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RETHINKING GENRES OF REFLECTION:  
STUDENT PORTFOLIO COVER LETTERS  
AND THE NARRATIVE OF PROGRESS

The portfolio cover letter, whether it takes the form of a letter, essay,  
or self-assessment questionnaire, has proven to be at least as  
important to composition instructors as the rest of the materials  
collected in their students’ writing portfolios (Conway 83). Like many other  
scholars, such as Kerry Weinbaum, I appreciate these reflective documents  
for the insights that they provide into students’ writing practices, and for the  
syntheses of teaching and learning that they offer (Camp and Levine 197).  
But I enjoy these cover letters on a more visceral level as well—they affirm  
my faith in my students. For example, Jing, a student in one of my first-year  
composition courses, reflects on her quarter’s work with pride,  
characterizing her experiences with writing as a progression from struggle  
and difficulty to relative security and comfort: “I was neither confidant of my  
ability to express myself [in] English nor confidant of my writing. I was a  
bad writer. I was disorganized and did not have any direction when I write.  
But after I finished [the course], I feel so much better about my English  
writing skill.”

As her instructor, I appreciate and am gratified by Jing’s statements—  
she takes ownership of her writing, honestly evaluates her skills, and  
indicates her growth as a writer. I want to honor her sense of  
accomplishment and give real credit to her struggles and successes. Jing’s  
comments testify to the benefits of a portfolio classroom: the processes of  
developing and reflecting on her skills throughout the quarter have marked  
a transition for Jing, a movement into a space that, although far from error-  
free, feels better and more comfortable to her. In response to the implicit  
requirements of the assignment, Jing has made wise rhetorical choices—her

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assertions of confidence are moving; her emphasis on the distance her writing has come is appropriate. Indeed, Jing’s emphasis on her own progress and growth as a writer is a rhetorical move that I have begun to recognize and label the narrative of progress. Students in many of my composition classes, and in those of my colleagues, have consistently relied on this kind of narrative to enact and perform their transformations from novices into authors.

As a mode of reflection, the portfolio cover essay has developed into a genre that requires a rhetorical maneuver such as the narrative of progress. Asking students to participate in their own evaluation—by requiring them to comment on their best work for the quarter—has fostered the development of discursive strategies for demonstrating growth and improvement. As strategies like the narrative of progress become typical of their respective genres, they also become sites of inquiry for genre analysts working from Carolyn Miller’s redefinition of genres as social actions (25). Thus, the portfolio cover essay tells us a great deal not only about our students and their writing habits, but also about the rhetorical and behavioral demands of our own pedagogical practices. An analysis of both our assignments and our students’ responses to them suggests, in contrast to our post-process goals, that we currently value the display of personal growth and individual achievement in isolation from the discursive and social practices of larger communities. In other words, the development of the narrative of progress as a response strategy brings into sharp relief the limitations of our current reflective practices: while we encourage students to take an active and thoughtful role in assessing their own work, we paradoxically allow them to remain isolated from the social-interactional nature of that work. In the end, students like Jing leave our classes with an overall sense of improvement but without a sense of how that improvement reflects (or does not reflect) the rhetorical demands and pressures of, in this case, the academic community. Thus, our reflective assignments are quickly refashioned as self-reflective assignments, as occasions to consider highly personal and individual qualities and achievements, rather than as occasions to struggle with the relationships—both textual and rhetorical—that constitute writing for a particular community.

By rewarding internally focused reflection, our assignments miss the chance to direct students toward a wider view of writing as participation in the work of particular communities. Additionally, with their attention focused on personal growth, students may be unlikely to recognize that their progress as writers could proceed in a variety of directions depending on the discursive situations they encounter. In other words, one of the dangers of an uncritical self-reflective practice is that students will see their own writing strategies as universal and will be unable to adapt to new scenes of composition. Further, students who remain so isolated will continue to be constructed as marginal and non-legitimate members of the academic community, because they have not internalized or even recognized the (textual) expectations that indicate active membership. However, our reflective assignments can be revised so that students begin to look outward toward the social environments in which they are writing and to envision the relationships their writing responds to and enacts. This process may begin with asking students to articulate the existing discursive conventions and to assess their own successes in responding to those community expectations. This, of course, is only a first step in encouraging a more dynamic reflective practice. Beyond articulation of rules and conventions, students should be encouraged to engage with and critique the practices they identify. Such active participation—not just reciting but also questioning, challenging, and rewriting rules—has the potential to make students aware of writing and literacy as plural practices. That is, students may begin to view writing as always already contextually influenced and to recognize and develop their own strategies for meeting the varied demands of multiple writing situations.

