# New Encounters with an Old Course: Rethinking my Composition Course Approaches for a Highly-Diverse Class

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When I enter a new classroom, start teaching a new class, or am consumed by the beginning stages of planning a semester with a new group of students, I tend to think about this endeavor rhetorically. Who will I encounter? Who are the students? Who is my audience? And who am I this time around, in relation to them? What is my positionality? What is happening in our place or the larger context that will shape and influence my student groups' topics, the form of their writing, or other writing choices? I try to gauge my incoming writing students' interests by exploring their majors and year in college on my roster. I sometimes check out "popular" shows on Netflix, see what is currently being retweeted, or listen to the language of young adults as we sit at opposite sides of a bar or stand near one another in the checkout line.

Teaching at an extraordinarily diverse institution, I also try to examine my roster for potential insights that might give me an idea of where my students are from. Perhaps we have experienced the same location, or some students share language backgrounds. Of course, I remind myself that names are at times only names; my own is a compilation of Persian, French, and Canadian, but I do not identify as any of these! I was born and raised in Germany before moving to the United States at 18, and even though I now have my own little family here, my

identity still includes my German experiences. Based on this duality, I, at times, still struggle to explain the complexities of my own national identity. Despite the inevitable differences that lie between generations or cultures, I feel quite prepared to teach any common writing course and am confident in what I was fortunate to learn at my graduate institution. However, new circumstances, courses, and students always enrich us with new experiences and add to our knowledge and understanding of what we thought we knew.

## Context and Adjustments

I started my new position at a rather unique Midwestern institution in early 2017. My job description included teaching Communication and English classes while coordinating the Writing Center. Aside of my school being a liberal arts college seminary – an institution type, which I had never been exposed to prior to my employment – the incredibly large number of international students intrigued me. In fact, international students outnumber US-born and US-educated students. Over 90% of the students hold passports from non-US countries, but maintain citizenship status in countries such as Benin, Kenya, Togo, South Korea, Columbia, Haiti, China, Togo, to name only a few of the 23 countries that are currently represented. Sharing my students' international and ESL or EFL status, I accepted my position excitedly and was ready for a challenge. I felt that my various graduate TESOL credits and Ph.D. program (Composition and TESOL) had sufficiently prepared me for anything that might deal with large numbers of students who did not view English as their first language.

As I started preparing my Academic Writing class, I analyzed my students' background by having conversations with them and other faculty members who had taught at the institution for several years. It became clear that many students were familiar with and accustomed to more traditional European models of education where the professor lectures and fills the students' "empty brains" with knowledge. Based on my students' home countries – most of which are former European colonies and still heavily influenced or/and burdened by this past – they felt at ease with this approach and content with the teaching style. According to a few of my students, a classroom did not need to be a place for reflective and interactive discussion. It also did not have to be a sphere for exploration through questions or group work, which were all things I had learned and began to feel comfortable with as part of my own experiences and education! Some of my students, however, felt comfortable with very traditional student-teacher roles and were not bored or bothered by quietly sitting there to soak up information. We seemed to be at opposite sides of a spectrum, and my power position made me feel awkward as I did not want to impose things, disrespect my students' backgrounds, or suggest that my approach was superior. I had never taught in a very traditional way but thought that my students and I could all compromise and meet in a middle. This might allow all of us to still be happy in our current roles without feeling like our prior knowledge and experiences were constantly lingering in the back of our minds, telling us how bizarre and maybe frightening the classroom was.

I had also never used a textbook for a Composition 1 or 2 class and had never encountered issues or resistance for this approach. Most students had always been happy to save the $50. At my new institution, however, I felt compelled to use something to emphasize to my

students that they were now entering and becoming part of a new academic discourse community and that their research, writing, and dialoguing would enable them to be part of a larger conversation that was occurring. My students were already accustomed to transcending discourse communities as most spoke at least one other language. Due to this, I assumed that taking an approach that emphasized and explained academic writing as a language variation might be effective. I remember how powerful and enabling the idea of academic writing being a variation of English had been to me once I had learned about it during my graduate years.

I had played with Bedford's *Book of Genres* (Braziller & Kleinfeld, 2018), as I enjoyed the contemporary nature of its texts, the thorough descriptions of generic conventions, the section on multimodal and multigenre writing, and the rhetorical approaches to each genre. However, I felt my students needed something that would allow and encourage them to write themselves into an entirely new discourse community and would do so in an explicit manner. My students are extremely motivated when it comes to improving any aspect of their English literacy practices, so when I decided on Bedford's *Joining the Conversation* (Palmquist & Wallraff, 2017), the name itself even resonated with my approach and mission. Emphasizing to my students that they could envision academic writing as a variation of English seemed to help them conceptualize the context immensely. Framing the course as an interactive, interdependent, ongoing, and existing conversation that they could write and communicate themselves into, agreed with the students' desire to encompass various aspects of the English language. As the text often refers to conversations, it allowed me to continue the discussion of varying interpretations and representations of information and thought. My students and I were able to

easily transform their oral communication into written documents and foreground the similarities

and differences between the two, which my students found extremely beneficial.

