

Diversifying Writing in Student Research Projects on Global Issues: Exploring the Creative-Critical Dynamic

多様化するライティング —創造的・批判的ダイナミック研究—

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Abstract

In this short paper I look at fundamental changes that I made in a first-year university research and writing course on global issues. These changes were made to break free of the confines that an excessive focus on academic genre conventions can involve. What might an engagement with global issues through writing begin to entail where students are asked to try a diverse range of academic and real-world genres and exercise choice over the genres that they wish to use for communicating their research to others? In exploring this central question, I draw on the perspectives of both Exploratory Practice (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) and Critical Literacy (Janks, 2010) as I look at how students may be guided to make, deconstruct, and re-design texts, as they work both creatively and critically on the development of their literacy practices. This exploration represents an initial—and incomplete—attempt to probe “the creative-critical dynamic” in student research and writing about global issues. It also raises questions about how students themselves see their developing capacity for creative and critical engagement with global issues through research and writing.

要旨

本稿では、大学1年生を対象にしたグローバル問題に関するリサーチライティング授業での抜本的な変化について考察する。本実践により、アカデミックジャンルの慣習を重視しすぎるといった制約を打破するという変化をもたらした。アカデミックで現実世界の様々なジャンルを試し、自身の研究の伝達手段としてのジャンル選択も求められるライティングでのグローバル問題の実践では、一体何が必要になるのだろうか。この核心的な問題の探究にあたり、Exploratory Practice (Allwright & Hanks, 2009)とCritical Literacy (Janks, 2010)の観点を用い、リテラシー発達に創造的かつ批判的に取り組みながら、学生自身がどのようにテキストを作成、脱構築、再考案するかを考察する。本実践は、グローバル問題に関するリサーチとライティングでの「クリエイティブ・クリティカルダイナミック」を探究する初めての(不完全な)試みであるが、リサーチとライティングを通じたグローバル問題への創造的かつ批判的な実践での能力向上に対する学生自身の捉え方についても論じる。

Keywords

academic literacy, global issues, genre diversification, creativity, criticality

アカデミックリテラシー、グローバル問題、ジャンルの多様性、創造力、批判力

“It was so hard for me to change different text types because I had to change the way of researching in each type. For example, in Cycle 4, I had to research individual cases including quotation. It was different from the types that I did in Cycle 1- Cycle 3, so global issues news article text was the most challenging text type, but it is also the most satisfying text type for me...” (Reina, end-of-year reflection)

“I feel interesting that I change text types. That is because I can broad my range of expression through learning some different manners of writing, so I think that’s useful for me at the same time. The most challenging type was Question Sheet. In order to use this type, it is required to comprehend what is the problem and to pick up appropriate questions ...” (Masayuki, end-of-year reflection)

“Research Report text style was easy to write. However, it was good to write this style in the last cycle. Media text and other text styles that we wrote in spring semester have peculiar style so we need to have ideas to research and to write...If we had written Research Report or Research Narrative in spring semester they might be monotonous writing...” (Kanako, end-of-year reflection)

Introduction

The end-of-year reflections by Kanako, Masayuki, and Reina¹ give some sense of the challenges and benefits that a class of first-year students experienced in researching global issues and writing about them in different genres. Reina notices how her research was constrained by genre: in order to write a “Global Issues News Article,” she needed to search for specific quotations to give voice to different individuals’ experiences. Masayuki highlights how writing in different genres helped him develop a sense of versatility in

expressing his ideas. His reflection also suggests that creating a “Question Sheet” helped him to gain a critical perspective about key questions to do with one of the global issues that he researched. Kanako’s comment underlines how writing in a range of real-world genres earlier in the course enabled her to feel confident about producing an academic “Research Report” as her final product for the year. All in all, the three students’ reflections point to how their creativity and criticality were engaged by using different genres to write about the global issues that they researched. In this short paper I look at the diversification of genres in a first-year research and writing course on global issues and explore the interplay between creativity and criticality that such diversification brings into focus in the development of academic literacy.