In the following pages, I explore some of the limitations of our current reflective practices, starting with their ideological roots in the process movement. Examining the responses to a traditional reflective assignment, I highlight ways that students are able to remain distanced from the discursive conventions and social practices that they are ostensibly learning to control. Next, I describe a revised reflective assignment that explicitly asks students to situate their writing in relation to the expectations and habits of, in this case, academic discourse. Again using student texts, I argue that a reversal of the reflective gaze—from an internal contemplation of a writer’s growth to an external analysis of community practices—encourages students to become not only more effective writers but also more active members of their various communities. Ultimately, the following analysis suggests that asking students to reflect on their own progress is at best unproductive and at worst additionally marginalizing unless it also asks students to consider the contexts within which that progress is made and against which that progress will ultimately be tested.

**THE LEGACY OF PROCESS: SELF-REFLECTION**

The student writing portfolio, one of the most enduring legacies of the process movement in composition, has encouraged us as teachers to open a space within the academy where our students can experiment with their writing, testing their own acquisition of the skills we value. Indeed, the portfolio has placed a useful emphasis on formative evaluations—peer and instructor feedback, repeated student conferences, and a series of drafts in response to all of these activities. In its idealized form, the portfolio
classroom offers students and teachers a chance to collaborate in the learning process by opening a conversation about writing. Thus, the successful student will begin to internalize a sense of personal satisfaction about writing he has nurtured through various stages of maturation; the astute pupil will own her writing not only because she has produced it, but because she has also learned to evaluate and improve it. In the end, the portfolio system has been both popular and successful at least in part because it involves students more actively in their own learning. As Sandra Murphy and Mary Ann Smith suggest in their summary of recent scholarship on portfolio pedagogy, "what composition scholars are telling us is that we, as teachers, need to allow students to own their work, not just rent it" (339). Borrowing Robert Tierney’s renters-versus-owners metaphor, Murphy and Smith suggest that student portfolios offer a space for student agency and ownership. Thus, the portfolio invites students into the assessment process by allowing them to select which pieces to include, by asking them to revise those pieces in response to peer and instructor feedback, and by requiring some form of reflection on their own processes of textual production.

Using portfolios in the writing classroom has the potential to make students more responsible for and more in control of their own development as writers. Nevertheless, portfolios also serve to postpone, sometimes indefinitely, our students’ attention to institutional and disciplinary expectations for their writing. We ask our (often reluctant) students to postpone the “reality check” that grading provides until the end of the term because we believe that this postponement will pay off in the form of more thoughtful revisions, greater investment in their own writing, and, ultimately, better (summative) self-evaluations of their work. But, as Susan Richardson warns in an article recently published in Assessing Writing, we may not be able to shed our institutional authority or hand over assessment responsibilities to our students, even with a strong portfolio system in place. In her case studies, Richardson finds that “students generally looked to their teachers to show them the ‘correct’ way to write and resisted the notion of making independent judgments about their writing and the necessary revisions” (117). Instead of fostering the appropriation and incorporation of academic evaluation criteria by students—one of the necessities for successful reflection according to Murphy and Smith (336)—the portfolio process and, more importantly, the reflective component has asked students to engage very little with the expectations beyond the portfolio classroom itself. While our intentions may have been to democratize the writing classroom by giving students access to the tools of self-assessment, the result has been less emancipatory. Still looking to us for final evaluations, our students have used our calls for reflection as moments to assert their personal growth instead of their relationships to a community’s discursive practices.

As the first document in most student writing portfolios, the cover letter or reflective essay begins the textual construction of the student-author for us as readers/evaluators. As Glenda Conway has pointed out, when we evaluate student portfolios, we do more than judge writing skills, we also evaluate “students’ selves, based in large part on the ways they construct themselves in their cover letters” (87). In this reflective assignment, students perform their writing-selves according to the implicit requirements of the rhetorical situation: they must demonstrate growth as writers. The scripted response to this exigency is what I have labeled the narrative of progress—it begins with a reluctant, frightened student and ends with an articulate, confident writer. Our responses to this genre are complicated by what Kathleen Blake Yancey calls the “schmooze factor,” “the temptation to reward students who tell us what we naturally enough want to hear: that they are learning, that they are taking risks, in the most dramatic case, that they have never experienced such pleasure in learning before, that it is in this class where it has taken place” (100). Together, the narrative of progress and the schmooze factor have shaped a genre that affirms our pedagogy without interrogating it—because the reflective responses seem to provide evidence of growth and progress, we are reluctant to investigate whether or not these responses are founded on an understanding of our expectations. Further, the satisfaction we derive from hearing essentially what we want to hear from our students may be obscuring our own pedagogical motives. In the end, the narrative of progress reinforces our power over community membership, and allows students autonomy only over their personal growth.

