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Pulling It All Together: Teaching Genre, Disciplinary and Career Literacies, and the Framework for Information Literacy in an Associate Degree Capstone Course

Linda Miles and Lisa Tappeiner

Introduction

We team teach a semester-long credit-bearing information literacy course for urban community college students in New York City’s South Bronx. In our course, information literacy is inextricably connected with academic literacy, disciplinary literacy, and career literacy. We conceive of information literacy as a broad category, academic literacy as more specific, and disciplinary literacy as a narrower domain still. Each of these literacies—information, academic, and disciplinary—comprises not only the ability to find, process, and use information but also the ability to understand and navigate knowledge production and dissemination practices within a particular culture or community.

James Elmborg describes information literacy as “the comprehension of an entire system of thought and the ways that information flows in that system.”¹ Academic literacy, at its core, involves understanding, processing, and producing the kinds of information and

texts that circulate within academia.² In recent decades, however, conceptions of academic literacy in the United States have tended to extend to also encompass the complexity of “a postsecondary culture of composing, reading, thinking, resourcing, reflecting, creating, and revisioning—of writing and of student.”³ As for disciplinary literacy, Shanahan and Shanahan draw a crucial distinction between content area literacy, which involves development of skills and strategies to be applied generically, across disciplines, in students’ coursework and assignments, and disciplinary literacy, which focuses on the ways individuals create, process, and communicate knowledge in their specific discipline.⁴ The information practices of community and culture are key for understanding complex texts.

And then there’s career literacy. Our course is a capstone course, designed to support students at the end of their first two years of college as they consider the next stage in their own development, be that transferring to a four-year institution or entering the workforce. For this reason, one of our goals in designing this curriculum was to orient our students toward a profession or career. If academic literacy is information literacy applied within the college setting and disciplinary literacy is academic literacy applied within the domain of a specific academic discipline, then career literacy indicates a shift in students’ mindset toward considering information practices and the processes of knowledge creation and dissemination within a post-academic profession or career.

Critical Reading Connection

For this course, we have constructed an approach to critical reading that combines explicit exploration of academic and disciplinary genres with an investigation into the processes of knowledge production and communication shared by the individuals who produce them. Academic genres are forms of writing and communication that are a part of teaching and learning, including things like syllabi, textbooks, multiple choice exams, or student research papers, for example. Disciplinary genres are forms of communication employed by members of a given discipline, or those that are used to share new knowledge with individuals beyond disciplinary boundaries. For example, in the discipline of history, this might include things like an archival finding aid, a peer-reviewed journal article, an essay in a newspaper or magazine, or a televised documentary. These disciplinary genres often double as academic genres when, for example, they are incorporated into an assigned research project.

We are not the first to suggest that genre or disciplinary literacy are important concepts for information literacy instruction. For example, in 2005, Michelle Holschuh Simmons noted the challenges students face as they work with texts whose underlying rhetorical practices are only tacitly addressed and argued that instruction librarians should extend their curriculum to include genre theory—a focus on the conventions of specific genres—so that students will be able to apply an understanding of these conventions to their reading practice.⁵ In 2002, Ann Grafstein advocated for a disciplinary approach to information literacy, suggesting that the focus on basic, cross-disciplinary skills that dominated information literacy instruction in the late twentieth century didn’t adequately prepare students for critical thinking or lifelong learning.⁶ A discipline or workplace is, above all,

a community or context where information practices take place, and the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, established by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2015, marked a turn in the field toward a more contextualized view of information literacy, one that foregrounds inquiry and process.⁷

Many of our students come to college with little or no familiarity with the types of texts they will encounter in their courses or assignments and, in fact, they often lack any awareness of the concept of genre. For many, information is simply information. They're not used to noticing the differences among information sources, so they try to read a peer-reviewed research report, for example, in the same way they might read a pop culture news article or a short story. Bean notes, "Their tendency to get either lost or bored results partly from their unfamiliarity with the text's genre and the function of that genre within a discourse system."⁸ The term "discourse system" points to the complexity of the community from which communication (or "discourse") arises, involving relationships, social norms, and beliefs, as well as inquiry processes and the sharing of new knowledge. It is this dual focus on genre and the discourse system that we work to address. When students are able to recognize a text's features, they are able to more effectively apply basic reading strategies; when they understand the ways discourse is developed and circulated in a specific field, they are able to read more deeply.

