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How Creating Class Zines Opens Pre-Freshman Writers to Write Confidently and Think Critically about Rhetorical Situations

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Professional Skateboarders Have Good Ideas

A few months from the start of my summer composition class, I sat with my husband in our living room watching a skateboarding documentary. The focus of the film was on a Mid-Western skateboarder named Andy Howell, a man who became a sort of pioneer and visionary in the skateboarding world for his artwork and forays into the music business, not to mention his street-skating abilities. In one scene, Andy Howell discusses how he struck up a friendship with legendary skater Tony Hawk.

Howell holds up a pasted-together-and-photocopied booklet he'd made, his *zine*. "Well, no one was really reporting on what was happening here," he said, "the West-coast skaters had their publications, the Southern skaters had theirs. We had nothing to represent us. So, we just started making our own publications." Howell sent one of his homemade zines to Tony Hawk, receiving in return a free skateboard and a very powerful new friend in the skateboarding world. The homemade zine opened the door for not only Howell but the entire community of Mid-western skaters to make their voices heard in the broader national and international skateboarding community. As I watched the film my mind started to spark: I began to think of ways to apply the skaters' DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic to my writing classroom.

The idea didn't fully germinate until a few weeks later as I sat, dozing, on a red-eye flight from

Seattle to Detroit. A Disney remake of *Escape to Witch Mountain* played on the in-flight monitors, the cabin lights mostly extinguished, and my husband snored beside me as I the full realization hit. If zines could open doors in the skateboarding community, couldn't they do the same in the classroom community? Yes, if framed properly. What were doors that I wanted to open for my writing students? I came up with a list that I scrawled excitedly on a notebook resting on the tray-table in front of me.

Framing Zines in Writing Class

My first step after inspiration struck was to research this genre of writing, *zines*. I learned that zines (pronounced *zeens*) are self-made, non-commercial, amateur magazines that are usually assembled by hand, or on a home computer, reproduced on a photocopier and distributed by hand or by mail, or online (Congdon and Blandy 44). The Internet made for easy access to a plethora of zine examples, as well as detailed how-to tips (for example, see "The Book of Zines," <http://www.zinebook.com>). The composition class I teach is built on a genre-approach, designed to help students "think strategically and become flexible writers" (Adler-Kassner and Estrem 229). By using a genre-based approach to writing instruction, I help my students to develop reading and writing strategies by what Mary Jo Reiff calls constructing rhetorical situations, or creating intersections between students past knowledge of genres and rhetorical aspects that can help shape their response to and through new genres, such as considering audience, purpose, and format (157).

Zines would become, for my students and me, a new genre to be explored, analyzed and eventually created. They would serve as a site of rhetorical situation, a tangible place to put writing that students created, and intended for particular audiences to accomplish particular purposes.

An Additional Piece of the Frame: The Summer Incentive Program

The composition class I was weeks away from

teaching happened to be part of the university's Summer Incentive Program (SIP), a "bridge program" designed to give students who might not be traditionally admitted a chance for provisional admission. SIP is a seven-week semester where students not only take classes but also work on campus and live in the dorms; a full-on college experience. Successful completion of the seven-week program results in admission to the university for the coming fall semester. In this way, the program opens the doors to the university for students who may not ordinarily have had the chance to attend, a factor that makes teaching in the program extremely rewarding.

In teaching ENGL 120 (a freshmen composition elective that traditional students may choose to take before the required ENGL 121) for SIP, I would be instructing pre-freshmen students, or those who were yet to matriculate. The challenges that are normally present in a typical freshmen composition course are exacerbated by the same variables that make teaching in this context so rewarding. The hesitations and fears regarding writing are present in addition to the hesitations and fears regarding fellow

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students, and school in general. By participating in SIP, students are not only aware of their own academic struggles but are thrown into intensely close quarters with sixty-or-so other people who have their own similar struggles. Students

enter the program as strangers to each other, yet with the commonality of "needing" the program to "make it" to college. And throughout the intense seven weeks of the program, they work to overcome the habitual defensive strategies that they might revert to.

The questions are constantly before them: Will they openly mock their colleagues' writing because the spelling is bad? Will they rest their head on the desk to try to avoid the in-class writing assignment because they

feel they write too slowly? Will they refuse to share their writing because they can never see it as "good enough"? The swirling mass of general uneasiness about writing that one might encounter in an average freshmen composition class is concentrated through the lens of SIP, like sunlight through a magnifying glass.

When class finally began and I announced that, in addition to the creative and academic genres we would be investigating and writing, we would be publishing a class zine, about half the class gave me fearful "are you crazy?" stares. The other half of the stares were accompanied by slight nods of assent, even approval of the assignment, especially when I explained that the zine would be entirely the students' responsibility to design and produce—in accordance with a few guidelines and parameters. When the class understood that this was their zine, their chance to explain themselves, and their writing and learning processes, they pleasantly surprised me and threw themselves whole-heartedly into the project.

The Three-Birds-With-One-Stone Effect

Incorporating class zines created an opportunity to help further three main goals of my composition class, the same ones I scrawled into a notebook on the red-eye flight. Those three goals are:

1. Give students a voice through writing.
2. Give students the opportunity to write for real audiences.
3. Build students' confidence in and ownership of their own writing.

