The "Research Paper" Prompt: A Dialogic Opportunity for Transfer

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Abstract: The treatment of a research paper as an isolated utterance within a composition classroom is problematic in that such papers may fail to encourage transfer of writing knowledge. In this essay, I argue that a research paper's failure to work as a utterance situated within a conversation—as critiqued through a framework constructed by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the utterance—often disadvantages students in their future writing endeavors. I conclude by suggesting one way to encourage students to situate their research writing as a part of—rather than separate from—an activity system. By making the research paper an integral part of a entire course sequence, students will be better equipped to understand the role that research and writing plays within a specific activity system.

In a recent piece, Amy Devitt notes the frustration she experienced during a conversation with a colleague who was complaining about biology students' inability to write research papers. Devitt writes, "I thought such a well-respected scholar and teacher would know better than to think that students could be taught writing in their first-year and have it suffice for their senior year. I thought such a well-respected scholar and teacher would know better than to think that the research paper could be taught once and for all, and she need not worry about teaching it herself for her own field" ("Transferability" 215). Although I have never been challenged in this same way, Devitt's anecdote reminds me of my own experience when faced with a not altogether different assumption about the research paper. I recently taught a freshman composition course that included several short papers, some of which involved research, but no extensive research project. Although I had distributed a syllabus that included descriptions of the assignments we would cover that semester, a student approached me several times throughout the semester to ask when we would write "the big research paper that is common in every English class." Despite my attempts to convince her that we would be writing no such paper in this particular course, she could not let go of the idea that an English course could exist without the inclusion of this particular genre. What fascinated me most was that her previous experiences had so deeply engrained into her the belief that there is *one* unified research paper—a paper that seems to belong to an English class—that makes up one unified genre. I could not fault her for this belief, as many students rightly come to my classes with similar expectations, often seeing writing courses as hoops through which they must jump before moving into their disciplinary courses and being done with "English." Through additional conversations with this student, I realized that for her, and I suspect for many other students, a research paper stood between her and the rest of her disciplinary work for which she believed there would be no such papers.

By now, many of us have probably had a similar conversation to one of the aforementioned. On the one hand, we have a professor who expects the first-year writing course to prepare students for any future writing endeavor, specially research papers; on the other hand, we have a student who sees the research paper as belonging only to the first-year writing course.

From our perspective, we can see a wide gap between the professor's expectations—that the student will come prepared to write anything, and the student's—that research writing belongs to the first-year writing course. Yet assuming that we want composition students to see their work as having meaning beyond our classroom, how might we help our students to understand writing as an interdisciplinary activity by making the transfer value of composition courses more explicit? The issue of transfer, while often studied by professional communication scholars, has recently gained importance in the field of composition (Bergmann and Zepernick; Carroll; McCarthy; Rounsavile, Goldberg, and Bawarshi; Sommers and Saltz; Wardle, "Understanding"). Some scholars are now approaching the composition course with the explicit goal of "teaching for transfer" (see, for example, Fishman and Reiff). Our ability to help students understand that knowledge they learn in first-year writing courses might be useful for their future writing is crucial, especially since Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick recently "observed a tendency among students to actively reject the idea that what they learned about writing in high school or in first year composition (FYC) courses could be applied to the writing they were asked to do in courses in other disciplines" (124), a finding further supported by Jarratt et al.

The research paper has caused our field decades of warranted stress over its place in the curriculum, yet research is so pivotal to every discipline—and to many careers—that it would be imprudent to banish it from writing courses. This interest in research papers and their role in first-year writing courses has resulted in the publication of 350 articles between 1923 and 2001 (Moulton and Holmes). {1} [#note1] In the 1980s, continual dissatisfaction with student papers often prompted instructors to discontinue the use of this assignment (Ford and Perry). Indeed, even today, most scholars still seem unsatisfied with the results, as research papers are often introduced as necessary evils (Blue; Moulton and Holmes; Sutton). Yet variations of this genre prevail within composition courses and across the curriculum, although perhaps not as prevalent in its traditional form. Carra Leah Hood, in her extensive 2009 study, found the research argument paper to be the most commonly identified assignment. However, it is important to note that Hood asked for "typical research assignments" from her participants and received in return prompts that asked for genres such as analyses, evaluations, cause and effect papers, proposals, profiles, and brochures—many genres that one might argue do not constitute the traditionally conceived research paper. Hood's study, purposefully limited to "four-year co-ed, secular, liberal arts, private and public colleges and universities," reveals that those genres instructors often deem to be research assignments make up a variety of genres that often share learning outcomes despite these differences in genre. Looking across the curriculum, Dan Melzer found that although the research paper "is representative of almost all of the genres" found in his study, his findings prove that "it is too various to classify by formal features, and too discipline-specific and even classroom-specific to be considered a type of writing without also analyzing its social context" (W252). And in 2010, Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, after looking at 191 course-related research paper prompts that were given to undergraduates in a variety of disciplines on 28 college campuses, found that "the written 'research paper' still prevails as the dominant course-related research assignment" (8).

