

12 Attempting the Impossible: Designing a First-Year Composition Course

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I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that in designing and teaching first-year composition, we find ourselves in an impossible situation. On the one hand, as the research shows (Hansen et al.; Beaufort; Yancey, "The Literacy Demands of Entering the University"), and as this volume no doubt makes clear, first-year students need such a course; on the other hand, what the course needs to accomplish cannot be achieved in the time given to it.¹ Regardless of where composition is "delivered" or how, what we think we need to accomplish continues to be broad.² When I began teaching in the 1970s, for example, our curriculum was already overly full: in addition to helping students develop as writers, we helped them acclimate to college and to campus, to think critically, to develop wider horizons, and to begin a journey in review of received truth. Indeed, as important as writing was to that English course, it was more vehicle than outcome.

Since then, our curricular efforts seem to be contradictory. Seen from one perspective, it's now easier to narrow our aims, and to do so relative to a sense of national aims (at least in some limited ways), given the development and influence of outcomes generally in higher education, and specifically in writing via the WPA Outcomes Statement—with its five inter-related dimensions of focus: Rhetorical Knowledge; Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; Processes; Knowledge of Conventions; and Composing in Electronic Environments. Seen from another perspective, the promise of such focus—making the planning of a first-year composition (FYC) course take place in the context of a national framework—is contested by three tendencies. First, the WPA

Outcomes are often adapted by campuses to their local circumstances; as a consequence, campuses often take the narrow outcomes focus and extend it outward to include their own specific foci. Arizona State pays attention to argument, for instance, and the University of Illinois at Chicago includes the local, urban life of Chicago itself. Second, as of 2010, the WPA Outcomes are now situated relative to another, de facto set of outcomes, ones developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Writing Project (NWP) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE): the Framework for Success in College Writing. The Framework outlines “habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success”:

Habits of mind refers to ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines. The Framework identifies eight habits of mind essential for success in college writing:

- Curiosity—the desire to know more about the world.
- Openness—the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- Engagement—a sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- Creativity—the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- Persistence—the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.
- Responsibility—the ability to take ownership of one’s actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
- Flexibility—the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- Metacognition—the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

Interestingly, as admirable as these “outcomes” are, they expand what seems to be a narrower focus of my goals back in the 1970s—and beyond.

Third, but not least, campuses often have their own initiatives that they “assign” to FYC, sometimes because they see the initiatives as related, and sometimes because they see FYC as an empty vessel available for other projects, especially those related to student retention.

Most notable among these local efforts may be the “one book” program, in which students read a book together and work with it in some way in their FYC classes (e.g., University of North Carolina, University of Texas at Arlington, and Clemson University). All of this is before we think about “alternative” or complementary offerings to FYC, including: freshman interest groups (FIGS); first-year experience groups (FYE); first-year seminars (FYS), and the like. All of *this* is before we think about individual teachers and the ways that they enact their own outcomes for a given set of students.

In sum, it feels like we’re still locked into a 70s model, still trying—through first-year composition—to be all things to all students at all times, providing all kinds of preparations for all contingencies. Given this context, it’s fair to ask, what *is* the appropriate focus of FYC?³

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A recent trend in the teaching of FYC is what’s called the writing-about-writing or “Introduction to Writing Studies” approach. As described by Downs and Wardle in 2007, such an approach seeks to foster “rhetorical awareness” in students as they both practice and study writing as an object—although, it is fair to note, as Wardle and Downs have in a recent book chapter (“Reimagining”), that this curriculum comes in various forms, in part because taking writing as an object of study could mean many things. In the course design presented here, it’s a mechanism for helping students learn *about* writing as a part of their becoming composers. Such an approach is congruent with recent trends in higher education more generally in that we now believe that learning requires both theory and practice: assigning tasks *and* explaining the logic of the tasks are a necessary condition for their successful completion.

Though we complain about public misconceptions of writing and of our discipline, our field has not seriously considered radically reimagining the mission of the very course where misconceptions are born and/or reinforced; we have not yet imagined moving first-year composition from teaching “how to write in college” to teaching *about writing*—from acting as if writing is a basic, universal skill to acting as if writing studies is a discipline with content knowledge to which students should be introduced, thereby changing their understandings about writing and thus changing the ways they write (Downs and Wardle, “Teaching” 2007).

One heuristic for thinking about this approach, as enacted in this course design, is made available through a revised version of Bloom's taxonomy, where there are four dimensions of learning. Students learn *facts*: for example, writers are not born, at least not biologically; we become writers through knowledge and practice, through response and experimentation. Students engage with *concepts*: in this case, the key terms we use to describe writing, to create our map of writing, and to frame new writing situations. Students *practice*: the composing processes that the research says we are good at helping students develop (our stock in trade since the 1970s); in this course, practice is keyed to three spaces of composing—print, the screen, and the network. Students *reflect*: engaging in meta-cognitive practices is a means through which students articulate what they think they have learned—about writing as an object, about writing as practice, and about themselves as writers.

