"Mutt Genres" and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?
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The goal of teaching students to write for the university assumes that in first-year composition students can be taught ways of writing (genre and genre knowledge) that they can then transfer to the writing they do in other courses across the university. This goal and its underlying assumption are problematic for a number of reasons illustrated here through a study of a large midwestern composition program. The study validates theoretical critiques of general skills writing courses made by genre and activity theorists over the past decade. The difficulties of teaching varied academic genres in only one context suggest we might better serve first-year students by reframing the goals of FYC, such that the course does not promise to teach students to write in the university but rather teaches students about writing in the university.

For over a decade, a number of composition researchers and theorists have roundly critiqued first-year composition (FYC) as a general writing skills instruction course that cannot meet its objectives of preparing students to write in the university and beyond. Using activity theory, for example, David Russell critiques FYC for trying to teach something comparable to general “ball handling” skills to students who will then need to learn to play specific ball-using games (“Activity” 57). What general skills, he asks, can help students write the genres of the university or even of society in general? Aviva Freedman
argues that only scribal and mechanical skills can be called “general” (130), but, as Joseph Petraglia points out, these skills do not alone constitute writing. Rather, “writing is instrumental, transactional, and rhetorical” (“Writing” 80). FYC courses are different in “substance . . . epistemological assumptions . . . and ideological context” from all the other courses for which they purport to prepare students to write (Freeman 130).

These arguments all rest on or resonate with recent genre theory and research (i.e., Bawarshi; Bazerman, Constructing and Shaping; Devitt; Freedman; Freedman and Adam; Freedman, Adam, and Smart; Paré) pointing out the necessity of learning genres in context. The arguments are bolstered by the work of linguists such as Ken Hyland and John Swales, whose extensive studies of academic discourse have described in painstaking detail the differences between writing in different disciplines. The gist of the critiques against FYC as a general writing skills course is this: the goal of teaching students to write across the university in other academic courses assumes that students in FYC can be taught ways of writing (genre and genre knowledge) that they can then transfer to the writing they do in other courses across the university. This goal and its underlying assumption, however, are complicated by the fact that the activity system of FYC is radically different from other academic activity systems in its use of writing as the object of primary attention rather than as a tool for acting on other objects of attention. Because of this difference in primary focus, the rhetorical situations of FYC courses around the country do not mirror the multiple, diverse, and complex rhetorical situations found across the university in even the most basic ways. Transfer to such varied situations is not easily accomplished.

Russell, Freedman, and Petraglia made their criticisms of FYC over a decade ago; though their critiques were strong and eloquent, not much has changed in the interim. Richard Fulkerson’s recent CCC piece on the state of composition instruction and the WPA Outcomes Statement both suggest that one of FYC’s primary goals in many composition programs around the country continues to be preparing students to write in the university. In other words, its goal remains teaching students general things about academic language use that will help them write during college—and perhaps even after. If the critiques of FYC’s ability to accomplish such goals are strong and rooted in our own disciplinary theory, why does FYC remain as a general academic writing skills instruction course? One reason, of course, is institutional structure and public expectation: from its inception as English A to its many incarnations throughout the country, the course has been funded with the expectation that
it will carry out the task of teaching students "to write" for what comes next; in addition, institutional structures (TAships, English department status, even the discipline of rhetoric and composition) are now strongly built around FYC. Another reason the critique may have remained unconvincing to many, however, is that theoretical critiques do not illustrate the point strongly enough to convince the majority of compositionists that the time has come for us to seriously re-examine what our cornerstone course can do. This is the challenge I take up here.

In this article I first briefly overview the difficulties of teaching genres out of context, as FYC is asked to do. I then describe the results of a study I conducted of a composition program at a large midwestern university; this study concretely illustrates real problems that teachers—even teachers of homogenous cohorts organized around majors—encounter when faced with the goal of teaching students to write the specialized genres of the academy. I conclude by arguing that this research should lead us to radically re-examine the goals of FYC; I suggest we should no longer ask FYC to teach students to write in the university and instead construct FYC to teach students about writing in the university.

What We Know about Genre
Recent findings about the nature of genre suggest that genres are context-specific and complex and cannot be easily or meaningfully mimicked outside their naturally occurring rhetorical situations and exigencies (Bazerman, "Shaping," "Constructing," Berkenkotter and Huckin; Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré; Freedman, Adam, and Smart; Freedman and Adam; Myers; Smart; Winsor "Ordering," Writing). In FYC, teachers are charged with preparing students to write for and in the activity systems of other disciplinary classrooms. In essence, they are asked to teach students about and prepare them for the genres of other disciplines. Disciplinary genres are tools used to accomplish work central to a discipline. In the university, those genres arise from specific work done in disciplinary classrooms—that is, lab reports arise from and are shaped by the need to record lab work and share results. In FYC, however, teachers are asked to teach students about and prepare them for the genres of other disciplines when neither they nor their students are conducting the work that calls for and shapes those genres in other disciplinary classrooms.

