

Genre and Writerly Identities in an ALP Classroom

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Abstract: Success rates for basic writers have improved dramatically thanks to recent efforts to rethink and “accelerate” developmental education. This article will begin to answer the question of what is happening to students as they go through these accelerated options, particularly a co-requisite model like ALP. It starts by questioning the very notion of “basic writer.” There is no meaningful difference between groups of students labeled developmental and groups labeled credit-worthy. By encouraging students to think about genre—both to study genre and to write within genres—in ALP classes, the author argues that students will begin to think of themselves more as writers and less as basic writers. A simple action research project is explained and seems to validate that the intensive writing atmosphere of ALP classes can help move student identity in new directions.

In her 1986 article, “What Happens to Basic Writers When They Come to College,” Patricia Bizzell claims that, whether we define them in terms of their writing or by their placement, basic writers’ “salient characteristic is their ‘outlandishness’—their appearance to many teachers and to themselves as the students who are most alien in the college community” (164). Although a great deal has happened since 1986, many in higher education continue to view basic writers through this outlandish lens. Anxiety remains over whether certain students belong in college. Their test scores have “proven” that they are not (yet) “college material.” College professors seek to uphold rigor and ensure that all students pass their classes with the requisite skills. If they aren’t “college material” at the beginning of the semester, we hope that we can mold them into college material by the end of the semester, transmuting base metal into gold. There is something disturbing about this view of students—it relies on a discourse of deficiency and, I would argue, prevents students from reaching their potential.

When I first started teaching in a community college in 2006, I was assigned a lower-level basic writing summer class in which I was required to use two books: a grammar handbook and a writing textbook that focused on the five paragraph essay. Part-to-whole pedagogy was emphasized. Some of my students passed that class and went on to have successful educational careers, while others faltered and dropped out. Although I had little training of any kind—I had an MA in Writing Studies but had

concentrated mainly on fiction writing—I sensed that I was doing students a disservice. It was clear to me that what I was “teaching” was not getting through to students. The grammar exercises I struggled to complete along with my students had no discernable impact on their writing. Five years later, after earning a PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, when I started my first full-time teaching job at a large community college with three main campuses surrounding a major city, I was assigned an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) pairing, in which the developmental class was taken concurrently with the credit class. I was not given a textbook for the basic writing section, and I was actively discouraged from teaching grammar explicitly. Instead, I was encouraged to help students grapple with real, complex, college-level texts. What had changed in those four years?

The short answer might be, not a lot. David Batholomae and Anthony Petrosky first published *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, the textbook that accompanies their academically challenging basic writing and reading class, in 1986. There have been calls to “mainstream” students into credit-bearing courses since at least the 1960’s. There is nothing new about asking “basic” writers to do difficult academic work. A longer answer, however, might be more helpful. While some writing teachers, particularly in community colleges, are still enamored of part-to-whole pedagogy, many more are assigning real college-level texts to students, and offering “just in time” remediation¹ to allow students to work with and write about these texts. There are a number of reasons basic writing programs are being rethought, including legislative pressure and a string of studies showing dismal success rates for students placed in developmental education sequences. Complete College America has been traveling the country pointing to developmental education’s failures, labeling it a “bridge to nowhere.” In all of this commotion, basic writing programs *are* rethinking what they are doing and how they are structuring the instruction for students who have been labeled “developmental” or “basic” writers.

This article will begin to answer the question of what is happening to *students* as they go through these accelerated options, particularly a co-requisite model like ALP. It will start by questioning the very notion of “basic writer.” Bizzell noted that students felt “alien in the college community,” presenting

basic writers as outlanders. But if we redefine writing as “ordinary” and “ongoing,” and (as Laura Micciche does in her essay on the materiality of writing) “immersive in diverse environments” (493), then certainly our basic writing students are no longer outlanders. They are as enmeshed in these diverse environments as any other student. Label them “nontraditional” or “developmental,” but they are the students who are now in college, and they are doing the same kind of writing, and caught up in the same complex processes that produces that writing, as all other students. With the drive toward democratization and the need to educate a greater percentage of our population, these “nontraditional” students have become the quintessential students of the 21st Century. Since 81% of the students at my institution place into developmental classes in math, reading, or English, it is no longer possible to consider them an aberration. They *are* our student body. It makes little sense to separate them from other students.