* * *

I'm persuaded by the research reported in *How People Learn* of the power of key terms, of the ways we use them to create mental maps of given phenomena, and of the enactment of those key terms reiteratively as a way of understanding the terms, making them our own, and enhancing practice (Bransford). I've been interested in this approach since at least the 1990s, when I observed how key terms helped even small children play soccer; first and second graders weren't asked to kick a soccer ball—rather to *dribble* it, *pass* it, or *cross* it—in the process to link the kind of kick to its effect. The language mattered, and the children picked it up quickly as they attempted the action. So too with vocabulary in composition, a point I made in *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*: Both genre and reflection were two terms that were central to the course, I thought. More generally, I saw how important those key terms were in helping students create their own maps of what James Moffett described as a *Universe of Discourse*. One question, then, is which key terms we include *as* key terms: Research shows that we need to include a sufficient number for critical mass, but if we include too many, they don't stick (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). Another question is how we ask students to link these key terms in literal and metaphorical maps for the purpose of framing their next writing tasks.⁴

My list of key terms includes *rhetorical situation*, *composing process*, *discourse community*, *genre*, *literacy*, and *reflection*. The influence of Beaufort's model, outlined in *College Writing and Beyond*, is obvious in these choices. We begin with the term *literacy*. The first day of class, students are asked in a homework assignment to identify an object they associate with literacy and to write a one-pager explaining what they understand about literacy as suggested in the object. Given the course's focus on writing as theory and practice, such an informal assignment seems appropriate. Through this assignment, the course commences by tapping students' prior knowledge as a mechanism for setting the stage for the course.

Being literate means that a person can understand which way to turn a map, which way right and left are, which way North and South are. Literate people know . . . how to rotate a map relative to their position in order to find out the right way to go. . . . When given a map, literate people are perfectly capable of finding their way to any destination they desire. —Jason

* * *

The first formal assignment in this course design focuses on narrative. Given the course's commitment to writing as theory and practice, it might seem strange to begin with an assignment that seems to fall into a more expressivist version of FYC, but the advantages of beginning with this assignment are four (at least). First, as the research reported in *How People Learn* makes apparent, prior knowledge is the default option for all learners, including writers. Given their experience with literature in high school, students entering college bring with them a familiarity with narrative. In addition, many students bring *life experience* with narrative through playing video games and watching television and movies. In this sense, too, the narrative assignment invites students to build on what they know, even if they can't necessarily make that knowledge explicit—at least not at first. At the same time, this assignment brings to life genre as a *concept*: narrative is not, in this sense, a filling out of slots, but (in Carolyn Miller's famous formation) a response to a recurring situation. We think in terms of the conventions of a specific narrative in the context of narrative-qua-genre. Second, thinking of narrative inside the frame of a rhetorical situation challenges students' school-based understanding of narrative, as indi-

cated by the line of research on writing in high school conducted by Applebee and Langer. In high school, these researchers explain, the most significant influence on writing is the national and state testing regime that specifies Britton's teacher-as-examiner audience and that makes test-writing the only composing game in town. As Applebee and Langer remark, "Given the constraints imposed by high-stakes tests, writing as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understandings . . . is rare" (26). Engaging students in thinking about narrative as a genre operating inside of a rhetorical situation moves them from the familiar to the unfamiliar, as it asks them to think about the rhetoricity of narrative in their composing of one.

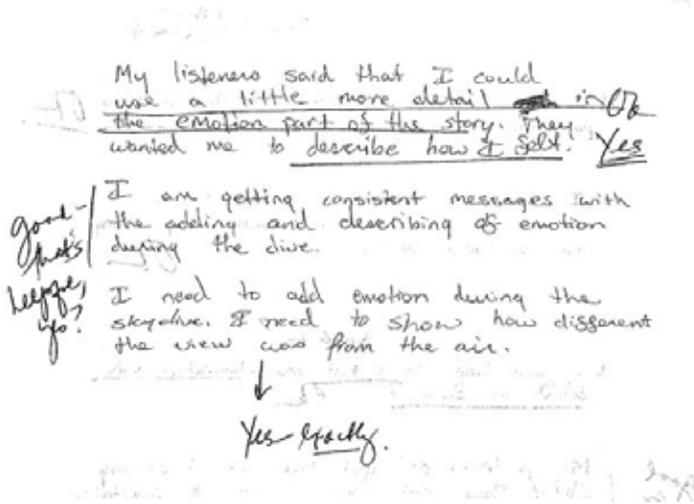


Image 1.

