

Short Reflective Articles

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Writing in Different Genres: Nurturing Students' Creativity, Criticality, and Informed Improvisation



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This issue of *Learning Learning* includes pieces of student writing by two third-year undergraduate students, Maria YAMAZAKI and Yuiko ASAI. Maria chose to write an academic blog post (“*What should we do to protect our language identities? The impact of society, beliefs, and the education system*”), while Yuiko decided to work on an article for a youth magazine (“*Time-traveling and recognizing Aboriginal cultures*”). These were the final products that Maria and Yuiko created in 2022 for their second-year seminar on Language Issues in Society. In this discussion, Hugh Nicoll talks with Andy Barfield, the seminar teacher, about why he asked the students to write in different genres and how Maria and Yuiko saw, from their perspectives, the process of creating these original pieces of writing.

Hugh: Andy – I really enjoyed reading Maria and Yuiko’s pieces as we were putting this issue of *Learning Learning* together. Reading their pieces took me back to my full-time days, when working with seminar students was one of my greatest challenges and greatest pleasures. My seminar students were tied to the graduation thesis requirements at my university, so there were few options for exploring alternative genres in their projects. Can you tell us a bit more about the context in which your students were working?

Andy: Sure, Hugh—the institutional context is a little different from the graduation thesis requirements at your university. My colleagues and I are fortunate to have some leeway with student work for the seminars that we teach as there is no standardised requirement for second-year students to produce a particular type or length of report, and the seminar itself is independent of students’ 3rd and 4th year “*senmon enshu*” choices. That said, “academic report” is probably the most common expectation that students have for seminars in the different years that they take them. Going back to the 2022 Autumn semester, the eight students in the Language Issues in Society seminar did individual semester-long research projects, with some fieldwork (e.g., observational/visual, discussions outside the seminar, interviews). Around mid-November or so, they gave presentations on their research, then they started working on writing up reports of their projects. When I raised the possibility of writing in different genres, most were interested in creating their reports in a non-academic style, so I encouraged them to choose their own style of report and to find examples in English and Japanese of the kind of genre they wanted to write. “*At first I didn’t know what way was better to do my report, and I was thinking about doing a video report like a documentary or blog. Because my report will be a little specific I was also thinking of doing academic writing too but I wanted to make a report which is easy to read for everyone,*” reflected Maria as she initially opted for a more personal style of academic writing. Later she settled on producing an academic blog. Yuiko decided to write an article for a youth magazine, while other students chose “newspaper article,” “mass media web article,” and “academic report.”

Over the next several weeks, the students would refer to different texts and discuss with each other and me how they were trying to align their writing with the examples of the genre that they had chosen. Often this involved multimodal features like images, headings, font choice, and font colour. Other features the students noticed included sentence and paragraph length. *“I am trying not to write an academic report like I am very used to doing, while thinking how I can be closer to the readers. Plus, I am taking a look at different magazine reports (and also other types of reports) to find some useful points that I can adapt to mine,”* wrote Yuiko in her weekly journal. I found it interesting to see students realising that they could use short 2- to 3-sentence paragraphs if they were writing mass media web articles, rather than longer, more complex paragraphs that they associated with academic reports. Some of the more elusive genre features revolved around the authorial voice that the students wished to adopt, and, where they wanted to write in an “I-you” style, how they might create an interpersonal quality to their evolving texts.

Hugh: This question of genres is a fascinating one for me, especially because I’ve been struggling for so long to understand why thinking and writing, any creative pursuit really, is subject to so much mystification – especially in institutional contexts. For example, many people express difficulty in understanding poetry or philosophy – seeing them as fundamentally difficult, essentially as impossible to understand. Not enough time here to explore all the ways in which gateway practices exclude people from participating in academic and professional life, but my sense is that Maria and Yuiko began to create new paths for themselves; new paths that allowed them to start participating in the conversations that are at the heart of so-called academic writing. Perhaps, by exploring these approaches, along with the commitment to demystifying academic writing in *They Say, I Say* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, we can help build bridges of empowerment that will benefit all stakeholders in our institutional contexts, and help us develop more critical or liberatory pedagogies for the long term.

Andy: Demystifying is a great way to put it. There was definitely a buzz and energy about the students’ discussions. As the groups rotated and changed, they seemed to be learning as much from working on the same genre as on a different genre. Maria and Yuiko both wanted to write for near-peer audiences—young people like themselves—and, as they were particularly enthusiastic about the whole process, in the final seminar of the year, I asked them whether they would be interested in seeing their writing published outside of the seminar. Serendipitously, they both said yes.

Catching up with Maria and Yuiko in April and early May this year, we met a few times in Zoom to discuss how they might develop their writing further for publication in *Learning Learning*, based on the feedback that you and Ken (Ikeda) had given them. They were both still focused on writing for a near-peer audience, and we talked in more detail about genre features, voice, audience, and purpose. Maria and Yuiko could see the “I-you” style in example texts that we looked at, and they were able to bring this into their writing in some places, but they found it challenging to sustain this throughout.

