Forging Rhetorical Subjects: Problem-Based Learning in the Writing Classroom

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Following a brief introduction to problem-based learning (PBL) as one type of highly-engaged pedagogy, this article examines how PBL activities in a first-year writing class and an upper-level professional writing and rhetoric class led students to develop rhetorical subjectivities. We conclude that highly engaged pedagogies, like PBL, that purposively situate students/teacher within indeterminate spaces requiring active reflection and meta-cognition are more likely to forge successful writers, writers who have more experience making a wide range of rhetorical choices, have a better sense of writing as contextualized praxis, and know to expect and value the collaborative nature of writing.

Today, it is commonplace to walk into writing classrooms in colleges and universities across the country and find scenes like the one described above. Students and teachers are regularly found during class time engaged with writing, writing technologies, and one another, and within the classroom there is a buzz of activity. If the primary aim of a writing class, at any level, is to develop effective writers, is it the development of successful writers that we are observing when we walk into the buzzing classrooms described above? Hands-on activity by itself certainly does not lead to the development of successful writers. Still, for a variety of reasons, educators in Rhetoric and Composition, as well as a growing number in higher education in general, believe strongly that learning and development are enhanced significantly through active engagement.

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Engaged learning pedagogies, which come into writing classrooms in forms like service learning, project-based learning, and client projects, share features that distinguish them from other pedagogies, like lecture and discussion, and even active pedagogies like workshopping and critique, common in the fine arts. A major distinguishing factor is the way assignments in engaged learning classrooms are designed to situate students within complex, authentic contexts and often require sustained amounts of time. They also commonly require high levels of collaboration, occasionally with others outside of the classroom (see Kuh).

Problem-based learning (PBL) offers another highly engaged pedagogical option for our writing classes. PBL shares with other engaged pedagogies the features listed above, but it distinguishes itself by initiating learning with the introduction of an ill-structured problem around which all learning centers. Service-, project-, and client-based pedagogies can initiate learning and also be designed as ill-structured problems, thus reflecting the distinguishing features of PBL, but PBL always carries these features, making it a distinctly engaged pedagogy.

The ill-structured problem is a hallmark of and key to PBL (see Rhem; Savery). To be ill-structured does not mean poorly, casually, or sloppily designed by an instructor. Ill-structured problems are messy, real-world problems; they are dynamic, without simple, fixed, formulaic, or even “right” solutions; they require a cycle of inquiry, information gathering, and reflection that is likely iterative. PBL revolves around these carefully designed but ill-structured problems. Another hallmark of PBL is the way it initiates learning. One generally thinks of teaching and learning as a process initiated with the introduction of new content, skills, methods, et cetera. After this initial instruction, students are given instruction and time to master the new material that has been introduced. Finally, their mastery is put to the test in one fashion or another before moving on to new sets of content, skills, methods, et cetera. For instance, in most case-based pedagogies, students are introduced to new content, such as the genre of the bad newsletter in business writing, and then they are put to practicing what they have learned by writing a bad newsletter specific to a business world case. In contrast, PBL learning is initiated with the introduction of an ill-structured problem. The new content, skills, methods, et cetera are gathered and generated through the process of investigating and addressing the problem, rather than being supplied, studied, and/or practiced prior to engagement with the problem (see Amador, Miles, and Peters; Duch, Groh, and Allen). In PBL-based medical education, for instance, instruction in new areas might begin with visits to rooms with real patients. The patient in the room, along with all of his or her health details, is the ill-structured problem that initiates learning. What students learn is initiated by and contextualized within this problem.

We chose to examine PBL in the writing classroom for a variety of reasons, but primary among them was to improve upon the kinds of engaged-learning already occurring at our institution and in our own classrooms, from
first-year composition to advanced courses in Rhetoric and Writing Studies (RWS). While our experiences with PBL do not lead us to herald it as the best or even a better way to teach writing, experimenting with PBL in our actual classrooms helped make obvious, again, the impact pedagogies have on constructing students/writers—rhetorical subjects—and compelled us to reflect more critically on the student-writer subjectivities being constructed in our classrooms. Our experience leads us to the conclusion that highly engaged pedagogies, like PBL, that purposively situate students/teachers within open-ended, indeterminate, messy problem spaces requiring active reflection and metacognition are more likely to forge successful writers, or writers who (a) have more experience making a wide range of situated rhetorical choices, (b) have a better sense of writing as contextualized praxis that is mutually constitutive of writers, readers, texts, and contexts, and (c) know to expect, understand, and value the collaborative, messy nature of non-routine writing.

In what follows, we reflect on our process of developing and teaching PBL assignments for two writing courses: one, a required first-year composition course, and the other, an introductory course in Professional Writing and Rhetoric, required of both majors and minors. Through this assignment-based reflection, we share sample PBL assignments designed specifically for writing instruction, which is in and of itself of some value, for though there is much available in terms of literature and sample assignments for PBL, there is very little focused on writing instruction (see Pennell and Miles). However, our focus, here, is not on applying PBL to writing instruction and sharing PBL writing assignment samples, per se. Our focus is on calling attention to two central questions always involved in the teaching/learning of writing but routinely left in the shadows of either more abstract theorizing or more nuts-and-bolts instructional detailing. Through our reflective process, we call attention to the following two questions:

- “What defines a successful writer?” and
- “How can we best develop/teach such writers?”

In calling attention to these questions within pedagogy and contextualized in our own pedagogical experiences, we hope to reinvigorate explicit disciplinary, as well as local, conversations about the role our pedagogical practices—PBL in this case—play in forming writers/people/agents and the significant impact pedagogy has on the formation of rhetorical subjects.

**The Subject of Writing**

In *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley challenges compositionists to consider how student-writers/rhetorical subjects are called into being through pedagogy, among other social/material/cultural practices. The primary focus of argument for Faigley is the distinction and historical transition between the modern construct of the writer/rhetorical subject as
the rational, autonomous individual and the postmodern construction of the fragmented writer/rhetorical subject. One iteration of this difference highlighted by Faigley is the contrast between the pedagogies advocated by Peter Elbow, on the one hand, and Kenneth Bruffee, on the other. Elbow’s emphasis on helping students find their authentic voices and helping them learn ways to control language to best express those voices led Bruffee to attack, as Faigley depicts it, Elbow’s pedagogy as “encouraging ‘ram-pant individualism’” (226), a hallmark of the modernist construction of the writer/rhetorical subject as a stable, unified self. Bruffee’s collaborative pedagogy, Faigley goes on to argue, emphasized “the communal nature of discourse and a view of knowledge as socially negotiated,” leading to the construction of writers/rhetorical subjects who understand and practice writing (and themselves, we would add) as part of “ongoing conversations” beyond any stable, unified self (226).

