takes away from this genre study: For one stressful, outrageous month, when it looked like GTAs would be left without subsidized health insurance, AEGS members were able to encourage public uptakes from a range of genres—most of which were narrowly-dispersed—towards the (re-)creation of this public conversation. They did not have to merely watch the public emerge from the sidelines, but they also did not have to publish an opinion-editorial piece in a major newspaper or organize a large-scale protest. While all of these widely-dispersed options were still available, I imagine they were rather daunting: This public surrounding GTA health insurance was dominated by official organizations and governing bodies. Thus, AEGS

members foremost turned to those narrowly-dispersed genres that they could easily locate, access, and compose. Based on this case example, I would like to offer some mirror pedagogical examples of how this aspect of public (re-) creation might translate to the public writing classroom.

Pedagogical Examples

In this section, I draw examples from my first year writing course titled "Writing as Public Action," although these strategies could be used in any course that incorporates public writing. The first half of this course invites students to conduct genre analyses of their own past writing by comparing a genre from school and a genre from outside of school. Students analyze the author, audience, and context of these various genres, and they break down how different textual features are shaped by the rhetorical situation. They especially consider how genres reflect identities, values, and power dynamics, and they even innovate one of the genres to broker ways of knowing that matter to them (see Russell). In the second half of the course, students put this genre knowledge into action by choosing, analyzing, and composing what I call a "Public Action Genre Set," a collection of three genres that might (re-)create a public conversation. To authentically engage publics that relate to their own lived experiences, students begin by listing all of their communities: from their alma maters, to their fan bases, to their organizations. Then, students brainstorm the problems or issues facing these communities, and they choose a problem for which they would like to rhetorically intervene. For some identified problems, rhetorical intervention means jumping confidently to a widely-dispersed genre. But for most students, rhetorical intervention meant following cues from the AEGS—composing genres with which they were already familiar, or to which they already had authorial access, or within which they could discursively locate themselves among a vast ecology. These students then encouraged public uptakes that blurred genre dispersions by (1) mobilizing known genres, (2) selecting concrete locations, and (3) tapping into an ecology.

Mobilizing Known Genres

Just as AEGS members mobilized their usual genres (Facebook page posts, listserv emails, and in-person meetings) to encourage public uptakes, students can also use this strategy. The first questions are: What genres are already part of students' spheres? And how might they mobilize those genres to encourage public uptakes? As an example, Belle cared deeply about the role of volunteerism in college—as a form of stress relief, an essential aspect of development, and a type of community-building. In order to spread this

message publicly, Belle turned toward an already-existing, narrowly-dispersed genre of her sorority: Instagram [see Figure 2].

Figure 2. "Belle's Instagram post"

Most students' social media pages are not the widely-dispersed platforms that celebrities or other famous figures can use to (re-)create publics; instead, students' social media pages mostly reach their family members and friends. Across my courses, students have successfully encouraged public uptakes from their social media posts for those issues they care about most. For Belle's Instagram posts, she could draw on genre knowledge she already had, and she could shape it for a known audience. In her post-assignment reflection, Belle touches on the public uptakes she encouraged by composing a series of Instagram posts for her sorority:

> I chose to write about the value of volunteering with the focus of get-
> ting more college students participating in community service […]
> The Instagram posts target a group of people who already know each
> other but gets them into the community. The posts also are written
> to help give the group a sense of belonging and accomplishment. In
> the final post, I say "We cleaned, we made toys, we brought many
> supplies, we helped our furry friends and we had tons of fun." I pur-
> posely used the word "we" to emphasize our group experience.

Thus, Belle's Instagram post encouraged the public uptakes of physically vol-
unteering at a animal shelter in town (notice she tags the humane society in
her post), as well as a sense of unity in the sorority. The 104 likes on this post
give us a sense of the public uptakes this post actually secured. Even though
Belle's Instagram is on the narrowly-dispersed side, she was able to (re-)create
a public she cared about by securing public uptakes from a genre and audi-
ence she already knew.

Selecting Concrete Locations

One of the main challenges of locating publics is that they are largely dis-
cursive and therefore not bound to any particular setting or site. This is why
the concrete setting of AEGS's in-person meeting was able to encourage so
many public uptakes—the purpose and audience were bound to a physical
location. In contrast, take a traditionally widely-dispersed genre like a pam-
phlet; students can struggle to compose this genre when its target audience
is…everyone, and its purpose is to placed…around. However, if students can
locate literal pamphlet distribution within concrete locations, they can better
conceive of an audience and shape the genre to encourage public uptakes.

Erin, for example, described the lived experiences that shaped her desire
to authentically engage an important public conversation:

> In St. Louis, where I am from, it is not uncommon to scroll through
> my Instagram feed and see a tribute post about the most recent high
> school student that had been involved in a fatal car accident. It has
> become such a problem that it seems every month a new name would
> appear in people's captions after a bleak R.I.P.

