

Valid academic writing connections across the curriculum

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A writing course teaching the principles of academic writing to Communication Studies students incorporates technology, visual imagery and the short story in an exercise that integrates a range of cognitive, technical and writing skills which link effectively to these students' academic programs and their future careers. Using Photoshop®, students conceptually and digitally frame a selected image from Bruegel's "*Flemish Proverbs*" to develop an understanding of the process of framing a story and identifying the story's "kernel of truth". This "truth" is linked back to their understanding of the thesis of the academic essay, and linked forward to applications of "telling a story" in their future writing for the media or client organisations. A case is presented to justify the place of the short story in academic writing programs for these students, and it is furthermore suggested that the academic writing of an even wider range of students could benefit from exposure to the principles and possibilities of the structured short story genre.

Key Words: academic writing, short story, framing, visual imagery, digital technology.

1. Introduction

Teaching the principles and techniques of writing to enable and enhance students' academic success is the purpose of all academic writing programs; however the optimal methods for achieving this are the subject of ongoing debate. "Writing across the curriculum" teachers often work within other subjects, and in collaboration with the subject-specialist teachers, to identify and support the genre-specific writing needs of students (Skillen, James, Percy, Tootell, & Irvine, 2003). Many universities, however, maintain separate academic writing subjects for a variety of pedagogical or organisational reasons; the goal of supporting students academically is still paramount since academic writing, as distinct from writing for personal or creative expression, should connect in a relevant and effective way to students' programs of study and in many cases to the writing in their future careers. The traditional genre of the academic essay will claim a place in virtually every writing program, as its requirements of analysis, research, structure, logic, argument and clear expression are essential components of academic development, and concurrently, assessment. The choice of additional genres is more contestable, often driven by the fields of study: the report in its many formats is well-established in psychology, science and business studies; the literature review, academic article, or thesis writing may be other options. With the range of university degree programs expanding to include new areas of knowledge and research, it is important to prepare students in these programs both for the traditional essays they must write, and for genres relevant to these developing branches of learning. While the short story has a strong claim as a creative writing genre, its presence in academic writing is not so universally accepted. The case for its inclusion as an optional genre for some students is, however, extremely strong when reflecting on the essential purpose of academic

writing. This paper attempts to provide justification for the ability of the structured short story to achieve one aspect of this purpose across a range of curriculum areas, and describes a process by which technology and visual imagery can be incorporated in an authentic way to enhance student engagement with the writing process.

2. “Academic” writing: A variety of viewpoints.

It is difficult to constrain academic writing within a narrow definition or a restrictive list of genres. Indeed, as Bartholomae (1995) comments,

Academic writing is a single thing only in convenient arguments. If you collect samples of academic writing, within or across disciplines, it has as many types and categories, peaks and valleys, as writing grouped under any other general category ... there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing. (pp. 62-63)

However, a quick scan of any selection of academic writing texts will demonstrate that the essay is the most commonly featured genre, followed by a variety of reports, and the various forms of research writing such as literature reviews, theses and research reports. While these all have undeniable validity, they do not necessarily exclude other genres such as the short story.

“Academic” writing appears in different forms and by different names across time and geography. American universities often employ the term “composition”, yet Mlynarczyk and August (2005, p. 1) comment that, “Composition it seems, is always defining itself”. In his article “Composition, 1900-2000”, Bartholomae (2000) describes the generally compulsory teaching of composition in American colleges driven by “a distinctively democratic ideal, that writing belongs to everyone” (p.1950). He charts the uneven course of composition teaching from the 19th century, through being initially subsumed in the 20th century by the study of literature, to re-emerge in the 1950s and 60s. He notes that in 2000, many of the same questions of who teaches, what is taught, and how it is resourced, remained. There was also the parallel development of, and debate between, the proponents of current-traditional rhetoric, the process movement of the 1960s and 1970s, then inevitably, the post-process movement in the 1990s and 2000s (Matsuda, 2003; Yood, 2005), although Fulkerson (2005) challenges the varied interpretations of this latter term.