Reflection, as Yancey demonstrates in her 1996 tracing of the theoretical basis of the practice, is almost universally deemed important for students’ growth. By taking time to examine and articulate their development as writers, we believe our students stand a better chance of being able to control their writing processes. According to Yancey, “Two major themes regarding portfolio reflection have emerged . . . the need to practice it, and the need to foster it by way of questions” (87). As this suggests, our attention as theorists has been focused on promoting the habit of reflection in our students rather than on questioning its mechanisms. Knowing that reflection is an important factor in cognitive development, we have been keen to provide spaces for this activity, but our students are resisting the kind of context-sensitive reflection that scholars recommend. Thus, we must reconsider what we accomplish when we assign a self-reflective essay: are we really empowering students if we allow them to ignore the pre-existing rules and conventions against which their writing will be judged when it leaves our classrooms? Perhaps we need to consider the rhetorical slippage between reflective practices and self-reflective practices. Our current genres of reflection encourage students to focus on internal, personal criteria
to assess growth and progress, leaving us in the uncomfortable position of judging selves rather than writers. Instead, our evaluations stand to benefit from a revision of reflective assignments that encourage students to engage more explicitly with the contexts and communities in which they are writing. As a start, students who can reflect on the rhetorical and social practices of the composition classroom (rather than those who simply reflect on their own internal practices) are more likely to be able to transfer these skills to new writing situations.

**Reflection and/or Introspection**

In the traditional portfolio assignment, students are asked to collect, revise, and explicate their best work from the term. In my classes, this work includes argumentative, analytical assignments that require both a facility with theoretical concepts presented in the readings for the course (e.g., Michel Foucault’s panopticon or Joan Didion’s sentimental narrative) and an ability to use these concepts to make an argument about another situation or topic. Throughout the quarter, students engage in a number of activities including peer- and self-assessments, writing conferences, and classroom exercises that encourage them to see the classroom as a microcosm of the academy, as an audience for their work that requires specific, arguable claims backed by appropriate evidence. In their portfolio assignment, my students are then asked to reflect on their final submissions and to argue for why these pieces represent their best work. The primary directive of this assignment includes the statement:

Your portfolio cover letter is itself an argument. Your claim, the basis of the argument, is that I should consider the papers you submitted for evaluation as your best work for the quarter. You’ll need to make that argument by drawing upon your current assessment of the work, your original self-assessments, your peer responses, and my responses.

While this assignment clearly asks students to revisit the comments made on earlier drafts—an attempt to help them become aware of their audience and the discourse practices of their writing situation—the primary focus is on the ambiguous notion of the students’ “best” writing. Despite encouragement to cite course evaluation criteria and the standards of academic discourse discussed in class, students consistently produce variations on the narrative of progress for this assignment. This narrative replaces specific evidence of criteria fulfilled with general comments about emotional satisfaction and personal growth. One student, Min, writes:

At the beginning of the quarter, I was really apprehensive about writing an essay, even though I had some writing experiences in English 103. . . . However, through this ten weeks, I gained some confidence and have improved immensely on many [f]actors of my writings. One that I have improved on the most is my organization of my thoughts.

As Min’s letter suggests, the growth of confidence is a significant step toward becoming an active member of the academic community. Yet while she begins to gesture toward improvement in a specific feature of her writing, her organization, Min characterizes this feature as personal and internal. She does not explain how her thoughts have become more organized and her self-reflection moves away from considering the academic conventions of organization, which are quite different from her own initial reliance on poetic imagery as an organizational tool in her early writing assignments. Instead, Min simply states that she has learned to organize her thoughts, presumably viewing this as an internal process of clarification rather than as an accommodation to rhetorical pressures.

In another student reflection, the euphoria of ownership is evident in an extended narrative of progress. James writes:

As a child I would stare at the wall during English class dreaming of other places. I had given up on the battle against verbs and prepositions. Comas and semicolons annoyed me. I didn’t understand our language. That is not to say that I couldn’t speak it fluently. It was the written side of the language, which gave me the trouble. . . . However, I must say that this class has been great for me. I won’t say I’ve become a great writer, but I must admit I take a lot of pride in the papers I have written for this class. My portfolio is genuinely my best work up to date. I invested a lot of time and energy into what you see before you. If you personally don’t like [it] I’m sorry but it won’t change my opinion of my work. No matter the grade you give I will retain my belief that I am turning [in] a solid example of my writing.

James’ letter responds to the demands of a reflection that is both inwardly focused and relatively autonomous. His declaration of progress is heartwarming and reassuring, and his assertion that he will remain proud of his portfolio regardless of its final numerical assessment suggests that he has begun to develop into a writer who is in control of his own work. Nevertheless, James’ reflection sidesteps the requirement to engage with academic criteria in favor of his own “time and energy.” This rhetorical move, while it does signal an attempt to exert control over the writing situation, ultimately allows students like James to ignore the pre-existing rhetorical and social demands of the community for/in which they write.