Context

The course is part of a common research and writing curriculum for first- and second-year International Law and Business majors. The umbrella focus of the curriculum is the development of academic literacy, which means, in this context, being/becoming able to engage with content and using English to learn about social, political, legal and global issues in self-directed research projects. The primary processes in these academic literacy practices are researching and gathering information and ideas to do with global issues, exchanging and explaining such information and ideas, analyzing and (re-)organizing (in spoken and written discourse) one’s understanding, responding, asking questions, and exploring different positions, in order to develop a critical position about different issues. “Critical” is taken to mean here developing knowledge of a global issue not only by understanding possible causes and conditions, but also examining them from multiple perspectives

¹ Pseudonyms are used here to protect the students’ identities.

and identifying and including voices of those affected by the global issue. It also involves looking at who benefits or not, and formulating solutions or alternatives that might be taken by different actors (e.g., persons, communities, organisations) (Barfield, 2015). This view of criticality is derived from work done in the UK on engaging students with controversial issues for citizenship education (Andreotti & Warwick, 2007; Andreotti et al., 2007).

Since 2014 the 13 classes in the first-year course have had a common global issues content focus, with students working mainly with simplified Global Issues readers and producing a 500-word report in the Spring semester, and doing web-based research using a bespoke global issues website (Global Issues Resources, 2016a) in the Autumn semester to complete an 800-word report by the end of the academic year. Students are guided to choose their own research focus where they typically do three weeks of self-directed research and note-taking, before writing, responding to each other's drafts, and revising their own, over a further three or so weeks (although some research and writing cycles are shorter according to the particular approach taken by individual teachers).

In the reformed curriculum the term "report" covers a wide range of genres, without an exclusive focus on academic genres such as "essay" or "research report." The assumption is that students can meet common curriculum requirements for researching (such as raising questions, gathering information, note-taking and paraphrasing) and writing (such as free writing, planning, composing and drafting) by working across different genres rather than within a limited number of specifically academic genres. There are usually between 12 and 20 students in a class, with a wide range of English proficiencies, in the first

year, from low intermediate through to advanced. Most students start their first year without experience of doing extended research or writing in English.

Questioning Practices

In the 2014 academic year I had asked students to move from "Summary" and "Summary and Discussion" in the Spring semester to "Research Narrative"² and "Research Report" in the Autumn, believing that working incrementally with such academic genres was appropriate for a mixed proficiency first-year class new to research and writing in English. Most students in my class took to this readily, but for a few students there was resistance and struggle, manifested in a lack of fluency and voice, perhaps even frustration, at the end of the year. Had writing exclusively in academic genres about global issues supported or limited their development? I wasn't sure, but the struggles of those few students made me begin to re-think how students might differently engage with researching and writing about global issues, leading me to step back and question what I had taken for granted.

Thinking the year over, I realised that from early on I had been expecting students to draft, respond, re-draft, and finalize writing products over three drafts, and that this emphasis on writing process and extended text development had cut down on the space for students to develop writing fluency and voice. Why not put much greater emphasis on writing fluently in the Spring semester by downplaying the need for drafting and re-drafting writing products in the first months of the course? If, instead, students did journaling regularly in class each week based on what they were learning about different global issues, they would have more opportunities for developing their writing fluency and for

² A research narrative involves students re-working journaling texts to tell the story of the development of their research and writing in a cycle. It may include an introduction, discussion, and

question-raising conclusion. See Table 1 further below in this article.

thinking through their understanding of what they were researching. Regular journaling would also let them develop a large body of writing that they could draw on for planning and writing a first draft of a particular genre. (Students started by writing between 120-150 words, but most were soon producing 160-200 words or more in each journaling session.) If the students also read and talked about each other's journaling in class each week, this would help them develop a more spontaneous sense of voice in English about the global issues that they were learning about.

A second question that came up for me concerned asking students from the beginning of the course to read and make notes on extended written texts (global issues readers in the Spring semester, and webpages in the Autumn semester) rather than initially using other, more popular, and less text-based sources of information for note-taking, explanation and discussion (for example, images, videos, slogans, quotations, and campaigns to do with global issues). Although the use of global issues readers in the Spring semester provided a common curriculum focus as well as solid support for students who might otherwise experience some initial difficulties with learning through English about particular global issues, limiting the focus on any global issue mainly to a 30-page reader risked becoming a classic example of "encapsulated learning" (Engeström, 1991; see also Yamazumi, 2006) where what is learnt in the classroom is separated from understanding and experience of the outside world.