Trying to understand why, I decided to ask them about their writing histories. Maria had written a research-based report in Japanese in her first year. While she had been expected to include her own experiences and views, she had been taught to follow a formal academic register and to adopt an objective position—to distance herself in her report. Maria was now interested in writing an academic blog, so that she could share her experiences and research in a more personal way without being too informal. She grew up in Japan as the child of Brazilian parents in a society which doesn’t use her mother tongue. Although Maria now uses Japanese, Portuguese, and English, she had had many struggles with identity and language, particularly in her teens. In the seminar, while she felt that journaling each week in the second-year seminar had helped her express her thinking with a greater sense of own voice, one challenge she still faced was how to share the story of her deeply personal language identity struggle and connect it to wider issues in society. This was what she became able to do by developing her academic blog. While Maria was satisfied with what she had written

within the seminar and with talking through her own experiences and research within the seminar community, she worked hard to include more of her personal experiences in the version of her writing published in this issue of *Learning Learning*. Through this process Maria came to understand and express her own story more clearly for herself and for a new readership.

During her high school years, Yuiko, on the other hand, had spent a year at a high school in Canada, where she had written essays and short reports in English. In her first year at university in Japan, Yuiko had also completed a 2,000 word academic report in English. She was academically literate in English and found writing in English more familiar than writing in Japanese. Now she wanted to diversify her writing repertoire and reach out to other young people and feel closer to her imagined readers by writing an article for a youth magazine. To some extent this followed through from Yuiko's way of researching in the second year. Her initial focus had been on the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages in Australia; very early on in her research project as she began to seek the different voices and perspectives, Yuiko decided to find popular sources and perspectives authored by Aboriginal people themselves. This included [video testimonies by survivors of the Lost Generation](#), the work of different Aboriginal artists (e.g., [2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial: Undisclosed \(2010\)](#), [3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial: Defying Empire \(2017\)](#)), including [Sandra Hill](#), and [the songs and activism of DOBBY Rapper](#)). Working with these sources radically shifted Yuiko's focus from revitalisation to [survival](#), [healing](#), [resistance](#), and [reconciliation](#), and appreciating [Aboriginal histories and worldviews](#). Her choice of youth magazine article fit well with her interest in understanding the stories, experiences, and strength of Aboriginal peoples in their own vibrant terms. By extending and developing her writing for *Learning Learning*, Yuiko came to create a stronger "I-you" voice and managed to express her thinking and understanding more concisely for her imagined near-peer readers.

Hugh: Wonderful that you encouraged your seminar students to choose a genre and emulate it. The practice we do—in athletics, music, or in writing—always begins most productively in learning forms. By giving them the chance to explore the various genres, and to discuss how to align their writing with their chosen genres, then share their challenges with their peers sounds like a great way to move toward what I'll call informed improvisation. Clearly, though you did not say so explicitly above, this proved a great way for your students to think about the relationship between rhetorical moves, diction, the function of the various elements of a piece of writing, and their awareness of writing for a specific audience.

The choices you are making as teacher/mentor also sound intriguingly parallel to efforts among our younger peers in academia, who—it seems to me—are exploring alternative approaches to formal literary criticism and developing new models for interdisciplinary study and writing. I am thinking here especially of [Anadhid Neressian](#), a writer and critic teaching at UCLA, [Namwali Serpell](#), currently teaching at Harvard, and London-based novelist and essayist [Zadie Smith](#). I am also thinking of historians and economists who have pursued newsletters, often hosted on the [Substack platform](#), as a way of engaging more directly with readers from both within and beyond the walls of academe. (Just a few names here, if *Learning Learning* readers might be interested: [Brad DeLong](#), [Heather Cox Richardson](#), [Noah Smith](#), and [Adam Tooze](#) – as always, too much to read, too much to learn, and too little time!)

Andy: I am always surprised and delighted by the connections you make, Hugh! There are some very interesting parallels there in creating new representations and understandings within different intersecting communities. On reflection, the practice of experimenting with genres goes some way to empowering students in authoring and communicating their own understandings of the world in *creative and critical* ways. They don't need to be beholden to a single paradigm for sharing their research with other people. Maria and Yuiko already had actual and *potential* [multiliteracies](#). They could see what they wanted to do, but it took time for them to realise this in their writing. Through

multiple interactions with others, in which they often de-constructed the way their own texts and other texts were organised, their perceptions of the new genres that they had initially imagined became sharper and more concretely focused. They were able to make sense of their own lived experiences (Maria) and the lived experiences of others (Yuiko) and connect this to conditions and ideologies in society. With feedback and support, they became fully capable of producing original work outside of standardised academic genres such as “academic essays” and “seminar reports.” For me, working with student-chosen genres has become a significant part of a pedagogy for learner autonomy and critical literacy with the Language Issues in Society seminar and other classes that I teach. This “informed improvisation,” as you eloquently put it, is, I feel, also resonant with a *Pedagogy of Hope* whereby students can “explore how they and others perceive the world and reimagine it as an equitable space for all” ([Gonzaga University](#), n.d.).

Hugh: Yes, exactly – as we’ve discussed and written about, formally and informally, for so many years now, the foundation of so much of what we’ve been trying to do for and with our students begins with Freire. Thank you Andy for this opportunity to explore these puzzles again.

Andy: And thank you, Hugh, for another thought-provoking discussion, both here in writing together and in Zoom as we have shared ideas with each other. To round things off, I’d also like to thank Maria and Yuiko for all their commitment and hard work on preparing their writing for *Learning Learning*—as well as say a big thank you to Ken (Ikeda) and you for supporting them and dialoguing with me about their writing. Thank you one and all!

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