In the Accelerated Learning Program at the Community College of Baltimore County, where I serve as the assistant director, ten “developmental” students are placed in credit-bearing first-year writing classes along with ten of their peers who tested directly into the credit class or who already passed through other developmental classes. The only difference between one group and the other is that one group takes an additional class—a difference which is significant but not, in my experience and the experience of any other ALP teacher I have ever talked to, stigmatizing. Instead, it is empowering. The ten “basic writers” meet with the teacher for an additional class period, the purpose of which is to help students pass the credit class.² ALP *resituates* both basic writing and basic writers. There are two reasons this is important. 1.) It changes how we think about the college community itself. One of the criticisms of what have been called bridge pedagogies, those that bring students to academic literacy by tapping into their vernacular literacies, has been that the bridge goes only one way—our students are expected to cross over to meet us, never vice versa. For example, Mary Soliday writes “by teaching students to manipulate the conventions and forms of academic language, writing teachers are unthinkingly acculturating students into the academy and glossing over issues of difference in the classroom. Considerable debate, then, turns on whether writing teachers and their students should assimilate, critique, or reject dominant discourses”

(512). These students are helping to redefine the community. 2.) This re-situation makes the acquisition of new ways of thinking easier. ALP explodes the myth that there is a meaningful difference between basic writers and credit-level writers, explodes the myth that a few points on a standardized test differentiates one kind of student from another in a meaningful way. More importantly, it redefines developmental students altogether by changing their placement—literally, placing them into different and more useful classes than the ones they would have been allowed to take previously.

The Accelerated Learning Program allows students to realize their potential as college-level writers. By minimizing the stigma attached to developmental classes, students react to the class differently. Students no longer question why they have been placed in a course that bears no credit because they immediately see the application of the class to their success as students. Because they are now getting credit for at least one of the classes, they are more willing to take the credit class on and stick with it, evidenced by much lower attrition rates in these classes. Part-to-whole pedagogy is not impossible in this structure, but it is strongly discouraged. It no longer makes sense. Because the Accelerated Learning Program focuses on backwards design, a process that starts with the objectives of the credit class, taking our students' abilities seriously, we are able to bring students up to the level we deem "college-level."

It seems self-evident that students would begin to see themselves differently after successfully completing a course, but how do we know that students see themselves differently after taking an ALP class? How do we know that their identity as writers has changed?

I designed a very simple, informal study to better understand how my students felt about themselves as writers after taking my 101/052 ALP pairing. I wanted to analyze their identities as writers and find out where they stood. I distributed the survey, available in the appendix, in the 101 section of the class in the beginning of the spring 2014 semester and distributed a second survey at the end of the semester. Initially, I wanted to get a baseline reading on whether students viewed writing positively or

negatively. I also wanted to see how they viewed writing in general and in what genres they had written. I had assumed that many students would see writing as an onerous task, something connected to school and only school. The results of the survey led me to more rich and interesting findings, detailed below. The survey asked students how they viewed writing, what kinds of writing they had done, what kinds of writing existed, and whether they believed some people were naturally better writers than others, and afterwards I analyzed their open-ended results, looking for connections. I hoped that this survey would get at both their perception of writing in general and their personal beliefs about writing, and that I could use the results of the survey to improve my classes.

From that initial survey, which seventeen students took, I discovered that eight students viewed writing negatively while nine students viewed writing positively, a slight surprise. Students who thought of writing in a positive light, however, considered writing in ways that I would not necessarily consider “academic.” They wrote about “getting things off my chest” and “speaking your mind.” They called writing “an escape” or a way to “express my inner thoughts.” One student wrote: “I like creative writing.” So, although these students had positive connections with writing, connections I hoped to capitalize on, their view of writing seemed fairly narrow. They did not view writing as multivalent, able to do many things, but saw it as either school writing or creative writing. Or they failed to see the ways in which the writing they already did was, in fact, writing. In her 2004 Chair’s Address, Barbara Yancey wrote about “the proliferation of writing outside the academy” (298), and that proliferation has only increased since then.

