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## “The Hidden Door That Leads to Several Moments More”: Finding Context for the Literacy Narrative in First Year Writing

Denise Goldman

**Abstract:** *The literacy narrative has emerged as a useful genre in composition pedagogy because of the perceived bridge it provides between personal narrative and academic literacy. Although there remains disagreement among practitioners with regard to its purpose and efficacy, it continues to be a staple in the writing classroom because it has the potential to help students learn analytical skills while fostering investment through the features of a personal narrative. Recent efforts in the field, especially with regard to questions of transfer of writing, have focused on the benefits of genre and community discourse analysis as a means to help students engage in critical academic analysis that will help them better understand the kind of thinking and writing required for success in the college classroom. In my work with online communities, I find that combining the literacy narrative assignment with community discourse analysis enhances the benefits of both these trajectories as students perform academic investigation of communities with which they feel a personal connection and interest.*

### Introduction: Phishing for Identities

My discussion here begins with my own membership in and fascination with the community of fans of the jam band Phish, a group I have been following for almost three decades. Characterized by its extensive tour schedule, where no two shows are ever alike, the band has garnered fans and aficionados unique in their sheer dedication and inter-relationship with the band. During the summer of 2017, Phish took up residency at the famed Madison Square Garden for thirteen shows, coined the Baker's Dozen, where each night was donut-themed, with playlists selected to reflect the flavor of the night. In total, the band played 237 songs with no repetitions. It was a feat that was revered even by non-fans and other musicians who were amazed at the tenacity of the band. But the fans knew that this was a thank you from “the boys” (as we call them), an appreciation for the years of dedication that they have witnessed and felt. The thirteen shows over two and a half weeks resulted in a pilgrimage to New York City, where thousands of fans of all ages took over midtown Manhattan. The experience, along with the emerging ubiquity of internet communities, resulted in the creation of “Phish Chicks,” a member-only fan community of over 16,000 female fans of the band Phish. The community was established by a fan who recognized that female fans were underrepresented in the overall discourse of the Phish community and wished to connect them online.

Out of my own ethnographic research that I conducted on the Phish fan community, I developed for my first year writing course a semester-long research project that

takes into account “the heterogeneous resources and social identities that students bring to schooling” (Roozen, Woodard, Kline, and Prior 205) before there is any attempt to initiate them into the discourse of higher learning. Kevin Roozen et al. also suggest that teachers’ own identities play “a crucial role in shaping pedagogical practices in ways that can reconfigure student learning” (206). By showing students my own interest and research agenda on Phish fans, I hope to provide them not only with a viable mentor model but to share with them this aspect of myself, and to enact for them that “identity is located not within and determined by a particular social setting, but rather along trajectories of participation that stretch across, and thus draw together, multiple sites of engagement” (Roozen et al. 206). In this way students may discover that they comprise various discreet and overlapping identities and discourses.

What academic discourse is and how (even whether) it should be taught to students are points of contention. Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle posit the helpful clarification that “a *unified* academic discourse does not exist” and highlight the need to question “what students can and do transfer from one context to another” (552; emphasis added). For first year writing, Downs and Wardle suggest a curriculum that focuses on WAW, writing about writing, where students learn that “writing is conventional and context-specific rather than governed by universal rules” and “that within each disciplinary course they will need to pay close attention to what counts as appropriate for that discourse community” (559). By creating a research project that focuses on community discourse, specifically online discourse communities, I hope to cultivate students’ ability to pay the kind of “close attention” that will allow them to see the multiplicity of literacies by which they are surrounded and with which they engage, and how they are already negotiators of various rhetorical conventions and contexts. Performing textual analysis of active online communities provides students an opportunity to study the organic development of discourse within a particular setting.

Online communities provide ample opportunity to participate in the discourse of one’s choice and to learn how the needs and values of the community undergird effective communication within that community. For my students, I not only saw the value in working with written texts that could easily be accessed, but also in the fact that students already engage in discourse communities that fill their lives in enriching ways but may remain unrecognized by the students themselves. We desire to fit in to a group of people whom we identify with for various reasons. We unconsciously study their communicative patterns until we feel ready to use our own voices to fit in and begin to merge our identities with theirs. There is an exhilaration that comes from that acceptance because communication is life. It inspires us to think and develop as members of a society until we can recognize how we fit into the bigger society in which we reside. Once we are able to see communication as tangible, it allows us to find commonalities with other communities that may overlap with the ones we are already literate in. The act of becoming literate in these other discourse communities is achievable in part when we are able to adapt and transfer the knowledge and understanding we’ve already acquired. This is the goal and challenge for FYW students who are trying to find their places in a world that has just been opened to them. This is the goal and challenge also for their instructors.

