ON GENRE: ATTENDING TO THE LOCAL IN THE EFFECTS OF GRADUATE WRITING PROMPTS

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ABSTRACT: In order to move beyond the limitations of classificatory notions of genre, scholars must pay attention to the functions, material circumstances, rhetorical contexts, and community uses of genre. Using Paré and Smart’s 1994 research methodology as a guideline for analysis, this piece focuses on the social roles provided by writing prompts given in rhetoric and composition graduate seminars in the United States and Canada. Looking closely at the genre of writing prompts for graduate seminar papers, I argue that such genres reproduce ideologies and material conditions local to their environs. A situated sense of disciplinary common topoi, like that located in American prompts, will give rise to those with the same sense of community and common history who go on to produce similar genre sets, whereas a variegated and sense of a developing field or a field in transition, shown in Canadian prompts, will give rise to those who are still struggling to assert and find membership within an academic community.

KEYWORDS: Graduate Writing Prompts; Location; Rhetoric and Composition; American; Canadian

Contemporary theories of genre indicate, as my co-presenters suggest, that closer attention to the functions, material circumstances, rhetorical contexts, and community uses of genre are necessary to move beyond the limitations of classificatory notions of genre. A dynamic theory of genre recognizes, as Bawarshi asserts, that genres are dual sites of invention, both “the instrument with which the rhetor thinks and the realm in and about which [s]he thinks” (2003, p. 113). If genres consist, as Bawarshi suggests, of these “instruments and realms—habits and habitats” (p. 113), then we must turn a critical eye to the locations of genre, adding contexts specific to geography and place to historical and social contexts, and viewing genre as a “localized…site of invention” (p. 114). Attending to the local then, this talk considers the socializing function of writing prompts embedded in syllabi in graduate rhetoric and composition seminars in the United States and Canada.

Using Paré and Smart’s 1994 research methodology as a guideline for analysis, this talk focuses specifically on the social roles provided by assignments given in graduate seminars. I argue here that despite the similarities in textual features of similar course syllabi and embedded writing prompts of graduate seminars in the United States and Canada, they produce differing social roles of participants, precisely because conceptual, rhetorical, and geographical expectations situate communicants differently before and as they enact typified rhetorical conventions. Drawing from similar graduate courses from both countries, courses in Rhetorical Analysis, Technical Communication, and Teaching Composition, I first situate syllabi and writing prompts in terms of Paré and Smart’s methodology, drawing upon Bawarshi’s 2003 analysis of composition syllabi and writing prompts as a guideline for comparison. The bulk of this talk then turns to the social dimension of genre, focusing in on the genre of seminar paper. By using Bawarshi’s work on the construction of writing subjects, I assert that perceived “universal” genres, like the graduate seminar paper, instead constitute particular sites of action “within which communicants instantiate and reproduce desires, practices, relations, and subjectivities” (p. 115) based on the local material conditions that surround the activity system in which they are a part. Writing prompts themselves are a genre that make other genres possible (p. 120). They locate participants in specific relation one another, to other texts, and to social institutions. By explicitly examining the internal and external effects of graduate writing prompts, my analysis suggests that it is in the uptake
between such writing prompts and their outcomes that ideological difference between American and Canadian participants and institutions are embodied.

Paré and Smart outline a research methodology for analyzing genre in their contribution to Freedman and Medway’s 1994 anthology, *Genre and the New Rhetoric*. Although they apply this methodology to predisposition reports and automation proposals, they may be used on a broader scale to define other genres as well, a task I take up here. In their piece, Paré and Smart assert that genre can be defined, and therefore analyzed, across four dimensions: “a set of texts, the composing processes involved in creating those texts, the reading practices used to interpret them, and the social roles performed by writers and readers” (p. 147). While I don’t mean to elide composing and reading practices here, it is my assumption that both the composing processes involved in the creation of graduate rhetoric and composition syllabi, as well as the reading practices used to interpret those texts, are somewhat embedded in the social roles readers and writers inhabit as they approach those texts. Thus, examining textual features and the social roles of communicants act somewhat as heuristics for the composition and reading of texts such as graduate syllabi, texts that are produced and consumed by and for a specialized disciplinary audience only in the realm of the university classroom. Unlike the undergraduate student then, the graduate student knows by the time he or she reaches the graduate seminar that correctness isn’t enough, and are for the most part familiar with academic conventions, the privileges of specialized disciplinary discourse, and the “exclusivity” of the genres they are asked to read and produce (CLARK, 2005, p. 6).