We value this approach to literacy in part because of the needs of our student population. As front-line librarians working in a highly diverse urban community college, we have had ample opportunity to reflect on our students' struggles with reading and writing. Researchers have found that college reading readiness is significantly lower among certain populations, including among students of color and those whose families earn less than \$30,000 per year.⁹ These characteristics are significantly reflected in our student body. At Hostos Community College, one of twenty-five institutions of the City University of New York, 43 percent of students attend part-time, more than 75 percent are Black or Hispanic, and the rate of poverty in the Bronx is more than twice the average rate in the rest of the United States.¹⁰ The other reason we value this critical approach to reading is based on our own professional interests. Via past initiatives, we have engaged in research related to students' reading practices and developed and taught exercises related to critical reading. This larger, ongoing professional interest is part of what led to the development of the capstone course and informs our pedagogical approach.

In our course, "From College to the Real World: How Information Works," students identify and analyze texts from a range of genres, explore issues related to the ACRL Framework's threshold concepts, and research and publish on the information and knowledge practices in a discipline or career of their choosing. Although it was originally conceived as an in-person, face-to-face class, the course was adapted to a synchronous online environment when our college went fully virtual during the academic year 2020–21. For both learning modalities, we were committed to an active, team-based environment in which students with similar academic or career goals together discover and articulate information practices related to their chosen disciplines or careers. The work is highly scaffolded across the semester, with ample discussion and reflection baked in. We meet these students "where they are" and help prepare them for what's next.

Curriculum Strategies

Daily Work and Zine Project

Using the six frames of ACRL's Information Literacy Framework to structure the units of the course, we assign students daily readings (or viewings) that in some way relate to the frames, to specific genres, or to disciplines or occupations, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not. Before each class, students complete a reading and prepare a pre-class "Brainwork" assignment that asks them to either (1) summarize or identify a reading's key points, (2) connect the reading to their prior experience or knowledge, or (3) critically appraise the content or form of the text. Completed Brainwork assignments serve as the source material for the first of two major assignments for the course. Students create a zine that tells the story of how their thinking about information practices related to their field of interest has evolved over the course of the semester. This assignment engages students in the metacognitive practice of reflecting on and creating a narrative related to their learning. It also asks them to practice combining both text and image to convey ideas, a skill often neglected in traditional college courses. Figure 21.1 provides an example of a prompt from a pre-class Brainwork assignment that engages several strategies for reading:

Brainwork, Class #7—Magazine Articles, Blog Entries & Academic Writing	
Question #2	
<p>In the reading "11 Most Popular Types of Magazine Articles," someone who makes their living writing for magazines describes different kinds of magazine articles from the point of view of an author. Choose one of these 11 types of articles and respond to the following prompts:</p>	
Prompt	Literacy skill/strategy
<p>Use your own words to describe that type of article as if you were explaining it to a friend who had never really thought about it before.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize information from a written text. • Translate information from one "register" to another—for example, from academic to informal discourse.
<p>If you were a writer and you wanted to convince a magazine editor to hire you to write one of these articles, what topic would you choose for this specific type of article, and why?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate prior knowledge with a specific information genre created for a specific purpose. • Metacognition: articulate thinking processes, describe decision-making processes.

Figure 21.1

Example Brainwork assignment for developing metacognitive strategies

Capstone Project

By the fifth week of the semester, students with similar disciplinary or career interests are placed into teams to develop their final capstone projects: creating online resources describing and illustrating information practices in a field of interest. This development process is scaffolded across the semester via Brainwork assignments and in-class activities. For example, in class #10, each team investigates online professional profiles of individuals in their field, in class #17, they individually take on the task of interviewing an expert in the discipline or career, in class #20, teams consider how to apply or adapt the ACRL Framework to their field, and by class #24, they are making choices as a team about content, design, and layout of their online resource. Successful projects demonstrate students' disciplinary or career literacy—their abilities to read, analyze, and use relevant genres, and their understanding of knowledge creation and communication processes within the discipline or career. Students publish these works and apply a license of their choosing. Over time, a body of capstone projects created by students will serve as a resource for anyone interested in learning more about the information practices in these disciplines or careers.

