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Genre, Diversity, and Disorder in the Writing Center

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Adherence to genres can hinder writers and consultants alike



Angela Woodward

I hadn't met her before, but surely I had met women like her. Louise had gone back to school when her children were grown. She told me she didn't write well, she wasn't organized, she needed help. Don't worry, I said. Hadn't I helped someone like her just that morning? You don't understand, she said. I really can't write. She had a proposal to put together, for a research project. I knew how to help her. She said she didn't like the bulleted list of instructions. Many people can't deal with those, I said. I have some model proposals, from this same program. We'll look at these together.

Much writing center work deals with genre. We can think of genre in a more or less static way, as texts that conform to certain patterns. We can easily describe the textual features of so-called genre literature, such as the nurse novel. Dell, Ace, and Harlequin published many of these in the 1960s and 1970s: *Ski Resort Nurse*, *Dude Ranch Nurse*, *Arctic Nurse*, *Wayward Nurse*. They all tell essentially the same story. Nurse loves doctor, doctor appears not to love nurse, nurse and doctor overcome obstacle together, wedding. Or take a genre closer to hand, the freshman English essay: some kind of argument, developed in paragraphs, with an underlined thesis statement, topic sentences, and a grand and hasty conclusion. Much of our work with novice writers involves making the requirements of the genre clear. Louise's research proposal needed to begin with a glance through relevant literature, relate the project to

the values of the college, and explain what steps she would take next.

We can also think of genre in a more dynamic way that encompasses not just the features of the text, but also its function in a social world. Carolyn Miller explains genre as

that aspect of situated communication that is capable of reproduction, that can be manifested in more than one situation, more than one concrete space-time. The rules and resources of a genre provide reproducible speaker and addressee roles, social typifications of recurrent social needs or exigencies, typical structures (or 'moves' and 'steps'), and ways of indexing an event to material conditions, turning them into constraints or resources. (71)

Looking at the nurse novel, we then have not only the love of the nurse and doctor, but perhaps the fantasy that this offers to its typical reader, and the ways this assuages her. The freshman English paper not only displays an argument, but is also an attempt by the writer to play a certain role of academic insider. And its genre is not confined to the page, but includes its readers—both the “ideal” reader often conjured in the writing center and the reader with pen in hand, who will respond with comments and a grade. So Louise’s proposal was not only an outline of her upcoming work. It needed also to be a signal to the department that oversees our capstone project: here is a student who can use the language of the research proposal. Thus we can put our stamp on her trip to Brazil, which has become not just a trip to see her daughter, but also a scholarly endeavor.

In this way, my initial conversation with Louise fell into genre as well, using Miller’s sense of genre as not just written texts but also a reproducible “situated communication.” I found myself in a familiar mode, the wise writing center director calming and appeasing an older woman. Many students had come to me with similar writing problems, and I had dealt with them in similar ways many times, successfully. This was a patterned interaction, with a familiar set of moves. “You can do it. Let me show you.” I had become versed in a number of useful genres in my few years of running the writing center.

[A] medical view takes the focus off the broader social question of the unassailable primacy of writing in the academy, and the covert workings of genre.

Louise’s genre problems, however, were quite intractable. Somehow she got the proposal accepted but was back in the writing center often with papers for a women’s literature class. The student tutors quite patiently did what they were used to doing: one would reverse outline what Louise had already written; another tutor would talk to her for a long time and sketch out an outline of what Louise might write. I had her train on DragonSpeak with another student, so she could talk her papers instead of type. No matter what, the papers she came up with jumped around so much, with incomplete sentences and flashes of thought, that they were more or less incoherent. We worked together to revise them. “What is the main idea of this paragraph?” I would say. She might or might not identify a main idea, but she was always quickly onto something else, and something else again. Her revisions were complete reworkings of the original paper, making a second, also incoherent version. She was rewriting extensively, but not fixing up.

It was nevertheless clear that she had a marvelous comprehension of the

literature. The readings often moved her to tears or anger, and our paper conferences rambled into all kinds of byways, so that eventually I learned about her family back in Canada, her mother's recent funeral, and that she was an artist in pencil and textiles. She brought in the crazy quilts she had made for her son and daughter, which were in fact miracles of organization and design. I began working on needlework analogies to help her with her writing: you need to sew this quote in, it's not attached; you need to stitch this idea to the next one. But this didn't work. Her papers were like collages, with sentences fetched up next to each other seemingly randomly. Her grades were poor, and the work made her anxious and unhappy. Her papers clearly did not conform to the genre of literary criticism. The expected format of the explication of a thesis, followed by evidence from the text to support this thesis, was not happening. She did not adhere to other requirements of genre either, such as standard punctuation and appropriate tone. She often questioned her right to critique anything, seeing it as a kind of violation of the text, while at the same time posing cogent questions about the validity of the course, the college, and the curriculum.

[T]he neat and polished work, the one that clearly fits all the generic trappings of its discipline, seems to close off investigation into the underpinnings of the genre.

This is an essay on diversity in the writing center. The word "diversity" in a higher education setting usually taps into a conversation about race and ethnicity, perhaps of social class. There was nothing you could see about Louise that really fired that diversity conversation. To the extent that she was a not a "traditional" student—not 18 to 22—she was very much the typical "non-traditional" student—the older single woman going back to school to finish an interrupted education. Yet she was an instance of true diversity, someone really different, who didn't fit. Actually, she was foreign, Canadian, and part Cree. But the truly diverse thing about her was that *she was not a writer*. She really couldn't write. At last she was given a neurobiological diagnosis, of dyslexia and expressive writing disorder, to explain this condition.