According to Miller, genres can be seen as "typified rhetorical actions" that respond to recurring situations and become instantiated in groups' behaviors (158). Recent genre theory expands on this notion of genre to forefront the
importance of both “social action and institutionalization” (Medway 134). Institutionalization, as Miller’s definition suggests, involves “the presence of a textual shortcut that can be pulled out and plugged into the current situation”; thus, “each time we are faced with a known exigence we can employ the solution embedded in a genre” (Medway 134). While institutionalization is an important genre feature, what Medway calls play and adaptability are also genre features. Social action reminds us that rhetors do not just “run the genre” (135) without an eye for purpose; rather, we constantly consider “the exigence and what we want to do in the face of it” (135). Exigence, then, plays a central role in recent genre theory. Genres arise when particular exigencies are encountered repeatedly; yet each time an exigence arises, people must be attuned to the specifics of the current situation in order to employ the institutionalized features of the genre effectively—or, in some cases, throw them out.

Thus, simply teaching students institutionalized features of various genres limits and simplifies the varied exigencies to which those genres have responded in their rhetorical situations outside of the FYC classroom. An essential feature of genre, according to recent genre theory, is that a genre at any given time is only stabilized-for-now (to use Schryer’s term). Simply teaching the institutionalized features of a genre to students also ignores the complex reasons why that genre evolved into what it is, and the myriad reasons it may (and almost certainly will) continue to change. In other words, genre features arise as a result of specific and complex rhetorical situations, they continue if they are effective in responding to those rhetorical situations, and they are changed when they are no longer effective in meeting the needs of those rhetorical situations. As people work within different activity systems, they “learn to . . . manage genres in complex and specific ways” (Kain and Wardle 115) because they are involved in the rhetorical situations to which those genres respond. They implicitly understand that certain genre features would not be effective in response to a specific exigence because they are involved in the rhetorical situation—and if they do not understand this initially, they learn it when their genres fail to meet their needs. Genres evolve as “a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need” (Miller 163). Thus, genres make sense to the people who create, use, and change them, but they are difficult, if not impossible, to teach people to write out of context (Berkenkotter and Huckin; Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré; Freedman and Adam; Freedman, Adam, and Smart; Russell “Rethinking”).
When, in a classroom situation, students are asked to write genres outside of those genres’ natural contexts, those genres become pseudotransactional (Petragna, “Spinning”); they no longer do the same work in the world or accomplish clear purposes in response to meaningful exigencies. They become classroom exercises rather than the genres they are when accomplishing transactional purposes (“Spinning”; “Writing”).

Some in our field have pursued the relationship of general knowledge, heuristics, and forms to later learning and expertise. Michael Carter, for example, though not directly dealing with genres, draws from work in cognitive psychology to suggest that novices must have some heuristics or general knowledge to fall back on when initially writing in new situations, or else they could not write at all (280): “Novices, because they are new to a knowledge domain, must rely on certain global strategies to act on whatever limited knowledge they possess about the domain” (270). General strategies and processes, while insufficient for competence or expertise in a new area, are “fundamental to the acquisition of skill” (Glaser, qtd. in Carter 272). Carter clearly states that local knowledge and socialization are important parts of expert writing; however, students need help gaining that local knowledge (279).

This hypothesis presents two intriguing questions: What general knowledge can we teach students about academic genres that will help them write in later courses? And how can we ensure that students will transfer that general knowledge—at all and in helpful ways? The answer to the former question hinges, first and foremost, on our ability to know what genres students will write later so that we can help them learn about those genres, as Carter implies when he proposes helping students gain “general knowledge about writing” (281, emphasis mine). While there is research on what students write across the university (e.g., Behrens; Bernhard; Braine; Bridgeman and Carlson; Ebben; Horowitz; Rose; Scharton; Zemelman), I doubt we can say with certainty that the majority of those charged with teaching FYC every day are familiar with it. In my own work I have found that FYC teachers often mistake the genres of English studies for genres-in-general. Certainly, we could respond more effectively to Carter’s suggestion if all of those teaching FYC knew what genres students would encounter across the university. However, even if we all knew what students would be writing later, David Smit points out that “the problem that will not go away” is “determining what aspects of a particular genre ought to be made more explicit and when and how to make those aspects explicit” (155). We have much yet to learn about this problem.