Third, inviting students to write about their own experience validates that experience. As Marcia Baxter-Magolda points out, validating students' experience is a key move in helping students learn. It is important, in a Vygotskian way, that the assignment asks students to revisit an experience of their own choosing so as to make meaning of it for others. Fourth, and not least, the assignment helps students see new ways of approaching material *and* organizing it. Focusing on a scene as the unit of discourse—rather than on the paragraph as the discourse block or on the essay as (familiar, five-paragraph) genre—students develop it out, then repeat the process with another scene,

then decide how to connect scenes, and then decide how to make a full composition. In this process, they learn how to compose from scenes, sending them back to the scenes: it's not a linear process. It is a building from the ground up that, in nearly all cases, is very different than what students expected or have experienced, yet very like practices of other narrative composers who work from the small to the narrative arc: think of Jennifer Egan developing a short story for the *New Yorker* through the discourse bloc of a tweet. As students enact this composing, it helps them see how language and genre are synthetic; through working with language and genre, we create both meaning and agency. Last, but not least, in reflecting on the practices they engaged in and on the final text they made, students create another kind of making: composing knowledge for themselves. Here, it's a very different kind of inventing the university than the one David Bartholomae described.

As important, each assignment is itself located in its own archive: a set of texts, scenes, drafts, peer reviews, and reflections that students create through a multiply layered set of practices.

* * *

I've made the argument elsewhere that part of what we do when we teach is to replicate positive experiences or correct our own negative experiences. Too often, we see our students as ourselves; of course, they aren't. My students are younger, with very different life experiences than mine simply by virtue of our diverse chronologies. At the same time, what I design for them as curriculum bears traces of what I might have designed for myself. Entering college as resistance to the Vietnam War was widening and influenced by my own background, I was quite certain—alas, dogmatic even—about our need to contain the Communist dominoes that would (allegedly) fall if we withdrew from Vietnam. A year later, I was protesting the war on the same campus, a very conservative campus, where the protestors were outnumbered, if we trust numbers and eyewitness accounts, about one hundred to one. That, of course, is part of the point: What evidence do we trust? Another part of the point is how we evaluate and decide: how *do* we decide if, or when, we should intervene—in Rowanda, in Bosnia, in Iraq, in Libya? What's the logic, what's the rationale, and what's the endgame?

Later in my undergraduate career, I took what was called a math course that focused on the philosophy of science. We read trade books

explaining the development of models seeking to explain the solar system and the universe itself. Coming into college, I certainly understood the shift from an earth-centric model to a sun-centric model, but it had literally never occurred to me that models provide us with a mechanism for understanding and explaining physical phenomena, that such models, like Kepler's, changed over time. In this formation of epistemology, as I would put it now, facts weren't really facts at all, as I had understood them.

Such learning takes more than one course, but it needs to begin in a course. If we think of composing, in the language of Applebee and Langer, *as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understandings*—FYC is one such eligible course.

* * *

Another assignment is what I call an inquiry assignment; its purpose is to engage students not in making claims, not in exploring their interests, but rather—and not simply—in thinking. I'm aware that as Marra and Palmer demonstrate, college students don't understand how knowledge is made, how facts become facts, or how facts are framed as understandings. This finding is echoed in Samuel Wineberg's research on students' understanding of history, and it is echoed again in the University of Washington Study of Undergraduate Learning (SOUL). My hope is that the inquiry assignment moves students toward an understanding that knowledge is in flux, and that specific practices contribute to what we consider knowledge. I'm also aware that many students enter college as dualistic thinkers, seeing the world as a platform for dichotomies, seeing their role as taking and holding one side. When we approach a topic most of us know very little about, we have an exigence, an occasion for inquiring and considering together, for undertaking and pursuing the larger and more philosophical questions that contextualize the specific.

We take as our topic World War II, a war that my father fought in but that is as distant to my students as the Revolutionary War is to me. It's an interesting war, one alive in popular culture through movies like Clint Eastwood's pair of documentary-like accounts, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, and books like Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*. Given the Holocaust, World War II seems like the proverbial "good" war, one that was reasonable, justifiable, and even

required. Given more current reckonings, it's a war FDR manipulated us into. Given the performance in battle of African Americans and Japanese Americans, it's a war that forwarded civil rights, a claim evidenced by the new roles that women played during the war: Rosie the Riveter was more than a public relations pin-up girl. Any reckoning of the war would also have to include the atom bombs we dropped on Japan. Was there no other way to end the war swiftly, as Truman claimed? Has dropping the bomb functioned as a deterrent since then? What does all this tell us about war generally, about if and when there is a time to go to war, or about how to behave once we are in war? Is this last consideration merely the musings of someone who has never experienced war, and who has the luxury of musing? These, then, are the kinds of questions we take up during the inquiry assignment; students who have been rewarded for claim and evidence for most of their K-12 testing lives now need not to claim, not to argue, but rather, to *inquire*. It's a shift in thinking as well as in genre.

There are dangers in this approach. Some students become so engaged in exploring that they want to continue exploring; it's engaging, they say. Going forward into the next assignment, they would rather explore; they do not want to stake a claim and supply evidence—even though there are times when claiming and evidencing is what is appropriate. I worry too that this assignment is too close to my own interests, that it will divert students' attention, that the issues of war will displace our focus on writing.