Disorder. That was the heart of the genre problem. Everything she wrote required a certain order, which she resisted. Her evaluating psychiatrist had given this a medical name, and in some sense I can see it this way. Louise seemed to conceive of written words very differently than I did, as tactile and aesthetic things. She made beautiful Celtic lettering and had very lyrical handwriting, and the scribing I eventually did for her seemed to go over better if I used brightly colored ink. Perhaps her sense of language was so fundamentally different that there had to be some biological fact underlying it. Yet this medical rationale does little to explain Louise. Seen this way, her difficulties become solely personal, or an individual obstacle. And this medical view takes the focus off the broader social question of the unassailable primacy of writing in the academy, and the covert workings of genre.



Louise's quilts were miracles of organization and design.

David Bartholomae's "What Is Composition?" questions student essays that seamlessly reproduce the genre of the student essay, and thus of certain larger genres ("Great Men and Great Ideas" or historical travel narratives). "As a faculty," he says, "we do not have a way of saying to a student, 'Make that essay a little worse, not quite so finished, a little more fragmented and confused,' and to say this in the name of learning. The institution is designed to produce and reward mastery, not to call it into question" (14). This is not a stylistic consideration of why we value the neat over the messy. It's that the neat and polished work, the one that clearly fits all the generic trappings of its discipline, seems to close off investigation into the underpinnings of the genre: why do we assume a fairly passive "ideal reader" who has to be fed those damn topic sentences? What if the nurse and the doctor overcome an obstacle together, but they still don't get along, and they have to forget about the whole romance but continue to work side by side in uneasy complicity? What if, instead of writing an analysis of the Zora Neale Hurston novel, Louise just read it, talked about it, and appreciated it? Genre, by giving us useful patterns, smoothes our interactions, minimizes surprise, allows us to grow and to master. But it also sticks us in categories that might not fit. The unhappy nurse novel does not exist, though there are unhappy nurses. Louise's probing into why she needed to write in order for her thought to be validated, and why she needed to write *in this way* about *this*, really had no place in the classroom.

What place did her questions have in the writing center? It brings up a long-standing writing center issue: how do we tell our institutions that we are not fix-it shops for broken writing? Because maybe we are fix-it shops. Even if we are not fixing comma splices, we are constantly repairing genre, affirming its authority, knitting our students into its conventions. We might ask our tutee: "what is an appropriate tone for this kind of assignment?" That is an open-ended question, but the thrust is that the student should settle on something "appropriate." We don't ask for disorder, suspicion, and refusal.

The key to a student like Louise was to allow her to push against the genre of student-tutor interaction that I had established for us.

With Louise, her disorder became its own genre, and our interactions too found a different set of 'moves' and 'steps' that recurred comfortably. She took to writing at her laptop in my office while talking to me. Sometimes we talked a lot; sometimes I looked out the window at the cars in the parking lot while she recited what she was typing. But writing as part of a live conversation was what worked for her, and this method allowed her to get her assignments in on time with less pain than before. I learned how to ask her for clarification in a way that would contour her thought, so while her essays remained relatively disconnected, the way they jumped around was more palatable. Her writing began to seem forceful and stylish. Her instructors liked these papers, and she earned high grades. Had I tamed her? She certainly tamed me. She remembers, though I don't, that she had asked early on that we work in this way. She says I replied, "We don't do that here." I can't imagine that I was so closed about it. But I already had a genre for Louise. At that point, I was satisfied. Catherine Schryer, embroidering on Miller's earlier work, calls genre a "stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough site of social and ideological action" (107). When Louise and I first met, I didn't sense the instability. I didn't know I wasn't listening to her, that I had slotted her in a way that was inaccurate and may have been harmful.

In order to understand each other, we need a basic framework of expectations, which genre provides. Wrecking a genre or refusing to play is more often than not, as in Louise's case, dismissed as disease, error, or petulance. The key to a student like Louise was to allow her to push against the genre of student-tutor interaction that I had established for us. Because I finally recognized her as someone really different, or because she was very patient with me, we were able to come up with a new genre of tutoring, one that worked for her and was like nothing I'd practiced with other students. Though I didn't do this, it would also have been possible to use the concept of genre to suggest to Louise's instructors other ways to assess her. She was never going to write that organized literary critique, but she may have been able to demonstrate her formidable insights into the text through alternate kinds of assignments, such as rewriting a passage from another character's perspective, or composing a fictional exchange of letters between herself and the author. I don't know how this would have worked for a biology class with required lab reports. But perhaps I could have had an interesting conversation with a biologist about what was really valuable in a lab report, and where the genre might bend to accommodate a different perspective. Are there alternate genres of lab report, of history exam, of research proposal? It's worthwhile to ask if the genre can adapt, to probe that rigidity. Disorder like Louise's may bring something better in its wake—a new genre, a new point of view, or those inconvenient questions that genre typically sweeps away. We and our institutions can't adapt, revise, and change if we constantly confine ourselves to the genres we know and are satisfied with.

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