Given that it is likely students will be asked to write such papers during their tenure in college, how might we best prepare them for writing a paper that changes across disciplinary contexts despite its common generic name? I believe that treatment of a research paper as an isolated utterance within a composition classroom is problematic in that such papers fail to encourage transfer. In this essay, I argue that a research paper's failure to work as a utterance situated within a conversation—as critiqued through a framework constructed by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the utterance—often disadvantages students in their future writing endeavors. In other words, the types of research papers assigned in freshman composition courses, often described as *the* research paper, usually fail to function as utterances that respond to any conversation, even one within a composition classroom. To that end, I begin by detailing Bakhtin's theory of the utterance before moving to an analysis of speech

genres. Looking at these utterances as working within the activity system of a composition classroom, I then examine examples of research paper prompts from a variety of freshman composition instructors, arguing that such prompts end up producing, as Elizabeth Wardle has phrased, "mutt genres": "genres that mediate activities in other activity systems, but within the FYC system their purposes and audiences are vague or even contradictory" ("Mutt" 774). I conclude by suggesting one way to encourage students to situate their research writing as a part of—rather than separate from—an activity system. By making the research paper an integral part of a entire course sequence, students will be better equipped to understand the role that research and writing plays within a specific activity system.

The Utterance

Bakhtin believes that all meaning is made from dialogism, or the exchange between a speaker and/or text and another. In "The Problem of Speech Genres," he writes that "language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well" (63). Language is, according to Bakhtin, essential to our lives because dialogic exchanges are what help us to make meaning of ourselves and of our worlds. Understanding language as a dialogic relationship, and one that must necessarily take into account past and future exchanges, is what enables us to communicate. Rather than speaking and writing in sentences, we use these sentences to form utterances that work "only in the entirety of the whole utterance" (74). Utterances are, as Bakhtin stresses, conversational acts; they are both a response and a stimulus, each with "an absolute beginning and an absolute end: its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others, and its end is followed by the responsive utterances of others" (71).

Because utterances tend to recur, genres are created. Bakhtin argues that "each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*" (60). It is important to note here that Bakhtin seems to use speech genres as being interchangeable with written genres, as some examples he uses of speech genres are novel and letters. However, genres are, of course, more than just the form they take. Most commonly, a genre is seen as a form of action (Miller) or as a way of being in the world (Bazerman). We might say that genres provide us with ways of responding to recurring, or similar, situations. While utterances within a genre might share the same form, a change in context or the consideration of the current rhetorical situation requires that use of the genre take such matters into account. This consideration is one that Thomas Kent addresses when he argues that

> a conception of genre steeped in the idea of addressability avoids the problem of infinite regress by insisting that a genre is defined by its response to other utterances and not by its conventional formal elements. In this formulation a specific genre becomes a response to something within a specific social situation; it is the determinate hermeneutic form that an utterance takes. (299)

Through our experiences with various genres, we learn to recognize ones that we see often and to predict their rhetorical purpose. Devitt points out that "part of what all readers and writers recognize when they recognize genres are the roles they are to play, the roles being played by other people, what they can gain from the discourse, and what the discourses are about. Picking up a text, readers not only classify it and expect a certain form, but also make assumptions about the text's purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader" (*Writing* 12). For example, a to-do list might be scratched on paper, put into a word document, or added to a calendar, and it may contain various levels of detail dependent upon its creator, but despite the different forms it might take, it would still be recognizable as a to-do list. In the same way, students use their previous knowledge and experiences with research papers when faced with another task involving research. Therefore, limited

knowledge of research is problematic, as even when the contexts change, a person who thinks situation B is like situation A, when encountering situation B, might act in B as he/she did in A (Russell, "Rethinking" 515). As a result, students who have written previous research papers may come to freshman composition with preconceived notions about what *all* research papers should look like, thus creating papers like those they have previously written no matter how different the situation. We see this often when students arrive in our classes and turn in a five-paragraph essay for the first assignment—a common occurrence that illustrates how students try to transfer previous writing experiences to present ones. Given that students tend to draw on a variety of previously used genres (Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi), we can anticipate (or hope) they may do the same with whatever genres they learn in their composition classes. But of particular importance to note here is that the students in Bergmann and Zepernick's previously mentioned study, while identifying previous courses as helping their writing development, did not ever refer back to their first-year composition courses (141)—a problem I believe composition instructors cannot ignore.