Faigley’s challenge to us, though, is more than historical and academic. It leads us to consider the following related questions: Are we aware of the kinds of subjectivities we’re inviting students to occupy through our pedagogies? Are they the kinds of subjectivities we want or we should want students to occupy? Are they the kinds of subjectivities that will serve students well in their other college courses, as they engage in casual conversations with peers, as they enter the workplace and become practicing professionals, as they take on adult and domestic responsibilities? Are they the kinds of subjectivities that will help students become responsible, active, ethical citizens? These questions continue to be overlooked in a great deal of pedagogical scholarship, perhaps because teachers and scholars find it unsettling to consider this far-reaching implication of their classroom practice (see Couture; Russell, “Activity Theory”). While Faigley’s challenge may have gone largely unheeded on a pedagogical level, other scholarship has explored, on a theoretical level, how certain pedagogies do indeed invite students to participate in learning and meaning-making in certain ways, and even affect momentarily the way students interact with the world and with others (see Ryan).

Engaged Pedagogies and (Re)Defining the Successful Writer

If compositionists and academics in the sister fields that make up the broader RWS community are to examine more closely and actively these questions of pedagogical impact on the formation of rhetorical subjects—if we are to reinvigorate explicit disciplinary and local conversations about the significant impact pedagogy has on the formation of rhetorical subjects—engaged learning is one broad pedagogical category RWS should likely investigate. Having grown up in a largely post-Freirian era, Composition Studies has long claimed high ground in discussions about engaged learning. Learning in composition, as well as most technical and professional writing classes, is and has been highly engaged. Though this term has shift-
ed in meaning, from simply active learning (e.g., hands on) to something more complex, those of us teaching writing have long been ahead of the curve when it comes to engaged pedagogies. But taking the high ground can also mean assuming a level of invisibility, at least in the explicit conversations about engaged learning. A quick scan of the scholarship being done in this venue highlights disciplines such as psychology and education, particularly for the empirical and theoretical, as well as the sciences, where the focus is more on reports on the implementation and results of engaged pedagogies. Arguably the leader in engaged learning, at least in higher education, is the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (CPR) in the School of Education, out of which come the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE), and the NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice. Only recently (see Consortium for the Study of Writing in College, started 2007-08) have those directly related to RWS entered discussions with comparably strong, expert voices about engaged learning.

When the two of us began incorporating PBL, we began to better understand and articulate more clearly for ourselves reasons we continued to be drawn to other engaged pedagogies, like service-, project-, and client-based assignments. We had each continued to be drawn to these pedagogies in spite of the frustrations they often bring, the additional work they often require of teachers, and the fairly typical resistance teachers receive from students when such pedagogies require them to assume new (highly engaged) ways of being in school: in other words, new subjectivities. PBL was foreign enough to Writing Studies that struggling to think through its value and how to best utilize it helped us begin to rearticulate why we continued to be drawn to the messiness, indeterminacy, dynamism, and sometimes outright frustration of highly engaged pedagogies, in general, such as client-based assignments. The frustrations of project-, problem-, and client-based pedagogies have, in the end, at least, always felt worth it because we saw that our students who were engaged in such learning experiences developed ways of being that seemed a closer fit to our sense of what successful writers are like. These sorts of assignments are so authentic (often almost too real-worldly for classroom comfort) that students daily wrestle with writing as a socially contextualized, dynamic, contested, ideological, meaning-making, iterative, messy process. Within such assignments, technē, heuristics, strategies, and procedural knowledge are not simply bits of knowledge learned and applied transactionally. Each of these takes on a life within a specific context, the way experienced writers know they do in actual writing practice. Heuristics, theories, process strategies, et cetera become heuristic themselves, and students find themselves theorizing in context. Students are involved in more sophisticated (and dare we say, authentic) rhetorical praxis. Patricia A. Sullivan and James E. Porter define praxis as “a kind of thinking that does not start with theoretical knowledge or abstract models, which are then applied
to situations, but that begins with immersion in local situations, and then uses epistemic theory as heuristic rather than as explanatory or determining” (26). As outlined earlier, all highly engaged writing pedagogies immerse students in complex rhetorical situations that often extend over more than a brief time and often require collaboration, and so they create pedagogical contexts in which students can experience, practice, and learn the praxical skills of writers and writing that Sullivan and Porter define. What we experienced and learned through our work with PBL, though, is that PBLs focus on initiating instruction and then having all learning arise out of a well-crafted, ill-structured problem can heighten the immersive element of engaged pedagogies, which subsequently helps to create learning contexts in which student writers/rhetorical subjects can develop praxical subjectivities. Praxical writing subjects have developed a sense of themselves as writers who are comfortable with and confident in their ability to immerse themselves in local situations and then use epistemic theory—for example, decontextualized strategies and processes—as a heuristic for determining how to proceed and make wise writerly decisions. This is what we conceive of as a successful writer, it is what we have seen develop through and as a result of highly engaged pedagogies, and it is what we became aware of even more clearly through our implementation of PBL.

But why? What is distinct about what we are referring to as these highly engaged pedagogies, including PBL, that more dramatically forges these praxical writing subjects? We believe it stems from a change in the meaning and valuing of “engagement.”