In this article, I attempt to reimagine the genre of the literacy narrative, a common assignment in FYW courses, in the context of an ethnographic research assignment of an online discourse community. In order to do this, I will present research that explores the use of internet genres, situated within online communities, as a way to gain meta-awareness of disciplinary literacy. I will then make a case for placing the literacy narrative within a curriculum that supports its purpose. Finally, I will scaffold my semester-long ethnographic research project, identifying the benefits of the literacy narrative within its structure. Ultimately, I aim to propose the literacy narrative situated within community discourse as a blueprint for which students can map their own literacy acquisition of a chosen discourse, something which may aid them in the future acquisition of academic discourses as well as the discourses they will encounter in the workforce.

## Internet Genres

Teaching genre awareness to FYW students helps ease them into the disciplinary writing that is required of them in college. A consideration of internet genres can shift views that have been instilled in students from a young age of genres as concrete entities. According to Janet Giltrow and Deiter Stein, "the general characteristic of Internet genres appears to be a greater fluidity and pragmatic openness. There is a constant and fast proliferation of genres—or of forms of communication that are candidates for being a genre" (9). In addition, students can access internet genres within familiar sites of activity, allowing for a connection to tangible rhetorical situations. "Internet genres, despite the global reach of the Internet, are less 'focused' and less general in the sense that their norms are of a more 'local' and of a less global nature with regard to Internet communities...whereas traditional, especially written genres, tend to have a wide range of applicability, or, at least, they have been regarded as having this wide range" (10). This aspect of particularity that Giltrow and Stein identify as an attribute of these digital genres can increase student chances of grasping the meta-awareness ideal for their college writing endeavors.

Rick Fisher defines this understanding as disciplinary literacy and suggests the use of internet genres as a practical way to emulate the expertise scholars must achieve that "requires a narrowness of scholarly focus and the adoption of certain epistemological positions" (240). He sees genre-oriented activity theory not only as a practical means for students to achieve disciplinary literacy, but also as a way to level instructor approaches to teaching genre awareness without their own disciplinary expertise narrowing their views. Because "practitioners and academics within a discipline may have competing goals, motives, and views of their work," writes Fisher, "disciplinary literacy scholarship should be lauded for promoting a view of literacy as a contextual achievement based on 'particular norms for everyday practice, conventions for communicating and representing knowledge and ideas, and ways of interacting, defending ideas, and challenging the deeply held ideas of others in the discipline'" (240). In other words, a more universal approach to the teaching of writing can be achieved by examining the fluidity of developing genres within their context; Internet genres are the key.

Internet genres, as multimodal forms of communication, represent the multi-dimensional society in which we function. They let us respond in more complex ways to myriad rhetorical situations that continue to emerge, in which social knowledge from a diverse

set of participants is integrated. This directly caters to the emergence of online communities, which unite people around the world based on their shared interests. These genres reflect the diversity that exists within the communities. Katherine DeLuca's research of online fandom communities as places where "shared identities and experiences are constructed...specifically through the creation and circulation of multimodal compositions" exemplifies how powerful a tool these sites of discourse can be. While DeLuca envisions them as sites for the practice of public writing, she advocates that instructors familiarize themselves with their "potential role in the composition classroom" (75).

Online discourse communities, whether they are the basis for fandom discourse or not, present spaces where students can rhetorically analyze texts that they personally connect to. As a result, "we can foster student engagement, encouraging students to view themselves as digital citizens who contribute in meaningful, rhetorically significant ways to communities and groups through multimodal composition" (DeLuca 77). By validating the choices students already make in terms of how and where they choose to communicate, we can teach them the importance of understanding the shared identity of their audience and how discourse is directly connected to that identity. Furthermore, "beyond demonstrating how individuals creating and sharing posts maintains [*sic*] the group's shared identity, these composing and circulating practices also illustrate the degree to which such affinity spaces and groups and online communities promote passionate and literate engagements with topics and compositions" (DeLuca 87). In this regard, we can connect such spaces to academic communities, where the exchange of ideas takes on similar patterns of communication and is inspired through similar passions. Using online genres as sources of engagement can promote a clearer comprehension of how literacy is acquired and how it is a source of pleasure and community.