However, the fact that first-year writers do try to draw upon their "antecedent genres" (Devitt, *Writing*; Jamieson) is promising, as it illustrates students' ability to transfer writing knowledge from one situation to another. Unfortunately, first-year writers often do not grasp how much the context of writing determines what genres are required. Students often come into the university with the belief that good writing is the same in every discipline (Russell and Yañez 334), so what works in one context should also work in another. Russell and Yañez argue, "students are alienated in part because they don't see the genres assigned as part of a human activity that makes sense that has uses beyond pleasing the teacher to get a grade" (351). Yet genres are developed not as stand-alone texts but as integral parts of activity systems that Bakhtin calls "spheres of human activity and communication," which each "give rise to particular genres, that is, certain relatively stable thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of utterances" (64). For example, a graduate-level course on rhetoric is a sphere of communication that is comprised of documents such as seminar papers, conference presentations, reading responses, and even emails between students and the professor. However, these genres are not unique to this class, as Elsie Rockwell argues that

> teaching genres are heterogeneous and may differ across localities (however defined) and even within traditions. Recalling Bakhtin's various terms, we may see each teacher as working within a "generic atmosphere" and drawing on "generic sources," while developing his or her particular ways of talking while teaching. (264)

In other words, there are enough common genres that occur within any classroom, such as the syllabus or essay test, that we are able to see how these genres function for similar purposes but contain very different rhetorical content. If we collected documents from classes such as geology, biology, and psychology, we'd find similar documents—syllabi, texts, articles—but these documents are functioning within a different sphere of activity and, according to Bakhtin, "reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area " (60), or activity system.

One such activity system, and the one most applicable to the purpose of this paper, is a composition classroom. Giving perhaps the most in-depth treatment of a composition classroom as an activity system, Anis Bawarshi argues in *Genre and the Invention of the Writer* that

> the classroom in its own right is a dynamic, textured site of action mediated by a range of complex written and spoken genres that constitute student-teacher positions, relations, and practices. As they reposition themselves within and between these genres, teachers and students acquire, negotiate, and articulate different desires, which inform the choices they make as participants in the FYW [first-year writing] course. (118)

For example, the syllabus sets the tone of the class, as students learn what is expected of them as participants in this community, or a peer-review sheet sets the requirements for students' expected responses to writing. But even less obvious genres such as emails between the student and the teacher function by helping students to determine how quickly their instructor will respond, how formal the emails should be, and what kinds of questions/concerns seem to be most relevant for these types of exchanges. Such genres help students to understand a composition classroom as well as their position within it. While students can have an understanding of how a syllabus works in general, they can only understand how a particular syllabus functions within a particular activity system when they become a member of that system. Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin stress the importance of situatedness of a genre, arguing that "our knowledge of genres is derived from and embedded in our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life" (478). For instance, students might learn partway through a semester that while the syllabus stresses a strict late policy for work, the professor is actually fairly forgiving and does not stick to this policy in all instances.

When entering a new activity system, students are likely to make connections based on their previous experiences, not realizing how different a genre of the same name might be in two different situations. As a result, a student may successfully write an argument in a history course, only to receive a less desirable grade for a philosophy argument after treating the papers as being of the same genre and not having a professor explain otherwise. Devitt, who was charged by a biology professor with not teaching students how to write, further discusses how her biology colleague did not understand that research writing in freshman composition and research writing in upper-level biology courses produce two very different texts:

> My biology colleague evidently saw her students' writing situation as similar to my first-year students' writing situation, and she named the same research paper genre for both. Even though … the change in location changed the genre, perhaps some writing skills would transfer, since her [the biology professor] genre name was the same. The fact that her students were evidently performing badly in her genre argues otherwise, and I think it was because the change of location changed the situation more significantly than she realized. ("Transferring" 219-20)

In this case, not even the professor was aware of the way that different activity systems require different approaches to genres that, on the surface, might look to be the same. The professor, in other words, thought that students were failing to write the specific type of research paper expected of advanced biology students. While the students might have been "performing badly" in this genre, these same students may have been seen as performing well within their composition classroom.