As Paré and Smart assert, regularities in textual features are perhaps the most recognizable facets of genre, typified in particular rhetorical moves (p. 147). Graduate syllabi, like other examples of the genre of syllabus explored by Bawarshi in *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, conform to patterns such as using abstract nominalizations, relying on future tense, and interchanging the pronouns “we” and “you” (p. 126). As instrument and realm, these typified conventions act to create syllabus as contract, objectify agency, and reproduce institutional desires (p. 126).

Both American and Canadian syllabi conform to these textual features, using abstract nominalizations “in which the doer becomes the thing done” (p. 124). Examples include phrases such as “Graduate classes rely on the students to be successful,” “This seminar will explore,” or “The workshop format of the course requires regular attendance and active participation.” By substituting objects for actors, these “activities become substitutes for the agents who perform them” (p. 125)—in this case, the professors themselves who teach graduate classes, structure classroom workshops, and design readings and activities that focus very specifically on instructor goals and expectations of course content and delivery. As communicants become described by performed actions, they better serve the evaluative and quantitative functions of the institution.

This masking of agency, or “genred subjectivity” (p. 124) as Bawarshi has it, continues with an overwhelming reliance on future tense verbs, casting the syllabus as “a genre that anticipates or predicates future action” (p. 125). In syllabi from all courses studied, professors relied on these constructions to initiate future action: phrases such as “you will learn” (American), “you will turn in” (American), “We will be using” (American), “We will look at” (Canadian), “In-class time will be provided” (Canadian), and “Students will have an opportunity” (Canadian), abound in all syllabi. Thus the contractual nature of the syllabus is rehilituated by an emphasis on “both permission and obligation” (p. 125). These particular examples also show the use of the pronouns “we” and “you,” often used in passive constructions on syllabi to indicate the contractual nature of the document and serve as an indicator of instructor tension between “establishing solidarity with students and demarcating lines of authority” (BAEKER qtd. in BAWARSHI, 2003, p. 122). At the graduate level then,
professors continue to implicate themselves as a collective “we,” avoiding the first-person singular pronoun, while still positing the student as “you.”

Writing prompts embedded in syllabi shared similar textual features as well. While writing prompts themselves were generically different across different syllabi and quite wide in range (consisting of reading responses, discussion question responses/position statements, discussion leading, seminar papers, developing assignment sequences, essay evaluations, literacy narratives, book and article reviews, textbook recommendation reports, rhetorical analyses) they shared similar rhetorical moves across corpus, including the three most common to writing courses examined by Bawarshi: loaded phrases, phrases that establish shared assumptions, and phrases which indicate roles for students and instructors. Overwhelmingly, it was these role-phrases that stood out as distinct rhetorical moves in the majority of the graduate syllabi.

Loaded phrases appear in writing prompts primarily to hint or suggest to students the expectations of instructors. Just as Bawarshi’s examples of first-year composition writing prompts indicate loaded phrases, graduate writing prompts also include phrases such as “be sure to” (American, occurring in a prompt for seminar paper), “you will want to show” (American, reading response), “Ideally” (American, discussion questions), “the content of your responses should do all of the following (in this order)” (American, reading response), “the final product should be of superior quality” (American, seminar paper), “the final project can take many forms, but it should be something that links theory and practice together” (Canadian, final project).