Thinking this through led me to a third question directly connected to the diversification of genre: Why not ask students to write in non-academic, personalised ways at the start of the course, and then later in the course have them engage with other, more institutionalised, real-world and academic genres (such as media texts, research narratives, and research reports) so that they would learn to

communicate their understandings of global issues in different ways? Such a broadening of genre would offer students more choice in how they wrote about the global issues that they researched. It might also let them develop a stronger sense of creativity and criticality in writing about different global issues that they were interested in.

By "creativity" I refer here to more than just a general act of imagination to produce or create something new that we conventionally read "creativity" to mean, as in these dictionary definitions:

the ability to use skill and imagination to produce something new or to produce art; the act of doing this (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, undated)

the ability to create new ideas or things using your imagination (Macmillan Dictionary Online, undated).

Rather, from reading Janks's (2010) compelling work on literacy and power, I started to find it useful to think of creativity as signaling a practice of "re-design" or "re-construction" that follows on from deconstructing texts and understanding how texts (including images) position and represent particular views of the world. Janks herself proposes for the development of literacy practices a "redesign cycle" of "*deconstruct-reconstruct-construct*" as shown in Figure 1.

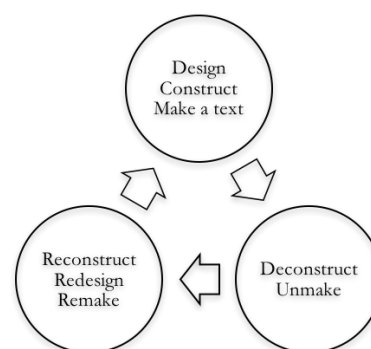


Figure 1. Janks's Redesign Cycle (2010, p. 183).

According to Janks, “A critical approach to writing helps us to think about how texts may be rewritten and how multimodal texts can be redesigned. It enables us to transform texts, to remake the word. If repositioning texts is tied to an ethic of social justice then redesign can contribute to the kind of identity and social transformation that Freire’s work advocates” (Janks, 2010, p.18). Her book, *Literacy and Power* (Janks, 2010), provides many interesting examples of how to work with both creativity and criticality in the development of critical literacy, based on her work in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Coming back to the first-year researching and writing class, I wasn’t yet clear how the changes that I had started imagining might work out in practice, but nevertheless raising these doubts and questions let me tentatively find some new directions. I became more questioning about the students’ ongoing writing development; I had also begun to see that it might make sense to reframe my concerns in terms of “critical literacy development.” That said, it was (and still seems) too early to make such a decision, so in this paper I reformulate these doubts and questions as a set of continuing “puzzles” in an Exploratory Practice (EP) sense³ in so far as they invite an extended, exploratory consideration:

- Why have an exclusive focus on academic genres?
- What real-world or popular genres might be interesting for students to work with? Why?
- How might students develop greater writing fluency about global issues so that they can more confidently engage with planning, drafting, and re-drafting different writing products?
- What place might images, slogans, and campaigns have in the development of

students’ research and writing about global issues?

- How might students be guided to rework and remake their own writing within the constraints of a particular genre, and, at the same time, develop a critical position about the global issues that they research and write about?
- How might I learn together with my students about their development as it unfolds?

Through the 2015 academic year I discussed these puzzles with different teachers at work, in Learner Development SIG get-togethers, at the JALT2015 International Conference, and at the Creating Community: Learning Together 2 Conference in December 2015. I also talked about them with the students in the 2015 research and writing class. Dipping into the work by Janks (2010), as well as Brookfield (2005) and Crookes (2013), helped me to understand further different critical views about learning and literacy. Brookfield presents a detailed and eloquent analysis of how Western democracies function with deep inequality, which is constantly reproduced “as seeming to be normal, natural and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system” (Brookfield, 2006, p. 370). He carefully explores how critical theory can help teachers in adult education address issues of power, alienation, class, racism, and gender. Crookes does much the same in relation to the field of ELT, appealing to readers who “value basic ideals such as equality, democracy, freedom, and solidarity and are looking for a way to bring those fully to bear” (Crookes, 2013, pp. 6-7) in their work. Another important influence for me was the volunteer teacher education work that I did in a completely different context in Burma (see Barfield & Morgan, 2016, this volume)