* * *

An advanced writing course I developed at Clemson was intended to help undergraduates work as Studio Associates in the new Class of 1941 Studio for Student Communication. Given the intent of the Studio to help students compose in multiple spaces, I built in specific attention to two such spaces: the page and the screen. Later, at Florida State, I expanded this idea as we developed an advanced writing class as part of our new major, Editing, Writing and Media. The advanced writing course, "Writing in Print and Online" (WEPO, as we call it) is designed explicitly for three composing spaces. Put another way, course outcomes include the successful creation and editing of several texts, including 1) in print; 2) on the screen; and 3) for the network. In addition, at least one of these texts is to be re-purposed for another medium; that is, revised and rewritten to take advantage of the af-

fordances of the medium, and students are expected to conclude the course by creating a digital portfolio, a site that is congruent with the multiple kinds of writing the course fosters.

If we are preparing students for the future, we cannot wait until they are juniors before introducing them to the multiple composing spaces available to them. Indeed, one might make the argument that Bitzer's rhetorical situation should include a consideration of such spaces. In such a class, the portfolio can play a different kind of role. Rather than asking students to compile or assemble a portfolio at the term's end—the conventional practice—we can introduce it early in the term—as a site for archiving informal and formal texts, for reflecting upon texts and experiences, for tracing connections to other kinds of composing and compositions (Yancey, "Electronic Portfolios" 2012). In constructing the portfolio as a site for thinking as well as for presentation, we integrated into the course several advantages of the portfolio that are not otherwise included. One: students begin thinking early on about their portfolio and about the ways they can represent themselves and their composing as they *begin* doing so, and they can do so by including texts from the FYC class, from other classes, and from outside school. Two: students create an archive, and it is through working with the extensive materials in an archive that students engage in making the fullest meaning. Third: early on, students have the opportunity to learn about the technology they want to use so that, as they progress, they can focus on the portfolio itself (Yancey, Graziano, Lee, and O'Malley).

In fact, I think of such a course less as a course culminating in a portfolio, and more as a portfolio course.

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There's a theory that each discipline has its own signature pedagogy. My own theory is that each instructor has his or her own signature pedagogy, too—a way of teaching that distinguishes their instruction. Like others, I try to design a course for a given group of students; I understand, however, that students change class-to-class and year-to-year, not to mention campus-to-campus. I've designed this class for the students I've taught at various campuses—land grants Virginia Tech, Purdue, and Clemson; urban institution UNC Charlotte; former Florida College for Women, now R1 Florida State University. Though

the institutions were different, the students were very similar. Still, I try to design for the students whose learning I currently support.

One practice that crosses campuses is what I call “finger exercises,” or what I compare to a practice that piano players engage in. The point is to warm up, sound the keys, and rehearse informally: so too with finger exercises in my class. For narrative writing, we use finger exercises for drafts of scenes. For inquiry writing, finger exercises provide accounts of the war—first for college students, then for children, then for twelve-year-old Japanese students, and then in the voice of someone living through the war. In the portfolio, finger exercises help students consider what has been learned so far and reflect on their understanding of genre, its conventions, and on writing itself.

Often, students write brilliantly in the finger exercises; a challenge is to help them write as brilliantly in longer, more sustained writing.

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A now classic assignment in first-year composition is the source- or evidence-based argument. At one point, scholars in the field called it the academic essay, but given what we know about genres and disciplinaryity, it’s increasingly difficult to argue (ironically) that such an essay is anything more than a school-based genre. Still, being able to identify evidence and employ it to make a point is valuable—whether one is applying for a job, deciding on a candidate to vote for, or writing one’s way through college. This assignment, “The Writing Project,” asks students to build on inquiry: to inquire into a question, as before, but in this case, to use inquiry to make a claim and to provide evidence for the claim. There are two other caveats to the assignment: 1) it must teach us all something about writing, as it is one of the more understudied fields in the academy; and 2) it must be shared publicly so that the research benefits others.

In thinking about this assignment, I can cite several of my own questions.

My grandmother was born in 1893, an observation that is made possible only by the note of her birth in the family bible; she was the oldest of three, and the names and dates of birth of the three siblings—Olive, William, and Ira—announce themselves on this page, just inside the cover. Nearly sixty years later, my grandfather, an attorney, filed the paperwork required to secure a birth certificate for my grandmother. It went all the way to the California Superior Court for approval and is

filled with the language, stamps, and forms that speak to government and regulation. In this small story is one account of writing during twentieth century America: informal, community-based practices of recording significant events through writing were transformed as government—sometimes local, other times state, and still others federal—took charge. Handwritten signatures on a valued familial book were replaced by official government forms. That’s not a value judgment per se, I’ll note; it is a claim about the role of writing in the twentieth century and how it has changed—a claim that can be evidenced.

Question: When it comes to ways that writing has changed during the last century, is this one example anomalous, or is it synecdoche?

Postcards were created originally in Europe in the nineteenth century; in the U.S., they were originally used for commerce, but toward the end of the century, the government began reducing its restrictions, and individuals began sending them everywhere, sometimes as a testament to travel, sometimes as a substitute for writing a letter, and sometimes to record a significant event. When a specific Brownie camera was invented in 1903, people began creating their own postcards with photographs, now called “Real Photo Postcards.”