### **The Literacy Narrative**

Often favored for its potential to bridge personal experience with college writing, the literacy narrative requires students to identify people, places, and texts that enlightened them in significant ways on the road to becoming the communicators they are today. The assignment has become useful in the first year writing class because it satisfies the requirements of some of the different schools of thought, personal and academic, that pertain to composition. The personal versus academic approach to the teaching of writing has been a debate for decades. Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae famously sparred on the topic so often that their arguments are the basis from which these debates are constructed. Bartholomae posits the mastery of academic writing as essential in order to succeed in college and sees the professor as a source for student mimicry that leads to understanding. On the other hand, Peter Elbow sees the value of personal writing to create a voice that is unique to the budding writer, fearing the distraction that focus on a larger discourse might pose to students learning to invest in and trust their own viewpoints.

The literacy narrative assignment eases the tensions of these two viewpoints. It can be seen as an assignment that echoes Elbow's desire to give students agency in their writing so that they are capable of entering an academic conversation only after their own voices have been validated. Caleb Corkery, in his research of the benefits of literacy

narratives, focuses on students' confidence in their primary discourses as an essential basis for learning to write in other discourses. He sees this as particularly important to multicultural education which "promote[s] pedagogies that account for and appreciate the differences among those in the classroom" (48). When the literacy narrative is presented as an academic genre, it creates a path for students to imagine themselves as part of an academic conversation and a bridge into the kind of academic writing of which Bartholomae might approve.

### The Tensions of the Literacy Narrative

The act of creating a literacy narrative is a process that intends to introduce students to more critical ways of thinking before they are expected to tackle unfamiliar texts. This segue is something of a source of tension among writing scholars who argue over how the genre should be situated within the curriculum. Rather than treating it as "add-on" or "optional" for already developed curricula to "promote student agency and metacognition" (74), Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix propose centering the curriculum around the literacy narrative so the skills that are obtained from the assignment can be more thoroughly processed by students. When we view it simply as a precursor to academic writing, "the value of the literacy narrative can easily be lost when students move to assignments framed by more traditional academic genres" (58), in which they "struggle with what counts as evidence [and] how to distance themselves from text and 'feign' objectivity" (75), two skills often expected in FYW. Prioritizing the literacy narrative in the curriculum as Hall and Minnix argue for will emphasize why and how we use certain genres in certain situations. This entails teaching genre awareness as well as situating the literacy narrative into the larger academic sphere so students can see how their own ideas can fit into an academic conversation. Rather than a bridge, Hall and Minnix suggest we treat the genre as a means to "heighten students' awareness of *barriers* to academic access rather than facilitat[ing] an easy transition," (74; emphasis added) as the expectation of ease can suppress the confidence in newly-found academic communication that is meant to result from the assignment.

Genre awareness is also an important concept in discussions of WAW and the transfer question. According to Hayes et al., composition scholars have proposed the idea of teaching students *how* to recognize that writing differs from discipline to discipline, with well-defined characteristics that apply to the genres used. They see the value of writing transfer (a subset of knowledge transfer), in which writing skills acquired in one environment are adapted to another. Genres are not seen as concrete or static, but instead as fluid responses to social situations that are chosen as the most effective way to communicate to a specific audience at a specific time. The recognition of this fluidity comes from an understanding that writing is linked to the needs and behaviors of the community being written for. This is why literacy narratives must be presented as responses to rhetorical situations in contextual settings so that students can understand the functions of genre.

First year writing students come to us from countless backgrounds, each with their own notion of why and how to write. In the FYW class, students may find themselves at a crossroads, where they must alter their previous understanding of writing goals. What

emerges is uncertainty; they find themselves balancing on a wobbly platform, stumbling into classes with different expectations, each one contradicting the other. Hall and Minnix's shift to center the literacy narrative as genre by emphasizing a thorough recognition of the genre's value both rhetorically and contextually gives students the tools they need to bridge the gap between their more familiar literacies and academic writing. While I support this concept, I believe that writing transfer can be better understood when students have more insight into how a community's genres are connected to the values and goals of the community. Thus, I ask students to engage in a semester-long ethnographic research of an online discourse community of their choice. While the literacy narrative is still a significant element of the course, it is situated inside the ethnography in order to contextualize the genre as a means of providing the transparency needed in qualitative research. The literacy narrative can then be seen as akin to the methods section of the ethnography. Students learn that their research cannot be taken seriously if the reader does not trust the researcher's methods and that they must be as transparent as possible in the methods section. Because they are observing a community that they are a part of already, the methods section describes how they became literate in the language of the community. The literacy narrative is then meant to give readers a full understanding of the writer's connection to the discourse community they chose to analyze. In addition, it acts as a way for students to trace their own journey into discourse literacy.

