**Considering Writer Identities and Agencies:  Curating the Complexities of Composition**

An enduring issue that writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines programs face is how to best collaborate with faculty outside of writing studies in an effort to explain the inside workings of writing in their scholarly disciplines, including common rhetorical moves, implied values, and dominate discourse intimately related to power. Understandably, these disciplinary elements are so common and everyday to “insiders” it can be difficult to identify and articulate them clearly to “outsiders” of their discipline.  As Walker explains, combining his words and ideas with Sheridan et al., “The words of everyday life will not come about through a sociological discovery but through its being expressed by those living it, wherein ‘writing opens up and transforms the social positions occupied and available to be occupied’” (Walker 51). In an effort to open up and transform our writing across and within the disciplines, our university writing program has turned to Content Curation Projects (CCPs) as an avenue for faculty to “pause and reflect” on the writing and thinking processes of their disciplines in an effort to articulate those somewhat private acts public. As the culminating product of our WAC Academy, we have found that CCPs are not only an engaging and empowering process for writing instructors across the disciplines, but the instructor’s products have also proven to be valuable resources for writing instructors and student-writers across the disciplines.

Modeled on the National Writing Project Summer Institute, the WAC Academy is a professional development activity open to all instructors from across the disciplines. Through the Academy, we seek to develop a community of writers and instructors of writing, which includes engaging in time to read, write, discuss, and inquire into theories, research, and practices of effective writing instruction.

Until recently, WAC Academy participates were asked to contribute a best practices focus piece on a topic or strategy for teaching writing as a final project. While many of the projects offered valuable strategies and knowledge to writing instructors, the projects were rarely accessed and utilized after being shared on the writing program website. In an effort to create a more engaging project for Academy participants and more useful products for writing instructors, Dr. Will Banks and I developed and introduced CCPs as the culminating project for Academy participants.

**Content Curation Projects**

The work of developing a CCP often involves identifying significant genres in a participant’s discipline, exploring how the compositions work (rhetorically and socially) in context, and considering the common formats and rhetorical moves and the disciplinary values they represent.  CPPs reflect the work of museum curators who identify a theme, select significant and related artifacts to display, contextualize the artifacts and theme, arrange the artifacts in a meaningful way within the theme, and curate the exhibit’s artifacts individually and in relation to the theme.  In the process of creating a CCP, participants consider the themes and concepts important to their discipline or field, identify significant types of writing and genres, consider how the genres work individually and as a whole, and narrate curate the types of writing individually and all together as a complete, digital “exhibit” (see Appendix 1).

CCP’s seek to answer three guiding questions: 1. What are significant genres in your discipline? (Identify)  2.  How do these genres and their components function, rhetorically and socially?  (Analyze)  and 3. Why do they function the way they do? (Explain)  In the process of working through these questions, we hoped we could all gain greater understanding of what, how, and why writers in disciplines and fields communicate in different (and similar) ways. These understandings may include greater understandings of discipline-specific values, the ‘ways of thinking’ in a discipline, and some of the traits of ‘effective writing’ in a particular classroom, discipline, and/or field. It was not until we actually started working with participants on these projects that we realized how CCPs could be used as subversive mediating tools to encourage writers and writing instructors to consider (and disrupt?) dominant, academic literacies and transform them into powerful literacies (Gee, 1989).

**One Instructor Turns Curator**

As a former participant of the WAC Academy, frequent writing program collaborator, and a mindful writer, Dr. Daniel Goldberg’s CCP was an ideal and available source for data collection.

Goldber’s full CCP includes curation of four artifacts: 1. Two writing assignments from his Introduction to Health and Humanities course, 2. A student paper from the same course, 3. A collaboratively constructed mind map from his Honors College course titled Pain, Its Paradoxes, and the Human Condition on the concept and perception of pain, and 4. A Thinglink on encouraging far transfer of writing skills in interdisciplinary writing courses. (For more information on these and other CCPs, please visit <http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/writing/wac/disciplines.cfm>.)

For this project, I am using open coding in conjunction with critical discourse analysis to unpack this instructor’s curation of one of his artifacts, two Health and Humanities writing assignments. While analyzing Goldberg’s curation, several significant themes emerged.

