Genre, Relationality, and Whitehead’s Principle of Relativity: How We Write

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Genre’s Recent History

Much has been written in recent years about the categories of thought and language that shape the forms of our thinking. George Lakoff’s *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* comes to mind as a book that is full of evidence and illustration that the mind gains much advantage over the world with its ability to map one conceptual domain onto another. Lakoff’s arguments illustrate the power of metaphor, and the British paleo-anthropologist Steven Mithen, as a further example, has suggested that the evolution from Neanderthal man to Cro Magnon is marked precisely by the ability to switch cognitive frames: thinking metaphorically may have been responsible for the Paleolithic genesis of art.

The search for the origins of art and science through speculation about the prehistory of the mind has precedent in the heroic, speculative efforts of Immanuel Kant. But unlike Kant, Lakoff and other contemporaries view such categories as “metaphors we live by,” social constructs, not absolute and categorical obligations. Certainly much of Kant’s foundationalist epistemology has been refuted or corrected in the last century, but the idea that we apprehend the world about us through conceptual schemes—social, linguistic, cultural, aesthetic, or otherwise—is so widely held nowadays that it is sometimes difficult to avoid the vicious relativism these views can sometimes fall prey to in their effort to update Kant.

Whitehead scholars view Whitehead’s epistemology—his explanation of the way that we apprehend the world about us—to be his philosophical forte. Whitehead, David Ray Griffin has recently argued, has “unsnarled the world knot” that vexed Kant and subsequent philosophers. I do not intend to trace the convoluted paths of this “unsnarling” of the perennial mind and body problem, but my readers will note that Whitehead’s non-foundationalist account of how we “prehend” the objective world about us does receive a kind of non-technical elucidation in the discussion of genre below. Genre—like language, art, metaphor, and other vehicles of cultural communication—is omnipresent, constantly shaping the way we perceive not only discourse, but all other kinds of social action as well. From the first apprehension of “friendly smiles” to later understanding “round things,” “scary things,” “knock knock jokes” and “signs with rules,” children quickly learn to “read” typified situations and respond appropriately and rhetorically. In fact, one well-argued view of what learning to write is all about (see Newkirk) explains writing as a child’s semiotic “symbol weaving” activity in response to recurring social and rhetorical patterns. Genre is ubiquitous, and once we note how it works, like the metaphors we live by, we can begin to notice how it frames up the world around us, mediating and filtering what we see and don’t see, guiding our social and textual expectations. As Carolyn Miller concludes, “what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have . . . for the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (165).

This kind of broad sketch of the relation of thought and language to learning and writing instruction has been a starting place for teachers seeking to reconceptualize writing instruction. The most important of such efforts for language arts teachers can be
found in two books published over thirty years ago at the beginning of what came to me known as the process movement in writing instruction: James Britton’s Language and Learning and James Moffett’s Teaching the Universe of Discourse. These books outline slightly different and much fuller philosophical backdrops than the one I sketched above. Nevertheless, the goal of casting the language arts, not as the cookies themselves cut from the curricular dough, but language arts as the connected lattice of dough itself that is leftover when the cookies have been removed. This is Britton’s metaphor of the systemic importance of language arts, and his effort to recast the importance of the language arts and writing instruction in particular kicked off a new generation of writing theory and instruction.

The last three or four decades of writing instruction have been dominated by the kinds of questions that emphasize the dynamics of writing experience, not the upshot or final products of that experience. Thus, the teacher’s banner slogan has been “teach process, not product” and the result has been mostly positive. Before the “process revolution” in writing instruction, teachers focused instruction on the final form of a written product, its formal characteristics and conventional features that make it look like other successful pieces of writing. Since then, teachers following process models have been more inclined to focus instruction on what is going on in the writer’s experience—cognitive and social—that contributes to successful written products. The shift has been subtle at times, at other times quite overdone, but it has no doubt changed a whole generation of writing instruction.