Yet what remains unclear is what it would mean for a student to complete a successful research paper in a composition classroom, especially when we often try to judge the text based on how well it would succeed elsewhere (although it is never quite clear where). We may be asking students to create genres that do not contain utterances that are a part of any real communication—or at least a part of a genuine conversation working with a shared activity system. If, as Kent believes, "the genre represents the utterance's social baggage in a sense that the utterance must take on a determinate and public form that communicants can identify," as "the genre constitutes the public form that an utterance must assume in order to be comprehensible" (295), then what happens when such utterances are not taking on a form recognizable to any activity system? In other words, what happens when we teach students that a research paper looks like *A* and fail to suggest that a research paper might also look like *B, C, D, E, F, etc?* Heather Bastian calls this the genre effect, or

> the overarching idea of genre in users' minds, and this overarching idea of genre reflects the beliefs that similar rhetorical situations are equivalent, that a specific rhetorical

situation is representative of all possible rhetorical situations, that genres achieve only one primary social action, and that rhetorical differences within the genre features are often inconsequential. (35)

The Writing Prompt

Perhaps one of the most common genres of the composition classroom is the writing, or assignment, prompt that instructors use to generate writing from their students. Bawarshi believes both that "the prompt is a precondition for the existence of student writing, a means of habituating the students into the subject as well as the subjectivity they are being asked to explore" (128), and that "the writing prompt not only *moves* the student writer to action; it also *cues* the student writer to enact a certain kind of action" (127). One such common action is, of course, to ask students to write a research paper. Before looking at particular examples of this type of writing prompt, we might consider how writing prompts may or may not work to function as types of real utterances.

Bawarshi argues that "students are expected to situate their writing within the writing prompt without acknowledging its presence explicitly in their writing so that it appears as though their writing created its own exigency, that somehow their writing is self-prompted" (*Genre* 134). As a result, the relationship between the assignment prompt and the actual essay may resist dialogue by its very nature. If the writing prompt is indeed an utterance that requires a response, then the written paper would be the utterance that is meant to function as a reply. However, the conversation within the paper must act as though it is not a part of a conversation between the teacher and the student but rather a conversation between a student and a different audience, usually one that exists outside of a composition classroom. Bakhtin writes that when someone experiences an utterance from another person, when he/she "perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it" (68). We might argue that a prompt generates questions and discussion from students or continues the conversation through a series of utterances, but the primary utterance that responds to this prompt is the paper that students will eventually write—a paper that must come into existence *as though the assignment prompt did not exist*. Rather than responding to the *actual* utterance that is the prompt, students must discover their own utterances to which they can respond. Students must, in other words, find a different conversation, often one that is a part of a different activity system, if they are able to create their own utterances. Of course, this might be true of many different disciplinary assignments if instructors choose to assign decontextualized genres, but this practice of assigning outside writing tends to be most common in first-year writing courses. David Russell argues that "learning to write means learning to write in the ways (genres) those in an activity system write," so "the object(ive) of GWSI [general writing skills instruction] courses is extremely ambiguous because those involved in it are teaching and learning the use of a tool (writing) for no particular activity system" ("Activity" 57). Might we be, as this argument suggests, teaching students how to use a piece of sporting equipment that belongs to no specific game? And if so, how does this help students to understand how writing functions differently as we move between contexts? Irene Clark is right to note that "many [students] have little understanding of the 'situation' the writing assignment intends them to address and are unfamiliar with the community (or audience) toward which their essay should be addressed." But I also argue that it is nearly impossible for a student to become familiar enough with this "other" community to write successfully for that community—a community of which he/she is not a member.

Expecting students to write for a different community is, of course, problematic because students' texts are evaluated within the activity system of a composition classroom—by their teacher and their peers—even though such readers are not often supposed to be their targeted audience. Bawarshi notes:

> students first have to situate and "invent" themselves in our prompts before they can assume the position of student writer. In fact … it is the prompt that tacitly invokes the position that student writers are asked to assume when they write, so that students read their way into the position of writer via our prompts. (130)

Prompts sometimes come with stated directions about finding audiences for students' work, but they also often rely on unspoken assumptions that students are to write for a situation and an audience outside of the classroom. Bawarshi is right to note that "it is perhaps more than a little ironic that most guides to writing effective assignment prompts emphasize the importance of specifying an audience *in* the prompt while more or less ignoring the students as audience *of* the prompt?" (130). As a result, there is no genuine uptake, which Anne Freadman defines as that which "happens when you accept an invitation to a conference, or agree to rewrite a paper for publication (or erase the traces of its previous occasionality for that purpose), or disagree with, or explore, a proposition in theory" (39). For example, when I take up the task of writing a paper for a conference, I write that paper for composition scholars who ideally will listen to and respond to my utterance. But if a prompt were to require a student to uptake a paper on marijuana use, and to imagine an intended audience outside of the classroom, then the completed piece is neither read nor evaluated by that imagined audience, and thus, as Freadman argues, "the pairing of the text produced by the simulation with its appropriate uptake has been broken. It has simply become another assignment" (48). In other words, the research paper becomes a classroom exercise in writing, often without a clear transfer value.

An Analysis of Prompts

Although I recognize that a prompt actually works within the context of a classroom, I also believe that the prompt is what students can most easily turn for guidance in their papers. Recently, Head and Eisenberg found in their study of assignment prompts the following two results that support the need to consider the role of this genre:

- Written guidelines that an instructor distributes for course-related research assignments tend to play an integral role in helping his or her students define situational context—how to meet the instructor's expectations.