Question: Where did people learn to write postcards? How did writing postcards influence their view of writing? How did they value postcards? How have postcards represented places and issues, and what difference (if any) have such representations made? What was the relationship of postcards to other genres, like letters and business cards? Is email simply the modern version of postcards? When it comes to answers to these questions, how do we know?

In World War II, a group of five young Japanese-American women began writing to Japanese-American soldiers. The twenty-something year old who founded the group was leading a Sunday school class and conceived of the idea with some of her female students, girls who were only a few years younger than she. This was at the Santa Anita Reassembly Camp, and the girl was Mary Nakahara, whose given name was Yuri, and who married Bill Kochiyama; she is now called Yuri Kochiyama. The young women—but they were really teenage girls, the five of them—pledged to keep writing to the soldiers as they left for intern-

ment camps spread out across the Midwest and western U.S. The list of soldiers they wrote grew and grew until they couldn't write letters anymore—there were too many soldiers—so they wrote newsletters that could be duplicated and mailed. Over time, the list of soldiers they were writing grew to five thousand; postcards became letters became newsletters. The role of writing here, in part, was to create a network, a community over space, for support. In fact, the young women who wrote these newsletters theorized them, calling them “mixed up newsletters.”

Question: What did the young women write about, and why? Were these newsletters more like letters? More like newsletters? What can we learn about community and about writing from reviewing these? As important, other communities may have participated in similar practices; is this so? If so, who are those communities, who began them, what genres of writing did they employ, and for what purpose and to what effect?

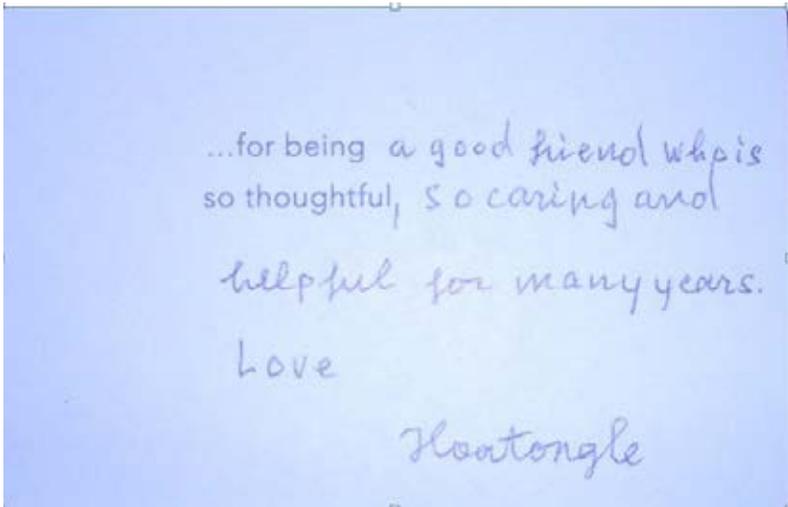


Image 2.

In 2010, a used bookstore in Alexandria, Virginia, gave me all the materials they had retrieved from the used books they had purchased prior to shelving them, including a shoebox full of materials dating from 1942 to 2008. The materials ranged widely: greeting cards, postcards, letters, bookmarks, a jury summons, a menu, a large photograph of U.S. soldiers and European civilians in World War II, a swim

club card, a car repair bill, a “Facing Death without Fear” brochure, some pressed flowers, and one leaf. One of the interesting features of both postcards and greeting cards was the kind of additions that writers made to the “given” card: drawings, personal notes, extensions and extrapolations to the greeting card greetings. In fact, both cards and postcards—regardless of the date they were written—seemed to function as a kind of prompt, something for the writer to use not as a substitute for his or her own writing, but as a beginning to say something else, something more.



Image 3.

Question: Is this the way we typically use cards and postcards, to write over, around, and beyond the given message? Is this practice a kind of repurposing that predicts the repurposing of today? When people buy cards now, do they think in advance of how they might expand the message, or talk back to it—or does this adaptation or repurposing happen in the process of signing the card?⁵

I have asked students in several courses how they learned the genres they write, from letters and postcards to emails, texts, and tweets. The pattern has changed: In 2006, students had learned to write the newer genres on their own; today, some of them report that they have learned them in school.

Question: How are students learning newer genres? Which ones do they use, why those, and how do they value them? Do all students report the same experience, or does the experience differ across lines of gender, ethnicity, age, major, or some other or combination of factors? Is such a study important, and if so, why?

In taking up questions like these—many of which may well be located at the nexus of personal interest and academic interest—and pursuing them in a source-based way, students engage in inquiry; learn about the function of writing and its contexts in a given situation, field, or event; make a claim about this function and evidence it—all from a position of expertise they are developing. Students can engage in this exploration singly or collectively; on a class blog, we keep track of our progress, raise questions, and help each other; as members of a classroom community, we collect our knowledge about writing and its influences.

