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## There Is No "Right Answer:" Teaching as Exploration

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[Final MA Portfolio]

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*There is No Right "Answer:" Teaching as Exploration*

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green  
State University in partial fulfillment of  
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Master of Arts in the field of English

May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Dr. Heather Jordan, First Reader  
Ms. Kimberly Spallinger, Second Reader

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English Capstone

7 May 2019

*Framing Narrative*

“Teaching is like attempting to solve a puzzle without a guiding picture.” I wrote these words in my application to graduate school, with the hope that spending time digging deeper into pedagogy would give me the answer to teaching, that I would emerge from the chaos of my previous experience in the classroom with a sense of perfect clarity, that I would essentially “figure out” the teaching profession. I would solve the puzzle. The irony of this is, of course, that teaching is unsolvable because it is neither a puzzle with an answer nor a problem with a solution. A student-centered pedagogy dictates that teachers might come alongside students and from the depth of our experiences, our encounter with our subject (English), and the theoretical underpinnings of our assignments or developed methodologies of our lessons, students might come to critically engage with their world and critically consider their place within it.

The contents of my portfolio signify my own growth in understanding my role as a teacher and developing a framework for teaching students in a way that cultivates curiosity and that prioritizes student agency and student voice. As is the case for many teachers, I began teaching the way *I* was taught; if students could follow my instructions carefully and adhere to the formulaic writing I prescribed, they might develop as writers and find themselves prepared for the next step of their education. And this perpetuating cycle manifested in a lack of student engagement and authentic writing; students were discouraged from taking risks and from feeling

that their own observations and ideas were valued. I was essentially, for much of my career, teaching students *what* to think rather than *how* to think. The former is simple, yet stifling. The latter is difficult, yet liberating. So while I understand now that the teaching puzzle can never be definitively solved by finding the perfect assignments or happening upon the conclusive best-practice, I'm also acutely aware that to teach in a way that asks students to wrestle with uncertainty or liminality, coming to their own interpretations of complex texts or a complex world, also invites me into the iterative revision of my own teaching practices. The following projects, and their revision, is indicative of such a process—the same I now ask of my own students.

With this in mind, “FROM: An English Student, SUBJECT: Why Read Fiction?” is the first piece in my portfolio. As the title evinces, the format incorporates an email Dr. Phil Dickinson, my professor for ENGL 6090 Teaching Literature, was given by a colleague. The actual email, while it creates a rhetorical situation for my hypothetical response, is less important than the fundamental question the unnamed student is asking—and that all students may find themselves asking—“Why read fiction?” As a critical essay, this piece incorporates much of the course material from the Teaching Literature class, surveying a number of theorists such as Helen Vendler, Wayne Booth, Gerald Graff, and Martha Nussbaum, to try and provide a satisfactory answer to the age-old question of why reading or studying “false” stories could teach us any “truth” about our own world. I chose to write this essay because it rests on a question I found I could not answer on my own or understand via my own experiences; story, for me, had been a significant part of my entire life. Of *course* it had an inherent value...and it was only a matter of students coming into contact with the right books—canonical or not—that would transform their way of thinking.

Yet the quote within this piece that still resonates with me today, what I consider the crux of my own understanding of literature—and the backbone of my teaching—I include on pages 2-3, when Roland Barthes writes, “In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered.” As I discuss within this essay, deciphering a text means reading it for an answer; *disentangling* it immerses us in the process of dealing with the conclusion that a text’s meaning is dependent on numerous perspectives, and that these perspectives—and the consideration of our own—brings us into a critical community and into contact with unfamiliar paradigms.

My revision of this piece was dictated by the rhetorical situation I created for myself by including the email within the paper. While the original essay had featured a formal, academic tone, the imaginary audience existing as Dr. Dickinson and/or within an academic setting, much of my changes intended to mimic the voice I would use were I sending this “email” to one of my students. Informal phrasings, meta-acknowledgements of the paper as an email correspondence, and subtle bits of humor changed the readability of the piece, making it more accessible to the type of student I would love to one day respond.

Given my consideration of tone, it is fitting that my second piece involves helping students practice identifying and considering rhetorical situation within their own writing. And, if the previous piece is a reaction to my own inclination towards offering students “the meaning” of texts rather than helping them in their “disentangling,” “Exploring Genres” similarly invites students to engage within a writing process that is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Much of my work in graduate school has been a response to my own classroom context, as I teach in a private school that has historically prioritized formal and formulaic writing over writing that we might consider “real-world” or “authentic”—the “fresh and fearless” stuff Grant Wiggins

implores teachers draw out of students. “Exploring Genres” originated from my own apprehensions regarding this approach. Indeed, if a student could ask “Why fiction?”, I could ask “Why the five-paragraph essay?” And both the theoretical rationale and materials within “Exploring Genres” offer what I believe is a step towards a better way.

As I reconsidered the overall clarity of my theoretical rationale and unit, I made significant changes to the structural process of the rationale; while my initial versions emphasized the *unit*, describing the assignments and lessons and walking a reader through each week, subsequent drafts placed a priority on the theoretical concepts and ideas that I felt spawned the assignments themselves. For example, the theorists I cite, such as Grant Wiggins discussing “real-world” writing, Deborah Dean imploring for teachers to blend the five-paragraph model with other structures, or Cynthia D. Urbanski indicating the need for teachers to understand their role as a writing “coach,” are all instrumental in the formation of the other assignments. I valued their precedence as I reconsidered this piece as potentially read by a wider audience.

As I reflect on my coursework, I also feel it is necessary to indicate how many of the assignments and projects I completed and created built upon work completed previously; such is the case with my third piece, “Beyond the Academic Essay: Exploring Genre and Voice,” the final project for Dr. Cheryl Hoy’s ENGL 6220, Grammar in the Context of Writing. Having understood the importance of giving students space to explore an unfamiliar genre and creating a work they may not have been familiar with, I wanted to create a unit that focused on developing specific tools in their writer’s toolbox. After all, it’s one thing to write *one* piece and consider the best form of composition; it’s another to spend time moving in and out a *variety* of different genres with specific attention to rhetorical moves concerning “voice” and the rhetorical grammar choices that shape meaning. As the rationale within “Beyond the Academic Essay: Exploring

Genre and Voice” indicates, I’ve become more adept at giving students space within writing assignments to “play,” to experiment with writing styles and original choices. Additionally, this unit demonstrates how I’ve evolved in my pedagogical assumptions about how to teach writing. By incorporating the framework of “Model,” “Students-Write,” and “Share,” I’m beginning to take the theoretical guidance of scholars and educators such as Erika Lindeman and Kelly Gallagher and adapt their own research and experiences to my own classroom context.

Perhaps it is because of my own poetic sensibilities and a predilection towards the dramatic that the final piece of my portfolio was the first I wrote within this graduate program. A memoir, “Learning Spaces: My Voyage into Knowing” is part creative non-fiction and part academic-memoir. The more I tried to mediate between the two, the more I understood how unnecessary a binary I was creating between academic/creative. I believe, more than any other piece of my writing, this project captures who I am as an educator and also the educator I wish to become. It invokes the failures of my teaching career, while also memorializing the successes that pushed me deeper into uncharted pedagogical waters. As a memento to the reader of my portfolio, Dr. Heather Jordan, and because of the formative experience writing a teaching philosophy for Dr. Jordan’s ENGL 6020 Composition Instructor’s Workshop, one of my main decisions for revision was placing that philosophy at the memoir’s end; its placement as a “map” is thematically fitting with the piece while also indicating how I feel about completing this graduate program.

And that is to say, I walk away from my time with my professors and my fellow graduate students with the knowledge that I am a more proficient educator than when I started, with immeasurable uncertainty and apprehension, three years ago. While my goal at this journey’s beginning was to find the easy solution or to gain the “answer” to my teaching dilemmas, I now



feel equipped to begin forging my own path, in my own way, in my own classroom contexts— contexts, that I should add, are always permutating. The pieces within this portfolio exhibit the theoretical underpinnings that I will continue to rely on as I continue creating and developing new ways to walk alongside students into their own ways of learning.

*FROM: An English Teacher*

*SUBJECT: Why Read Fiction?*

Dear Mr. Zimmerman,

“The non-English/non-Theater major in me is starting to creep out and I feel like I'm struggling a little to understand the basis of our class. Before I explain what I mean, I am NOT trying to be a smart-ass about this, I am genuinely interested in your answer. I guess the most basic way to put this is that I don't understand the point of discussing a fictional piece of literature. For example, in class today when you asked us to get into groups and [*discusses group activity relating to a specific text*], I felt unsure of *why* we needed to answer that question at all. [*Character X*] never actually existed so to discuss her relationship to her husband just seems like a fun thing to do.

Since I got to college, and especially since I started taking honors classes, I have been wondering about the purpose of discussing fiction. It never happened so our only means of discussion seems to be speculation. And if you wanted to perhaps compare the story to real life that too would have to be based on speculation. I can grasp the importance of learning about literature; discussing why someone may have written something, the influence that work had on people, things like that, but to only talk about the story feels fake.

Obviously in our class we have talked a lot about [*Author Y*] the man, the time period he worked in, etc. I love the days we have those discussions. But, when we spend the entire period talking about what happened in the chapters and what we think they meant... I leave class wondering what the purpose was.

I'm sorry if this sounds like a terrible attack on the way you teach or something, that's not it at all. I'm sure that all English courses are taught this way but I think you are a really great teacher so I just wanted to know why you think learning about [*Author Y*] is so worthwhile that you've dedicated your work to it, and what exactly is one supposed to get from discussing a fictional story in general?

Thoughts?”

~A student

Dear student,

“Fiction is the lie that tells the truth, after all.” -Neil Gaiman

In all likelihood, you’re suspicious of these types of maxims. I would be, too, if I was in your spot; in some ways, it seems like we’re oversimplifying the difficulty of uncovering meaning or what we could call “truth.” And maybe that’s what you’re getting at when you write, “I can grasp the importance of learning about literature; discussing why someone may have written something, the influence that work had on people, things like that, but to only talk about the story feels fake.” How can a *story*, of all things, help us in our quest to understand life? Society? Ourselves?