Students respond to the traditional reflective assignment by producing a narrative of progress that 1) celebrates their achievements without acknowledging the contexts of those achievements, and 2) develops its own
internal criteria for success. Despite the class and conference time spent describing and working with the “standard” academic criteria for evaluation (e.g., purpose/thesis, organization, development of evidence, etc.), students tend to focus on subjective qualities like “effort” and “improvement.” In many cases, these criteria are stated as self-evident (as in James’s letter), but at other times students like Ravika explain their criteria more fully. She writes:

College life can be a very stressful time as well as challenging. With so much to accomplish, I always wonder if I had enough time to finish my assignments, study for tests, and have time to relax to clear my mind. What I did know was that with hard work, and determination I was able to accomplish my intentions for this quarter. My hard work consisted of staying up late, receiving tutor help, and lots of time trying to think and figure out answers. With all this in mind, I am hoping my grades will reflect my achievement.

Here, Ravika explains that her criterion—hard work—includes the qualities of staying up late, receiving help, and spending time. While the process of asserting, defining, and adhering to an internal criterion for success is an indication of growth and confidence, it also reifies the sense of an autonomous writer who responds to the external pressures of community through personal effort. Nevertheless, Ravika’s final statement—that she hopes her grade will reflect her self-defined achievement—is an indication that she at least intuits that her own assessment may not fulfill the discourse expectations of the academy. This intuition turns out to be quite correct—the academy will not necessarily reward her for losing sleep and seeking the help of friends—and it becomes ever more important to initiate a process of reflection that will bring Ravika closer to an awareness of what will be rewarded and therefore to an awareness of her own strategies for fulfilling and possibly challenging those expectations.

By producing a narrative of progress that relies on personal criteria and avoids direct engagement with evaluation procedures of the academy, these students are resisting the power of the community to define “good” writing. They seem unwilling to give credence to a discourse that has for a long time excluded them—all of the above examples come from students enrolled in the “stretch-model” composition course at my university, a course that allows students from less privileged academic backgrounds to encounter the demands of academic discourse over two quarters instead of one. Nevertheless, students from privileged high school programs also rely on the narrative of progress and internal criteria when addressing the demands of this traditional reflective assignment. Although concerns specific to basic writers are important to this discussion, they cannot be fully addressed in the space of this essay. I am convinced, however, that the current genres of reflection—with their ambiguous emphasis on students’ “best” writing and “improvement”—discourage all students from actively engaging with the communities and discourses that they are attempting to enter.

Isaac, a more advanced writer, produced consistently readable and entertaining prose throughout the quarter. He took revision suggestions to heart and worked intensely on his papers. And, while his final reflection does engage with the specific details of his revisions (including more complete quotation analysis, narrower claims, and definitions of terms—all qualities of “academic discourse”), he, too, falls victim both to introspective criteria and to the “schmooze factor.” He writes:

You should consider these two papers as my submission to the testimony of what I believe to be my best work for the quarter. Based on how I personally felt about the original drafts of these papers, peer reviews, and your responses, I felt that with a little fine tuning, these were the two that would best exemplify the highest quality work which I could produce.

Framing his argument on his beliefs and “how [he] personally felt” about the papers, Isaac still avoids direct engagement with the discourse community. While he does refer to his peers’ and my own commentary in detail, Isaac does not connect these reviews with a larger set of conventions or requirements. He again plays on the notion of hard work and accomplishment more heavily than on the evaluative criteria that were well explained throughout the quarter. He writes that “After many hours of work and revision, I must say that I am pleased and impressed with the final results, and it is my hope that you share in my sentiments.” As with each of the students I have discussed here, Isaac’s sense of personal accomplishment is something that I do not want to discount, but it is a form of teacher-flattery that deflects attention from a more careful analysis of the rhetorical demands of the academy.

Process and expressivist theories of writing, which privilege introspective knowledge over community practices, are clearly implicated in the traditional reflective assignment described above. Personal testimonies of growth and emotional success are key features of the narrative of progress that students (re)produce in response to our calls for reflection. Yet as affirming as these narratives are—both for our students and for us as teachers—they reinforce the ideology of an autonomous author who is not bound by social contexts. Scholars like Patricia Bizzell have critiqued process models for being “inner-directed” (as opposed to “outer-directed” or social), identifying their goals as “seek[ing] to discover writing processes that are so fundamental as to be universal” (367). Bizzell continues by suggesting that such inner-directed theories do not acknowledge that “changes made to accommodate an audience” might change a text’s meaning. Rather, process
theories assume that meaning “is based in the underlying structure of thought and language” (368). Such beliefs about language and meaning are untenable when placed alongside recent innovations in post-process and genre theory which contend that what can be said in a given situation depends largely on the genres and discursive practices available to the writer. Thus, the construction of meaning is more complicated than simply looking within oneself for the appropriate language to express one’s thoughts, and our practices of reflection are disingenuous if they allow students to ignore their own social locations as they write.