Because this area is so under-studied, we have much to learn and much to share about writing itself, about how to write, about how to share what we have learned and can claim and can evidence.

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My interest in reflection began with my interest in portfolios, a practice I first began in 1979. Later, I defined my terms and tried thinking more systematically about reflection itself—as part of a portfolio, yes, but also apart from a portfolio as well—in *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. More recently, I've been very impressed by new practices in

reflection that I've seen through my participation in the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research (I/NCEPR).

One lesson I've learned is that reflection can point in any number of directions: Do we mean meta-cognition, for example, or an account of process? Or perhaps we mean self-assessment generally, or self-assessment in terms of outcomes. Alternatively, we could mean account of learning, synthesis, or exploration. Often, we mean connections—between prior and new knowl-

Sociolinguistic Content and Process: Reflect back on the content covered in this course. Do you consider geography a social science or a physical science? Why? How do you think other people view geography? Do you feel the things you've learned in this course will be helpful in future courses and your career? If so, how? Do you think your friends, employer, or parents understand the value of geography?

edge, between what we don't know and what we need to know. I use the term too loosely as well: it refers to a rich set of practices, and as a teacher, I'm hungry, wanting them all in my classroom. But perhaps the one that's most important to me is reflection as theorizing—about writing—what it is and why; and about writers—who I am as a composer and why.

One of the questions we've asked participants in the I/NCEPR focuses on prompts: What types of prompts elicit the most reflective thinking? In their work on reflection, the team from the University of Akron used Cranton's model, one that divides reflective thinking into three types: epistemic, psychological, and sociolinguistic (Cranton). What they found was that to encourage the richest reflection, they needed to engage students in all three domains. Later, extending this work, we asked another group in the I/NCEPR to think about reflection by creating a prompt and by observing students creating a portfolio. What they found was that student reflections were especially rich when taking place at the intersection of two of the domains.

Might this be true for writing as well? Is this the logic we call on when we ask students both to define writing and to define themselves as writers?

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The last assignment, apart from the portfolio, asks students to compose a composition in three genres. This is an assignment I adapted from

Liane Robertson and Kara Taczak in their “Teaching for Transfer” course.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENT # 3: COMPOSITION- IN-THREE-GENRES PROJECT

For this assignment you will move from researching and analyzing your topic, as you did in the Writing Project, to creating a composition that uses different genres to communicate to a targeted audience about that same topic. You will use your previous research, along with new sources, to inform your creative strategy and help you make the rhetorical choices necessary to create an effective composition. Your genres are your choice. . . . In this assignment, you will be relating your topic to audience even more than you did in the Writing Project, incorporating additional evidence and new arguments designed for audience expectations. You will target your audience(s), consider the rhetorical situation, and develop genres to communicate to that audience based on the knowledge you have from developing the research essay. You will also develop a rationale to communicate the strategy behind your genre choices, and a reflection on the process. This assignment requires you to engage your critical thinking, your rhetorical awareness, and your reflection capabilities in order to most effectively communicate to your audience.

Of the three genres, there is one genre that is required: a webtext for Florida State University’s Center for Everyday Writing, which has as its general mission the study of everyday writing. Through this assignment, students write themselves into expertise from a position of expertise, contribute to a larger archive available to the world, and join a company of other students, scholars, and everyday writers.



Image 4.

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The continuing/culminating project is an electronic portfolio, one that students have been keeping since the beginning of the class. I learned about this kind of portfolio from Julie Hughes at Wolverhampton University in the U.K. In her teaching, Julie had constructed a portfolio not as a final project, but as an environment similar to a CMS, but with additional features (e.g., a blogging tool) and as a place where her students archived, recorded, and reflected upon their learning together. In addition, her students—who are student teachers—continue working in the portfolio as they take up jobs, so the portfolio also serves as a kind of transitional space.

My students are different. They haven't all signed on to the same major, and I can't assume (and I certainly can't require) that they continue with the portfolio, but I can assure that they have a very good experience with it. To do that, I design a portfolio that is integral to the course, a place where they record, archive, think, and share. I create one myself so they can see what mine looks like, and I refer them to others. In terms of grading, this is where the rubber hits the road. We work on a set of guidelines together; each student needs to include his or her goals, and we include development as well as accomplishment.

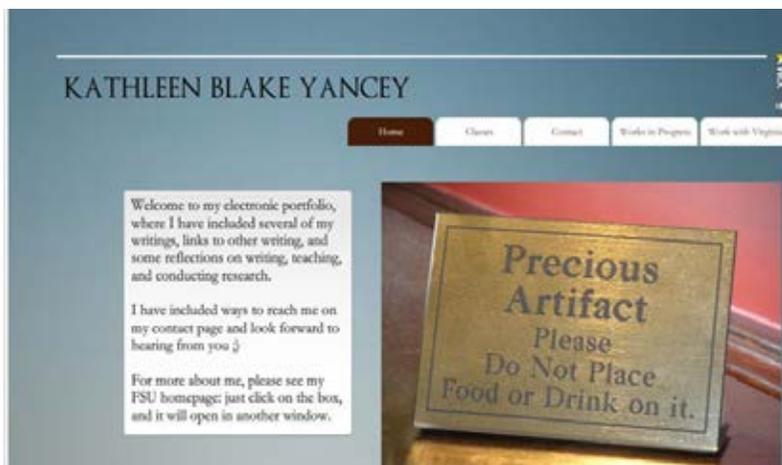


Image 5.