With every new movement or revolution there is eventually a counterstatement, and for many, such a statement has been voiced by those promoting recent genre theory. Seen perhaps more as “post-process” than “counter-process,” genre theory has called attention once again to products. But this is no ordinary educational pendulum swing; instead, genre theorists have pointed out that genres are far more than mere products. The conventional understanding of genre is just that: a particular set of conventions, the story goes, take on the characteristics of a “type” of writing and eventually this pattern of types becomes a genre, a form that is learned and mimicked by other writers. Thus we have the office memo, the quarterly report, the detective novel, the sonnet, and countless other “text types” for aspiring writers to try and master. However, recent genre theory complicates this conventional understanding.

Consider a young writer learning to write the “book report,” “lab report,” “research paper” or some other conventional genre of school discourse. One strand of early genre theory emphasized the importance of learning genres per se, a kind of stocking up on the lingua franca of school discourse. The best way to succeed in the academy, as this view goes, is to master the genres that dominate its discourse. Thus, Australian educators, who were among the early proponents of this approach, were teaching products once again, and many writing theorists felt this was a pedagogical step backwards to the pre-process days. But as other scholars began to explore the pedagogical implications of Carolyn Miller’s “Genre as Social Action” and explicate and disseminate the complexity of Bakhtin’s work on genre, the concept of genre came to mean teaching writing as a way of teaching how written language functions in—and is a product of—its social contexts. Thus to learn how to write a book report or lab report is to learn not just a set of school conventions, but to learn as well the way that these conventions get work done in their social context. According to this new view, learning a genre is about learning something
much more than the container-like features of certain forms, but rather learning about the rhetorical exigencies and social circumstances that shape a genre and press it into service to begin with—e.g. business memos now use blockstyle because of relaxed formality and increased demands for speed and efficiency in the workplace. Whereas formerly the student was memorizing headings to follow and noting how many paragraphs were needed to satisfy the conventions of a book report, now a student would be responding to his or her own rhetorical exigency such as the need to publish a review in a student magazine or familiarize other students with a new set of books.

Of course other implications and teaching strategies have followed from recent models of genre theory. But broadly speaking, the instructional change has been from static, passive concepts to dynamic, active concepts. Genre conceived as mere form emphasizes the reception of texts rather than their production. In fact, these familiar dichotomies—reception/production, reading/writing, text/context, individual/society—have too often become the governing abstractions that organize our understanding of what is possible as writers and teachers of writing. Consequently, genres take on the static role of “formal cause,” of that into which our writing efforts become. The result is that genres are normalizing: our goal as writers is to make our prose look like its supposed to look and conform to a pattern (no small achievement), while we slight in our composing how it is they contribute to a context, create some effect in the world, make something happen, or do something in response to rhetorical exigency. No wonder genre has traditionally been more interesting to readers than to writers: while students of literature in the schools learn how to “name that piece of writing,” (e.g., a sonnet is fourteen lines of iambic pentameter) students of writing have inferred that genre is a constraint rather than the creative matrix of the medium and craft of composing.

Conversely, when new conceptions of genre cause us to conceive of genre as an “efficient cause,” that by which our writing efforts become, a very different dynamic is made possible. The dichotomies that formerly loomed as normalizing and static forces in our writerly experience now recede into the background. Into the foreground comes our knowledge of how writing works in the world, how text/context, individual/society, reading/writing constitute one another. Whereas before we defy convention at our peril or break out of it only as an expression of “genius,” the student who understands genre as efficient cause now takes up a genre for some rhetorical purpose. Consider Aviva Freedman’s comments on this new role for the student writer:

Knowing a genre is also knowing how to take it up: the manners are reciprocal. What do you do with a form, if you’ve never been taught to fill one out? What do you do with theoretical writing, if all you have learnt to read with is narrative? How do you take up parody, if you’ve never met the parody or the genre that it spoofs? Using a text is primarily a matter of understanding its genre and the way it plays it—recognizing it, certainly, but also reading its tactics, its strategies, and its ceremonial place. Learning to write, equally, is learning to appropriate and occupy a place in relation to other texts, learning to ensure that the other chap will play the appropriate game with you and learning to secure a useful uptake: the rules of playing, the rules of play, and the tricks of the trade. (121-122)
This approach encourages writers to think of genre as one of the tools of writing, as one
of the factors that good writers learn to manipulate.