Understanding the connection between discourse and identity is at the heart of the literacy narrative. Corkery, in his research of the benefits of literacy narratives, sees this connection as vital to its purpose. He cites Wendy Hesford who "suggests that a dialogic approach to autobiographical writing can assist students 'to recognize [their] complex identity negotiations and discursive positions' [so that] the students' perceived 'real' voices emerge out of the discourse communities they are most comfortable in" (52). In other words, when students analyze a discourse that they have chosen, they can begin to see how that discourse becomes a part of their identities. Recognizing and recording the methods one uses in order to adopt a discourse of their choice is essential because the process can be repeated as the individual moves into other discourse communities whether this involves classes, jobs, or social groups. This is why I propose the genre of the literacy narrative combined with discourse analysis as a way for students to explore the journey that must be taken in order to acquire the literacy needed to effectively communicate to an audience.

## **Understanding the Ethnographic Research Project**

In the past decade, online communities have gained prevalence in the lives of individuals who seek to enhance their identities by participating in discourse that brings them satisfaction. When students immerse themselves in discourse communities and look at communicative patterns that establish genres utilized by the group, they are "conducting primary research [on issues that interest them]" which "helps students shift their orientation to research from one of compiling facts to one of generating knowledge... [which, in turn] empowers them to write with legitimate originality and conviction" (Downs and Wardle 562). While the ethnographic research of a community of one's own choice gives students insight into the patterns of communication or genres that

are most effective for the audience, it also helps them recognize the individual process by which one becomes literate in the discourse of the community and forms identity in relation to it. This furthermore reinforces the multidimensional nature of audiences, whereas audience can be as "simple" as a group of friends, and as "complicated" as an academic community.

Offering validation of the discourse communities that students are already in allows them to see that they are multiliterate, which is why I encourage them to choose communities of which they are already a part and have insider knowledge. For example, students may choose fandom communities such as a Reddit page for fans of the television show "Friends," or health and wellness communities such as a Facebook group for yoga enthusiasts. Analyzing such groups gives them a meta-awareness of the process and the devotion that is essential in order to become literate in a discourse of their choice. It also empowers them to see that although they may have difficulty adopting one academic discourse, when they are ready for one that they are truly connected to, they will put in the time and energy to fit in.

Ethnographies are used to inform others about the "lived experience or behavior of a culture...and the way in which this behavior manifests itself rhetorically" (Reiff 554). In this regard, students see the genre as a means of communicating the nuances of a culture to others who wish to have an insider view of the culture. Examples of ethnographies range from academic journal articles to general knowledge books that explore cultures that the public wishes to learn about. Parts of the ethnographic research project that are genres within themselves are the proposal, the literature review, field notes, and the methods section. To begin, students must write a proposal that outlines the reasons why they wish to explore the community. In some cases, depending on the rules of the academic community, they may be required to apply for permission to observe the communities. This requires an understanding of purpose, audience, and design as a response to a rhetorical situation, one in which they must present their intentions in order to be granted permission to proceed with research. Next, students learn how to take research articles on the topic of discourse communities and create a comprehensive summary that connects an academic "conversation" to the purpose of their own research. This is a skill that teaches them how to enter such conversations. Students then learn about field notes, another genre that requires them to see the value of communicative patterns for their own use. While field notes are generally a way for researchers to look back at their data analysis, it gives students the unique ability to view themselves as the rhetor and the audience at once. They learn how to write thick descriptions (see Geertz 3-36), as well as the purpose of these descriptions in the analysis of the community. Next, the methods section, as a form of the literacy narrative, is another genre that relies heavily on the ethos of the writer. This takes the form of a narrative, which traces the relationship to the community and how the student has come to decide what aspect of the community they decided to observe. Of course, students must also indicate the methods they used to record the data.

The use of an ethnography research project is not a new concept. Mary Jo Reiff, for example, explores it in "Accessing Communities Through the Genre of Ethnography: Exploring a Pedagogical Genre." She posits the use of the ethnography as twofold: "ethnomethodology as an academic research method and ethnography as a genre of writing

that...can provide more authentic language tasks in classrooms and give students better access to contexts of language use beyond the classroom” (554). To further this notion, I see the ethnographic research project as a way to explore the genre of the ethnographic essay, which has a specific purpose in the area of research, as well as viewing the various sections of the ethnographic essay as individual genres that can be used in other scenarios. In addition, the method of ethnomethodology as a learned skill gives students the opportunity to view genres in context, so that they can “see first-hand how communities use genres to carry out social actions and agendas” (Reiff 553).