Outside of textbook adoption, my writing course within this highly international context

also called for the inclusion of more detailed course materials that were available and retrievable

for students beyond the classroom. I needed to make available information that my students

would read, listen to, or even watch, as I wanted to ensure that whatever learner they might be,

they could easily engage with the course. Coming to the English language after having acquired

German first, I recall how much I preferred the solace of reading in private over orally

contributing to an in-class activity. As a student, I liked being able to watch a clip on something

that we had encountered in class and that I could use in order to further my understanding about

the topic or content. With my own experience in mind, I wanted to make sure that my students

could focus on our course content and do so despite their learning preferences. For the first time

in my history, I decided to enhance our discussions with PowerPoint presentations. I had always

been against lecturing in writing classrooms and was conflicted to change this practice, as I was

picturing my favorite graduate professor shaking his head. It almost felt like betrayal as I slowly

and secretively created my first PowerPoint for my Academic Writing course. The PPT was

about rhetorical situations.

Instead of simply discussing, practicing, and writing on the board, I wanted my students

to have access to our discussion, the definitions, examples, links to resources, and YouTube clips

where instructors spoke in a way that some of my students might have experienced as being

more clear and effective than my words had been. After each class, I uploaded the PowerPoints

to our Learning Management System and encouraged students to use them as resources and

guides for potential questions. At some point, I realized that almost every student printed each

presentation in its entirety and that students were creating binder booklets as supplements to the

textbook. It also became common practice to add and alter slides throughout the class period in

order to keep the presentation engaging and a tool to opening interactions and dialogue. After a

while, the PPTs became a regular component of my classes and enhanced my students'

understanding of the intertwined nature of oral and written communication and language. Adding

to the textbook's message, the PPTs enabled us to continuously recognize and talk about

rhetorical differences in regard to audience, writer/speaker, and form.

Regarding assignments, I commonly ask my Composition students to write a general

research paper as their first graded paper. The topics are up to them, they can choose from MLA,

APA, or Chicago, and must limit their exploration of a topic to roughly four pages. When I first

assigned this paper to my current student group at my institution, I was met with numerous

questions that I was as surprised by as my students were with the lack of more precise

expectations and limitations that I did and did not provide. My students wanted to know

specifics: what is the minimum page number? Word count? What should the title include? How

long is a first paragraph (according to my expectations)? What is a good location for a thesis

statement? Among others. Usually, in my experience, writing students were happy to explore and

not be confined by too many rules and imposed restrictions. New group, new world! Some

students informed me that they were completely unfamiliar with the term "research paper" and

did not quite know how to begin. *Joining the Conversation* didn't present sufficient details on the

roles of paragraphs, what an introduction must address, the significance of a title, etc. I, and the textbook, assumed that students were familiar with a research paper, its terms, and basic moves. I had again made a wrongful assumption based on my personal experience and position. I contacted my Intensive English Language Institute colleagues who are housed in the same building as I am. They assured me that the students who were enrolled in my Academic Writing class had most certainly written research papers in their higher-level writing EFL courses and that they couldn't quite understand where the disconnect or lack of information transfer had occurred. In the end, I created another famous PowerPoint in which we toured the research paper like a botanical garden. We examined various essay titles, discussed the importance of a thesis statement, the role of the assignment within our course and the larger academic writing context, and eventually I received wonderfully composed research papers that reflected the student writers' clear comprehension of the assigned piece.

Teaching the basic research paper in such a diverse college setting re-emphasized to me the need to contextualize information and study results. So many times did I find myself starting a sentence with, "According to research…", to then realize that this research was based on an US context, had relied on US-American study participants, and asked questions in a way that reflected an US-American culture, mentality, and mindset. I noticed some looks of disbelief, at times, and realized that I was talking about locally contextualized knowledge like it was the "truth"! I soon started to change my phrase to "According to US-based research…", or "This study was done in the United States, so it might not uphold for other cultures." The question of international validity opened up great discussions and research endeavors that the whole class

participated in. Having completed my post-secondary education entirely in the United States (aside of a study abroad in the Netherlands), I had become accustomed to reading articles and research in my field without comparing it to other locations and contexts and had stopped asking myself how something might be different someplace else. Fortunately, my class reminded me of the importance of raising these questions and critically thinking of place and reality.