³ Allwright & Hanks (2009, p.156) observe: “For EP we find it helpful to think in terms of “puzzles” rather than “problems”, if only to try to capture the difference between something that simply calls for a “solution” and something that is just interesting

and warrants work for understanding. ... This deliberate shift of formulation from “problem to solve” to “puzzle to understand” is a central and highly productive characteristic of EP.”

that let me become clearer about the value of focusing on both criticality and creativity. At the same time, all these different influences and interactions didn't provide any immediate answers for the research and writing course other than to talk about different possibilities for the students' writing and to experiment. In short, a direction had been set, and now it was time to explore.

I continue by presenting some of the different genres that the students tried in 2015, before looking at the "literacy development story" of one student. In the final part of this paper, I raise some further questions about the interplay between criticality and creativity in the development of such literacy practices.

Experimenting With Different Written Genres

In 2015 students regularly did journaling, writing freely for 20-30 minutes each week about the research that they were doing. Following some broad guidelines that I gave them at the start of the writing stage of each cycle, the students would plan their writing product and draft it by drawing from their research notes and journaling over the previous "research" weeks. As mentioned earlier, this enabled the students to start from a body of writing that they had already completed and to rework it towards particular genre conventions. These conventions were explained in handouts with example modified-authentic texts, which students read and discussed in class in the writing stage of each cycle. In the Autumn semester, students also did jigsaw readings in pairs in class to raise their awareness of different ways of organizing texts. These activities helped sensitize students to the mediation between local and global representations of an issue, as well as

between different voices, interests, and perspectives around an issue—those of individuals, local communities, official positions, as well as counter-positions taken by researchers and civil society actors.

The range of genres diversified over the year, including Personal Diary, Question Sheet, and Visual Report in the Spring semester, and media texts (News Article, Op-Ed/Opinion Piece, and Editorial), Research Narrative, Research Report, and Blog Posts, in the Autumn semester. Table 1 below shows the genres for different research and writing cycles in 2015.

Table 1. Range of Genres Across the Year.

<i>Semester</i>	<i>Cycle</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Brief descriptor</i>	
Spring	1	Personal Diary	"bringing together your starting interest and thoughts about Global Issues, by presenting and interpreting (a) different images, (b) different sayings, quotes, slogans, and (c) different popular projects, campaigns or organisations to do with global issues/a global issue that you are particularly interested in"	
	2	Visual Report	"6-8 steps of analysis with images of a global issue, including a short introduction, discussion, and a short conclusion"	
	3	Question Sheet	"6-8 critical questions about a global issue with a well-organized response to each Critical Question, so that the reader can learn about the global issue and understand why it is important to take action"	
Autumn	4	News Article	"taking up a local event from individual, group/community, and official points of view about a global issue, using short quotations, and giving a precise picture of the issue, followed by wider analysis"	
		Op-Ed/Opinion	"taking up a global event and explaining its importance, before presenting your key argument about the issue both globally and locally"	
		Editorial	"arguments against an official or widely accepted position on a global issue, presenting counter-claims with reasons"	
	5	<i>any of the above except for Personal Diary, plus:</i>		<i>a set of Blog Posts</i>
		Research Narrative	"3 or 4 blog posts, each 200-300 words"	"re-working journaling texts to tell the story of the development of your research in Cycle 5, with an introduction, discussion, and question-raising conclusion"
Research Report		"problem-solution analysis of a global issue"	"some other genre	... open to discussion and negotiation ...

As can be seen, the genres grew in complexity from Personal Diary in Cycle 1 (focusing on different images, sayings, quotes, slogans, and popular projects, campaigns or organisations to do with a global issue) to Question Sheet in Cycle 3 (a modified form of a FAQ webpage, where the writer raises critical questions about a global issue), to a choice of three different media texts in Cycle 4, and a wider range still in Cycle 5 of what genre to work with. Importantly, Cycle 5 included one option where students could produce a combination of shorter texts (a set of 200- to 300-word blog posts) on the global issue that they researched in case any individual felt that it would be too difficult to write a final text of 800 words on a single issue.