**Post-Process Reflection: Engaging with Context**

In his 1994 review of three influential post-process texts, John Trimbur explains that post-process theory “represent[s] literacy as an ideological arena and composing as a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others’ subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions” (109). He goes on to point out the irony of process pedagogies that imagined themselves as liberating authentic student voices when in reality the most successful students were those who were “hard at work constructing the authorial persona of self-revelatory personal essays written in a decided non-academic style” (110). A similar irony can be found in the way that our reflective assignments have been taken up by students who are, again, hard at work producing earnest, hard-working selves represented to us through the narrative of progress. Thus, although we may agree that some form of reflection is a necessary component of learning to inhabit the discourses of various social settings like the academy, we need to reconsider how our students enact that reflection.

The stakes of such a redefinition are higher than whether or not our students recognize the contexts of their writing. Indeed, recent work in genre theory suggests that genres are more than text types; they are social actions (Miller). The implications of this are that the portfolio cover letter as a genre is not simply an artifact and a text that is useful to study. Rather, the cover letter becomes an ideological force that constructs and maintains social identities. Viewed in this light, the production of an internal, personal narrative of progress—one that does not value the larger community beyond the composition classroom—demonstrates the production of a marginalized member of that community. Using Miller’s definition of genres as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (31), the portfolio cover letter becomes an important factor in the power dynamics of the classroom. Occasions for self-reflection are recurrent for our students, and so the social development of a response—including the narrative of progress—provides a site for inquiry into the structure of a rhetorical situation.

Recognizing that the complex circulation of genres like assignments, syllabi, student essays, and teacher comments inevitably produces particular kinds of community members, genre theorists have urged us to focus our attention on systems of genres (Bazerman) and activity systems (Russell). In both of these formulations, the emphasis is on constellations of discursive tools available within an activity site (like the classroom). Rather than focusing on a single text or text type, an emphasis on systems allows us to see the interactions between/among texts and to deduce the social relationship that are constituted by these textual exchanges. For David Russell, power is mediated and deployed through the technologies (like writing) of these systems, and to analyze power we must “follow the genres” (524). I would add to this that not only must we follow the genres, we must encourage our students to do so as well. We can, I am suggesting, usefully apply the methodologies of genre analysis to the classroom and foster more than teaching the marginalized student genre theory often becomes nothing more than teaching him or her another privileged genre, another way to “write like the Man” (77). However, choosing not to alert our students to the expectations of discourse communities can be an equally detrimental pedagogical choice. “We must also ask,” writes Richard Coe, “to what extent the social processes of tacit genre acquisition serve to limit genre knowledge and thus to limit access to power” (188). Extending Coe’s analysis, by allowing genres to develop and be inhabited by students unconsciously, we fail to take advantage of moments where critique and change can happen consciously. Heeding both of these cautionary notes, it becomes important to avoid didactic schemes of genre instruction but also to focus on more dynamic modes of joint inquiry with our students. Here, Coe’s idea of “genre knowledge” can be productively deployed in our writing classrooms. If students can learn to explore and question the forms in which they are expected to write, perhaps they can begin to control and modify those forms.

**Reflection and/or Social Practice**

As we search for a way of allowing students both access to and a critical vision of discursive communities, our reflective assignment might usefully be revised to ask students to engage explicitly with the specific
discourse conventions that their writing is subject to. Since investigating the prevalence of the narrative of progress, I have begun the process of revising my own reflective assignments. And while much of the course has remained the same—e.g., the emphasis on academic discourse and argumentation—my focus has shifted slightly to encourage students to explore the conventions of their social location in the academy. Currently, I ask students to divide their final reflection into two distinct sections, the first of which asks them to “explore and analyze what [they] have learned about academic discourse.” In essence, I am asking them to show that they have acquired “membership” in a general academic community of practice, and that they “know” the rules of the game. In the second section of the essay, I encourage students to place their own work in the context of this analysis. The assignment reads:

Building on the knowledge of academic discourse that you displayed in Section One, use this second section of your Cover Essay to explain how you have revised your essays for this final submission. . . . Use this last portion of your Cover Essay to highlight the changes, and, more importantly, to explain why your changes make your essay(s) more like the idealized academic discourse you described in Section One.