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The answer to the second question is equally complicated. As Julie Foertsch points out, “Abstract rules of thumb are worthless if they are not adaptable to contextual constraints and if learners are unable to see how rules apply to the concrete complexities of real-life situations” (375). Yet as a field, we know little to nothing about the transfer of writing-related knowledge from FYC. As recently as 2004 Smit was able to conclude, “As far as I know, there are no research studies that concentrate directly on the nature of transfer in writing” (124). Nearly all research studies of writing-related transfer are confined to the field of technical communication, detailing transfer from advanced business and technical writing courses to other school writing or workplace writing (Beaufort, Writing; Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré; Dias and Paré; Ford; Freedman). Apparently, in recent decades composition researchers have conducted only three case studies (Carroll; McCarthy; Walvoord and McCarthy) that discuss FYC writing-related transfer problems—and these were not studies initially or primarily interested in transfer. However, the findings of those three case studies are revealing, in that they mirror findings from psychology suggesting transfer is not easily accomplished. In summing up over a century of research in psychology, David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon claim that transferring school knowledge from one situation to another is difficult, and that most school settings do not facilitate transfer: “very often,” they conclude, “the hoped-for learning transfer does not occur” (“Transfer,” par. 1). Terttu Tuomi-Gröhn, Yrjö Engeström, and Michael Young, psychologists holding the cultural-historical activity perspective, conclude the same thing after reviewing the literature: “achieving significant transfer of learning has proved to be a difficult task” (2).

We cannot say with certainty why transfer does not occur. In theory, however, transfer depends to a large extent on an individual’s ability to recognize similarities between the two situations (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström, “Conceptualizing”) and appropriately transform and expand knowledge so it works in a new situation (Beach; Guile and Young). But transfer also depends on the presence of affordances for transfer being present in the next situation (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström). If students are taught decontextualized “skills” or rigid formulas rather than general and flexible principles about writing, and if instructors in all classes do not explicitly discuss similarities between new and previous writing assignments, it stands to reason students will not see similarities between disparate writing situations or will apply rigid rules inappropriately. In other words, one reason for lack of transfer is instruction that does not encourage it.
Which pedagogical methods do encourage transfer? Perkins and Salomon ("Transfer") helpfully overview some pedagogical methods that studies have shown to be useful for encouraging transfer:

- Explicitly abstracting principles from a situation (Gick and Holyoak);
- Self-reflection—asking subjects not simply to apply a strategy but to "monitor their own thinking processes" (Belmont, Butterfield, and Ferretti);
- Mindfulness—"a generalized state of alertness to the activities one is engaged in and to one's surroundings, in contrast with a passive reactive mode in which cognitions, behaviors, and other responses unfold automatically and mindlessly" (Langer, qtd. in Perkins and Salomon, "Transfer," par. 19)—involves subjects who can explicitly abstract principles and who engage in self reflection.

How can these general principles be applied to the teaching of writing? Perhaps the first is evident in inductive assignments such as the one described by Lunsford in "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," in which she asks students to examine a number of sentences with semicolons, for example, and explicitly abstract some rules for their use from those sentences (305). The second method, self-reflection, is often incorporated into portfolio classes via reflections about revision and growth; according to a 1998 NAEP exam, portfolio use is one of the few pedagogical methods to "cause predictable and significant increases in writing ability, controlling for other factors" (Rhodes, sec. 9). Mindfulness is more difficult, as students cannot be forced to be mindful about their own work. Certainly, however, it would be easier to encourage mindfulness with meaningful, engaging assignments asking students to really communicate rather than the assignments Petraglia has derided for being pseudotransactional.

What, then, can we conclude about teaching academic genres in FYC? Teaching genres out of context is difficult, though there may be some value in teaching genre forms if we know what students will be writing later and if we can discern what aspects of what genres to teach about and if we can find methods for helping students apply those lessons elsewhere in meaningful ways. How successful are our FYC courses at accomplishing these things? Are they even goals for FYC courses?
How I Examined the Problem of Genre in FYC

To answer these questions, I studied second-semester FYC courses at a large, public, midwestern university ("Midwest U") over the course of two years. In particular, I focused on students and teachers in designated "learning community" courses that enrolled students from common majors who were enrolled in several of the same courses during the semester. Their FYC course was linked with at least one of the other courses in which students were enrolled. This linking of an FYC course to a course in the students' major could potentially prove to be a solution to some genre-related problems; in particular, the fact that students all shared the same major and the teacher could have contact with faculty in that discipline seemed an important step toward helping students prepare specifically for what they would write later.

I collected data from 23 teachers in 25 sections of English 104 (first-semester composition) and 462 students from all 25 sections. One-third of these sections were learning community sections. Every teacher in my study—like most teachers in the large Midwest U. composition program—was a graduate student or part-time instructor. Most of the graduate students were MA students, since the PhD students regularly taught advanced writing courses rather than FYC courses.

The FYC program at Midwest U. is housed in the English Department and serves approximately 3,500 students each semester in its two-semester required writing sequence. The FYC program at this university is often described as "rhetorically-based." Students are told that they will learn four "academic writing skills" in English 104: observation, summary, analysis and evaluation, and using sources. According to the general description of the program, goals for the program include:

- Preparing students to use written communication in their chosen disciplines and
- Helping students achieve university level skills in reading and writing.

While goals of the FYC course are officially outlined and teachers are given sample syllabi and assignment sheets, as well as some minimum criteria for the course (e.g., number of pages of writing required, number of assignments), teachers are free to create their own syllabi and assignments.