Of course, examining a text as a solitary object, poring over it until it yields meaning, as if it were a Rosetta Stone we might suddenly decipher, seems disingenuous or speculative. There’s the word you used, again: “Fake.” Of course, this assumes that our goal *is*, in fact, to extract *the* meaning from a given work; and, it’s at this crucial point where we diverge out of necessity. If this were the point, I would’ve quit this profession a long time ago. Because you’re right: if a teacher or professor were to devote their lives to simply extracting meaning and close-reading the same series of texts forever and ever into oblivion...well, that seems less like a “calling” and more like a cruel punishment of the Sisyphean type—each successful interpretation or analyzed theme would mark the conclusion of an action and immediately call for a new ascension up the mountain of meaning. Rather, according to Roland Barthes, we should “accept the multiplicity of writing where ‘everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*” (qtd. in Moi 297). And it’s within this distinction that fiction proves its necessity.

If we were to *decipher* a text, it would mean that we would find an answer: “The book is ultimately about \_\_\_\_\_.” When we *disentangle* we understand that there are many, perhaps countless “answers.” Or, more accurately, we understand that these answers are all shaped by our ideologies—ideologies at work within a larger critical conversation, discovered in the discourse of readers who interpret ideas differently: a critical community. Understanding that studying literature is more than speculation about a work in isolation, but instead an entrance into a such a community is fundamental to understanding what the heck it is we’re doing in English class; using the immersive backdrop of fiction and the critical lenses at our disposal not to discover a “truth,” but to discover how we construct it.

Here’s what I mean: without understanding the way fiction beckons us into a critical conversation, it is no wonder the discussion of literature lacks a meaningful “real-world” connection to students’ lives and, perhaps, your own (think of all the times you’ve heard, or thought, “Why are we going to need this someday?” I’ve been there). The absence of such a framing often places literature in one of two categories: the first, you note when mentioning learning literature in the context of history—that what we might come to know would restrict itself to the accumulated knowledge about an author or how that author’s work influenced society in a given time period. The danger of only teaching (or learning) about literature in this fashion is evident when considering what theorist Elaine Showalter describes as “subject-centered theories” of education, which “emphasize content and information, often presented as the ‘correct’ answer” (27). Showalter, invoking Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s “banking model” of education, discusses the limits of such practice; according to Freire, “Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (27-28). In other words, it would be like me lecturing the class about the

meaning of a novel, depositing tidbits of knowledge, and then rejoicing when you repeat it back. Not only is this approach limiting to a myopic view of literature, placing the ideological authority in the power of one, but it also works against the higher thinking skills I want for all of you, and that Showalter reminds us of, as developed by B.S. Bloom: “knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (27). If a fictional work is only objectified as an item to know, comprehend, and then apply to a real-world context, the actual discussion of a piece of fiction, or what you take issue with, is meaningless; it would be preferable to look up the “correct” interpretation (Sparknotes, Lit Charts, Shmoop, and the rest of the merry gang) and use this as a basis for application. After all, if the teacher is the expert, as indicated by Freire’s “banking model,” shouldn’t their interpretation, or those of an expert, take precedence over the insights you might develop on your own?

Does that mean that you all can just kick me out of class? Not so fast, my friend. Removing the teacher as sole authority necessary to understand a text is not quite enough to bring students such as yourself into a critical conversation with the text. After all, the goal is still not to “decipher” a text but to “disentangle it.” In fact, the second way of viewing the discussion of fiction, if we lack the awareness of the need for critical conversation, involves the belief that simply reading (or discussing) fiction will allow the text to reveal itself to us. This romanticized, standard story, as identified by Gerald Graff, is one in which

[T]he business of teaching is basically simple: Just put the student in front of a good book, provide teachers who are encouraging and helpful, and the rest presumably will take care of itself. The traditional maxim that sums up this view is that a good book ‘essentially teaches itself.’ The great teacher is one who knows how to let the book teach itself. (47)

To look at reading or discussing fiction in this way again suggests that a piece of fiction is imbued with a “truth” to be found, and that with a little digging, either in a state of innocence before the text, as Helen Vendler would suggest (32), or through a discussion encouraging the speculation about setting, characters, or theme, “truth” might be found, and the story, solved.

The reason that the discussion of fiction is necessary, therefore, is one that resists the illusory attempt to discover a meaning, either derived from a solitary, revelatory reading or parsed together in a group context. Instead, discussing fiction allows us to capitalize on the shared views of each other to understand how different ideologies construct truth. But this begins with understanding that studying fiction is social. As Gerald Graff argues in “Disliking Books at an Early Age”, “[R]eading books with comprehension, making arguments, writing papers, and making comments in a class discussion are *social* activities. They involve entering into a cultural or disciplinary conversation, a process not unlike initiation into a social club” (47). To understand the activity of discussing fiction as more than a discussion taking place within a group of three or four students and instead the entrance into a cultural conversation might help alleviate your frustration with something you likely view as meaningless or without real-world implications: to enter into such a conversation *is* to join the real-world, critical community (see, we should celebrate...it’s not useless!) And, interestingly, access to this critical community does not necessarily require the presence of others—it fundamentally shapes the way that we read. Actually, the ideologies, or the lenses through which we see the world, disallow an objective reading; if there is a “truth” within fiction, it is that our assumptions and perspectives affect our interpretations. In his discussion of how this works, Graff points to Richard Rorty’s argument that when we read, we come to a text with questions beyond those posed by the text, restating his point by explaining, “As readers we are necessarily concerned with *both* the questions posed by

the text and the questions we bring to it from our own differing interests and cultural backgrounds” (46-47). Discussing fiction within an English classroom, then, is a place to voice these questions in the microcosm of a larger critical community. Through meaningful discourse and observing the questions of others, we can question the objectivity not only of the perspectives around us, but also ourselves.

This is likely the longest email you’ve ever received. And I get that. But there’s one more point that might be useful in resolving your questions, especially the core question to your inquiry: Why *fiction* itself? If I am to maintain the position that fiction does not possess a meaningful “something,” a “truth,” and that it instead provides the elucidative framework necessary for identifying ideologies and how they shape our readings, your question is a valid one. Couldn’t we do that reading other texts? Wouldn’t it be easier? In her essay “The Literary Imagination”, Martha Nussbaum confronts a similar question about the novel; what is the role of fiction in disentangling ideology, if historical texts and biographies might ostensibly offer similar access points of discussion? Nussbaum couches her argument for the novel in the idea that literary works “typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences” (359). In a way that historical texts and biographies cannot, fiction immerses the reader in “the possible,” causing readers, as Nussbaum puts it, “...to wonder about themselves” (359). Therefore, while a fictional story contains characters, and as you note, to talk about their interaction seems merely speculative, the immersive nature of fiction allows us to move the critical conversation surrounding the actions away from mere speculation; Nussbaum writes, “I cannot read as an immersed participant without bringing some such views to bear; they are implicit in the very emotions with which I respond” (361). The power of discussing fiction is apparent when we consider how each

participant within a discussion, like Nussbaum, has responded individually to the text, and supplements the group conversation with their own feelings and insights.

It's worth pointing out the societal effects of such a critical community, which Nussbaum captures as the essence of Wayne Booth's argument from *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*:

the act of reading and assessing what one has read is ethically valuable precisely because it is constructed in a manner that demands both immersion and critical conversation, comparison of what one has read both with one's own unfolding experience and with the responses and arguments of other readers. If we think of reading in this way, as combining one's own absorbed imagining with periods of more detached (and interactive) critical scrutiny, we can already begin to see why we might find it an activity well suited to public reasoning in a democratic society. (362)

In other words, to discuss fiction and to switch between the immersion of a story, the questions and observations it beckons, and the placement of those viewpoints within a larger critical conversation (as revealed, perhaps, by a classmate's dissenting position), extends its usefulness beyond a small classroom and into the fabric of our democracy.

I'm assuming this answer to your email goes far beyond what you may have expected, but the question you ask is an important one. Seriously, I'm thankful. Too often do students go beyond seeing a teacher as one who deposits knowledge, as in the Paulo Freire model, instead characterizing him as a magician, pulling themes from mid-air and conjuring voices of critics that seem disassociated from the reality they know. As a teacher, my goal has always been to move away from either depositing or conjuring, and instead utilize a pedagogical practice that focuses on the extent to which students master *skills* versus *content*. One such competency that



students, such as yourself, might come away from an English classroom is enumerated in Elaine Showalter's list of the primary skills we should desire for our students to master: "How to detect the cultural assumptions underlying writings from a different time or society, and in the process become aware of one's own cultural assumptions" (26). By entering into a critical conversation and community, cognizant of the ideologies that construct truth in ourselves and others, we can enter a discussion of fiction holding a truth and leave with it slightly revised. And, as you've heard repeated in my class, revision is everything.

-Mr. Zimmerman

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*Exploring Genres***Theoretical Rationale**

*“The problem with much writing in schools is how false it is” (525).*

Whitney, Ridgeman, and Masquelier’s essay “‘Beyond is This Okay’: High School Writers Building Understandings of Genre” begins with this bold assertion that raises important questions: what does it mean for student writing to be “false?” Or more importantly for teachers, who are tasked with nurturing young writers, what does it look like for student writing to be “true?” “False writing” or “true writing” are perhaps merely helpful misnomers, albeit ones that specify a binary between an un-inspired, formulaic, five-paragraph essay and the type of writing that seems “true”—cases in which a student’s work seems particularly inspired, or, simply, instances when it’s clear their writing *matters*.

But such writing traits are not the sole burden of the student, despite what some teachers may lament when reading a particularly dull or repetitive essay; while students might produce “false” writing—the type often produced in schools, according to Whitney, Ridgeman, and Masquelier—it is prompted by assignments detached from a rhetorical situation (Bitzer), insulated from an actual audience, and devoid of meaningful purpose. That is to say, it is teachers who fail to give students the ability to participate in real-world writing. As Grant Wiggins suggests in his article “Real-World Writing: Making Audience and Purpose Matter,” “That’s what ‘authentic assessment’ in the teaching of writing amounts to: ensure that students have to write for real audiences and purposes, not just the teacher in response to generic prompts” (30). A more accurate binary beyond “true” or “false,” therefore, is “authentic” or

“inauthentic,” a label reflecting the reality that student writing evolves from the teacher’s primordial assignment sheet.