The meaning of engaged learning shifts when one moves from, say, (a) small group work aimed at ends achieved through discrete processes culminating in well-defined products to (b) immersion in messy writing problems. In the first instance—small group work—engagement is employed as a means for more effectively transferring writerly knowledge. For instance, rather than speak about and then have students individually work on revising, the small peer-group revision workshop functions as a more effective means for transferring that writerly knowledge of revising. The engagement linked to small peer-group interaction is a means to an end: more effective (e.g., experiential) transfer of learning. In the second instance—immersion in messy writing problems—engagement is no longer employed as a means for enhancing the transaction of writerly knowledge. Instead, engagement has become part of the knowledge being learned, as well as a context within which writers learn. Being engaged is understood and practiced as an essential part of “being a writer.” The student-writer/rhetorical subject shifts from being a receiver of the transfer of knowledge through engaged/experiential means of teaching-learning (e.g., the small peer-group revision workshop) to being an active agent/writer immersed in/engaged with messy writing problems. From within this new sense of engagement, what is considered the successful writer also shifts.
One approach to defining writing success might stem from a general skills model of writing expertise (see Peeples and Hart-Davidson for discussion of the three models of writing expertise referenced here and adopted from Kaufer and Young). In this model, writing expertise is defined by the knowledge and control of general strategies (e.g., making diagrams, analogies, and means-ends analyses) that are deemed useful in and transferable to any context; the successful writer is one who can demonstrate having and effectively applying such knowledge. Another approach to defining success might stem from a contextualist model of writing expertise. In this second model, writing expertise is defined by the knowledge and control of context-/culture-specific norms; the successful writer is one who has accurately read/interpreted local norms and is able to maneuver effectively within those norms through the application of contextual knowledge. In both of these models, successful writing is relatively predictive and dependent on the application of what one has come to know in a transactional way. Engaged pedagogies *qua* active learning are valuable in both of these models because they increase motivation and the ability to transfer knowledge learned in one case, for instance, to another. In one of these two models of expertise, the contextualist model, engagement takes on an additional value, beyond enhanced motivation and practice in transfer: the creation of authentic scenarios, situations, and contexts gives students experience reading/interpreting local norms and adapting/adjusting to them. It is presumed that this experience will help students more effectively transfer such knowledge to new contexts.

A third approach to defining success might stem from an interactionist model of writing expertise. In this third model, writing expertise is defined by the sort of *praxical* wisdom and behavior earlier described; the successful writer “relies on a complex... interaction between context knowledge and general strategies that are in principle articulable and teachable” (Kaufer and Young qtd. in Peeples and Hart-Davidson 101). In this third model, successful writing is messy and less predictive. Like the general skills and contextualist models, the interactionist model values hands-on, active engagement as a means for motivation and as a crucial part of learning transfer. In addition, though, the interactionist model values hands-on, active engagement in and of itself, as something that, in and of itself, is instructive. *Through engagement,* students learn *that* writing is messy, open-ended, indeterminate, and iterative; they learn *how* to write within such contexts; and they learn to *value* the process of working through/with this messiness.

When engagement carries these new values, the goals and objectives of engagement change significantly. From the perspective of the first two models, the context for engagement is meant to be a vehicle for learning, and as such, the context should be relatively transparent. When the context itself is problematical, it should be for clearly defined instructive purposes—the problematical should be, in other words, under the control of the teacher. From the perspective of an interactionist model of writerly success, however,
the problems posed by contexts—for example, the availability of resources, collaborative differences, shifting and complex matrices of power, shifting timelines, changing goals, et cetera—are themselves uncontrollable, essential, and essentially instructive characteristics of writing. From this perspective, the frustrations teachers and students have with highly engaged pedagogies, such as project- and client-based assignments, mean something very different. Teachers employing and reflecting on these pedagogies from a generalist or contextualist model perceive the problems of context as failures either of themselves, their students, or the contexts. From an interactionist perspective of writing instruction and writerly success, experiences with unpredictable, messy, and dynamic contexts are instructive, not failures.

It may or may not be an accident that many in writing have embraced highly engaged pedagogies. If an accident, we believe it is an accident that might be leading (though accidentally and, thus, not as effectively as might be the case) to the development of a different kind of student-writer/rhetorical subject, one who reflects a more praxical, interactionist model, for these student-writers/rhetorical subjects have experienced the messiness that is the nature of most writing. If it is not an accident, then we believe we can more effectively and powerfully develop this praxical, interactionist model of expertise by consciously focusing on the development of our highly engaged pedagogical practices, with attention to the changing values of engagement and the writerly experiences and qualities developed as a result.

The Forging of Rhetorical Subjects: Reflecting on and through PBL Assignments

First-Year Composition, Digital Literacies, and PBL

We designed a set of three digital literacy PBL activities—“Critiquing Search Engines,” “Understanding & Using Databases,” and “Documenting Digital Sources” (see Appendix for actual assignments)—for College Writing, our university’s first-year composition course. Digital literacies were our focus for a variety of reasons, but first and foremost we wanted students to learn that critically engaging online research and documenting online sources is a more sophisticated, rhetorically contextualized, and messy process than a general skills model, or even a contextualist model, of writing sometimes suggests. We assumed that students often put little deliberate thought into selecting search engines and databases, since we repeatedly observed them turning to the same search engines and databases in different research situations, usually because they were the ones students learned about in high school and with which they felt most comfortable, regardless of whether or not they were appropriate or even adequate sources of information for their current research purposes. We also observed that students often failed to appreciate the disciplinary values that are conveyed through documentation standards and, instead, viewed writing citations as a kind of formulaic
drudgery. Since this was our first foray into PBL, we chose to design several shorter low-stakes assignments, in the hopes that they would encourage students to embrace the activities without fear of how such an experimental pedagogy might impact their grades or standing in the course (see Anson). The low-stakes nature of these shorter PBL activities also made us, as instructors, more comfortable using this pedagogy for the first time as well.

It is easy enough to provide students with a list of numbered directions for conducting a simple search engine or database search, but in the “Critiquing Search Engines” and “Understanding & Using Databases” digital literacy activities, we wanted students to experience that how a search engine or database worked—for example, how it was designed and programmed, the search options that were or were not available, the types of sources it catalogued, the kinds of returns that were possible—could affect profoundly the activity of research and the quality of research identified. We also wanted students to learn that the practice of using research technologies is itself part of the meaning-making process, and that search engines and databases are not just mere tools for returning supposedly objective research results. We expected that immersing students in an indeterminate, messy, and open-ended research context could help them think about research engines and databases as socially and culturally constructed artifacts with biases and limitations, with intended primary and secondary audiences. And since this first-year writing course is charged with preparing students for later writing courses as well as real-world writing situations, we also wanted to disrupt what students thought should happen in writing classrooms and real writing situations by putting them in indeterminate and complex writing and research spaces. These two activities asked students to solve the problem of determining how exactly different search engines and databases functioned, and to develop strategies for deciding which ones to use for different research situations they were actually facing in their other courses (see Appendix for actual assignments).

