

REVIEW: The Matter of Assignments in Writing Classes and Beyond

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Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines. Mary Soliday. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011. 146 pp. Print. ISBN 0-8093-3019-9. \$32.00.

Toward a Composition Made Whole. Jody Shipka. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2011. 173 pp. Print. ISBN 0-8229-6150-4. \$24.95.

The two books reviewed here, *Everyday Genres* by Mary Soliday and *Toward a Composition Made Whole* by Jody Shipka, are, in simplest terms, seeking to guide us on how to design good writing assignments. Soliday argues for genre-based, socially situated writing assignments in disciplines other than writing studies, and Shipka argues for assignments in writing studies designed to encompass forms of communication and rhetorical problem solving other than academic writing. The design of writing assignments is a subject under-researched and under-discussed in English and writing studies today. James Moffett, in the early 1980s, suggested that writing courses should start with personal narrative and work outward from the self toward exposition and then argument. His proposal was based on Jean Piaget's research showing that children's cognitive abilities progress from egocentric to other-centered perspectives. Moffett's assignments were largely based on the rhetorical modes, which Robert Connor challenged, also in the 1980's, as an artificial framework for assignment design. Today, the rhetorical modes are challenged by those who argue for a genre-based approach to writing assignment design (Bawarshi; Bazerman; Coe, Lingard and Teslenko; Devitt; Freedman; Johns; Jolliffe).

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But genre theory alone does not address all of the issues and concerns associated with the design of writing assignments. The subject deserves more attention in our research and theorizing, which these two books offer.

Both books draw from related epistemological and theoretical perspectives, but they make very different arguments about the question of what a good “writing” assignment should look like. In fact, *writing* must be placed in quotes in the previous sentence because Shipka argues for assignments that encompass a variety of sign systems (in the semiotic sense) that may not look anything like a typical writing assignment in any discipline, writing or otherwise. Soliday seeks to extend the work of genre theorists in her presentation of her research on writing assignments and students’ performances on assignments in the City University of New York (CUNY)’s writing-across-the-curriculum program. She argues, in a nutshell, that “[. . .] because genre is a social practice, an assignment must be aligned with the larger social motives the genre performs for readers in the first place” (11).

When Soliday speaks of assignments aligning with social motives, she is referring to the rhetorical purpose of a genre. The successful assignment (that is, one that fits Soliday’s criteria and that Soliday reports students find engaging) should be introduced in the context of course goals; should be a “wild” genre, that is, authentic to the work of a given discipline; should be broken into manageable chunks, or steps, for learners; and should be explained in the context of the social purposes the genre fulfills within a given discipline. The opposite of this model for an assignment, to Soliday, is an assignment that is a “tame” genre, that is, a school genre that has not been introduced by the professor in the context of some social motive other than the evaluative function of school assignments. She points to the constraints in general education courses (introducing a discipline to nonmajors) that often lead professors to assign school genres, not rooted in any particular social context except the class itself. She further explains her views of what is entailed in constructing sound writing assignments, which are genre specific and socially situated, by reporting some of students’ and teachers’ genre-related concerns.

In chapter 2, Soliday takes on one problematic aspect of mastering genres—what she refers to as the author’s finding a “stance” to take on his or her subject matter. In chapter 3, Soliday raises the matter of “content” in genres. In both chapters, she gives examples of problems for novice writers, such as how much background information to include in a text, what counts as evidence in a particular discipline’s genres, and how to handle sources; she also notes the need to determine these choices in light of the rhetorical context and purposes for genres. In these chapters and in the appendices, Soliday offers some examples of assignments and pedagogy in two general education classes, anthropology and music, that, in her view, successfully instruct students in the socially situated nature of genres.

