

The Genre Project: A Framework for Transfer Across the Disciplines
Jane Danielewicz & Jordynn Jack, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
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Abstract

Our study involved two investigations. First, we surveyed 213 syllabuses from undergraduate general education courses to determine what genres faculty assign at UNC. The results showed distinctive disciplinary differences. In Humanities, thesis-driven “essays” involving textual analysis are common. In Social Sciences, analytical “research papers” asking students to apply a theory or synthesize ideas are typical. In Natural Sciences, transactional genres (proposals, reports) dominate. Second, we interviewed 10 faculty from various disciplines about their syllabuses, writing assignments, and expectations. Two main themes emerged. First, faculty wanted students to read critically and rhetorically, both to build content knowledge and to understand how to construct an argument in that discipline. Second, faculty wanted students to enact disciplinary research practices by applying a theory or method and by mimicking how scholars evaluate sources, incorporate evidence, and structure their claims. However, faculty did not tend to make these expectations explicit in their writing assignments and instead used general terms (such as essay or paper) and content-focused prompts that did not cue students to disciplinary expectations. For results see <http://genre.web.unc.edu>.

Summary

We coded types of writing assignments and skills (e.g. critical thinking, applying a method, etc.), listed in syllabuses from 58 disciplines. We tallied frequencies of genres and skills. Ten faculty were interviewed by a PI and research assistant using eight open-ended questions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Faculty wanted students to write like anthropologists or historians, but couldn't articulate this expectation in actual writing assignments. One study could prompt faculty to assign genres specific to their discipline and to articulate their disciplinary expectations about method, evidence, and argument in assignment descriptions. Faculty could then be interviewed about whether students were more successful. Another study could follow students in such a disciplinary course to see how explicit genre instruction influenced their writing.