I conducted teacher interviews, focus groups, and surveys, as well as student focus groups and surveys. I also collected the first and last papers students wrote in their courses. When students turned in their first and last papers, they
were asked to fill out a brief rhetorical analysis, a small cover sheet ("the half sheet") asking them to identify the topic, purpose, audience, and genre for the paper. Not all students remembered to fill out these half sheets, so I collected half sheets from 60 percent of the students whose papers I collected.

Two PhD students assisted me in analyzing assignment sheets from all but three teachers participating in the study (these teachers did not provide me with assignment sheets). We looked at two assignment sheets from each teacher—those for the first and last assignment of the semester (corresponding with the papers I collected). We were seeking to determine what sorts of tasks students were being given, what genres they were being asked to produce, and what audience(s), if any, were suggested by the assignments. Because methods for analyzing assignments based on genre and rhetorical situation are not available in existing methodology literature, I based my analysis on the following questions commonly used in rhetorical analysis:

• What rhetorical context is given or suggested?
• What is the purpose of the assignment?
• What genre is being asked of students?
• Where does the genre occur outside of FYC?

The two doctoral students and I each received a copy of all assignment sheets, with names and other identifying information removed, as well as a copy of the questions. We then engaged in discussion about each assignment sheet, discussing the above questions. I tape-recorded and later transcribed this discussion.

What Genres Look Like in FYC
An analysis of the genres assigned in the twenty-two FYC courses from which I was able to gather assignment sheets demonstrates that, while the general descriptions of these assignment genres resemble genres found outside of FYC, their specific characteristics, their rhetorical situations, are quite different. The types of writing asked for in the assignments can generally be grouped into the following genres:

• Autobiography/personal narrative
• Profile of a person
• Argument/position paper
Most of the assignments are described by one of the doctoral students who analyzed assignment sheets with me as "mutt genres." The mutt genres teachers assigned mimic genres that mediate activities in other activity systems, but within the FYC system their purposes and audiences are vague or even contradictory. They are quite different from and serve very different purposes in FYC than they do in other disciplinary activity systems. A detailed discussion of two of the assigned genres will illustrate these points.

**Example 1: Observation Assignment**
The observation assignment is a common one at Midwest U. Though the specifics of the assignment differ from class to class, the official description of how observation is included in 104 reads:

Paying attention to specific details is the basis of good descriptive writing. Some of your assignments will require you to write about your observations of events, people, and the world around you. These assignments will help you learn how to focus your topic, to develop and support a thesis, and to shape your writing to your audience of readers.

For the observation assignment, teachers ask students to observe such things as a career fair, a work of art on campus, or a person working in the student's chosen field of study. The purposes of all of these assignments are described in terms of the writers (who will learn to notice details, for example), which differentiate the FYC observations from observations people might write in other disciplinary contexts. Many disciplines incorporate observations into written texts—for example, scientists report on their experiments and social workers describe their home visits (see Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré; LabWrite; Paré; Sanford). However, the observations outside of FYC are typically written for an audience other than the writer, to accomplish a purpose other than helping the writer gain isolated skills. Even lab reports written for
a class are not written so that the student can learn to write a lab report, but rather so that students can learn the material under consideration and demonstrate their knowledge to the instructor; the lab report is the vehicle—the tool—not the object.

The circumstances surrounding disciplinary or professional observations vary greatly from one another—and the purpose, audience, and format of those texts vary greatly from the observation papers assigned in this FYC program. This situation is not problematic if we assume transferability of language-related skills from one genre and one activity system to another—that is, if we assume that students can practice the skill of "observation" for an English essay on art and then transfer that same skill to a lab report for biology. However, as I have already pointed out, the literature on transfer does not support this assumption and, in fact, suggests that such "far transfer" happens rarely (Perkins and Salomon, "Science," "Transfer," sec. 2; McCarthy)—at least without specific features built into the assignment to encourage useful transfer. This assignment, like the other observation assignments I analyzed, does not ask students to abstract any principles about writing observations, does not ask students to reflect on what they are learning about writing, and does not appear to serve any transactional purpose that would encourage students to active mindfulness.

**Example 2: Argument Assignment**

Arguments are another common genre in FYC—one that we might expect to see across the university. The "argument paper" is its own genre in the FYC courses I examined at Midwest U. There, "The Argument" is assigned as a genre whose purpose is to write the genre. One assignment states, for example, "the purpose of this position paper is to write an argument." Within the broader university, arguments are complex and encompass a range of genres, from documented essays arguing for conclusions based on research, to lab reports arguing for results, to essays arguing for a student scholarship. However, within the broader university, "The Argument" is not a genre in and of itself.