As Erin searched for a genre that would allow her to (re-)create this public
conversation about teenage driving fatalities, she turned to a concrete loca-
tion she had visited as a St. Louis teen driver: the Department of Motor
Vehicles (DMV). She wrote in her post-assignment reflection:

I chose a pamphlet [see Figure 3] because it is an easy way to get to new drivers. I think for this genre to work efficiently, it could be given to new drivers when they receive their permit. Pamphlets are very good at providing a lot of important information quickly. Since my targeted audience is 15-16 year olds, they most likely will not want to read a lengthy article or blog. […] I believe this type of information should be readily available at DMVs because this is such an important age to teach this to.

Figure 3. "Erin's pamphlet (title panel)"

Unlike Belle, Erin did not already have knowledge of this genre. However, by selecting a concrete location for her pamphlet, Erin could better consider the audience and what kind of public uptakes she wanted to secure. Erin's

pamphlet covers major accident statistics, tips for new drivers, and further resources on the web. In this way, her pamphlet drives the public conversation about safe teen driving by encouraging St. Louis teenagers to take up an attention to the statistics, enact the tips, and visit further resources on the web. By placing these pamphlets within a concrete location, Erin did not have to wrestle with overgeneral questions of who her audience might be or where these pamphlets would be distributed; instead, the pamphlets were narrowly-dispersed enough to be reasonably located and accessed, but they still publicly engaged an issue about which Erin cared. And while Erin happened to focus on a physical location, these concrete locations might also be digital depending on how defined, or at least characterizable, a site and audience is to a writer.

Tapping into an Ecology

A final strategy students might use to ultimately (re-)create publics is to tap into a larger textual ecology. AEGS members used this strategy when their narrowly-dispersed genres connected members to sources across the university, like HR meetings, climate surveys, or the graduate student union. In this way, AEGS members did not have to jump to a genre that would communicate directly with upper-administration and policy makers, but they could still (re-)create the public by tapping into more narrowly-dispersed genres that could then be taken up by other genres and entities.

In my classroom, Bridget chose an issue facing most of our students: college tuition rates, especially out-of-state tuition rates. She ultimately wanted to spark a conversation among the university's upper-administrators and state legislators about lowering out-of-state tuition rates. Like AEGS members, then, Bridget traced an ecology of texts backwards until she found a generic opening she could reasonably access. She started with a genre she knew could be posted in a concrete location: a flyer [see Figure 4].
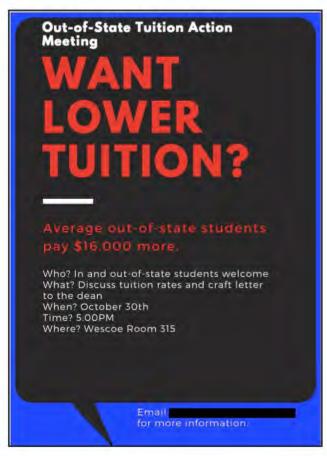
Figure 4. "Bridget's flyer"

She explains, "The audience for the flyers are students who are interested in lower tuition. I target both in and out of state students in the flyer, so that I could get many perspectives on the issue." Notice that the main uptake that the flyer encourages is to attend a meeting; the main uptake of the meeting is to "craft a letter to the dean"; and the main uptake of the letter is for the dean to spark discussions with other administrators and ultimately policy makers. Bridget is thus able to meaningfully locate and (re-)create this public by tapping into a larger ecology of texts at the level most accessible to her.

Conclusion

When we realize how uptake can bind and extend generic actions across dispersions, as evidenced by the AEGS members' engagement with the GTA health insurance issue, the "forms of life" available to our students in the public writing classroom suddenly explode. They can use strategies such as

mobilizing known genres, selecting concrete locations, and tapping into ecologies to encourage public uptakes from a range of genres. The question is no longer, which widely-dispersed (and therefore "truly public" in some broad sense) genres can our students reasonably engage. Instead, the question becomes: Which genres (across blurry dispersions) can students reasonably locate, access, and compose to encourage public uptakes? The point in shifting this question, of course, is to open possibilities for our students to locate and authentically (re-)create those publics they care most about.

One exciting implication of this exercise is that it increases students' awareness of just how much writing shapes their worlds. They begin thinking through the genres they regularly engage in their hobby groups, their Greek clubs, their online fandoms, their volunteer organizations, their sports teams, and their workplaces. They also realize the way genres are ecologically connected, as well as the genres that discursively permeate their material locations. This pedagogical approach to public writing, then, may work well in concert with other approaches. Students might engage multi-genre projects that use a range of strategies for locating and authentically (re-)creating publics, both individually and as part of larger service learning projects. Perhaps most importantly, this pedagogical approach expands discursive options for our students—whether inside or outside of the classroom—for (re-)creating publics that have very real, material consequences.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. The names of graduate and undergraduate students are anonymized.

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