The students who didn’t like writing had similarly narrow views. “I like to write how I like” one student wrote. And “I wouldn’t write for fun because I feel like it’s a bunch of work.” Every single student agreed with the statement that some people were naturally better writers than others. This was not surprising, considering the “common sense” understanding of writing students bring in with them. Our culture is saturated with the view that some of us are gifted writers, others less so.

In order to get my students, both the 101 and the ALP cohort, to see writing more holistically, to see it as a tool for both learning and rhetoric, I planned to talk extensively about genres during the semester. Genre-study seemed to me a good way to get at attitudes toward writing, because in previous classes I had seen students suddenly see writing in more complex ways after having written in a way that broke away from the five paragraph essay in which they seemed steeped. We were going to write in multiple genres, do many genre analyses, and complete a multi-genre project along with three other papers—a traditional academic paper, a TED Talk, and a case study. During the course of the semester, I decided that I wanted to get students out of the classroom more and designed a project called “Getting out of the Classroom,” available in the appendix.

As Amy J. Devitt writes in the “Genre Pedagogies” chapter of *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, “When teachers make students aware of genres as rhetorical, they give access to strategies and choices as well as cultural expectations. Genres make rhetoric visible” (146). Devitt points to three different approaches to teaching genre: “teaching particular genres,” “teaching genre awareness,” and “teaching genre critique” (147). My approach most closely followed the first approach. I wanted students to understand how to write within genres, how to position themselves as writers of genre. I also wanted to teach “genre awareness,” but did so less overtly. As Devitt writes, for genre awareness “we teach students a process for understanding contextually any genre they might encounter,” (152) by having students collect and analyze those genres. My main focus was on getting students to understand that writing was situated within genres. It’s important to remember that that doesn’t mean instruction becomes prescriptive. “[T]eaching a particular genre no longer means teaching a static set of formal rules” (148); instead, students are learning that those so-called rules are contextual.

More importantly, I wanted students to understand the ways in which genres influenced the kinds of writers they could be. Anis Barwarshi notes that, “We cannot understand genres as sites of action without understanding them as sites of subject formation, sites, that is, which produce subjects who desire to act in certain ideological and discursive ways” (78). I wanted students to understand how they could

“write themselves into” certain positions and respond to “typified subjectivities” in this genres. By doing so, they would start to see themselves as writers, and, particularly important for the ALP, as college-level writers, writers of academic texts that went beyond the strictures of school writing.

During the semester we did just that, with students engaging in many different kinds of writing, both as readers and writers, as evidenced below. My approach to the 101/052 ALP sections looked like this:

We began the semester by talking about deviance and reading the novel *Nightmare Alley* by William Lindsay Gresham in the 101 section. I used the novel for a number of reasons. I assumed that it was not like anything students had ever read before, it introduced strange and interesting academic topics, and it kick-started our discussions about genre by providing an example of genre in terms students were probably already familiar with: genre fiction. Students were taken aback by the strangeness of this sideshow noir novel, which coincided with the sideshow season of *American Horror Story*, which several students watched. We looked at both the noir novel and at sociological studies of deviance, two very different genres taking on the same general topic. This led to a fairly traditional paper that had to incorporate some kind of outside research—whether it was a survey, an experiment, or an interview. The second paper was modeled on a TED Talk and asked students to write about an issue in which they were personally invested. During this unit we watched many videos and discussed the TED Talk as a genre. I urged them to see the subjectivities embedded in the TED Talk genre, which included humor and a public intellectual persona. The third paper took a case study approach to the play *The Laramie Project*. Students were encouraged to make ethical decisions about this play, based on an incident in which a gay man was beaten to death. The case study provided them with another example of how subjectivities are embedded in genres. Finally, the fourth project was a multi-genre group project that asked students to create rhetorical websites about an issue that they found pressing. The most successful of these projects looked at felon disenfranchisement. That group even scheduled interviews at a local jail and produced a final site that included resources for recently released felons and a student-created video detailing challenges.