Occurring much less often than these loaded phrases were those phrases that established shared assumptions, although in quite a few cases shared assumptions were embedded in those phrases that indicated roles of communicants. Bawarshi gives examples of such signal phrases: “of course,” “obviously,” “as we all know,” and “after all” are a few he recognizes (p. 132). While the phrase(s) “You should remember the goals” (American, assignment sequence), and “it should be clear” (American, seminar paper) appeared in a few syllabi, it seems that such tags were less needed in writing prompts for graduate courses overall than they might be in Bawarshi’s sample of first-year writing courses. And with good reason—the context and function of a graduate seminar implies shared assumptions by virtue of its existence and the admittance of its members and their implied community. An implication of attendance is admission, and of admission, shared assumptions, goals, interests, and desires.

The last rhetorical move that all of the embedded writing prompts share are those phrases which indicate, to some extent, the role of participants. As my later discussion of the genre of seminar papers shows, it is this complex role assumption and the uptake that it implies that is most significantly revealing of ideological differences between the two countries.

The range of writing prompts on varied syllabi produce, perhaps expectedly, a rhetorically diverse range of expectations in social roles of participants. Bawarshi includes a detailed analysis and explication of the double subject position the teacher/writer in writing prompts, one I would like to complement here by a focus on how graduate students are constituted as readers and writers through particular prompts. In various assignments students are expected to be workers, by the use of a phrase “your job will be” (Canadian, presentations), or as teachers, by addresses such as “Most of us who teach writing” (American, essay evaluation), “part of being a successful writing instructor is developing successful assignments” (American, assignment sequence), “A central activity that professional writing instructors use today is …” (American, literacy narrative), or “Assume ‘your students’…” (American, textbook recommendation report). At the same time, graduate students are posited as novices, with phrases such as “In order to give graduate students a
chance to practice” (American, essay evaluations) appearing in writing prompts. Other times their expertise is differentiated, with explicit distinctions between MA and PhD students made by giving each separate expectations. They may be addressed “as leader,” (Canadian, discussion leading), as scholar, as in “write a scholarly review” (American, book review), as artist, with phrases such as “I encourage you to be creative” (Canadian, class discussion leader), or as businessperson, as the directions “Plan and execute a report” (American, seminar paper) imply.

This element of performance and role playing is commensurate with what Bawarshi and Clark both describe as a defining generic component of writing prompts. Although we may be a bit surprised to learn that the underlying role for graduate students in the discipline isn’t simply “thoughtful novice teacher-scholar” or the like, the socializing function of these prompts is made clear here—students are very much expected to perform in multiple ways as “graduate student” in order to meet instructors’ expectations.

Yet these role-indicator phrases were taken from a range of writing assignments embedded in graduate syllabi, which understandably may not be a fair representation of typified action and certainly may not be enough to use as a guide with which to draw many conclusions. If I could extend myself then, I’d like to take a closer look at a particular genre of writing prompt, the ever-so-specific graduate “seminar paper” (also known in other iterations as “course paper” or “long paper”), and examine the notion of uptake as key to understanding localized responses to its genre function (in this case, making another genre possible) (BAWARSHI, 2003, p. 130). The seminar paper was a prompt that occurred in almost every syllabus, American or Canadian, and one that you are all probably familiar with. Yet if we believe that “participants in an activity system are at work … reproducing the ideological and material conditions that make up the activity system within which they interact” (p. 116), then it makes sense to first look at those particular conditions (in this case, American and Canadian institutional disciplinary identities of rhetoric and composition) in order to contextualize the work required of the seminar paper (a genre common to both) and its reproductive function in these localized activity systems.