**Whitehead and Genre**

Significant historical changes in pedagogy are sometimes the result of changes in
philosophical thinking. In fact, a premise of this collection of essays is that philosophy
can change the way we think about teaching and learning. In the discussion below I will
provide a background for the notion of “relationality” [this chapter is in a unit titled
“relationality”] and its importance to a particular current of thought in American
philosophy and education. I will then turn my attention to how relationality can help us
better understand genre theory and its impact on teaching writing.

Relationality has a long history in American education. Indeed, the early progressive
movement might be viewed as a quest to develop approaches to learning that pay close
attention to the relational context of human life and learning. John Dewey’s famous
*Democracy and Education*—(1916), a book that is now quite old to those always on the
lookout for something new to fix what’s broken in the schools—looks at schooling in the
relational context of American democracy. That book seeks to mend the strict separation
of the individual and society and other static bifurcations that halt personal and social
educational progress.

Yet he was not alone in this quest. Alfred North Whitehead and John Dewey
share in a peculiarly American intellectual tradition that is sometimes called the
“pragmatic-process” tradition. The pragmatic tradition in American philosophy engaged
all of the traditional philosophical problems and developed its response in the voluminous
writings of Charles Peirce, William James, Dewey, Whitehead, and several others.
Although some may think of pragmatist philosophy as having mostly to do with theories
of knowledge and truth, these same philosophers also developed fruitful ideas about
metaphysical concepts such as “being” and “relationality” and, of course, “process.”

Thus, the pragmatic-process tradition is a rich and wide-ranging set of philosophic
concepts, and Whitehead’s process philosophy has a central place in this family of ideas.
So partly what it means to be a “process” philosopher is to share the task of developing
metaphysical ideas that hinge on the notion of process as a basic concept that helps us to
understand reality. It is impossible not to presuppose some metaphysical notions when
speculating about the nature of reality, learning, and other human activities. And
Whitehead was among a group of American thinkers who found it helpful to critique the
prevailing substance metaphysics and start fresh with a process ontology that entails
relationality as one of its key concepts.

In fact, the relationality of philosophic ideas—what is known as systematic
philosophy—is simply the principle that the various aspects of our ways of understanding
the world are most powerful when they work together. That is, if we speculate about the
basic nature of reality—about how we know, about what is beautiful, about what is right
or wrong, about what we value, about how we learn—our ideas are more productive and
convincing if they fit together, if they shed a mutual light on each other and these various
aspects of human experience.

All of this is to say, Whitehead was a process philosopher and a systematic
thinker. Of course he wrote on different topics and he didn’t try to say everything at once.
But when approaching Whitehead’s work, it is helpful to keep in mind that he didn’t
work out his ideas in distinct containers. His deepest notions about being and becoming typically inform in some way his most practical ideas about learning or how to teach business students. Indeed, it is my belief that Whitehead’s most important ideas about education and learning are not found in his explicit discussions about educational topics, but in his difficult metaphysical ideas.

One such idea is the principle of relativity. This principle, as Whitehead uses it, takes us closer to explaining why the contributors to this book have identified the idea of relationality as central to re-envisioning education. It is important to keep this much clear—although there is a close connection between the words relationality and relativity, the former is more broadly suggestive while the latter has a particular and peculiar meaning in Whitehead’s system.

Whitehead writes:

... according to this principle [of relativity] an actual entity is present in other actual entities. In fact if we allow for degrees of relevance, and for negligible relevance, we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity.

The philosophy of organism is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of “being present in another entity.” (PR 79-80)

Actual entities are the particulars of experience. Not physical atoms or material building blocks, but rather a fundamental component, having the character of an event, from which things both mental and physical are derived. More to the point, the principle of relativity claims that each new event takes account of every other event in its past; that is, that past events are included or repeated in each new event, some being more relevant than others in the formation of this new event. This principle of relativity is at the heart of Whitehead’s deep, speculative system of thought. Fortunately, it is not necessary to argue for Whitehead’s thesis as a metaphysical proposition in order to see its value in thinking about education and learning. In order to appreciate the “New R” of relationality, we can take a look at Whitehead’s principle of relativity in particular as a way of helping us to better understand the repetition of particulars within genre conventions and thus how we learn to not only mimic genres (i.e. learn to write) but also how we learn to move beyond received conventions and create novel variations on those conventions.