We designed the third PBL digital literacy activity, “Documenting Digital Sources,” because we wanted students to understand that there is a method behind what often seems like the madness of documentation, that this method reflects academic values and disciplinary priorities, and that such an understanding can assist one in documenting ever-evolving online sources. Janice R. Walker and Todd Taylor’s The Columbia Guide to Online Style 2/e examines what they call “the logic of citation” and notes five principles of citation style: access, intellectual property, economy, standardization, and transparency (31-36). While Walker and Taylor’s guide goes a long way to demystifying the process of writing documentation and understanding its underlying logic, we sought a more engaged way of teaching students about documentation so that they could approach it as a heuristic, not as a series of rules to follow. This last digital literacy activity asked students to solve the problem of identifying the values embodied in the different documentation features and explaining these values to an audience of high school students.
What sets each of these three PBL digital literacy activities apart from other kinds of engaged pedagogies is that they each initiated instruction with real, and in these cases, deceptively simple, problems—for example, how do different research engines and databases function? How do you decide which search engine or database to use for different research situations? What do the different components of an online citation mean? Then, all learning emerged out of student attempts to answer these questions. Initiating and sustaining all learning through real problems increased student immersion, which in turn gave students opportunities to experience and practice the praxical skills of writers and writing. Instead of being given abstract or theoretical knowledge about research engines, databases, and documenting online sources, students were immersed in local, meaningful situations and then had to use epistemic theory—that is, the knowledge they were creating themselves—as a heuristic for figuring out real answers to real problems.

Given that a hallmark feature of PBL is the open-endedness of the learning environment, it was interesting, but not surprising, to hear our students express disbelief that they could learn anything from these experiences. They expressed frustration at being given such open-ended assignments without clearly defined expectations for how they should respond to them and what exactly they should learn. With all three activities, students began working silently, either individually or in groups, but as they became more involved with the problems, the classrooms became animated with collaborative chatter. Students started to express surprise at the ways they tended to take certain things for granted or as givens, for example, when they realized that not all search engines returned the same results when using the same search terms, or that using different Boolean functions (or, for that matter, when they learned what a “Boolean” function actually is) returned different results; when they figured out that it was possible to determine what kinds of resources different databases collected and that there were ways to return only certain types of sources (i.e., full-text only, PDF only); or when the previously puzzling way to write a bibliographic citation finally began to make sense when they considered that the various features reflected a discourse community’s concerns or values.

In their own ways, each of these digital literacy activities showed students that real engagement—the process of working in indeterminate contexts to solve real problems—is instructive itself. We used the “Critiquing Search Engines” and “Understanding Databases” in the middle of the term in our first-year writing classrooms, after the students had completed several shorter writing assignments but before they began longer, research-based projects. These two activities, in particular, highlighted the messy and iterative process of research and writing, because they taught students that neither search engines nor databases are objective tools and that writers need to consider their respective advantages and disadvantages on a technical as well as rhetorical level in each different research situation. What students (and in particular, at our institution, first-year students) often think should happen
in a college classroom, and what they often think writers are and do, was also disrupted: instead of sitting quietly in their seats listening to a lecture and then being given explicit instructions about what kind of writing to produce in response to the assignment, students were permitted to, quite simply, decide how they were going to proceed. They were permitted, to their surprise, to physically move about inside or outside of the classroom, to ask each other questions and collaborate, or to e-mail friends or family members they thought could assist them in their inquiry, and to actually begin crafting their responses to the problem in genres of their own choosing (instead of being told, in an assignment handout, in what genre they should respond, usually outside of class time).

Their immersion and engagement in a real writing situation itself helped the students develop sophisticated responses to the problems they were tasked with solving. So, for example, research became for the students not a clearly delineated activity which points to the most obvious research engine or database to use, but rather an imprecise activity which requires writers to develop strategies for selecting the most appropriate research source for any given disciplinary situation, and then to revise iteratively these strategies on the spot as one learns more information either about the database, research engine, or one’s research topic. Students first tried to write neat, numbered lists about how to decide which search engine to use or how to conduct effective database research, or they tried to make a list explaining which search engine or database to use in different situations. But as they themselves engaged in the research necessary to construct these lists, the impossibility of composing a series of steps to follow or writing an objective list that would cover all rhetorical situations became apparent. Students then often moved on to create more sophisticated decision-trees, but these also became too complex. Finally, most students decided upon writing responses that were rich in detail about the rhetorical, biased, and complex qualities of search engines and databases, while also emphasizing that their readers would have to make wise decisions based upon their own rhetorical and disciplinary reasons for conducting research. Supported by activity theory’s claim that human actions cannot be understood outside of the wider human activity of which it is a part, the very pedagogy underlying these activities required students to take the wider human activity into account (real, student-identified research scenarios, particular research questions grounded in particular disciplines) in order to make informed research and writing decisions (see Dias et al.). So, for example, students composed humorous letters to first-year writing students, warning them not to thoughtlessly rely upon the same search engine for all occasions and encouraging them to research search engines themselves, while considering their own research purposes, before selecting a search engine to use.

We used the “Documenting Digital Sources” activity closer to the end of the term, as students were completing their long-term research project. This activity also immersed students in messy and indeterminate writing
spaces and prevented them from simply regurgitating the documentation styles for online sources. Instead of being given abstract knowledge about how to document online sources, they had to use epistemic theory—that is, the knowledge they were creating themselves—as a heuristic for figuring out how to write these entries. So when confronted with the open-ended request to write an explanation to a less-experienced audience of high school students about the significance of a bibliographic citation’s components, our students were often, at first, at a complete loss about how to proceed. This activity moved them from this place of certainty (all I have to do is mimic this set format, or fill in the empty spaces at the Landmark’s online citation generator) to a place of uncertainty (what is the significance of these various components? why are they in this particular order? what would high school students already know about online documentation? what do I take for granted that high school students might not know?). We viewed their hesitation as a sign of a growing understanding that documenting online sources is not an isolated skill (as the filling-in-the-blank model implies), but part of a wider human activity (in this case, the activity of engaging in responsible academic discourse) that is context or disciplinary bound.