Graduate programs in rhetoric and/or composition abound in the United States. This has not always been the case, as histories of the discipline in the United States by Berlin (1987), North (1987), Goggin (2000), and Connors (1999) show. After 1890, rhetoric suffered a disciplinary blow in the U.S. when it was truncated in universities to study of usage, arrangement, and style. Harvard introduced the freshman composition course in 1874, and this was complimented by new institutional philosophies of educational utility in places of American higher education. For almost sixty years, rhetoric itself nearly disappeared as teachers of English literature were plagued with teaching required composition courses, with little or no connection made between rhetoric and writing. As these teachers grew more interested in defining their activities in this course, their expertise slowly began to coalesce towards the 1940s (CONNORS, 2003, p. 408). The first professional organization devoted to theories and practices of teaching writing, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, was founded in 1951. An established connection between composition and classical rhetoric changed how the discipline thought of itself in the 1960s, which led to increased professionalization in the form of the first graduate programs in rhetoric and composition in the 1970s. This was “the founding decade of the disciplinarity of composition studies” (p. 410), complemented by an introduction to expressive, process, and social-cognitive theories of writing instruction that carried well into the 1980s and 1990s. The abundance of these programs and theory contributed to the amassed creation of professional organizations, such as the Association for Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW), the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA), the Council for Writing Program Administrators, the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies (ARS), the Alliance for Computers and Writing (ACW), and
the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition. Such disciplinarity was made largely possible by the commonality of the first-year composition course, which provided a locus for research, inquiry, and teacher training (SMITH 2006, p. 321).

As a result of over forty years of this increased visibility, as of 2005 there were at least 54 known Masters programs in Rhetoric and Composition in the United States (BROWN ET AL., 2005, p. 7-8), although this number reflects an online survey of MA programs, data that admittedly is not representative of the full sample size (leaving out programs like DePaul University’s Masters in Writing and the University of Milwaukee’s Masters in English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition). Twenty-eight of these MA programs have a PhD program as well, making up part of the over seventy doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition in the United States as reported by the Doctoral Consortium in Rhetoric and Composition (“Current Members”). While most PhD programs are housed in departments of English, a few outliers exist, such as the University of Minnesota’s Department of Rhetoric or through Michigan State’s Rhetoric and Writing Program. MA’s are located somewhat similarly, although 25 out of 54 stand-alone programs were included in the 2005 survey. Most MA programs are housed inside English departments, but a few exist in stand-alone departments, such as the University of Arkansas’ Department of Rhetoric and Writing. Together then, masters and doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition in the United States number over 90; some reports assert graduate programs in the discipline number near 120 (SMITH, 2003).

As Hubert (1994), Graves (1994), Johnson (1988), and Brooks (2002) explain, the development of rhetoric and composition as a discipline in Canada has had an entirely different set of exigencies and institutional outcomes. Not only has higher education in Canada been peppered by suspicion and critique of American practices, a suspicion that includes composition as an American enterprise (HUBERT AND GARETT-PETTS, 2006, p. 65), but also reflects a history with differing values and attitudes altogether about the teaching of writing, as Northrop Frye’s 1957 state of the profession address suggests. He asserted that “The English teacher’s ideal is the exact opposite of ‘effective communication,’ or learning to become audible in the marketplace. What he [sic] has to teach is the verbal expression of truth, beauty, and wisdom: in short, the disinterested use of words” (FRYE qtd. in BROOKS, 2002, p. 678). This liberal ideal was very much set against the practicality of the American required composition course, and as a result, most of the writing taught in institutions of Canadian higher education has historically been taught in literary studies classrooms—writing about literature. While some American scholars trained in rhetoric and composition taught in Canada in the 1980s, many were critiqued by Canadian counterparts for their “extremely narrow training” (BROOKS, 2002, p. 684).

Although the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English was launched in 1957, this organization’s primary focus was on the teaching of literary studies (the reading of great works), and not writing or rhetoric. With an almost exclusive literary curriculum, no first-year required course to unite theorists and practitioners, no unifying professional organization (all divisions of humanities instead represented by the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Canada, known as the Learned Societies until 1998 (SCHOLARLY ASSOCIATIONS TASK FORCE, 2005, p. 30), a suspicion of American practices, and a history of “philosophical idealism” (BROOKS, 2002, p. 673), the roles and places in which “Canadian composition” might be established were severely limited until around 1989 (BROOKS, 2002). Today, while Canada no longer wholeheartedly agrees