- Students tend to use handouts to help them define information-gathering context— how to find and to use appropriate information sources and develop a course-related research strategy (6).

The fact that students turn to a prompt repeatedly is telling, as students seem to recognize that they must respond *to* a prompt by looking *outside* of a prompt—a task made no easier by the confusing language often used in such prompts—language of which I, too, have been guilty of using.

Given that research papers seem to remain the most common genre of writing in *any* discipline, and that first-year writing is often charged with preparing students to write within those disciplines, it seems pertinent to focus on the treatment of such papers within our own field. While an in-depth study of research writing across the curriculum is beyond the scope of this paper, of importance to note is that Head and Eisenberg found that most prompts "placed more attention on the mechanics of preparing a research assignment than on conveying substantive information that students also needed, such as how to define and focus a research strategy within the complex information landscape that most college students inhabit today" (2). With this timely information, we might hesitantly assume that many students who enter their disciplines might have to depend on whatever knowledge they glean from the first-year writing courses for their writing assignments. If this is the case, then how are we helping students to transfer knowledge from our courses? To get an idea of what research paper

prompts look like in different sections of composition, I emailed instructors in my English department at a public, land-grant, doctoral granting institution asking for the prompt to whatever they would consider to be their research paper, a requirement for the second semester composition course that all students must complete. Those who teach composition within my department have relative freedom to create their own assignments, in addition to flexibility in textbook use. Graduate students and full-time lecturers teach most first-year writing courses. My purpose here was not to do an exhaustive study of every possible type of research paper written but rather to look a few different ways that prompts might work as utterances, prompts I believe to be representative of a department that serves several thousand first-year writing students each year.

The prompts I received had titles such as "Research paper – Argumentation paper," "Researched inquiry project," "Research project," "Argument Essay or Informative Article," "The Research Paper," "Long Essay," "The Assignment," and "Argument Paper." What is immediately problematic is that such titles position the expected paper in often vague or even confusing terms. For example, the use of the definite article for "the research paper" may suggest that this paper is in fact typical of all research papers. Other titles suggest confusion over what genre is actually to be expected. Is it a research paper or an argument? Is it an argument essay or an informative article? Based on the title alone, the expected genre remains unclear. Many genres seem to be used interchangeably, as indicated by the titles, despite the vast differences or close similarities in content, goals, and rhetorical context for which these papers are written and thus evaluated.

In his treatment of Bakhtin, Kent argues, "Because one must guess about the genre to which an utterance belongs in order to recognize the boundaries of an utterance and to recognize its tenuous finality, all communicative interaction derives from our ability to recognize and to generate genres, for we communicate only through the utterance as genre" (292). Students are able to recognize a prompt; they know, in other words, that they are being asked to write something. But a sampling of *what* exactly is being asked for in these prompts shows how varied a research paper is among different sections of composition:

- "The capstone of the first-year writing course is the Inquiry Project, which is a research paper assignment. You will research a topic of your own choosing using your readings in the course, primary research, and secondary sources to create a focused, coherent, convincing report on an issue that is relevant to our course theme … . Your research paper will take the form of a report on your findings of the issue you choose."

- "After you've spent time observing, taking field notes, conducting library research, and conducting a personal interview, it's time to synthesize your research into an ethnographic-type research essay. This essay will be different from traditional research papers … . This essay should, necessarily, not be an argument/thesis- driven essay."

- "You will then take both the primary and secondary research into account to create an informed persuasive essay or informative article arguing a specific point … . This paper should incorporate what you learned from your fieldwork, paired with secondary sources and make a convincing argument or specific stance."

- "How do I Write a Research Paper? [Heading] This essay is an argumentative paper that contains research; you will have a clearly defined, analytic, arguable, and focused thesis that you will use to persuade the reader of something, using evidence from both your in-class and outside sources"

- "For this assignment, you will write a paper that argues a position on the issue you've chosen for this class … . This paper will most likely take the form of a persuasive essay, with a distinct thesis supported by both secondary sources and the fieldwork you have already conducted."

- "Purpose: To write a research paper on a controversy related to food. The paper should be educated on and involved in others' arguments on the subject. The essay should take a clear position in the existing discourse that is your original belief … . When you have a thesis statement you are ready to begin writing."

- "Your research project is thesis driven and should be related to the theme of the class (myth, legend, and heroes) in some way. This is also a text-based paper. Consider all of the material we have covered this semester and choose a topic that you would like to explore further. After some research, take a position on your topic and then find outside sources that support (or even possibly refute) your thesis. If there is a way to approach your topic from the position of your major, you are welcome to do so, although it is not necessary."