Scholarly interest in genre has developed out of interest in language, social contexts, discourse communities, and philosophy—all in search of more contextual ways of understanding what happens to writers when they write. Empirical studies have looked at many contexts, from the elementary classroom to tax accounting firms. These studies are available in well-known journals in these fields and readers interested in these particulars may want to follow these leads. What I want to focus on below, however, is a more general notion about the repetition of particulars—a key concept in Whitehead’s principle of relativity, which in turn, is one of four or five fundamental concepts in Whitehead’s systematic philosophy. As it turns out, this principle of relativity, which includes the notion that particulars are repeated in experience, offers a fresh view of what it means to use genre to guide composing efforts and what it means to be creative or offer novelty against the received background of existing genres.

When we shift our focus from genre as form and text-type container to a view of genre as a dynamic reflection of human social and rhetorical experience (as the source of
these text types) we can begin to see the power and importance of relationality and Whitehead’s principle of repetition at work in a quite ordinary realm of literate experience. This new conception of genre casts form and content into the larger arena of meaning-making activities (as opposed to meaning containers) and asks us to view genre as a dynamic component in every rhetorical situation.

In fact, my understanding of Whitehead’s metaphysics leads to the view that all of our seeing, indeed, all of our awareness and grasping of reality—conscious and unconscious—is characterized by a repetition of particulars given to our experience as types, a symbolic representation of one order of experience atop of another, “all the way down.” Language and genre—at different levels of abstraction—selectively mediate our communication and perception to the extent that as forms they carry the past into the present as they embody past particulars and hand them over to us. Others apart from Whitehead have made similar observations about the nature of experience. Consider the following proposition by Bakhtin, whose work is the theoretical source of much recent discussion of the nature of genre.

Each genre possesses definite principles of selection, definite forms for seeing and conceptualizing reality, and a definite scope and depth of penetration . . . . One might say that human consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality. A given consciousness is richer or poorer in genres, depending on its ideological environment. . . . The process of seeing and conceptualizing reality must not be severed from the process of embodying it in the forms of a particular genre. . . . Thus, the reality of the genre and the reality accessible to the genre are organically related. (Bakhtin & Medvedev 131-135)

This is relationality at work at much deeper and more complex levels than we ordinarily attribute to genre as most of us became acquainted with the concept in schools. But then so much of what most of us experienced in schools derives not from Whiteheadian process ontology, but from educational philosophies with Aristotelian overtones and tacit substance metaphysics. That is, Aristotle’s predilection to classify is not unrelated to his substance ontology. When reality is finally understood as independent parts each requiring nothing other than itself (and perhaps God) for its existence, the educational upshot is pervasive. Indeed, Aristotle’s own classification of text types is still studied in schools today; but more significantly, the received notion of text types conceived according to mutually exclusive container characteristics has gone unchallenged until recently.

The point is not that mere categorization of texts is “wrong” or that genres conceived as mutually exclusive containers do not sometimes have a pedagogical purpose, but rather that the ancient substance ontology misleads and for centuries never spurred anyone to look past this abstraction. The effect has been to limit our understanding of the way language, text, and context work together as mutually constitutive components of experience. This conceptual limitation has had significant pedagogical consequences, not least of which is that our approaches to teaching writing have too often been static and non-rhetorical. Or, even when “teach process, not product” has prevailed in our pedagogy, the vicious dichotomy has created a contempt for product so that odd maxims like “we want good writers, not good writing” often accompany these
views. Viewing genre as a fluid outcome of relational patterns in human experience and rhetorical situation will help us see ways to move past lock-step or static models of teaching writing, help us reintegrate process and product, and teach writers to become more intelligent creators and consumers of genre itself.