Within the FYC I examined, the argument assignment rarely reflected the varied and complex genres that include argument in the broader university. An FYC assignment given to Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) students illustrates this point. According to their HDFS professor, HDFS students can expect to write arguments within the genre of reports about particular professional situations (e.g., childcare or social work visits) for an audience
of judges and other superiors who can make decisions about the lives of the people being discussed in the reports. However, this context—and the textual rules stemming from this context—was not reflected in the FYC argument assignment. Instead, within FYC students were assigned to write a "documented position paper" telling about "a topic from within their major." In it, they were expected to include three kinds of proof: personal experience, observation, and interview. And they were told to write for an audience who was "college-educated, with a high general knowledge level, but [who] may not be experts in the area you’re discussing." The format of the paper was the traditional FYC documented, double-spaced argument paper utilizing MLA citation style. This FYC argument assignment does not reflect the types of arguments that HDFS students will write during their time in the university and in the workplace.

**FYC Genre Problems**

Based on my initial assessment of FYC assignments, it appears that within the FYC activity system I examined, particular assignments are common and recurring, and thus, over time, they appear to have become genres according to the new understanding of genre: within FYC there is a recurring exigency that elicits fairly consistent responses (Medway 124). However, FYC's official purpose is to prepare students for the genres they will write elsewhere. Thus, for FYC to present an exigency that has elicited new genres exclusive to FYC is deeply problematic. FYC is intended to be what Wenger has called a boundary practice, linking students from where they were (and what they were writing) to where they will go (and what they will write). However, Wenger has pointed out that it is possible for boundary practices to

> [gain] so much momentum of their own that they become insulated from the practices they are supposed to connect ... if their practices cease to be boundary practices then they fail to create connections to anything beyond themselves. One teacher, isolated from other practitioners and immersed in classroom issues, ceases to be representative of anything else; and artifacts gain local meanings that do not point anywhere else. (115)

Student responses to my questions about their work in FYC suggests that they did not see the class as a boundary practice; they did not see any connection between what they were asked to write in FYC and what they would write in other courses later (or even during the same semester). Students’ responses to the rhetorical analysis half sheets they turned in to me with their papers suggested they felt they were being asked to demonstrate discreet skills

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outside of a transactional rhetorical situation. Many students gave the same or similar information for both purpose and genre (Purpose: "persuade them that learning is necessary;" Genre: "persuasive"), suggesting that purposes seem to become their own genres in FYC—that is, the paper in which students informed their classmates of their views became "The Informative Paper"; the paper in which students made an argument on a topic of their choice became "The Position Paper."

Conflating purpose and genre becomes problematic when the goal of the course is to help students write effectively beyond FYC—and neither "The Informative Paper" nor "The Position Paper" exists in that way outside of the FYC classroom. I suggest this conflation happens because the students are asked to write what I previously called "mutt genres"—genres that do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful to the author. They are asked to write mutt genres because the exigencies giving rise to genres in other courses are not available within FYC (nor can they be expected to be available). Thus, FYC students are told to write an argument in order to write an argument or "describe the atmosphere of a football game" simply for the sake of doing so (i.e., for "practice"). The students in my study could explain what they were writing (a paper about a football game), but they could not explain why they were doing so or why they were doing so in the form of a particular genre (i.e., an essay).

These students appear, then, to have been learning discrete skills (as illustrated previously with the observation paper) not connected to any specific academic genres, and they did not appear to make even near connections of those skills, much less transfer those skills to very different contexts. For example, no students suggested they were being asked to write a persuasive paper in order to be able to write persuasively in other courses. Instead, students often described their purposes as related solely to the FYC class and not beyond it (e.g., "get a good grade" or "fulfill grade requirements"). This response is deeply problematic when the explicit purpose of FYC is to help students write in other classes and other rhetorical situations.

Additionally, the assignments given in FYC may not constitute genres at all—or rather, they may exist as genres for the teacher but appear only as arbitrary assignments for the students. In my study, teachers moved quickly from one FYC genre to the next in order to cover the required components of the course; they did not assign similar genres repeatedly over the course of the semester. As a result, students were presented with a particular exigency only once during the FYC semester and were not likely to face that exigency again
during their time in the university. According to Medway, one of the necessary characteristics of genre is “the presence of a learned textual shortcut that can be pulled out and plugged into the current situation” (134). In other words, a genre exists when a situation recurs often enough that rhetors learn similar and agreed upon ways to respond to it. FYC, however, often elicits assignments that are exclusive to FYC—that is, assignments that do not recur for the student rhetor. The teacher gives the assignment semester after semester to hundreds of students, so she may recognize similar patterns of response, but the students may never be required by the varied exigencies that arise from their academic experiences to perform such a writing task again (or the contexts may be dissimilar enough so that they do not recognize similar writing tasks, as McCarthy demonstrates). In this situation, the students may not view the genres of FYC as genres. In this scenario, no student (save one who had to retake the course a number of times) ever stays in the course long enough to recognize recurring situations that call for similar textual responses. The difficulty here is that even if students were presented with genres that clearly exist beyond FYC, they do not spend enough time writing or considering those genres to gain the general knowledge about them that Carter suggests they may need in order to initially write them as novices.