To invoke this idea, that the authenticity of student work is tethered to the types of assignments given, is to critically assess the flaws of my own curriculum design for much of my teaching career. Despite my attempts to free students from the rigidity of the five-paragraph essay, despite creative writing prompts, despite writing conferences or grading contracts or substantial revision and peer-review, students have nevertheless turned in written work devoid of inspiration and authentic writing choices. While the design of the system may have changed over the years, its production—and final product—never did. Students still submitted work into the narrow pipeline that exists in many classes between student and teacher: a flood of papers in, the slow drip of feedback out.

It is in response to the “falseness” of student writing as I’ve perceived it and the desire to encourage “fresh and fearless” choices (Wiggins 29) that my five-week writing unit, “Exploring Genres,” has taken form, predicated first and foremost on students delving into a wide variety of genres. To determine the type of writing required by a specific genre is to begin looking at how rhetorical situation insists upon the conventions of a given genre, thus placing students into authentic writing choices.

### **The Unit**

The beginning of my “Exploring Genres” unit originates from Grant Wiggins’ first tenet of authentic assessment:

Engaging and worthy tasks of importance, in which students must use knowledge effectively and creatively to achieve a result. The tasks are either real-world or replicas

and analogous to the kinds of tasks faced by professionals in the field, adult citizens, and/or consumers. (30)

The students' task the first week involves a hypothetical scenario in which groups form their own social media agency, competing for the chance to market the "Flame Festival"—a music extravaganza promising customers a weekend experience unlike any other. Students are responsible for designing a branding guide based on simplified industry models, constructing Facebook and Instagram advertisements, and creating a functional website on the Wix platform, the culminating presentation existing as a "pitch" for their agency's place as lead marketer for the music festival. While this is certainly a "fake" event, the skills and writing process required throughout the project are authentic, especially taking into account the considerations students must make regarding how their design choices are "read" by consumers. These types of task place students in the role of defining both their audience and their purpose, forcing them to empathize with the emotions of those they hope their advertisements and website will reach. Such an endeavor helps them begin to learn the effects of tone and voice. By placing students within a rhetorical situation (Bitzer) that allows them to make choices regarding *how* to best affect their audience and communicate their purpose, students participate in authentic writing.

The idea behind student choice and their autonomy in making these decisions is integral to the success of this project; in fact, the vagueness and free play within the guidelines align this assignment with what Carrie Leverenz refers to as a "wicked problem," or one that is modeled after the concept of "wickedness" in the field of tech design. In the same way that designers must often deal with "wicked" design problems, which Leverenz communicates in Richard Buchanan's terms as "ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole

system are thoroughly confusing,” so too, argues Leverenz, must writing prompts draw upon “the wickedness of most real life writing tasks” (7). As she suggests,

Making writing assignments more like design briefs is a place to start. Design briefs share some characteristics of typical writing assignments but also differ in important ways. A design brief is the initial description of what the client wants or needs the designer to create, specifying the outcomes of the design—what the design will achieve—but not the design itself, which is what the designer is being hired to provide.

(7)

And this idea, that students feel the freedom (and difficulty) that comes with the territory of designing their own website, advertisements, and a final pitch, is one that is noticeably absent in traditional academic papers or formulaic pieces of writing.

One of the main goals of this unit, however, is not to have students jettison their notions of relying on formulaic structure; instead, to explore genres is to understand the extent to which genres rely on internal convention and disparate constraints. Deborah Dean suggests in “Muddying Boundaries: Mixing Genres with Five Paragraphs” that by both analyzing and mixing other genres into traditional five-paragraph form, students “begin to make the choices writers make—at the same time working with the accepted form for these situations. Students will need to consider the social context of their writing even more because of the choices they have open to them (56). Therefore, I’m using a particular mini-lesson to tether the rhetorical choices students are making within their designs to the five-paragraph model they are familiar with. First, I give students a copy of Stephen King’s “Why We Crave Horror Movies”—albeit one I’ve adapted into a five-paragraph-essay form. Students point out what makes it a “good” essay; they work with the language we’ve used in class and that they are already familiar with:

thesis, topic sentences, specific examples, a formal tone, etc. The original essay, however, is much more *informal*. It situates an argument for mankind’s sick fascination with fear amidst humorous anecdotes and various aphorisms, adhering to no particular structural constraints and breaking many of the “rules” students have come to conflate with “correct” writing. The comparison of both is a useful introduction into how genre conventions shape an author’s choices, and is a necessary first-step into their continued exploration of genre.

The second step? Determining what we mean by “genre” and just how many genres exist. Week Two begins with a brainstorming session listing different types of writing and uses their experience designing work for the “Flame Festival.” For example, was the writing they compiled in their advertisements and in their website copy reminiscent of any “school” writing they’d done? What are some other types of “real-world” writing? Such questions help clarify the goal of this brainstorming: to organically begin defining genres, especially so as not to discount valid writing genres that may be traditionally overlooked within classroom settings or that are currently emerging. For example, as P.L Thomas writes in “Adventures With Text and Beyond: Challenging Genre, Medium and Text—Students as Authentic Readers and Writers,”

While the real world of ‘text’ has expanded and challenged us with a variety of media, format, and genres including but not limited to print texts, our classrooms have remained relatively static in terms of the texts we challenge and the explanations we offer for ‘text,’ ‘medium’ and ‘genre’—primarily because our classrooms have been abdicated to raising test scores instead of fostering autonomous and literate students. (92)

The goal of this brainstorming and discussion, in addition to introducing students to the *concept* of genre, is also to prime the students for what will comprise the remainder of the five-week unit: students choosing a genre that is either unfamiliar to them or that they would like to explore, and

then composing a genre-appropriate piece of writing that is drafted and workshopped for submission into their final semester portfolio. The mechanics of such a genre-study and creative composition are helpfully supplied by Andrew-Vaughan and Fleischer in “Researching Writing: The Unfamiliar Genre Project,” which involves students finding models of genre-specific pieces, annotating them with their observations, and analyzing the writing within the genre of their choosing.

Rather than asking students to undergo this project alone, however, my methods of instruction are informed by Cynthia Urbanski, who encourages teachers to exist as a writing “coach.” I aid the students’ own analysis by modeling for the students the types of observations useful in determining the conventions of their genre; additionally, in choosing the genre of a personal memoir essay for my own writing piece and participating in the project alongside my students, I’m taking David Harrington’s advice to “cast off [my] last shreds of protective covering and plunge into the writing process alongside [my] students, perhaps even splash about in the same assignments” (14). Harrington’s reasoning for this is to avoid the impression that writing is easy or clean, when it is instead complex and requiring sophisticated thought. By allowing students to aid in my own pre-writing process, they should feel more equipped to participate in their own brainstorming and pre-writing experience.

Another important aspect of the student’s writing process, in addition to the aid I provide them by modeling, is their participation within a writing community. In this space, which I’ve carved out towards the end of Week Two, students spend time workshopping and revising their genre piece, both giving and receiving constructive criticism. The goal of this revision process, as exemplified by Nancy Sommers, is to clarify revision as an iterative rather than linear process. Sommers notes that students often revise using the “thesaurus philosophy of writing,” where



“better” words are simply substituted into papers, and that this type revision often occurs at the very end of the writing process (381). As demonstrated in the students’ peer review sheet (see appendix), students will look at the content of their peers’ work rather than just grammatical errors.

But this, too, requires additional guidance, as students’ default way of revision is to look for sentence-level mistakes. In order to facilitate a paradigmatic shift towards identifying a wider array of stylistic choices, I guide students in how to read for the form or shape of an argument, using, for example, an excerpt from Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Furthermore, students are asked to identify similar forms within the work of their peers, first looking at the content of a piece and how well it accomplishes what it sets out to *do*.

Students will be revising, writing, meeting with their groups, and conferencing with me throughout Week Three and Week Four. And, I should note, that the model of student conferences I will employ are modeled after Urbanski’s set of guidelines, which implore that teachers use writing conferences to listen: “We can only find out why our students make the writing choices they make by *listening* to them” (128). Additionally, as students continually share their work both with myself and with their peers, they are participating in the authentic act of offering their writing to an actual reader; as Peter Elbow explains,

“No wonder [writing] is agony. As you are writing you get no clues as to how readers will react. You have to write the whole thing out and keep going till the end, even though you have no idea whether the reader is lost or thinks you are crazy at the end of the first paragraph” (qtd. in Urbanski 128).

In this way, students will participate in an authentic writing throughout the unit, until their piece is finished. The culminating publication of their piece to a digital audience on the class Wordpress blog and the reading of their work to a real one a few days later once again invokes the idea of writing for a real-world audience.

### **Assessment**

The primary mode of assessment for the students' composition occurs at the end of the semester, as students submit their piece of genre-writing, as well as other types of writing assigned throughout the course, into a final portfolio. This final portfolio, in the model of King, Patterson, and Stolle, is both a "showcase" and a "formative" portfolio, meaning that students provide their most completed work *and* the drafts and peer review reflections that dictated their final revisions (6). As such, students receive a grade not only for their selected pieces, which are originally assessed broadly according to a grading contract, but also the quality of their peer reviews and the completeness of the accompanying documents to their final composition. Additionally, by including *all* of the components required by a final grading contract, the minimum grade assigned for the portfolio (and for each writing assignment, assuming it meets the stipulations of its own contract) is an 87 (B+). This practice of assessment is suggested by Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow as an aforementioned "grading contract," in which students' adherence to project or course guidelines set forth in a contract solidifies a minimum score students can earn for a complete portfolio, while also allowing for students to earn A's by producing and continuing to revise exemplary work. Danielewicz and Elbow's rationale for this style of assessment is multi-faceted: first, "The contract helps strip away the mystification of institutional and cultural power in the everyday grades we give in our writing courses" (249). By providing a concrete grade that students can earn simply by producing work that meets the

criteria of the grading contract, students can avoid the types of personal responses Elbow forecasts: “ ‘He gave me a bad grade because he just doesn’t like me’ ” or “ ‘because he disapproves of my ideas or point of view or ideology’ ” (249). Second, contracts actually end up yielding more student work (Danielewicz and Elbow 250). Because students have a firm understanding of the components their portfolio must include and because the benchmark for a “B+” or the grade indicated by the contract is clearly communicated, skilled writers, especially, “must now engage in learning tasks they used to skip” (Danielewicz and Elbow 256).