To recognize a genre is to recognize certain patterns as having been repeated. These patterns could have to do with the physical aspects of a document, but also a nearly infinite number of other physical, textual, and rhetorical features such as style, language, word choice, line length, use of white space, ink, paper size, font, and so forth. When a writer puts all of these things together in such a way that takes up the conventions in a way that is appropriate for rhetorical context and somehow does so in an interesting or novel way, we call that writer, a good writer. This is, of course, not a simple task and those who complain, “why can’t students write!” may underestimate the complexity of the task.

Repetition is ubiquitous in experience. Whitehead, in fact, makes the startling claim: “Tear ‘repetition’ out of ‘experience’ and there is nothing left” (206). What he means is that at the very foundation of experience is the repeated particulars of past experience, our own and, in fact, that of the whole history of the universe. And at the same time, each new moment of experience is objectified or included in all other future moments of experience. This connectedness and solidarity among all things is expressed in the principle of relativity. Our experience does not arise out of nothing, but out of the repeated particulars of our past. On the whole, something new in experience is quite uncommon. Mostly we experience subtle variations of repeated things and we must marshal our imaginations and muster up our creativity in order to issue forth something truly novel from our experience.

Discourse genres have emerged as repeated patterns of response to recurring situations. When enough people have formal weddings, soon a “wedding invitation” will emerge as a textual response, and such invitations take on similar discursive patterns, in part, because they are responses to similar social situations and rhetorical exigencies. The situation determines the discourse pattern as much as the discourse pattern tells us what “kind” of a wedding we should prepare for. The point is that repetition of social/rhetorical situations is a primary reason we have genres in the first place. Genres—just like language at a lower level of abstraction—provide a way for us to eschew novelty in ordinary experience and to gain rhetorical leverage from the expectation we all have that repetition is ubiquitous in experience. Nobody wants to write two hundred novel wedding thank-you notes, and nobody probably wants to receive one. In fact, we want to receive thank you notes, read obituaries, business memos and sonnets, that satisfy our expectations of the genre or we can, when taken too far, begin to feel the rhetorical act has itself begun to subvert its purpose with too much originality.

Repetition is a key feature of clear communication because it leverages the advantage of recurring situation to some situated, rhetorical end. The form of our discourse becomes the means by which we put that discourse to work. And to learn to write well has everything to do with learning to manage these forms as rhetorical possibilities, not as formal products.

Although the pedagogical emphasis on the classical conception of genre’s formal features might produce, on the one hand, sheer repetition, monotony, conformity, and
redundancy, the deconstructionist critique of this emphasis has led to the ahistorical notion that novelty (new genres) could emerge out of nothing at any moment in history. The everyday consequence of this line of thought is evidenced in a kind of “genre fetish” among those (mainly academics of course) who would make novelty an end in itself and “create new genres,” not in response to situational or rhetorical exigency, but out of the felt need to politicize conversations about discourse.

If we take Whitehead’s metaphysics as our guide to understanding experience in general, it is not difficult to see how the speculative structure he describes can help us understand the experience of writers and genre. With regard to novelty, I have already pointed out that repetition is far more common. If we analyze a particular moment of ordinary experience, we discover it is full of kinesthetic and pneumonic repetition, feelings repeated as we recall past events, focus on the present, or anticipate future events. Of course there is much more to analyze in a given moment of experience than what is repeated, but Whitehead would say that repetition is a fundamental feature from which additional and subsequent phases of experience occur.

Nevertheless, repetition is just the beginning. Any given moment of experience begins with what is repeated from the immediate past. If we are angry, we tend to stay angry until these feelings gradually give way to others. But how do they “give way” if experience is dominated by repetition? The answer is that repetition is not the whole story in our experience. It is the beginning point, providing the raw data of subsequent experience, but not always the final story. It is the nature of higher orders of experience to entertain possibilities and imagine how a given moment of experience might be different from the moment it inherits. Thus we give up our anger as we consider (consciously or not) other ways of being.