Genre and Disciplinary or Career Communication

As we began to develop the curriculum, we envisioned ACRL's Framework as the organizing structure for the course. Over time, we also kept circling around the notions of genre and disciplinary or career information practices, and these ideas also became key course touchstones. Students establish the foundational understanding of how texts differ in form and content to serve a range of communication goals. At the same time, they begin to examine the ways knowledge creation, evidence, and communication practices differ in different disciplinary or career contexts, making connections to fields of particular interest to them.

The first ten weeks of the fifteen-week semester are organized using the ACRL Framework, with each of the first six units focusing on a frame paired with a genre. For example, the fifth unit associates the frame Research as Inquiry with the genre of an academic research article. The pre-class Brainwork assignment (figure 21.2) prompts students to engage with an article written in technical language that may be difficult to understand without a solid foundation of background knowledge in the field. Rather than asking them to read for content, we prompt them to apply strategies outlined in another reading, Frederique Laubepin's *How to Read (and Understand) a Social Science Journal Article*, which gives specific strategies for approaching a technical article, such as understanding what kinds of information each section contains and determining one's own purpose for reading.¹¹ We have observed that students we interact with in the classroom or at the reference desk really struggle with this structured approach to reading complex texts. One strength of Laubepin's approach is that he presents skimming and "structural reading" as a strategy that students can use to build comprehension or to meet a specific information need, but not as a substitute for close reading.¹²

Brainwork, Class #14—Research as Inquiry, Academic Research Articles	
Question #5	
The reading, <i>How to Read (and Understand) a Social Science Journal Article</i> , talks about the genre of academic research articles and gives advice about how to read them. Based on what you've learned from this reading, do a “structural reading” of the other reading, called “Transformative? Integrative? Troublesome? Undergraduate Honors Student Reflections on Information Literacy Threshold Concepts,” and respond to the following prompts:	
Prompt	Literacy skill/strategy
What are the “big picture” and “main points” of the article (hint: structural reading, big picture, and main points are defined in the <i>How to Read</i> article)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ a top-down, generalized approach to reading. • Skim, read for structure.
In one sentence, in your own words, what is this research about and why does it matter?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activate prior learning and understandings. • Condense large ideas into concise statements. • Understand reading as an interaction between author (text) and reader's knowledge, preferences, and beliefs.

Figure 21.2

Example Brainwork assignment for reading academic research articles

Our course is structured as a collaborative, team-based learning environment where students are asked to make connections between their prior understandings and new concepts they are introduced to through readings, media, and class discussions. As a capstone class, we want students to reflect on the range of disciplines they have encountered in their first two years of college, notice the genres of the academic or other texts they come into contact with, and develop strategies for reading disciplinary and career genres critically and with an understanding of how knowledge is created and communicated differently in different domains.

Discussion

By focusing on disciplinary and career literacy, our course helps students who are completing their associate's degree prepare for what's next. This course prompts them to place themselves in the shoes of someone working in a discipline or career. For example, early in the semester, students do a little research about a career, take on the role of someone in that occupation, and describe things like workplace surroundings and daily challenges and rewards. They not only read texts from the discipline, but they also interview an expert in the field about their information practices and about the context and community in which they work. They use the ACRL Framework as a way of understanding the differences among practices in various professions or careers.

Learning to read critically, in any context, is an ongoing process. We have found that once students learn to recognize the features of a genre or discourse, they are able to read more strategically. Once they begin to develop an understanding of the relevant processes of investigation, knowledge creation, and communication, they are able to contextualize specific texts and read more deeply. This is where disciplinary and career literacy enable critical reading. In the literature about disciplinary literacy, it is not uncommon to find discourse about students' navigation of insider/outsider status.¹³ Getting students to start thinking about disciplinary and career communities is the first step. "Simply knowing that they aren't members of the text's intended audience—that they don't possess the background knowledge, cultural codes, and genre awareness needed for complete understanding—gives them a way of proceeding. If you can get students to say, 'I had trouble with this text because I'm an outsider' rather than 'I had trouble with this text because I'm a poor reader,' you will have provided powerful help."¹⁴ When our students are faced with a reading that is complex and full of unfamiliar language, their emergent understandings of discipline and career give them a conception of the community practices that produced that reading and enough insider knowledge to begin asking questions about what's going on in the text. With disciplinary and career literacy and a conception of genre, we make the discourse system visible and help students develop analytical strategies for tackling complex readings.