Lastly, contracts help rectify the delineation between “behavior” and “writing” as it applies to grades (Danielewicz and Elbow 249). Students who exhibit the “behavior” necessary for the grade as specified by the contract can earn it through honoring the contract; students, such as the skilled writers Danielewicz and Elbow acknowledge, must also practice the behaviors of real-world writers. Elbow’s justification is apparent in the implementation of this type of contract: “when students spend fourteen weeks doing everything the contract requires (which is a great deal), the quality of their writing improves enough to *warrant* a B by the end of the semester” (250). While portfolios can often be taxing at the end of a semester, this methodology seems to reduce the grading burden while providing a valid measurement of student success.

### **Conclusion**

Placing students within rhetorical situations that beckon them towards authentic writing recognizing audience and purpose has been, as demonstrated through research on composition, a successful methodology towards producing writers who are capable of writing in a myriad of different contexts. As a contribution to the ELA profession and to helping burgeoning writers discover their own writing voices, “Exploring Genres” carries out the mission of both authentic

writing within a classroom and authentically assessing student work in a way that allows both students and teachers to situate a real-life writing scenario amidst real collaboration.

## **Unit Schedule**

*\*Note: I see my students 4 days a week in 60 minute classes.*

### **Week One**

#### **Day 1:**

*In-Class:*

- Introduction to Flame Festival Activity
- Wix Website Tutorial

HW: Work on Flame Festival Website component via Wix Platform

#### **Day 2:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Examination of the most famous advertisements in history...intro to rhetoric: ethos, pathos, logos, audience and purpose.

*In-Class:*

- Work on Flame Festival Activity

HW: Continue work on Flame Festival Activity

#### **Day 3:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Introduction to Genre... “Why We Crave Horror Movies” in King’s original form and tone, followed by the five-paragraph essay version. Discuss the differences, building upon the audience and purpose idea of the previous day.

*In-Class:*

- Work on Flame Festival Activity
- Prepare “Pitch” for tomorrow

HW: Finish Flame Festival Activity

**Day 4:**

*In-Class:*

- Presentations
- Quick-write “apology letter” to customers of the Flame Festival after it goes up in...flames.

*\*Note: This is based on the real-life Fyre Festival, which shared a similar fate.*

**Week Two**

**Day 5:**

*In-Class:*

- Brainstorm “types” of writing on the board
- Introduction to genre-specific writing
- Introduction of Writing Project

HW: Preliminary research...decide the “type” of genre-writing you want to include from the genres brainstormed/provided

**Day 6:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Modeling how to analyze a piece, looking for genre conventions

*In-Class:*

- Research models within genre of your own choosing.
- Find three different models to inspire your own piece.

HW: Complete model analysis worksheets.

**Day 7:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Hunger Games Sharing/Revision (Fish bowl with names, students are sitting in pods, name is drawn, if student doesn’t want to share their models and analysis, classmate can “volunteer as tribute.”)

*In-Class:*

- Model pre-writing process
- Brainstorming/pre-writing
- Brainstorming/pre-writing conferences

HW: Continue pre-writing. Identify Audience and Purpose of composition. Provide a statement of purpose: What would you like your piece to *do*?

**Day 8:**

*In-Class:*

- Contract expectations and assignment of writing groups.
- Read/Discuss “Shitty First Drafts”
- Writing day (I’m available throughout class for questions/feedback)

HW: Continue work on draft

**Week Three**

**Day 9:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Critique of my draft... modeling of constructive feedback in peer review.

*In-Class:*

- 1<sup>st</sup> Draft Due to Writing Groups
- Peer Review

HW: Complete peer review worksheet, work on 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

**Day 10:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Sentence structure and style... MLK’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

*In-Class:*

- Writing Day, focus on sentence structure and style.

HW: Work on draft

**Day 11:**

*In-Class:*

- Writing Day w/ Conferences

**Day 12:**

*In-Class:*

- Writing Day w/ Conferences

## **Week Four**

### **Day 13:**

*In-Class:*

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Draft due
- Writing Group Discussion: Talk about the changes you've made, collect feedback.
- "Bless, Address, Press"

HW: Work on draft

### **Day 14:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Identifying "Movements" within excerpt from Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Between the World and Me." Take one volunteer's piece and apply a similar reading.

*In-Class:*

- Writing Day.

HW: Work on draft

### **Day 15:**

*In-Class:*

- Writing Day w/ Conferences

### **Day 16:**

*In-Class:*

- Peer Review Workshop Stations (Stations (students rotate through each): Structure, Syntax, Diction, Grammar)
- Conferences

HW: Work on Draft

## **Week Five**

### **Day 17:**

*Mini-Lesson:* Proofreading and editing of my own model

*In-Class:*

- Final Writing Day

HW: Finalize Draft

**Day 18:**

*Mini-Lesson:* I read my own piece, and students reflect back to me what makes a “successful” reading.

*In-Class:*

- Turn in draft electronically for publication on class blog
- Practice “reading” within writing group

HW: Prepare for Reading

**Day 19-20: Readings**

**Exploring Genres Introduction Sheet**

As we’ve discussed in class, and as you’ve seen in your previous writing assignments, different types of writings are appropriate for different audiences and for different purposes. For this project, you’ll have the opportunity to pick your hypothetical audience and craft a piece of work for a specific purpose by exploring “genre.”

As you can see from the list below and from our brainstorming session, genres are numerous and are always evolving and adapting to fit necessary situations. So, while I encourage you to begin by reflecting on a genre below that may interest you, feel free to branch out into a writing genre that may not appear on the list below. I ask, however, that you clear it with me first!

By the end of this project you should have:

-A piece of writing that fits within your chosen genre, as evidenced by the conventions of the genre you choose.

-A research component of three professional “model” examples that you will analyze as the basis for your own writing

-A collection of peer review/ Writing Group Documents...see the handout for specific requirements.

-A Writer’s Memo, or, in other words, a 300 word accompanying document that provides a brief reflective narrative of your writing process and a brief justification of how your work fits within the genre of your choosing.



**Grading Contract:**

If **ALL** of the following conditions are met, students are ensured to make an 87 on this writing assignment. For any of the conditions **NOT** met, student grades will be lowered by a step in the letter grade system (for example, 1 condition not met= B 83, 2 conditions not met=B- 80, 3 conditions not met = C+77, 4 conditions not met= C 74, etc.)

Initial for each condition:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. All deadlines are met, including drafts, peer reviews, and the final project.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Students provide peer review to each group member, and *fully* complete the peer review worksheet for each draft.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Students have researched and thoroughly analyzed three different model texts, clarifying the conventions of their chosen genre.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The student's writing shows evidence of sustained revision throughout each phase of drafting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The student's writing shows evidence of thorough editing and is free of careless grammatical mistakes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The student's writing memo meets the appropriate word count, and also reflects thoughtfully and intentionally on their writing process and final product.

**Class Behavior:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Students are on task and not distracting to their writing group or other classmates (one warning).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Students speak respectfully to their writing groups and classmates, providing constructive criticism and feedback.

**To earn an "A" on this assignment, you should:**

- Clearly demonstrate your knowledge on the genre of your choice, not only in form, but also in audience-appropriate choices in tone, syntax, and diction.
- Provide thorough and thoughtful feedback to your writing group members in a way that indicates a careful reading of their work.
- Demonstrate the ability to revise your work in accordance with the feedback you receive, with deliberate revision choices apparent in each draft.
- Produce a work that is free of grammatical errors, awkward phrasing, or sentences that obscure the delivery of your content to your audience.
- Provide a writer's memo that indicates your effort throughout the writing process, as well as your ability to argue the success of your final product.

**Step 1 Pick a genre:**

-Application:

- college \*
- job
- scholarship

-Art commentary

-Books

- children's book
- cookbook
- graphic novel
- user's manual

-Closing or opening arguments

-Critique of art/photography

-Essay

- personal (college)
- prose
- literary criticism

-Eulogy

-Last Will and Testament

-Letter

- to the editor
- of recommendation
- to representative

-Memoir

-Newspaper/magazine

- news article
- feature article
- in-depth report
- opinion column
- editorial
- sports

-Review

- book
- movie
- album

- Play

-Novel or novella

-Poetry (with written defense)

-PSA

-Script

- monologue
- one-act
- screenplay
- soliloquy

-Speech

- Commencement speech
- Toast

**-\*Note, if a genre you wish to explore is not listed above, clear it with me and go for it!**

**Step 2 Research**

Select **three** different examples of the type of writing you wish to create.

For each piece, complete the Genre Analysis Worksheet (see appendix).

**Step 3 Writing and Peer Groups**

Peer Groups will be assigned next week. You are responsible, on days of peer revision, to read the work of all group members and complete the Peer Review Worksheet (see appendix).

**Step 4 Due Dates**

1st Draft to Peers: Monday, 10/16

1<sup>st</sup> Peer Review to Peers: Thursday, 10/19

2<sup>nd</sup> Draft to Peers: Monday, 10/23

2<sup>nd</sup> Peer Review to Peers: Wednesday, 10/25

Final Project Due for Publication on Class Blog: **Tuesday, 10/31**

\*Readings will occur on the two days following.



**Appendix B**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Peer Review Worksheet**

Name of Peer you're reviewing: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. On their document, what are the most meaningful comments you provided? Explain how your comments will help their final essay.

2. What is your peer doing well, that you would like to see them continue to think about for the remainder of their work?

3. What could your peer improve upon in terms of the *content* of their paper (NOT GRAMMATICAL) for future drafts?

4. After reading your peer's paper, write a three sentence summary of their work, as you understand it. \*Be as accurate as possible! This is a great way for your peer to see feedback on how their content is being delivered to their audience.

## Appendix C

### The Flame Festival (minor, supplementary assignment)

To the design firms of W166 Inc.,

My name is Jah Roole, and I'm a music promoter for Island Vibes, an innovative and cutting edge music agency that connects fans to the sickest music experiences on planet earth. As an entrepreneur, I'm always on the lookout for fresh talent. So, I'm soliciting the help of one of your agencies for my newest business venture, Flame Festival, a luxurious music festival unlike anything in the industry. I'm talking, a private beach in the Bahamas, a glamour camping weekend, and the vibiest vibes ever vibed. With tickets priced at over \$20,000, it better be.

Our mutual contact, Mr. Z, has indicated that one of your agencies may be up to the task. Here's what we're looking for as we try to expand our digital footprint and get the word out about the festival:

- A website that gives off the vibe we're looking for.
- An explanation of your chosen voice and tone (see the difference in the link I've included).
- Help us identify the demographics of our target market. Who should we market to, and how should we style our brand to appeal to them?
- Two sample Facebook and Instagram advertisements. I want to see the type of work I should expect from you.