Giving Voice to Students

When I introduced the concept of the zine to my students, I explained the history behind zines, from their inception in the 1930s as an outlet for science fiction fans to publish their opinions to their roles in various counter-culture movements, from skateboarding to punk-rock to feminist movements. Together, we looked at some and read about the ways zines had been used to give voice to communities not represented in mainstream media coverage. This struck a chord with the students, and I didn't realize at first how deeply it resonated until it was time to create our first class zine. The criteria I attached to the zine production was as

follows: (1) it had to represent the unit we had just studied in some way; and (2) everyone in the class had to play some role in its creation.

The unit we had just finished was a “familiar genre” unit, where each student selected, described, dissected, and critically analyzed a genre of writing that was familiar, a favorite, important, interesting or fun for him or her. We broke into groups to brainstorm about how to translate the unit into a zine, and the classroom buzzed with the students’ voices. They suggested more ideas than we could implement on my measly faculty paper budget, which was essentially the paper budget for creating and reproducing the zine, so we trimmed it to a few key concepts.

For the zine, the students divided themselves into “genre teams,” grouping themselves based on who had chosen similar familiar genres. Each group collaborated on a piece of writing to represent both the genre studied and their feelings about being involved in SIP. For example, the genre team that was working with song lyrics collaborated on a song they titled “Swagg SIP’n.” The lyrics dealt with ideas of gratitude to be in the program and the need and desire to focus throughout the semester to finish the SIP program in fine style, i.e., with good grades. The genre team that was working with short stories created a piece entitled, “The Mysterious SIP Roommate,” a suspenseful take on the challenges of getting to know a roommate who seems beyond understanding. The genre team working with sports articles demonstrated a particularly masterful use of the genre conventions, from their punchy, informative title to their appropriate use of sport-writing style. The sports article team used a grammar game from class as the “event” they were reporting on, describing the two teams’ head-to-head comma-usage battle, “From the opening question, it was a test of speed and grammatical intelligence.”

For students already fighting negative self-perceptions based on their frustration with academic life, the zine offered a safe space to voice their perspectives on everything from the writing we did in class to the aspects of life outside of it. The panache with which the first zine came together showed off the students’ voices as writers so well that I swelled with pride as I handed out the photocopied first issue. The students perused that first zine with awe. They had written, drawn, pasted, organized, and assembled

the zine themselves, but to see “official, published” pieces of their own writing rendered them all speechless, a rare occurrence for my class.

Writing for Real Audiences

Not only did the zine offer a safe space for students to exercise their writing voices, it offered a space that *mattered*. Since the definition of a zine includes both publication and distribution, our zine would be no exception. In order to follow those conventions, before we began creating the zine as a class, we brainstormed about our “distro” areas, the places where our zine would be distributed. Who would we select as an audience for our writing? The list of readers grew as the students spouted ideas for the audience. We elected to distribute the zine to the other SIP English classes, the SIP administrators, English Department faculty, and English Department administrators, and these choices were integral to our approach. This contextualization was necessary for me not only to fulfill my goal for the students to help them write for real audiences, but also to help them situate themselves rhetorically as they created the zine. As students drafted, we asked questions like, “would this be an appropriate way to address our audience?” and “what message are we trying to communicate to our readers?”

Receiving encouraging emails from the department chair and my supervisor after our first distribution, the students and I continued to work to clarify and polish the communication of the students’ ideas. The feedback from “real” audiences that mattered (the feedback was not coming from an indulgent parent) helped build students’ awareness of the rhetorical situation they created for themselves with the zine.

Building Confidence and Ownership

The more the students grasped the rhetorical implications of writing for real audiences, the more they worked to craft zines that they were proud of, zines that clearly communicated their writing voices. So, while the first zine that we created as a class included a “Letter from the Editor” that I wrote, I turned my focus toward my third goal: helping students take ownership of their writing. After seeing how quickly the students embraced the zine project, and the enthusiasm with which they crafted each page, I decided to shift more responsibility onto their shoulders. After class, I met with

three of my students whom I'd observed carefully and noticed demonstrated leadership abilities. Two of the three also had earned the highest grades in the class to that point. I explained to them my plan to "step down as editor," and asked if they would consider taking on the extra responsibility. Three heads nodded assent so emphatically that I couldn't help but grin. And just like that, the "letter from the editor" became "letter from the editors." The three editors owned their roles well, working diligently to envision, compile and publish the next two zines.

With the new editorial staff, the whole class sensed a deeper level of ownership of the zine, often devoting extra time outside of class to work on the zines together. The students seemed to feel more comfortable presenting new ideas to their classmate editors than they had with me, and the editors worked to accommodate their classmates' ideas graciously. By the time the final zine was being assembled, the process had become a streamlined collaboration, with students trying things in their writing while also playing to their strengths as writers and composers.

Conclusion: Zines Open Doors

For professional skateboarder Andy Howell, zines opened the door to worldwide success. His zine gave him a vehicle to not only voice his own achievements and those of his fellow Mid-Western skaters, but also allowed him to meet Tony Hawk, a friend and colleague who in turn, opened many other doors for him in the skating community. For my SIP students, zines opened the door for them to exercise and develop their voices as writers, to write for real audiences, feel the thrill of seeing their names in print, and to gain the confidence and ownership of their own writing, which they can take with them into the fall semester and beyond. For me, zines opened up an exciting new genre study and the possibility to fulfill goals for students and my own writing classroom.

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About the Author

Nicole Guinot Varty (nguinot@emich.edu) is a writing instructor at Eastern Michigan University. She continues exploring creative ways to engage her students in critical thinking and rhetorical situations. Her work has appeared in *LAJM* and in *Cellar Roots*, and at the Lee Review poetry forum.