In his curation of two writing assignments, Goldberg drive me to wonder about the agencies of writing assignments, the larger implications of small words, and the paths we intentionally (and unintentionally) create for our student-writers (see Appendix 2 for full transcript).

**Agencies of Assignments**

One theme that became evident in my analysis of is how writing assignments can be thought of and used as mediating tools for instructors. For example, early in his curation, Goldberg explains, “Each [assignment] requires a little bit more independence, a little bit more self-directed learning. So [this assignment] offers a little bit more creativity to the learner…”. In examining these statements, it becomes apparent that the instructor - a common element of the learning process - is missing. It is the assignment performing the actions of requiring and offering. Throughout his curation of two writing assignments, which is a little less than three and a half minutes long, the assignments “do” or perform at least thirteen actions. These hard working inanimate tools *offer* creativity, *encourage* confidence, *ease* anxiety, *provide* a direct stem, *open* space for learners, *respond* to another topic, *give* more space for creativity, *require* students to wrestle with difficult situations, *challenge* student to include their own voice, *force* students to “come to grips with” some complex paradigms, *ask* students to make the invisible visible, and *request* students think critically about these paradigms.   But why, as teachers, may we remove ourselves from this discussion?

On the one hand, Goldberg could be intentionally removing himself. Utilizing the assignment as a mediating tool could be an instructional strategy, an attempt to avoid a controlling or overly authoritative tone. Contributing agency to the assignment could be an effort to create a more flexible or comfortable connection with student-writers (Clark, 2001). In this context, the assignment could serve as a common meeting place for clear communication between the instructor and student-writer. While the creation of these assignments and the use of scaffolding and structuring of the assignments is clearly a product of the instructor’s careful crafting, he does not directly take credit for it.  Instead, the disembodied voice of the assignment bequeaths power to a text instead of those creating or negotiating it. Clarifying for students that a writing assignment can be an extension of the teacher’s self in the writing classroom could clarify a writing assignment (the object) as a site for conversations about expectations, a space to consider how a writer could navigate her composition, or an starting place for negotiating student agency in or over the assignment.

On the other hand, Goldberg never describes or indicates the assignment is an extension of his self, and he neglects to insert himself as an actor in this context. Instead, his language gives human agency to a tool, an inanimate object. Such an act can serve to absolve him of possible responsibility and blame in the situation, and such language may reflect the larger system in which the student-writers and instructor are a part. And perhaps it is an indication of the greater need for participants in this system’s need to pause and reflect on the possibilities of our “productive power” (Kress, 1994).

**A Little Bit…**

Another theme also evident in the language discussed above could be an indication of an instructor’s desire for student independence or a constructed illusion of agency. As we remember, in his initial quote, Goldberg explains, “Each [assignment] requires a little bit more independence, a little bit more self-directed learning. So [this assignment] offers a little bit more creativity to the learner in selecting the topic and building the thesis as they move on…” In this sample statement, the instructor uses the modifier *a little bit* three times, and it appears three more times throughout this curation.

The use of *a little bit…* could signify multiple things. Through a frame of Vygotskian pedagogy, *a little bit* could indicate an instructor’s attempt to scaffold for student learning. In this context, Goldberg’s use of *a little bit…* signifies a gradual “letting go” to allow student-writers the opportunity to think critically and create their own meaning, apart from her instructor. Evidence in support of this view appears closer to the end of this curation as Goldberg describes a goal for his students to “to be able to critically evaluate [the dominance of biomedical and scientific paradigms]” and to “make meaning of illness and health… the advantages and limitations of biomedical culture”. In this case, his *little bit*s are a reflection of an instructor providing successive levels of temporary support to assist students in achieving greater levels of understanding and eventual independence.

From another perspective, the use *a* *little bit…* could indicate more about the constraints of academic institutions than pedagogical strategy. Each of the six times these three words are uttered, they are attached to a type of allowance being offered to student-writers or a form of student-writer freedom: *a little bit* more space or *a little bit* more room. From this point of view, *a little bit* could be a tool used in the creation of an illusion student-writer agency: the farce that she actually has agency and can think for herself. Considering the constraints and inherent limitations of working within a class, an academic program, an institutional setting, *a little bit* may be a used to veil the confines of an academic reality. With each little bit, the constraints of the academic context is displaced by the assignment itself.