Oh, and this coming Friday, I'll need you to present your website and ads to me and my crew. We'll decide whose design is right for the *Flame Festival*.

Best regards,

Jah Roole

CEO Island Vibes, Flame Festival

#### Additional resources:

Main website: [www.Wix.com](http://www.Wix.com)

Voice and tone: <https://blog.bufferapp.com/social-media-marketing-voice-and-tone>

Ad-Mock Ups: <https://adparlor.com/ad-mockups/>

#### Examples of advertising on both Facebook and Instagram

**Instagram:** <https://adespresso.com/academy/blog/37-instagram-ads-examples/>

<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/instagram-ads-we-love>

**Facebook:** <https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33319/10-examples-of-facebook-ads-that-actually-work-and-why.aspx>

## Appendix D

### Common Core State Standards:

#### **Reading Literary: Key Ideas and Details**

ELAGSE9-10RI1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 2).

ELAGSE9-10RI2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 2).

ELAGSE9-10RI3: Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 2).

ELAGSE9-10RI5: Analyze in detail how an author’s ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter) (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 2).

ELAGSE9-10RI6: Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 2).

#### **Writing: Text Types and Purpose**

ELAGSE9-10W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in Standards 1–3 above.) (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 4).

ELAGSE9-10W5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language Standards 1–3 up to and including grades 9–10.) (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 4).

ELAGSE9-10W6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 4).

ELAGSE9-10W10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 5).

#### **Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration**

ELAGSE9-10SL1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics,

texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively ("Georgia Standards of Excellence" 6).

- a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- b. Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.
- c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented ("Georgia Standards of Excellence" 6-7).

ELAGSE9-10SL2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source. ("Georgia Standards of Excellence" 7).

### **Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas**

ELAGSE9-10SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task ("Georgia Standards of Excellence" 7).

ELAGSE9-10SL5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest ("Georgia Standards of Excellence" 7).

ELAGSE9-10SL6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 9–10 Language Standards 1 and 3 for specific expectations.) ("Georgia Standards of Excellence" 7).

### **Language: Conventions of Standard English**

ELAGSE9-10L1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

- a. Use parallel structure.\*
- b. Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional, absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent; noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations ("Georgia Standards of Excellence" 8).



ELAGSE9-10L2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

- a. Use a semicolon (and perhaps a conjunctive adverb) to link two or more closely related independent clauses.
- b. Use a colon to introduce a list or quotation.
- c. Spell correctly.
- d. Produce legible work that shows accurate spelling and correct use of the conventions of punctuation and capitalization (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 8).

ELAGSE9-10L3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening, and to write and to edit so that it conforms to the guidelines in a style manual (e.g., MLA Handbook, APA Handbook, Turabian’s Manual for Writers) appropriate for the discipline and writing type (“Georgia Standards of Excellence” 8).

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Bowling Green State University

Beyond the Academic Paper: Exploring Genre and Voice

Unit Plan/Rationale

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English 6220: Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing

Dr. Cheryl Hoy

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## Beyond the Academic Paper: Exploring Genre and Voice

### 1. Rationale

In her essay “Shifting Perspectives About Grammar: Changing What and How We Teach,” Deborah Dean reflects on the degree to which her understanding of teaching “grammar” has shifted according to trial-and-error throughout her career, as well as a growing awareness of the writing skills a student needs for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; such writing, as Dean acknowledges, will present itself through a variety of emerging modalities within a number of digital spaces and forms—some yet unrealized. These “shifting perspectives,” therefore, shun an outdated and prescriptive approach to writing that does not account for updated realities. A knowledge of grammar that emphasizes “correctness” and that places the student under the tyranny of the red pen? Obsolete. An emphasis on modeling and combining sentences *outside* the context of rhetorical consideration? A step in the right direction, but not quite fulfilling what Dean and other contemporary theorists recognize as the essential requirement for students as 21<sup>st</sup> century writers, regardless of changing landscape: the ability to critically consider how rhetorical, grammatical choices affect a reader.

Reflecting on my own journey in teaching grammar, my own perspectives, like Dean’s, have dramatically shifted over the course of my teaching career. While I’ve done much to curb the mistakes of my first years of teaching, specifically the aforementioned wielding of the red pen, I’ve found that by exposing students to predominantly one type of text—formal, academic writing—I’ve neither provided space for students to explore various genres, nor given them room within their writing to play with “voice”—either mimicking a variety of professional voices or developing their own.

The unit I've designed attempts to reconcile this oversight. Spanning just over three weeks—my school's rotating class schedule means I see my students a total of 16, one-hour class periods—the lessons and activities I provide culminate with the submission of a "Genre-Portfolio" in which students will include a number of small-scale prompts stemming from numerous professional examples, as well as one fully developed work inspired from one of their smaller pieces of writing. Driving this framework is the theoretical understanding that, as Dean writes, exposure to many genres is paramount:

In order to learn this strategic approach to language use, I need to make sure that students are exposed to lots of texts. More than exposure, they need immersion in texts of all kinds. It's hard to see how language used in one context differs from or is similar to that in another if a person isn't exposed to very many kinds of texts. Through exposure to multiple kinds of texts, students are more likely to view genres as scenes of both choice and constraint, of both expectations and flexibility. (23)

As we explore these genres as a class, adopting a variety of different tones and making grammar choices dependent on rhetorical situation, I hope students will understand how the "formal" writing they've engaged in for the duration of their high school experience is just one of many genres that rely on a number of expectations and conventions.

My structural choices within these lessons are inspired by the approach Constance Weaver advocates for in *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*, wherein she discusses a framework intended to gradually release responsibility to student writers after using model texts, either in the form of examples (professional or student-written) given to students, or a model developed collaboratively in a whole-class context (63-64). As an attempt to align my classes with this framework, I've chosen to divide each of my lessons into three explicit categories:

“Modeling,” “Students Write,” and “Share.” Overtly organizing class activities under such labels allows me to stay accountable to the guiding theoretical principles presented by Weaver and other contemporary theorists: “Modeling” ensures that students benefit from examples and guided practice, “Students Write” ensures the consistent generation of their own work, and “Share” ensures the existence of an authentic audience, whether it be a fellow-student at an adjacent desk or the entire class via discussion board. This decision stems from Erika Lindemann’s assertion that students are accustomed to writing only for the teacher: “students also need to practice writing for themselves, for each other, for audiences outside the classroom” (13).

## 2. Context

The lesson plan I’ve developed, at its core, is a response to the myopic study of academic writing my students have engaged in for much of their first semester. Additionally, it attempts to bridge the gap that exists in my current school context, which often implicitly communicates to students the binary that “formal” writing is “correct,” while “informal” writing (the use of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person, for example) is “incorrect.” Instead, by exposing students to a number of different genres and types of writing, I hope to not only help students expand their repertoire of stylistic tricks, but more importantly equip them with the necessary practice of synthesizing grammar choices based on thoughtful consideration of their own intended audience and purpose.

**Lesson Plan Name: “Exploring Genre and Voice”**

**Grade level:** 11<sup>th</sup> Standard

**Supporting Theory/Theorist:**

- Dean, Deborah. “Shifting Perspectives about Grammar: Changing What and How We Teach.” *English Journal*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2011, pp. 20–26.
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- Noden, Harry R. *Image Grammar: Teaching Grammar as Part of the Writing Process*. 2nd ed., Heinemann, 2011.
- Weaver, Constance, and Jonathan Bush. *Grammar to Enrich & Enhance Writing*. Heinemann, 2008.

**Standards (“NCTE/IRA Standards for the Teaching of Language Arts”):**

- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.



## **Lesson Plan**

### **Materials and Technology Needed:**

- Writer's Notebook
- Model Texts (see appendices)

### **Objectives:**

- Students will gain an understanding of the extent to which rhetorical situation (consideration of audience and purpose) dictates the stylistic/structural conventions and grammar choices within a given piece.
- Students will practice strategically employing voice and making stylistic writing choices according to the genre in which they are writing.
- Students will add writing strategies to their "writer's toolbox," especially continued exposure to Noden's Five Basic Brushstrokes.
- Students will gain greater familiarity working within the writing process, with a continued emphasis on expanding their audience beyond that of just the teacher.

### **Class Sessions Needed: 16**

### **Assessment Strategies**

Type of assessment: Formative

Tools used for assessment: Feedback via conferences, use of grading contract (see Appendix 7)

### **Post-Lesson Reflection prompts**

Reflection prompts for students: Writer's Memo (see Appendix)

Class Descriptions:

**Class Session # 1: Introducing Genres**

**Modeling:**

- Students identify and annotate the conventions of “academic writing” in a 5PE version of Stephen King’s “Why We Crave Horror Movies”
- Students are then given the *actual* version of Stephen King’s essay. They are asked to annotate/identify where Stephen King breaks “the rules.”
- Students discuss why “rules” are “rules.”

**Students Write:**

- Students will then attempt to write a “Why We Crave \_\_\_\_\_” paragraph in which they attempt to emulate Stephen King’s style.
- Writing conferences occur in the midst of student writing.
- HW: Finish paragraph.

**Class Session #2: Introducing Audience/Voice**

**Share:**

- Students will partner and share their “Why We Crave \_\_\_\_\_,” with space to share their paragraph with the entire class.

**Modeling:**

- Discuss “voice” within student models...what do we mean by a writer’s “voice?” When should we use different “voices?”

**Students Write:**

- “Invitation Activity” to introduce concept of “audience”/ “rhetorical situation.”
- Students repurpose the voice of a party invitation in order to fit the different “audiences” as presented via slideshow (see Appendix 1)

**Share:** Students share their work in-between each change of “audience.”

**Class Session #3: Building the Toolbox**

**Modeling:**

-Introduce/ work through Noden's Five Basic Brushstrokes

**Students Write:**

-Noden Activity/Writing a paragraph using Brushstrokes 1, 2, and 3.

-HW: Finish paragraph

**Class Session #4: Building the Toolbox (cont.)**

**Share:**

-Students swap paragraphs with a classmate and fill out brushstroke rubric (Noden 18); afterwards, they can share with entire class.

**Modeling:**

-Brushstrokes 4 and 5

**Students Write:**

-Students revise their original paragraph, implementing Brushstrokes 4 and 5.