In composing, genres serve as abstract forms of situated, rhetorical response. Genres take their shape from such experience repeated, but like words and language, they stand in where novelty would be a vice. As words and language stand as a “good enough” abstraction for complex feelings (I’m angry!) genres work in similar ways, but at a higher level of abstraction. The business memo, the thank-you letter, the wedding invitation, the book report all contain words that carry out communication, but the genre itself sets the stage of rhetorical possibilities as it both dictates and anticipates the rhetorical exigency. But genre is among the givens, the raw data, the things repeated. In addition to these received components of discursive practice, the writer imagines possibilities, considers novel variations, and works out fresh ways of adding to what is received or already present in the situation. As the writers takes up the rules of play, the tricks of the rhetorical trade, he or she begins to add something new to the world of discourse. In this manner, the significance of inter-textuality, discourse community, and the public world of discourse becomes just as important as the subjective privacy of the so-called lonely writer. Singular writers are just as much a myth or abstraction as so-called discourse communities—real abstractions, but like all abstractions, merely short-hand accounts of the fuller story.

Take, for example, the young student composing a science report on kinds of heat transfer. There is a form of “science report” that the teacher may well have developed over the years as a response to the need to gather from students certain kinds of work and assess certain kinds of knowledge. Such a report is likely a subgenre of what schools more generally call report writing or academic writing. At any rate, this teacher begins
instructing students by showing examples of the genre, by offering sample papers, or by outlining the general expectations about the structure of the paper. Such forms and structure might include such things as required content and headings. The formal pattern might require the use of images or charts. It might require a concluding section headed “Heat Transfer and the Modern Home.” Any number of conventions might develop over the years as the genre gradually takes its shape from the writers themselves and from the rhetorical exigency—in this case a teacher’s effort to create a learning situation and assess how well students have understood the scientific concepts.

Once the genre has developed and is in place as a given in this discourse community, a large number of purposes, constraints, and educational goals are ready made and present in the genre. The power of the genre lies in the many years’ worth of pedagogical aims and expectations that are contained within the genre. These particular aims and expectations are repeated or handed over as subjective aims for each new student taking up the genre. Such power can of course also be a problem when these aims and expectations want to change but the genre remains codified. Educators must be careful, ready to revise assignments. Nevertheless, the teacher merely needs to assign the paper in this genre and a whole set of learning tasks are entailed, for better or for worse. Also entailed within the genre is an entire set of possibilities as to what the writing could look like, what the student might learn, and the textual shape that learning can take. Genre itself does a lot of work in this case. The set of possibilities is theoretically infinite, but not unlimited.

In this example, the school science report is revealed as itself a contingent form, a genre developed in response to a recurring educational and rhetorical exigency. The academy is full of such genres that are just as real (and contingent) as codified forms whose origins can be traced back to Shakespearian poetry with fourteen lines. That is the first thing to note in this example: genres are contingent and derivative of recurring situation. This does not make them any less real or valid as “genres” than traditional, entrenched forms of discourse. To criticize a genre as not being “real” or as being a construct of a local institution or to elevate some genres as “more real” or legitimate than others reveals a shallow understanding of genre. Lab reports, five-paragraph themes, one-act plays, the course syllabus, and the “short story” all have equal status as “genres” per se, albeit varied textual, cultural, and educational usefulness. This observation brings up a second point to note: a genre is capable of freeing itself from its originating exigency and surviving on new rhetorical, social, or cultural grounds. The Shakespearian sonnet is a good example of this unmooring. Furthermore, the question of what counts as being called a “genre” and what is merely a familiar form is a technical question and not relevant at this point. The main issue here is that genres are not absolute forms, but rather contingent and derivative of experience—like language.