**Where Are We Going?**

Goldberg seems to be crafting a certain path of learning for his curation of these two writing assignments. While he has expressed a desireindependence and self-directed learning, these objectives are also negated *a little bit* by a variety of possible authorities. There are other inductions that this road may be more of a bottleneck that threshold.

In his ongoing exploration of the first writing assignment, Goldberg explains that it “offers a little bit more creativity to the learner in selecting the topic and building the thesis as they move on…” As the definition and idea of *creativity* is confusingly signaled by student-writer’s topic section and thesis construction, other significant rhetorical and composition acts are also unclear. The curation indicates the student-writer is free to decide whatever she would like to write about, neglecting to acknowledge the constraints of the course, discipline, or institution. The act of composing itself is limited and muddled as individual writing processes are replaced the linear idea of starting with a topic and then building a thesis.

He goes on to introduce the possibilities the second writing assignment as it “opens up a little more space for learners to explore their own perspectives…” While we agree with the idea that words and language can create openings and opportunities for writers, it is not the student-writer drafting the path in this context. Instead, the student-writer is offered “…*a little bit* more room to exercise their creative faculties and think about how they want to answer the question…”on a path that is already determined for them. By inviting student-writers to think about their perspective on question(s), student-writers are encouraged to “exercise their creative faculties” to think about the content and focus of their composition, situate themselves in an academic community, and articulate their ideas on the issue, utilizing an effective, academic discourse. Practicing this discourse not only affects their paper, but it is also affecting the student-writer identity (McCorkle, 2012). As they imagine this discourse community and its ongoing Burkean parlor conversation, they consider how they are situated within the community and conversation, the possible use and benefit of this genre and begin to embody their new, academic self. But whose discourse is it really? As they imagine this discourse of the academy, it affects them as much as they affect it.

As the instructor curates the genre of persuasive writing, he reveals at least some of the possible directions these student-writer are being led in along some of the complex, dynamic, and messy aspects of writing. In his curation he explains, “The persuasive essay is both personal and persuasive.  It’s not simply a meditation. It’s not simply a piece of creative writing. In fact it is not a piece of creative writing although it is creative.  But it’s also not completely an argument.” He hedges this discourse of ‘what it’s not’ by claiming an intentional opening, which “gives the students a little bit more room to exercise their creative faculties and think about how they want to answer the question.” But the opening the assignment offers is, of course, not authentic and also not articulated clearly.

**Constructing an Instructor**

In his heteroglossic discussion of the complexity and ambiguity of writing, Goldberg starts to directly build on certain aspects of his identity.  While discussing persuasive writing, he reveals or attempts to build on his teacher-writer identity by offering more information on persuasive writing along with a resources: “If y’all are really interested in looking into [the rigors of persuasive essays] further, go back and read Montaigne since he is the guy who actually invented the essay form, but you’ll see exactly that kind of thing in his essays: his own personal voice, his own personal judgment.  That’s all the essays actually are. But he’s using authority, and he’s actually making arguments as well.” In this brief statement, Goldberg seems to be utilizing the marked, cultural resources for a kind of “self authoring” (Holland et al. 45) by performing a cultural discourses that contributes to the construction of his academic ethos, offering writing instructors a relevant pedagogical resource. This act of exemplifying his depth of knowledge of writing, the language of writing, and writing pedagogy may, in other words, be an attempt to prove his *membership* to certain discourse communities.

Soon after this comment, he reveals another important construct of his academic identity and the values associated with it: interdisciplinarity.  He explains, “The topic and the course itself, like almost everything I teach, are interdisciplinary. So the essays, to be done well, have to reflect such interdisciplinarity.  And the best essays in this class they did so.”  To expand on the implications of what interdiscplinary compositions may include, Goldberg provides examples of student topics, which include “deeply personal” narratives like encounters with health care systems along with themes like religion, gender, race, history, and ethics.

In addition to these examples, he also curates what “the best writers” in an interdisciplinary composition do.