Ethnomethodology refers to the process of gathering data for the ethnography they will write. This requires students to engage in the process of genre analysis within their communities by looking at the genres used by the community and connecting them with the behavior and goals of its members. Students first begin to look for patterns in communication. These patterns may or may not be in the form of established genres. As mentioned earlier, students may find that the genres used by the community are, in fact, unique to the community. For example, in one Facebook community that a student observed, members tended to ask questions using the option of a colorful background that Facebook provides. The repetitive nature of this directed the student to categorize it as a genre. She then began to look at how the genre was connected to the goals of the community. By learning a community’s language through its genres, students then have a more realistic sense of what it is to be a member of the community.

### **Scaffolding the Assignment**

The literature review is a daunting task for a first assignment but an essential one for students to understand the concept of academic conversations. The literature review is the easiest way to approach this concept because it is a genre that can be taught as a summary of research. Within the ethnography genre, it is meant to provide an overview of the conversation that the student intends to enter. For this project, we study and use discourse community theory to learn how to write effectively for a particular audience. John Swales constructed the following criteria for a discourse community: 1) has a broadly agreed upon set of public goals; 2) uses mechanisms of intercommunication among its members; 3) uses participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback; 4) utilizes one or more genres to communicate goals; 5) has an acquired lexis; and 6) has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of expertise (*Genre* 24-27). Swales’s focus on the concept of genre as a tool for communication allows students to gain an understanding of how the patterns of communication are established in order for the community’s goals to be met.

Beginning the project with an introduction to the genre of an academic article gives students the opportunity to engage in imitation. Corkery explains that “We depend upon imitation not only in the sense that we learn from examples in context; we automatically use the language of those we engage with in order to communicate at any moment” (55). Using academic articles gives students examples of the genre that they are, in some way, trying to emulate in their ethnographic essays. They can learn about what the audience they are writing for cares about: transparency, lack of bias, language that is somewhat formal, and a clear connection to an academic conversation that has

already taken place. A basic understanding of discourse community theory is essential before students attempt to enter into the academic conversation. As in all online ethnography, "an important research question [must] ...be defined and...online ethnography identified as a workable method for addressing this particular question" (Skageby 411). In this case, students are asked to question how discourse communities can help them learn how to write for audience.

The language in academic articles is often overwhelming for students. I tell them that they are not required to understand everything they read, but they should get used to the format of these articles, which will help them to dissect them and learn to connect genre to rhetorical situation. I use Swales's CARS model ("Create") to show them how to break down academic articles. Although academic articles can differ in style and format, usually based on the experience of the writer, students can learn to recognize which sections to read in order to comprehend the research presented. I explain to them that an academic article most often begins with a summary of other research that has informed the present research. In order to begin their ethnographic research of online discourse communities, they must enter the conversation that already exists about the reason why discourse communities are important. I inform them that after dissecting the articles, they will write a comprehensive summary of the research, which will serve as the literature review for their ethnographic essays. I help them narrow down the overall goals of this research comprising a basis for the introduction of discourse communities: Swales gives a basic introduction to the criteria for identifying discourse communities, Paul Gee introduces the concept of literacy in discourse communities, Wardle makes the connection between discourse and identity, and Ann Johns discusses the role of authority in discourse communities. In addition, Kerry Dirk presents a digestible approach to the connection between genres and discourse communities.

This part of the project is challenging for many students, and I struggle to help them understand. I often think of the concept of audience when characterizing the class of students who have become my audience for the semester. While they share a common goal, of getting through this class with as few scars as possible, they have not yet established a common language to get them through it. It is my job to acclimate them to this language as quickly as possible. In addition, students are shy at the beginning of the semester, and it is difficult to persuade them to openly share ideas. Staring out at the blank faces of my students during the first week of the semester is a harrowing experience, and one I will never get used to. But I persist; I reach deep into my gut and try my hardest to read their facial and body language.

Being exposed to a new genre is like learning a new language, and reading strategy is important. In order to avoid the feeling of defeat that so often is the impetus for student disengagement, I tell my students that I will get them through it, using Power Point presentations for each article. I tell them to highlight what they don't understand, and jot down what they do. I assure them that I will supply all the essential concepts and that they should focus on becoming accustomed to the genre of the academic article. I also vow my support and tell them to email me if they are flailing. A few nods and gentle sighs (of relief, I hope) and I send them on their way.