The immediate result of this assignment change has been a marked increase in students’ uses of the terminology of assessment, but even as these terms are used more frequently, students are providing their own explanations of them. Through classroom practice and an emphasis on the conventions of academic discourse, my students have become better able to define in their own words the criteria for evaluation. In addition, the students more readily apply the terminology of assessment to their own work. For example, Lin writes: “And this new claim conforms to the ‘standards’ of academic discourse more clearly than the original claim, because it links much [more] tightly with my evidences and analysis. Which is one crucial fact within the academic discourse parameter.” Here, Lin justifies her revision by using the language of our class rubric—evidence and analysis are figured as leading directly to a more focused argument/claim statement. Additionally, Lin’s response indicates an awareness of conventions as conventions (rather than immutable formations) by using terms like standards and parameter.

More than simply parroting back the terms of assessment which are used and valued in class discussion, students respond to this reflective assignment by providing their own examples and explanations of relevant conventions. For example, Jae-Hee provides her own version of an unacceptable academic claim:

Writings in the academic discourse are not the opinion papers.

For example, this sentence cannot be a thesis that the Vietnam

War must be ended because I want to do. A writer cannot write their opinion without supporting evidence like previous sentence, because a writer do not suggest objective, supportable, and provable reasons.

Here, Jae-Hee demonstrates her control over the convention that academic claims cannot be mere opinions by providing an example and analyzing why it is inappropriate. Jae-Hee goes on to show how she revised one of her own essays from a “description that explain[s] three Korean women’s lives” to an argument “against [Virginia] Woolf’s claim” that women need a room of their own to foster creativity. Here, Jae-Hee engages with the notion of an arguable claim, and she shows how her own work is in conversation with Woolf’s. This recognition of the social interplay of writing is particularly relevant to an outward directed reflective practice.

In this class, other students also engage with the notion of academic argument—most note the need for specific, narrow claims as one of the major features of academic discourse. Beyond simply describing “good” arguments, however, students find that their own work benefits from a closer adherence to the style of academic argumentation. Mary explicitly describes her revision process as the result of conforming to the discourse conventions of the academy. She begins defining the “rules” of academic discourse by making references to the community to which her writing will be addressed: “[T]here is a set of rules of academic discourse that must be followed. The following or not following of those rules will determine how its readers receive the paper. If those rules are not followed, the paper will not be effective.”

Mary acknowledges the importance of readers who have specific expectations of her writing. Mary continues her cover essay by describing how her revision processes respond to the practices of this community: “Because it is necessary to have a focused, arguable claim in an academic essay, the second essay needed a stronger, clearer claim. I changed it to: [new claim statement]. Making my claim clearer made my argument and evidence stronger and the paper more focused.” Here, Mary discovers that the new claim, revised to better address the expectations of her audience, helps her focus her paper and develop stronger evidence. Her engagement with the criteria suggests that she is not only making use of the conventions, but also judging her own work against them.

Similarly, revising his argument enables Joe to make a better connection to his audience: “From these small improvements, I discovered how much more clear-cut my argument became compared to before. It seemed to focus the reader on one question and provide many answers to convince the reader of the argument instead of giving him more questions and fewer answers.” In his analysis of his own revising process, Joe not only
invokes the convention of a specific argument, he also explicitly recognizes that his work will be read by an audience and that he can manipulate the reading experience of that audience.

This recognition of writing as a social activity, as a practice that assumes an audience, becomes much more relevant for students who complete the two-part reflective assignment. Stacy moves beyond stating that her “purpose” is clearer to suggest that her work must be “important” to her readers: “I really liked the way that my paper ended—to tell the reader why this paper is important and how they find my paper is useful in daily life. This matches one of the goals of academic discourse—to tell the reader why the topic is important and why they should care about my essay.” By asserting that she has told her audience “why they should care” about her argument, Stacy moves from a passive observer of her audience to a more active participant with them. Similarly, Tom points out that anticipating his audience’s questions is useful as he revises his work:

In order to write a good article, including academic discourse, writers must try to stand in the position of readers. Essays are written to let people read, and convince them with the idea in the essays. The essay should be clear enough to answer all the questions that readers might have while reading it. If writers can imagine themselves as readers while revising their essays, they will know what their essays are lacking.

Here, Tom shows himself to be aware of the whole rhetorical triangle—he seeks to put himself in the place of his audience and to imagine the questions that they will have about his argument. In the rest of his reflective essay, Tom continues to refine his notion of audience by describing the expectations of his academic readers.