Grading itself merits discussion. This is a writing class, so the majority of the grade comes from the portfolio—ordinarily about 80%—and the rest comes from class participation and homework. The logic is twofold: First, the portfolio, deferring grading, as Irwin Weiser explained over twenty years ago, gives students—all students—the gift of time. Second, the portfolio provides space for an archive, and it is through working with materials in the archive—including drafts, reflections, responses, and texts from outside the class—that students make meaning from their texts, of their experiences, and with their own reflections. Periodically, over the course of the term, I respond to the portfolio as a member of the audience to let students know what I see, how I’m seeing, and what questions occur to me. At the end of the term, though, the institution has its way; a grade is required, and we move from the formative assessment of responses to writing and to the portfolio to the summative assessment of grades.

For years I used a scoring guide for the portfolio. It is no different with an ePortfolio, though the criteria should be (Yancey, “Electronic Portfolios”; Yancey, McElroy, and Powers). Partly, it’s an exercise in survival: Portfolios come in late, and grades are due early. Partly, it forces us to articulate criteria and benchmarks: What is expected begins to become defined. Partly, when put into dialogue with a portfolio, expectations become tangible. More recently, I’ve seen the guide less as mechanism for summative assessment, and more as heuristic, as a way of prompting a kind of discussion about a writer’s develop-

ment, achievement, understanding, and knowledge. Seen this way, the guide, especially when we all contribute to its making, frames a concluding conversation about the writing we've engaged in all term. What, we can ask, has been learned about writing as knowledge and practice? How has the writer developed? What are the next steps in this development?

* * *

I began this text—is it an essay, an article, a series of short notes strung together, punctuated by images and textboxes?—by saying that first-year composition is an impossible course to design given all that it needs to do. Perhaps this is so for all our courses, but for some reason, it seems especially so for FYC. That's evidenced by what's here, by how I developed what I have here designed—the product of a kind of curricular and pedagogical bricolage, with bits of curriculum stolen from one source, bits of pedagogy borrowed from friends and colleagues, the sum something of a collectively individual design. But the importance and impossibility of FYC is also evidenced by what I haven't included; those absences—of reading strategies, of evaluating sources, of considering how research is made in multiple fields—are a presence providing a small index to what we need to include. Some of those items, I do include. Others: I only wish. So yes, this is an impossible task, I concede, but in the *same* breath, I have to say: It's an important task. And that just because it's impossible doesn't mean we shouldn't try. And that when we try, we should try both individually *and* together.

This design, then, is one effort in the larger constellation. I look forward to learning what you make of it.

NOTES

1. In this sense, my response echoes Edwin Hopkins's view in the inaugural issue of *English Journal* when he, now famously, asked "Can Composition Be Done under the Current Conditions?" and answered: "NO" (1).

2. The range of "delivery" options for first-year composition is wide indeed. See *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon*.

3. The two volumes devoted to this question are one good place to think about this issue. See Sullivan and Tinberg, *What Is "College Level" Writing?* and *What Is "College Level" Writing II?*

4. The metaphor of a map is in fact more than metaphor. As we explain in *Writing Across Contexts*, the kind of map students create has everything to do with how they see the world of writing:

What's interesting here, relative to writing, is how the mental model of writing that students develop—or don't develop—can affect how they approach writing tasks. One way of thinking about it is to say that a mental map is very like a larger road map that allows one to see different locations and routes to those locations (and connections among those routes); with such a map, one has a fair amount of agency in deciding where to go and how, at least in terms of seeing possibilities and how they relate to each other—precisely because one can see relationships across locations. Instead of maps, of course, many people now use a GPS device, which can be enormously helpful in getting from A to B and, depending on the model, can offer various routes from A to B (the quickest, the most scenic); traffic alerts; and alternative routes. Still, all a GPS offers is the route from A to B: one doesn't have much sense of how the route is situated or its relationship to other routes or places. The analogy, though imperfect, is probably self-evident: at some level, without a large road map of writing, students are too often traveling from one writing task to another, using a definition and map of writing that is the moral equivalent of a GPS device. It will help students move from one writing task to another, but it can't provide them with the sense of the whole, the relationships among the various genres and discourse communities that constitute writing in the university, and the accompanying agency that a fuller map contributes to—nor will the GPS support the development of expertise.

5. These examples are drawn from my forthcoming *The Way We Were: Everyday Writing in 20th Century America*.

IMAGE SOURCES

Image 1: Student writing and my response; used with permission.

Source: Kathleen Blake Yancey.

Image 2: Greeting card with handwriting. Source: Kathleen Blake Yancey.