- "If you feel your audience would more greatly benefit and likely be more easily persuaded or reached via a genre other than an essay, please come talk to me."

Although this is a small sampling of the types of descriptions that instructors use to introduce their research component, the language creates troublesome and even contradictory utterances. For example, one of the descriptions explains that the paper will not be like a "traditional research paper" but also not argument or thesis driven. Or, for example, consider the consequences of positioning two possible options—a persuasive essay or an informative article—as though they are always two distinct genres. But even the simple suggestion that an essay is one genre, rather than many (as seen above with the instructor who told students they might write in a genre other than an essay) might make students see the essay as being of one genre. More importantly, however, is what it means to have our students write "a persuasive essay" or a "research paper." Wardle is correct to note that "'The Argument' is assigned as a genre whose purpose is to write the genre," and that "within the broader university, arguments are complex and encompass a range of genres" ("Mutt" 775). She points out that "within the broader university, 'The Argument' is not a genre in and of itself" ("Mutt" 775). In other words, having students write a paper such as "the argument" is meant to be practice for when they later write arguments. However, when a student writes an argument paper in a history course, he/she is expected to take on the role of a historian and to put forth an argument that would be acceptable in the discipline. In composition courses, a student writes an argument to prove that he/she can write an argument. As a result, instructors may be asking students to write in genres that exist in very different ways outside of the composition classroom but are being positioned as *the* way that these genres typically exist, which Wardle found to be typical of composition instructors ("Mutt" 769). And as we can see from the above prompts, there are so many different genres that end up being called research papers, or in some cases, arguments.

Further, these prompts give little to no treatment of audience, but even those that do treat audience do so in potentially problematic ways. One prompt explains audience in the following manner:

> Remember your audience at all times, too – what will your audience need to know for the paper to "make sense"? What background information should you provide? What kind of tone should you adopt in the paper? What expectations will the audience have about you and your writing? Knowing the answers to these questions will help you formulate a more effective piece of writing.

The prompt is unclear as to what group might constitute an appropriate audience for this assignment and how effectiveness is to be judged outside of the context for which the paper might actually be

written. Because the paper is written within the activity system of a composition classroom, the only real audience the student might write for is the instructor and the other students. The student does not have proper access to other activity systems, which is problematic if we agree with Bakhtin, who argues, "any utterance is a link in the chain of speech communion. It is the active position of the speaker in one referentially semantic sphere or another. Therefore, each utterance is characterized primarily by a particular referentially semantic content" (84). Yet these students are being asked to create utterances for a semantic content, a content that is often unclear in terms of situation and audience, while residing and writing in another—the composition classroom. Another prompt says, "You will identify an audience for this paper on your own. It should be an audience who you feel would benefit from reading your work. The audience also needs to be a specific community of people." But in reality, the audience is still the instructor. As such, the dialogue that is created between the student and the teacher is not authentic, as it is written for one audience but read by an entirely different one. Russell Hunt argues that

> the transaction constituted by that writing and that reading may be a dialogue. But it is a very peculiar and asymmetrical sort of dialogue. It is neither direct nor authentic … . The discourse was neither created by the student nor understood by the teacher as an utterance; rather, it was bracketed, set aside, considered, evaluated. (248)

In other words, even though the instructor might require the student to identify an audience, the actual context for the paper is still a classroom context; the paper can, in no way, be evaluated as though it were actually written for the student's chosen audience.

The one prompt that specifically says "Audience: Your class peers and me" is perhaps the only prompt that may work within Bakhtin's definitions of utterances, as students who are writing within and for their actual activity system—their peers and their teacher—are actually engaged in a dialogic conversation of exchanged utterances. Bakhtin recognizes that different audiences require varying levels of knowledge and argues that "in these cases, accounting for the addressee (and his apperceptive background) and for the addressee's influence on the construction of the utterance is very simple: it all comes down to the scope of his specialized knowledge" (96). The remainder of the prompts I collected made no mention of audience at all, other than one who poses the requirement that "the essay's argument is valid and should convince the reader" and another that suggested the writing be targeted toward an academic audience.

Even the language of prompts does not work to stimulate dialogue but to demand certain conditions. Of course, every genre comes with its own set of rules or conventions, and Bakhtin points out that genres have greater or lesser degrees of freedom based on the context in which they are working (79). These prompts specified varying levels of requirements such as the following: "You must include at least three quotations in your paper," "The essay must include an original and interesting title, using a colon," and "You must cite from each of your sources at least 3 times." Yet such requirements are not constraints of a genre but constraints determined by the teacher. Hunt writes that "Bakhtin is well known for his resistance to closure, for his insistence that every utterance be conceived and treated as though it were provisional, open to response, as though it were dialogue rather than monologue" (259). Although genres can often be restricting, they also allow us to communicate intelligibly because we are able to recognize and to respond to genres appropriately. Requirements such as the above fail to encourage students to engage in dialogue through their papers in a genre appropriate for their purposes. Further, phrases that require the use of a certain number of sources or even citations are unnatural and incorrectly teach students about the purpose of research, which is not to use a set number of sources despite relevance or need, as they may then have trouble creating a genuine dialogue in their paper if they are limited by the number of voices that they can add to the conversation.