In fact, one student chose to do blog posts because this enabled them to write about different human rights issues rather than limiting their focus to a single global issue. The student wrote three blogs on “Inequality and Discrimination in the World” (the “October 26 Driving Campaign” by women in Saudi Arabia, hate speech in football, and the eradication of child labour). In addition to Blog Posts, examples of student writing in all the other genres listed in Table 1 (except for Personal Diary) can be found on the Global Issues Resources website.⁴

Tables 2 and 3 further below show what genres students chose in Cycles 4 and 5. “News Article” was the most popular choice in Cycle 4, with eight out of 19 students choosing this type of media text as their writing product. In contrast, in Cycle 5, Question Sheet was the first choice of 8 students, with two research genres the next most frequent (Research Report: 4 students; Research Narrative: 2 students). Just two students wrote Blog Posts in the end; a third student started with Blog Posts, but then switched to Research Report in the process

of re-drafting. What was particularly interesting in Cycles 4 and 5 was seeing students within the same class learn from each other not only about a broad variety of global issues, but also about different genres for communicating their understanding to readers as they grappled with the development of diverse literacy practices.

Table 2. Cycle 4 Student Choices of Genre.

Genre	Number of students
Editorial	5
Op-Ed/Opinion	6
News Article	8
Total	19

Table 3. Cycle 5 Student Choices of Genre.
(2 students didn't complete cycle 5)

Genre	Number of students
Editorial	1
Blog Posts	2
Research Narrative	2
Research Report	4
Question Sheet	8
<i>Total</i>	17*

Learning with the Students

During the year, I tried to talk in each class with three to four students about what they were doing, what questions and puzzles they were exploring, and how they were coping with writing in different genres. For reasons of space I focus here on the literacy development of one student, Reina. I have reconstructed her story from fragments of dialogues with her, my research notes and reflections, extracts from her journals, and her Cycle 4 review. In Cycle 4 Reina decided

⁴ See “Student Writing on Global Issues”
<https://sites.google.com/site/resourcesforglobalresources/student-writing-on-global-issues>

to research and produce a global issues news article about the Syrian refugee crisis. My narrative reconstruction of part of her literacy development reads as follows:

Reina's interest in refugees has come from watching a video news story on the plight of Syrian refugees (Dialogue 10/07). Reina started out wanting to look at conflict and war situations in other countries. She was also interested in the new security law in Japan (Journal 12): her first research notes don't have a single focus on refugees. In her second journal, she commented: "Japan is far from Syria, but we can deliver food, water, and other necessities, so I think we should do first what we can do." (Journal 13). Reina started to look at the specific issue of EU countries refusing to accept refugees, and she records in her notes (Research Notes 2) arguments made against refugees, as well as the counterarguments in favour of refugees being accepted: "Secondly they think that the number of refugees will exceed the population in a few decades because the birth rate in Europe are low. Actually, even though the birth rates are higher among Muslims, they drop out and adjust as the standard of living and level of education rise." (Journal 14)

Reina wondered why the Gulf States refuse to accept Syrian refugees. In her writing, she reasons that they "don't have the concept of a refugee" (Journal 15) and Gulf States are "concerned about their nation's security" (Journal 15). She feels that "it is important that we do not criticize the Gulf states but work on them patiently" (Journal 15). Her other research question is "What can we do for refugees?"

Reina opts for "Global Issues News Article", and, talking with me, she explains that she wants to look at the situation in Syria deeply and find the voices of refugees (Dialogue 10/21). Later, in her Review, at the end of the research and writing cycle, Reina notes: "I wrote 'News Article'. This type needs quotation from the individuals, so I searched them by watching videos and using the internet ... I read many articles written by Reuters, the Guardian, and so on. When I found information I want to know, I became very happy." (Review) In talking with

Reina, I question her about her first-draft conclusion, which said, "The organizations such as UNHCR and AAR are working hard, so each of us should know about their work and cooperate with them." (Draft 2) I respond in a comment to her: "It's a typical thing that we say, but what does it mean? I would encourage you to use a different phrase here and explain more. Yes, we can (and it is a good thing to do so too) support actors like the UNHCR and AAR, but what do we also need to do so that we help change the public understanding of refugees in the civil society and private and public networks that we are part of? What actions can we take? How?" (Draft 2 Comment) Reina doesn't reply, but she changes the ending substantially. She concludes her end-of-cycle review: "This cycle's writing was very, very difficult for me, but I got a of good things to me through this writing process." (Review).