Clearly, many different genres were considered by students as both readers and writers, and I hoped that this would lead students to a more nuanced view of writing, as they recognized the “typified subjectivities” within the genres.

Following the 101 class, the smaller ALP section moved classrooms, to a much smaller room with a table in the center. The physical layout of the classrooms in which students meet has an impact on their learning. As Jonathan Mauk writes in an exploration of how space impacts community college students, “the physical geography of an institution, and the human geography which surrounds and constitutes it, have an impact on the topography of composition courses” (206). In part because of these spaces, the ALP sections are more collegial, becoming similar to seminar classes. The smaller ALP section of the class did additional short writing assignments that prepared them for the larger assignments in 101. They dug into additional research and had more discussions about the readings in 101. More unpacking of sources and dialoguing with sources was done. By preparing students for discussions and assignments in 101, the ALP students were primed to be college level students. They were, in fact, often the top students in the 101 section. The ALP section either caught students up with the credit students or, in some cases, helped them outperform. Throughout the semester, students were given increasingly more control over their own process, and many of them saw their own writing in a new light. We did some analysis of genres as a whole, looking at the websites of colleges and discussing the “rules” of syllabi. Importantly, none of this work was part-to-whole. The work in the ALP section was more holistic and integrated—not as structured as the 101 but never less than college-level.

At the end of the semester, I surveyed my students, both ALP and non-ALP, again. Because of attrition and two excused absences, only twelve students took the second survey. Four of them felt the same way as they had previously about writing, while eight were now more positive about writing. In fairness, one of the people who was more positive was only “a tad bit” more positive. Although I surveyed both sections of the class, I want to dig down deeper into the findings from the ALP group.

Three out of the eight students who viewed writing more favorably were ALPers, while two did not view

writing any more favorably than before. There had been little movement in terms of attitude toward writing or, much more importantly, any great gains in understanding writing differently. Those two students passed the class, but I didn't feel like I had done enough with them.

To give an example of a student who did *not* see writing in much more complex ways, one ALP student wrote: "Talking about genres did help me discover writing in a new way. It made me realize that there actually is no way to write correctly, there are so many different forms of writing and styles which makes it limitless." This student recognized the variety of genres, but the idea that "there is no way to write correctly" was not exactly what I was hoping for. To say that writing is "limitless" seems to ignore the fact that certain conventions exist within certain genres for a reason. On the other side of the scale, another student the ALP class wrote, "My whole outlook changed on writing. I love it more because I feel that I am a better writer than before. I've become more flexible with my writing and have more confidence." That verdict was born out in the writing she did for the class as well as in her self-assessment. She viewed writing as something to master, a flexible set of skills and attitudes.

A third ALPer wrote: "I've learned to write in a way that would interest my audiences. I think that the way I use to write was kind of boring. I don't dislike writing as much as I did before. Talking about genres just allowed me to think outside of the traditional writing like the essays." I would call this a mixed success.

Finally, another young woman in the ALP section wrote:

I like writing more than I did before. I am more open to writing essays than I was before and I've realized they don't have to be as boring as they appear to be. I used to think of writing in a more formal way. Talking about genres of writing helped me to understand writing in a larger scope and not just in English class. I learned of the more informal ways of writing that include things like posts on social media and texts that may be to friends. It made me think about how I write differently depending on the audience.

It's clear from these student voices that something had shifted in their thinking. They now saw themselves as writers and of writing in more varied ways. ALP, specifically, helped to make that movement possible, though perhaps not in a quantifiable way. Time on-task—additional time to write in various genres—gave these students confidence to take risks. I'm confident that if I had taken a more part-to-whole approach in either the smaller ALP section or the 101 as a whole, I would not have been as successful. Students did gain “strategies and choices” in terms of their writing. The small class dynamic of the cohort section helped make it happen.

Conclusion

Although my survey was certainly limited, including a small number of students, and analyzed only informally, I believe it does point to some possible conclusions. Since teaching the class, I have continued to think about the identity of my students and how I can promote a more writerly identity. Genre has become a part of what I do.