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1 Brown et al.’s data includes a sample of 55 programs, one of which is Canadian. For purposes of this piece, I have subtracted the one Canadian program and its location from their data, and have included it instead in a discussion of Canadian programs.
with Frye’s views, writing and rhetorical study done at the post-secondary level has in large part arisen in places other than departments of English: in writing courses across the disciplines and across curricula; in departments of Communication, colleges of Engineering and sciences, writing centers, and to a lesser extent, in independent writing programs (GRAVES AND GRAVES, 2006). A smaller and more diverse group of organizations has also sprung up around these sites relatively recently: the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric (CSSR, established between 1981 and 1986); the Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (CATTW, established in the early 1980s); the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning (CASLL / Inkshed, established in 1984), as well as local groups such as the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation and the Alberta Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

While the establishment of activities relating to rhetoric and composition may not be said to have experienced a contemporary boom per se, they have given rise to a few graduate programs. Canada has established twelve MA programs and, as of 2005, three of those institutions also offer PhD programs “with a significant degree of study in rhetoric and composition” (SMITH, 2006, p. 355). While these numbers stand in stark contrast to those of the United States, there are additional variations in them as well. While graduate programs in the U.S. are overwhelmingly located within departments of English (although there are a few outliers in writing programs or departments of rhetoric), Canadian programs exist in different locations. Only two of the eleven programs are located within English departments, coincidentally, they are two of three programs with a PhD. The third PhD program is located in Communications Studies. The other graduate programs are located across disciplines: in extension or continuing education programs, in departments of Communication, Media Studies, Professional Communication, Communication and Culture, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Linguistics and Applied Language Studies.

It is obvious from this discussion then that despite similarities in name and disciplinarity, the field of “rhetoric and composition” is not a static and unitary concept in North America. Instead, it has been crafted in the United States and Canada out of differing material conditions and practical concerns. Of these differences, perhaps the one that stands in most stark contrast has been the unification of rhetoric and composition in Departments of English and writing programs in the United States and the diversification in location of the field in Canada. It is of this realm that I argue the genre of graduate seminar paper writing prompt inhabits, reproducing both social roles and ideological conditions that serve to recreate these distinctions of location.

In the writing prompts that ask students to create the genre of seminar paper in the United States’ graduate courses, the roles they are asked to enact are quite standard. Students are overwhelmingly asked to perform as scholars, either being told to write in a “scholarly” fashion, asked to locate themselves “ideologically or epistemologically,” asked to use “theoretical or methodological models,” and told to based findings on “outside research.” A second scholarly role is implied in prompts that explain to students that their product should be “suitable for presentation at a regional or national conference” or “show promise of future publication.” These guidelines ask students to perform in ways that recreate academic convention, values, argument, and outlets for delivery. No surprise, perhaps, given that one purpose of graduate study, at least in the minds of professors, is to replenish and produce a next generation of scholars to fill their shoes—in this case, scholars with a background in rhetorical study and composition theory.

It is this referent to the “field” itself which separates seminar prompts in the United States from those in Canada, even when identical names of courses and similar course descriptions united graduate courses. In every American seminar paper writing prompt, students are told to locate their writing specifically: “as a contribution to the professional
literature of the field of writing instruction;” to explain connections that embrace “certain ideas that are central to composition scholarship;” or to engage in analyses that enter into a “conversation with the field.” This insistent and explicit reference to “the field” assumes some shared assumptions on the part of both professors and graduate students in the United States: shared disciplinary history, a knowledge of the location of the field itself in time and space, and common topoi of scholars writing in fields of composition studies and rhetorical theory and history. Students aren’t told in these prompts what these central ideas are per se, but the understood commitment on behalf of the graduate scholar is that by the time the course ends, they will be prepared to enter into this “conversation”—most likely producing genres which sustain and produce knowledge on writing, writing instruction, and rhetorical analysis, the touchstones of the discipline in the U.S.