The genre complexities evident in the preceding discussion—especially the ways the FYC assignments differ from the genres found in the broader university—suggest FYC (at least in this program, which I would venture to say is not unusual in its approach) is not overtly discussing academic genres, is not actively teaching toward them, and is not taking steps to help students achieve useful transfer of the genre-related skills they gain in FYC. FYC is not, then, achieving its official goal of preparing students to write the genres of the academy. FYC teachers in this study assigned genres that were limited to the FYC course and that did not mirror the rhetorical situations to which genres in other disciplinary activity systems respond—or even appear to consciously bridge to them.

**Linked FYC Courses and Genre-Related Problems**

Nationwide there has been a movement toward linked courses with cohorts of students. One of these movements is the learning community movement. When FYC is linked with a course in another discipline, and the students in the FYC course are majoring in that other discipline, can the problems related to genre described above be overcome? To answer this question, I turn to one learning community FYC teacher who participated in my study. Karen voiced
conscious awareness of problems achieving course goals related to genre and actively worked to overcome them. In this section I briefly describe Karen's attempts to overcome the problems—and, ultimately, the challenges she was unable to overcome despite her involvement in a learning community.

Karen was a second-year MA student in rhetoric and composition, charged with teaching the biology learning community section of FYC. Karen decided that her students should not be writing what she termed “argument paper[s] like most 105 English teachers want to have.” However, she realized how little she knew about written arguments in biology. She wanted her biology students to write like biology students, but in order for that to happen, she said, “I'm going to have to learn how to do that”:

I want to learn more about what knowledge is valued in [the biology professor's] field and how writing in the field of biology is supposed to be, what their genre is like, because that's what I would like to teach the students. I want their argument paper in the end not to be [an] argument paper like most 105 English teachers want to have. I want them to be . . . biological arguments. I want [students] to adhere to their citation styles, their argument structure, and I'm going to have to learn how to do that in order for me to teach them.

Karen consciously considered how genres function in different activity systems and recognized FYC genres as FYC genres and determined that her students would not be writing these genres in biology. She tried to remedy her lack of knowledge about what and how biology students write by collaborating extensively with the biology professor:

I'm drafting an e-mail right now that has a tentative outline of my syllabus for next semester and at the close of it I'm asking him for some specific things. What are good journal articles that I can read just for my own knowledge? What is the standard format of abstracts in the field of biology? Because instead of a summary assignment, which is standard for 105, I want them to write abstracts that would adhere to those guidelines. And they're also going to be doing oral presentations and I wanted to talk to them about how conference presentations are conducted in biology. And, once I get all of this discipline specific knowledge, I'm going to try and meld as much of it into their class as possible. And when they do these debates and discussions, I'd like for him to be there.

Karen's energetic attempts to learn about biological genres and teach them to her students were not, in her eyes, successful. After a full year of teaching the biology FYC course, Karen told me that some tools and conventions were simply not available to her as a biology activity system outsider, no matter how
strong the collaboration with the biology teacher—nor were they available to her students as long as the students were not acting within the biology activity system. For example, though she wanted to teach her students to write “biological arguments,” Karen found that biological arguments were very subtle, and an outsider’s eye would see them only as a collection of facts. She herself, though enrolled in a graduate program in rhetoric, could not see the argument in a biology article until a biologist pointed it out to her:

"I learned . . . that no [biology] journal [article] was a reporting of fact. To my untrained eye it looked like a reporting of fact but to them [my friends and colleagues working in biology] especially that was argument. Who they cited, who they didn’t cite in their research, how they prefaced something meant a lot. So the argument was much finer than standard.

Understanding the conventions of arguments in biology depends to a great extent, Karen found, on being familiar with other work in biology. As long as she and her students were not familiar with that other work, she felt they were unable to fully assess arguments in biology, much less write them. Thus, though Karen actively pursued the official FYC motive of helping students write in other courses, and though she was able to draw on her colleague in biology to help her do so, she nonetheless came to feel constrained by the position of the FYC course and the students in the course. The students were not working in biology, thus they (and she) were not able to understand or even mimic the genres that mediate work in the biology activity system.

This point is further illustrated by the difficulty Karen encountered when she asked her students to write “biological arguments.” Karen found that she could teach the students typical formats for arguments in biology: “what I got a sense of was biological writing by and large has a very short introduction, very fast lit review, and dives right into the research and results. And the discussion is the lengthiest part.” However, Karen found her students could not write those arguments because the arguments depended entirely on research the students were not able to do as early as their first year in college—because they were not involved with the activities of biology:

"they didn’t have any research . . . they hadn’t done the kind of thing that would merit writing in that way. What they had done was researched about biology topics, mostly about genetically modified somethings, from a variety of sources, some of them written by biologists."
Karen's findings demonstrate a fundamental difficulty in FYC: There are a tremendous diversity of activities within the university, and a tremendous number of genres mediating those activities. The activities of the FYC activity system and the activities in other disciplinary activity systems are, of course, different. The writing in each system serves the activities of that system. Separated from the activities the writing serves, the writing of one activity system will likely seem strange (even inexplicable) to an outsider. In addition, this writing will be nearly impossible for an outsider to reproduce in any way that would have meaning to an insider. Karen could have asked her students to write biological arguments, based on what they could see of the conventions of biology (conventions they did not fully understand). However, because they did not and could not do the research that biology arguments usually convey, and because they were not familiar with traditions of research on particular biological topics, the arguments they could produce in FYC would not serve the function of real biological arguments in the form of research reports—which must be written by those working in a biological activity system.