Our students first responded to this activity much like they did to the two earlier digital literacy activities: they tried to compose neat, orderly lists or explanations that would tell the high school students exactly how to compose a bibliographic citation for a digital source. But the students’ efforts to write one comprehensive citation description were quickly thwarted as they were confronted with the existence of such a wide range of digital sources, with the lack of page numbers or inconsistent numbering practices, with unclear author attributions, and a plethora of other complications that arise when trying to attribute author, publisher, dates, Web addresses, and even titles to digital sources. Students ended up responding in ways similar to how they responded to the previous two activities: by writing letters, or memos, or a series of short Web pages to their audience of high school students, imploring them to think about digital citations not as a series of blanks that can be filled in mindlessly, but as one of the ways we join, participate, and extend academic discussions responsibly. For the remainder of the term, when students worked on their bibliographies, we often heard comments about how they were making decisions and choices—about which information to include, in what order, et cetera—based upon what the particular disciplinary community expected, cared about, and which information was necessary so that readers could locate the same exact resource.

This PBL activity also seemed to encourage metacognitive awareness in students because the process of articulating explicitly for a real audience why various components of an entry are significant to the academic community highlights that documenting digital sources serves a very specific purpose in academic writing. For instance, documenting digital sources increases the author’s ethos and shows that the various entries are not random, but rather indicate what academic communities value in digital sources. Such
metacognitive awareness also helps students identify the similarities and differences between academic, real world, and workplace writing as well (see Russell, “Rethinking Genre and Society”).

**Entering the Field of Professional Writing through PBL**

At the same time we were exploring PBL in the first-year writing classroom, we were exploring how it might fit into and enhance some of our advanced major/minor courses in Professional Writing and Rhetoric. We designed a set of four PBL assignments—“Defining the Field,” “Adding to the Conversation about Organizational Context,” “Embodying Rhetoric as an Ethical Act,” and “Making Space for Good Work”—for our introductory course to the major/minor. Each of the other courses within the major/minor already included some form of highly engaged pedagogy, such as client- or service-learning-based assignments. The introductory course, unlike most in professional writing, functioned as an introduction to histories, theories, and issues that defined the field, so it did not lend itself as readily to highly engaged pedagogies beyond a case study here and there.

Unlike the low-stakes digital literacy activities we designed for our first-year writing course, we took it as a challenge to meet the majority of our learning objectives for this introductory professional writing and rhetoric course through PBL. Aside from a midterm and final exam, we constructed the entire course around PBL assignments. We focus, here, on the first two assignments, “Defining the Field” and “Adding to the Conversation about Organizational Context.”

At the undergraduate level, in general, but particularly within an introductory course, students do not conceive of themselves as participating in defining the field to which they are just then being introduced, nor do they conceive of themselves as being able to contribute in any meaningful way to the conversations that make up the field. Students generally assume, at this level, that they will be fed the content, that all will be defined for them, and that their role is to receive definitive knowledge from another. Two of the objectives of our major/minor are that students will (a) develop their own clear definition of the field and themselves as writing and rhetoric experts within it and (b) understand their role and the role of writing and rhetoric in the shaping of the worlds in which they participate. “Defining the Field” and “Adding to the Conversation about Organizational Context” embraced those learning objectives, but quite differently through PBL than they had been addressed in prior offerings of the course. Just as it would be easy enough to supply students with clear instructions for conducting a variety of online searches, or generating accurate and appropriate citations, it is relatively easy to present students with a range of information about and within the field of Professional Writing and Rhetoric and then engage them in syntheses of the field and arguments within the field. These PBL professional writing and rhetoric assignments posed deceptively simple problems to students—“How would you define Professional Writing and Rhetoric to
a group of novices?” and “What is organizational context and how does it affect the practice of Professional Writing and Rhetoric?” They then engaged students in largely self-directed problem solving that regularly included identifying, reading, and synthesizing disciplinary scholarship and, finally, drawing their own conclusions and crafting their own responses. Student learning was initiated by open-ended questions, and all learning emerged out of the students’ own efforts to answer these questions.

As one might imagine, student reaction to the “Defining the Field” assignment after only one week of class was just short of either active rebellion or total paralysis (see Appendix for actual assignment). After initial vocal and kinetic resistance—for example, “You don’t really mean you expect us to define the field before you’ve taught us anything?,” “You’ve got to be kidding?,” and looks of disgust exchanged across tables accompanied by much fidgeting—some students started asking productive, problem-solving-oriented questions: “Can we use the class text books?,” “Can we ask you questions?,” “Can we interview other professors and students?,” and “Can we use online sources?” Somewhat surprisingly, the start of such productive questioning and writerly activity actually preceded any individual student’s feelings of resolution that “Yes, he really isn’t kidding” and certainly preceded any communal sense of positive resolve and proactivity. It was students’ engagement in problem solving—in writing, in assuming the role of the active rhetorical subject—that led to positive resolve rather than vice versa. By the end of the initial class period in which the assignment was introduced, the majority of students were so engaged, and positively so, they had already surpassed the comfort level with the activity of addressing such a question—“How do you define Professional Writing and Rhetoric?”—that previous students struggled to achieve after two weeks of other teaching-learning activities. We highlight, though, that it was their comfort with the activity of addressing such a question that reached higher levels more quickly; they were still very much struggling over the content of their arguments, as should have been the case. On day one, the students addressing this PBL assignment were already deeply immersed in the authentic engagement of writing—of being active rhetorical subjects.