**Class Session #5: Writing to Persuade/Entertain**

**Modeling:**

-Students read/annotate "Every Single Part of the First Creed is Perfect," by Shea Serrano.

-Students discuss specific choices, especially pertaining to voice and sentence structure.

-Draft model in front of students arguing why \_\_\_\_\_ is the perfect movie.

**Students Write:**

- Writing Prompt: Describe a scene of your favorite movie, with the eventual goal of arguing why \_\_\_\_\_ is a perfect movie. Keep in mind the goal of entertaining the reader.

-HW: Write opening paragraph

### **Class Session #6: Genre Type—Personal Essay**

#### **Share:**

-Students share with each other their opening paragraphs; students highlight instances of “voice”/strategic use of brushstrokes in each other’s writing. Provide space to share a few examples with the whole class.

#### **Modeling:**

-Give students a copy of “Dumb Kids Class” by Mark Bowden

-Students read/annotate, identifying stylistic choices/examples of writerly voice. Answer question: What is the *purpose* of Bowden’s essay?

#### **Students Write:**

-Class brainstorm: What are some unwritten social rules? What are the unwritten rules of the lunchroom? Etc.

-Writing Prompt: Begin writing an essay, in the style of “Dumb Kids Class,” in which you explore some of the “unwritten rules” in our school/society. Purpose is to inform/entertain.

### **Class Session #7: Zooming and Layering/Revision**

#### **Modeling:**

-Introduce Noden’s Zooming and Layering Revision w/ activity within *Image Grammar*, followed by revision of a previously written paragraph (Noden 35-38).

#### **Students Write:**

-Students should pick **two** of their writing samples to revise via zooming and layering.

(Revised samples included as artifact in final Genre-Portfolio).

-Writing Conferences

### **Class Session #8: Formal→Informal**

#### **Share:**

*Hunger Games* sharing: A student is randomly selected to share one of their samples with the class, with the opportunity for another student to “volunteer as tribute” to take their place.

#### **Modeling/Students Write:**

-Students read article on gender roles.

-Students must then re-write the article as a letter, explaining the concept to their best friend; the letter should try to capture their *own* voice.

### **Class Session #9: Genre Type—Memoir**

#### **Share:**

-Students read their letters out loud and discuss the ways they integrated their personal “voice” into their writing.

#### **Modeling/Students Write:**

- Students read and annotate “The Chase” by Annie Dillard, discussing specific choices Dillard makes within the essay as well as her overall purpose. Students respond to question, “What is her goal in writing this essay?”

-Students brainstorm and write rough draft first paragraph.

-HW: Compose one paragraph that introduces a story they could tell from their childhood.

### **Class #10: Toolbox Work—Writing Cohesion and “How-To” Activity**

**Share:** Students share their paragraph with a partner, with space to share w/ whole class.

#### **Modeling:**

-Explain “sentence cohesion” and the use of transitions w/ model.

-Students participate within a how-to activity/magic trick (Noden 173-174).

#### **Students Write:**

-Using their notes on how the magic trick is performed, and with an emphasis on sentence cohesion, students compose a set of instructions. Then, students try out their “how-to” instructions on the volunteers who were out in the hallway (Noden 173-174).

**Class #11: Introduction to Writing Project/Drafting**

**Students Write:**

-Students are introduced to the culminating writing project, in which they must choose **ONE** of the following entries to develop into a full piece:

Options:

- Why We Crave \_\_\_\_\_
- Why \_\_\_\_\_ Is a Perfect Movie
- Unwritten Rules Personal Essay
- Retelling a story/memoir Personal Essay

-Students begin drafting

**Class #12: In-Class Writing**

**Students Write:**

- Student drafting time
- Mini-Conferences

**Class #13: In-Class Writing**

**Students Write:**

- Student drafting time
- Mini-Conferences

**Class #14: In-Class Writing**

**Students Write/Share:**

- Rough draft #1 finished
- Peer-Review w/ written feedback (see Appendix 3)

**Class #15: In-Class Writing/Revising Time**

**Modeling:**

-Students watch as I revise one of my own pieces in front of them. We talk about some of the choices of sentences/voice and ways to continue zooming and layering.

**Students Write:**

-Students revise/edit their pieces.

**Class #16: Final Draft due**

**Share:**

-Students complete questions for Writer's Memo (see Appendix 4)

-Class reading day: Students share their work whilst we feast (students bring food). Their final essay is also published on the class discussion board.

-HW: Students must comment on *two* of their peers' essays via discussion board, remarking on how the author successfully used an emphasis on style and voice in order to fulfill the purpose of their piece.

Appendix 1

**Examples for “Invitation Activity”**

\*Note: Several other examples possible beyond the ones included.

**Compose 3-4 sentences inviting the following people to your birthday party:**

-A Congressman/President

Example:

Dear President Obama,

I am writing to ask if you would do me the distinct honor of attending my birthday party this coming Wednesday. While I know this is short notice, I cannot help but think that your presence would add to the overall atmosphere of the evening. The dress attire is formal, and there will be appetizers before a sit-down dinner at 8 pm.

Warmest regards,

Mr. Dawson J. Zimmerman

-A friend from your childhood you haven't seen in years:

Example:

Hey Michael,

Hope everything's going well, bro. The reason I'm reaching out is to see if you're available to come to my birthday party this weekend. We're having a pretty big throwdown at Chuck E. Cheese's, and don't worry...I'll cover the pizza. Tbh, I know it's been awhile, but I'm trying to get everybody together for one last time...so just let me know if you can make it work.

-Dawson



## Appendix 2

**Exploring Genre/Voice**

As we've discussed in class, and as you've seen in your previous writing assignments, different types of writings are appropriate for different audiences and for different purposes. For this project, you'll expand one of the pieces we've begun together with the ultimate goal of writing within a different genre and with a chosen "voice."

By the end of this project you should have:

-A piece of writing that fits within your chosen genre, as evidenced by the conventions of the genre you choose.

-A collection of peer review/ Writing Group Documents...see the handout for specific requirements.

-A Writer's Memo, or, in other words, a 200 word accompanying document that provides a brief reflective narrative of your writing process.

**Grading Contract:**

If **ALL** of the following conditions are met, students are ensured to make an 87 on this writing assignment. For any of the conditions **NOT** met, student grades will be lowered by a step in the letter grade system (for example, 1 condition not met= B 83, 2 conditions not met=B- 80, 3 conditions not met = C+77, 4 conditions not met= C 74, etc.)

Initial for each condition:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. All deadlines are met, including drafts, peer reviews, and the final project.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Students provide peer review to each group member, and *fully* complete the peer review worksheet for each draft.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Students have included a Genre-Portfolio that contains all WNB entries and exercises. Entries are complete.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The student's writing shows evidence of sustained revision throughout each phase of drafting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The student's writing shows evidence of thorough editing and is free of careless grammatical mistakes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The student's writing memo meets the appropriate word count, and also reflects thoughtfully and intentionally on their writing process and final product.

**Class Behavior:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Students are on task and not distracting to their writing group or other classmates.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Students speak respectfully to their writing groups and classmates, providing constructive criticism and feedback.

**To earn an “A” on this assignment, you should:**

- Provide thorough and thoughtful feedback to your writing group members in a way that indicates a careful reading of their work.
- Produce a work that effectively succeeds in its overall purpose. Writing is fresh, fluent, and fearless.
- Demonstrate the ability to revise your work in accordance with the feedback you receive, with apparent revision choices.
- Produce a work that is free of grammatical errors, awkward phrasing, or sentences that obscure the delivery of your content to your audience.
- Provide a writer’s memo that indicates your effort throughout the writing process, as well as your ability to argue the success of your final product.

Appendix 3

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Peer Review Worksheet**

Name of Peer you're reviewing: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. On their document, what are the most meaningful comments you provided? Explain how your comments will help their final essay.

2. What is your peer doing well, that you would like to see them continue to think about for the remainder of their work?

3. What could your peer improve upon in terms of the *content* of their piece (NOT GRAMMATICAL) for future drafts?

4. Look over the annotations you've written on your peer's paper...list **TWO** of your most helpful comments in the space below (can be direct quoted or a paraphrase).

Appendix 4

**Questions for Writer's Memo**

1. How do you feel about the success of your overall piece? What was the purpose of your writing?
2. What are some examples from your own essay where your writing has a distinct "voice?" Why did you choose to employ it the way you did?
3. Write your best sentence in the space below:
4. What part of the piece would you consider still "under construction?" Explain.

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All maps to knowing are different. This one is mine.

***Learning Spaces: My Voyage into Knowing***

By Dawson Zimmerman

2019

*This tale is true, and mine. It tells  
How the sea took me, swept me back  
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,  
Showed me suffering in a thousand ships,  
In a thousand ports  
and in me.*

*-“The Seafarer,” author unknown.*

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*“There is an illness in our culture; it arises from our rigid separation of the visible world from the powers that undergird and animate it. With that separation we diminish life, capping off its sources of healing, hope, and wholeness. We cannot settle for pious prayer as a preface to conventional education. Instead, we must allow the power of love to transform the very knowledge we teach, the very methods we use to teach and learn it”*

*–Parker Palmer*

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### ***Beginnings (1994)***

It was my mother who unlocked story for me. I remember the floral couch where we’d sit for hours in the summertime, the two of us, my small head on her shoulder, leaning in toward the page and waiting for the words to happen. I see her now, as I couldn’t then: with an eye on our book and an eye on me, gauging my reaction, and hoping. Her voice breathed life into words with the urgency of one who knows they’re sharing something important.

Back then, it wasn’t uncommon for us to churn through a basket of library books in a single day, my mother’s abilities as a former actress giving life to the characters,

words, and pictures on the page\*. Taking the trip to the Five Forks Trickum Public Library was like visiting the shores of another world. I'd plunder the shelves, fingers sticking to the clear covers and hearing the snap of plastic, the identifiable muted crackle of a book opening. I'd stack my bounty into deep green baskets and waddle to the car, load them up, and take them home. And then I'd head for the couch.

But this precious chapter in time, an introduction into the world of books, of stories, would come to an end. She told me, years ago, about one of her most profound moments of sadness: pulling up to the kindergarten school in our blue mini-van, she watched a carpool volunteer take my hand, saw the backpack pulled tight around my shoulders, the thermos in place, and how I gripped my lunchbox, dressed in the outfit she'd carefully picked out for my first day of real school.

The letting go.

The end of things.

The changing of the guard.