Focusing on complex reading and giving students a chance to do real college level work, whether it is in an ALP class or another accelerated model, changes the identities of our students, shifting them toward becoming scholars and writers. I focused on genre in order to help students understand writing as a situated activity, and I'm confident that this was a successful approach, but it is not the only approach that can be taken in an ALP class. I saw some success in helping students to change their views. The informal but high-level work done in the so-called developmental section helped students come to a more complex understanding.

By focusing more on genre awareness, not simply on writing in specific genres, I might have been able to encourage more students to view writing in more complex ways. Because we looked at a limited set of genres—the academic essay, the TED Talk, the case study, and a mix of multiple genres—without actually analyzing those genres in depth, some students were able to skim along the surface of a genre understanding. Perhaps with more explicit attention to the contextual nature of genres, and to the

“diverse environments” in which writing happens now, students’ understanding of writing would have been enlarged. Still, I consider this approach at least a partial victory, made possible by the structure of ALP and the intensive writing atmosphere of the small class.

Kelly Ritter has convincingly argued that basic writing programs are defined by local conditions. “[I]f there is a universal need, an agreed-upon societal and institutional demarcation for ‘basic’ writers that diagnoses a lack of something specific and transferable from educational site to educational site, then why does the course vary so dramatically from institution to institution?” (7) she asks. She argues “for a shift in program design that does not eliminate necessary assistance for these writers but also does not rhetorically separate them from other writers in the university or imply that their needs are universal or identical from institution to institution” (13). I certainly support this step, but we have to do more than simply stop *rhetorically* separating these writers. We should stop separating these students, in as far as we can even define them, *physically* as well. Although ALP does not completely erase the differences between the two populations, it does reduce and redefine the place of both.

Appendix

Survey

Please write a narrative of your experience with writing, both in and out of school. Include your personal feelings about writing and the kinds of writing that have had the most meaning to you. Please be specific.

What is writing?

Do you like writing? Why or why not?

What are the most important things you need to learn to be a good writer?

How many different kinds of writing are there?

How many kinds of writing have you done? List them.

How do you expect writing in college to be different from writing you’ve done previously?

True or False: Some people are naturally better writers than others.

Getting Out of the Classroom: A Multimodal Group Project

English 101

Let's get out of the classroom and make our writing *matter*. I want you to address an issue that is actually happening in the world around us.

Each group will have to satisfy the following requirements:

1. Secondary Research

You will have to do some research on your chosen problem. Find out what has already been written about this subject.

2. Field Research/Primary Research

As part of your research, I want you to GO SOMEWHERE. You could go to a meeting of a local advocacy group. You could observe a group of people in their natural setting. You could do interviews with people about the problem.

3. Narrative

The narrative will tell the story of the issue. Lay it out so everyone understands it.

4. Proposal

You have to have an answer to the question: What should we do about this problem? This should be an in-depth and well-supported proposal, explaining all aspects of your ideas. It should be realistic. You should keep in mind those who may disagree with your proposal. How can you convince them?

5. List of links for programs/advocacy groups dealing with this problem already.

(Annotated)

You are not the first person to realize this problem exists. Find out what other people are doing about the problem, locally and nationally. In your list of links, include a brief description of the program. What is useful about it?

6. Creative Component

Depending on what talents you find in your group you could make this component: a performance, a poem, a piece of art, a story, a series of photographs. The options are wide open here.

7. Video

I would like part of the project to be a video. 90% of you have phones that can take videos. You could make one of the above sections (the narrative, proposal or creative component) a video, or you could make it an add-on.

Your final project grade will be based on two things:

1. Your part of the project (Each person should be primarily responsible for one section)
2. The project as a whole

If one section of the paper is horribly weak, your project grade as a whole will be hurt a little, but your grade for your part should bring that up again. Everyone in the group needs to keep everyone else on task. At the end I'll ask you to tell me, in confidence, whether everyone should get the same grade or not.

Notes

1. See *Toward a Vision of Accelerated Curriculum and Pedagogy*
2. For more information, see "The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing Opening the Gates"

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