Soliday also draws on the cognitive apprenticeship model of learning articulated

by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger to amplify her emphasis on genres doing “real” work in specific contexts. She gives examples of how assignments, if conceived of by professors as the work of apprentices within a discipline, and if taught in an apprenticeship-like way, can more readily convey a genre’s social motive and hence increase students’ successes in writing effectively in the assigned genres. In addition, Soliday takes on the discussion in writing studies about whether genres need to be taught explicitly or can be intuited simply by being within the social context the genres are used in (Freedman; Petraglia). She does give some evidence from her research that teachers who gave explicit genre instruction as a part of assigning writing improved the likelihood of more students succeeding in the assignments. Recent empirical research on problems of transfer of learning that demonstrates the need for metadiscourse around an activity in order to foster positive transfer would support Soliday’s argument for explicit genre instruction (Beaufort, *Writing in the Real World*; Wardle).

In contrast, Shipka’s core argument takes the issue of assignment design in a different direction. Evoking James Wertsch’s and Paul Prior’s work on “socially mediated” communications, she argues implicitly that a much larger goal should be served by writing assignments in writing courses than is generally the case. For Shipka, the goal of training students in production of written text limits, in unnecessary and even unproductive ways, the types of tasks that can motivate students and engage them in rhetorical problem solving and communicating. If students are invited to use all forms of communication—including dance, performance art, theater, traditional art, music, and so on—or writing that does not get “performed” on paper, but may be placed on any physical object (T-shirt, ballet slippers, and so on) to solve interesting problems, then, Shipka feels, we will have created well-designed assignments that are truly engaging students in rhetorical problem solving, which appears to be her highest priority for assignment design. She is also critical of a current emphasis in writing studies on Web-based writing assignments, arguing that computer-driven writing modalities are also limiting students’ choices within the rhetorical situations they encounter. There are many other modes of communication that are not technology driven, and she would have writing curricula embrace all modes of communication.

Shipka is rhetorically aware herself. At several points in her text, she raises the probable objection to her curricular approach in writing classes, namely, that the open-ended nature of the tasks, in which the “product” does not have to take any specified form, bypasses the need to teach writing, and in particular, academic writing. She argues that her assignments do align with the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Outcomes Statement for first-year composition, and also states that all of her assignments entail writing. As examples of the writing her assignments call forth, she cites lists, notes, journal entries, project plans, and “highly detailed” (113, 157) statements of goals and choices (SOGCs). The latter is the

document she uses to evaluate the products that students design. (We are not told her evaluation criteria for students' SOGCs). At another point in her book, Shipka responds again to the objection that she is not teaching academic writing by giving an example of a doll project done by her students. At the end of the project, Shipka writes on the board seven characteristics or moves that are typical of academic texts, and she invites students to reflect on how the doll project taught them in fact to do those moves (for example, engage in research, make a claim, or support a claim) (142). This meta-awareness of writing process strategies and rhetorical issues, Shipka implies, will transfer to more traditional academic writing tasks.

Shipka has a second agenda in her text, beyond challenging the status quo of writing assignment design. She also argues for a reinvigoration of the research on writers' processes. She notes a decline of research in this important area of writing studies since the 1980s, and she challenges the field to return to this crucial aspect of research if we are to fully assess what types or processes of instruction our writing students need. Her own research is focused on students' processes in solving the rhetorical problems she gives them. In one study with Prior and in another of her own, image-based protocols were used in interviews with students to generate discussion of students' writing processes. Students were asked to create two visual images: one, of the spaces in which they worked on a text, and the other, of the overall process of composing a text (Prior and Shipka; Shipka).

These, then, are the central arguments of the two texts. I find both books problematic, for some of the same reasons and for some different reasons. What follows reflects my own biases and should be considered in that light. Both Soliday and Shipka situate their research and analysis within a social constructivist framework for knowledge creation and interpretation. Soliday invokes the framework of genre theory, and Shipka, the framework of activity theory. This move away from focusing on the individual writer in isolation or the written product in isolation is of course one of the major paradigm shifts that has occurred in writing studies in the last three decades. But not all research that uses a social/contextual framework for analysis necessarily illuminates clearly how social context and writers' behaviors are interrelated.