While Canadian graduate prompts for seminar papers also asked students to perform as scholars, asking students to explore “studies, methodology, findings, preliminary conclusions,” and prepare texts to “share with a conference audience,” they were also, sometimes in the same paragraph, recast as students, for example:

The purpose of the presentations [of the seminar paper] is to share project explorations with the conference audience; to elicit comments from peers, instructor, and other conference participants that may help produce better course papers…(emphasis mine)

Here, students are asked to present themselves as scholars, perhaps producing a text for a conference audience. Yet the presentation of their paper exists not to forward and revise their ideas for an eventual publication (the purpose of most academic conference presentations). Instead, reference is made to the classroom situation of peers and instructor, recreating the student as novice (or at least solidifying a student’s position as classroom-bound), and the purpose of directing one’s argument toward this invented audience becomes not the production of a better article or conference presentation, but a better course paper. Similarly, other seminar prompts imply the supervised position of graduate student by asking them to produce papers “for your supervisor,” making reference to the committee context that most graduate students find themselves a part of. It is obvious here that Canadian graduate students are asked to play various roles in their production of text, but often these roles are still explicitly bound by notions of the classroom.

Perhaps the most telling of the Canadian context is the lack of explicit referents to the discipline of rhetoric and composition studies in seminar prompts. The only prompt to do so was from a course in Composition Theory, admittedly “conceived on an American model” (“Re: Graduate Syllabus?”). Other prompts from courses on rhetorical analysis, technical writing, and academic writing make no implicit or explicit references to “the field”—no mention of entering into a conversation, engaging central ideas to the field of rhetoric and composition, or contributing to explicit professional literature of a discipline. While students may be asked to “explore a writing situation,” strategies and reasons for doing so are not couched in references to a unified scholarly discipline. They are instead couched as ways to “encompass worldly situations” and to “recreate discourse community of various sorts.” Thus as students are introduced to engaging topics of interest, they are not being invited to do so as part of a larger academic discipline, nor are the common topoi of American rhetoric and composition specialists invoked—phrases such as “the field,” writing instruction, teaching writing, rhetoric and composition, rhetorical theory. It is in this potential for differed uptake that perhaps best represents the ways in which these genres can reproduce the ideological and material conditions of the “discipline” of rhetoric and composition in ways that separate American and Canadian conceptions of “rhet/comp.”
According to Anne Freadman (2002), uptake is what happens between genres and their generic responses. As she explains it, there are texts which suggest or invite certain uptakes (such as the writing prompt of a seminar paper), and uptake texts (in this case, the produced seminar paper that results from the prompt) (p. 40). In the relationship between texts and uptake texts, or seminar writing prompt and seminar paper, the interplay and interpretation between them suggests differing kinds of uptake. Thus it is within the relationship between genre, context, and effect that differences in uptake might occur. In the case of graduate seminar writing prompts in the United States, it is possible to see how scholarly social roles and explicit references to “the field” of rhetoric and composition might produce an interpretation, or an uptake, that is different from that of a Canadian graduate student asked to respond to the genre of “seminar paper” in a similar graduate course. At the same time, we may observe that writing prompts such as the graduate seminar paper reproduce ideologies and material conditions local to their environs—a situated sense of disciplinary common topoi will give rise to those with the same sense of community and common history who go on to produce similar genre sets, whereas a variegated and sense of a developing field or a field in transition will give rise to those who are still struggling to assert and find membership within an academic community.

The fact that the history of “rhet/comp” is a distinctly American enterprise with a firm sense of disciplinary identity is readily transcribed onto genres that create and recreate us, and these “desires, practices, relations, and subjectivities” (BAWARSHI, 2003, p. 115) are replayed in our creation and response to generic texts—the graduate seminar writing prompt stands as a useful example. The sense of an emerging field and diverse range of interests that characterizes the local contexts surrounding rhetoric and composition in Canada is just as readily reproduced in the seminar writing prompts that have less implicit member-knowledge transcribed in their uptake. Each situated instance of the graduate writing prompt instantiates relationships between participants, relationships which go on to produce (and help explain) local histories and differing senses of disciplinarity. Attention to the local contexts of genre, even those that appear similar, is a must if we expect to continue to interrogate genre as a site of invention and explore its significance as a site of social action and response.

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