We begin with the territory the writer is trying to enter. We look for the other research the writer refers to in order to decipher what that territory is. Then we look for

the niche that the writer is proposing to create in that territory, and how and why they plan to do it. I choose the remaining parts of the article that are most relevant to the research they will be doing, in order to understand why scholars have focused on discourse communities when it comes to effective communication. To clarify how identity is connected to discourse, I talk about their identities as college students. For example, I say to them that before you came to college, you identified as a high school student. But since starting college, you now identify as a college student. Now, that is not just because you come to campus every day, or sit in a college classroom. You identify as a college student because you are talking or using the discourse of a college student. You talk about classes or events on campus, or about things happening in the dorms. You converse with others who are college students. The words and utterances, as well as the lexis, are all college related. As a result, you begin to identify as a college student. It is your main identification right now. After college, many people have trouble adjusting to the identity of a person living and working as a contributing member of society. That is in part because of a shift in discourse. This is one reason why many young men and women try to stay connected with college friends, or college events. They are having a hard time adjusting to their new identities. But these identities stem from the discourse that they engage in every day. At the end of the unit, I present them with their literature review assignment and explain that it will be, like the articles they have just read, the “territory” part of their own final papers.

While the students generally understand the major concepts of the articles, they struggle to piece them all together as a basis for their research, so I enforce the relationship between the articles and the thesis the students created. While I ask them to think about the importance of studying discourse communities, I also want them to think about how the scholars relay this information. The idea is a little abstract, and I find I must review this concept after each article so that they have a working thesis for the literature review.

The next part of the project entails students’ observations and recordings of discourse within their own online communities. For three to four weeks, students look for patterns in communication that can be considered genres and then hypothesize the reasons why these genres developed based on the values and goals of the members of the community. As per Swales, this connects back to the goals of the community which is the reason why the community formed in the first place. While students are generally capable of finding the goals of their communities, choosing a post that exemplifies the goals, and doing a line-by-line analysis of the communication tools used to accomplish the goals, I find it useful to exemplify the process with my own research of the “Phish Chicks” community. I explain how I began by skimming through the hundreds of daily posts, saving ones that I felt were indicative of the general demographic of the participants. One of the first ones I chose asked the simple question of what do you do for a living? In real time, I witnessed the response feed fill my screen revealing composites of diverse identities; these were women who were doctors, lawyers, educators, farmers, tattoo artists, dog walkers. There were scientists and nannies, executives and students. In my thick description, I wrote that the post indicated that the shared love of music can create a community that—although with wildly different backgrounds—share a common outlook on life. A goal of the community could be seen as a space for these

women to share and seek advice on personal matters, a private group where they could be anonymous or not, but where they could trust the feedback offered to them, even if it came from across the globe.

The observations and descriptions are then used as primary sources in the quest to find an acceptable way to enter the academic conversation about discourse communities. As students create their thick descriptions of the observed discourse, they relate back to the articles they read and see why an awareness of these communities is so powerful. The patterns of communication have emerged because of the rhetorical situations that demand a specific genre to satisfy all parties involved. In addition, students dig into ideas such as authoritative voices, why literacy in the discourse leads to acceptance, and how one's identity is enforced by the practice of this discourse. The power of this meta-awareness of discourse communities comes from the fact that they have been practicing these concepts all along.

For example, one student who looks at the lexicon of her yoga community sees the online community as an extension of the physical community of the yoga class. While yoga is a very individual practice, the community allows members to enforce their identities as yogis by utilizing the discourse that ties the community together. The student sees the use of words like *namaste* as a way to show positive vibes so that members can feel safe expressing themselves and their inner emotions. This is because members of the community value deep discussion and the use of discourse that encourages it. In addition, special words used by discourse communities enforce a level of commitment that weans out people who do not identify with the community. Another student writes about a taxidermy-enthusiast community which is often misunderstood, as many people do not understand the appeal of taxidermy. From the beginning of the semester, she voiced her hesitation with sharing because of the backlash she has received before. She echoes this sentiment when she discusses how the discourse in the community reflects the desire to clear up misconceptions about the hobby. She points out that the discourse tends to focus on positive taxidermy practices because of the shared goal of promoting such practices. As other students have also pointed out, discourse communities allow members to feel safe and as if they belong. This stake motivates the member to acquire the language used in the community.