Though the students in this course were less surprised to be confronted by another problem-based assignment immediately following the completion of the first, the open-ended, ill-structured problem nature of their second assignment (“Adding to the Conversation about Organizational Context”) created similar immediate and ongoing problem-solving challenges for them. In other words, feelings of resistance and disbelief were at the very least less vocal and extreme, but the socio-cognitive challenges—the writing and rhetorical challenges—were equally dramatic. We saw this, in part, as a sign of good learning very early in the course. Writers are constantly faced with new rhetorical challenges, and the expert writer not only expects that but has learned how to work through—that is, problem solve—those challenges effectively. At the very least, our students were already learning how to ad-
just/manage their affective response to novel rhetorical situations—that is, their PBL assignments. More promisingly, we saw them already developing, or developing-in-action, inventional and collaborative strategies and process knowledge for conducting the work writers routinely face. For example, one group of students developed inventional strategies for how to identify and keep track of resources that should be included in the project; another pair of students began designing a system, involving e-mail, Google Docs, and a free wiki, as a way to share and revise their peers’ writing; several other students began generating a list of potential audiences for their organizational context project, taking complex notes on why each potential audience would be interested in such a project and how these different interests meant that the different audiences would expect different kinds of information, different ways of presenting the information, and even different navigational schemes for their project’s interface.

The second PBL assignment in this class posed a new challenge: large-scale collaboration. In addition to learning about organizational context in order to address the “content problem” of the assignment, the students were experiencing the impact of organizational context building and rebuilding from the start of the project. As Linda Driskill explains, “Context can help explain what a document means, what ideas it contains, why the writer would try to express his or her ideas in a particular way, and why readers who occupy particular roles in different parts of an organization would be likely to respond to a document in particular ways” (108). In other words, writing is not successful simply because it is grammatically or structurally correct, it is successful when its writers have taken into account the organizational context and responded accordingly, for example, by defining the situation, identifying the key individuals and participants and their sometimes conflicting motivations, understanding the external influential parties, and acknowledging that there are multiple direct and indirect audiences for a given text. The students’ location within the organizational context of our introductory professional writing and rhetoric classroom became a point of reflective instruction throughout and, particularly, after the completion of the assignment.

In their writing about organizational context and its relationship to Professional Writing and Rhetoric, students often reflected on their own immediate organizational/contextual experience. They would, for instance, comment on the strengths and weaknesses of their own collaborative practices with this particular assignment, as well as other class assignments, and they would begin adopting and adapting language they were learning as they studied organizational context to reflect on their own experiences and to enhance the content they were developing within their assignments. Through that reflective process, they would not only effectively learn about, write about, and revise their own writing about organizational context, but they would at some dramatic, though infrequent, moments revise elements of their own organizational contexts. They would, in other words, rewrite
a portion of the context of their own immediate writing work and their worlds of action/subjectivity. To illustrate, one group with high motivation and strong academic skills, but that showed deep frustration early on with learning and employing digital writing technologies within the context of the classroom and the designated time of a class period, reframed their working time and space—their organizational context—to actively integrate outside resources and other spaces. They requested out-of-class time to meet with technology experts on campus, and they devised out-of-class collaborative work times in spaces beyond the classroom to work. These students learned through direct experience and engagement, accompanied by disciplinary study and reflection, about organizational context as an integral, though partially revisable, element of writing and rhetorical action. “Writing” for these students, then, was that fully-engaged, socio-cultural kind that has material consequences and impact, a lesson that is exceptionally difficult to teach in a way beyond the purely abstract. Further, “writing” for these students became a way to reinvent not only the field of Professional Writing and Rhetoric, but their own writerly subjectivities as well (see Slevin). Far from being passive recipients of a lecture from a professor on the field of Professional Writing and Rhetoric and the impact of organizational context on writing situations, and then blandly repeating these descriptions on an exam, the students themselves participated in generatively reconstructing and redefining the field, and recreating their own rhetorical, praxical subjectivities, as they engaged in complex and reflective writerly ways of being.

Conclusion

We now return, more directly, to the two central questions we proposed earlier and offer some preliminary responses, in the spirit of igniting further conversations about the role our pedagogical practices play in forming writers and the impact pedagogy can have on the formation of rhetorical subjects:

- “What defines a successful writer?” and
- “How can we best develop/teach such writers?”

As we also mentioned earlier, we are not claiming that PBL is the only or even the best pedagogy for creating active learning environments. We are, instead, proposing that by focusing our attention on designing PBL activities and then reflecting on the kinds of writerly behaviors in which they invited students to participate, we became more aware of how the very pedagogies we enacted in class created particular kinds of subjectivities for students to occupy. We found that PBL activities did indeed have the advantage of inviting students to behave more like “real” and what we have come to call “successful” writers, based on an interactionist model of writing. In this model, successful writers understand that writing is messy, iterative, and indeterminate; they know how to negotiate writing in such contexts;
and they *value* these messy processes as well. Unlike other engaged pedagogies, which rely on a model of presenting information to students first and then asking them to put that information into action second, PBL activities require students to immerse themselves in real-world problems and then generate the knowledge itself, as an act of heuristic invention. This difference seemed to lead to the creation, at least temporarily, of rhetorical, *praxical* student subjects who were confident relying on their own generative knowledge when finding themselves in novel situations that required them to decide how to respond appropriately. With other types of engaged pedagogies, when writerly ways of acting are “pre-packaged” and delivered outside of real writing situations, student writers routinely become flustered when these “pre-packaged” bits of information fail to respond adequately or fail to take into account the complexity of their writing situation. In contrast, students who engaged in generative problem-based learning as they experienced real writing situations and hurdles appear to be more rhetorically flexible and capable of taking responsive action. For example, when the students working on the “Adding to the Conversation about Organizational Context” project realized that one of their secondary, indirect audiences might be future employers, they decided to rethink entirely their project’s organizational and navigational schemes. They decided that the academic resources they had been relying upon as examples, and with which they were most comfortable using themselves as students, were inadequate for this newly realized and yet very important audience. Instead of relying upon tried and true, and perhaps even dull, ways of organizing their content, they decided to engage in large-scale audience analysis to support their efforts to create a more audience-responsive organizational scheme.