The crux of the problem Karen faced is that the rhetorical situation, the context, of any writing task in FYC is fundamentally different from the rhetorical situation of a writing task in another activity system. In FYC, writing is the object of attention and the tool, and improving writing is the goal. In most (if not all) of the disciplinary activity systems where students are headed, writing is a tool used to act on any number of other objects of attention and to achieve myriad other goals. In FYC students use writing as a tool in order to learn to write (in new ways, for various purposes, etc). In biology classes, students study about biology and perform experiments, using writing to learn, to demonstrate knowledge, and to convey results. The motive of FYC entails, quite explicitly, preparing students for the varied rhetorical situations of the academy. However, FYC teachers are (through no fault of their own) largely unfamiliar with the rhetorical situations and genres of disciplinary activity systems to which they do not belong.

Finally, Karen's experience illustrates an important point Russell and others have previously theorized but not proven with data: even if FYC teachers can become familiar with the conventions of other disciplinary genres, the activities of FYC do not provide the content needed to practice writing those genres in any meaningful way.
Resolutions

Many in our field have argued that teaching general academic genres in FYC will not help students later write the genres of the university. When we temper that critique by suggesting that general genre knowledge is useful for novices, we then set two expectations for that teaching: it must clearly and directly relate to the university genres that follow, and it must include activities that will encourage transfer, such as reflection, explicit abstraction of principles about those genres, and mindfulness. In my study, neither of these expectations was even acknowledged as important in most of the assignments I examined. When the expectations were acknowledged as important by the biology FYC teacher Karen, she found herself unable to successfully respond to them.

I have two suggestions, a more and less radical one, for improving the situation. First, if we wish to continue pursuing “teaching students to write in the university” as a goal for FYC, we must change the content of FYC so that its assignments serve not as “mutt genres” but as boundary objects (Star and Griesemer; Wenger), actively functioning as bridges to the varied disciplinary genres students will encounter. FYC teachers and students alike must become educated about the genres of various disciplines, collect as many examples of them as possible, explicitly abstract the textual characteristics of those various genres, and reflect on how those genres are used to mediate work in different classrooms (see Kain and Wardle for more detail about how one might do this). Ideally, students should actively and thoughtfully practice writing several of those most important genres. However, Karen’s experience illustrates the difficulty of asking students to do this in a meaningful way in the first year as outsiders to the activities that produce and are mediated by those genres. Perhaps such practice could be meaningfully accomplished by the junior year when students are engaged in the work of a discipline, but then we are no longer talking about teaching FYC.

As I have outlined elsewhere, changing our focus to explicitly teach about academic genres will first require us, as members of English departments, to change our understanding of genres, to “recognize English genres for what they are—some of many, perhaps never to be used again by some students” (Wardle, sec. 7). Even if we can accept this reality, however, the diverse corps of FYC instructors nationwide “may be unwilling to teach about the genres of other disciplines, seeing them, at best, as representing too narrow a view of what education should give students and, at worst, as unethical or suspect” (Wardle, sec. 7). Asking FYC teachers across the country to teach for and about
the genres of other disciplines will, I believe, unearth a number of our deep, unspoken assumptions about what education should be, what good writing is, and what our opinions are of other disciplines and their textual practices. As Russell has pointed out, a tendency exists on the part of instructors trained in the humanities to position nonhumanities disciplines as somehow less ethical and less concerned with the "public good" than humanities disciplines ("Ethics"). Such an attitude is not conducive to helping students learn about the genres of other disciplines. Teaching genres in an explicit way require us to come to a meta-awareness of the nature of genres, an awareness of the varied genres of the university, and an acceptance of the legitimacy of non-English genres as academic discourse. These things are difficult to foster in the diverse and varied group of part-time instructors, graduate students, and tenure-track PhDs currently teaching the course around the country. People cannot be forced to meta-awareness, nor can they be forced to accept a motive they believe to be suspect. (Wardle, sec. 7)

Analysis of academic genres need not be unreflective or slavish; genre analysis in FYC should do what all good analysis does: take stock of the genre, how it works and does not work, whom it serves and does not serve, and so forth. Our goal should be to help students successfully write in the academy; to the extent they have the power and authority to change academic genres to better meet their needs, we should help them understand how to do so. But we must also be realistic about how much power students have to change those genres, and we must be certain that our analytical genre work will help them succeed, not paralyze them with doubts. In other words, we might adopt what Russell calls a "kairos of critique" that not only analyzes but also respects the genres of other disciplines (105).