### **Modeling Academic Discourse for Clarification**

Throughout the project, I provide the students with excerpts from my own ethnographic writing in order to demonstrate how to present the analysis of how their communities have adopted and utilized genres based on the needs and values of the community. I give them the following set of questions which outlines the relevant information:

#### *Guide for Findings and Analysis*

- 1) What is one goal of the members of your community?
- 2) Select a post that exemplifies this goal (put it in block quotes).
- 3) Answer the following about the post:
  - a) Does the poster use any typographical features (caps, emojis, fonts, italics,

- bold, etc) to enforce his/her point? How does this help enforce the goal?
- b) Does the poster use any special words (lexis) or terms that are unique to this community? How does this help enforce the goal?
  - c) What word choices or utterances help enforce the goal?
  - d) How is this post representative of other posts that you see in the community and how do they exemplify the goal?
  - e) How do people respond to the post? What does this tell you about the interactions in this community?
- 4) How does this help prove your thesis? Can you connect it to anything the scholars said?

The following excerpt is based on my observations of the emergence of specific genres that were created in the Phish Chicks community when overlaps in interests and values became apparent.

Another goal of the members of this community is to find a place to express themselves creatively and share their Phish-related crafts. This is because many women in the group are artisans, some of whom have shops on Etsy.com, a website that allows individuals to sell their homemade goods to a wide audience. Historically, Phish shows have catered to such artisans who sell their goods in the parking lots, to customers who are attracted to a unique representation of their devotion to the band. Examples of merchandise include clothes, jewelry, and decorations for the home. At shows, fans are able to dress up in outrageous ways that are typically rejected by the dominant society. As a result, in order to maintain this identity outside of shows, they accent their wardrobe or home with symbols that are connected to the band. One iconic symbol is the red donut. This is because the drummer of the band, Jon Fishman, wears a dress with red donuts during every performance. By purchasing accessories that have these symbols, fans are able to maintain a silent discourse with others who understand.

While self-promotion is unacceptable in many online communities, because it is part of this community's identity, it is celebrated. Still, in order to counter the negative connotation of self-promotion, the women often promote themselves with giveaways. As a result, another type of genre has emerged, which falls under the category of self-promotion/giveaways.

For example:

Monday Giveaway! 🍩👑

I'm giving away one of my tea/dish towels. Pick a number between 1-3000, BB rules; I'll pick a winner Wednesday. Winner picks which towel you want. (JMH)

Such posts are meant to promote the woman's goods by offering a free sample in a contest where the women choose a number. The poster uses the red donut emoji which has

been adopted by this community to represent the Fishman donuts and gain the attention of the audience. In addition, she gives accolades to the founder of "Phish Chicks," Bethany Barker, when she writes "BB rules," something that validates the self-promotion she chooses to engage in. While there are also some women who promote their shops without offering any giveaways, the giveaway post is a genre that has taken hold of the community. In fact, on the one-year anniversary of the group's inception, a full day of giveaways flooded the discourse on the page. The women expressed gratitude for the community that had quickly become a staple in their lives, with offers of Phish-related wares with similar "pick a number" rules. Some participants got creative and asked the group to pick their favorite song or to guess the year of their first show. The giveaway genre is directly linked to the identity of the community. If we look at the rhetorical situation in which a member of the group would like to share her artistic creations with a group of women who she knows will appreciate them, she must look at the best way to appeal to them. Innately, the woman knows that consumerism is not a priority in this down-to-earth community. Yet, Phish-related products help us to present our identities to the outside world, which is why self-promotion is accepted. However, there is still an inherent understanding that this community would like to protect itself from the constant barrage of advertising that inhabits the dominant culture. As a result, the woman chooses to promote her business to an audience that rejects consumerism by giving away her goods. She understands that this audience will respond to and appreciate the ethos she has presented by visiting her online store when they are looking to purchase Phish-related goods.

Gee states that one cannot simply acquire a discourse like a secondary language without a full understanding of how the beliefs and values of the community affect the actions that are required to accompany the words. He coins this term Discourse with a capital D which reflects the "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing combinations" that are defined by one's association with the community (278). Here, he is saying that individuals do not simply communicate within a discourse community, but they acquire a set of values that reflects the way communication occurs within the group. If individuals attempt to participate without this understanding, established members may be able to recognize it, and, as a result, alienate them. This is why literacy in a chosen discourse is required before one is fully accepted into the community.

By modelling appropriate academic discourse, students are able to emulate the style with the understanding that their own analyses represent worthy observations that deserve to be published. By giving them the questions beforehand, they are able to acquire the confidence necessary to envision their own ideas in place of my own.