Even amongst proponents of these differing approaches to writing there is not consensus. Rhetoricians question the field’s arising from, or privileging, one tradition, or the recognition of plural traditions (Bizzell & Jarratt, 2004). Also, as Fulkerson (2005) notes, there can be confusion over terms such as “process”, contending that this clearly cannot exclusively relate to expressive writing since all writing involves a process. Beyond the reality of words on a page, Trimbur (1994, p. 109) reviewing books by Bizzell, Knoblauch and Brannon, and Spellmeyer, noted the presence of “a post-process, post-cognitivist theory and pedagogy that represents 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.” Thus Yood (2005) describes the “shifting ground of composition” (p. 16), and presents a post-process scenario in which writing programs can never be static and must be constantly evolving to meet the needs of students, an aspiration that resonates with the multi-modal writing strategies described later in this paper. Similarly, Fulkerson (2005) describes composition studies as “a less unified and more contentious discipline early in the twenty-first century than it had appeared to be around 1990” (p. 654), noting the increase in the critical/cultural influence, the growth of “expressive” writing applications, and the branching of the rhetorical field.

The degree to which academic writing does or should allow students a personal voice is also debated. Amongst many others, Elbow (e.g. 1995, p. 80) has promoted the concept that students should learn to write “as though they are a central speaker at the center of the universe – rather than feeling, as they often do, that they must summarize what others have said”. Bartholomae (1995), however, has countered this by noting that students must learn to write according to the requirements of academia since “To hide the teacher is to hide the traces of power, tradition and

authority" (p. 63). Bartholomae and Elbow are careful to not present this as a binary decision, and others such as Mlynarczyk (2006, p. 21) comment that while teaching students to "move towards Elbow's mountain – crafting powerful personal narratives using poetic language" is not by itself adequate, a personal engagement with an issue has value insofar as it can result in a deeper understanding and consequently more cogent exposition or argument.

Academic writing can also provide a pathway through which students explore different cognitive processes. Mlynarczyk (2006, pp. 5-7) presents an interesting discussion of the way in which different genres of writing relate to the three theories of language proposed by Bruner (1986), Sapir (1921), and Britton (1971). Bruner (1986) in his classification of the two modes of cognitive functioning, the "Narrative" and the "Paradigmatic or Logico-Scientific", matches these respectively to the story and the argument. He agrees that both can be effectively convincing, although what they are convincing *of* may differ: "arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness" (Bruner, 1986, p. 11). However, he notes that many scientific or mathematical hypotheses may begin as a story, but then pass through verifying processes to be accepted as scientifically valid. Also, not all would agree with Bruner's somewhat limiting dichotomy of persuasion, arguing that the story is indeed capable of demonstrating truth. Sapir's (1921) category of "Referential Language" relates to formal academic writing, while in Britton's (1971) "Schematic Account of Language Functions" (p. 210) the continuum of "Poetic" to "Expressive" to "Transactional" also aligns with the progression from narrative, through everyday speech, to structured language such as scientific reports. All three theorists describe the range of cognitive functions underpinning the uses of language and the resulting formats or genres in which this language is displayed. Thus, extending academic writing to include the narrative has at least a double benefit for students: it provides them with the opportunity to expand their cognitive ability, as well as providing them with another tool of persuasion, a claim supported by our students' experience. Mastering the principles and techniques of the structured short story has broad writing and academic applications.