She cried all the way home.

*\*I hear her voice in my own when I read to my students.*



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*“At its deepest reaches, education gave me an identity as a knower. It answered the question “Who am I” by saying “You are one who knows” (Palmer 20).*  
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***Tales from a Sea-Deck (2015)***

*Welcome aboard, I say from the door of a classroom, and as the students walk in we high-five, and they sit diligently in traps of steel, and I hoist the sails, and away we go.*

*I’m twenty-five, a captain again, third-year-running, bon voyage.*

*This time, the winds have changed.*

*I’ve been in their shoes, remember the new blisters, torn half-moons on my hands and feet, the soon-to-be old scars.*

*Fresh-faces spun upwards towards the mast, some catch their breath in the blinding light, some already complain of sea-sickness and the hard gaze of the sun.*

*And I’m in their midst with an adopted stare from all my old Captains, dressed like I think I should, lips cracked from the mist’s salt-brine.*

*They’ll get saltier still.*

*Tucked under my arm is the map, an old piece of parchment I’ve drawn on, erased, re-drawn, sketched in the soft-light of my captain’s quarters.*

*Someone’s voice, mine, speaks to them of hard labor, red sky at night, sea monsters, and dark waters, and I hear the echo of my old Captains.*

*I feel the unsteadiness of the deck, the roars of waves and wind.*

*Captains share the same life. The same lungs.*

*I speak and tell them to follow me, to do what I say, to do what I do.*

*I finger the callouses on my hands.*

*They sing back their allegiance, they sign their names in blood, scratching initials in blank space below the rules of the ship.*

*We’re pushed away from shore. Drawn out by the wind and the tides.*

*Small sailors bound together in the ship’s belly, strung together, whispers of treasure like vapor.*

*It’s lonely on the sea deck. Cramped quarters below.*

*Setting suns and new waters, but the same maps.*

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There's an inherent optimism to beginnings, no matter where the story goes. In writing or in life, the existence of a word on a page pulled from the void of unreality, a body coming into being in the fullness of presence, the idea that something "is," presently, in a moment of time...there's only the pregnant possibility.

It's the passage of time that twists and molds and shades entities or ideas; it's context and the narrative itself, words in conjunction with words, the great chain of signifiers that creates the chaos and that breeds the possibility of something going terribly wrong, of us losing our way.

But beginnings?

Beginnings are golden.

The couch.

The classroom.

In many ways, my academic life as both a student and teacher is a tale of a first love forgotten and reclaimed.

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***Oh Captain, My Captain (2012)***

In the beginning, there was the newly-minted teacher and the private school nestled in the suburbs of Atlanta.

After an undergraduate degree in English and a year spent in a teaching fellowship where I was essentially figuring out “teaching” on the fly, these were the conclusions I had arrived at regarding the teaching profession.

**ONE: Parent interaction was terrifying.**

For someone with mild social anxiety disorder, where picking up the phone and ordering a pizza requires a specific script, my prevailing goal was to teach well enough to avoid any kind of negative interactions with parents.

**TWO: *The Dead Poets Society* was a work of pedagogical theory.**

Desks were meant to be both sat in and stood upon. Perspectives were meant to be altered. English class was more than a class; it was an escape from the traditional confines of school, a place to facilitate the development of burgeoning poets who could learn to suck the marrow out of life and gaze upon their world with wonder.

To do this, the old ways I had learned English needed discarding. In their wake: games. Poetry slams. Sprinting through the woods while teaching *Lord of the Flies*. The world of the classroom was an intellectual playground and I, having bought a life size Gandalf staff, ruled it idealistically, naively, and often with no real idea about what I was doing. I bought two couches and placed them in my classroom, just because. And, because I viewed the world of teaching through the lens of a Romantic, I was a living embodiment of an English teacher movie trope; there was a time my first year of teaching that I actually handed a 12<sup>th</sup> grader in-crisis my personal copy of *Catcher in the Rye*, foolishly believing that they would a) read it, and b) give it back.

**THREE: Teaching was, and is, the joy of my life.**

To this day, (and I hope this will always be the case) the classroom is one of the places I feel most alive.

In reflection on all of this, in remembering my naivete and the flurries of energy I had as a twenty-three-year-old, I'm struck by how simple everything seemed. Was I a great teacher? Maybe in my own mind. There were frustrations and learning curves and moments of "Well, I'm definitely never going to do *that* again" (one activity gone awry featured 9<sup>th</sup> graders rolling around on the ground at the moment the high school principal decided to pop in and see what I was up to). But my only teaching philosophy was rooted in the simplicity of knowing a subject and wanting my students to hop on the ship and enjoy the ride.

Throughout the trials of years after this utopic era, I would often look backwards and search through the nostalgia for whatever it was I had forgotten. Why did it seem like I somehow knew more without knowing? What was I at the beginning? What core philosophy was I relying on that I could not have named?

To adopt the ideas of academic and educator Parker Palmer, a teacher exists as "a mediator between the knower and the known, between the learner and the subject to be learned. A teacher, not some theory, is the living link in the epistemological chain" (29).

And this, for me, is the answer.

I may have been flying blind, but I was alive.

*Echo.* "A teacher, not some theory, is the living link within the epistemological chain."

My mother's voice, still with me.

Sometimes when I think about my life and my own journey, I see through my mother's eyes. I'm able to put together the narrative of someone whose love laid the groundwork for the flourishing of my mind and spirit. Without realizing it, the core of my beliefs of what a teacher should be, beliefs that for so long I've never been able to articulate, rely on my mother's careful introduction of myself and literature. Perhaps my journey into knowing literature and writing is best summarized by another statement from Palmer— "I have come to see that knowledge contains its own morality, that it begins not in neutrality but in a place of passion within the human soul" (7).

The overarching question of my *teaching* journey has been how to replicate a similar passion in the lives of my students. It's the question that all teachers ask, isn't it? How to facilitate the learning of students so that they might embark upon the path to knowing as passionate, inquisitive members of the human race.

In the years following my first year of teaching, I began looking for answers to the question of how to teach, while at the same time I took on a new teaching load, a difficult group of students, and all the increased obligations of teaching a course for the first time.

Unfortunately, before arriving at the heart of the matter and what I came to know about teaching, the important intertwining of knowing, love, and the learning space, I made severe miscalculations. And while it hurts to acknowledge this, I think my crew ended up paying the price of a young teacher's assumption that the way to the promised land was based not upon love, exploration, and space, but in control and grit.

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**INTERLUDE:****“Down To Your Soul”****-Right Away, Great Captain (2009)**

I'm a traitor to your flesh in a stone  
 You're gonna read about the way, the way a man can go  
 I'm a good man, are you a good man? does a good man take you home?  
 With a rejoicing mouth I sing for you and pause.  
 And I know you don't know what I'm capable of.  
 But in time you'll taste all the salt in my lungs.

And I see things I actually don't see.  
 I knew it wasn't actually you a few feet from my reach.  
 I looked into your eyes and I began to lose my teeth,  
 And I felt you were dreaming the same thing.

And I know you don't know what I'm capable of  
 But if you give me just one more minute I'm sure  
 That you would be shaking right down to your soul  
 And I'd hope that the fear of the lord brings me home.  
 I'm a man in a body of water so tall  
 Could swallow you whole and forget where he's going  
**But I carved a map in the back of my arm**  
**Don't worry I'm coming home**  
**I said don't worry cause I'm coming home.**

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**Shipwreck (2013)**

I remember the exact moment when I realized the ship was sinking:

I felt my face flushed, the sweat beading together on my forehead. I stood in front of my class, gesticulating wildly, brain short-circuiting, desperately attempting to convey to them the definitive meaning of a Shakespearian sonnet. To my left, my friend and mentor, our department chair, sat and watched it all take place. It's funny how clarity often comes from imagining ourselves through the eyes of another.

I'm not sure what I was expecting to show him. My skill as a teacher? How my teaching had progressed over the few years I'd been at my school? My own adeptness as a knower of English?

The sonnet. Vague questions. I stumbled over my words and offered forth meaningless abstractions, tangents of thought conceived but then aborted. In frustration, I

attempted to salvage the lesson: “And so what’s important about this sonnet, what you need to know, is that Shakespeare is attempting to convey the beauty of his lover—the images help us figure it out.”

Silence.

“Next sonnet.”

It was after class and I sat alone, left with the lingering feeling of embarrassment of having distorted something important. Not the sonnet, but the student’s experience with words and with language, bastardized and deformed. It was a microcosm of various lessons throughout that year; I would prepare harder, attempt to understand more, put together more complex lessons and speeches, but always find emptiness, with a few exceptions, waiting on the other side.

Where I was mistaken was my understanding of how our own identity and formation animates our learning, especially within an English classroom. There are varying schools of thought on what English should teach, but that debate doesn’t belong in this discussion; what *is* necessary involves identifying the lifeblood of an English classroom, taking a moment to think about the *experience* of students who fold themselves into desks in front of us every day. And this experience is not transferrable from ourselves to our students in the form of lecture or simple explanation. It requires something deeper.

Again, Palmer’s words resonate and encapsulate my experience:

In the conventional classroom the focus of study is always outward—on nature, on history, on someone else’s vision of reality...So we come to think of reality as ‘out there,’ apart from us, and knowing becomes a kind of spectator sport. (34)

So, the question of how to teach, catalyzed by my failures, again became the focus of my energies. And present within my own academic journey is the treasure and the truth that what's necessary and required within learning is somewhere hidden within students themselves.

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*“People who write about education often remind us that the root meaning of ‘to educate’ is ‘to draw out’ and that the teacher’s task is not to fill the student with facts but to evoke the truth the student holds within” (Palmer 43).*

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**Takeoff (1997)**

*The ship's prow rips through the arcs of the wave, taut sails*

*Billowed out, strained soft curves.*

*And I'm not yet a captain, not yet an experienced sailor.*

*Just a boy, gripping the edge of a sea-deck,*

*Aware of my heart beneath slender bird-bones*

*No ropes to cut my hands or long-shifts under the summer sun.*

*The open sea speaks syllables I can't yet decipher,*

*But I know it's worth listening to,*

*And as I forge my way into the world, alone,*

*A ship is for sailing, not sunburn or sea-sickness.*

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm in first grade, languid limbs, all elbows and knees. Placed in the "Green Group" for reading, I watch as other students are given skinny books with glossy pages of illustrations, large fonts and audiotapes. I'm handed *A Wrinkle in Time* and in the afternoon of a new house with the same couch where my mother and I once sat, I curl up again and push off from the dock.