A third consideration relevant to the student’s science report has to do with the place of novelty. Ezra Pound said “make it new,” yet outside the poetic community, few writers have really understood why newness, per se, offers any special advantage. Sometimes a novel contribution like The Cantos survives for artistic reasons, but where genius does not win out, nearly all writing survives because it gets some work (aesthetic or otherwise) done in the world. Therefore, genre plus novelty, we learn, is not enough. Situation and rhetorical exigency is the fulcrum on which genre leverages novelty. The formula for success in the work-a-day world (which includes our schools, of course)
requires this trio of components: genre, situation, novelty. Mere repetition of genre forms is dull, uninspired, and it ploddingly responds to the rhetorical situation if at all. Mere novelty likewise ignores the relevant rhetorical situation, indulging unrelated aims or self-serving aims of its own design. Genre plus situation plus novelty, however, coordinates past, present, and future in a way that advances discursive practice in productive ways. The artful coordination of these three elements is often called “good writing” because the past is carried into the present and is thus taken into account, the present rhetorical situation is measured and weighed, often noting a contrast to what could be the case in light of what is the case, and the future is anticipated and added to in creative ways. This is abstract analysis, but it should be clear, in other words, that the successful science report begins by including and assuming the educational aims and expectations handed over from past experience; that it not only repeats certain expectations implicit in the genre, but also takes account of the present rhetorical and social situation that gives these received components contemporary meaning; and that the received past, conditioned by present circumstance, is handed over to a new moment of experience as a synthesis that will somehow invite fresh responses. Whitehead’s principle of relativity describes this relatedness of things with its insistence that that every new thing must be a potential object or beginning for something else.

How novelty gets introduced into this process and how genres include change without subverting the genre is the remaining issue needing illustration in this example of the student science report. Novelty does not exist independently of past instances of actual writing. That is, there are no novel forms or ingredients waiting in the wings, waiting to see the light of day by way of a new piece of writing. This does not mean that something new is not possible. On the contrary, but understanding novelty is about understanding potentiality. And understanding potentiality is bound up with understanding the way in which the developing immediacy of the writing moment (whether that moment be word, sentence, paragraph, chapter, or book) takes account of what is given and contrasts that given with what might be. Whitehead says that “immediacy is the realization of the potentialities of the past, and is the storehouse of the potentialities of the future” (Modes 99-100). As noted above, genres repeat particular forms and their possibilities. Thus they carry a payload of potentiality. The “immediacy” of a writing moment (irrespective of the duration or physical time involved in that “moment”) provides an opportunity to realize what a particular genre makes available to the writer; but it also provides an opportunity for that writer to make hybrid additions to the implicit potentialities. A writer who is “stuck” sometimes needs only to slightly reconceive of the genre or shift genres completely in order to begin entertaining an entirely new set of possibilities. But also, as a writer composes, he or she can consider ways of adapting the genre’s implicit potentialities to the rhetorical situation at hand and integrating those components with varieties of imagined content, shape, and form. The imagination has before it, the entire universe of discourse representing possibilities for any one writing moment. Every piece of writing is numerically novel as one counts essays turned in on Friday. For some students, this kind of novelty may itself be an achievement. But novelty of thought and form is an achievement of craft or aesthetic dimension. As everyone who has ever given serious attention to composing knows, the nature of writing is such that it compels us with its creative possibilities—sometimes even when it’s the most mundane of genre forms that provokes us in the initial
immediacy of a writing moment. It compels because of the creative tension existing among the givens of genre, the present exigency, and the potentialities latent in the universe of discourse. It is these thicker dimensions of experience that Whitehead’s philosophy helps writers to see and appreciate.

According to Whitehead, experience begins with the repetition of the past but in some cases moves on to originative phases that entertain conceptual contrasts. For this reason, what might be displaces what is as the dominate focus in experience. We can thank genre for helping students to see what kind of things are possible, but finally it is the integration of new ideas and novel variation that moves the good writer on to fresh forms of expression. In Whitehead’s writing classroom (if you will), the prevailing student question would not be “how good is it” but rather, “how good could it be?” Where substance philosophies prevail, we reward piecemeal achievements, we study genre as separate from rhetorical situation, as separate from discourse convention, as separate from audience expectation, as separate from language itself. Given the relational experience described by Whitehead’s philosophy and his insight that particulars are repeated, I would urge educators to search out the connections, emphasize the contexts, and develop teaching practices that leverage the advantages of the relational solidarity of all writing experience.

Works Cited