Image 3: Greeting card opened up with handwriting. Source: Kathleen Blake Yancey.

Image 4: Screenshot of website. Source: Kathleen Blake Yancey.

Image 5: Screenshot of electronic portfolio. Source: Kathleen Blake Yancey.

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Appendix: Course Syllabus



FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION*

Kathleen Yancey (kyancey@fsu.edu) M 6:45–9:30

Spring

Hours: Mon 4–6 and by appointment

Purpose: The primary purpose of this section of First-Year Composition is to help you continue to develop as a writer. To do that, we'll read, write, talk, develop a language that will help us talk about our reading and writing, reflect on our communications with each other, use email, revise, blog, revise again, share writing, and laugh—though not in this order. If we succeed in this effort, you'll find that you are writing differently, with a fuller sense of the interaction that writing initiates.

Texts: Your own writings (including a flash drive)

Three issues of *National Forum*

The McGraw Hill Handbook

Articles in pdf, on the web, and via the library's electronic journals

Handouts

The Nature of the Course: Reading and writing and talking and listening are all part of communication; in this course, we'll use our talents in three of these arts to focus on writing. Just as there are many rhetorical situations in which we write—different occasions and audiences and purposes—there are different genres—forms of writing—and we will work in several of them. We will write individually, and we will write together, as a class and in partnerships and groups. As we

* A complete version of the syllabus is here <http://kyancey.wix.com/fsufyc#>

compose, we will reflect on our writing experiences, thinking analytically and holistically about what works for us and when, about what we are able to see by framing material in different ways, and about how rhetoric is always at the heart of that framing. Through this reflection, especially on the key terms defining writing, we'll create a theory of writing that you'll find helpful as you take up writing tasks in new situations, both inside and outside school.

Requirements: The course requires that you

- participate in class and online
- read material as it is due
- write homework assignments when they are due
- present formally your oral assignments, with visual communication as stipulated
- create an electronic portfolio and submit it at the end of the term with interview materials
- submit compositions when they are due: in addition to a portfolio, there are four of these
 - **narrative
 - **inquiry
 - **source-based argument/claim and evidence
 - **composition in three genres

I may also ask that you attend the Reading/Writing Center or Digital Studio and/or that you complete other supplementary assignments.

Attendance, Assignments, and Due Dates: You'll need to come to class; and if we all participate, you'll want to come to class. This reading and writing is engaging, a point of intersection where we learn about ourselves and the world, about people we create, about subjects we create, about knowledge we create. If you have to miss class, please let me know in advance. If you miss more than 2 classes, your grade will be lowered, and you may fail. Assignments are due when they are due. Enough said? They are listed on your course schedule.

Some Axioms: This course is intended to help you develop critical literacy, which is itself a function of one's ability to read, to critique, to articulate, to share, to reflect, to revise. Critical literacy also suggests a kind of ability at adaptation, a kind of flexibility that allows a person to function in many kinds of situations. It's a literacy worth having academically, professionally, and personally.

Evaluation:

Class Participation: 10

Reading SRR (Summary, Respond, Reflect): 20

Portfolio: 70

Academic Integrity: Since we are here to learn, I assume we won't cheat or plagiarize. If you have any questions about whether your work could be construed in either of these ways, please let me know.

Concerns or Questions: If you have them, please let me know. I'm here to assure that you have the best experience possible. If my hours aren't yours, let me know; we'll find a time that works.

The Syllabus is subject to reasonable modification, given the needs of the class. I'll keep you posted.

A YANCEY ACADEMIC USER DOC/GLOSSARY

Class Participation *means what you think it does: prepare for class, be ready to discuss issues and raise questions; when prompted to, discuss in the same way online.*

SRR's come in three forms:

- *First, a general SRR=Summarize; Respond; Reflect (connect to class, readings, other classes/experiences; raise questions)*
- *Second, a focused assignment with its own directions*
- *Third, a collaborative SRR, focused on a specific question and composed with one or more colleagues in class*

Submit=send to KY

Share=put on blog; responding on the blog=provide context; connect your observations/post to earlier ones and to readings; help us all see anew → <http://fsufyc.blogspot.com/>

Collab Share=as above, but with a partner/s

Electronic Portfolio *typically means a compilation model showcasing someone's work created through collecting, selecting and reflecting that is completed at the end of a given period of time—a unit, a course, a program, even a degree. In this class, we'll work in a different kind of portfolio model, an environmental portfolio providing space for you to*

archive work and to reflect upon it as we go. Think of it as a materially rich thinking space.

Composition means: *we'll decide this together ;)*

Other than the ePortfolio, all work should be submitted in e and print formats.

Key Terms: All disciplines and fields of inquiry are defined by their vocabulary, and a map of these terms, created by an expert, is a defining feature of expertise. Our key terms in this course include *composition, composing process, drafting, revision, peer review, editing, rhetorical situation, genre, families of genres, audience, discourse community, context, medium/ia, reflection, knowledge, and theory.*