3. The many guises of the short story

Thus if the possibilities of academic writing are considered as a continuum from the personal responses proposed by Elbow (e.g. 1968, 1973, 1995, 1999), to the highly structured and rule-controlled formats required for theses or academic publication, then the short story might appear to be located somewhere between. Of course the short story itself does not fit any one definition. Within the confines of an academic writing program, the short story allows for a degree of personal voice, yet can still be required to meet some of the criteria set by the "founder" of the modern genre, Edgar Allan Poe (e.g. Cobb, 1910; Stovall, 1963; Rans, 1965; Pasco, 1991). While short stories have existed eternally, and are exemplified in such disparate forms as biblical parables or the tales of Scheherazade, the modern short story is usually sourced to Poe's seminal 1842 review of Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales" in which Poe sets out the requirements for a "short prose narrative" which have guided subsequent generations of short story writers and students (Morelock, 1921; Potter & Dale, 1948; Pasco, 1991). His later "Philosophy of Composition" (1846) added to this analysis of story-telling. Poe's (1842) short story criteria include totality based on a single unique effect which is then illustrated by incidents which enhance this effect. The opening sentence is critical, and no word superfluous, the overall purpose being to paint a picture for the reader. He sums up by saying, "But Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale" (§7). Identifying and illustrating this "kernel of truth" is a key challenge for our student writers, and parallels the challenge they faced in their previous academic essay assignment's requirement to clarify and argue for the truth of their chosen thesis.

Within – and outside – Poe's framework, the short story has of course developed and mutated into various forms, though Bickham (1994) counsels aspiring writers that while the modern published short story might appear to have no rules or consistency, "The things that made a good story long ago still make a good story today" (p. 1). Since an introductory academic writing program rarely aspires to provide an immediate pathway to publication, it seems reasonable

to require of students a structured version of the short story from which they later may wish to deviate.

4. Making the valid connections

4.1 Mapping the theory and practice links

Introducing our students to the structure and process of writing a short story fulfils three purposes. This form makes valid connections to their writing needs in other areas of their curriculum and careers, it provides opportunity for a personal voice, and it taps into an alternative mode of cognition. In addition to this, the particular teaching strategy described herein also maximises their engagement with the writing process by its connection with their wider lives inhabiting the modern visual and technological culture, and by its appeal to those who respond to a kinaesthetic approach to teaching and learning.

The “voice” and “cognition” purposes have been previously discussed, and while the following justification for the valid connections is based on our own program (a Bachelor of Communication Studies with majors in Journalism, Radio, Television, Public Relations/Communication Management, Digital Media, Advertising Creativity, and Creative Industries), the applications could clearly be much wider. The linkages for our students are made in several ways: retrospectively to their earlier subjects and assignments, feeding forward into later study or career choices, and acknowledging their visual and digital cultural environment. In previous classes the students have encountered the concept of “framing” as part of the lexicon of visual communication (Berger, 1972), while later they may meet framing in its role in communication theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993; Drake & Donohue, 1996), as well as media theory (Scheufele, 1999), discourse theory (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005), sociology (Benford & Snow, 2000), public relations theory (Hallahan, 1999) and the news frames of journalism (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Norris, 1997). Many theorists (e.g. Kress, Leite-Garcia, & van Leeuwen, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) argue for the need to interpret written text using a broad contextual framework incorporating not merely the language, but also multiple factors including visual, physical and social/historical elements – the Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) book provides reading material for the students’ Digital Media, and Image and Sound subjects. Awareness of these connections is also essential for graduates whose work in the new media must inevitably be boundary-crossing (Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004). The study program includes computer applications, specifically Adobe® Photoshop®, but almost universally students are technically proficient, and as digital natives, seamlessly integrate multiple forms of technology into their daily study and social lives. Students have also already studied and been assessed on the requirements of the academic essay, and can transfer the concepts of thesis, structure, illustrative support, development, word economy and many other writing fundamentals, between the two genres.