One of the interesting aspects of Reina's story is how her research steps up a gear at the moment of deciding what genre she is going to use to redesign her understanding of the issue that she has researched. The choice of "news article" requires that she find (and/or create) quotations by different actors so that she can give voice to different perspectives and positions about the refugee crisis. Reina articulates her need to find quotations very clearly, and she uses both video and text information sources to find appropriate voices. At a conventional level of academic literacy, her clarity of purpose may stand in marked contrast to the familiar struggles that many first-year students have with the use of quotation in academic genres.⁵ Another aspect of Reina's story of literacy that deserves comment is the affective dimension. Reina expresses a feeling of happiness in searching and finding quotations, as well as a sense of achievement in completing her research and writing a global issues news article. It appears that the creative challenge of producing a media text with global, local, and individual perspectives helps Reina to imagine what might be done

⁵ The final draft of Reina's global issues news article is available online. See

<https://sites.google.com/site/resourcesforglobalresources/student-writing-on-global-issues/news-articles/refugees>

more concretely on refugees' behalf and to gain some sense of emotional satisfaction in redesigning her news article with those perspectives and voices.

From a critical point of view, Reina's story shows her moving between nation-state perspectives (Japan, Syria, the EU, Gulf states), the concerns of international and global and local actors such as the UNHCR and the Association for Aid and Relief (AAR)⁶, and her own position. Who she includes as part of her collective position appears to change as she takes different positions on the issue: To what extent does the "we" in "we can deliver food, water, and other necessities, so I think we should do first what we can do" overlap with the "each of us" in "so each of us should know about their work and cooperate with them"? The closing part of her finalised news article reads as follows:

The organizations such as UNHCR and AAR are working hard, so each of us should know about their work. Reporters of newspaper or magazine should interview members of organization, write their work on articles and tell readers how useful their work is. Especially, young people are not so interested in this problem, so it will be make a difference to write about conditions refugees are facing and work of organizations on magazines which young people read. (Global Issues Resources, 2016b)

Reina imagines it is possible to make a difference by writing (locally?) about what problems refugees face and what work humanitarian organisations are doing on their behalf; yet, her individual agency is hidden. Re-reading her story and considering how her global issues news article positions her and others raises interesting questions not only about the development of critical literacy in student

research and writing on global issues, but also about how the "global (imaginary)" is locally reproduced and re-designed in individual literacy practices.⁷

Connections and Questions

In this short paper I have tried to trace a fundamental shift in my pedagogy and understanding of what an engagement with global issues through writing may begin to entail where students are asked to try a diverse range of academic and real-world genres *and* exercise choice over the genres that they wish to use for communicating their research to others. This shift helps break out of the confines of "encapsulated learning" that an excessive focus on academic genre conventions can involve. It moves our attention towards an expansive engagement with making, deconstructing, and re-designing texts where students can learn to work creatively and critically on the development of their literacy practices. The exploration presented in this paper represents an initial—and incomplete—attempt to probe what we might call "the creative-critical dynamic" in student research and writing about global issues. Many interesting puzzles remain to explore, and, drawing on the perspectives of both Exploratory Practice (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) and Critical Literacy (Janks, 2010, p.19), they include:

"How might students be guided to deconstruct, creatively re-design, and make texts within the constraints of particular genres, and multimodally re-write their own critical position about the global issues that they research so that they pose questions, educate others, take action, and/or raise public awareness towards establishing greater social justice?"

⁶ AAR is an NGO that was founded in 1979 to assist refugees in post-conflict Cambodia. For more details see <http://www.aarjapan.gt.jp/english/about/>

⁷ See Kamola, 2014, for a broader discussion of how "global imaginaries" are re-produced in higher education.

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