In addition to employing the external criteria and engaging with revision as a process of social negotiation (between writer and audience), these students explore more fully the implications of the discourse conventions of the academy. In the first section of the cover essay, students demonstrate a deeper understanding of the criteria—both as a means of conforming to the standards (“getting in” to the academic discourse community) and, to some extent, as a means of critiquing them (“getting at” the community). These instances are steps toward the kind of rhetorical reflection that the portfolio cover letter can encourage. For example, Alex uses the metaphor of a conversation to discuss why academic discourse must be “critical.” He acknowledges the primary focus of academic discourse as trying to “convince” others, and he suggests that without critical analysis the “conversation” will become one-sided. This metaphorical formulation shows a sophisticated understanding of the ways that texts interact in the academy. Alex writes:

The primary reason that writers try to make their evidence related and their claims provable is to convince readers with analytic information. Because of this, academic discourse requires readers to be critical. Without critically analyzing the claim and its supporting evidence, our conversation in the academic community is meaningless, since the discourse becomes a one-way conversation. When we take a critical viewpoint and develop detailed analysis while reading the academic essay, we are able to acquire ‘membership’ in the academic community.

Alex demonstrates a strong grasp of the social nature of academic reading and writing; he figures his texts as part of a larger conversation among community members. In addition, his awareness of the centrality of analysis in academic discourse is a move toward a critical stance that he can inhabit in relation to this discourse. In other words, Alex is now able to see the work he has done as one specific kind of textual production instead of viewing it as simply “good” writing.

Beyond the idea of responding to a community, students begin to explore the character of academic conversations. Juanita focuses on the ways that academics must be “cautious and specific debater[s].” She focuses on how language is manipulated and qualified in order to make a more convincing case:

Through discovering and exploring the aspects of writing that academics appreciate, I have made a list of characteristics that a person needs in order to gain membership into this cerebral community. It takes a very cautious and specific debater to gain admission to this group. The authors must be particular in their wording of statements, as well as, able to assert their position in a way that invites discussion, but not dismissal. In order to prevent other scholars from automatically rejecting a claim, an investigator must be specific in their phrasing, adding just enough qualifiers, to ensure that their readers take them seriously and do not dismiss their work as bogus to soon. And, finally, a person needs to be critical of their own work, anticipating the types of questions others may ask of them, and then addressing those concerns in their papers instead of waiting to be questioned.

Here again, Juanita shows her understanding of the interactional nature of academic discourse. Further, she recognizes both the need for “discussion” and the role of careful language choices in avoiding “dismissal.” Her willingness to anticipate her audience’s questions indicates that she has a well-developed picture of that audience in her mind as she writes. From a critical perspective, Juanita’s awareness that her work could be “dismissed” as “bogus” because of particular language choices is an important factor.
in her development as a rhetorician. By describing these processes of admission/exclusion, Juanita is moving toward the ability to manipulate both her own rhetorical choices and the discourse conventions themselves. She is learning to construct her arguments so that they will be acceptable to an academic community, but she is also learning that she can assert her own power instead of “waiting to be questioned.”

For Frank, a science major enrolled in introductory composition in his last quarter of study, the differences within/among academic discourses were additionally challenging. Frank’s writing throughout the quarter displayed a heavy bias toward meticulous description, and he resisted making critical arguments in his essays. In his reflection, Frank alludes to these difficulties by characterizing complexity as a variable commodity:

The level of academic interpretation that is sought for by the author will dictate what level of language is used, and the difference between the levels is mostly contained in the depth of descriptions of terms used and complexity of sentence structure. This basic level of complexity is often inherent in the field of study that a paper or essay falls under.

In this portion of his essay, Frank acknowledges that different fields of study require different levels of complexity. Thus, he begins to form his own critique of the discourse conventions that I had been advocating in my class. In addition to this analysis, Frank explores how academic “credibility” is established. He writes:

One final important aspect of academic discourse is the fact that it builds on itself. In any given essay, there must be some other works that had inspired the author to have an opinion about the topic in the first place. These other works are simply other authors’ attempts at directing the audience toward seeing the topic from their angle, and it is critical for the establishment of credibility of the paper being written that the previous authors be cited.

In this excerpt, Frank exhibits his understanding of the social motivations driving academic texts. He acknowledges that others’ ideas form the “inspiration” of his own arguments, and he discusses the ethical requirements (and benefits) of giving credit to those previous authors.

In response to the revised portfolio cover essay assignment, students display more comfort with the actual assessment measures, a greater awareness of the social locations of their writing, and a sense of empowerment about their own rhetorical choices. These results confirm the validity of refocusing our students’ reflective attentions toward the contexts in which they are writing. Instead of indulging the narrative of progress, even though it offers a comfortable and often flattering vision of our and our students’ accomplishments, we will prepare our students more effectively for their futures as writers if we use our privileged positions within the activity systems of the academy to continually critique and reshape the genres in which we ask students to compose themselves.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Texts like the portfolio cover letter circulate within the genre system(s) of the university. While the narrative of progress may have developed as an appropriate response to the exigencies of traditional portfolio reflection, it has become a substitute for more critical engagement with community literacy. Offering as it does a sense of triumphant closure, the narrative of progress may be missed by many of us as we face stacks of student portfolios. However, as my analysis of this inwardly focused reflection has shown, its reification of a romantic, individual self may not help students gain membership in their chosen communities. Instead, this self-reflection is a simple mirror of the individual, obscuring the social realities of her writing situations. Using post-process and social definitions of writing instruction, we can see that the genres contained in student portfolios are part of a larger system of discourse within the university. Recognizing this complexity, we can usefully redefine reflection as an outwardly focused practice that seeks to locate the writing self within the discursive spaces of our disciplines. Asking students to reflect both on the conventions of a particular kind of discourse and on their own performances within those parameters offers them a place from which to explore the possibilities and consequences of community membership.