At later stages, most of the students taking this writing course will need to “tell a story” to communicate a broader message through diverse media and for multiple purposes. Journalism has long used the device of telling the larger story through the eyes of the individual. Harvard University’s “Nieman Narrative Digest” (<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu>) showcases newspapers of the world telling the critical news stories of the day through the lens of the individual. Selections include *The Washington Post*’s Sudarsan Raghavan (March 10, 2007) circumventing reader fatigue at five years of Iraq war stories with “Anguish in the Ruins of Mutanabi Street”, while Paul Meyer of the *Dallas Morning News* (March 7, 2008), illuminates the rich/poor divide in “The Fight For Sugar Hill” as a black pastor battles to bring hope to a crime-riddled housing project sited in Texas’s richest county. Kevin Roberts, the worldwide CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi Advertising, is fond of quoting Danish futurist Rolf Jensen (1996): “The highest-paid person in the first half of the next century will be the ‘storyteller’. The value of products will depend on the story they tell” (p. 9). As Roberts (2007) describes it, “stories can get right inside our heads while facts just slide off and hit the floor” (¶ 1). Public relations or communication management literature contains extensive reference to the identity of organisations as conceptualised through storytelling (Brown, 2006), while Hallahan (1999), in defining the social

constructivist role of public relations, describes framing as a key element in this construction and identifies storytelling as the most complex form of this framing. Thus in the same way that an understanding of the structure, logic and execution of an academic essay develops cognitive and composition capabilities far beyond the specific topic of an assignment, so too for particular students, can mastering the key concepts of framing, illustrating and narrating a story provide insight into not only the modes of writing but also the theoretical frameworks of other fields of study.

The transference principle is also important when making these connections. There is sobering evidence that unless connections are made explicit, students have an alarming tendency to not automatically transfer principles or knowledge (Catrambone & Holyoak, 1989). The relevance of this genre, and the following teaching strategy, are therefore enhanced by clearly mapping for the students (see Figure 1) the aforementioned linkages.

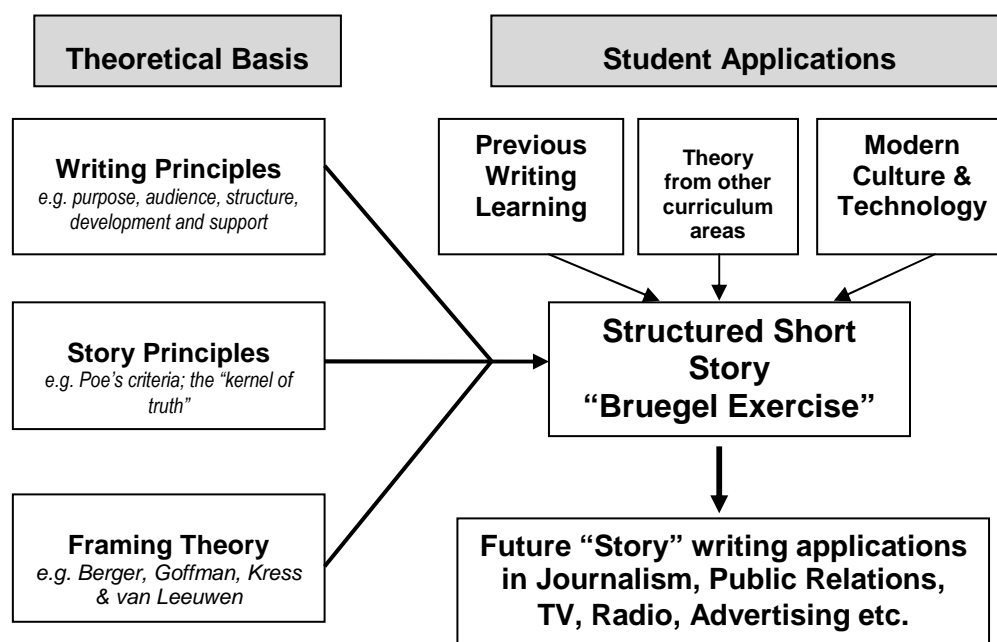


Figure 1. Mapping for students their transference of theory, skills and experience.