A problem with Soliday's use of genre theory is that when used alone as a tool for assignment design and writing instruction, such theory conflates the construct of genres with larger social constructs, such as discourse communities or activity systems. These must be understood in themselves in order for us to gain a fuller understanding of the social functions of genres. For example, in a study of workplace writing (Beaufort, "Operationalizing"), I found that a single genre, the grant proposal, took on different social purposes and different textual features depending on which discourse community the grant proposal functioned within. Had I not added to my framework of analysis the specific communities of practice at which these proposals

were aimed, I would not have been able to account for the textual differences in the various grant proposals being written. And in school settings, disciplinary communities of practice certainly not only shape genres, but also shape norms for good writing in the discipline, and so on. These larger social entities, and their values, processes, norms, and so on, need to be accounted for. Genres are only one piece of the communicative context. I have the same problem with the “mediated activity theory” Shipka uses, which draws on the work of Wertsch, Prior, and others. The fundamental concepts of mediated action, or in this case, mediated communication, certainly make sense. But written communication looks very different depending on what social sphere—that is, what discourse community—is being examined. Without some definition of the specific discourse community being communicated to or within, considerations of social context remain limited.

I have a few additional concerns about Soliday’s book besides the limitations of her theoretical framework. Other studies (Bazerman and Paradis; Beaufort, *College Writing*; Berkenkotter and Huckin; Bizzell; Dias; Herrington and Moran) have pointed out, as Soliday does, the need for an articulation of social context in relation to writing tasks in order for novices to learn appropriately and engage meaningfully with writing tasks. And we need more than one or two empirical studies to affirm proposals for curriculum or pedagogy. So, Soliday’s study is welcome, if not “news.” But I wish that her research methodology had been explained in greater detail in order for the reader to know that her interpretations were arrived at systematically and rigorously. For example, her first two research questions are very broad, encompassing many variables that may or may not inform the third question:

- How do students across disciplines talk about the relationship between writing and learning course content?
- How do teachers across disciplines talk about and evaluate student writing?
- By exploring these questions, what good assignments and supports for assignments could we recommend to faculty? (11, 29)

I would have liked an explanation of the interconnections of these three questions and how asking all three, together, enabled a richer understanding of effective writing assignments. And I would have liked even a brief indication of how the data were analyzed and whether there was any triangulation of data, which is a cornerstone for solid ethnographic research. Not having this information, I read the evidence cited in chapters 2 and 3 as anecdotal evidence rather than evidence that is the result of systematic analysis. This makes me cautious about accepting Soliday’s claims. She may have in fact used very rigorous research methods, but I’m not informed of them, and as a result, I question the evidence in support of her argument in that light.

I would also have liked to see a clearer differentiation between the aspects of genre that Soliday takes up in chapters 2 and 3. For me, her distinctions between

“stance” and “content” in relation to genres are hard to grasp. Both concepts, as she defines them, are matters of rhetorical purpose and audience that must be considered in shaping a text. Soliday acknowledges these overlaps, but what I hope for in future genre-focused research is that components of genre knowledge are parsed in ways that bring greater clarity to assignment design and pedagogy for teaching genres than I find in Soliday’s articulation of “stance” and “content.”

Turning back to Shipka’s work, I am troubled by her core argument—that we need to extend the notion of “text” in writing assignments to include many other sign systems that may make little if any use of written text. Her reach also extends beyond assignment design, to “researching, theorizing, and teaching a more integrated approach to composing” (23). Her rationale both for multimodal, open-ended “products” for writing assignments and for research and theorizing in writing studies is based on several claims or observations:

- that written communication is often, and always has been, even before computer technology, multimodal, and therefore writing teachers need to design multimodal assignments in which the final product may or may not be a typical academic text (21);
- that writing teachers need to respond to a rapidly changing communicative environment, which is multimodal, in their curriculum designs (22);
- and that students in first-year composition, given only academic writing tasks, view academic writing as “impractical and useless” because the curriculum lacks any significant content or context for writing (23).