For all writing classes, my writing students and I start each day that we spend together with a journaling session. Depending on the class period, these sessions range from seven to fifteen minutes and are completely open in regard to topics, what the students write on or with, and the form their writing may take. I also do not read or grade these assignments as they are intimate, private, and for no one's eyes but my students'. It had become my experience that when I say the usual, "Please finish your current thoughts and put away your writing devices and utensils," things would immediately raddle as students abruptly ended their writing to move on to something else. I always found it quite comical how quick and immediate the response to ending the freewriting had been. In my current context, however, I was surprised at having to repeat my "please put away your writing stuff…." My students quite literally finished their thoughts that did not end with a current sentence. Ending a freewriting journaling session could take five minutes. I did not change the writing requirements for our journaling time. I simply enjoyed the fact that I could also write for a few more minutes and peeked up from my screen once in a while to make sure I could also finish my thoughts before my students ended theirs. This new experience helped me to re-conceptualize and reconsider what time means when I write and ask my students to write. Yes, deadlines are firm, but why must time be so limiting and

imposing when it comes to freewriting? What happens to my students' and my personal writing if it's not bound by any form of time?

In order to ask my students to culminate and present their genre-based proficiencies and awareness at the end of each semester, I frequently assign multimodal or multi-genre pieces that reflect a personally held interest and does so using at least five genres. Most students find this quite interesting and view it as an opportunity for creativity, engagement, and exploration. While my current students also found the assignment exciting and intriguing, the introduction of genres in writing was a bit different. That day's PowerPoint listed about twenty different academic genres, all of which we briefly (or extensively) addressed and collaboratively identified. At the institutions I had taught prior to my current college, students frequently asked for clarification on the syllable structure of haikus, how to write lyrics for an existing melody, or how to produce a pamphlet or brochure using MS office. This time teaching my college writing course, none of these questions were raised and none of the mentioned genres required clarification. Everyone knew the generic guidelines for the questions that my experience had prepared me to answer. What was different, however, was the need to elaborate and explain what "Thank You" notes/cards were. We addressed their purpose, when they are written, who writes them and for whom, what common occasions for "Thank You" notes are, and so forth. I was so focused on what my experience had taught me in regards to what genres I would have to explain and address that I, until that moment, had almost forgotten how "American" the "Thank you" card genre is. Sure, other cultures thank givers of gifts, hosts of parties, or letter of recommendation writers! But I re-realized that, similar to my puzzled students, "Thank You" cards had not been part of

my upbringing, cultural contexts, or commonly encountered genres. Like many other times that semester, I noticed that I had overlooked and assumed something about my course and my students. To this day I have probably written three "Thank You" notes, simply because the "Thank you" card is absolutely not part of my culturally "engrained" literacy practices.

Another interesting encounter with genres and their clear cultural associations occurred when I asked students to compose a brief narrative. It became clear that one of my students, who had moved to the United States only a few months prior from a former communist country, felt uncomfortable with the thought of revealing so much information about himself. He explained that he'd rather write a research paper, which, according to my experience, is quite unusual for an undergraduate writer! Most welcome a narrative over a research piece any day! My student was quite adamant about not writing the paper with too much detail but agreed to adhere to the assignment guidelines without divulging too much about himself. Later that day, his peer stopped me on my way out of the room to explain that some of his country mates felt uncomfortable sharing personal information, simply because that is how they had been raised within their sociopolitical contexts. "Of course! I understand," I explained, embarrassed that I had never thought of this and been so ignorant to the realities of other cultural influences. "That makes perfect sense. Thank you for letting me know!"

## In the End – Moving Forward

The mentioned instances offered fantastic opportunities for the students and myself to discuss what we think and know about writing and how culturally bound and reflective our writing can be. Instances that demonstrated misaligned assumptions re-emphasized the importance to keep in mind how one's identity with all of its complexities heavily influences writing choices, writing behaviors, and writing practices within and outside of one's cultural context. Teaching my course to this particular group of students reminded me to stay open minded and take into account my own context from which my course design stems and my own assumptions that I've created through my cultural background, upbringing, and "re-acculturalization" to this subculture within a, to me, foreign culture. Neither my students nor I had grown up in the United States, so as we were trying to integrate our justifications for our reactions and responses to certain textbook and article assumptions, we were able to co-construct and negotiate meaning for our shared culture and the writing we were sharing and creating here.

It was also a good opportunity for me to reconsider commonly held assumptions and reevaluate what I do in my writing classrooms. Not taking into consideration certain common factors had been my oversight, but I hope that this writing helps others to keep in mind some important considerations for their highly diverse composition classes.

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