4.2 Challenges of teaching the short story.

For the purposes of this exercise, reflecting the linkages and principles described in Figure 1, students are directed to construct their short story according to set parameters which will enable them to identify the principles of writing applied to storytelling, rather than to merely recount an event. The story may be triggered by personal experience but may also be fictionalised to enhance the key elements of a story, and should “show” rather than “tell”; it must use a “framed event” which, to echo Poe, communicates a “kernel of truth” to the reader. These two latter characteristics had previously posed the greatest challenge for students who wanted, for example, to tell the complete travel story rather than the pivotal experience, and were not clear about identifying the message, theme, or moment of enlightenment that their story was attempting to convey. The following exercise was devised to deal with these challenges, using a multi-modal strategy of visual imagery, conceptual as well as kinaesthetic framing, and digital technology skills. The focus is clearly on the writing principles, while the visual and technological domains are presented as stimuli for the conceptualising and writing process, rather than as superficial devices.

4.3 The “Bruegel Exercise”

Using the visual in an analogy with writing, Jan Vermeer’s (1665) “Girl with a Pearl Earring” is presented to the students as an exemplar of a visual short story. Many students are aware of the multi-media development of this evocative image as the prompt for the Tracey Chevalier (1999) book, then the Scarlett Johansson / Colin Firth movie (Paterson & Webber, 2003). Vermeer’s painting represents a tantalising mix of innocence and intrigue, a “story” that has fascinated for centuries. Bruegel’s (1559) “Flemish Proverbs” on the other hand, is “life writ large”; in true Bruegel style it is an exquisitely detailed work with a multitude of characters and scenes, so the task of framing the selected image must be done by the observer. Moreover, this particular image has an extra dimension that ideally serves our function of explicating the short story. As indicated by the painting’s title, the subject matter of the painting is proverbs, indeed at least 118 of them, the proverb being an expression which distils a “kernel of truth” whose universality is illustrated by the connections that our students over 400 years and 18 000 km away were able to make with their own lives.

Students could each access and manipulate a 16Mb¹ image of Bruegel’s painting in Photoshop®. They are provided with a line drawing key to the painting and its 118 – 120 proverbs (Vohringer, 1999, pp. 56-57) – art historians cannot agree on exactly how many. Some students work from the proverb text to the painting, while others prefer to work in the reverse direction. Their task is to find an image or proverb which connects in some way to their own experience, and which could provide a prompt for their writing. Using the framing tool in Photoshop®, they can select and place a lined frame around this image. Their conceptual framing has identified a proverb theme such as friendship, or betrayal, or wise advice, then the physical and digital action of the Photoshop® framing tool throws the framed image into the lit foreground, while the remainder of the painting recedes into a darker background – both a literal and a metaphorical highlighting. The <<Enter>> key transfers this selection to a fresh screen where the image can be enlarged as desired to act as the visual prompt for the short story to be constructed around this theme. The students have thus engaged in a process whereby they have selected and framed a small event from a larger theatre of action, then magnified this to illuminate the particular details that give unique meaning to the image’s story. Thus they focus on the twin concepts of framing their story, and identifying the implicit message or “kernel of truth” of that story.

One example of this process was the choice of an image illustrating the proverb, “The pig has been stuck through the belly (The decision has been made and is irrevocable)” (Vohringer, 1999, pp. 56-57, No. 64). This prompted a story of two friends meeting again after many years, and the tentative and eventually unsuccessful attempts to re-establish their friendship which one deduces must have been seriously damaged in some “irrevocable” way. Another choice related the proverb, “Not reach from one loaf to the next (too little money)” (Vohringer, 1999, pp. 56-57, No. 75) to a student’s grappling with perennial budgeting problems, while, “They shit through the same hole (inseparable friends)” (Vohringer, 1999, pp. 56-57, No. 93) sparked several stories of the timeless value of true friendship even in difficult or embarrassing moments. These “small stories”, which convey the much larger message, demonstrate the same principles used by journalist Raghavan (March 10, 2007) on the streets of Baghdad, advertiser Kevin Roberts in his new storytelling campaign for J. C. Penney (Barbaro, July 11, 2007) or the public relations company salvaging Johnson & Johnson from the 1982 Tylenol crisis (Pauly & Hutchison, 2005).