Returning for a moment to the variability of our students’ skill levels as they enter our classrooms, a very relevant question emerges: Is this complex reflective practice necessary or even possible for all of our students? This question reminds us of the potential for any genre like the reflective essay to devolve into a stale reproduction of disempowered student subjectivities. Additionally, some students will need more time to make the move from identifying discourse conventions to critiquing them. For these students, especially, we must be extremely careful not to turn this assignment into a stale recitation of “the rules.” We can ensure the viability of this new genre of reflection by continually directing our students’ attentions toward the relationships between their own writing and the social practices of their audiences. In this way, the object of reflection is shifted away from both the writer’s self and the static textual conventions toward the interactions among author, text, audience, and context. This relocation of reflection will require students to view their own discursive practices as part of a larger set of social and rhetorical strategies for accomplishing the goals of a particular community. Such a revision of reflective practice is
empowering to students because they will ultimately begin to recognize and alter their place within the community instead of (re)enacting their marginal status through introspection and isolation.

For first-year composition and writing in the disciplines, the potential benefits of this kind of reflective practice are numerous. Strategically, this revision foregrounds what composition scholars have long known but what our university colleagues have often failed to acknowledge: what counts as “good writing” varies depending on context, goals, and community values. By asking students to explore a particular community’s definitions, and by asking them to evaluate their own writing in light of these definitions, we can encourage students to recognize that each community has its own sets of discursive and social practices. Importantly, helping students see conventions as conventions rather than as immutable features of “good writing,” we foster the potential for more effective engagement with, resistance to, and revision of the discursive practices of particular communities. For writing in the disciplines, an outwardly focused reflection offers students the chance to investigate situated writing practices and to explore the consequences of community membership. For first-year composition in general, this practice foregrounds the impossibility of teaching writing once and for all situations, and it promotes the investigative habits that students can then exploit in order to produce texts that will be acceptable to the particular communities they want to join. As we introduce students to the rhetorical demands of the university and of various disciplines and professional discourse communities, we stand to benefit from a more robust reflective practice that rewards students not for constructing improved personal selves but for articulating how their writing acknowledges, contributes to, and even resists the practices of its social locations.  

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Notes

1 I thank all of my first-year composition students for their hard work and insights into their own composing processes, and I especially thank those who agreed to allow me to use their words in my research. All of the names in this paper are pseudonyms, and I have left student texts unedited for spelling or grammar except where indicated by square brackets.

2 Along with much classroom research, my analysis is based on a limited sample of student writing, namely on the students who were enrolled in my sections of introductory composition during the academic years 1997-2001. While other composition instructors at my institution have verified my analyses with their own experiences, I recognize that my data are limited. Many of the student writing samples that will be discussed in relation to the “traditional” portfolio reflective assignment were enrolled in a “stretch-model” composition course, indicating that they were closer to basic writers than those who responded to my “revised” reflective assignment. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to suggest that basic writers are more likely to produce a narrative of progress while more advanced writers are more likely to engage with the demands of the academy, as the cases of Isaac and Jae-Hee will demonstrate. However, the issues of skill level, relative familiarity with the language of the academy, and sense of membership/entitlement are important areas for further study.

3 Such judgments are additionally complicated by gender and class expectations that we bring to portfolio assessments. As Laurel Black et al. point out, the forms of reflection that we encourage have important consequences. In their study, Black et al. find that the combination of reader expectations and the relative generic competence of students results in the maintenance of gendered writing styles.

4 JoAnn Campbell offers a useful critique of what she calls a “mimetic composing model” (266). For other critiques of explicit teaching of genres, see Freedman; Berkenkotter and Huckin; and Luke. Important considerations about how/when to teach genres are discussed in Christie, Threadgold, and Coe.

5 I gratefully acknowledge the participants at the University of California, Santa Barbara writing conference, “Writing as a Human Activity” (October 2001), for their input on an earlier version of this paper. In addition, I thank the editor, the anonymous reviewers, and my colleagues at the University of Washington for their constructive feedback and revision suggestions.

WORKS CITED