*… the best writers really did a remarkable job of integrating insights, approaches, and evidence from all these different disciplines into a cohesive whole that is not actually reducible to the sum of its disciplinary parts.*

Considering the objectifying, mediating language and intentional ambiguity Goldberg uses in this curation remains unclear, but perhaps this lack of clarity understandable.

Goldberg concludes his curation of some of the significant aspects of his discipline and course by explaining, “… these paradigms are actually so dominate – and this is one of the major themes that we explore in the course – that they are often invisible”.

**The Messiness of Membershipping**

A significant purpose of his course design and writing assignments becomes clear when Goldberg comments, “This essay asks students to make the invisible visible. To come to grips with the dominance of biomedical and scientific paradigms. And then to be able to critically evaluate them”.  The instructor and writing assignments work toward student-writers achieving a degree of intellectual and social belonging in the larger conversation of interdisciplinarity.  In other words, the instructor’s objective is to facilitate the student-writer’s process of interdisciplinary membershipping in order to include student-writers in social aspects of academic disciplining.

Riley (2006) discusses membershipping as a communicative practice involved in the negotiation of identity.  His research examined membershipping strategies to examine a fundamental question in social interaction:  “how do individuals go about signaling and recognizing the roles and discursive positions which they consider themselves… to be occupying in specific situations?” (Riley, 2006, 297).  In other words, how do we negotiate identities?

This analysis revealed how both CCPs and this instructor’s writing activities both ask writers to go through a similar process in which they are asked to 1. Consider/situate their academic selves, 2. Exercise their creative faculties, and 3. Make meaning by integrating their insights/knowledge into a cohesive whole. In other words, both task participants with discovering, uncovering, and explaining the dominant, everyday/ordinary, and often invisible paradigms and values embedded in WID.

**So What?**

In certain ways, both CCPs and Goldber’s writing assignments attempt common goals. Each holds the possibility of using language to create opening to those who previously were not privy to it previously. Each offers the opportunity of going beyond the status quo of membershipping and acquired literacy some pedagogies and educational systems and moving to a more powerful and empowering place. But while each could be used as tools to disrupt or subvert dominant discourses, that end is not always achieved.

While these activities, of course, have greater pedagogical purposes, there are also possible political implications. As academic discourses of educational institutions exclude certain persons as much as they include others, the projects also subverts what some considered to be ‘insider’ knowledge by curating/explaining the *what, how*, and *why* of the academic discourse normally only open to by academics, vetted by various institutional processes and the struggles that may come with academic membershipping.

CCPs and writing assignments must be mindful in supporting writers to push past memebershipping to a more meaningful and powerful understanding of literacies. In order to achieve this transformation, these activities ask writers to: 1. consider and situate their academic selves within a specific context, 2. exercise their intellectual faculties by engaging in disciplinary discourses and membershipping activities, 3. step outside of that discipline’s 'insider' discourse 4. identify the dominant paradigms and discourses of that community, 5. deconstruct and critique those paradigms and discourses and critique how they function within the larger community 6. create their own meaning of this discipline’s ‘insider’ knowledge by curating a collection of texts that reveal the meaning of and explain how the they function, making them available to others, outsiders. As a result of these kinds of projects, the dominant, everyday, and ordinary may be transformed, making the invisible visible.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix 1: CCPs Handout**

**Content Curation Projects**

*Traditionally, teachers have modeled perfection and students have struggled to meet [these] standards. Today, as teachers move toward individualized instruction and collaborative learning, students struggle to create and meet their own standards of excellence; teachers are learning to model the struggle.* (Lane, 1992, 6)

**Content Curation Projects (CCPs)**

* explore genres and articulate values that are key to writing in your discipline,
* help others understand writing in their scholarly disciplines in ways that allow them to articulate rhetorical moves that are familiar to “insiders”,
* make the implicit aspects of writing in the disciplines explicit, decoding the possible puzzle of an unfamiliar academic genre for newcomers and outsiders,
* offer a meta-language and a meta-genre that articulate the values that are key to writing in that discipline, and
* provide avenues for helping faculty engage the writing and thinking processes of their disciplines.

