Textbook Review for *inReview*

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**Trimbur, John *The Call to Write*, (brief 2nd ed) New York: Longman, 2002 723 pages**

A few years ago, when I started to teach advanced composition, I was excited by the array of possibilities. Advanced composition seemed to have become an object of renewed interest, as nicely exemplified in Shamoon, Howard, Jamieson, and Schwegler's wide-ranging *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum*, and I relied on many of the ideas in this volume as I thought my course through. But as the opening of the term came nearer, my excitement turned to bewilderment; with so many ideas, I was unsure about how to structure the course. Many of my students were required to take advanced composition for English or Communications degrees but I wanted to provide an opportunity for them—perhaps the first in their college career—to pursue their own writing interests, not mine, and to try on "being a writer" for this short space of ten weeks. I had been influenced by Robert Brooke's "Individualization and Group Work" in which he lays out a structure of "predictable activities, goal setting, and portfolio evaluation" (115) that relied on group work and individually-selected writing projects. But, his plan was more free-form than I wanted—for example, he eschewed using professional models—and I felt the need to have an accompanying textbook to fall back on, at least the first time around.

After a quick, unproductive appeal for ideas to the WPA listserv, a colleague recommended John Trimbur's *The Call to Write*, so I took a look at it. It seemed better than some and more appropriate for what I had in mind than others, so I ordered it. Suspicious about textbooks in general—their hidden pitfalls (that only become apparent after you've tried them) and their one-size-fits-all agendas—and especially wary about relying on a textbook at the
advanced level for a course where I wanted less structure not more, I used the textbook gingerly for my first advanced writing course, relying on the book mostly for the readings. But gradually, I have come to like using this book more and more; it seems to embody both a theoretical and practical approach to teaching and learning about writing that I already subscribed to. Since then, I have used this book four times at two different institutions—one a private Catholic institution and the other a state university—with increasing success.

**Overview and Structure**

Here's how Trimbur's book works. First, it is geared to helping writers write both privately and publicly, in academia and in the world outside the university. The approach is rhetorical—that is, it's about what writing is and how writers write, but most importantly it's about what writing *does* in the world. *Part 1 -What is Writing? Analyzing Literacy Events* introduces the conceptual framework. Chapter 1 of this section looks at the kinds of writing we do in everyday life including, but not limited to, writing at school, nesting all writing in the context of purpose. It introduces the concept of ethics in writing, an aspect that is taken up in differing ways in every chapter thereafter. It also looks at writing as visual communication and ends with readings on literacy events, including an assignment suggestion on a personal literacy narrative and analysis.

Of all the chapters, perhaps Chapter 2 is the most focused on what could be termed conventional academic literacy, demonstrating strategies for critical reading and rhetorical analysis, constructing plausible and successful reader-writer relationships, and making claims supported by evidence. Chapter 3 is a follow-up, looking at argumentation, introducing rhetorical concepts of ethos, pathos and logos, and examining how these aspects of rhetoric work in the writing of others and in one's own writing. There is a student's sample rhetorical analysis at the
end. Most points are amply exemplified with writing or visual rhetoric from college, the world of
business, political arenas, and newspapers and other media.

For the purposes of the advanced writing course that I was teaching, however, I used
these chapters only in passing if at all, wanting to move away from forms of writing my students
had already studied and were relatively comfortable with and onto forms of writing that my
students felt were refreshingly (and sometimes unnervingly) non-academic. We spent most of
our time, then, with Part 2, Writing Projects. This section is organized generically, picking up
the rhetorical framework outlined in earlier chapters and focusing on a range of genres, from the
more private and personal (letters to one's intimates) to the more public and professional (FAQ's
and opinion pieces for publication). Each genre (or "writing project") is given its own chapter.
Chapters include: letters, memoirs, profiles, public documents, fact sheets, commentaries,
proposals and reviews. Each chapter focuses on examinations of professional and non-
professional writers taking stances in particular kinds of contexts for specific purposes.

A Typical Project Chapter

The structure of each chapter is particularly useful to teachers and students because its
logic seems to anticipate students' emerging questions: What are the expectations for this genre?
And why? What does this genre look like? Are there exceptions? How can I come up with ideas?
What are my options? How can I get it drafted? How can I draft it well? And what constitutes
"well"? Each chapter includes a short introduction, titled "Thinking about the Genre," that lays
out the parameters of the genre in language easily approached by college students of any age,
and connects writing with real world contexts. For example, the first paragraph from Chapter 7,
"Profiles: Creating a Dominant Impression," reads as follows:

Talking about other people—describing them, analyzing their personalities, trying to
understand why they do the things they do—is one of the main topics of conversation in most people's lives. Think for a moment about how and why you talk and write about other people in the course of everyday life—whether you're telling your parents what your new roommate is like, discussing with coworkers why your supervisors act the way they do, or writing a letter to a friend, trying to explain why someone you both know is leaving school or changing majors. This impulse to describe, to analyze and to understand what people are all about seems to grow out of genuine need to come to terms with our social experience and our relationships with others. (222)

This is followed by a paragraph describing where profiles typically appear: *Rolling Stone, Sports Illustrated, Ebony, Ms.* or *The Wall Street Journal.* Right after this is a short section (“Exploring Your Experience”) that asks students to reflect on the kinds of stories and comments about people that emerge from conversations with friends or family, immediately encouraging students to tap into their own, already significant (though perhaps naïve and uncritical) experience with profiles.