While we want to be careful and refrain from arguing that PBL is the best pedagogy, we also think it is important to note that PBL does offer something special, and that is its quality of *initiating* instruction with, and then having all learning emerge out of, a well crafted problem. This feature helps to create a learning environment in which student writers/rhetorical subjects develop not only rhetorical subjectivities, but praxical subjectivities as well. It is worth noting again Sullivan and Porter’s definition of praxis as “a kind of thinking that does not start with theoretical knowledge or abstract models, which are then applied to situations, but that begins with immersion in local situations, and then uses epistemic theory as heuristic rather than as explanatory or determining” (26). So in regard to the question of how we can best develop/teach such writers, we argue that one way is by using pedagogies that so intensely immerse students in local and real situations that engagement *itself* becomes part of being a successful writer. This ups the ante, so to speak, on our understanding of engaged learning: it is no longer just the means for transferring effectively writerly knowledge, but rather a way of “being” and acting. In other words, engaged learning becomes, in the interactionist model of writing, rhetorical praxis.
The two courses we use as illustrations here are not even the kind most readily adaptable to PBL, and yet that is in part why we chose to focus on them, both for our own pedagogical exploration and also for scholarly reflection. Courses that most readily spring to mind for adoption of PBL include what we might categorize as advanced practice or performance-based courses. These courses are typically populated by students who bring some advanced-level rhetorical/writing skills and experiences, to which they can turn when addressing complex, ill-structured, novel rhetorical/writing challenges. These practice- or performance-based courses common in RWS curricula (see The Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric’s “Writing Majors at a Glance”—“Writing for the Web,” “Teaching Writing,” “Tutoring Writing,” “Environmental Writing,” “Report and Grant Writing,” “Technical Documentation,” “Advanced Editing,” “Publications Management,” “Document Design,” et cetera—also intuitively lend themselves to the creation of writing problems that can initiate and sustain highly engaged learning. For these reasons, advanced practice- and performance-based courses most readily lend themselves to PBL and would be excellent grounds, we say encouragingly, for broader exploration in RWS. However, what we observed happening in our first-year writing and introductory professional writing and rhetoric classes convinced us that even courses less readily adaptable to PBL can use this pedagogy effectively, as a way to immerse students in active learning environments and invite them to engage in rhetorical praxis.

Appendix

Critiquing Search Engines

Do you use different search engines for different purposes or when looking for different kinds of information? Or do you turn to the same search engine over and over again without really thinking about how the search engine functions or how it might affect the kinds of information you locate? Faculty who teach first-year writing at your university have noticed that a lot of first-year students seem to over rely on just one or two search engines for all of their research needs, which probably isn’t the most efficient or productive research strategy. These faculty members have asked that you create some materials or a resource that will help first-year writing students understand how to decide which search engine to use when faced with a new research question or situation, or when looking for a particular kind of source.

Some of the complexities that make this problem unique are that different search engines may have different features (such as options for narrowing or filtering a search, or special Boolean terms), they may identify Web pages or Web sites differently (by their title, by their metadata), they may
have user preferences that can be adjusted, or they may focus on particular kinds of sources (i.e., image, video, full-text, PDF file, etc.).

You can decide as a group what you think is the best way to address this problem.

Understanding & Using Databases

Have you ever felt like you were drowning in information, or conversely, that there was no existing research on the topic you wanted to study? Information that exists “out there” on the Internet or in databases, journals, or books is useless unless you know how to locate it. One way we can locate meaningful and useful information/sources is by using our library’s academic databases. Your library has asked your class to create an online resource that will help other student-researchers conduct effective database research and avoid that “drowning in information” or “there’s nothing on my topic” experience.

This activity asks you to determine how exactly different databases function and develop some strategies for deciding which ones to use for the different research situations. Some complexities that you might confront when examining databases and developing strategies for selecting among them include determining the sources searched by the databases, figuring out what kinds of advanced searching options or “filtering” options are offered, identifying what kinds of sources the databases return (i.e., journal article citations, and/or abstracts, and/or full-text, PDF, or HTML files), and determining whether certain databases serve particular audiences or disciplines.

How you create this online resource and what it will include is your decision.

Documenting Digital Sources

Your university has close ties with one of the local high schools; professors give guest lectures and the students visit our campus to attend summer classes and special talks. In an effort to help the senior class of high school students be better prepared for college, you’ve been asked to teach them to use one of the major documentation styles (MLA, APA, or Chicago). So the problem you’re tasked with solving is identifying the values embodied in the different documentation features and explaining these values to an audience of high school students. You need to do much more than simply tell the students how to “fill in the blanks” of a Works Cited entry. Instead, you need to figure out a way to explain what the different components of an entry mean, and what kinds of values these different components convey about what that particular discourse community’s values.
It’s up to you how you decide to explain these documentation features/values to the high school students.

**Defining the Field**

It’s the fall of your junior year, and you have decided that you want to get a summer professional writing internship before you go into your senior year. You figure that in the current slow economy, an internship would give you some much needed experience and possibly even open up a door to a full-time job at your internship site after you graduate.

To prepare, you’ve talked with your advisor and also a career counselor at the Career Center. Both have given you lots of good advice about narrowing down the kinds of internships you might want and how to go about finding them, but both have also strongly urged you to create a portfolio you can send as a follow-up to your initial application and resume, and then also use in any interviews you might get.

You get good advice about what should be in your portfolio, but one piece that surprised you was a definition of your field of study. When your advisor told you such a piece would be helpful, you only kind of believed her: “I mean she is only a professor. What would she know about job portfolios?” But when the career counselor told you the same thing, you started to think you’d better put some time into this piece.

When talking with the career counselor about this field definition piece, you ask, “Who would want to read that?” The counselor said, “Well, you’ll have a person or group of people who may want to know in a quick glance sort of way what your expertise is and what you can bring to them. Then, there may be a second person or group who will want to read that portion of your portfolio to find out more than the quick and dirty. This other group will want to read something that illustrates your depth of knowledge, as well as something that showcases your writing abilities and abilities to reason.”

Throughout your discussion with the career counselor, the issue about how professional writing and rhetoric are connected keeps coming up. She is really interested in hearing more about this connection, about how you define rhetoric, and what it means to connect the two. You’ve gotten the same sort of response from friends and family, most of whom simply leave out the term “rhetoric” when they talk with you about this topic. So far, you aren’t able to respond very well to their questions, a situation you figure you shouldn’t find yourself in when you’re interviewing for internships. Maybe, you think, this is a key topic in your portfolio piece.
Adding to the Conversation about Organizational Context

Professional Writing and Rhetoric: Readings from the Field argues in the “Introduction” that the field of Professional Writing and Rhetoric can be defined as “organizationally situated authorship.” But it also says that phrase requires a lot of “unpacking.” In other words, you can’t just say “organizationally situated authorship” and expect people will understand you, or even that you will know what the heck you’re talking about.