While I think the goal of helping students analyse academic genres rather than learn to write academic genres in FYC is a promising one, it does present one major stumbling block: students cannot meaningfully practice writing the genres of the university in such a first-year course, and the course may have limited value as a result. Thus, my second, more radical, suggestion. Rather than continue pursuing the impossible goal of teaching students to write in the academy—or the slightly more manageable goal of teaching students about the genres of the academy—I propose we lay such goals to rest. Nearly everything we have learned as a field over the past decade suggests that specialized writing is best taught by reflective insiders who know the genres and their content, in the activity systems where those genres mediate (and are in-
formed and shaped by) meaningful activities. I submit we actively and vocally give up “teaching to write” as a goal for FYC. In doing so, we will declare war on the myth of transience—a myth that has harmed the teaching of writing and our own discipline for decades, as Russell details at length in *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*.

What I propose may sound like heresy. FYC as preparation for writing in the academy has, after all, been our cornerstone enterprise, the course from which our discipline emerged. But therein lies the crux of the problem. In most cases, courses emerge from disciplines, not the other way around. Courses emerge from the knowledge of the discipline and are shaped by that knowledge. FYC began before the discipline and has long defied shaping by our disciplinary knowledge; instead it has served as a tool for any and all agendas—personal, departmental, or administrative. All the while—despite the mighty efforts of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement—other disciplines have been implicitly relieved of their duties for teaching writing, comforted by the suggested promise that students are “learning to write” in FYC (see Russell, *Writing*, for a historical overview of this phenomenon). There is no evidence that FYC has taught students to write for the university and none to suggest it will start to do so as soon as we discover the next best teaching method. I suggest we would do our students and our discipline more good by giving up this false hope, revealing the myth of transience for what it is, and pursuing new goals, perhaps even in a course defined by a new name.

If we start from what we know about writing, I propose we start with the goal of teaching students about writing (Russell, “Activity”) in a course called something like Writing about Writing (WAW). In such a course, the subject (as Wendy Bishop put it) is always writing: how people use writing, how people learn to write, how genres mediate work in society, how “discourse communities” affect language use, how writing changes across the disciplines, and so on. The research is about language, the discussions are about language, and the goal of the course is to teach students the content of our discipline (see Downs and Wardle for more detail). I am not advocating this as an advanced composition course or a specialty course for select English majors. I am advocating sharing with our first- and second-year students what we as a field have learned about language and discourse, in the same way that biology, history, and philosophy share their disciplinary knowledge in first-year courses.

Why is this goal more achievable than the current one of teaching students to write? Because it teaches students a clear content—what we know about
how writing and language work—and focuses on that content as the object of attention. Not only that, but the nature of that content nearly requires students to reflect on their own writing practices and the writing practices in courses across the academy. Reading Lucille McCarthy’s “A Stranger in Strange Lands,” for example, can clearly call students to reflect on their experiences writing in different courses and give them some explanation for why that experience may be difficult for them. Writing research as course content lends itself to self-reflection, abstraction of general principles about writing (potentially academic writing specifically), and mindfulness about writing practices. Such content will also teach general principles about writing—the very principles that novices need—but without framing them as decontextualized “skills” that might become confusing to students when they are faced with a new writing situation. Thus, in theory at least, such a course is set up to teach for transfer. It also sidesteps to a large extent the problem with asking instructors to teach for and about the genres of other disciplines when some instructors may view those genres as suspect. Here, instructors are asked to teach the knowledge of our discipline about language; the focus is on what we know as a field.

Should Writing about Writing be a required course for every student? That question will have to be answered locally; the answer depends on how courses are chosen as mandatory general education: is knowledge about language and writing as important as knowledge about history or mathematics or biology? It is possible some schools will answer no, though certainly an effective argument could be made for an affirmative answer. If such arguments are not successful, all is not lost. Offering the course as an elective rather than requiring it of all students will go a long way toward righting our problematic labor practices—practices that are not only unethical but also undermine our claims to disciplinary authority. Equally important, without an FYC general skills course always standing in the background, faculty across the university will be encouraged to assume more responsibility for the teaching of specialized academic writing themselves (or at least interrogate their assumptions about what students can write and why), rather than relying on the false hope and promise of general skills writing courses. Writing studies can more fully assume responsibility for continuing to explore important questions about language use, teaching only courses whose content is our disciplinary knowledge. By giving up the goal of “teaching students academic writing,” we can finally stop bowing to demands our research suggests can never be met by any one course or any one department.
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Note

1. After this article was accepted for publication, but shortly before it went to press, a number of studies about writing transfer were published, most notably Anne Beaufort’s College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction.

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