A communicative approach to first-year composition, by which Shipka means multimodal approaches, would, she claims, “provide students with a stronger incentive for writing” and allow them to be more “flexible, reflexive communicants” (24).

I find many aspects of a multimodal approach appealing. Shipka’s sample assignments, detailed in several chapters and in the appendices, look exciting, creative, engaging. I want to do them myself. She lays out interesting problems to solve, which is a hallmark of intellectual engagement. She gives us several examples of how students have approached these assignments: creating a dance performance, creating a mirror IQ test, creating board-game instructions, and so on. But, as intriguing as these projects are, I see Shipka’s agenda as changing the goals for even foundational writing courses (some of her examples are drawn from courses titles such as *Rhetoric* 105). Shipka has shifted the goal of the assignments, and hence, the course, from academic forms of writing literacy to creativity, problem solving, and critical thinking, broadly conceived. Writing skills may be strengthened through her assignments, but the types and amounts of writing that students might do to respond to the assignments vary widely and could potentially bypass writing in any academic genres. I am more comfortable with goals for fundamental academic writing courses that focus on academic writing skills, creativity, and problem solving at least in equal measures.

There is another potential pitfall for me in Shipka's proposal: the transfer-of-learning issue. What skills, exactly, will students who respond to Shipka's assignments be able to apply in more traditional academic tasks? She is inviting metacognition about rhetorical problem-solving processes in her pedagogy. Metacognitive reflection is an essential component of positive transfer of learning from one context to another. Good. But the writing tasks done by at least some of her students are very different from any number of genres that students will be required to learn in other disciplines, and rhetorical issues are not all the same for all modes of communication. Transfer-of-learning research shows that the more dissimilar the tasks, the less the likelihood of positive transfer (Perkins and Salomon). Also, every mode of communication, and more specifically, every genre demands very specific types of knowledge and skill for appropriate use. For example, I find that students can be extremely articulate orally in class discussions and fail completely at being articulate in a written text that demands logic, clear sentence structure, and particular genre conventions. So I question the likelihood of Shipka's assignments strengthening academic writing skills.

Shipka's assignments *are* brilliant in fostering rhetorical thinking and creative problem solving. But they leave a gap in what I understand to be a necessary goal of writing instruction, namely, to focus on the challenges and possibilities of writing in academic genres for academic audiences. I can see her assignments serving the goals of a humanities course better than I can see them serving the goals intended even in the WPA Outcomes Statement. (In fact, another sample assignment she gives in an appendix is from English 324 Theories of Communication and Technology, which may offer more room for the type of communications projects she favors.) And in addition, to be convinced of the merits of her approach, I would want to see empirical evidence of the specific knowledge and skills students achieved through these types of assignments that they were able to transfer to other school and workplace contexts for writing.

But I do not want to end my review on this note. Both Soliday and Shipka enlarge the perspective from which to examine the problem of designing good writing assignments: Soliday gives us more data on the confusions and dilemmas that students face in mastering genres, and on the complexities of designing good genre-based assignments. And Shipka challenges us not to get too enamored with technology-based assignments as the *only* way to make writing assignments relevant and meaningful to today's students. She also sounds a needed call for intellectual tasks in writing courses that students find engaging, and a needed call for more writing process research. And in the appendices of both Soliday's and Shipka's texts are descriptions of writing assignments that can stir the imagination of any teacher who wants to think in fresh ways about his or her writing assignments, whether in writing studies or other disciplines. Those who direct writing-across-the-curriculum

programs or writing programs will likewise find in these two texts some food for thought about the nature of the writing assignments they espouse in their work with teachers. Soliday and Shipka have each taken on significant problems in assignment design and done enormous amounts of work toward advancing our thinking in these areas. I hope that others will build on their work, taking into account some of the concerns I raise.

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