PWR faculty have talked a long while about creating some sort of source that students in all PWR classes could turn to when trying to get a deeper understanding of professional writing and rhetoric as “organizationally situated authorship/action.”

The following e-mail was sent by a PWR faculty member to all the other PWR faculty after a flurry of e-mail messages related to this issue:

Hey, y’all –

This “source” we’ve been talking about sounds like a great research project for a whole class. We’ve discovered again and again that none of us could handle this project alone, but a whole class could create something very helpful.

In fact, this makes me think of a rhetoric resource site at Georgia Tech that was created by some students there. It’s been a helpful and often used resource for people across the country for almost ten years. One of our classes could create something akin to that Tech site.

Since the issue of “organizationally situated authorship” is so closely connected to Professional Writing and Rhetoric: Readings from the Field, which we know is being used in a number of places around the country now, the site would be a great resource for students and faculty outside of our university. That creates an effective and real audience for this work. Plus, our students would be able to point family, friends, internship and job interviewers, grad schools, etc to the site and say, “Hey, I did that!”

What do ya think?

Notes

1. Further introductory information about PBL can be found in these valuable sources: James Rhem’s “Problem-Based Learning: An Introduction” (1998); Barbara J. Duch, Susan E. Groh, and Deborah E. Allen’s The Power of Problem-Based Learning (2001); Jose A. Amador, Libby Miles, and C. B. Peters’s The Practice of Problem-Based Learning: A Guide to Implementing PBL in the College Classroom (2006); John R. Savery’s “Overview of Problem-Based Learning: Definitions and Distinctions” (2006); and Michael Pennell and Libby Miles’s “It Actually Made Me Think: Problem-Based Learning in the Business Communications Classroom” (2009). Two excellent online sources for PBL schol-
arship are *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-based Learning*, hosted by Purdue University, and *The PBL Clearinghouse*, hosted at the University of Delaware.

2. Elon University has made a long-term institutional commitment to engaged learning, a commitment which has become a hallmark of the school’s reputation. This reputation is recognized externally by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), in which Elon consistently earns top scores. In 2009, NSSE surveyed 360,000 students from 617 four-year colleges and universities and is considered “one of the most comprehensive assessments of effective practices in higher education” (see http://www.elon.edu/e-web/news/nsse/). In the 2009 NSSE report, Elon students rated Elon highly on each of the five benchmarks of excellence: Level of Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, Enriching Educational Experiences, and Supportive Campus Environment. For example, Elon’s scores for a few of the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark items were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elon First Year/Seniors</th>
<th>NSSE First Year/Seniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have done/plan to do an internship, field experience, co-op experience or clinical assignment</td>
<td>96%/92%</td>
<td>82%/76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have done/plan to do community/volunteer service</td>
<td>93%/92%</td>
<td>80%/75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have done/plan to study abroad</td>
<td>91%/76%</td>
<td>45%/24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have done/plan to do culminating senior experience (capstone project, thesis)</td>
<td>76%/93%</td>
<td>50%/64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The university’s internal commitment to engaged learning is evidenced by its focus on study abroad (71% of students study abroad at least once before graduating), undergraduate research, service-learning (supported by The Kernodle Center for Service Learning), internships, and civic engagement. The Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL) and the availability of numerous internal grants which aim to enhance pedagogy, active learning, and faculty-student interaction also speak to the university’s commitment to engaged learning. Further, student and faculty participation in Student Undergraduate Research Forum (SURF) has steadily increased over the last 15 years. This forum gives students the opportunity to engage in large-scale research projects and present professionally their research at national and regional conferences.

3. Writing curricula objectives we collaboratively established over the years represent significant features of the context within which we studied PBL. Any decisions we would make or evaluations of possible pedagogies would undoubtedly be made with at least indirect reference to our curricula and the goals/objectives we had established for them.
Our first-year writing program goals reflect a significant connection to rhetoric, with special emphasis on process, strategies, reflection, and social context. In first-year writing, our goals state, all students will gain:

1. A more sophisticated writing process including invention, peer responding, revising and editing that result in a clear, effective well edited public piece.
2. A more sophisticated understanding of the relationship of purpose, audience, and voice, and an awareness that writing expectations and conventions vary within the academy and in professional and public discourse.
3. An appreciation for the capacity of writing to change oneself and the world.

As part of a mid-sized university with a core of Professional Writing and Rhetoric faculty, some of whom direct first-year composition and the university’s writing center, and all of whom teach in the English department’s Professional Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) concentration, we conceive of all of our writing classes as being intimately connected, not within a “major” curriculum but by the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition. Therefore, the goals and objectives of the professional writing and rhetoric curriculum reflect, in some significant ways, those of first-year writing. The assumptions or principles of PWR include the following:

1. We approach professional writing and rhetoric not simply as a functional art limited to means of production, but as a critical social practice that includes engaging in cultural production of social ends.
2. We approach professional writing and rhetoric as a way of acting effectively and wisely within complex situations, corporate, civic, and personal.
3. We understand professional writing and rhetoric to be a situated art.
4. We value the integration of theory and practice.
5. We see professional writing and rhetoric as one, integrated disciplinary field of study and practice.

From these principles, we have established the following set of student-focused objectives:

1. Students will understand that writing participates in socially constructing the worlds within which we live, work, play, et cetera.
2. Students will learn, often through working hands on with actual clients, how to analyze, reflect on, assess, and effectively act within complex contexts and rhetorical situations.
3. Students will study a wide variety of rhetorical techne or strategies and, by working within and reflecting on actual rhetorical contexts, learn to adapt and develop rhetorical strategies and heuristics appropriate to specific situations.
4. Students will show an ability to integrate theoretical knowledge and professional practice.
5. Students will adopt a disciplinary identity as a writer and see themselves as experts (i.e., professional writers/rhetors) who bring particular (e.g., rhetorical) ways of seeing and ways of acting in and on the world around them.

As we build curricula, develop new courses, conceive new assignments, assess programmatic effectiveness, et cetera, we actively reflect on and refer to these
goals and objectives. Therefore, they have played a significant role in our inquiry about the place and value of PBL in writing instruction.

**Works Cited**


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