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**Treasure (2002)**

*Every voyage, a new captain.*

*The waves are choppier, but I'm stronger, just watch me,*

*Sea-weathered, I know the mechanics*

*Of the sails and jagged rope,*

*and the ocean is still a place*

*Where I find something,*

*where from the crow's nest*

*I can gaze out further than before.*

*The crew is young. And this captain knows*

*How to spin stories of the depths,*

*sea-monsters and treasure, lost for us to find,*

*and of ancient voyages that we might someday*

*chart a map for*

*He stares sternly, face chapped by wind*

*But eyes alive,*

*And whispers over the din of wave and foaming surf,*

*And I know he knows,*

*That no map for one sailor is the same:*

*Because who can know the whereabouts of*

*Another man's treasure.*

\*\*\*\*\*

I've grown as tall as my father, and my knees ache because of it. But I squeeze myself into a desk in Mr. Hollingshead's seventh grade class and listen as he reads some of his own writing, fragments of his own story. We open up our own marbled notebook and write, every day, and while my friends scribble and gaze toward the clock, I keep my head down and let the images spill onto the page. There are no requirements for this writing, just suggestions. "Show, don't tell," I repeat to myself. It's another echo. And after four weeks, I hand in my journal, each entry in a different pen, but the same story; it's an account of a mad scientist's attempt to take over the world, his captivity, and finally, his grand escape. Mr. H pulls me aside at lunch on one of the days that follow, tells me how much he enjoys my story, and asks me to read an excerpt to the class. And so our class eventually sits in silence and the words, my words, are animated and spoken into being.

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***Treason (2006)***

*Treason on the high seas.*

*As it turns out, for my shipmates and me,*

*We've been deceived, it's told to us,*

*By the new captain on a new voyage*

*Who asks us questions we don't know and*

*Who blames our old captains for not teaching*

*What's important.*

*Like the history of why we sail*

*Or other ways to rig a mast, toss an anchor, and*

*Follow the map that will lead us to someplace*

*Beneath the ocean I can swim in,*

*That's my second home*

*And to be on the sea-deck isn't to feel the salt-spray  
Or soak up the sun's rays, or even  
To feel the shifting of an unconquerable force  
Underfoot, that reminds us we're here, alive,  
But a place where we toil for the success of Someday,  
Falling in line, the acquiescence  
To callouses and the long days,  
A turgid thrust  
Towards X marks the spot.*

*At night I creep up to the crow's nest  
And wonder, drink in the moonlight, close my eyes and feel  
The bobbing of an older rhythm.*

*The new captain never said I couldn't.*

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I make a B in 10<sup>th</sup> grade English. An 84. And amidst the unfortunate reading quizzes and the daily grammar assessments, I feel capsized, buried under the weight of school; not entirely because of this one class, but because of all the baggage age sixteen brings. And my teacher pulls me aside. She tells me that I'm being lazy, that she thinks I'm a good writer, but that I need to focus and get to work. So I do, and I memorize the vocabulary words she gives us, and I follow the templates, and I spend time preparing for grammar quizzes. I try hard, I find a measure of success, and I see the 93 and believe this is school. The game has changed, but I've adapted to it. Knowledge gains correlation

with “grit,” and I begin to chase the number. I begin to understand that there’s a right way to write, and there’s a wrong way to write, and that they exist on opposite continents, separated by a vast expanse of water.

The last novel we read is *A Once and Future King*. I remember making an 87 on a difficult test, well above the class average, but still inferior to other classmates who giddily share their 93’s and 94’s. And my teacher smiles at them.

But I wonder what she would have said to me had she seen me reading the last pages, caught up in the images of King Arthur lying on his death bed, remembering how the culmination of his life had come together to embody both success and failure. How in his mind’s eye there were the images of himself as a boy bounding through the woods, learning from fish and from geese and from a wizard about the truths that make one human; how these thoughts made him weep with the nostalgia of it all.

What would my teacher have said, if she had seen me soaking up King Arthur’s last moments, a sixteen-year-old male flipping pages with wet cheeks, sitting alone in his room, connecting the dots of something deeper?

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*“I hated Macbeth in eleventh grade, because someone tried to teach it to me like a rule-book. I loved it in twelfth grade because it wasn’t really taught to me at all. Someone basically handed it to me for class, and said let’s talk about. There was no pressure to understand “technique,” but after I got the beauty of the thing, I was all about technique. I got an A in English that semester that they tried to bump me up to AP. I looked at them like they were crazy. I’m a weird cat. **I don’t like audio-tours through museums. Let me wander. If I’ve got a question, I’ll ask...**” -Ta-Nehisi Coates*

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*“Presently, many academics advocate theories which, rather than illuminating the works under scrutiny, obfuscate and problematize these works so that students are rendered speechless. **Consequently, the students constantly question what they know, and often, unfortunately, they conclude that they know nothing**”*

– Opal Palmer Adisa

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*“If we are to open space for knowing, we must be alert to our fear of not knowing and to our fearful tendency to fill the learning of space. First, we must see that not knowing is simply the first step toward truth, that the anxiety created by our ignorance **calls not for instant answers but for an adventure into the unknown**” (Palmer 72).*

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### ***Adventures into the Unknown (Present)***

I've explored some of my own journey, and in an attempt to encapsulate my own discovery of English, I've decided to point out the pivotal moments of this voyage of knowing. A couch. My mother. A teacher who believed in me. A teacher who gave me room to explore my own writing and who seared the truth across my heart that my exploration was worth it.

The essence of it all?

A teaching philosophy that relies on several truths.

As a teacher, it's crucial for me to understand that "coming to know" is a process that is rooted in the compassion of a teacher and the cultivation of a love-filled learning space. It's within this space, where the teacher acts as "a mediator between the knower and the known" (Palmer 29), that the curiosity and engagement we seek from our students can begin to thrive. My own experience as both a teacher and student bear this out; if our goal as teachers is to foster curiosity and encourage students to think for themselves, our roles as mediators is to come alongside them, and, like good captains, prepare them to someday sketch the maps of their own voyage.

This is what I experienced sitting beside my mother, whose own love for the story introduced books into our home, and whose voice brought pages to life.

However, it's worth noting that all the love for a subject in the world is not in and of itself enough to truly teach a subject. In my undergrad, one of my English professors loved W.B. Yeats more than what I would consider is humanly possible. But how I hated his class and the way he droned on and on about Yeats' life, projecting his love for a subject loudly but in such a way that my classmates and I couldn't really hear it. The

space we needed, or even wanted to explore, was filled with the experiences of another.

To invoke Palmer's words a final time:

Similar experiences of crowding and space are found in education. To sit in a class where the teacher stuffs our minds with information, organizes it with finality, insists on having the answers while being utterly uninterested in our views, and forces us into a grim competition for grades—to sit in such a class is to experience a lack of space for learning.

(70)

There is no greater sin I'm guilty of than hijacking the learning space of my students.

That's evident in my attempts to assert my own sovereignty in the classroom at various points of my teaching career.

So with this in mind, I'll cling to these principles and search for practicalities. I'll continue to arrange my desks into a circle, participating within student conversations and guiding discussions rather than existing as the focal point of the room. I'll seek to find ways for students to develop their own, authentic writing voice. I'll strive to develop assignments that don't rely on students slinging my own knowledge back to me, but that instead urge them to develop their own conclusions and examine their own perspectives.

Ultimately, what's clear to me now, as every year of teaching career presents itself as a new chapter and a new adventure, is that part of being a good captain is acknowledging there will never be the same map, and there will never be the same treasure. My deepest hope is that my students leave my classroom having slowly begun to sketch their own maps of knowing—I hope they feel that the voyage is one that's worth continuing, whether that be into English or any other space of knowledge. I hope



that someday in the future, as one feels after an extended period at sea, they might recall the rhythmic churning of waves within them, beckoning them somewhere important.

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## THE MAP

### **Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

Dawson Zimmerman

At the core of my teaching philosophy is the belief that “what” we know is significantly less important than “how” we know; resisting what Paulo Freire calls the “banking model of education” (in which I merely transmit “knowledge” to students), my teaching practice within an English classroom is to join students as an active participant in their development as readers, writers, and thinkers.

The resulting pedagogy within a classroom is an emphasis on students learning through the “process” of their writing rather than learning to write a prescriptive, final “product.” It is my belief that the multiplicity of writing as it exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires students to become skilled at detecting the “rhetorical situation” of their writing context; therefore, students within my classes consider, write, and revise for a variety of audiences and purposes with the goal of developing such a skillset. This type of “writing” is also not constricted to the page, but across a variety of modalities that draw upon and cultivate students’ creativity and ingenuity.

Similarly, I seek to inspire students to pursue inquiry-driven independent choice projects that allow students to pursue and discover their own interests, whether that’s in the context of research assignments or service-based learning opportunities. After all, I believe that students learn best when they are encouraged to follow their own passions or curiosity, applying the writing or thinking skills we work on in class to a project in which something is “at stake,” where their work exists outside of the vacuum between teacher and student. Within such a dialogic classroom, students learn to work with their peers and become a valued member of a learning community; much of the work that occurs in my classes features students themselves leading discussion, writing within peer groups, and collaborating within group work.

As students within my class grow as readers, writers, and thinkers, I see myself not as a writing teacher, but a writing mentor. Rather than standing in front of students and telling them what to do, I’m more interested in meeting with them in writing conferences throughout the drafting process. It’s important that my students know that I am on their side as an advocate, coaching them to reach their potential. And, the way I assess their work, through portfolios and grading contracts designed to challenge the centrality of the teacher as only a grading-entity, bears this out. With a heavy emphasis

on metacognitive components to assignments, I want to teach students how to evaluate their own work and value their own thoughts about their writing as much as mine.

Lastly, I should note, undergirding all of my pedagogical beliefs is the fundamental act of caring for the students I have the privilege of teaching. It's from this place of love for students that all my teaching decisions are made, and it's with this as the bedrock of a classroom that I believe students can be most successful.

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*And yet my heart wanders away,  
My soul roams with the sea, the whales'  
Home, wandering to the widest corners  
Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,  
Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me  
To the open ocean, breaking oaths  
On the curve of a wave  
-The Seafarer (author unknown)*

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