Teaching this course has been a learning process for both students and teachers, and we are constantly evaluating and adjusting teaching practice according to our day-to-day observations in the classroom. It is worth mentioning a few practices that have served us well and might translate into other teaching contexts. First, we built the course to be iterative, with key concepts such as genre and disciplinary and career information practices discussed multiple times during the semester in different contexts. Second, we designed daily Brainwork assignments, due before class each day, to enable us to check for understanding and provide timely feedback. For instance, when we detected lingering confusion about the meaning of genre based on Brainwork submissions, we started the following class with a whole-group exploration of a very familiar genre—a recipe—to help clarify and reinforce the idea that genre is as much about form as content and, above all, is about purpose. Third, even for low-stakes, daily assignments, we make it a point to provide direct and substantive feedback. In part, this practice models the kinds of thoughtful and reflective responses we expect from the students.

Conclusion

As academics, we often lose sight of the information practices that animate the texts in our own disciplines. These approaches to knowledge come to seem natural and automatic, and it is assumed that if students are simply presented with these texts, and they can read and understand the words on the page, they will accomplish full understanding. By learning through a combination of genre theory and disciplinary and career literacy, our students realize that communication happens in patterns of knowledge practices and genre within communities, and they learn to read those patterns.

Most of the students who choose our course to fulfill their liberal arts capstone requirement have indicated that they are headed toward a four-year degree program, and a small number will graduate and move directly into the workforce. In this highly interactive, team-based approach, students analyze information practices and genres in their own fields of interest, and they also have the opportunity to explore a range of academic and career contexts. Critical reading via this approach is not just about analyzing academic texts in an academic context but also about applying the skills and strategies of literacy in a career context.

Notes

1. James Elmborg, "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (March 2006): 196.
2. Elmborg, "Critical Information Literacy," 196.
3. Kathleen Blake Yancey, "The Literacy Demands of Entering the University," *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research* (2009): 269.
4. Timothy Shanahan and Cynthia Shanahan, "What is Disciplinary Literacy and Why Does It Matter?," *Topics in Language Disorders* 32, no. 1 (2012): 8.
5. Michelle Holschuh Simmons, "Librarians as Disciplinary Discourse Mediators: Using Genre Theory to Move toward Critical Information Literacy," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, no. 3 (2005): 297.
6. Ann Grafstein, "A Discipline-Based Approach to Information Literacy," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 28, no. 4 (2002): 197.
7. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, Association of College & Research Libraries, accessed February 10, 2021, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
8. John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 164.
9. ACT, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2006), 2.
10. Hostos Community College Office of Institutional Research and Student Assessment, *Student Profile for Fall 2018 Term* (New York: Hostos Community College, 2018); "Bronx County, NY," United States Census Bureau, accessed February 8, 2020, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US36005-bronx-county-ny/>.
11. Frederique Laubepin, *How to Read (and Understand) a Social Science Journal Article*, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (IPSPSR), accessed Feb 14, 2021, http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/files/instructors/How_to_Read_a_Journal_Article.pdf.
12. Laubepin, *How to Read*, 3.
13. For example, see Cecilia Jacobs, "Opening up the Curriculum: Moving from the Normative to the Transformative in Teachers' Understandings of Disciplinary Literacy Practices," in *Working with Academic Literacies: Case Studies towards Transformative Practice*, ed. Theresa Lillis et al. (Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse, 2015), 136–37; Corrine M. Wickens et al., "Habits of Practice: Expanding Disciplinary Literacy Frameworks through a Physical Education Lens," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 59, no. 1 (2015): 78; ReLeah Cossett Lent and Marsha McCracken Voigt, *Disciplinary Literacy in Action: How to Create and Sustain a School-wide Culture of Deep Reading, Writing, and Thinking* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2018), 51.
14. Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 169.

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