Creating a More Genuine Utterance

Although a goal of many composition classrooms is to help students learn how to do research, we should make it clear to our students that we are unable to teach them how to write a research paper for every possible discipline. The first step might simply be accepting and validating a freshman composition classroom as an activity system that is able to produce its own knowledge. By accepting that the audience of such a system is one's teacher and peers (which students have not been fooled into thinking otherwise), we might use such assumptions to focus on how we might write within those communities. Joseph Petraglia defines transactional writing as "that which does not pretend to function in any other way than it does" (21), an outlook I believe we should take towards our own writing classrooms. Rather than writing to audiences outside of the classroom, students should be encouraged to write with their classroom as the community. Our goal is not to prepare students to be able to write in their majors, as writing is not a static skill that they can master but a changing, dynamic tool for working successfully within different activity systems. In other words, I agree with Downs and Wardle's argument that freshman composition should not be about teaching students *how* to write in other disciplines—for this is impossible—but should be used to teach students *about* writing in a variety of activity systems, one of which can include their chosen disciplines.

That said, I do think that taking a disciplinary approach to the study of writing is beneficial because students are provided explicit links between first-year writing courses and their disciplines, and such an approach can draw from recent scholarship. Currently, several movements in the field have attempted to make first-year writing courses more explicitly transferable to other writing situations, three of which have influenced my own approach. First, Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff's 2003 *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres* textbook asks students to analyze and to critique different genres as they work in various situations and scenes. Second, Wardle and Downs' *Writing about Writing* textbook includes readings central to our field and asks students to approach the study of writing as one might approach the study of psychology or philosophy, as a body of knowledge that works as a part of an ongoing conversation. And finally, Reiff calls for students to participate in ethnographies, which allow students "to examine communicative actions within living situations and to see first-hand how communities use genres to carry out social actions and agendas" ("Materiality" 553). While these approaches are often treated as isolated pedagogically, I find that all three of these approaches provide us with unique and not mutually exclusive ways of making our first-year composition courses more explicitly transferable.

Despite the frustrations that research writing has brought our field, I have confidence that learning about writing works best when such knowledge is positioned in a series of assignments within a composition course. In my composition class, students' first assignment asks them to conduct research on the writing and research practices of other disciplinary activity systems by interviewing professors, students, and professionals on their writing and research practices. I provide students the option to study an activity system outside of the university, but no student has chosen to do so, possibly because students already have access to the activity system of the university. Students are encouraged to observe a class meeting and to collect any syllabi, assignment prompts, or other documents from this activity system, in addition to conducting interviews. For example, students might ask professors what citation format is commonly used in their field, what journals are most respected, what is expected of students in terms of writing, and what issues are most current. Such a prompt allows students to work within a composition classroom devoted to the study of writing practices, and, as Reiff argues, "students learn a new genre [ethnography] as they employ patternings of language and rhetorical strategies to create an empirically grounded representation of social realities" ("Materiality" 555). Because students read each others drafts and share their findings with the rest of the class, one of the most rewarding features of this assignment is that students begin to see that writing and research are valued and necessary outside of first-year composition (engineering

students are often told that, to their surprise, that the best writers get the best jobs). Of course, students recognize that their findings are limited, but they also come to recognize that even though they are studying one field, there are multiple activity systems within that field, each with its own genres.

This ethnographic work leads to their next assignment, a rhetorical analysis of a journal and article within their field. Clay Spinuzzi argues that "such rhetorical analyses would be transactional, because they do not pretend to be other than what they are" and "rhetorical analyses fall within the focus of the teacher's field: the collection of habits into genres, the forming of utterances" (304). For this assignment, students research the history of the journal, its purpose in the field, and its requirements for publication, as such constraints affect the rhetorical choices of the author(s). I encourage students to find articles in journals that are within their major but lack extreme specialization. Here I am not only concerned that students understand the rhetorical features of the text—how the writers use sources, how papers are organized, and what type of knowledge seems to be privileged—but also that they see how the articles seem to work in their field given their knowledge gained from the previous assignment. Students share their articles with the class by giving mini-presentations, so all students are exposed to a variety of articles no matter their major.