## **Student Responses**

The goal of this project is for students to begin to see the connections between goals and values of a discourse community and the genres members choose in order to express themselves effectively. In addition, I ask students to link their findings back to discourse community theory in order to prove that these connections aid in the comprehension of writing for audience. In this respect, I look for student responses that show a thoughtful and intentional look at patterns of communication that were embraced by the com-

munity. For example, one student observed a fan community for the television show “Friends” on Reddit. This show fosters a diverse community of fans, some who were not even alive when the show first aired. The student observed a genre that was embraced by members, which appropriated clips from the show in order to create new media, allowing them to take something familiar and make it their own. The videos were also humorous because members value how funny the show is and want to make other members laugh. For example, one video contained a mashup of clips from different episodes set to a backdrop of music with a synchronization that made it look realistic. The student observed that members use this genre in order to feel a sense of belonging while having a positive impact on the community, which enforces the goal of people coming together to discuss their common interests. She was able to make the connection to Wardle who says, “Individuals need to find ways to engage in their communities which includes seeing their own contributions as meaningful and compatible with others. This entails formulating or modifying an identity. It is not simply a matter of learning new skills, but also fielding new calls for identity construction” (4). The student presents an understanding of how discourse communities often alter genres to match the needs of the community. She recognizes that people join communities to connect with others through a special language. Once this language is adopted masterfully, the member can begin to have an influence on the community, something that brings great satisfaction.

### **The Literacy Narrative, Revisited**

The final part of the ethnographic paper is the methods section that is presented as the genre of the literacy narrative. While traditionally this is where the methods used for research are indicated, the goal here is to present the writer as a credible researcher by using transparency as the key to credibility. I ask students to show that their research was conducted to try to minimize or otherwise account for potential bias in their descriptions. Presented in the form of the literacy narrative, students are able to explore the process they took to become literate in the discourse of their community. The result yields the same goal of being transparent and thus credible to the audience. In addition, students have fun recalling the ways they were introduced to the community and write creatively to express this.

The notion of including the literacy narrative within a context that supports its rhetorical purpose echoes Hall and Minnix’s decision to alter their curriculum in order to support the genre. Their research “illustrate[s] that the power of literacy narratives is constrained and fostered by the spaces of their circulation and reception” (64). In this regard, the ethnographic essay supports the need for the transparency of the student ethnographer in order to make an argument for the importance of looking at discourse communities when learning to write for audience. Student understanding of the narrative’s purpose is essential when “developing opportunities for students to ‘link’ the literacy narrative to their work in other academic genres and use their literacy narratives to critically examine and even challenge academic discourse” (65). In other words, with this project, students are able to gain a metacognitive understanding of discourse acquisition by analyzing their own experience with a discourse that they have a stake in.

This gives them the freedom to approach discourse without the daunting requirements imposed on them in academia.

In my instructions for the narrative, I require the use of at least three vignettes (short, vivid descriptions) that tell the story of how the student learned the language of their community. To help them, I ask them questions such as the following: Can you recall a person or an activity that aided in your adoption of the special discourse of the community? How did participation in the online community help you to become more literate in the discourse? Can you clarify how this experience helped you to become more literate in the discourse? The final paragraph of the literacy narrative focuses on the methods they used this semester to observe the community. While the vignettes show the reader that they have extensive experience in the community, the final paragraph tells the reader how they shifted from member to researcher. They should say how long they observed the community, how often they observed the community, and how they chose the posts to analyze (the most likes, the most comments, at random...). This paragraph is important, not only because it reflects the more traditional way to write a methods section for an ethnographic research paper, but also because it helps student recognize how their understanding of the discourse of the community was altered when they began to formally observe it. In essence, the placement of the narrative within the ethnographic research paper enforces the rhetorical situation for which the literacy narrative is the logical genre.

## Conclusion

With online discourse communities being so prevalent in our lives, it makes sense to utilize their commonalities to teach students how to write for audience. Within their academic careers and beyond, students will encounter discourse communities that they have a strong desire to be a part of. Although many may not be academic, there is value in analyzing how discourse is connected to goals and values, and how genres are created as a result. In addition, using the genre of the literacy narrative to trace one's literacy acquisition aids in their ability to repeat the process. The goal is for students to feel empowered enough by their intricate knowledge of the discourses they have analyzed to join an academic conversation. The discourse then can be seen as a tool for entrance into a community where being part of a conversation requires research of the accepted forms of communication. If the connection between these communities and the academic ones they will be required to understand is consistently enforced, students walk away from the class understanding what is required of them, not only in their classes, but in the communication that they wish to be a part of in other aspects of their lives.

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