**The Curation Metaphor**  
  
These projects reflect the work of museum curators who identify a theme, provide a context, select artifacts to include, and decide how those artifacts should be annotated or articulated in an exhibit for a viewing public.

Similarly, CCPs ask you to sort through relevant genres and writing in your discipline, contextualize the materials for a specific audience, present it in a meaningful and organized manner, and narrate (or curate) each piece of writing individually and all together as a complete “exhibit”.

**The Purpose of CCPs**

CCPs make opaque aspects of the institution transparent as the curators discuss how and why they select genres and pieces of writing that best represent the values of writing in their discipline, arrange the pieces in a specific and meaningful manner, determine the values represented in the pieces individually and as a whole, curate the pieces individually and globally, and reflect on the curation process.

**In the End**

Finished CCPs take various forms depending on participant’s interpretation of *meaningful genre* for their discipline. For example, curators from business or technical writing may use the voiceover function of PowerPoint to curate aspects of a professional memo and professional website because that instructor sees memos, websites, and PowerPoints as valued genres in that academic community. On the other hand, an instructor from Art Education may use a comic book or graphic novel meta-genre to call out and curate genres like a lesson plan, a teaching philosophy, and an interpretation of a sculpture.

**Appendix 2: Transcription of Goldberg’s Curation of Writing Assignments**   
  
(This content curation video can be located at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTf1XxApS88>)

(0:23) I typically require a trilogy of formal writing assignments.

(0:28) Each one requires a little bit more independence, a little bit more self-directed learning. So it offers a little bit more creativity to the learner in selecting the topic and building the thesis as they move on.

(0:41)It’s designed to encourage confidence, especially with students who may not have had as much experience writing. So. This is the first assignment here consisted of a series of structured, short essay answers to questions. And again, this is to help ease the learner’s anxieties about writing. It is to provide them with a direct stem to which they can really sort of grapple with and really focus their answers.

(0:57) The second assignment opens up a little more space for learners to explore their own perspectives. And this is the second assignment that you are looking at here.

(1:04) And it’s provided but it’s still in response to an actual authored topic. The topic is intentionally less focused. It is a little bit broader. It gives the students a little bit more room to exercise their creative faculties and think about how they want to answer the question.

(1:20) And, of course, it requires students to actually grapple with the difficulties involved in writing a true persuasive essay form. So. The essay… The persuasive essay It’s both personal and persuasive. It’s not simply a meditation. It’s not simply a piece of creative writing. In fact it is not a piece of creative although it is creative.

(1:35) But it also not completely an argument. Right? This is not a philosophy paper. It’s not a logic paper. It’s somewhere in between. It challenges writers to really incorporate their own sort of authentic voice and to weave in and integrate their own personal experiences within the structure of a rigorous argument addressing a topic. If y’all are really interested in looking into that further, go back and read Montaigne since he is the guy who actually invented the essay form, but you’ll see exactly that kind of thing in his essays: his own personal voice, his own personal judgment. That’s all the essays actually are. But he’s using authority, and he’s actually making arguments as well.

(2:07) So. The writing assignment, this one in particular, it does not require students to write for their discipline. The topic and the course itself, like almost everything I teach, are interdisciplinary. So the essays, to be done well, have to reflect such interdisciplinarity. And the best essays in this class they did so.

(2:23) They drew on deeply personal illness narratives. Right? Religious themes. Gender and race issues. Encounters with health care systems - or the non-system, if you will… History and ethics. And the best writers really did a remarkable job of integrating insights, approaches, and evidence from all these different disciplines into a cohesive whole that is not actually not reducible to the sum of it’s disciplinary parts.

(2:48) So, in terms of content and substance, the assignment forces students to come to grips with the dominance of biomedical and scientific paradigms in our sort of shaping our understandings of the world. And these paradigms are actually so dominate – and this is one of the major themes that we explore in the course – that they are often invisible.

(3:05) This question... This essay asks students to make the invisible visible. To come to grips with the dominance of biomedical and scientific paradigms. And then to be able to critically evaluate them. It is not necessarily a bad thing, but we want to sort of expose them to light and then think about them,

(3:22) and the advantages and limitations of biomedical culture in helping people make meaning of illness and health and understand these kinds of things. So… That’s writing assignment number two.