The sample readings that follow—an essay from *The New York Times* profiling a breast cancer surgeon, an excerpt from Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* in which he profiles students he knew in the vocational track in high school, and an obituary on Kurt Cobain from the *Providence Phoenix*—provide three quite different examples of profiles. Each professional essay includes a short analysis and a set of discussion questions. I've found these questions very useful because they focus not necessarily on rehashing the content of the piece, but on eliciting analysis about the shape of the message. The questions ask readers to assess the rhetorical structure: the intended readers of the piece in question, the kind of stance the writer has created in shaping her piece, and the strategies that are used to achieve a certain rhetorical impact.
Each chapter also has a section on visual rhetoric. The profile chapter, for example, examines how profiles are used in advertising. Using two sample ads that incorporate profiles, Trimbur (who, by the way, has an essay on visual design in *Coming of Age*) asks students to analyze the visual rhetoric of the ads—how text and graphics can be used to get a message across. Discussion questions focus students’ attention on the rhetorical power of visual design elements (photos, texts, logos, slogans and headlines). This chapter also invites students to visit Web sites that use profiles to create dominant impressions, in this instance in sites designed specifically for women and girls, and to assess how the design of the sites work.

After exploring the genre, the chapter then turns to the task of helping students write their own profiles. This includes a section on ethics ("Responsibility to the Writer's Subject"), then discussions on invention, purpose, research (such as how to structure a good interview for your profile), planning, and arrangement. The drafting stages provide tips on getting started, frequently referring back to the professional essays as models. And the revision section is preceded by some very decent questions that could be addressed in a peer review session ("Describe what you see as the writer's purposes" or "Describe the arrangement" of the piece.)

Peer reviews are a consistent feature of these chapters but what makes these sections even more valuable is the sample student essay (in "Writers' Workshop") that comes near the end of each chapter. This enables the students to see a student's work in progress, the effect of peer reviewers' responses, and a commentary from the student writer on the process of revision. Finally, the chapter asks for reflection ("Write an account of how you put your profile together") and suggests that the student author share his profile with the person profiled. All of these activities reinforce the prevailing assumption of *Call to Write* that writing involves a world outside the text and, even, outside the classroom. Writing has readers. Writing has results and
ramifications. Many of my students did share their profiles with the person they profiled, one with a parent struggling with cancer, another with the pitcher from a professional baseball team.

**Beyond Genres**

While I did not use Parts 3, 4, and 5, I might have, had I more than ten weeks to work with. *Part 3 - Writers at Work* takes up a related range of topics: a real student's response to her writing assignment, an examination of how to successfully negotiate collaborative writing projects, the structuring of non-fiction prose, and communicating on-line. *Part 4 - Guide to Research* is fairly predictable—how to do research, how to cite, how to do field work. *Part 5 - Presenting Your Work* covers MLA/APA citations formats, visual design, essay exams and writing portfolios.

**Format and Layout**

The combination of short, easy-to-read sections and plenty of white space make this a very accommodating book. The readings tend to be short, from one page to six pages, nicely meeting the constraints of the 10-week quarter system and the demands of students who have a ton of other stuff to do besides write for English 300 (or 101). In addition, plentiful charts and graphics not only explain points but also serve as models or examples of the rhetorical genre being illustrated.

Furthermore, while the chapters interrelate, they can stand alone nicely, making this book flexible and adaptable to quarters, trimesters, and semesters of different lengths, with varying levels of writing ability, and for diverse student and instructor preferences.

**Target Audience**

At the end of last quarter, I asked my students what they thought of the book. Most of them pointed to how easily the book accommodated their own ideas about what to write about.
They were relieved to know they wouldn't have to write about a topic of the instructor's choosing (gender relations, gun control, or euthanasia) but rather could select what they wanted to explore within a particular genre. Most students had not yet had this freedom in their writing courses, and while it baffled some, most got used to it pretty quickly, especially given the support apparatus this textbook provides.

While I used this book for an advanced composition course, I could easily see using it for a first-year writing class. The preface of the book maintains that one of the goals of this text is to help students with the kinds of writing tasks that will be expected of them in college. While I did not use it to prepare students expressly for the demands of academic writing, the book does contain the kinds of information and guided exploration that would be as helpful to first year students as to more advanced students. The entire book is based on the writing imperative, that good writing comes from the need to write: "[T]he call to write—he felt sense that something needs to be said—presents writing not just as a skill to master but as a means to participate meaningfully in the common life and to influence its direction" (Preface, xxxv). This "call" includes traditional and non-traditional forms of writing as well as writing that is personal, professional, and public. And in just over 720 pages, this textbook seems to cover an amazing amount.

Works Cited


Brooke, Robert. "Individualization and Group Work: A Small-Group Writing Workshop and Individualized Invitations to a Writer's Life." In Small Groups in Writing Workshops: