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WRTG 120: Writing for a Specific Situation; a Lesson on Genre

Background/Context

While students often believe they are familiar with the concept of genre, in truth, the concept is more complex than it seems (refer to Bitzer). I first introduced genre by asking students to share their ideas about the concept in a whole-class discussion. The responses typically involved a list including “poetry,” “fiction,” “biography,” etc. In an attempt to focus their thinking, I asked the students to discuss the difference between writing an email to a professor compared to writing one to a friend. This conversation began our work with genre and allowed me to assign Dirk’s “Navigating Genre” as reading homework. The justification for teaching genre to first year writing students lies with the belief that this knowledge “helps students understand that genre is linked to rhetorical situation, and that the choice of genre is one a writer must carefully decide using a variety of factors” (FSU). Because we were working on analyzing the rhetoric of individuals we considered “rhetorical superheroes,” this lesson on genre aligned well with discussions we had on the rhetorical choices that writers must make. According to the FSU site on genre, “[k]ey to making the appropriate choice is audience, message, and occasion – all factors in the rhetorical situation.” With this preface, I was able to carry out a genre lesson, adapted from the FSU website, with the students writing within different genres to meet the course outcomes of “demonstrate[ing]awareness of academic writing genre conventions, including mechanics and syntax” (Losh, Alexander, Cannon, and Cannon).

Procedure

1. Asking students to recall their understanding of genre, I referred back to a previous discussion we held on the genre of the break-up letter. We had listed the qualities we expected to find within a break-up letter and then looked at two examples to determine the more effective based upon on our criteria. Students matched this list to the rhetorical qualities that we should consider when writing within different genres. We came up with a list that included: situation, audience, purpose, logos, ethos, pathos, kairos, writer’s identity, and word choice/tone.
2. Next I explain to the students that each of them would be writing in a different genre based upon the following scenario:

You borrowed your grandmother’s car to drive to your Biology exam. On the way, you ran a red light because you were texting a friend. The car is un-drivable. The police come and you acknowledge that the accident was your fault.

1. Each student selects a card with one of six writing situations: an email to your professor explaining why you are late, a text to a friend to pick you up, a police report on the accident, a letter to your grandmother telling her you crashed her car, a blog post on car accidents, a Psychology essay on the dangers of texting and driving.
2. Working in groups to write within different genres based upon the selected situation, students discussed how they would address each rhetorical quality we had listed on the board.
3. After deciding on the rhetorical qualities, group members wrote a paragraph in their assigned genre on poster paper.
4. When all groups were finished, the posters were placed around the room, and students rotated through reading each one and taking notes on differences between the genres. When we gathered back together as a whole class, volunteers shared their insights on the differences and the experience.
5. The lesson culminated with a quick-write on the differences they noticed in each genre and how they would now explain genre to someone outside of the class.

Reflection

Works Cited

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