Two subsequent exercises were also developed to test appreciation of the story principles, and to extend understanding of writing from different perspectives. The first of these applied the opposite process to the Bruegel exercise which had provided the themes for students to match with their own stories. Students were asked to recall and “frame” a small but significant event,

¹ The large file size enabled considerable magnification of even tiny image selections without loss of detail, incidentally illustrating Bruegel’s incredible artistic craftsmanship to the amazement of our 21st century students.

then to probe why this event was noteworthy, and what “kernel of truth” it might illustrate. If this could not be identified, the event may not have the potential for story development, one of Poe’s key elements being missing; a similar test would need to be applied in a journalistic context to differentiate a story of genuine social or political significance from a banal “human interest” item. The next exercise used a small scene from “Flemish Proverbs” that illustrated more than one proverb, just as the same news event might have different meanings if viewed from the perspectives of different stakeholders, or if different aspects of the event were spot-lighted. This scene in the painting’s left foreground contains four proverbs (Vohringer, 1999, pp. 56-57, Nos. 43, 44, 45, 46). Two people are shearing, one a sheep and the other a pig, while a lamb lies tied waiting on the ground. This provides, “One shears sheep, the other swine (identical work is not rewarded equally)”, “A lot of squealing, not much wool”, “Shear it but don’t flay it (do not go for profit at any cost)” and “Patient as a lamb”. Students are asked to identify an event, then consider various interpretations by adopting the viewpoint of different protagonists, by highlighting different aspects or emotions, or by fictionalising or elaborating details; one “story” would then be written from the perspective of two of these interpretations. This also allows them to investigate the polysemic aspects of a story, while not privileging one interpretation over another.

5. Student responses

The response from students has been enthusiastic. In the first semester of delivery, 59 of 70 students gave the following feedback. Eighty-three percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I found the Photoshop® exercise of ‘framing’ an image in *Bruegel’s Flemish Proverbs* useful in understanding the purpose of experiential writing”. Fifty-three students made positive comments such as that it helped them to frame or focus their stories, it was interesting and enjoyable, and that they found the visual element helped their writing process. Sample comments were, “Probably by writing a story about a brick in a wall rather than the whole wall”, “I am a visual person and I like visual analogies”, “It’s a bit much to take on the whole Bruegel picture at once so by breaking it down it also helped me to understand the proverbs. ... You can think how it relates to things / events you’ve heard of or experienced yourself.” Some enjoyed the active experience as a lead-in to their writing process. Only six students gave negative comments such as that they could not see a connection with their own life, or that they wanted a more modern art work.

6. Conclusion

Academic writing in the current environment encompasses far more than the construction of grammatically and syntactically correct text conforming to prescribed structures and layouts; many 21st century students require writing skills that can cross traditional boundaries and mesh with the visual and digital literacies of their other curriculum areas. Adapting and extending approaches to academic writing is critical for delivering the best outcomes for our students, and opens up exciting new areas for research and teaching. The structured short story, also connected here to the visual and the digital, can be a valuable component of the academic writing tool-box of the future for a wide range of students. The Bruegel visual connection also poses an interesting social semiotic 16th/21st century comparison in the “reading” of the painting: Bruegel’s was an era of low reading literacy when messages were often communicated orally or visually – there are echoes of this in our evolving communication landscape that are of importance to our students, and which could merit further investigation.

For maximum effectiveness, academic writing programmes must also make valid connections across the curriculum. These connections should have a sound conceptual basis, ideally feeding into multiple aspects of the total curriculum, and signposted explicitly for the students. It is also important that technology is promoted as a facilitation of writing, not as a replacement for the knowledge and skills of the writer. We observed that the Bruegel task resulted in a significant improvement in students’ understanding of the writing process by which they framed their stories and ensured that their stories had the “kernel of truth” to communicate to the reader.

Thus this multi-modal exercise was engaging for students, as well as delivering valid learning outcomes applicable to a broad range of their study and vocational choices. The writing/ digital/ visual nexus is a space that 21st century academic writing must occupy.

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