Although both of these assignments involve research, their primary purpose is to help students understand what it means to learn how to enter a new activity system. For such assignments, the activity system of their discipline becomes the unit of analysis, although we often discuss in class how specific journals and classes in their discipline do not stand for the entire discipline. The final assignment asks students to use their knowledge of research and writing within their discipline and to complete a research project that they believe would add to the conversation. In other words, I ask students to decide how to enter the conversation based on what they have learned about their particular discipline. I do not explicitly teach students how to write these papers but rather help them to discover the variations of research genres within their disciplines. For example, I might ask students to bring several journal articles to class and to determine, working in groups, how the writers situate their own research into the conversation. For background information, I might provide them with an understanding of Swales' CARS model. This activity leads to discussions of literature reviews, use of sources, and methodology. Most students choose to do a primary research project, although other students complete an extended literature review. Rather than learning MLA by default, students are required to learn and to use the citation format most common in their discipline, helping them to see how different citation styles contribute to different ways of using sources. The goal of the assignment is less about how well the research paper is written—although I am always impressed by their quality—and more about how students learn to write a genre based on what they know of the activity system in which it functions. As a part of this project, students complete a proposal, a progress report, and an annotated bibliography. They also give a conference presentation, focused on both their findings and their rhetorical decisions for their paper, targeted to their peers. We also spend considerable time in-class and during conferences discussing the rhetorical choices they are making in their papers, and why they believe these choices to be most fitting for their discipline. Much of our conversations in the class are about writing. We read articles much like those assigned by Wardle and Downs, and students use this knowledge of writing to guide their own discoveries about writing in their disciplines.

Many students come to first-year writing with the idea that academic writing involves taking a stance and using quotes to back up that point, which limits their understanding of research. My approach asks them to move past the idea that there is generalized academic writing to discover the discipline-specific nature of research and writing. Such an approach has many transferable outcomes. For example, students learn that conventions and citation styles vary drastically between fields, and they discover how different ways of using sources can affect the reading of a text. They see that research has many different forms and purposes. They also learn what it means to use a research question to

guide their work and to position their own research in a current conversation. Most students only use scholarly articles as their secondary sources, especially after I show them how to track findings reported in a popular source back to the original article. In addition, students see the benefit of engaging with a topic in depth.{2} [#note2] I've never seen students so excited about conducting research and realizing that they have something to contribute to a conversation. Rather than students asking me whether their paper is too short, they ask me whether it is too long (they range anywhere from 8-18 pages and often include appendices, figures, and tables).

Bergmann and Zepernick argue that "the primary obstacle to such transfer is not that students are *unable* to recognize situations outside FYC in which those skills can be used, but that students *do not look for* such situations because they believe that skills learned in FYC have no value in any other setting" (139). As a result, we must consider how we might make the writing that we assign function as preparation for genres students might encounter in the future. In other words, consideration of what antecedent genres we are teaching our students is important, especially if freshman composition is being charged with preparing students to write in all disciplines (however ridiculous such an expectation). Rather than hoping our students recognize that the change in location will change the genre they are expected to produce, we need to make these contextual changes clear by showing students how to approach genres in these new contexts. Carroll argues that "professors in major disciplinary courses may underestimate how different their expectation about writing are from those that students have already experienced and how much practice is needed to apply discipline specific concepts, knowledge, and conventions in writing" (6). In other words, even when students enter their disciplinary courses, they might still be expected to learn the genres on their own. As a result, rather than teaching "*The* research paper" or "the argument," we might help students to learn about genres in a way that better positions them to write in genres they will encounter in their future writing endeavors.

While instructors do not have to agree with my particular approach, instructors can no longer ignore that freshman composition may provide students with little transfer value when it treats writing as a skill that can be learned outside of a specific context. If we agree with Bakhtin that communication "has a particular purpose, that is, it is a real link in the chain of speech communion in a particular sphere of human activity or everyday life" (83), then we should help our students understand what it means to learn how to communicate within any sphere of human activity.

Notes

1. For an in-depth history of the research paper, see David R. Russell (*Writing*) or Robert Connors (*Composition*). (Return to text. [#note2-ref])

2. Students have researched and written on a variety of topics. For example, one student wanted to know how prevalent the use of fake IDs is on campus and what contributes to their use. He surveyed more than 400 students. Another student was interested in the use of equine supplements for horses at barns across the country, for which she conducted multiple phone interviews. Some students' projects grew out of frustrations they saw related to their major courses. For example, all engineering students are required to purchase a tablet PC when starting the major, but there are widespread complaints among students about the PC's relative lack of use for what it is worth. A student conducted an extensive study of the history of the tablet PC on our campus, the problems with its incorporation in classes, and recommendations (based on surveys and interviews) to make it more worthwhile in coursework. (Return to text. [#note2-ref])

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